

# RELIGION REDEFINED

Ronnie McBrayer is a nationally syndicated columnist writing about religion and faith. His approach to religion is unconventional, based on love and light instead of guilt and fear.



## Keeping the Faith Chowder

By Ronnie McBrayer

My friends have a new dog. His name is Chowder. Chowder is a black and white globe of fuzz and fun with one ear that points due north and another that falls like a floppy patch over his right eye. Full-grown but not even knee high, I don't know how this charming little mutt could be any cuter. You just want to scoop him up in your arms, throw a tennis ball for him to chase, or scratch behind those mismatched ears of his. But he won't let you; at least he won't let me. My friends' new pet is a rescued dog who must have suffered a terrible life of abuse before his adoption. Chowder won't let me – or any other male for that matter – get near him. His fear is very real, and very severe.

Whenever I visit my friends, Chowder barks, howls, squeals, and eyes me as if I were carrying a loaded gun. If I get too close to him, he bristles and bares his teeth, so I keep my distance. Usually, he settles beneath the dining room table where he whimpers, chews on the chair legs, and wets himself and the floor with his terrified bladder. His owners tell me Chowder is improving, however. He used to react to them the same way. But now he greets them at the door with a wagging tail, sleeps at the foot of their bed every night, and is the overall reliant companion that makes dog “man's best friend.”

He still cowers from them on occasion, retreating to the safety of the dining room table; especially if there is an unexpected loud noise or a quick, sudden movement. But all in all, Chowder is learning to trust his new owners. I hope one day he will learn to trust me.

I thought about my little friend Chowder after a recent talk I gave. Most of my talks pursue the same theme: Jesus came to show us how to live, how to be free, how to know God. Jesus came to save us from

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ourselves, not from God. After sticking with this script yet again, a person approached me as the lecture crowd was dispersing. She asked me, “Do you really believe in the kind of compassionate God you talked about tonight?” I explained that in Jesus, that is the only God I can see, not the religious images we have been sold; so yes I believe. She answered, “I really want to believe in this God – in this Jesus. I really do. But I am afraid.” I asked her, “What are you afraid of exactly?” She responded, “I am afraid this is all too good to be true, and if so, I could not stand the disappointment.”

It was then I thought of little Chowder. His experience has been our own. We have been spiritually abused. Our understanding of religion's God has been this ugly, angry, violent being with nothing but a clenched fist and a kick off the front porch if we bark just once. We huddle under the table, afraid to get close to God or anyone who represents him. We can't help it – it is the only experience we have. But I believe this experience has terribly damaged many of us. For this reason, among many, I find

Jesus to be so liberating! Jesus shows us a different God than the one we have known; one who loves us, not abuses us; one who has painstakingly adopted us as his own, not given us reason to fear him; one who wants to care for us, not hurt us.

Can we learn to trust this God? Can we learn to believe this God really loves us? Can we come out of the dark place where we cower in fear and give him a chance to care for us? Can we give up our dread and live out our lives in his good grace? Can we? This is not too good to be true – it is far better than you can imagine. Just ask Chowder.

*Ronnie McBrayer is the author of “Leaving Religion, Following Jesus.” He writes and speaks about life, faith, and Christ-centered spirituality. Visit his website at [www.ronniemcbrayer.net](http://www.ronniemcbrayer.net).*

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