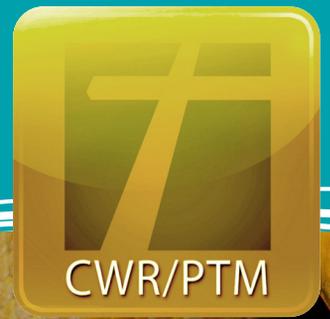


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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



Healthy Faith OR Toxic Religion?

by Greg Albrecht



**The Gospel: Information
or Transformation?**
by Keith Giles
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You may remember the famous first lines of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. But that's only a fragment of the one long introductory sentence to *A Tale of Two Cities*. Here's the full sentence:

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Healthy Faith or Toxic Religion?

Greg Albrecht

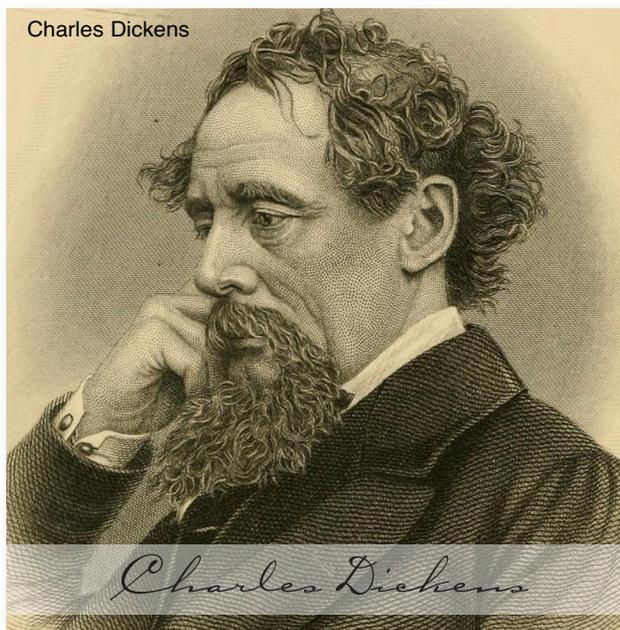
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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

A *Tale of Two Cities* is set about 225-240 years ago, in the backdrop of the political/economic/cultural environment in the two cities of London, England and Paris, France, between 1775 and 1790... and Dickens' long introductory sentence is an amazingly accurate description of our world today! Cultural fragmentation, political upheaval, class warfare, racial strife, religious animosity and propaganda ... it all sounds, as the British say, "spot on!"

While there are many culprits for the turmoil and turbulence that defines the "worst of times" in our world today much of the blame can be laid

squarely at the door of religion. Christ-less religion defiles and corrupts authentic faith. Christ-less religion is a breeding ground of pride rather than humility.



Just as a pristine river watered the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:10) so too will "the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal" (Revelation 22:1) flow through the New Jerusalem, in the New Heavens and the New Earth. Sadly, between those bookends of pure, clean spiritual water lies a vast, toxic swamp, filled with the raw sewage of the debris left behind by religion. As we live between the Two Gardens of pure and undefiled faith, symbolized by pure water, we must carefully discriminate between health and toxic faith.

CHRIST-LESS RELIGION

The word "religion" itself, even while it has positive meanings attributed to it, is, at its core, a toxic faith. The etymology of the word goes back to the Latin *religare*—to bind and *religio*—obligation (to the gods). The use of the word "religion" today generally points toward the practices and beliefs individuals accept as being a true definition of what God (or the gods) expects of them.

In its broadest sense *religare* and *religio* span the divides between all

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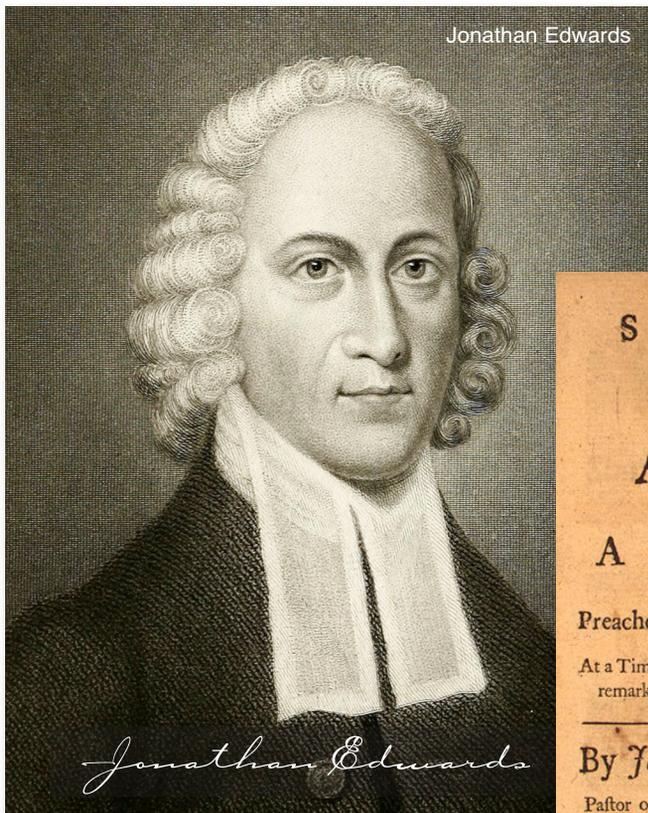
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the world religions. Religion exists, in fact it thrives, within Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Christendom. Christ-less religion is the common denominator, the foundational belief of the overwhelming majority of religious people, regardless of the religious label they adopt. Christ-less religion perceives God (or the gods) as the Divine Being (or beings) who must be pleased and appeased.

Christ-less religion includes churches, denominations and buildings that use the name of Jesus Christ, perhaps often and regularly, but endorse and even enforce toxic faith, rather than healthy faith—which is one of the definitions of Christ-centered faith. Such environments are Christian in name only.



Toxic faith is religious in the sense that religion binds and imprisons its followers in belief systems that control them. Healthy faith is Christ-centered in the sense that it is based on the gospel of Jesus Christ, which, by the grace of God, frees us from religion.

Christ-less religion is a pernicious, lethal belief system based on the premise that humans may begin a positive relationship with God (or

maintain a positive relationship with God) on the basis of human efforts believed to please and appease God.

Christ-less religion is therefore based on the polytheistic, pre-Christian presupposition that the gods must be pleased and appeased. That essential supposition permeates all religion today—including huge chunks of what is popularly called and understood as Christianity.

One might use the word “religion” in a positive and spiritually healthy sense but only if “religion” is qualified such as “Christ-centered religion.” Christ-followers often substitute “faith” for “religion” to speak of their beliefs and practices but even then, it is still necessary to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy/toxic faith.

HEALTHY CHRIST-CENTERED FAITH VERSUS TOXIC CHRIST-LESS RELIGION

1. Healthy, Christ-centered faith is love—for God, above all, IS love.

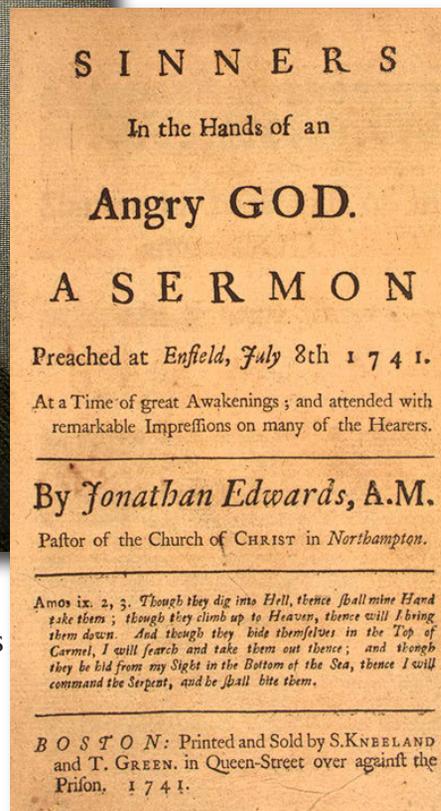
To the degree that our perception of God is

contaminated and corrupted, our faith will be unhealthy and perhaps even toxic. When one’s idea of the nature of God is flawed, then the rest of one’s spiritual house is built on the shifting sands of toxic religion.

Healthy faith experiences God as love, while unhealthy faith perceives God as wrathful, angry, cold, distant and harsh. Toxic faith perceives and proclaims God to be a taskmaster who loves his law more than he does his children—a God who enslaves and punishes.

One of the most corrupt pictures of God ever was preached in a

sermon titled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” The pastor who preached this sermon was named **Jonathan Edwards**, and to



this day his sermon is celebrated by many within Christendom as one of the most powerful, inspiring sermons ever given. Edwards described individuals consigned to hell as hanging over hell precariously, like a spider on a thread.

Here's a brief quote: *Thus it is that natural men are held in the hand of God, over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it, and God is dreadfully provoked...*

the devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them...

My friends—that is not God. *God is not a monster!* If you believe he is, chances are your faith is unhealthy, perhaps even toxic. **God is exactly like Jesus.** If you are trapped by images of a monster God, ask God to reveal himself to you as he is.

2. Healthy, Christ-centered faith is just that—centered and focused on Jesus Christ. Healthy faith has Jesus and the grace, mercy and love of God at its core. The Prince of Peace is himself a river of living water (John 7:37-38), the spiritual Bread from heaven (John 6:37) and our healing Savior who leads us to his rest.

Whereas healthy faith is Christ-centered, unhealthy faith is centered on regulations and rituals, on formulas, traditions and ceremonies. Unhealthy faith (Christ-less religion) is often built on the teachings of a man or a woman who founded a religion. Unhealthy faith may use and appropriate the name of Jesus, while denying who he is. Sadly, in many cases Christ-less religion uses the name of God for human prestige, power, and profit.



John Martin - "Sodom and Gomorrah 1852"

“Nothing good can ever come from a theology built on fear—a theology that so often quickly disintegrates into hate.”

The opposite of healthy faith is of course unhealthy faith, but we must also realize that the opposite of faith is not lack of faith. The opposite of faith is

fear. We see so much religious fear in our world today—religious fundamentalism, radicalized faith, distorted and perverted faith—and those radical expressions, whether at the far left or far right are theologies built on fear.

Nothing good can ever or has ever come from a theology built on fear—a theology that so often quickly disintegrates into hate.

3. Healthy, Christ-centered faith is driven and fueled by God's grace.

Whereas healthy faith is based on God's grace, unhealthy, toxic faith is based on laws and legalisms—within healthy faith one is free in Christ, and finds rest in Christ and experiences the peace of God.

On the other hand, captives of toxic faith are never good enough, never work hard enough and are never able to reach the standards imposed by Christ-less religion. Toxic faith is characterized by programs, procedures and prescriptions.

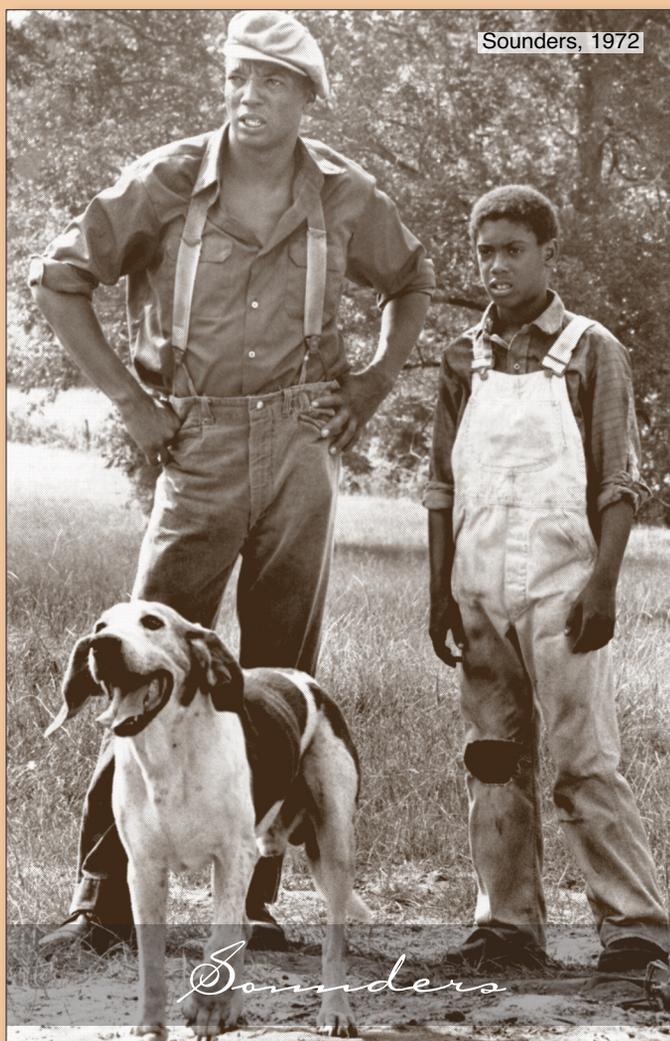
Healthy, Christ-centered faith never inflicts harm and hurt, while unhealthy, Christ-less faith/religion persecutes and wars against all who dare to disagree. Toxic faith is at war with anyone or any system of faith that disagrees with it,

enslaving all those who follow it. Toxic faith is about controlling all who are unfortunate enough to come into contact with it.

In the 1972 movie "Sounder," a black family is depicted as they lived in 1933 Louisiana—in the middle of the Depression and in the middle of the American South long before civil rights. A black man and his son are walking by a segregated church.

The boy says to his father, "Daddy, I ain't never been in that church."

His father replied, "That's okay, Son. Jesus ain't never been in there neither." □



Greg Albrecht is the director of Plain Truth Ministries. You can hear Greg's weekly sermons on CWR audio online at www.ptm.org/cwr-teaching-ministry.

THE GOSPEL:

KEITH GILES

Knowing God is pretty important. In fact, according to Jesus, knowing God is eternal life.

"Now this is eternal life: to know God and His Son whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

But is this "knowing" a reference to gaining the right information about God? Is it about having knowledge? Or is it something more than that?

The word Jesus uses here for "to know" in the Greek is "ginosko" which maps to the same word used in the Hebrew scriptures for the way a husband "knew" his wife in an intimate, sexual way.

In other words, this "knowing" is less like studying for a test and more like connecting on a physical, spiritual and emotional level with God Almighty.

To "know God and his Son" in this way involves an ongoing, daily relationship with him that many would consider a little bit scandalous.

Nevertheless, we are expected to have an intimacy with God that conceives something within us, and that "something" is new life.

This means that knowing God is more about transformation than information.

Here's something else about knowing God that you might find interesting:

"No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27).

So, the best way to know God is to know Jesus, and the best way to know Jesus is to listen to his voice, spend time with him and start putting his words into practice.

Let me ask you: "Do you think of the gospel as being more about having the right information about God? Or do you see it as being more about