

**This is the transcript of an interview conducted by Jeremy Sample from Smyth and Helwys Publishers (Summer 2011):**

**Jeremy:** How would you describe your calling and mission as a writer and as a Christian?

**Ronnie:** In a word, I would describe it as catalytic. Think about striking a match: With a little push and a little friction, there is a spark. Will it lead to a fire? Maybe. Maybe not. But in the right environment, that little spark can ignite a roaring blaze. As a writer-preacher-follower of Jesus, all I want to do is shower a few sparks here and there, creating space and place for people to hear and draw closer to Christ. If I haven't accomplished that – being a catalyst for Christ-centered change – then I feel my writing and living aren't all they could or should be.

**Jeremy:** Why did you write the book *Leaving Religion, Following Jesus*? What were you hoping to communicate to readers?

**Ronnie:** I don't know how I could not have written this book. It is, in many ways, the diary of my own spiritual journey. No, it's not a biography or a memoir (it follows a portion of the Gospel of Luke), but ultimately, I found religion to be more of an obstacle in knowing God than a help. I don't say that to be critical of the church, but to say that Christ must be the focus and center of our faith, eclipsing everything else, even our religious structures and constructs.

I hope that through this book those who maybe find themselves outside the established church will be encouraged to cling to faith in Christ, even though their faith in church institutions may be shattered. And to those within the church, I hope we would read this book and take a serious look at how we “do” church. Much of Christianity is more concerned with protecting its position and power than caring for people. As such, it has little credibility. We must be quick to accept that even something we label “Christian,” if it is not consistent with the words and ways of Christ, should be discarded.

**Jeremy:** Does *Leaving Religion, Following Jesus* relate in any way to your new book, *The Jesus Tribe*? If so, how?

**Ronnie:** Native tribes of North America, particularly the Cherokee, used to build fish traps in the rivers and streams. This was a triangle built out of stacked stone. When the water was high, fish would swim into it, and when the water receded the fish would be trapped. The family could then wade out to their trap and snag a meal whenever they needed it. It was a natural storage tank for fresh food. I use this same approach when writing. If an idea or concept really strikes me, I make a note and put it in my journal or mental fish trap, knowing I will come back to it later for a fresh idea.

It was while writing the chapter entitled “Whose Side is God On?” in *Leaving Religion* that *The Jesus Tribe* was first conceived. In that chapter I say that Jesus

offered his people an alternative way to live in the land of the Empire. *The Jesus Tribe*, using the Sermon on the Mount, explores and expands upon that alternative way of life. I'm glad I stuck that idea away in the fish trap.

**Jeremy:** You've recently completed *The Jesus Tribe*. Can you tell us a little about the book? What interested you about this project?

**Ronnie:** This is the question I get the most these days – What is this *Jesus Tribe* book all about? – And describing it is a bit like trying to paint the wind. The concept is simple enough; it is a book that explores Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, but that Sermon, only three little chapters, is a lot to get your mind and life around! My premise is that these words and ways of Jesus form the alternative counter culture for his followers, and the metaphor I use, calling on my own Cherokee ancestors, is of course, the tribe.

A growing number of Jesus followers in North America have this splinter in their minds that tells them there is something suspicious about attaching a national flag – any national flag – to the cross. Good! We should be suspicious! Because the church's identity is not bound to our nation. The church is a unique, called-out people who live as aliens and strangers in a world that is no longer our home. So, this book is about the inherent tension of being a follower of Jesus while living within one of the world's most powerful Empires.

I think there is a two-fold question that every marginalized/tribal people group has had to wrestle with: How do we sustain our distinctive way of life, and to what extent do we adapt to the culture around us? There are a few possible answers: 1) We can conform and simply become a part of the Empire. 2) We can fight; wage holy cultural war, or 3) We can concede and just give up. All of these are dead ends. The way of life is the way of Jesus, crystalized so well in the Sermon on the Mount.

**Jeremy:** What is your hope for how *The Jesus Tribe* might impact readers?

**Ronnie:** Well, let's return to the idea of writer as catalyst. This book will definitely cause a few sparks, and I don't expect everyone to agree with my conclusions. In fact, I expect some of my "God-and-Country" friends to all but disown me. But if this book can wake a few readers to the fact that there is no such thing as an "American Christian" (there are, however, Christians who happen to reside in America), that our dependence upon and attachment to the Empire's power is extremely dangerous, and that the way of Jesus graciously resists "how things really work" in the world, then the effort will be worth it.

My intent is not to polarize. It is to raise questions in the reader's head and heart. Some of these questions I won't be able to sufficiently answer with this book – maybe no one can answer them. But my Cherokee ancestors would say the right answer is not as important as raising the right questions. That is my hope.

**Jeremy:** How would you describe your writing style?

**Ronnie:** Most of those who review my books describe me as a story-teller. I like that description, actually. Being raised in the Appalachian south, story-telling is as much a part of me as my name – it's inescapable. I just hope I can use it – along with all my metaphors, tales, and examples – to point toward the grace and truth of Christ.

Think of it like this: Have you ever tried to get your dog to look at something? You point at what it is you want him to see: A bird, a stick you have thrown, or a toy of some kind. What does the dog always look at? The end of your finger. The best stories are those that do more than draw attention to the story-teller's finger. The best stories actually enable the listener to see and hear something “other,” something “out there,” that he or she can explore.

**Jeremy:** You recently made the decision to focus more on your writing. Can you talk about the difficulties and hopes behind this decision?

**Ronnie:** It is both terrifying and exhilarating. I have come across the assumption that once you write a book you are “set.” Maybe if you are Max Lucado, but the majority of authors couldn't live a month off their annual book sales much less retire from public life. I also direct a non-profit that seeks to be a catalyst (there's that word again) in the world of faith, assisting the planting and growth of non-traditional communities of faith, and I hope combined with my writing that will be as engaging and promising as it appears to be.

**Jeremy:** You now have a syndicated newspaper/internet column. Where can readers find it?

**Ronnie:** It's a column called “Keeping the Faith,” and is one of the great surprises of my life. It started out as a devotional in my local newspaper, and now it is in more than 50 outlets in North America with a circulation of more than a million people. The Detroit News is my flagship paper, which makes me smile. How does a hillbilly kid from the Appalachians get a reading in the Motor City? God has a sense of humor.

Otherwise, it can be read in papers across the South, the Midwest, and California. One unique thing about the column is that I give it away. There's no charge for newspapers that carry it. I believe that issues of faith – and good ideas and thoughts about faith – should not be treated as commodities. If as Christians we believe we have the greatest message in the world, we ought not treat it as merchandise.

**Jeremy:** Outside of your ministry and job, how do you enjoy spending time?

**Ronnie:** Raising three young boys, my wife and I find ourselves on a ball field a fair amount of the time. Soccer and football primarily, but there is also a little basketball, tennis, and wrestling thrown in as well. It's busy, but we love it. My wife and I also like to hike, read, and cycle. We are getting ready for a charity Century Ride right now – yes, that's a hundred miles on bicycle in one day.

**Jeremy:** What would readers be surprised to know about you?

**Ronnie:** You saved the toughest question for last! Actually, for the last few years I played guitar and sang for a band called "Sawmill Gravy and the Biscuits." Seriously, I'm not making that up. We did a combination of blues, gospel, jazz, and folk music – and the occasional 80's cover song. It was more fun than you can imagine.