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## The Born-Again Bank Robber?

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A man once wanted as Mexico's "Public Enemy Number One" has been arrested in California, living under an alias and claiming to be born again. Alfredo Rios Galeana, arrested on charges including bank robbery, had escaped from a Mexican prison and then made his way to California, where he lived as Arturo Montoya. As Montoya, he was an active member of [Ebenezer Baptist Church](#) in Huntington Park, California.

As *The Los Angeles Times* reports: *Montoya told Ebenezer Baptist's pastor, Melvin Acevedo, that he had been saved in Mexico. He said he lived two blocks away in South Gate and had a wife, three children and a growing janitorial business. Acevedo said Montoya displayed a deep passion for God and for sharing his faith with others. He was the host of frequent church events at his house. In the last few years, he attended church four times a week and led four Bible study groups. He had a beautiful voice, which he used to perform Christian mariachi. Montoya often referred to [2 Corinthians 5:17]: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."*

He may well have taken that verse out of its context. Here's more from the news story, published in today's edition of the paper:

*Montoya's fellow church members have no doubt that he was sincere in his beliefs. "You cannot imitate a Christian life for 12 or 13 years," Acevedo said. "Jesus said, 'You will know them by their fruit.' The fruit he gave was serious. He was constant." . . . Munguia often preached with Montoya in parks or on street corners. He said Montoya spoke little of his past. "But he did tell me he had a tremendous past, and that salvation had opened a path in his life," Munguia said. "One day, Americo," he said, "you're going to be amazed at my testimony. I'm going to tell it one day."*

That day probably didn't come as Montoya expected. An informant directed U.S. authorities to Montoya, and he was arrested on July 11. He now awaits trial in Mexico. If convicted, he could face up to fifty years in prison.

How do we come to terms with a story like this? Without doubt, bank robbers — like all sinners — can be redeemed and be transformed by the Gospel. Alfredo Rios Galeana would have us to believe that he had become a Christian, and, as his pastor and fellow church members testify, his life as Arturo Montoya demonstrated the fruit of Gospel authenticity. The problem is this: The Gospel is about God forgiving sinners on the basis of the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ — not about sinners escaping human justice on the basis of their status as Christians. The "amazing" testimony Montoya promised his pastor would have been a far more powerful demonstration of the power of the Gospel had Montoya revealed to his congregation of fellow believers — and to the authorities — that he was indeed wanted as a criminal, had escaped from prison, had been living a lie under an alias, and was now ready to tell the truth and face the legal consequences as a demonstration of his Christian discipleship. He could have brought glory to God by demonstrating genuine repentance and remorse for his sins and a humble willingness to accept the discipline of the church and the legal consequences of his criminal deeds. Christians must not live under an alias in order to escape the consequences of true criminality. Rios Galeana's testimony to the power of the Gospel is tragically compromised by the fact that he never told the truth — he was caught.

Luis Aranda, a commandant with the Mexico City's Judicial Police provided details of Rios Galeana's exploits, which included multiple bank robberies, violent encounters with the police, and two dramatic escapes from prison. Rios Galeana's exploits were even put to music in a folk ballad. In a truly odd twist of fate, Rios Galeana (posing as Arturo Montoya) played a bit part in an American film about a notorious Mexican bank robber.

According to *The Los Angeles Times* and *The San Diego Union Tribune*, Rios Galeana is also sought on charges including kidnapping and murder, in addition to bank robbery and escaping prison. The San Diego paper also reported that, just after his most recent arrest, Rios Galeana made a statement of his Christian experience to reporters in Mexico City: *"Let me tell you that Jesus changed my life, and that's why I left all this," Rios said after arriving in Mexico City under heavy guard Tuesday. "He changed my life and he can change yours. God forgives even the worst criminal."*

The San Diego paper also provided further details of Rios Galeana's criminal past: *The former Mexican military paratrooper allegedly took part in a series of violent bank robberies in the 1970s and '80s and is wanted in Mexico on*

*eight felony warrants that include charges of murder, kidnapping and robbery. "I regret it with all my heart," he said of the crimes he is accused of. Asked what happened to the money taken in the bank robberies, he told reporters, "It was all spent."*

Officer Aranda said of Rios Galeana after his arrest: "He says that Jesus has forgiven him . . . . We'll have to investigate to see if it's true." That should make for an interesting investigation, to say the least.

OTHER NEWS COVERAGE: [\*The Sacramento Union\*](#) [published just after Rios Galeana's arrest], [\*The Telegraph\*](#) [London], [\*KLTV-7 News\*](#), [\*USA Today\*](#), [\*KESQ-3 News\*](#).

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