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March 2016

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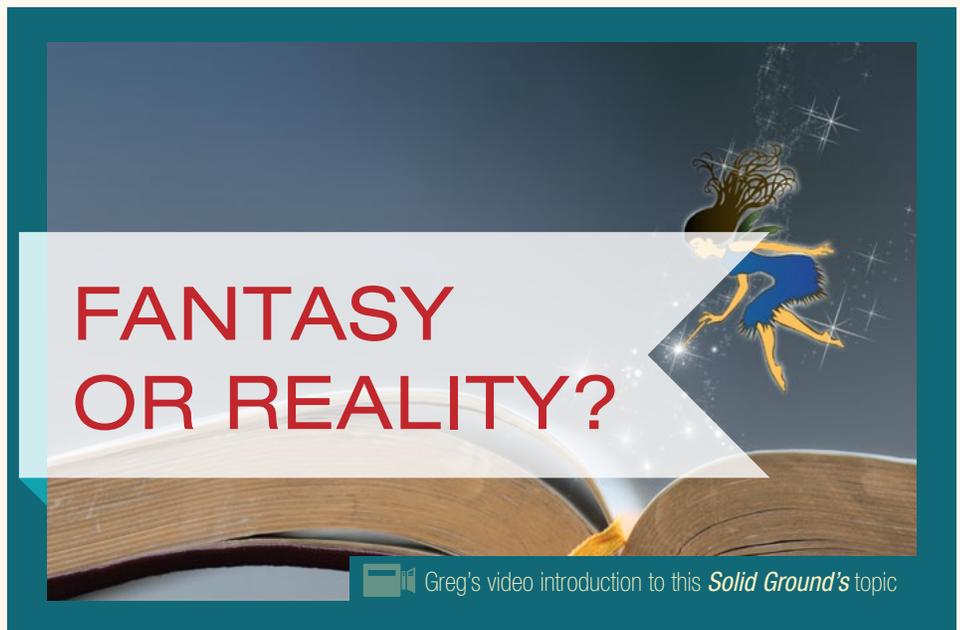
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SOCIAL MEDIA



I have become convinced that, in general, people are confused about religion. Somewhere along the way, folks got it into their minds that religion was a kind of spiritual fantasy club—true for you, but not necessarily true for me. Find the club that warms your heart and meets your personal needs. Do not, however, confuse religious stories with reality. That is a different thing entirely.

Surprisingly, many Christians have been caught up in this confusion. They do not believe their beliefs are really true in any deep sense of the word. You can tell by the way they live their lives. In this month's *Solid Ground* I address that confusion. I do not really argue in favor of the Christian claim about the world (as I often do). Instead, I simply want to clarify what kind of claim we are making.

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Greg Kousser





March 1, 2016

Dear Friend,

I have become convinced that, in general, people are confused about religion.

Somewhere along the way, folks got it into their minds that religion was a kind of spiritual fantasy club—true for you, but not necessarily true for me. Find the club that warms your heart and meets your personal needs. Do not, however, confuse religious stories with reality. That is a different thing entirely.

Surprisingly, many Christians have been caught up in this confusion. They do not believe their beliefs are really true in any deep sense of the word. You can tell by the way they live their lives.

Whether a person is confused or not hinges on the answer to a simple question: What is Christianity? The response he gives will tell you whether he is looking at Christianity principally from the “inside,” so to speak—as an expression of his personal feelings or beliefs—or from the “outside”—as a description of how the world really is in itself.

In this month’s *Solid Ground* I address that confusion. I do not really argue in favor of the Christian claim about the world (as I often do). Instead, I simply want to clarify what kind of claim we are making.

I want you to see that the real problems we face as human beings require real solutions, not wishful thinking, facts not fantasy. Yes, we tell a story, but it is a *true* story—it is *the* true story. It is the story of the way the world really is. It is the story of reality.

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In His care,

Gregory Koukl

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FANTASY OR REALITY?



By Gregory Koukl

This material is excerpted from *Credo—The Story of Reality*, a new book by Gregory Koukl to be released December, 2016.

Once I was sitting on an airplane next to a stockbroker. He asked me what I did for a living and I told him I was a writer. When he asked what I wrote about, immediately I faced a problem. I wanted to tell him that I write about religion, specifically Christianity, but I didn't want him to make a mistake many people make when they think about those two things.

Most people nowadays would not say that the religious stories believers believe are actually false (it would be impolite to put it that way, and might even be considered intolerant). At the same time, though, they do not think they're really true, either, in any deep sense of the word.

Instead, people are tempted to think of religion as a kind of **spiritual fantasy club**—true for you, but not necessarily true for me.

Find the club you like—the one that meets your personal needs, that gives you rules to live by that are respectable (but not too demanding), that warms your heart with a feeling of spirituality. That's the point of religion. Do not, however, confuse religious stories with reality. They don't give you the kind of information about the world that, say, science does. Yes, believing in God is useful to a point, but religion taken too seriously is, in some ways, like believing in Santa Claus—quaint if you're a child, but unbecoming of an adult.

I am convinced this is a completely misguided approach to religion, and I did not want the stockbroker thinking this is what I had in mind—that my faith is an exercise in spiritual wishful thinking, the kind of delusion Karl Marx once called the “opiate of the people.” My comments

to the stockbroker, then, were informed by a very particular way of understanding Christianity, a way even many Christians have not fully grasped.

The Central Question

Here I need to ask you a rhetorical question. It's a question I don't want you to answer (I'll answer it for you), but one I want you to think about as if you did have to answer it. Here is that question: What *is* Christianity?

Some say Christianity is a religious system people follow. Others say it is a guide for living a fulfilling life, or maybe a way of finding peace with God, or maybe a system of ethical principles to

live by. Some might say Christianity is not really a religion at all, but rather a relationship with God, or a relationship with Jesus. This way of putting it might be confusing to some, but I think I understand what those who say this are getting at.

These answers all have some truth to them as far as they go. The problem is, I do not think they go far enough. They are all too “thin,” in a certain sense. Each is a look at Christianity from the “inside,” so to speak, from the perspective of the Christian living out his or her individual “beliefs” or “personal faith.” That is certainly part of it, and I think these answers would have made complete sense to the stockbroker. But there is something missing.

The answer to the question “What is Christianity?” turns out to be much bigger than any one of those things because it includes something important from the “outside” as well as the inside. The way Jesus understood religion was not simply as a private, spiritual view, or as a subjective source of ethics, or even as a personalized “relationship” with

What
is
Christianity?



God. It was much bigger than any of those things. Jesus understood religion first from the outside, not from the inside.

Here is what I am getting at. The correct answer to the question “What is Christianity?” is this: *Christianity is a picture of reality.*¹ It is an account, or a description, or a depiction of the way things actually are. It is not just a view *from the inside* (a Christian’s personal feelings, or religious beliefs, or spiritual affections, or ethical views, or “relationship” with God). It is also a view *of the outside*. It is a view of the world out there, of how the world really is in itself.

Christianity is a Picture of Reality

Put another way, Christianity is a worldview. The Christian view is not the only way of viewing the world, of course. It has competition. Every religion and every secular philosophy claims to represent reality in a true and accurate way. Indeed, every person has a view like this of some sort.

Everyone has in his or her mind a story about the way the world actually is, even if he hasn’t thought about it much or worked out all the details.

In this sense, there is no difference between an atheist and a religious person. None. Each believes particular things to be true about the world. I am not using the word “believe” here like some people use the word “faith,” that is, a *mere* belief with no thought, rationale, or justification behind it. I do think that happens with religious people, and I also think that happens with atheists, but that is not what I’m talking about here.

A person’s “belief,” in my sense of the word, is simply his view of some detail of the world that he holds to be accurate. That’s all. And both scientists and saints have beliefs of this sort. There’s nothing unusual going on here.

Now of course, just because they believe things about the world does not mean they *know* their beliefs to be true. That is something else entirely. But they still *think* they are true, otherwise they would not believe them. Instead, they would believe different things and think those things true instead.

Since everyone—religious person, atheist, scientist, skeptic—believes his beliefs are true, it has always struck me odd when some have been faulted simply

for thinking their views correct. They’ve even been labeled intolerant or bigoted for doing so. But what is the alternative? The person objecting thinks his own views correct as well, which is why he’s objecting. Both parties in the conversation think they’re right and the other wrong. Why, then, is only the religious person (usually) branded a bigot for doing so?

All of us have beliefs about the world we think are accurate. All of us have a worldview picture—at least a rudimentary one—forming in our minds, even if we are not consciously aware of it. Every religion tells a story of reality. Every philosophy and every individual outlook on life is a take on the way someone thinks the world actually is. There is no escaping it. These stories are meant to bring order to our beliefs, to explain the “pieces” of reality that we encounter in life, whether big things or little things, important or inconsequential.

All worldviews are not equal, though. Some have pieces that seem to fit together (internally) better than others, and some have pieces that seem to fit reality (externally) better than others. If they are good stories—that is, if they explain many things, especially the most important things, in a way consistent with our normal encounters with the world—then we have more confidence the stories are accurate, which is just another way of saying the worldview is true, at least for those parts that fit well.

True Story

The Christian Story starts out a long, long time ago, long before Jesus. How long ago is a matter of debate, but that does not concern us here. One thing that does concern us is this: The Christian story is different from other stories in a significant way. This story does not start with the words, “Once upon a time.” Why? Because this story is not meant to be understood as a fairy tale or a myth.

When my eldest daughter was young, she read *The Chronicles of Narnia*. After finishing the first book she asked me, “Papa, is the story about the wardrobe and Peter and Susan and Lucy and Edmund and the lion a true story?”



“No, it’s not,” I told her. “Some stories are true, and some stories are not true. The story about Narnia is fiction.” (I did tell her, though, that some fictional stories like Narnia are actually *about* true stories, even though the stories themselves are not true.) The Christian story, I was careful to point out, is not like the Narnia story. It isn’t make believe. It is a true story.

Now, when I say this story is a true story, I’m using the word “true” in its ordinary sense. I don’t mean “true *for* me.” I mean “true *to* reality.” I mean the things the Story describes actually exist and the events in the Story really happened (or, in some places, are yet to happen).

This is the same as saying, as I did earlier, that Christianity is a picture of reality. This is the story of the way the world really is. That’s the kind of story I’m telling. It’s history, not fiction. This was the point I was trying to make with the stockbroker. I didn’t want him to think the Story was my personal spiritual fantasy, my religious fairytale, or my make-believe-to-make-me-feel-happy kind of story.

This point is important for another reason. One of our deepest questions about our world is, “What went wrong?” We know the world is broken, but we wonder how that happened, and to some degree we want to fix it. Those two issues are related. Answer the first and you might be able to answer the second.

That’s why for the Christian Story a myth or a fairy tale simply will not do. Make-believe accounts do not actually explain anything. They only illustrate problems in clever, imaginative ways. When a boy asks his father how he got the scar on his face, if his father begins with the words “once upon a time,” the boy immediately knows his father is not giving him an answer to his question. Only a true-life experience can give a true-life scar.

The world is wounded, this we know. Answering the question of how it got to be wounded requires more than a myth. It requires an accurate account of reality. This point about reality applies to every detail of the Story I am telling. The narrative is history, and if it is not, it explains nothing.

Math Not Bigotry

If our Story is really true in the deep sense, then it ought to be obvious that other religion stories, taken as complete pictures of the world, are simply mistaken. This does not mean, of course, they are wrong at every point. That would be a foolish mistake for me to make. There are many individual things a religion might teach that are completely sound, as far as they go. I mean, rather, that if the Story is true, all other stories *taken as a whole* cannot be true as well. To say otherwise would also be a foolish mistake.

A man once told me I was probably one of those bigoted people who thought 90% of the world was wrong about their religion. I agreed with the 90% part, but I told him it had more to do with math than with bigotry.



Think about this. Some religions teach Jesus is the Son of God and others deny it. Fair enough. But is it not clear that somebody is right and somebody is wrong on that score? There is simply no getting around it.

The great monotheistic faiths understand God as a distinct, individual person, whereas some Eastern religions see God as the impersonal sum of everything all put together. Is it not clear that, if there is a God, both of these notions cannot be true about Him at the same time? Clearly, massive numbers of people are mistaken on one side of this issue or the other.

When anyone dies, they *might* go to heaven, or they *might* go to hell, or they *might* be reincarnated, or they *might* disappear into nothing at all. But even a child can see they cannot do them all at the same time. Multitudes—the majority even—must be mistaken. Again, that’s not bigotry. It’s simple math.

And notice, I am not wasting our time by citing debates about angels dancing on pinheads. No, I am speaking of the heart of things, the foundations, the deep structures, the most basic claims about reality that religions make.

So then, though it’s the rage these days to say all religions are basically the same, it turns out not to be the case at all. What ought to strike us, rather, is how unlike each other they really are. When it comes to the most important things, each religion’s picture of reality is quite different from the others. And those differences simply cannot be smoothed over by invoking naïve stories about blind men and elephants that do not really get to the heart of the matter.²





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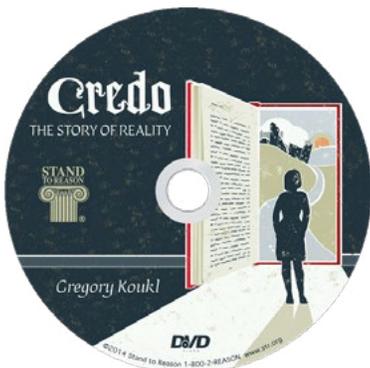
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The ancient Christian teaching that trust in Jesus is anyone's only hope for salvation clashes head-on with the modern idea that all religions are equally legitimate paths to God. Sadly, this "religious pluralism" is a notion many Christians have embraced, too. Is Jesus the only way? Is salvation dependent on faith in Christ?

This handy quick-reference guide identifies nine distinct lines of argument that biblically prove Jesus taught this truth and entrusted it to every one He trained to take His message after Him. Neither Jesus nor His disciples were religious pluralists. When a hundred passages argue the same point from a variety of different angles, it cannot be mistaken, only ignored.



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Credo: The Story of Reality DVD, Gregory Koukl – \$12.95 DVD Video (DVD042)

What is Christianity? Is it a religious system? A relationship with God? A philosophy of life? A roadmap to Heaven? It is actually much more than any of those. Christianity is a story, a drama about conflict, love, betrayal, rebellion, self-sacrifice, and redemption. But this story isn't a make-believe story. It is a story about the way the world actually is. It is the story of reality.

In this presentation, Greg narrates the Christian story—the Christian view of reality, or worldview—in a way that is a refreshing in its simplicity and clarity. Greg describes the basic concepts that form the cornerstones of all worldviews, and the five simple words needed to outline the plot of the Christian account of reality.



And it's also not going to do any good dismissing our account of the world as "your truth" in favor of your own story called "my truth." Since believing something can't make it true (otherwise there'd be no difference between believe and make-believe), it makes no sense calling any belief a "truth" as if they were the same thing.

Confused talking leads to confused thinking. Some beliefs are true. Others are not. The difference matters. If a story is not accurate to reality, it's not any truth at all, so it can never be *my* truth or *your* truth, even though we may believe it. It can only be our delusion, or our mistake, or our error, or whatever else you may want to call it. But it could never be our "truth." I hope that's clear.

The Narrow Way



Which brings us to a related issue. To many, the Christian Story seems so narrow in light of today's sensibilities it's almost suffocating. Only one way to Heaven? That is nearly impossible for most people to take seriously. As one bumper sticker states, "God is too big to fit into one religion." And those who think differently think too highly of themselves and their own beliefs.

Does God really care about the theological details? After all, isn't He more interested in how a person behaves than in what he believes?

It might be helpful to note that even though Christians are faulted for being small-minded for this view, the idea was not invented by them. Christians promote the "narrow way" because Jesus Himself was the author of it. He made the claim repeatedly, many times in many ways. Every disciple on record whom Jesus personally trained to carry on after Him delivered the same message: There is a narrow way to eternal life that few find, but a wide way to destruction that many follow. Indeed, "Christian" was not the label the followers of Jesus initially used of themselves. Rather, they called their group "[the Way](#)," in light of Jesus' own claim.³

Of course, some will quickly note that just because Jesus taught it does not automatically make it true, and they would have a point. But it does seem to make the narrow view more difficult to dismiss. Jesus of Nazareth is a person most people are inclined to take seriously—which is why they freely quote Him when it suits their purpose.

But why would Jesus, of all people, say such a thing? Wasn't Jesus' main message about equality, fairness, social justice, loving our neighbors—*inclusion*, in a word, not *exclusion*?

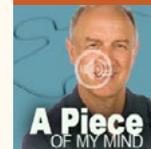
It is fashionable these days to presume such things about Jesus, but those were not the reasons He came—at least not the reasons He gave. Jesus cared about those issues, no question, which is why we find them scattered here and there within His teaching, but they were not the heart of it, not according to Him.

No, there is a reason Jesus made this controversial claim about Himself, and it had nothing to do with arrogance, bigotry, or small-minded exclusion—a kind of cruel trick played on unsuspecting people to guarantee their damnation. Rather, it had to do with the nature of reality—a very real problem with man and his world that needed a very real solution.

Humanity is afflicted with a moral disease called sin. Rebellion has created an enormous debt. There is only one antidote: payment. Either Jesus pays for us, or we pay for ourselves. It's that simple. That is why He is the only way of salvation. *He is the only one who solved the problem, since He is the only one who paid the price.* He paid so we wouldn't have to pay. This is not fantasy. It is fact. We sinned in time-space history—the real world. Jesus died in time-space history—the real world.

When
Christianity
talks about
Jesus
it means to talk about
Reality

A Piece of My Mind



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And that is my point, for the moment. It has not been my goal here to expound on the reason Jesus is necessary, or to defend that claim (I have done both elsewhere), but rather to make clear the kind of claim we (and Jesus) have been making. And this is a point that non-Christians and even many Christians have not been fully clear on. *When Christianity talks about Jesus, it means to be talking about reality, not religious fantasy.* If we were just making things up, we could easily contrive answers that were more convenient. Reality, however, is not always so accommodating since facts are stubborn things.

Some of the facts in question are those underwritten by our common experience. There are two things we all know to be true about life. First, the world is not the way it is supposed to be. Second, we are not the way we are supposed to be. These are not guesses. These are facts. And if there is a solution to those problems, then that must be in the realm of fact, too, or else nothing is solved.

Jesus offers Himself as that solution, a claim underwritten by the singular facts of His remarkable life, death, and return from the grave. Yes, His claims are subject to verification and debate, but they should not be dismissed simply because they are uncomfortable or unpopular.

If you are looking for a psychological lift for the moment, a temporary bromide to relieve the distress of life—Marx’s “opiate of the people”—then you are welcome to your religious fantasy, whatever it may be. Be advised, though, it might soothe for the moment, but it will never heal since it does not address reality.

If, however, you want genuine healing instead of emotional distraction, then you need a genuine Healer. That is what Jesus offers: genuine healing, actual restoration with God, true forgiveness—reality, not fantasy.

Endnotes

1. I am grateful to Chuck Colson for the insight that Christianity is a view of reality.
2. I have written an entire article about this confusion titled, “The Trouble with the Elephant.” You can find it by searching for it by name at str.org.
3. Jesus’ comments about the “narrow way” can be found in Matthew 7:13-14, and His claim to be “the way, the truth and the life” can be found in John 14:6. His disciples repeated the idea in many places, notably Acts 4:12 and Romans 10:1-4, 9. Find 100 such verses collected in the booklet, *Jesus, the Only Way—100 Verses*, available at str.org.

Putting This Solid Ground into Action

Remember that Christianity is a worldview—a depiction of the way things actually are.

Keep in mind that religious people, scientists, skeptics, and atheists all have worldviews they believe are true. Just believing something doesn’t make it true.

Christianity is different from other stories in a significant way. It is history not fiction.



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PLURALISM?

By Greg Koukl

One of us must be wrong, at bare minimum. Maybe we both are. But one thing that we can never say is that we're both right.

I want to continue to pursue this concept of pluralism. Triggered by a comment made last week: "They may not believe in Jesus, but they love God and serve God with all of their hearts. They love God. You love God. How can you say one is wrong and the other is right?"

This kind of comment is so common and, on the surface, so reasonable, that to question it immediately brands you as some kind of religious fanatic, someone so blinded by his narrow-minded convictions that he has no tolerance for other's beliefs.

Now here is the hitch in the new pluralism. Tolerance used to mean that everyone has a right to their beliefs. It doesn't mean that anymore, because all of these Christians who are considered intolerant still believe, as far as I can tell, that everyone has a legitimate right to his own beliefs.

No, the new pluralism demands that you must not say that anyone else's belief is inferior or, worse yet, flatly mistaken. To say someone is wrong is to be intolerant, to be close-minded and provincial, to be extreme and is impossible to reason with.

How can I say one person's view is wrong and the other is right? Very easily. Precisely because reason and rationality demand it. Here's what I mean.

I'm praying to God who is Jesus. They're praying to God who isn't Jesus. God can't be Jesus and not be Jesus at the same time. therefore, we both can't be praying to, loving, or worshipping God. One of us must be wrong, at bare minimum. Maybe we both are. But one thing that we can never say is that we're both right, that we're both worshipping God.

This underscores the irrationality of this kind of pluralism, an irrationality that is based, I think, on an errant understanding of what it means for something to be true.

To many, the concept of truth is deep, esoteric and indefinable. Let me give you a definition in one syllables. It's from Aristotle, I think. If you say "It is," and it is, or "It is not," and it is not, then you speak truth. If you say "It is," and it is not, or "It is not," and it is, then you don't speak truth. This is called correspondence, in other words, a thing is true if and only if it actually corresponds to what is really there. Truth, therefore is not determined by opinion or belief. Believing something to be so doesn't make it so. It is not true merely to me. It might be true to me and still entirely false.

[Click here for the rest of this article.](#)

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Our mission—no, our passion—at Stand to Reason is to help you develop as a Christian Ambassador who can handle the Word of God carefully, communicate its knowledge clearly, and defend it graciously. This is possible because faithful friends like you support STR's efforts prayerfully and financially. Your gift today helps ensure that STR continues equipping followers of Christ to promote "Christianity worth thinking about."

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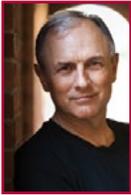
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Greg Koukl

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- [4-5](#) Mt. of Olives Lutheran Church, Mission Viejo, CA [Contact](#)
- [11-12](#) Biola Apologetics Tactics Course, La Mirada, CA [Contact](#) #koukl
- [17-20](#) Elgin First Baptist, Elgin, IA [Contact](#)

April

- [15-16](#) Ratio Christi West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV [Contact](#)
- [17-18](#) Ratio Christi Marshall University, Huntington, WV [Contact](#)
- [22-24](#) Bonnyville Baptist, Bonnyville, AB [Contact](#)
- [30](#) Change Conference, Newmarket, Ontario, Canada [Contact](#)



Alan Shlemon

March

- [2](#) Bethel Church, Houston, TX [Contact](#)
- [6](#) Desert Springs Community Church, Goodyear, AZ [Contact](#)
- [7](#) Magnolia Baptist, Anaheim, CA Private Event
- [21-22](#) Oregon Right to Life- Camp Joshua, Salem, OR [Contact](#)
- [28](#) Riverview Church, Bonsall, CA [Contact](#)

April

- [9](#) Oregon Right to Life, Portland, OR [Contact](#)
- [10, 17](#) Harvest Christian Fellowship, Riverside, CA [Contact](#)
- [18](#) Magnolia Baptist, Anaheim, CA Private Event
- [26-30](#) Thinking Matters, New Zealand [Contact](#)



Brett Kunkle

March

- [6](#) Church Everyday, Northridge, CA [Contact](#)
- [10-12](#) Great Homeschool Convention, Greenville, SC [Contact](#)
- [17-19](#) Great Homeschool Convention, Fort Worth, TX [Contact](#)
- [20](#) Cottonwood Creek Church, Allen, TX [Contact](#)
- [31](#) Great Homeschool Convention, Cincinnati, OH [Contact](#)

April

- [1-2](#) Great Homeschool Convention, Cincinnati, OH [Contact](#)
- [9](#) Crossroads Community Church, Valencia, CA [Contact](#)
- [16-17](#) First Baptist El Reno, El Reno, OK [Contact](#)
- [30](#) Pathway Community Church, Fort Wayne, IN [Contact](#)



Tim Barnett

April

- [9](#) RIZM Canada, Toronto [Contact](#)
- [18](#) Unity Christian High School, Barrie, Ontario, Canada [Contact](#)
- [23](#) Apologetics Canada, Barrie, Ontario, Canada [Contact](#)



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