

JESUS,

BREAD, *and*

Crafting a HAND-MADE FAITH
IN A MASS MARKET WORLD

CHOCOLATE

JOHN J. THOMPSON

ZONDERVAN

Jesus, Bread, and Chocolate

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Introduction

**NEW RESPECT FOR
THE TWANG**





Y

ou know, John,” my friend Buddy said over breakfast at Grandma Sally’s Pancake House, “I would suggest that maybe it’s not the twang you don’t like about modern country music, but the absence of twang.”

It was 1995. Buddy Miller had played a show at my concert venue in Wheaton, Illinois, the night before with his wife, Julie, and a singer-songwriter named Randy Stonehill, who was a bit of a legend in my little world. I had known Buddy casually for a few years and loved the way he and Julie played together. My wife and I had them on a bit of a pedestal, in fact. Their brutally honest, transparent, unadorned style emboldened us in our own musical pursuits. I jumped at the chance to have breakfast with Buddy.

As we ate, Buddy asked me about our music and our influences. I rambled on about my eclectic tastes—from Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan to gospel music like the Fairfield Four and Blind Boys of Alabama to modern rock like U2. I also mentioned that my wife, Michelle, and I had found some musical common ground in the sounds of artists like Merle

Haggard, Patsy Cline, Emmylou Harris, Maria McKee, and the Eagles. “I love old country,” I insisted. “I just don’t like the twangy stuff like Garth Brooks and Shania Twain.”

Buddy proceeded to school my sorry twenty-four-year-old self with great patience and grace. “The twang is the essence of American music,” he said. “It’s in the high, lonesome sound of bluegrass. It’s in the field hollers and angst of gospel. It’s in the tension and release of the blues and the bent strings of rock and roll.” He went on to tell of how Nashville producers removed the authentic twang from country music and replaced it with strings and lush production to make it more palatable to mainstream audiences. They then added some pseudo-twang back in as a kind of musical window dressing. It sounded fake. Unsatisfying.

“That stuff you say you like,” Buddy said respectfully, “is full of twang. Heck, Bob Dylan is practically nothing *but* twang.”

I felt—I’m not kidding here—like a light was shining on our little corner booth, and God in heaven was saying, *Pay attention, John. This is important!* I did pay attention, and my heart started to race. So many things began to make sense in that moment.

The music I craved, sought out, and spent my life talking about had always been laced with *twang*—whether it was country or metal or folk or gospel. Buddy had simply given me a new understanding of the word—a word I would have ignorantly run away from a few minutes earlier. Actually, he reappropriated a word I had used disdainfully and imbued it with new and exciting meaning.

By the time of my breakfast with Buddy, I was already a music journalist and aspiring pop culture historian covering a tiny niche of faith-fueled, mostly independent, subtly spiritual alternative music. I invested in words like *authenticity* and *integrity* as I circled the indescribable essence of music that captivated me. I suppose by devoting so much time to writing about music, I have, in fact, spent my life “dancing about architecture,” as Elvis Costello once said in an interview. That may seem absurd, I suppose, until a building really makes you want to cut a rug. When I come across music or anything else that carries the aroma of another, more real dimension than the one in which I’m currently trapped, you will always see my toes start tapping. I know I am not alone in this.

And it wasn’t just music that charmed me with its twang. I started hearing the twang everywhere—and noticing its absence when it went missing. It can be felt in the tension of a loving, vulnerable relationship. It can be tasted in good food and drink. When the twang is removed from these things, they go down easier but satisfy less. It’s much easier to maintain a shallow connection with someone than to cultivate a real friendship. No one has to develop a taste for sugary, salty, processed food, but it can take effort to learn how to like *real* food.

Nowhere is this reality more important than in the cultivation of our faith life. Millions of Americans are losing their taste for processed, convenient, consumerist Christianity. We have gorged ourselves on cheap church for decades and have become, as Randy Stonehill sang, “undernourished

and overfed.” The gospel we are living has, in many cases, lost its saltiness. What good is it? We have created a Jesus made in our own image; a light-haired, blue-eyed, fair-skinned, corporate-friendly, feel-good American guru with absolutely no discernable twang.

I grew up a product of a highly automated and manufactured culture that prided itself on removing all of the rough edges and twang from my world. It felt as if the values of the Industrial Revolution found their full expression during my coming of age in the 1970s and '80s. I had no idea how much farther we had to fall. Cheaper, easier, faster, more—these are the tenets of our increasingly globalized neighborhood. I am hungry for something deeper, something truer, something chewy and challenging and risky. Although I didn't know it at the time Buddy and I sipped our coffee and talked about music, I was teetering on the edge of a personal, professional, and spiritual catastrophe I didn't see coming. I was going to need some twang to get me through. Thank God I found it.

I've run down many rabbit trails in my obsession with twang. You'll get a feel for that as you read these stories and listen in on my conversations with coffee gurus, bakers, chocolate makers, brewers, and others I've encountered along the way. I'm losing my taste for the prepackaged, the mass-produced, and the canned. It's no longer enough to add water, microwave, stir, and eat. I want to know where things come from. I want to know how they affect me. I want to know how they were supposed to taste before the factories took over. I search obsessively for the good, the true, and the beautiful in the grooves of an LP, the pages of a book, the

frames of a film, and the conversations and prayers I share with a small group of fellow pilgrims in our home. In these pages I'm going to do my best to ruin you for the cheap stuff. Ultimately, it doesn't matter what kind of coffee you drink; it is the kind of faith you live, or the kind of faith you abandon, that can make all the difference in the world.

I've noticed that most human endeavors fit somewhere on a continuum between manufactured and handmade, between plastic and flesh. Millions of people are intentionally moving backward on that continuum, seeking out handmade things and communal experiences in ways that buck a couple of thousand years of one-way commercial "progress." I was recently looking up recipes on my iPhone while walking through a farmers market and simultaneously texting my wife about the shopping list she'd given me. The irony was not lost on me. I am a fan of technology, and I stand in awe of its potential for good or for ill on a minute-by-minute basis in my life. But the spiritual, social, ethical, and emotional conundrum facing all of us is much more complex than analog versus digital.

I'm following hints of this "crafted" approach to life and faith like they're breadcrumbs leading me deeper and deeper into an enchanted forest. It chills me to think of the toxic effect industrial fumes are having on our relationships, art and imagination, and even on how we understand and interact with the designer of all of this stuff. Too many people are giving up on Jesus because of the corporate accent of his people. Many find much more satisfying community at the local pub or coffee shop than at church. My artisanal

spelunking, however, is showing me that we don't need to hand out suspenders and moustache grooming tools to our worship teams or replace all of the lights in our churches with Edison bulbs in order to correct the unfortunate pall industrialism has cast over the church. We just need to stop and smell the coffee.

Every real awakening is personal. This journey has been a very personal one, but as you will see, I am a continually evolving product of some peculiar and wonderful communities. While the stories and conversations contained in these pages are my own, the implications resonate far beyond my own walls. I'm a musician and a music industry professional. I'm a husband and a father. I'm a songwriter and a roaster and a brewer and a gatherer. In the ways that matter, I bet you are too. These stories may be mine in the literal sense, but my conversations over the last decade about the ideas and experiences covered here have shown that many of us are combing these same beaches for glimmers of a renewed vision. It's time for us to figure out what the surface stuff—the beards and the campaigns to buy local and the community gardens—tells us about where our own hearts and our neighbors' hearts really are.

Maybe bread and chocolate and coffee and farmers markets can show us something about what it means to cultivate a taste for real community, real humanity, and real discipleship. It may seem frivolous to some. It may feel threatening to purveyors of the status quo. But our ability to rediscover and embrace an authentic faith in the authentic Jesus may, in fact, be a matter of spiritual life or death.

Chapter 1

THE ROAD TO RUINATION





M

y biological father was a charming, articulate, sociopathic mess of a human being. His mother taught him how to get away with check fraud, and it's unclear if he ever did an honest day's work in his life. He was a controlling, abusive, alcoholic monster who could change, without a second's notice, into an exuberant, hilarious clown. If he had been more disciplined, he would have made a good mobster.

He was a con man by trade—or at least that's the best we can figure. He scammed people and then disappeared. His life was about hiding from the law while living large. He had a car phone in his fancy ride, while his wife and kids were scrimping by on welfare. His fraudulence sent me searching desperately for the truth at a very young age.

We moved a lot when I was young. For several months during the summer of '77, we were basically homeless. My brother and I stayed with my grandparents while my father and my pregnant mother drove around Illinois trying to find a new place to live. We eventually settled on a run-down

farm outside of Peoria, Illinois, for a couple of years. It was the longest we ever lived in one place, so I used to say I grew up on that farm. The truth is that in many ways I was forced to grow up before we moved to the farm. I was seven then.

My mom became a Christian when I was about three years old. By that I mean she transformed from a well-mannered Episcopalian into a young woman who believed that Jesus was alive and real and available to her. A spiritual phenomenon that *LIFE* magazine referred to as “the Jesus Movement” inspired millions of young people to connect with Jesus in a very personal, intimate, and communal way. Once these Jesus people got to Mom, I was a quick convert. At three years old, I began developing my own relationship with God. My faith, in fact, predates my conscious memories.

My earliest church-related memories include the high, vaulted ceilings and haunting choral singing of the Episcopal and Catholic churches, and the joyful mayhem of Mom’s early charismatic Bible study groups. It was a pretty normal occurrence to hear people speaking in tongues and to see them laying hands on people during prayer and searching large, leather-bound Bibles for answers. I remember when my mom got baptized. It was a strange thing to see these people I barely knew take her into a lake and dunk her under the water. She came out crying. I was upset. I ran to her—ready to protect her from these strange people—but she told me the tears were happy tears. Jesus was in her heart. I was used to seeing her cry, but this was different.

She stayed with my father for seven more years, until I was

not quite ten, because she did not believe that divorce was acceptable in God's eyes. Mom wore long sleeves to cover the bruises on her arms when she took us to the beach. At one point, things got bad enough that we moved to my grandparents' house in the Chicago suburbs. After a few months, my father managed to convince her he had changed. He had "found the Lord." He even became the pastor of a storefront church.

Yes, you read that correctly. He preached up a storm at that little church, cried like a televangelist on the evening news, and then went right back to the same old, same old once we moved back in with him. I hated him and feared him, and I was mystified by him and terrified of becoming him. I defined myself, to the best of my abilities, as his complete opposite.

Late one night, he came home drunk and armed with a large handgun. With me on his right knee, and my brother on his left, he waved his .38 just inches from my right ear as he threatened to kill my mother and take away my brothers and me if she ever tried to leave him. There were four of us boys by then, and though she believed divorce to be a sin, Mom rightly understood that leaving us to be raised by him would be a greater sin. It was time for us to flee.

Unfortunately, she had no idea how to escape. One day while she was at a community college in town, a couple of college students approached her tentatively. They explained that while they had never done anything like this before, as they had been praying, they felt strongly compelled by God to approach her to tell her she needed to escape some kind of situation, and

they were going to do whatever they could to help facilitate that escape. These complete strangers coordinated the details with her, and within a few weeks, a pickup truck carried us and our belongings away while my father was in court.

Because of my father's criminal connections, we had to go into hiding. We lived at a rescue mission called Wayside Cross in Aurora, Illinois, for a while and then moved to a Christian summer camp for underprivileged and at-risk youth on the Fox River in St. Charles. We couldn't say goodbye to our friends. We couldn't call our grandparents. We had to completely disappear.

Months later, the police assured my mother that it was safe for us to come out of hiding. We moved back in with my grandparents in Lombard, a typical Chicago suburb. My parents divorced shortly thereafter, and somehow, our father was granted visitation of us boys every other weekend. We then experienced a season of psychological warfare, as he did everything in his power to use us to convince our mother to return to him. He read me Scriptures about divorce and wives submitting to husbands, and he wept juicy tears as he testified to his undying love for her and us. My youngest brother was just a baby and was already showing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Excessive acid in my stomach—in part the result of near constant stress—caused me to throw up every night. I was pale and skinny, and my eyes were dark. I was falling apart physically, psychologically, and spiritually.

On my thirteenth birthday, my father called, and I, at my counselor's suggestion, finally let him have it. I swore and

cried and screamed at him. After our conversation, he told my mother that if she ever remarried, he would find her and kill her. My grandfather heard the whole thing on the other line and made sure my father knew it. My mom called the police and filed a report. My father disappeared.

My mom had met a man at our church. He was a relatively new Christian and had recently gone through a divorce himself. He and Mom clicked, and despite the incredible baggage involved, he married her and took us all on.

I had recurring nightmares about killing my father. I begged God to send his car off a bridge, then prayed for forgiveness for having such evil thoughts. My “personal relationship with Jesus” involved lots of screaming at the heavens, pounding my fists into the earth, and reading Romans 8:28: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” I read it over and over, trying to make sense of my life. That verse drove me crazy.

I tried to stop believing in God, but it never worked. There was just too much evidence all around me. Everywhere I looked, I saw his fingerprints. Music, art, nature, kisses, the sun and the moon—it all pointed to him. I believed in God, but I thought he had forgotten about us or was punishing us for our father’s sins, like I gleaned from my reading of Exodus 20:5, where God is said to be “a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation . . .”

As terrible as my biological father was, the rest of my family

is incredible. I am blessed to have grown up with a loving, attentive, and extremely cool extended family and with mentors and heroes who celebrated my eccentricities and encouraged my headfirst approach to making sense of the world around me. When I kicked against what I perceived to be stale traditions, they were gracious and patient. When I asked what I was sure were deep questions, they honored me and gave me thoughtful answers. I see now that my instinct to handcraft my faith instead of settling for the off-the-shelf version that wasn't working for me was inspired, encouraged, and enabled by family members and close friends.

Life as I saw it unfolding spoke of humanity's fall and evil and the serpent and death and pain, but a deeper reality gripped my heart and has never let me go. The flame of faith could not be extinguished by abuse and terror. A few months after that terrible phone call on my thirteenth birthday, I made a conscious decision to begin to find a way to forgive my father so the pain and anger wouldn't consume me. At one point, I regularly attended five different youth groups. I was an aggressive seeker and was interested in the different ways various churches sought God's truth. As a teen, I read theological books I could barely understand by Francis Schaeffer, C. S. Lewis, and G. K. Chesterton because my mentors read those books. Mostly, though, I dug for truth in music and conversations.

I now realize that throughout my teen years I was sheltering in a grove of tall, nurturing trees. I often felt alone, or I liked to imagine myself as some kind of pioneer, but in hindsight

I see I was just a bucking lamb in a very safe corral. I remember regularly dressing as obnoxiously as possible for church, just to irritate “traditional” people. I wore fake leather pants, studded leather wristbands, and a ripped-up shirt, and I spiked up my hair as high as it would go. I scrawled Bible verses and lyrics from Christian songs on my jackets and jeans. I challenged every vestige of traditional church life I could find—always kicking against the pricks and deeply desperate for it all to be real. My grandparents, aunts, uncles, and parents’ friends were eventually joined by priests, pastors, youth ministers, volunteer “big brothers,” songwriters, and other role models—all doing their best to equip me to thrive.

It seemed clear to me from a young age that truly authentic people inhabited all types of spiritual environments. I remember profound and life-changing conversations with priests and Sunday school teachers at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church and sermons delivered by nondenominational pastors that were easy to understand and apply to my life. As a teen, I found my place among a tribe of edgy rock-and-roll Christians deeply invested in issues of cultural relevance, social justice, and good, clean fun. In all of these varied environments, I have been profoundly blessed and lovingly tolerated.

Some of my heroes were people I actually knew, while others were musicians and songwriters I admired from a distance. Terry Scott Taylor sang acerbic, haunting faith songs in his tragically unknown band, Daniel Amos, while Greg Hill mentored me through confirmation and youth

group. Obscure rock bands, filmmakers, authors, parish priests, extended family, and high school friends formed a spiritual and cultural tapestry that covered me like a cloak during some very confusing years. The gospel modeled for me was not one of fear or retreat; it was a careful balance of improvisation and faithfulness. I do not take these relationships and experiences for granted. They not only helped me survive but also tuned my heart to see and hear things differently.

Someone set up this world, filled it with all the necessary elements, started it spinning, and seems to enjoy interrupting its gradual and temporary decay with glimpses of a bright and glorious future. “The kingdom of heaven has come near,” Jesus said. It’s not far-off in the future. It’s here, right now; yet it’s still not yet. The brokenness in me, and in the world around me, is groaning to be repaired. There’s a beat to it, a cadence. All creation points toward this someday coming and present healing. People with ears to hear can detect its patterns. I want to be a person who hears.

WELCOME TO THE SUBURBS

My life didn’t begin to resemble anything normal until I was a teen in the Chicago suburbs. Having grown up “on the lam,” I hadn’t benefited from peer groups, social cues, or a common culture. Lots of kids don’t fit in. I, however, was terrified of boys my age. I made up stories about myself because the truth was too hard to talk about.

Once, in sixth grade, when the kids in class were taking turns telling the group what their fathers did for a living, I froze. One kid's dad had been a Stormtrooper in Star Wars. Several other dads were doctors or engineers. When it was my turn, I panicked. But I'd seen a documentary on PBS about the history of Chicago's lakefront and how hundreds of men had basically built a big chunk of the city out over the water. "My dad dug Lake Michigan," I blurted out. The other kids laughed. The teacher laughed. I tried to moderate my lie. "Well, he didn't dig it by himself; he had lots of help." I was mortified. I had no idea what my father actually did. I just knew it was illegal and that I wasn't supposed to walk home alone because my mom and grandparents were afraid he would abduct me. But I couldn't say that. I never did.

From the time I was very young—maybe five or six—music was my escape from the pain and confusion of life. At one point in the late 1970s, probably around age eight, I was given a set of stereo radio receiver headphones that would have to be considered the primordial ancestors of the Sony Walkman that would debut a few years later. They were enormously bulky and had an antenna that stuck up from one side. Those goofy headphones and I were inseparable. They were like a secret door to another dimension. In order to keep them on my head when I rode my bike, I had to tighten them down with a bungee cord. I would sneak them on in bed and slowly dial through AM radio stations coming in from as far away as Chicago. Once we moved to the Chicago area, one of my favorite ways to spend a day was to ride my bike to the library and check out a dozen LPs (the

limit)—everything from *Hotel California* to the *Star Wars* sound track to Mahler's Fifth Symphony. I would lie down on the floor listening to records, writing stories, painting pictures, or trying to play along on my guitar.

We attended a variety of churches until we settled in at my grandparents' Episcopal church. Once my biological father was out of the picture, my mom married Tom Thompson, the fascinating, goateed college man she had met at church. He began to unconditionally love my three younger brothers and me, though none of us were "normal." He'd played in rock bands during the 1960s, so he and I bonded over music. I needed a bit longer than my brothers to trust that he would stick around, but by the end of eighth grade, I took his name. When I was eighteen, he adopted me. To this day, I consider him one of my best friends. This father let me listen to his records, and he taught me how to play the guitar. Whenever I refer to "Dad," he's the one I'm talking about.



Sociologically speaking, I am a member of Generation X. I'm the oldest son of a baby boomer. I came of age during the 1970s and '80s, awash in popular culture, emerging technology, and skyrocketing consumerism. The arbiters of cool neatly subdivided my generation into "markets," then sold us all the corresponding accessories. I fell into the "alternative" camp. I knew a few real people who were on the same wavelength, but most of my community was virtual. I stayed up late to watch *U2 Live at Red Rocks* on MTV, and I

imagined that all those people in the rain were My People. I read magazines and imagined sitting at a table with writers and artists talking about stuff that really mattered, while the ignorant masses listened to dumb music and ate white bread. I watched movies and imagined the offbeat girl would notice me and appreciate me as a Curator of Interesting and Meaningful Ideas rather than see me as Awkward Teenage Dork.

When I discovered a somewhat underground world of Jesus-loving rock-and-roll artists, I was more than a little intrigued. One of the first records I found was by a hard rock group from a gritty neighborhood in Chicago. They were called Resurrection Band, and they blew my mind. They played seriously hard rock that was every bit as good, or better, than anything my friends were listening to. They also lived in an “intentional community” called Jesus People USA with hundreds of other radical Christians. They served the poor and the elderly. They worked hard and blessed the urban world around them. Talk about authenticity! I begged God to “call” me to move in with them. He never did.

Several members of JPUSA became friends, mentors, and cultivators of my growing understanding of the gospel message. They published a magazine called *Cornerstone*, which tackled the most difficult and controversial issues of the day. When I was thirteen, they started a music festival of the same name. I attended one day of that first Cornerstone Festival in Grayslake, Illinois, just a few days before my fourteenth birthday. An instant city had been crafted out of tents, barns, generators, and PA equipment, and I

experienced a kind of community I hadn't even known I was craving. It was as if a glowing path had appeared in front of me. I'd found my tribe.

Cornerstone was about blowing past the comfortable edges of the modern evangelical experience and daring to take Jesus at his word. Sure, the music was far more engaging, culturally relevant, and diverse than any other Christian festival in the country, but it didn't stop there. The event offered dozens of thoughtful seminars led by brilliant people who tackled everything from sex and dating to cultivating a biblically sound theology of social justice. The music seminar focused on aspects of personal discipline and accountability that would allow artists to maintain their integrity in the midst of a world of compromise. The event included emotionally powerful worship, intellectually challenging teaching, opportunities to serve others, and mosh pits. The first time I raised my hands in worship was when the Orange County pop punk band Undercover played an amped-up version of the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy." Cornerstone was a wonderfully euphoric and deeply pragmatic playground of faith, art, mind, and soul that gathered outsiders and insiders for a few days' worth of heaven on earth.

By the time I turned fifteen, I had a vision of how I would speak order into my own chaos. I would become a youth pastor or social worker (or both), one who wrote and performed my own music and helped introduce others my age to this underground world of faith-fueled rock and roll. I would have a record store, a concert venue, and maybe even a radio station—and it would be called True Tunes. I would

incubate a culturally relevant community and turn people on to a fresh (and, I thought, new) understanding of who Jesus really is and what he's all about. It wouldn't be about the dirty word *religion*—at least not about my understanding of what religion was. It would be about a love that was so pure and so powerful it would pulse through broken, sinful people and bless the entire creation. And it wouldn't be some utopian hippie love either. This would be a love that cost something. It would be a love that made big claims and then lived up to them. It would be a love with teeth.

JESUS, BREAD, & CHOCOLATE

Crafting a Handmade Faith in a Mass-Market World

By John Joseph Thompson

Our culture is telling us something, says author John Joseph Thompson in *Jesus, Bread, and Chocolate*: The big the industrial, the synthetic, the mass-produced are making way for the small, the artisanal, the organic, the small-batch. It's affecting everything from the food we eat, to the art we enjoy. And guess what: It's also affecting the faith we live---and for the better.

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