

GOD RELIGION

WITHOUT

CAN IT REALLY BE THIS SIMPLE?

ANDREW FARLEY



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, MI

© 2011 by Andrew Farley

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Farley, Andrew, 1972–

God without religion : can it really be this simple? / Andrew Farley.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8010-1399-7 (cloth)

1. Christian Life. I. Title

BV4501.3.F357 2011

248.4—dc22

2010049698

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations labeled Message are from *The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson, copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled NASB are from the New American Standard Bible®, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations labeled NKJV are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled TNIV are from the Holy Bible, Today's New International Version®, TNIV®. Copyright © 2001, 2005 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Italics added to Scripture quotations represent the author's emphasis.

Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920, www.alivecommunications.com.

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Andrew Farley, *God Without Religion*
Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2011. Used by permission.

For my son, Gavin.
How much joy it brings me just to watch you play!

CONTENTS

The Extortionist 11

Part 1 Mennonite Motorboat 17

Part 2 Divine Slot Machine? 65

Part 3 The Two Ministries of Christ 79

Part 4 God's Big Fat Greek Wedding 95

Part 5 Frank Lloyd Wrong 127

Part 6 Government Bailout 177

Part 7 Theater of Life 211

Part 8 The Spirit of Gretzky 245

Acknowledgments 265

re-li-gion \ri-'li-jən\ (noun)

A return to bondage. The word *religion* is traced to the Latin *re* meaning “again” and *ligare* meaning “to bind.”

THE EXTORTIONIST

Drew Dog! How you doin', Drew Dog? Hey, listen, I know what happened to your stuff, and I can get it back for you. Crime Stoppers offers a thousand dollars for information about a burglary. But if you give me a thousand bucks, I'll get your stuff back right away."

We'd been robbed. While our family was away, our Indiana home had been cleaned out. Now, just one week later, this guy was on our doorstep trying to extort money. On top of that, I knew him! He had come by a month ago asking to rake leaves in our yard, and we hired him. Apparently, he'd taken that opportunity to scope out our place and strategize his entry through a rear window.

Welcome to life in downtown South Bend. We'd only been living there a few months. This was the latest in a series of indicators that maybe there was a *reason* our home had been so affordable.

"Hang on just a minute," I told the guy. "I've got something I need to take care of in the kitchen. I'll be right

back.” I closed the door and headed to the kitchen to call the police. When I returned, I expected the guy to be gone.

He was still there.

I kept him talking. We chatted about, you know, the weather and sports. After several minutes, the police pulled up and hauled him away for questioning. We were sure we’d never see him again.

Knock. Knock.

It had only been a couple of hours. I peered out the window to see who was on the front porch. Sure enough, it was him. I opened the door to a loud shout. “Drew Dog, I went downtown for you! I got knocked around for you! You owe me, Drew Dog! You owe me!”

In a weird way, I enjoyed the nickname. But I wasn’t sure how to respond, so I fell back on what had worked in the past. “Hang on just a minute. I’ve got something in the kitchen I need to take care of. I’ll be right back,” I said.

This time I expected him to catch on. But upon my return from the kitchen, he was, yet again, still there. It was just a few minutes of chitchat before the squad car pulled up. Once again, they hauled him away. Surely this time they’d pin something on him—harassment, or disturbing the peace, or something.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

It was now close to midnight. I crept downstairs and looked out the window. Yeah, it was him. What was with this guy? Wasn’t he getting the message? I opened the door for the third time that night.

“Drew Dog, I’m cold. I’m homeless. I need some gloves.”

I held up my hand to signal that I needed just a minute to check on something. By now *you* know the drill, but

did he? I headed to the kitchen and told the police he was back for the third time. Then I returned to the front door. There he was, waiting patiently for me.

Remembering our previous small talk, I said, “Homeless? I thought you said you live at 211 West Young Street, Apartment B.”

Feeling caught in his lie, he said, “Oh yeah, well, I’m cold. You got any gloves?”

I looked around the front hall. A pair of my wife’s furry pink gloves was right there. My wife would’ve preferred that I continue the search, but I handed him the lovely gloves and said, “Here you go. Now, the best thing to do is just leave.”

“Okay,” he said, “but can I jump your fence?”

“Jump our fence? No, just walk around, man,” I said.

“C’mon, Drew Dog, I always jump the fence when I go through your yard!” he said.

His reply wasn’t exactly comforting. After that night, we began looking for ways to move! “Look, man, you gotta get out of here. The police are on their way again,” I said.

He seemed surprised. But he took my word for it and headed off down the street. When the police pulled up, I pointed in his direction, and they set off in pursuit.

That was the last we saw of him for a while. But then one beautiful fall afternoon the following year . . .

Knock. Knock.

I opened the door and was greeted with, “Drew Dog! How you doin’, Drew Dog? Listen, you got any work for me? Maybe I could rake your leaves again?”

“Just a minute,” I said. “I’ve got something in the kitchen I need to take care of.”

RELIGIOUS ROBBERY

After the burglary, we felt pretty insecure. Every night we closed the curtains up tight, and every noise made us jump. Before long, we purchased an expensive alarm system, installing motion sensors on our windows and throughout the house. The burglars had taken \$13,000 in belongings, but our sense of security was the most valuable thing they stole.

In much the same way, we can fall victim to spiritual burglary. *Religion* is a thief that's delighted to clean us out. Religion plots to rob us of our spiritual possessions and our sense of security. Oh, and religion is happy to drop by our doorstep later to offer it all back.

At a price.

So how can we keep our confident rest in Jesus from being stolen and held for ransom? *By abandoning any form of religion.*

**Religion plots
to rob us and
offer it all back
at a price.**

Is it safe to just abandon religion? As we'll see, it's not only safe; it's God's passionate desire for us. But if we're to escape the clutches of religion, we need to see religion for what it truly is. And we need to be certain

there's another way.

As I shared the true story of our experience with burglary and extortion, you probably wondered, "Why did he keep opening the door?"

Good question.

In hindsight, I realize I shouldn't have. It would've been safer to ignore the burglar and his offer. I guess I thought there might be some way to get our stuff back. Similarly,

the trouble with religion is that it appeals to our human appetites. When we've lost a sense of belonging in God's kingdom or the feeling of closeness to the King, we may look to religion for answers. It's difficult to simply ignore religion, shutting the door on its offers. And we can't afford to ignore religion unless we're *certain* we already have everything we need to make life work, apart from religion.

This book is an invitation to consider the idea that we Christians need no religion of any sort. That instead we already have everything we need to experience an intimate relationship with Jesus. Maybe our only real trouble is that we just don't know what we have.

PART 1

MENNONITE MOTORBOAT

**[The law] is a widower in search
of a girlfriend, and he has no
problem finding one at church.**

Juan Carlos Ortiz (1961—)

1

I wrote my first book, *The Naked Gospel*, on a Sony laptop. It began crashing pretty often during the last couple of months of finishing the book. So after I finished the book, I decided I'd shop for a new laptop.

Now I'm typing away on my new Apple MacBook. Yeah, I switched teams. But for you die-hard PC fans, let me explain what happened to me.

I had done my research ahead of time. I was well aware that *Consumer Reports* rated MacBooks as the most reliable. I also knew that Apple had top-rated customer service. But that's not what got me.

There I was, standing in front of *so many* PC-compatible laptops in my price range. And there was only one model from Apple. I had never owned a MacBook, and the learning curve with a new operating system seemed unnecessary. But just as I was ready to walk away with another PC, it happened. One sly comment from the savvy salesperson, and I was sold.

“You know, nowadays you can install Windows software on a MacBook. You can use the older, familiar operating system on your new Mac hardware.”

Next thing I knew, I was at the checkout with MacBook in hand. The *compatibility* of the old and familiar with the new and shiny was precisely what convinced me.

Which notebook computer was the most reliable? The MacBook. And which had the best customer service? The MacBook. Still, what I wanted was a *compromise* so the transition would seem easier. I wasn't comfortable with making a radical change, at least not without “training wheels.”

It's not much different when it comes to the old way of religion and the new way God longs for us to know. We're used to thinking we need religion to keep us on the straight and narrow. Even when we buy into the simplicity of “Jesus plus nothing” for salvation, we might try to make Jesus fit *alongside* some religion for the long haul. Just like I was tempted to do with the MacBook, we end up mixing the old with the new.

God's simple message for us is like our New Year's declaration “Out with the old and in with the new.” Through the voices of New Testament writers, God pleads with us to firmly place our confidence in his new way, not allowing even a hint of religion to creep in. God wants us to put all our stock in one place, but that feels risky. To be safe, we'd rather take our religion along for the ride.

By the way, I never ended up downloading any PC software onto my MacBook. When I got home, everything just worked. It was incredibly easy to use. I guess I forgot all about the old operating system once I realized Apple's new way was simpler and better.

How do you completely drop the old way of religion? Easy. Just get to know God's new way. Then there's no looking back.

INCOMPATIBLE JESUS

Even if we want to mix old-time religion with our new-found life in Christ, we really can't. At least, not if we want to keep Jesus in the picture. Yeah, you can put PC programs on a MacBook, but you can't make Jesus fit with the old way of the law.

Here's one reason why: the *lineage* of Jesus.

The lineage of Jesus? Yes, Jesus's lineage is one of the strongest arguments for abandoning the old way and grabbing on exclusively to a brand-new way.

Today, we call upon Jesus as our high priest, our representative before God. But Jesus was born into the tribe of Judah. And here's what Moses, author of the law, said about priests serving from the tribe of Judah: Nothing. Zero. Zilch. Moses never once mentioned any priest being allowed to come from the tribe of Judah. God himself forbade such an idea. God told Moses that *only* the tribe of Levi was to serve as priests:

You can't make Jesus fit with the old way of the law.

[Jesus] belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and *in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.* (Heb. 7:13–14)

For thousands of years, Old Testament priests came from only one place—the tribe of Levi. Then Jesus

shows up on the scene, breaking all the rules. He's an illegal priest with a "passport" that disqualifies him for priesthood.

Why would God do this? Why would he arrange for Jesus to be born into the tribe of Judah? It would've been a lot easier sell if Jesus had been from the tribe of Levi. The Jews would've recognized his Levitical authority. They could've just tweaked their understanding of Moses to make room for what Jesus was adding to the mix.

Apparently, God wasn't looking for a smooth transition. He wanted to turn everything upside down. And he began by having Jesus be an *unqualified* priest according to the law.

NEW PRIEST = NEW WAY

We look to Jesus as our representative before God. But how can Jesus legitimately be our priest if the law won't allow it? The answer is simple, and it comes straight from Scripture:

For when there is a *change of the priesthood* there must also be a *change of the law*. (Heb. 7:12)

Because there's a new kind of priest in town, God is telling us we can't mix in the old way of the law. To do so involves a serious contradiction.

Do you see it? Against the backdrop of thousands of years of doing things one way, God has now done it another way. Former priests came from Levi, but now no more. Since our priest has a different lineage, the old way

is entirely incompatible with him. When there's a change of priesthood, the *whole* system must change.

There's more. The writer of Hebrews says Jesus "was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 5:10). You can just see the Jewish readers going, "Melchizedek, Melchizedek . . . boy, that name sounds familiar." They thumb through the Old Testament and find one reference to him as "king of Salem" (Gen. 14:18). And Hebrews describes him as "without genealogy" (Heb. 7:3). Apparently, Mel had no known father or mother. He came out of nowhere! But Abraham respected Mel as having a unique priesthood from God. And this was *more than four hundred years before the law*.

**When there's
a change of
priesthood, the
whole system
must change.**

So let's get this straight. According to the law, Jesus is from the wrong tribe to be a priest? He has the wrong lineage? On top of that, his priesthood is in the order of Melchizedek, a mystery man who lived *before* the law? Yes, that's right. And for these reasons, the old way of the law and Jesus just don't mix.

Our heavenly high priest invites us to a whole new way.

2

New way, old way—doesn't make much difference! If you knew me, you'd understand. I'm just not that good at religion. I'm not that committed. I'm a weak Christian by any measure."

Maybe you think you've committed some pretty big sins. Or maybe you still have some major struggles going on. So you think the idea of enjoying God to the fullest can't possibly apply to you. If so, I'd like to ask you a question:

How many people have you killed?

Yes, you read that one right. How many people have you killed? I ask you this question, because much of the Bible was written by murderers. Moses killed an Egyptian in rage. David killed a guy to steal his wife. And Paul killed Christians in religious pride. Here's a sample of Paul's ugly resume:

I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were *put to death, I cast my vote against them*. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another *to have them punished*,

and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities *to persecute them*. (Acts 26:10–11)

In comparison with killing Christians, how big are *your* sins? And just how “different” is your situation? Let’s face it—the only thing that stops us from enjoying God is *not believing we are qualified*. But here’s a news flash for you: Your sins are small. Your God is big. And you are qualified.

OUR CONTRACT WITH GOD

So how can we experience God without religion? The key, I believe, is in understanding our contract with God.

Contract? Yes, contract. Our contract with God is better than we can possibly imagine. It’s better than the double-minded religion we’ve concocted. It’s better than the Christian jargon we’ve fabricated. And it’s better than the old way we’ve been peddling alongside Jesus ever since the early church.

Our contract with God invites us to experience something Old Testament people only dreamed of. Apparently, they never enjoyed what we have now. The heroes of the Old Testament were more dedicated than nearly any of us today. But that doesn’t seem to matter. We still get a better deal than they had:

Your sins are small. Your God is big. And you are qualified.

These were all commended for their faith, yet *none of them received* what had been promised. God had planned

something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (Heb. 11:39–40)

Why is our contract with God so much better these days? To answer that one, let's start with a marriage on the rocks.

A GOD OF DIVORCE?

David and Shelly had been married for nine years. For the first few years, it was like heaven. But little did David know that Shelly had plans for him to change, or else.

Shelly really liked David but saw things in him that she planned to “work on.” If she could change him, she'd stick with him. But if David didn't change, well, that would leave the door open to who knows what—maybe even divorce.

David entered the marriage a bit naïve. He assumed Shelly was in it for life. Boy, was he surprised when Shelly began to complain about his lazy habits, his low-paying job, and his lack of drive. “Why can't you be more like your brother? He has a plan and a future. He knows where he's going in life. You don't have a clue! Do you expect me to stick around if you stay in the same dead-end job and don't get us out of this hole?”

David was a hard worker. He worked two jobs: construction during the week and car sales on Saturdays. He was doing *everything* he could. But it wasn't good enough for Shelly. Her standards were just too high. At least once every few months, she'd really go after him. She'd tear him down and make him feel like nothing. Then she'd threaten to leave him. David would apologize and make frantic attempts to please her.

David worked double shifts. Then he changed jobs to make more money. Still Shelly complained that David wasn't giving her the life that she'd hoped for.

David's heart was broken. He was absolutely in love with Shelly and wanted nothing more than to please her. He just lacked the ability to do it! No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't keep her happy.

Eventually, Shelly made her decision. She met with a lawyer and issued David the papers. It would soon be over, and she could find someone capable of giving her what David could not.

Sound like a marriage you'd enjoy? How'd you like to be David? Most of us would take a pass on that one! But isn't this exactly what it'd be like for us if we could *lose our salvation*? We'd be married (spiritually) to a spouse who was constantly evaluating us and ready to drop the hammer of divorce.

God hates divorce. We know this from Scripture. Yet those who claim we can lose our salvation are saying we become the bride of Christ, but God will divorce us if we don't perform to his standards!

God's marriage
contract with
us truly means
"in sickness
and in health."

A WHOLE NEW WAY

As we call upon Jesus, we enter into a new way of relating to God. This new way eliminates even the remote possibility of God "divorcing" us. God's marriage contract with us truly means "in sickness and in health." Jesus

introduced a better contract with God (Heb. 7:22; 9:15). It's unlike anything before. It enables us to enjoy God without the rocky road of religion. Here's what it's all about:

Heads up! The days are coming
 when I'll set up a new plan
 for dealing with Israel and Judah.
 I'll throw out the old plan
 I set up with their ancestors
 when I led them by the hand out of Egypt.
They didn't keep their part of the bargain,
so I looked away and let it go.
 This new plan I'm making with Israel
 isn't going to be written on paper,
 isn't going to be chiseled in stone;
 This time I'm writing out the plan *in* them,
 carving it *on the lining of their hearts*.
 I'll be their God,
 they'll be my people.
 They won't go to school to learn about me,
 or buy a book called *God in Five Easy Lessons*.
They'll all get to know me firsthand,
 the little and the big, the small and the great.
 They'll get to know me by being kindly forgiven,
 with *the slate of their sins forever wiped clean*.
 (Heb. 8:8–12 Message)

Did you notice the trouble with the old way of religion? Just like David's failure to meet Shelly's expectations, it says Israel "didn't keep their part of the bargain" (v. 9 Message). And the result? God looked away from them. But under this new contract, that problem is *solved*.

First, God stamps his desires on our hearts, so that we will want what he wants. Second, we receive a place at the table, as part of God's family. "They'll all get to know me firsthand," he says, "by being kindly forgiven, with the slate of their sins forever wiped clean" (vv. 11–12 Message). A brand-new heart and a clean slate make God's new way radically different.

Everyone under the old way "did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them" (Heb. 8:9). In the Old Testament, even the most dedicated religious servants failed to impress God and stay in his good graces. That's a problem, since most of us today won't exert the same efforts! Old Testament servants worked tirelessly to get it all right. And God still turned away from them. It just wasn't good enough.

But God said, "I'll throw out the old plan" (Heb. 8:9 Message). And this new way came on the scene to solve everything. The secret to this new way is this: *it's not about us*. Instead, it's about God's faithfulness *to himself!*

IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU!

God's new contract is very different. Our performance is not in focus. We're not the ones signing the contract. Sure, we benefit from it. But we don't enact it or sustain it. The old problem of faithfulness is cured by God's new solution. Now it's about someone else's faithfulness.

Under the old way, "God found fault with the people" (Heb. 8:8). Under the new way, God made *a promise to himself*. He didn't want to involve anyone else who might waver or change. He'd already been down that road!

God did this so that, *by two unchangeable things* in which *it is impossible for God to lie*, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as *an anchor for the soul*, firm and secure. (Heb. 6:18–19)

What are the two unchangeable things? God and God. We're not involved in the bargain, because God knew how that would turn out! Instead, this new contract is about God's promise to himself. God's no liar. That's why his new plan is "an anchor for the soul, *firm* and *secure*" (Heb. 6:19).

This new contract is about God's promise to himself.

Picture the mythological Greek character Atlas, carrying the world on his shoulders. This reminds me of Christians who are overcome with guilt about their relationship with God. They suffer from an Atlas complex, thinking the weight of the world is on them. In their minds, it's up to them to remain obedient, faithful, and in good standing with God. If they fail God too much, they may lose their salvation. If they find their moral strength failing them, they fear the consequences could be eternal. So with flexed, tense muscles and sweat on their brow, they live life suspending their salvation on their shoulders.

Every Christian I've met who believes they can lose their salvation has always given a reason that involves *them*. What if *I* commit suicide? What if *I* get a divorce? What if *I* stop believing? What if *I* . . . ? You fill in the blank there, but it's all the same. Every hypothetical scenario puts ourselves at the center of the equation.

But our faithfulness to God is an *old*-covenant problem that is solved by the new. Under the new, God has accomplished the unthinkable: he has taken us out of the equation. Our salvation and our faithfulness are all about him:

If we are faithless,
he will remain faithful,
for he cannot disown himself. (2 Tim. 2:13)

Even our spiritual growth is about him:

He who *began* a good work in you *will carry it on to completion*. (Phil. 1:6)

The head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows *with a growth which is from God*. (Col. 2:19 NASB)

Religion tells us that we're at the heart of the equation. We must "do." And we're never done until we hit heaven and find out if it was enough. In contrast, this new way is all about what Jesus *has done* to provide an unbreakable connection with God and guaranteed growth in him.

God's new way is not about us. It's all about him. And God's new way allows us to embark on the lifelong adventure of knowing Jesus intimately, *without* any religion to kill it.