



Christianity

Without

the



Religion

by Greg Albrecht

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Pasadena, California 91129
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www.ptm.org

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Introduction

Jesus repeatedly took the religious leaders of his day to task for being legalistic instead of loving. He accused them of making merchandise of men’s souls—and do you know what? There are religious leaders who still do all of that, and in the process many are captivated by, in bondage to, hurt by, burned out with and turned off by religion. If you are bogged down in the religious swamps or trapped in the quicksand of religion, I have good news!

Jesus Came to Free Us From Religion

Oppressive religion has hurt and maimed millions throughout the centuries, even since Jesus walked this earth.

Authoritarian control over the lives of its followers is one of the historical products of Christendom that has strayed from the teachings of the Master. Even today religion can hurt and enslave those who are caught in its tenacious grip. Some have escaped that grasp—they’ve rejected religion outright, wanting nothing to do with it. While rejecting unbiblical religion is not only under-

BIBLICALLY BASED FACTS ABOUT RELIGION

- *Jesus hates oppressive, legalistic, authoritarian religion*
- *Religion, as opposed to authentic Christianity, separates us from God*
- *Jesus eagerly desires to rescue us from religion, to give us freedom that can only come from him (Galatians 5:1)*
- *Christianity without the religion is living in the confidence of God’s love*

rejecting unbiblical religion is not only under-

standable, but laudable, in the process many have also rejected God. They did not recognize that oppressive religion and authentic Christianity are opposites, and that Jesus came to this earth to put such religion out of business—to free us *from* religion!

A Definition of “Religion”

When I use the word “religion” I’m not talking about the pure religion of caring for orphans and widows spoken of in James 1:27. What I’m talking about is all the stuff we humans feel we need to do to try to please or appease God. My definition of religion, over against authentic Christianity, includes the vast differences between form and substance, appearances versus reality, legalism instead of love and fear and superstition instead of confidence and truth.

Oppressive religion is based on the premise that if humans do more and try harder they will be able to manipulate and perhaps obligate God into accepting their efforts as at least partial payment for salvation. Religion teaches that human performance of religious duties and regulations gains us a higher standing with God than we would have otherwise enjoyed. The gospel of Jesus Christ is absolutely opposed to the idea that anything we do earns us favor with God. God is good to us because he is good—not because of righteous deeds we produce and perform.



YOU MIGHT BE IN BONDAGE TO RELIGION IF:

- You’re not sure if you are saved, or if you are, whether you might become unsaved
- Your identity as a member of your group, congregation or denomination is more important to you than your identity as a Christian and your relationship with Christ
- Fear or superstition motivates you to obey religious rules and regulations
- You think your particular group is special to God—the one and only true church
- Writings, ideas or books other than the Holy Bible become as or even more important than the Bible in determining your beliefs about God
- You yield independent thought and decisions to authoritarian figures
- Those in authority have abused and battered you psychologically—perhaps even physically
- Your main focus is trying to understand future events—prophetic speculation occupies a large part of your life
- Doctrinal distinctions—twiggy and petty issues—are more important than unity in the Body of Christ—than loving those who hold other views
- You think ritual and ceremony are required elements of Christian life
- You’ve been coerced into giving money by fear, guilt or promises of future health and wealth

Why Religion Is a Problem

Why should you be concerned about religion? Isn't "being religious" a good thing? Doesn't it make God happy? Religion that is focused on anything or anyone other than Jesus Christ often becomes a "middle-man" between us and God—a spiritual power broker. Religion can even become a counterfeit for Christ. Unbiblical religion obscures the reality of who and what God is. The legalisms of religion become obstacles to a relationship with our Lord and Savior.

Religion that counterfeits Christ conceals his love and grace—and redirects our attention from him to its own systems and traditions. Rather than point us to God, unbiblical religion points us to itself, many times in the form of a specific church, denomination or doctrinal emphasis.

Fears of end-time judgment—of getting left behind by a Rapture—permeate religion. Fears of hell or purgatory, fears of authoritarian figures within religion, fears of not measuring up, fears of being discovered as the imperfect sinners we really are and fears of excommunication abound in religion.

Some priests, pastors and preachers stir up those fears in order to manipulate and control those who will follow them. The results are often feelings of intimidation, insecurity—even depression. It's as if those who use such fear tactics forget that the gospel of Jesus Christ is "good news!" Legalism is a major subset of religion, and it's spiritually toxic. Legalism is thinking that human obedience actually contributes to the reward of eternal life. Religious legalism can obligate us to give lip service to credal formulas and mindlessly perform rituals and obligations—turning us into spiritual zombies.

Doing all of the right things may give an appearance of being good, but robot-like, performance-based religion can take us far from God. Our spiritual life can become just so much empty religiosity that stands between us and a real relationship with God. If we allow religious authorities to determine our faith, rather than take personal responsibility for what we believe, we are in bondage to them.

RELIGION

- Attempts to gain God's love and approval on the basis of human performance
- Controls with fear and superstition
- Seeks power over others
- Based primarily on external appearances
- Inflicts hurt and pain
- Is exclusive
- Tears apart
- Proclaims conditional love and acceptance
- Is critical
- Is condemnatory
- Binds and enslaves
- Makes merchandise of people
- Is never satisfied; always demanding more

AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY

- Assures that Jesus has done all that is necessary for your salvation
- Comforts with God's unconditional love
- Seeks to serve others
- Emphasizes the inner life in Christ
- Soothes and heals
- Is inclusive
- Builds and nurtures
- Teaches unconditional love and acceptance
- Is encouraging
- Is gracious
- Frees and gives liberty
- Graciously empowers people
- Gives Christians rest in the Lord

The Lord Is Our Shepherd

God provides us with examples throughout the Bible of his tender care, comfort and compassion—often illustrating his love for us with images of sheep and shepherds. Jesus is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). John the Baptist announced Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

Psalm 23 tells us that the Lord is our shepherd. This chapter promises God will take care of us, lead us by quiet waters, guide us and restore our souls. Even though our journey may take us through the valley of the shadow of death God will comfort us, as a shepherd does to his sheep.

God will prepare a table, feeding us both physically and spiritually, giving us a place in his house forever. Psalm 23 is what God promises. Psalm 23 is what God’s grace provides us. Psalm 23 helps describe authentic, Christ-centered Christianity.

But there is a counterfeit alternative to God’s grace—it’s available in many sizes, shapes and forms—all of it is human religion, opposed to God’s grace.

Psalm 23 promises that those who accept Christ will never be in spiritual need—God will compensate for our spiritual shortcomings. According to Psalm 23, God will give us a place to rest and to be fed and nourished. He will serve us, right in front of our enemies. His direction will make us feel secure, safe and loved.

Religion, on the other hand—religion that is far from the Christ-centered gospel taught in the New Testament—always keeps us guessing,

PHOTO BY MARY WEGNER—PTM

worried if God is happy with us. Religion leads us into swamps of deception, lies and manipulation.

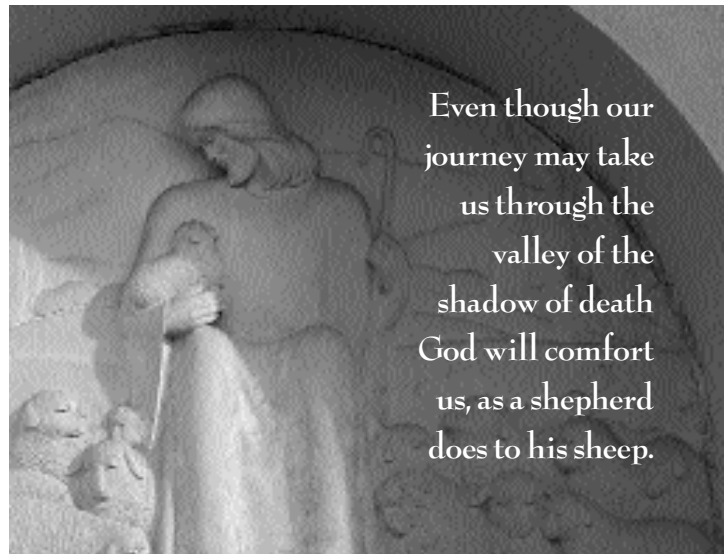
Religion controls us, keeping us enslaved, always demanding more from us. Religion is never satisfied, attempting to persuade us that our lives will forever be lacking in some way.

Religious Counterfeits

Religion can become a wolf in sheep’s clothing, attempting to lead us away from the Lord, who is the good Shepherd. Religion tries to replace or at the very least volunteer itself as a helper and assistant to the Lamb of God (he does not need any help—he has already saved us!).

God is not amused with those who misrepresent him, pointing people away from the birth, life, death and resurrection of the Lamb of God toward human deeds and works that, according to religion, will save us. Here’s some of what God says about false shepherds and their religion, in Jeremiah 23.

“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” (vs. 1). “...you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them” (vs. 2). “The prophets follow an evil course and use their power unjustly” (vs. 10). “Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they



Even though our journey may take us through the valley of the shadow of death God will comfort us, as a shepherd does to his sheep.

LEGALISM MAY HAVE OVERWHELMED YOU IF:

- Ordering your life according to laws and regulations is what your spiritual life is all about
- You think God is harsh and eager to condemn you—that he is angry with you
- You think what you do or don't do determines your salvation
- You gloat self-righteously over others and condemn those who don't measure up to your particular brand of law-keeping
- Judging and gossip about others' law-keeping failures are rampant in your church life
- You feel you must fulfill extra-biblical requirements decreed by a church
- You feel it's important for you to always look good and to hide any imperfections

fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord" (vs. 16). "I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues" (vs. 31). "They...lead my people astray with their reckless lies" (vs. 32).

The immediate context in Jeremiah concerns the religious leaders of the kingdom of Judah—the priests and prophets who should have been providing moral and spiritual direction, but instead were intent upon providing for themselves, fleecing the flock.

They claimed that they had "dreams"—direct revelation and inspiration from God—but their "dreams" were nothing more than lies that enabled them to control, manipulate and abuse the flock of God. These religious leaders were not leaders at all, but frauds and hypocrites. They used God's name (vs. 30-31), but in fact completely misrepresented him. They called attention to the supposed significance and importance of rites and rituals of Baal worship, while ignoring the one true God, who is the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls (1 Peter 2:25).

Are things much different today? Religion, even in the name of Christianity, promotes and tel-

evises wild and pathetic carnival-like "shows" that it claims God supports. In the name of Christ religion claims that health and wealth will be given to those who obey God and his laws, or at least a specific interpretation of God and his laws.

Religious legalism, under the banner of Christianity, promises the kingdom of heaven to those who keep all of its rules, perform all of its deeds and observe all of its prescribed rituals, regulations, traditions, days, times, seasons and observances.

What is the will of God? How can we know what God wants us to do and to be? Our greatest need is for Christ-centered and biblically based Christianity without the religion. Christ alone can rescue us from the religiosity, religionism, bondage, ceremonialism and churchianity that war against the Lamb of God.

What Does God Really Want?

God's will is to give us his kingdom. God's will is to deliver us from the religions of Egypt that enslave the people of God and to lead us to the promised land of his Son, the Lamb of God who was slain from the foundation of the world. God's will is to save us and rescue us from ourselves and from all unbiblical and oppressive religion, including religion whose intent seems to be to improve upon the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus doesn't need any help. Our absolute and total acceptance of him is sufficient and enough to save us. Faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone.

God's will is for each of us to accept Jesus Christ as our only Lord and Savior. Jesus is the Lamb of God, the Lord who is our Shepherd, the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. He has all the power and credentials that are necessary to save us. God's will is for us to accept Jesus on that basis, even if it means rejecting cherished traditions, ceremonies and rituals that others claim we must observe and obey in order to be saved.

The Cross of Christ

When Christian missionaries first preached the gospel of Jesus Christ in North America, native Americans could not understand how the powerful, technically advanced European civilization could worship a man who died on a cross.

To the human mind, God should be powerful, never vulnerable. He should be impervious to human limitations.

To the human mind, God, if he exists at all, should be hearty and healthy—not feeble nor fragile. He should control and rule, not submit and serve. He should live a long life, rather than be crucified in his youth.

Paul commented on this paradox when he wrote to the Corinthians, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.... Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.... But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong....” (1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-25, 27,29).

He Visited Us to Become One of Us

Accepting that the God of the Bible is eternal and sovereign, uncreated, all powerful, all knowing,

all wise and all merciful is one thing. Even that admission is difficult for humans, for if God is God then we need to listen to what he has to tell us. But we humans are staggered by the fact that God, in the person of Jesus, has willingly subjected himself to our world, visiting our planet, becoming one of us, only to suffer and die on the cross! What kind of love is this—that Someone who has everything would come and become one of us? Why?

God’s ways are often paradoxical for us—the very opposite of our human values and natural inclinations. The apparent defeat and ignominy of the cross led to the overwhelming, eternal victory of the resurrection. But the cross did not immediately become a symbol of the victory we have in Christ. During the early years of Christianity, in cities throughout the Roman empire it was common to see crosses planted outside city limits, bearing the bodies of dying men. The cross was then a sign of the power of Rome.

Several hundred years later, the same Roman world continued to be filled with crosses, but now those crosses were in the very center of the cities, in places of worship bearing upon them the image of the man Jesus. The cross—once seen as a symbol of humiliation, shame and defeat—was now the symbol of the glorious victory of the once slain but now risen Lamb of God. Once exclusively used for torture and execution, and relegated to places of shame outside of cities, the cross became the central symbol of the Christian faith. Once a sign of the power of Rome, the cross became a symbol of the power of God.

The message of Christianity is that God has become one of us, to save us. He is not remote and far away, but intimate and close. Apart from Christianity, all religions worship a God who remains at a distance from his creation—immune and unaffected. Authentic Christianity teaches that Jesus, God in the flesh, came to serve us, rather than for us to serve him.

The Bible tells us, in Romans 8:31-32, that God gave his own Son because of our suffering.

God proved to us that he identifies with our world through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God identifies with our pain and misery. He does not remove all of our suffering any more than he refused to subject himself to suffering while he walked this earth. God is not remote—he is intimate and near.

When Jesus was resurrected, his immortal body still had the scars and reminders of his torture and crucifixion (John 20:24-28). He still has those scars. The scars on Jesus' immortal body are an eternal image and reminder to him of wounded, hurting and sin-sick humanity.

He Was and Is One of Us

The history of the Bible is a history of the self-imposed, willing humiliation that God has accepted as an inevitable consequence of his love for us. The love he has for us means that he exposes himself to hurt, pain, disappointment and failure. From the very beginning God made himself vulnerable, placing himself at risk. The fall of Creation was painful, the old covenant and the monarchy of Israel and Judah were failures. The Old Testament is a long chronicle of the times God was rejected by his own. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Hosea and many other prophets tell us of God's feelings of betrayal and rejection.

God decided to begin his human life on earth, not as a mature adult like Adam, but as a helpless baby—choosing what humans would consider the weakness and vulnerability of infancy over the safety and security of adulthood. Isaiah was inspired to write of the humble beginnings of Jesus' life on earth—"He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of a dry ground" (Isaiah 53:2). The Suffering Servant, as Isaiah was inspired to depict Jesus' ministry, confronted adverse conditions from his infancy. He was regarded as a bastard child, born out of wedlock. Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Egypt to escape the savagery of Herod—who in a jealous rage killed all boy babies age two and under when he heard a new king of the Jews had been born.

The 53rd chapter of Isaiah describes Jesus as someone who had no beauty or majesty that galvanized people to him, like the stars and heroes of our world do. He was despised and rejected, "a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (vs. 3). Much of this chapter is a description and commentary of those few days leading up to and including what we call Good Friday—the day of his crucifixion.

The crucifixion was ignominious and filled with shame, as the perfect, unblemished Lamb of God was treated as a criminal who needed to be executed. Jesus' willingness to bear pain and heartache continues today as he is the living head of a very human church, as he experiences our imperfect and often pathetic attempts to be part of his body on earth.

In their book, *In His Image*, Paul Brand and Philip Yancey comment, "The pictorial Chinese language combines the two concepts of love and pain in eloquent symbolism. In the character that expresses the highest kind of love, symbols for love and pain are brushed on top of each other to form a word like 'pain-love.' Thus a mother 'pain-loves' her child. She pours out her whole being on the child's behalf. In essence God showed pain-love to creation by emptying Himself and joining us in the Incarnation" (pages 282-283).

The God of "pain love" is the God we worship, and we know that he went to the cross for us. We know and are assured that "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

This is the God of the Bible! This is the real Jesus, who died that we might live, who served us by sacrificing himself. This is authentic Christianity—a way of life where the standard is the love and mercy of God, rather than the unrelenting demands of religion.

The cross of Christ is Christianity without the religion. The cross of Christ is our connection to God, the proof to us that God's love for us is without measure, the proof that Jesus saved us without our help or assistance.

The Meaning of Jesus' Resurrection

Picture yourself lost in the woods. You are disoriented. Initially you denied the fact that you were lost and could not find your own way. But after many attempts to “find yourself” you are now ready to admit your hopeless condition. As you desperately keep trying to find a way out of the forest you come to a fork in the road. The road splits in a clearing, so that you can see both roads for miles ahead of you before they disappear among the trees.

Considering one path you see the tombstones of now dead and buried travelers who chose that route. They died deep within the woods without ever being rescued. Your gaze then falls on the alternative. Standing in the road several hundred feet from you is Someone saying, “Follow me. I know the way. I will lead you out!” Which road will you take?

Jesus Christ has been through the valley of the shadow of death and has come back to show the way. As the Lamb of God he died on the cross. But the cross was not the end. Jesus was buried, and he was resurrected, just as he said he would be (John 2:18-22). His tomb could not contain him. He is risen. He is alive. He will never leave us nor forsake us. He came to be one of us and he is still with us.

He has been through all of the pain and heartache and misery each one of us might experience in our life, and far more. He “remembers we are dust” (Psalm 103:14), he understands our limitations, frustrations, suffering and pain. He has walked this earth, he has experienced what it is like to be human, and he knows the way out.

We can be “more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Romans 8:37). This is the true meaning of the resurrection. We win because he won! We overcome because he overcame! We can get out of the deep and dark forests of our lives where we are lost without hope because Jesus knows the way.

The Greek Passion

Nikos Kazantzakis wrote a novel called *The Greek Passion*. It's a story based upon experiences Kazantzakis had early in life. When he was a young boy the Turks came into many small villages on Crete, murdering and butchering Greeks in bloody atrocities. After a massacre in their village his father took young Nikos out and made him touch the corpses of dead men. His father did not want him to forget. In Kazantzakis' novel the word “passion” has two meanings. It's about the Passion of Christ, and it's about the Greek passion for freedom. Kazantzakis marries the two concepts in his novel, painting a rich picture of the freedom Christ gives his people (Galatians 5:1).

The story is centered in a small Greek village where the people dramatically reenact the Easter celebration every year. Those who are chosen to act in the passion play are informed of their parts a year ahead of time so that they can take that time to get into character. One year a simple shepherd boy is chosen to play the part of Jesus, with other villagers playing Simon Peter, John and Judas, among others. Kazantzakis describes these people, as they prepare for their parts for almost one year, gradually becoming the character they are depicting. The shepherd boy becomes more Christ-like, and the man who will play Judas becomes more vindictive and deceitful, until his best friends cannot stand to be around him. Life begins to imitate art.

During the year leading up to Easter and the village passion play, refugees arrive in the village. The refugees have been driven from their homes by Turks and initially the villagers

welcome them, giving them aid and assistance. But as the weeks and months pass, the people of the village grow tired of being inconvenienced and begin to wish that the refugees would leave. Some of the elders of the town demand that the refugees move on, while the shepherd boy, now thinking more like Christ, defends the refugees. The young shepherd boy urges the villagers to reach out and help the refugees.

The conflict comes to a head at Christmas, with everyone gathering at the village church to celebrate Jesus' birthday. During the service the man who was chosen to play Judas stabs the shepherd boy to death. Using irony to teach a profound and Christ-like message, Kazantzakis explains that many of the people of the village are actually relieved that the shepherd boy, who had been chosen to play Christ, was murdered and that he was no longer around to make them uncomfortable by taking the side of the refugees.

Specific details in *The Greek Passion* are fiction, but the moral of the fictitious story is absolutely true to the gospel of Jesus Christ. *The Greek Passion* is a story of the longstanding religious war between the primarily Islamic Turks and the Christian Greeks. It's also a story about how Christians in name only are merely going through the motions—showing up at the right place, having the right expression on their faces, saying the right things, standing up at the right time or kneeling at the appropriate moment. They are doing all of the right religious things but they still welcome the death of the young shepherd boy because he is behaving more and more like Jesus Christ.

Called to a New Life

Religion will always attempt to eliminate authentic Christianity. Religion killed Christ, and it has opposed authentic Christians over the course of history (John 15:18-19; 16:2). Religion enslaves its followers, addicting them to the idea that what they do can please and appease God. Jesus sets us free from all such encum-

brances that weigh us down, allowing us to love, comfort and reach out to everyone—including refugees who are in need. Authentic Christianity teaches that God loves the whole world, while religion teaches us to love only our own, only those who are part of our group (Matthew 5:43-48).

The resurrected Christ beckons to us at the fork in the road to follow him. He alone can save us from ourselves! He alone can save us from the bitterness, divisiveness, animosity and hatred that so characterize our world. He can even save us from religion, of all things! Jesus calls us to new life—a life in which he lives his life within us, breaking down walls and barriers constructed by our fleshly lusts and vanity.

Religion diminishes the importance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, while authentic Christianity insists that Jesus Christ is the ground zero of our lives. Religion insists that human effort, performance and works are at center stage, in the spotlight. True Christianity points to the work of Christ alone as the only source of our salvation and that he alone, the Light of the world, is worthy to occupy that spotlight.

The birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus are big stop signs in our lives. Jesus' life, from the cradle to the cross, beckons us to stop, look and listen. Who and what Jesus is invites us to consider the heavenly and ponder eternity. As the light of Christ breaks through the dense forest of our lives, God places two roads in our path (Matthew 7:13-14). Christianity without the religion is life at the crossroads.

Will we follow Jesus, or will we follow the priests, potions and philosophies of counterfeit Christianity? Will we place our trust in him alone, or will we continue to insist that we can find our own way, and that our deeds and performance will eventually get us out of the mess in which we find ourselves?

Finding God's Peace

An oxymoron is a combination of two or more words that do not belong together. They are incongruous and may actually contradict each other. Here are a few examples: Genuine imitation. Plastic glasses. Nutritious junk food. Government organization. Temporary tax increase.

Some of these illustrations may cause you to chuckle (or at least smile!), but the oxymoron that I have in mind is deadly serious. Holy war. There is nothing holy about war. Even when war is necessary to oppose tyranny and prevent further bloodshed, human warfare is never holy. If you have been around the block a few times in this old world, you know the current warfare in the Middle East will not be the end of all wars—there are more wars waiting in the wings.

James reminds us that wars come from human lust and greed (James 4:1-2). We humans covet what others have and we hate what they stand for. War is actually an accurate, concise description of the ultimate product of human nature. On the contrary, peace is both a definition and an attribute of God. Jesus is the Prince of peace (Isaiah 9:6) and the Lord of peace (2 Thessalonians 3:16). The gospel of Jesus Christ is not only founded in and defined by peace (Ephesians 2:17) but Jesus himself is our peace (Ephesians 2:14).

Peace is the fundamental disposition of a Christian. We are at peace because Jesus is peace and because he dwells within us (Galatians 2:20). We are secure, safe and content because our confidence and trust is not in the flesh, but in

him “who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine...” (Ephesians 3:20).

For the purposes of this discussion, we'll consider two definitions of peace:

- 1) the absence of war and hostility
- 2) the presence of God

“Blessed are the peacemakers ...”

Perhaps you are familiar with this well known beatitude in Matthew 5:9, a part of the early portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, translated in the King James Version:

“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.”

Greek scholar and translator Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, offers this translation of Matthew 5:9: “You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.”

Apart from God, the peacemaking that Jesus is talking about is humanly impossible. Jesus' description of peacemakers is of men and women who walk in the new life of the Spirit—men and women in whom Jesus himself lives his resurrected life. Peace, defined merely as the absence of war, is possible apart from Jesus Christ. But peace defined as the presence of God is not possible unless Jesus lives his risen life in us! God's peace is not possible unless he is present!

Remember the chorus sung by the great company of angels who appeared to the shepherds at the time Jesus was born? They were joyfully announcing the presence of Jesus, God in the flesh: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14).

The peace of God is not simply the absence of war. The absence of war is one kind of peace—perhaps the highest form of peace that humans can hope for, apart from God. But God's peace is given to humans upon whom God's favor rests. God's favor is another way of

explaining his divine grace. How much human peace (assuming our human definition of peace as the absence of war) has the world experienced? One estimate is that over the past 3,500 years (roughly the documented history of warfare) humans have experienced only 286 years without any war.

Jesus himself, the Prince of Peace, told us that he did not come primarily to bring human peace—the absence of war and hostility—to this earth (Matthew 10:34). Jesus came to bring God’s peace—God’s grace and favor. Jesus came to establish the new covenant in his own blood so that by his cross and empty tomb the grace and peace of God would be freely available.

God’s Peace Is Free—But It’s Not Easy

Being a peacemaker means that we become more like God. We, as Eugene Peterson translates it, discover who we really are and our place in God’s family. Being God’s children means we become more like him, as we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). Contrary to conventional wisdom, being a peacemaker does not mean that we will be pushovers and easy marks for those who would exploit us. Being the kind of peacemaker Jesus described does not mean that we compromise with everyone, never taking a stand, always trying to keep everyone happy. Peacemakers do not keep everyone happy. Jesus didn’t.

Living by God’s grace means that religion will oppose us, even some religion that uses the name of Jesus Christ. Religion and churchianity wants us to bow our knee to its rules, regulations and restrictions. Religion wants to be in charge of our lives with its priests, pills, philosophies, spiritual potions and elixirs. God’s grace tells us that Jesus alone is the Lord of our lives. We bow to no other king.

It isn’t easy accepting God’s grace because it means we must admit that we cannot be at peace, and that we certainly can’t be peacemakers, without his help. Whether we are seven

or 77 years old, whether the issue is physical or spiritual, we humans would rather do things ourselves. Accepting God’s grace humbles us because we are forced to admit that we are not big enough, strong enough, moral enough or good enough to take care of our problems. Accepting God’s freely given grace is not easy because we have to surrender to him, giving up the idea that we can build enough character, do enough righteous things and somehow produce peace in our life and that of others through our own actions.

Peacemakers who share God’s peace do not primarily bring that peace about through politics or through the military. We are not able to bring God’s peace to this earth by boycotts, demonstrations or legislation. We don’t bring God’s peace to others by frightening them with vivid details about what God will do to them if they don’t “straighten up and fly right.” Remember, it is oppressive religion that intimidates, dominates and threatens. Fear religion is the precise opposite of the presence of God.

Peacemakers bring the peace of God, the presence of God, as we allow Jesus to live his life in us, as we allow others to see the reflected light of Jesus Christ, the light that Jesus produces in our lives by God’s grace, not by our deeds.

We can experience God’s presence in our lives though we often endure physical pain and suffering. We pick up our cross and follow our Lord and Savior. He was misunderstood, mocked, persecuted, scourged and crucified—yet in the last moments of his life he asked God the Father to forgive those who caused him pain and suffering and who put him to death. We experience God’s presence in our lives even though we may stagger and fall under the weight of our own cross.

A Portrait of Perfect Peace

Conventional religion, even religion that masquerades as Christianity, always has and always will war against the presence of God that exists

within pure and unadulterated authentic Christianity. Consider a story of two artists who were asked to paint a portrait of perfect peace.

One artist depicted a lazy summer day, a tranquil lake without a ripple breaking its surface, with couples and families eating and playing near the shore. In the distance was a mountain range under a perfect blue sky without a cloud in sight.

The other artist was a Christian. He experienced the presence of God in his life, through Jesus who lived within him. He knew the peace of God and what it involves.

He painted a roaring sea, with a ship being tossed back and forth on the waves. Raging winds caused waves to break over the deck of the ship. The scene seemed to be anything but peaceful.

But the artist was not finished with this scene until he added a light coming from the captain's quarters in the front of the ship. A number of passengers and crewmen were seated at the captain's table, eating and conversing, serene and confident that this storm would be weathered and that the storm had no power over their journey.

Their faithful expressions communicated their complete trust that the Captain of the ship would bring them to their final destination, no matter what obstacles the sea might present.

Though the tempests and storms of life rage against us, though we may experience hardships and suffering, though we may feel alone as we travel down the narrow road, the peace of God—the presence of God—is with us.

God's grace is the reason we are confident in spite of the storm. If we accept Jesus Christ as the Captain of our salvation (Hebrews 2:10, KJV), we not only experience God's peace but by his grace he will use us to be peacemakers in the lives of others.

Making a Difference for Jesus

Years ago I remember hearing a story about a town that had been deliberately flooded because of the construction of a huge dam. This project took many years—the residents of the town were informed well in advance about the eventual flooding of their town. After his town had been obliterated by the waters of the lake, one former resident of that town said that the most difficult part was watching his town die. Progress and growth came to a screeching halt, improvements and repairs to public, private and commercial property ceased because residents knew what was going to happen in the near future.

Why paint and repair a house that will be covered with water in a few years? Why improve schools or budget for a new playground? Why build churches, hospitals or parks? Why plan? Why do anything constructive? After all, within a few years the entire town was going to be under water—so why do anything?

According to the story, the town started to suffer from deterioration by neglect, and the physical neglect was accompanied by emotional depression that often follows spiritual decay. Teenagers dropped out of school, people stopped showing up for work, crime increased and traffic in illegal drugs flourished.

The story concluded with the lesson, “When there is no faith in tomorrow, there is no spiritual vitality or energy today.” The story is a parable for many communities and churches in North America. When we become convinced that what we are doing is without any purpose, decay and

corruption result. It's happening in North America today. It's happening in many lives around this world. Decay—decline—degeneration. Our world needs to be saved and rescued. Our world needs leaders who will provide Christ-centered vision!

Leadership Demands Vision

Leadership of any kind demands a vision. Without vision humans see little reason to build, plan, construct, improve, hope or dream. The lack of spiritual vision and vitality plagues North America today—and it plagues many of us individually. Our me-first world of false values has left us spiritually empty and void. Our shallow, “here today and gone tomorrow” culture tries to fill us with hollow, vain spiritual principles but they are platitudes that are junk food for the soul. Books are written and sermons given based upon positive thinking and self-help in the name of God, but because they don't address the real issue they are nothing more than ineffective band-aids placed over gaping spiritual wounds.

Spiritual decay, decline and degeneration exist in large part because of the corrosion and corruption of authentic, Christ-centered faith. In many cases religion, even in the name of Christ, has failed to supply a Christ-centered vision. Like a spiritual vampire, religion has sapped the lifeblood out of those who so desperately need to be rescued and healed. Religion has been quick to point out the problems of others, but slow to see its own failings. The Bible identifies two kinds of spiritual leaders it refers to as shepherds. One kind of shepherd fleeces the flock (Jeremiah 23:1-2), using the flock for his or her own selfish ends

There are many wounded spiritual soldiers in our world... They don't want (or need!) hell fire and brimstone sermons. They are wounded veterans of holy wars who have been traumatized by religion.



(2 Peter 2:3), scattering them and/or enslaving them. On the other hand, the shepherds who walk with Jesus, shepherd-leaders, are used by the Lord our Shepherd to gather God's sheep, to rescue them from danger and to save them from physical and religious addictions.

A Vision for Your Life

What about your life? What vision do you have for how you can make a difference for God? How are you allowing God to use you so that others might be served and reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ? Can you see the objective, work and mission that God has given you—a cause that is bigger than you? You are probably not a minister or pastor, or some other kind of professional who works full time in the cause of the kingdom of God. But in many respects we are all ministers of the gospel. We are all shepherd-leaders, all of us are called to serve as priests, pastors and ministers in the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9).

Some Christians are frustrated because they want to be involved in the work of the kingdom. They have been led to believe that the only way that they can be a servant-leader is to directly share the gospel with others. So they accept burdens that are laid on them that obligate them to “witness” to a certain number of individuals a week. They feel guilty if they don't hand out their quota of tracts each week.

In some cases, Christians are told they must not only invite one new person to church each month, it is also their job to ensure that the new person attends and continues to attend. Some Christians are told that they need to practice “confrontational evangelism”—confronting people with their sins, with the hope that once others are aware of their sins they will accept Christ.

Christians have become primarily defined by what we are assumed to be against, rather than by what we believe in and support. Our culture assumes that all Christians are placard-carrying political activists who boycott causes

they have determined to be pagan. We are understood to be pontificating moralists out to reform everyone into our image and reshape the behavior of everyone who disagrees with us.

This stereotype of Christianity is not a pretty picture. It's not a biblical picture. It's not a portrait of shepherd-leaders, but of vindictive people who have become angry with "the world" because religion has convinced them such behaviors are what God expects of them.

Ministering to the Wounded and the Refugees

A medic-chaplain once came to a severely wounded young man on the field of battle, and after binding up his wounds, he asked the young man if he would like to have a passage in the Bible read to him. The young soldier said, "I'm thirsty, pastor, could you give me a drink of water?" After the medic-chaplain gave him the water he said, "Now, would you like me to read you something from the Bible?"

The soldier shook his head and said, "I am very cold, could you find something to cover me with?" The chaplain found a discarded parka nearby, left behind by another soldier killed in the battle. The chaplain did not give up. He had been taught to teach, preach and pray for those whose wounds might be fatal. "Can I pray with you or read something from the Bible?" The soldier, who survived his wounds and lived to tell the story, said, "Pastor, if there is anything in the Bible that tells a person to serve other people like you have just done for me, then please read that to me." The wounded soldier didn't want to hear a sermon, he wanted to see and experience one. He needed vision—vision that would be exemplified to him in the life of a servant-leader.

There are many wounded spiritual soldiers in our world. They are refugees from religious wars and firefights. They don't want (or need!) hell fire and brimstone sermons. They are wounded veterans of holy wars who have been traumatized by religion. They don't want to be

witnessed to, confronted or condemned. They don't need to be scared out of hell and into heaven. They want a drop of cold water. They yearn for some human kindness.

Perhaps God is calling you to be a part in ministering to others who have been hurt as you were. Wounded soldiers long to meet a person who will volunteer to help, rather than a dogmatic I'm-better-than-you-are haranguer who will only intensify the agony they are enduring. You may be one of these wounded soldiers, well aware of the experience I describe.

Remember, most shepherd-leaders are not on the front lines. Most ministers of the gospel are not preaching in pulpits. Most priests in the priesthood of all believers are not writing books or speaking on radio or television. Most shepherd-leaders are behind the scenes, sharing the vision of Jesus Christ through both deeds of service and support. Most shepherd-leaders sacrificially serve so that others might do their jobs more effectively. Shepherd-leaders are often people whose actions speak so loudly that there is no need for them to preach a sermon or confront sinners by their clever arguments or persuasive speaking.

Is your life filled with the vision of the kingdom of God? Do you see that your life is so much more important, and so much bigger than the cares of this world which challenge you? Do you see that God has called you to be a part of something bigger than the immediate physical concerns of your life? Do you see the wounded who need to be helped? Can you grasp the vision of service to so many who have written off Jesus Christ because they have been through a religious hell here on this earth that called itself a Christian church or group?

God wants you and me to make a difference. He has called us to be involved in making a difference for now, and for eternity. Our lives are opportunities to yield ourselves to Jesus, that he might use us in powerful and mighty ways in the service of the kingdom of God.

What PTM Is All About

Plain Truth Ministries (PTM) is all about leading people to Jesus Christ and authentic Christianity with the main, plain and sensible teachings of the Bible. We are dedicated to being clearly focused and centered on Jesus Christ. We combat the deadly viruses of religion and legalism by identifying them for what they are and by pointing out the pitfalls and potholes into which Christians can fall. In the process we call for a move away from religion in Christendom and long for the unity in the church for which Christ prayed the night before his crucifixion (John 17).

PTM warns against claims of spiritual superiority, and we seek to give hope to those who've been burned out by religion and religious legalism. We proclaim the true nature of God as a God of immense unconditional love for every person—a love that brings with it a wonderful liberty in Christ.

PTM Resources

If you're one who's been beaten up and left for dead by religion, or someone who feels you've been cheated of a meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ, you're not alone. Millions have suffered and others continue to suffer at the hands of religion. We have many resources to help you if that's been your story. Those resources are largely contained in a ministry within PTM—"Recovering from Legalism" at our website, www.ptm.org. Be sure to check out the rest of the PTM website for many other helpful resources to understand the liberty Jesus offers you.

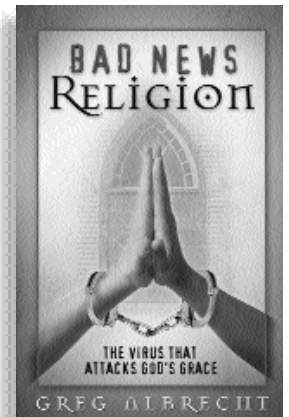
Join With Us

Though individual stories vary, the Christian church is tainted by much religion and legalism, and PTM feels deeply for all those who still suffer in the festering swamps of religious legalism. It's our burning desire to help others recognize the bondage that legalism is—but even more importantly that they know that Jesus wants to free them—to rescue them from oppressive religion. We invite you to take advantage of all the resources we offer to help you in your journey out of religion and legalism.

At PTM we seek to be a tool in God's hand to rescue people from religion and help them develop a deeper relationship with Jesus—helping to expand the Kingdom of God on this earth. That's the motivation for what we do, and we hope that you will identify with us in that and see its importance for the body of Christ. We also hope that the Holy Spirit will move you to join us in this critically important work, so that together we may provide our resources to many others.

For Further Reading: ***BAD NEWS RELIGION***

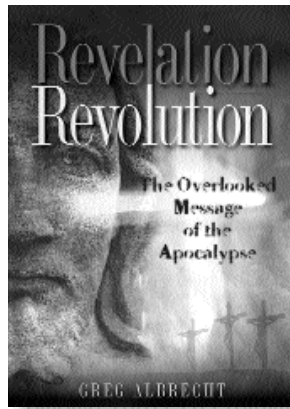
Since the church first began, Christians have had trouble accepting God's grace. *Bad News Religion* explores this fascinating topic. Humans have substituted order, holiness, discipleship, regulations and a long list of things to avoid in the place of God's free gift. The result is a "bad news religion" that drains the joy and the life out of believers. *Bad News Religion* is a convincing, liberating exploration of how we, in the name of religion, have shifted the focus from the work of God to our ability to become worthy of salvation. The result is bondage and



defeat rather than experiencing the true richness of God's grace. You may order *Bad News Religion* by calling 1-800-309-4466. If you prefer, you can order it at www.ptm.org.

**REVELATION REVOLUTION:
The Overlooked Message
of the Apocalypse**

Books about the “end-times” and about being “left behind” are often based on one exclusive view of how to interpret the book of Revelation. Lurid, spine-tingling portrayals of what will



happen in the “near future” have turned the book of Revelation into an epic horror movie.

Here's a book that strips away the manipulative, religious interpretations of this critically important book of Revelation. Here's a book that calls for a revolution in the way we approach and understand God. Here's a call to discover the real, Christ-centered message of Revelation. *Revelation Revolution: The Overlooked Message of the Apocalypse* is available by calling 1-800-309-4466 or if you prefer, order it online at our website, www.ptm.org.

For more about what PTM can do to help you and/or a loved one—and for more about what you can do to join us as we help others come to know and experience *Christianity Without the Religion*—visit us at www.ptm.org.