

LOSING
YOUR
Religion?

It may be a good thing!



Foreword

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The book of James speaks of “pure and faultless” religion (James 1:27). Since there is such a thing as “good” religion, it follows that “bad” religion also exists. Adulterated religion is oppressive, legalistic and authoritarian. Bad news religion is contaminated and can be toxic!

If you have served time in some religious dungeon, you know that religion maintains its control with threats, intimidation and condemnation. But there is good news!

God’s amazing grace is the remedy for legalistic religion. Jesus, our Beloved Physician, supplies us with the antidote to the virus of legalism. He did in my life—and he stands ready to do the same in yours.

God offers us *relationship*, not religion. God lavishes us with the riches of his grace. Because of Christ, by God’s grace, we can experience God’s peace and presence. God can and will help you to lose your religion, and give you freedom in Christ (Galatians 5:1).

In Christ,

Greg Albrecht
President, Plain Truth Ministries



I Kissed Religion Goodbye ...by Greg Albrecht

Religion: A non-Christian (though popularly believed within Christendom) worldview that convinces humans that their performance earns a higher standing with God than they would have otherwise enjoyed. Religion controls humans by persuading them that their relationship with God is governed by their attempts to do and be good and by their abstinence from sinful activities.

What picture emerges when you ask the average North American to define organized Christianity or to draw a portrait of what a Christian looks like?

A friend who was invited to a Christian event that turned out to be a political rally told me about his unsettling experience. He is active in a business that provides resources for evangelical Christians, but he was unprepared for the mudslinging and negative rhetoric that ridiculed *Demoncrats* and lavished unadulterated praise on all things Republican. He left shaking his head at this attempt to politicize Christianity—at the hostility displayed toward anyone who didn't march to the drumbeat sounded from the stage.

He went home, examined his home church, and determined that it, too, was filled with the very attitude and spirit that was beginning to trouble him. He and his wife left and started the search for a Christ-centered place of worship. They're looking for places where Jesus is welcome.

Some see institutionalized Christianity as angry and even bitter toward a culture it condemns. Others see corporate Christianity as irrelevant, self-absorbed, tilting at windmills with its own meaningless in-house arguments. Many Christians have themselves been lulled into a spiritual stupor, convinced that the real problems exist outside of their church, and therefore they allow themselves the luxury of endlessly feasting on “them-

and-us” rhetoric. Fundamentalist Christians relentlessly attack sinners outside of the holy huddle where they have circled their religious wagons.

What has happened to the revolution of peace and love Jesus started almost 2,000 years ago? The only qualification for the revolutionary movement Jesus started was the lack of qualifications of its members. Jesus started a movement that we humans have continually attempted to “improve.” The movement Jesus started was based on relationship with God, but along the way, we humans have overwhelmed the very heart and soul of the relationship Jesus offered us with organization, structure and institutionalization.

Where are the voices of Christendom today leading us? Self-help and how-to books abound. “Christian” management and leadership programs urge us to become successful. Sure-fire, can't-miss, your-church-will-multiply with our purpose-driven techniques promise to increase the size of any church.

Many spiritual addresses within the world of Christianity promote their brand of Christianity with a dynamic infomercial like appeal—a spiritual parallel to our culture's obsession with cosmetic surgery that will enhance our exteriors by reduction or enlargement. Look what we've done to the church, the body of Christ. We've turned the body of Christ into a place of lock-step allegiance to a long list of religious rules.

If you're in the “in crowd” then you must be at the right place at the right time, wearing the right clothing, using the right in-house clichés, singing the right songs, belonging to the right political party, parroting all of the right biblical proof texts, following the party line by never, ever asking a tough question—going along to get along.

The herd mentality demands conformity, but remember this—*unanswered questions are not nearly as dangerous as unquestioned answers.*

Want to join a church? In many cases you will need to get ready to meet a long laundry list of religious qualifications:

- Attend regularly—at least once a week.
- Volunteer for self-improvement, recovery, stewardship, missionary, discipleship activities and break out groups and seminars for men, women, seniors, teens, singles and children (not to mention exercise groups, yoga for Christians, overeaters

anonymous, recovery groups for former smokers, for alcoholics and children of alcoholics). In many churches attending the worship service is not enough...you will need to spend a lot of time doing a lot of stuff.

- Tithe 10% of your earnings (“we believe in grace, but...”).
- Evangelize—make sure you fulfill your weekly or monthly quota of confronting the lost (which in some cases includes anyone not in *your* church).
- Vote and politically agitate in absolute, lock-step agreement with pro-life and anti-homosexual views, exactly the way your church promotes and endorses them.
- Don’t drink, or if you do, don’t let anyone know because it might hurt your “witness.” Religiosity is generally not concerned about authenticity...so if you drink, keep it quiet.
- You need to believe in the hottest possible hell with billions being tortured. And you need to believe in the Rapture, the time when members of *your* church (at least those who are in good standing) escape hell on earth. Some call this time “The Tribulation”—a time when so many who richly deserve it will “get theirs.”
- Don’t gamble—or if you do, keep it real quiet.
- Don’t worry about the environment, the poor or global warming—those liberal, do-gooder churches have programs for those kinds of things.
- If you’ve got a moral problem or a “flesh” problem stop attending for a while so you won’t embarrass your church.
- Be successful. Drive a new car to church. Look good.

It sounds like the kind of place that got Jesus so upset that he turned over tables and drove out the money-changing prosperity gospel. Jesus wasn’t too fond of religious tradition. In fact, it takes some considerable hermeneutical gymnastics to turn Jesus into a religious leader. He came on a religious-search-and-destroy mission, but religion has wormed its way, insidiously, into the very fabric of the Christianity Jesus brought.

I am upset with religion. I am disappointed that I got sucked into the religious games people play. I played the games, I organized and officiated at them. But thanks be to God, I have kissed religion goodbye.

I’ve kissed religion goodbye, but I’m still in a profound relationship with the church because it is the body of Christ, warts and all. I love Jesus, I love his church, in fact my rela-

tionship with Jesus, the Lord of the church, has deepened since I kissed religion goodbye.

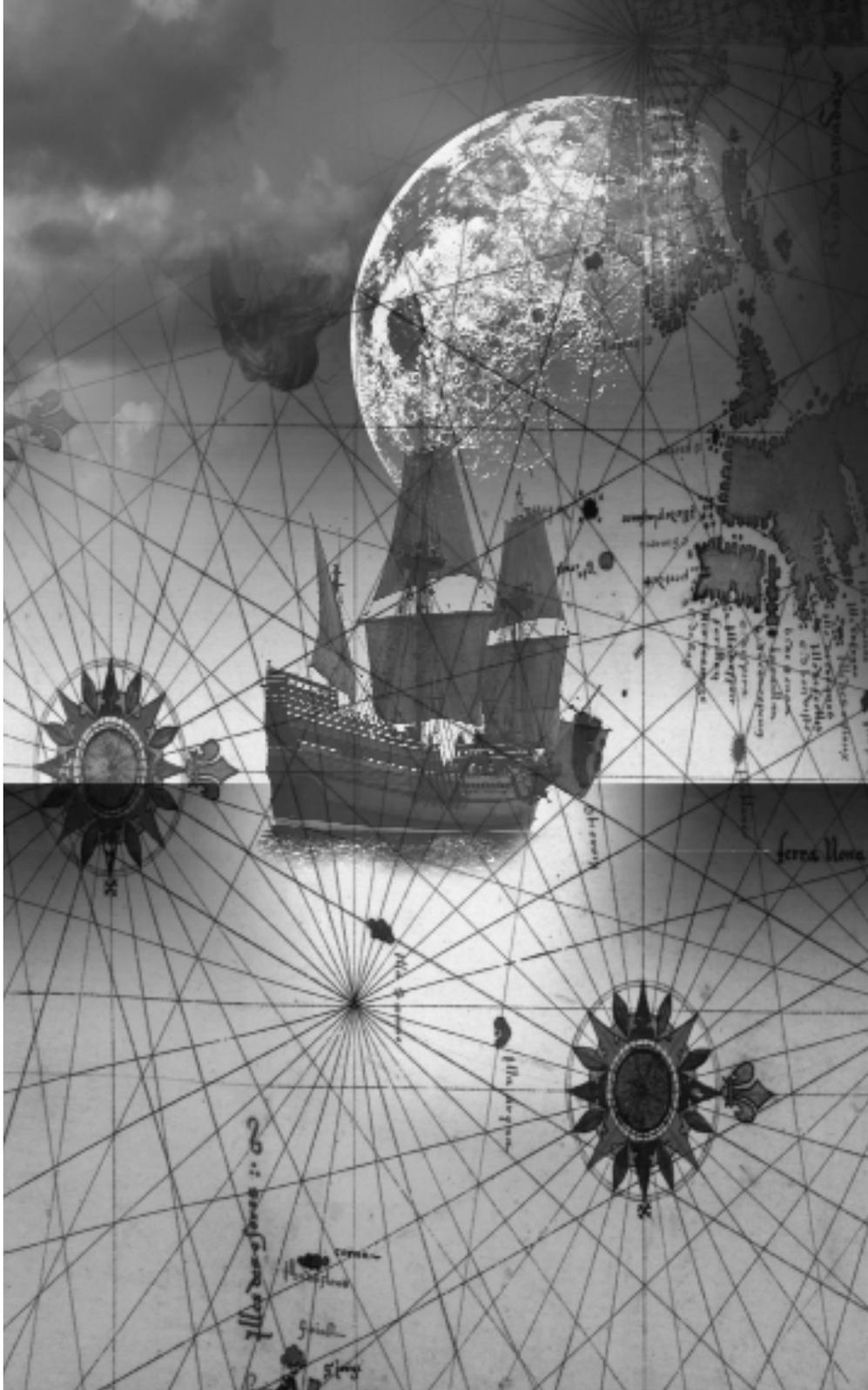
I pastor an electronic church—a church exclusively available on radio, online and via tape or CD—that’s the “place” we meet. I love to pastor this church—and many who join me for worship tell me they love to “go to” *Christianity Without the Religion*. These are people who are spiritual refugees and aliens—many of whom have had a hell-on-earth experience with people who gather in buildings and call themselves a church.

Being the church is not necessarily the same thing as *going* to church. What about all the “missing” Christians—those who don’t *do* conventional church anymore? Are people who don’t attend a church that meets in a building still Christians? If they are, can God actually be as happy with them as with those who “go to church” religiously?

Some say Christianity is in trouble here in North America. I categorically deny that charge. I agree with noted Christian trend-watcher George Barna, who, in his book *Revolution* reports that Christianity is morphing into new forms. Church attendance, according to Barna, doesn’t tell the whole story about the health of the body of Christ. In fact, why people don’t attend church as much as they used to (or at all) is part of the story. Could it be that many have left a visible, structured church because they know they need more Jesus and less religion?

Christianity is bigger than any one attempt, or for that matter, all collective attempts, to institutionalize it. Christianity is a revolutionary movement, and it is constantly in need of purification and reformation. The body of Christ needs reformation that asks the hard questions, with courageous reformers willing to take an unpopular stand.

Let the revolution of Jesus Christ continue, and may we yield to the humility, honesty, authenticity, inclusion, mercy, love and grace and transparency of the Master. May he help us to purge ourselves and repent of religious idols that are mere human innovations and manipulations. May we forget about trying to be bigger, better and superior to the church down the street. May we get off the case of sinners, may we lay down our theological spears and religious swords and take them to Jesus so that he might transform our weapons of bitterness and war into implements of peace.



Pilgrim's Voyage *...by Christopher A. Lee*

Pilgrim lived in the dark, dank, cargo hold of a sailing ship. He didn't realize the hold of the ship was dark and dank—for he had been born there and had lived there all his life. Pilgrim's eyes were used to the darkness, and being damp and cold seemed normal. In fact, all of Pilgrim's friends and family had always lived in the cargo hold, and none of them found it particularly dark or dank. It was all they knew.

For the most part, life in the cargo hold seemed pretty good. Pilgrim loved the stories about the Captain of the ship. Some of his friends and family told stories of having glimpsed the Captain or heard his voice once. Pilgrim wanted so badly to meet the Captain someday, but it seemed impossible. All of Pilgrim's friends said that the Captain wanted all good sailors to wear chains on their ankles and wrists, so Pilgrim did his best to wear his chains without complaint. Perhaps if he wore the chains long enough the Captain would one day notice him down in the cargo hold and commend him for being such a good sailor.

Pilgrim would often look up through the wood grid that formed a small square in the ceiling of the cargo hold. Pilgrim loved the light that would filter down through the cross work of the hatch. Occasionally, he would be able to see people walk by above the cargo hold. He would certainly like to see what was above the cargo hold, but there wasn't much chance of that as long as he was chained up, and he couldn't risk the anger of the Captain by removing the chains. Pilgrim knew the world above was not for him. He was a hold-dweller. Always had been, always would be.

Meeting a Person of Light

One day while Pilgrim was sitting under the small square of light, he suddenly noticed that one of the shapes that always

darted past the hatch so quickly had actually stopped. A face was peering down at him through the hatch. It was hard to see the face with the bright light behind it. The face looked more like a silhouette, but from the little that Pilgrim could see, the face looked kind.

The man's name was Evangel. Evangel told Pilgrim that he had once lived in the cargo hold himself, but had found that there was so much light, joy and happiness outside of the cargo hold that he couldn't stay any longer. What's more, he claimed that the Captain didn't want people to live in the cargo hold and didn't want them to wear chains. Pilgrim didn't believe him. In fact, he was scared of this person from the light, but somehow he also wanted to hear more.

Evangel pulled out a parchment—a copy of all the Captain's orders—and pressed it against the hatch so that Pilgrim could see. Evangel began explaining how the Captain wanted all the inhabitants of the ship to live in the light where they could learn to be real sailors. It was hard for Pilgrim to make out the parchment through the grid in the ceiling. The grid obscured the words of the parchment, and there wasn't enough light in the hold to read. For Pilgrim to read he had to pull himself up closer to the hatch. This meant he had to loosen the chains on his ankles that held him to the floor. He left the chains on his wrists just to be safe, but he was able to grab the hatch and hang on long enough to read a few more words from the parchment.

The Captain's orders were wonderful! They said anyone who wanted to be a sailor should let go of their chains, come up on deck and learn to sail! Pilgrim wanted this more than anything in the world, but the thought of leaving the hold was scary.

Warnings About People in the Light

Pilgrim's friends and family were becoming very worried about him. They began begging him to sit back down on the floor and put his ankle chains back on. They warned him how dangerous it was to read the parchment and try to interpret the Captain's orders on his own. They warned him about the people up in the light. They warned him how the people in the light would try to deceive him. They warned him how angry the Captain would be if he left the hold.

Pilgrim tried telling his friends and family about the Captain's orders to take off their chains and come into the light, but they just responded that he was trying to twist the Captain's orders. They told him that when the Captain said they should take off their chains it really meant that they could loosen certain links in the chains under certain conditions, but not too much, so it was probably better not to tamper with the chains at all. They pointed out that if you really looked at it correctly it could be seen that the Captain actually endorsed wearing chains as the best way to learn to sail. They told Pilgrim that he should sit down, put the chains back on and trust those who had been in the hold longer than he.

Pilgrim now felt discouraged. For the first time ever he started noticing how dark the hold was, how damp it was, how cold it was. It seemed like he shivered all the time now, and the chains began to chafe his skin raw. He had dutifully sat back down and accepted the chains that the others were so eager to help him with, but he couldn't help taking longing glances at the small square of light in the ceiling. The hold had always seemed like a good place, the only place he had ever known, but now it seemed oppressive. Pilgrim cried sometimes, and in his despair he began to speak under his breath to the Captain. He didn't think the Captain could hear him down here in the hold, but speaking to him brought comfort somehow.

Meeting the Captain

One day, Pilgrim was sitting beneath the hatch thinking of the Captain, when suddenly the wooden grid of the hatch was lifted out of the way, revealing completely unobstructed light for the first time. Pilgrim stood up in surprise, not even realizing that the chains had fallen from his wrists and ankles. A form leaned down into the darkness and firmly grasped Pilgrim's arm, yanking him up into the light.

At first Pilgrim was so dazzled by the glorious light that he could not make out who had lifted him out of the darkness. At first he thought it might be Evangel, but as his eyes began to adjust he saw it wasn't Evangel at all, but someone who looked just a little like Evangel. But that wasn't quite right. He could now see that it would somehow be truer to say that Evangel looked just a little like this man. At that moment the man

came into full focus and Pilgrim suddenly realized with astonishment that he was standing before the Captain. He embraced the Captain with all his might and clung to him. The Captain embraced him back.

"I've wanted to meet you all my life," cried Pilgrim. "I know," said the Captain in a voice which was matter-of-fact yet kind and infinitely wise. "I have been near you all your life, but I am very hard to see from the darkness of the hold. Evangel came to you at my bidding. He was once as you are, but now he is a sailor. Are you ready to learn to sail?"

Earnestly Pilgrim replied, "I've always tried to be a good sailor."

"But, my son, you cannot learn to sail while locked in the hold," laughed the Captain.

"But, Captain, what about my family and friends? They're still in the hold!"

"Speak to them. When you are ready, another of my sailors will begin to teach you. I will always be near."

Sharing the Good News

Pilgrim knelt down by the open hatch and called down into the darkness. He excitedly told the inhabitants of the hold all about how he had met the Captain. He tried to describe the brightness and warmth of the sun, the feel of the cool sea air on his face. He had only begun to describe what he was experiencing when several voices from below began to object that he couldn't possibly have met the Captain on the deck since it was well known that the Captain favored the hold.

Some of the hold-dwellers even claimed that Pilgrim had only left the hold so he could eventually be free to carouse on an island full of rum and naked natives. Pilgrim began to explain that he had left the hold to become a real sailor, but before he could finish, several sets of hands reached up from the darkness of the hold, grabbed the hatch and quickly pulled it back in place.

Pilgrim was stunned. His friends and family didn't want to hear about what he had experienced. They didn't want to hear about meeting the Captain. They had reacted to him with fear and even anger. Instead of joining him on the deck with the Captain they had pulled the grid of the hatch more tightly into place. Sorrowfully Pilgrim turned away from the hatch and saw

another sailor standing there. He too looked just a little like the Captain. The man introduced himself as Disciple.

"How is it that you and Evangel look different from each other and yet you both look something like the Captain? Are you related?" asked Pilgrim. "I suppose you could say we are, in a way. The Captain treats us like family and part of learning to be a sailor is learning to be more like the Captain. After awhile we all start to resemble the Captain. Some resemble him more and some less, but we're all learning. You'll start looking a bit like the Captain yourself as you learn to sail. Shall we get started?"

Becoming a Sailor

Disciple taught Pilgrim to tie knots, scrub the decks, trim the sails and a hundred other things that a good sailor needs to know. There were many challenges, but time went quickly as Pilgrim began to develop his skills. He loved working with so many other sailors with so many different skills. He soon realized that each sailor seemed to have unique talents and a job that matched their talents. He began to see how the ship could not sail without each sailor in his place. It also became obvious to Pilgrim that those still in the hold were not engaged in the work of sailing the ship and that they could never develop sailing skills as long as they remained in the hold. He longed to teach the hold-dwellers to sail.

Meanwhile, in the hold, Pilgrim's departure had caused much consternation. Several committees had been formed to discuss why people left the hold. Some thought that if they brightened up the hold a bit then people would be less likely to leave, but most thought that a bright colored hold was against the rules of sailing, so the idea was vetoed.

Others thought they should talk about the Captain more. Everyone agreed in theory, but felt that talk of the Captain should be balanced with training in managing shackles. This was tried for awhile, but it seemed like only a few had seen the Captain pass by the grid, but everyone knew something about chains so this approach fell flat. Some hold-dwellers thought that if they at least talked more about sailing then people would be less likely to leave the hold. Several people liked this idea. The rest felt it was inappropriate to talk about things outside

the hold. It was agreed that light could be discussed as long as it was in reference to how it looked through the grid. Mention of the sun should be avoided. It was agreed that they could talk about sailing, but not about the sea.

In the end, a vote was held to pass a resolution confirming that the only place one could learn to be a real sailor and truly please the Captain was in the hold. Everyone was pleased with the vote and agreed that a strong resolution on the necessity of hold-dwelling in the life of a sailor was the best way to solve the problem of people leaving.

Pilgrim's Transformation

Once in awhile someone in the hold saw Pilgrim pass by the hatch. He looked strong, sun drenched and happy. He looked like a sailor! The change was hard to explain, so hold-dwellers chalked it up to too much time carousing with naked natives.

Pilgrim had not been carousing with naked natives. He had been learning the Captain's commands from the ship's order parchment. He had been learning sailing skills from the Captain and fellow sailors. He had developed many new skills and, as Disciple had predicted, he had begun to look just a little like the Captain.

But still Pilgrim longed to have his own job as all the other sailors did. One day while talking with the Captain he asked him for a job that would fit his talents. The Captain turned to him with a twinkle in his eye and said, "I think you know what that job is. You've known since the day I pulled you from the darkness. Now you are ready."

Pilgrim nodded, hugged the Captain then turned and headed for the hatch with the ship's order parchment in his hands. It wouldn't be an easy job, but somewhere below in the darkness there were future sailors that needed to hear about the sunlight, the sea and the Captain.

Christopher Lee and his wife, Carmen, left a church they had attended for 30 years, along with their two daughters, to pursue a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. The Lee family is involved in planting and growing a contemporary church. Chris is a physical therapist in Lincoln, Nebraska.



Getting My Former Church Out of Me! ...by Dena Brehm

My religious journey is a long, complicated story. Our former church was heavy-handed, manipulative, harsh and controlling. It also fostered extremely close relationships with the church members, so we weren't willing to see the truth for many years...to do so would have meant leaving all of them, the whole community.

I came to my former church severely bulimic. Up until then I had been bulimic for all of my adult life. I had been to five separate inpatient 30-day treatment centers, had tried several antidepressants and had worked with countless therapists. I was ready to give up. The church took me in and ministered to me and my family.

They loved my husband immediately, and began grooming him to take over the ministry one day. They appealed to his need for others' approval and built him up, even encouraging him to go to seminary and putting us in charge of a small group at church (we did not feel ready, and protested, but were strongly encouraged to do it).

They tried their best to heal me, but nothing worked. Their attempts to fix me were all surface-oriented, behavior-modification techniques that were like putting band-aids on cancer. They would shame me when I failed, and accused me of being rebellious against them; I felt like a complete failure.

An "Outside" Ministry

I then heard about an "outside" ministry that relied on the Lord to reveal his truth, which set people free. We weren't really allowed to seek "outside" ministry, but I was desperate, so I went. I was free from bulimia within three weeks, and I have been 100 percent healed ever since (that was in 2000).

I came back to my church, so excited to be free! My priest and his wife did *not* meet my announcement with enthusi-

asm. They doubted my healing and spoke against the other ministry. I told everyone who would listen that I'd been healed, and many of the other church members attended that "outside" ministry to receive their own healings.

I was then accused of splitting the church, of having a *Jezebel spirit*, of being rebellious and of slandering my priest and his wife. They tried to turn my husband against me (he was now ordained and was serving under their authority, so he was torn). They forbade me from speaking of my healing to anyone at that church. After several months of this struggle, I stayed away from the church for a while, even though my husband and children continued to attend.

Eventually, I couldn't take the isolation, and I came crawling back to them, owning all the fault, saying that I'd been in

They would shame me when I failed, and accused me of being rebellious against them; I felt like a complete failure.

"transference" and asking for their forgiveness. They received me back, but conditionally. I was put on *probation* (this was implied, never spoken), and I frequently received corrections from them. At times, I was forced to listen to a list of all the things wrong with me: Rebellious, controlling, selfish, cold-hearted, manipulative, disloyal, self-centered, attention-seeking, bad wife, bad mother, underminer of authority, etc. Most of this came from my priest's wife, who had become his mouthpiece after he had a heart attack (we were actually blamed for his heart attack, as well).

We remained in this church for a total of nine years, and we were in the inner circle of clergy. We saw numerous people come and go. We were always given the official version of why they had left: They weren't spiritual enough; they were rebellious; they couldn't handle going deeper into holiness; they were *unclean* and God removed them; they were never really a part of our special, unique, elite group—they couldn't handle our special relationship with God and wanted to settle for "church as usual." And without exception, we were told to have nothing to do with the ones who'd left—so that we wouldn't have *those* spirits come upon us as well. Some of them were my close friends, and the parents of my children's

friends. But I obediently wrote them off, yet all the while I kept wondering just what the "other side of the story" really was.

Our priest used mind-games against us—often pitting one of us against others. He would say outrageous things and then later deny he'd said such things. He'd say that we were imagining things—that spirits lived in the air between his mouth and our ears who "twisted" his words. Whenever a problem arose with him or his wife, we were accused of being the problem.

On many occasions they would call my husband, or pull him aside and warn him against me, telling him that I was using and manipulating him, trying to turn him against them and the church. They addressed him as "son" (knowing full well that he needed a father's affirmation), but never once addressed me as "daughter." They told him, as well as me directly, that I was the liability in his life—that I was holding him back from progressing in his calling (he was an ordained deacon, but not yet a priest).

Saved...or Not?

During this time, this church changed its doctrine about salvation, moving from the Protestant understanding to a more Catholic understanding. They had me read books which taught that salvation is a process, not an event, and that one can never know if one has salvation—that only God can know for sure. After a year of trying to digest this new understanding (and over two years of being on *probation* and believing that there was so much wrong with me), something happened. My priest asked in front of a class one day, "How many of you know that you're saved—raise your hands!" I was stupefied. He'd just spent a year trying to convince me that no one can know if they're saved. I didn't raise my hand, since I'd been in confusion about my salvation for so long.

He looked at me and asked what the problem was. I tried to explain my confusion. My priest's wife began poking my leg, saying "Shhhh, don't start." My priest became more and more angry, and said, "I'm your priest, and if I say you're saved, you are. I'm speaking on behalf of God for you."

I was astonished at his words, and I said, with as much respect as I could muster, "I'm sorry, but I can't take a chance on

getting into heaven based on your say-so.” He lost control... he was livid! He dismissed me with a sharp gesture, and addressed the rest of the class, “Forget her! As for the rest of you, those who can believe me, I assure you that you all are saved.”

I was crying at this point—humiliated, confused and angry at his injustice. My priest’s wife grabbed my arm and took me into another room, saying, “You undermined his authority in front of all those people! How dare you!” She then went on to tell me all the things that were wrong with me.

Another woman, someone I had previously considered a good friend, came in and said, “The Lord has told me that you are making understanding an idol. You have to quit trying to understand everything and just believe what you’re told by God’s anointed.”

I went home so defeated. I even sent them an email, asking forgiveness for attacking his authority, and asking for clarification about salvation. I received a jovial, joking email back, effectively saying that it was “no big deal” and that God was giving new revelation about salvation. The whole incident was dismissed, and no one in that class ever came to my defense, except for one woman who later said she’d been terrified at his anger and thought he was about to have another heart attack (that woman has since left the church, as well).

Shortly thereafter, I experienced my second miscarriage in only seven months. After the first one, I was helped through the grieving process by others in the church. But I didn’t even know I was pregnant again until after I’d miscarried the second time.

My priest’s wife told me that since we didn’t take their advice, we were therefore in rebellion, and the second miscarriage was seen as a type of punishment. No sympathy or consolation was offered, other than, “God takes away deformed babies.”

Realizing Something Was Very Wrong

Those two incidents opened my eyes to the fact that something was very wrong in our church. My husband’s eyes had been opened a year earlier, but every time he tried to speak of it, I’d hush him and tell him that we had to just obey and trust God to work through our spiritual leaders. We were told

regularly to submit (which meant be in complete agreement as well) and to “touch not God’s anointed.”

Asking questions was a sign of challenging authority. We were expected to conform to their ideas about how Christians ought to act, think, feel, look, dress, speak...be. Everything about my own personality (analytical thinking style, creative expressions in art, style of relating) was deemed as defective, and I was told to “die to self” regularly. I was often compared to other women—they were more submissive, better wives and mothers, more spiritual—what was wrong with me?

We began to notice that people in our church were keeping their distance from us; I’d smile and say hi, and they would avert their gaze. Or they would just turn away as we approached. Then one of our friends (who was also on her way out of the church, unbeknownst to them) told us that she’d been warned by our priest’s wife to “watch out for” me.

Because of baggage from each of our pasts, our marriage was suffering. I felt emotionally detached from my husband, unable to give or receive affection, which led me to deny him sexually. My husband continued to love and desire me, but my rejection hurt him; he reacted out of his pain with criticisms and fault-finding.

We had no genuine intimacy for 17 years of our marriage (though we went through the motions—obviously, we had seven children!). We had given up on having anything other than an unfulfilling, joyless life together (divorce was never an option).

Then a marvelous thing happened: After 17 years of despising sex and feeling no love, I suddenly desired my husband. I realized that it was more than physical, that I’d suddenly fallen in love with my husband all over again—only more powerful than in the early years of our courtship.

A few weeks later, my husband received a call informing him that he was to attend an official Bishop’s Council meeting the next day. We called several people to pray for us, and he attended the meeting.

I was described in the meeting as a sex-crazed, obsessive-compulsive, out-of-control woman. My husband was told that his “house was out of order” and that he didn’t deserve to be a deacon. He was told by the priest, “I warned you about her six

years ago!” The archbishop said, “Don’t be fooled...she’s using sex to manipulate and control you.”

He was told that we had to leave our church and our entire denomination until such time as I could be brought under control, and we could then seek reconciliation and counseling. My husband left in a daze, but by the time he arrived home, he realized that they’d been wrong, and that he didn’t want his wife under control—he quite enjoyed the freedom that God had brought me into. Ironically, our home had never been more in order—we were in love, working as a

team, our children were thriving, secure in knowing their parents were committed to each other.

Several days later, we received calls from church friends, asking us about “the meeting last night.” We knew nothing about the meeting, but we were informed that it had been called to discuss us. We, obviously, were not invited. The church met, and our priest told everyone his version about why we were leaving the church.

By the end of the meeting, many were crying and they were told to have

nothing to do with us—including my children’s best (and only) friends. Even close friends, who already knew the problems in our church still turned against us. That’s the power of influence our former priest has on his flock.

We’ve been devastated by this. We’ve lost all of our friends, our church, our community. Lies have been told about us, and we haven’t been able to hear them or to defend ourselves.

Leaving—Seeking Healing and Forgiveness

We’re seeking healing, forgiveness toward those who’ve hurt us—and deprogramming! This won’t go away quickly—it’s one thing to get out of a church; it’s another thing entirely to get the church out of you! It has now been several months since we left that church. We’re preparing to move from the area, to a new home, a new community and a new church that the Lord has planned for us and will lead us to. Our fami-

ly is more than thriving—it’s flourishing. Our marriage has never been more united, stronger or more fun!

The Lord has taken us through an incredible and amazing journey of growth—teaching us about himself, about his church, the universal body of Christ and insights about ourselves that we didn’t fathom before. Blinders have been replaced with wide-eyed wonderment, as we take it all in. He’s moving us beyond and above all that we used to know, believe and understand...he’s truly *out of the box!*

But rather than believing the illusion that we’ve somehow arrived, we sense that we’re at the very edge of a new beginning, an eternal journey that transcends all barriers previously experienced.

To this day, our connections with the people of our former church have been scarce. Not once have we seen or heard from the priest and his wife, nor anyone else in leadership. We’ve had only two chance run-ins with others who were formerly close friends. The encounters were awkward on their part and freeing for us—there was no shame involved. Just a sadness for what could have been.

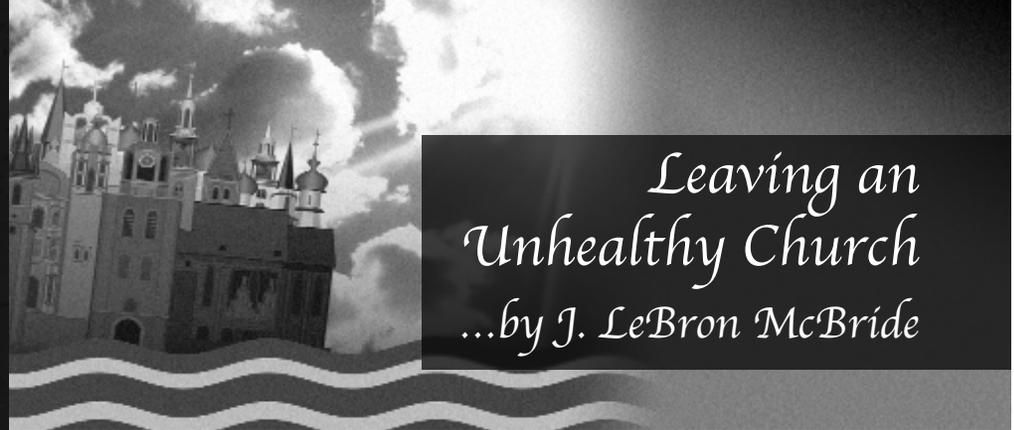
And yet, not a day goes by that we don’t express gratitude to our Lord for releasing us from that environment and belief system—we didn’t know that there was so much more!

We continue to love them, to pray for their healing and to pray that their eyes would be opened, not for our sakes, but for theirs. We also pray that that church would not increase in numbers until such time as true healing does take place. They’re no more evil than any of us...but they are indeed wounded, and I long for those wounds to be tended to.

I have never loved God more, never been so aware of his presence and his guidance, never been in a place of trusting him so fully. I gladly and eagerly follow him into the next chapter of our lives...let the great adventure continue!

Dena and her husband are learning about God’s grace versus religious legalism. They live in amazement at how wonderful the grace-infused Christian life can be.

Asking questions was a sign of challenging authority. We were expected to conform to their ideas about how Christians ought to act, think, feel, look, dress, speak...be.



Leaving an Unhealthy Church ...by J. LeBron McBride

***Editor's Note:** Plain Truth Ministries and Christianity Without the Religion have received many requests for information specifically addressing emotional and social issues people face as they leave an unhealthy church or even a heretical cult. The problems of disagreeing with and leaving such a community become increasingly daunting as friends and loved ones pull away in order to protect their own identities, esteem and offices in the dysfunctional group culture. LeBron McBride drew from his own experience of leaving an unhealthy church as well as from his clinical experience in family therapy as he wrote his book, *Living Faithfully with Disappointment in the Church*, published by Routledge Imprint (Taylor & Francis Publishers). Themes from this article are drawn in part from this book.*

Just as a diamond has more than one sparkle, so theological transitions have more than one dimension. Most people who come to new theological understandings do so by diligent study and reflection; they soak in their new discoveries like sponges absorbing water. Usually people come to intellectual insights that are freeing, resonating with their new spiritual convictions.

However, in the whirlwind of the excitement of their new discoveries, people often neglect a vital piece of the transition puzzle. Far too often, sincere persons are unprepared for the emotional impact of a theological awakening, especially when they have been intertwined in a toxic and controlling church. In fact, the emotional conflict may prove almost unbearable. People may get lost in a devastating transitional wilderness where life feels barren and desolate and the fierce monsters of loneliness, grief, anger, depression, anxiety and many other powerful emotions show their fangs—and appear ready to devour them.

Toxic Churches and Their Psychological Walls

This article will address the intense emotional and psychological dimension that may accompany a transition in belief and church identity. Oftentimes toxic churches have, over time, built psychological walls beyond which are wasteland moats around their closed systems. In attempting to leave the system, one has to maneuver among emotional predators to find true freedom.

For example, teachings stating that a certain church is the only true church, the remnant or last day church are psychological barriers that can be difficult to destroy. Further, destructive churches often develop very strong myths among the members that if they leave the organization, they will be eternally cursed or damned and will not survive spiritually.

When a church's theology supports a closed system and limited or no interaction with "outsiders" who worship differently or who have the "mark of the beast" or some other apocalyptic "mark," many fear the wilderness that lies outside that church is too threatening to risk experiencing. Anyone who once accepted such teachings or has been brainwashed by them should not minimize the powerful addiction to the church they ensure. These tactics make it very difficult for members to explore options intellectually and emotionally. Again, even when one does somehow break free enough to come to new intellectual and spiritual understanding, the psychological impact of abandoning those teachings may be what sneaks up and destabilizes the person. Those who do venture out of an unhealthy church do best if they know of the psychological and emotional dangers ahead.

Breaking Attachments

Human beings are social creatures with profound needs of attachment. When we break an attachment to another or even to a church, we usually suffer deep emotional agony. Many dynamics may influence the extent of this suffering: How long the relationship has been in place, how important it has been, what our support network is like post-attachment, what we believe about the attachment, how many areas of our lives the break in attachment impacts and so on. Therefore, we cannot

always judge for ourselves how profoundly the break-up may impact us; much less should we judge how others react to a similar severance.

A foundational principle in our dealings with people who leave particular churches, therefore, should be that we not judge each other regarding the timing nor the amount of struggle involved. Although people on similar wilderness journeys from toxic churches have much in common, complications vary enough that a simplistic "one size fits all" type of understanding will not be equally helpful to everyone. Each individual, no matter where in the process of an exodus, must assess carefully and walk by faith while being true to self as well as honest with God.

One model for understanding the severing of an attachment to a church is that of divorce. From working as a family therapist, I know from experience how varied reactions to divorce can be. People can usually expect a roller coaster of emotions during a marital break-up, often vacillating from sheer panic to calm assurance that one can survive. Profound ambivalence is often present; people make emotional progress and then move back again. Clean, fast, simple and easy breaks in attachments are unusual for caring persons, whether that break is with a spouse or with a church into which one has fully invested oneself.

Continuing with the model of divorce, think of a spouse that has an abusive partner and compare this relationship to a member of an abusive church. It may, in such cases, be very clear intellectually that one needs to divorce in order to survive emotionally and physically, but emotionally the person may feel confused. Often the abusive partner has used myths much like the ones already mentioned in relationship to abusive churches in an effort to convince the abused spouse that she cannot survive without him. The abuser may have told the victim such things as: "You will never survive without me," or "No one would have you but me."

...toxic churches have, over time, built psychological walls beyond which are wasteland moats around their closed systems. In attempting to leave the system, one has to maneuver among emotional predators to find true freedom.

Cognitive Dissonance

There is a psychological term called *cognitive dissonance* that describes our internal tension and struggle when we simultaneously hold conflicting beliefs or attitudes, or when our beliefs contradict our behavior. For example, if a person believes that divorce is wrong and honors the marriage vows but simultaneously realizes that staying in an abusive marriage endangers one's children or one's self, the resulting conflict is cognitive dissonance. The reality of the abuse may be clearly evident, but the intellectual belief about the permanence of marriage and the emotional attachment to the spouse may cause the person great internal struggle and confusion.

Or to take another example, one may change a religious practice out of a new biblical understanding, but the old familiar pattern may result in the new religious practice feeling awkward for awhile. Often when there is change in our beliefs, we go through a wilderness experience of emotional ambivalence before our minds and hearts are integrated regarding the belief.

As the shattering of one's assumptions and beliefs gains in momentum, so does a shattering of the foundation of one's security or of life itself. God may appear absent. Former friends may abandon or reject. If one is employed by the organization, career and income may be lost. Like an addict that goes into physical withdrawal, so a person leaving the attachment and womb of a toxic religion often has emotional withdrawal. Some even return to their religious addiction in order to get relief. These people can be the saddest cases of all because the cognitive dissonance of such a return ensures that they have no peace—or they go numb to their spiritual experience and become robots going through motions of religious life that have no meaning.

There is a better way. The road best traveled is walking through the wilderness toward the promised land of healing. It is not an easy journey, and it is filled with dangers, but it is well worth the agonizing struggle of the wilderness to find the promised land of freedom and wholeness.

Considerations When Making a Theological Transition

Do not minimize the stress. In stress theory there is the con-

cept of a “pile-up” of stressors, and I know of few instances where the pile-up of stress is any higher than when exiting some churches. The stress is not just in one area of life but is pervasive across most domains of living. There can be horrific stress because of the breakdown of a person's support system, social network, family life, mental theological framework, emotional securities, personal history, worldview, in some cases financial and career investment and so on. For a time a comfort zone is nowhere to be found.

Even persons who are very stable can only take so much, and when stress is so intrusive to so many areas of life, there is much at risk. When you survey the wasteland you must cross to get to a better spiritual and emotional land, prepare as best you can and beware of these dangers and risks. Otherwise, you will certainly be blindsided by the wilderness temptations and confrontations. For many, it will not be a short or simple journey.

I have known some who continued to feel guilty for years even though they knew for certain they were at a different point theologically and their former way was empty for them. Guilt can be true guilt or false guilt. In cases such as this, one is not dealing with true guilt for a wrong done but with the residual effects of a conscience that has been carefully indoctrinated and is, therefore, overly active with a guilt that is false. I think this is especially true for those who were indoctrinated as children, so beware.

Allow grief and realize that persons grieve in various ways—there is no one correct manner in which to grieve. When there is loss, grief is normal, not abnormal. Our society has popularized certain stages of grief, thus promoting a belief that if you go through the various steps, grief will be completed. However, in real life grief is emotionally all over the place and is rarely a neat progression of steps (see “Five Stages of Accepting That One's Belief System is Dead Wrong” on page 29).

It is so important not to expect a neat and tidy grief package and to remember that anyone who cares deeply may grieve deeply when there is loss. Grief reveals past attachment and caring and will, most likely, wax and wane and subside for awhile before coming forth with a new vengeance. Some grief lasts a lifetime; however, time normally does bring relief. A person may experience some losses long after leaving a de-

structive church. For example, being part of a special group, the group identity, the apparent closeness of the group, the like-mindedness and so on—although largely false perceptions—are powerful losses.

The loss of family and friends can be traumatic; being cut off suddenly and dramatically can cause a questioning of trust and the validity of all relationships. It is important to remember that those cutting themselves off are responding to their own insecurities and inability to tolerate anything that threatens their fragile belief structure. This self-induced separation may be the most obvious illustration of the bankruptcy of their religion at a deeper level. Truth is not so easily shaken and disturbed. The unfortunate reality is that many times there is nothing you can do to bring any closure to such relationships, and persons who do cut off in this manner often have to demonize you to give themselves an excuse for their behavior.

Don't let criticism and negativity overcome you; move toward the positive. One of the worst things that can occur is that we can take on the characteristics of our theological adversaries and become just as negative and controlling as they are. It takes grace to accept persons where they are, and it may help if we remember our own past and that we were in the same place at one point. One of the marks of psychological and spiritual maturity is the ability to move to a different understanding without rejecting those who remain at the former level of understanding.

How to Survive Transition Trauma

Accept that ambiguity is much more a part of faith than you have previously been taught. There is not a clear-cut answer for every theological question we have. Questions and honest doubt are parts of genuine faith. Most toxic organizations have an “answer” to everything, but you have to accept their presuppositions in order to believe them. I am not sure where it originated, but the quote: “Why is it that the religious institutions that say they have all the answers, never allow any questions?” holds great insight. Ponder it.

One has to ask if certainty in all areas is really valid or necessary. It appears to me that living with paradox and not being anxious about it is a hallmark of psychological health.

Put your focus on Christ and his acceptance of you and your journey. Christ accepted the disciples and shared communion with them shortly before they abandoned him. Their faith was imperfect and in transition, yet Christ accepted them and continued to work with them. He will do no less with you. Christ is much more graceful than what you have internalized from the teaching of your toxic church. He is with you even when it doesn't feel he is, and he will bring you through the wilderness, for he has been there and knows the way.

Remember the importance of forgiveness, but acknowledge that forgiveness may not be immediate and may not bring positive feelings. Just as Christ has forgiven and continues to forgive us, so we seek to forgive others. But it may take time to forgive a religious institution that you feel has harmed you. Even when you choose to forgive, the hurt and pain may remain; forgiveness is not a magical wand that removes all negative feelings. Our acceptance before God is not based upon the perfection or imperfection of our own personal forgiveness. If it were, our forgiveness would become a demand of works righteousness.

Ultimately, the only way we can forgive an entity that never apologizes is by turning over to God our “right” to get even. We are accepted and God continues to work with us in that acceptance in spite of our continued imperfection in forgiveness or in anything else. Perfectionism is an example of the all-or-nothing, black-or-white thinking that sometimes remains with us from toxic religion. It is unrealistic, and God's grace reaches us even in the struggles of our daily lives.

Seek balance in all areas of life. Not one of us is truly balanced, and giving attention to the spiritual, social, physical and mental areas of life is vital, especially when we are under stress. Do not neglect the importance of physical exercise to assist with emotional agitation and depression. Avoid extremes. Eat well and find outlets and hobbies that take you away from

Christ is much more graceful than what you have internalized from the teaching of your toxic church. He is with you even when it doesn't feel he is, and he will bring you through the wilderness, for he has been there and knows the way.

the intensity of the religious struggles you have been exposed to in your transition. An obsession with theological issues without balance becomes an insane approach to living.

Take a long and meditative look at the foundational Christian concepts such as grace, forgiveness, acceptance and God's infinite love. If you continue to study only minute details of obscure theology, your relationship with God will not develop. If you constantly feed on negatives your faith will be starved. You need, most of all, to develop your relationship with Christ and find solace and healing in his care for you. Careful reflection on the great principles and concepts of Christianity will pay great psychological and emotional dividends.

Conclusion

It is truly a myth that you cannot survive an exodus from a toxic church. There may indeed be emotional trauma as you make the break into the wilderness once you leave, but even Christ himself spent some time in the wilderness. The temptations of the wilderness are great, and the fierceness of the emotional predators that attack you can be devastating.

However, once you have made it beyond the wilderness, you will recognize how Christ sustained you even during your weakest moments. You will wonder how you previously got so caught up in all the theological briars and thickets of the old system. You will begin to relish the newfound freedom to commune with Christ without all the distractions of a toxic belief system sticking and jabbing its sharp thorns into your psyche. Best of all, you will find that Christ is the Promised Land beyond the wilderness that brings rest to your soul!

Themes from this article are from Faithfully Living with Disappointment in the Church by J. LeBron McBride, Ph.D., © 2005 by Routledge Imprint, Binghamton, NY. Used by Permission. Book is available at www.routledge.com or by calling 1-800-634-7064.

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Five Stages of Accepting That One's Belief System Is Dead Wrong

In 1969 Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who worked with terminally ill patients in Switzerland, wrote a book titled, *On Death and Dying*, in which she outlined a process that has since come to be known as the "Five Stages of Grief."

1. **Denial**—A refusal to believe or accept what has happened.
2. **Anger**—Blaming others or one's self for the loss.
3. **Bargaining**—Negotiating with one's self, or with God.
4. **Depression**—Listlessness, tiredness—a feeling of being punished.
5. **Acceptance**—Realizing that life goes on, thereby allowing one's self to heal.

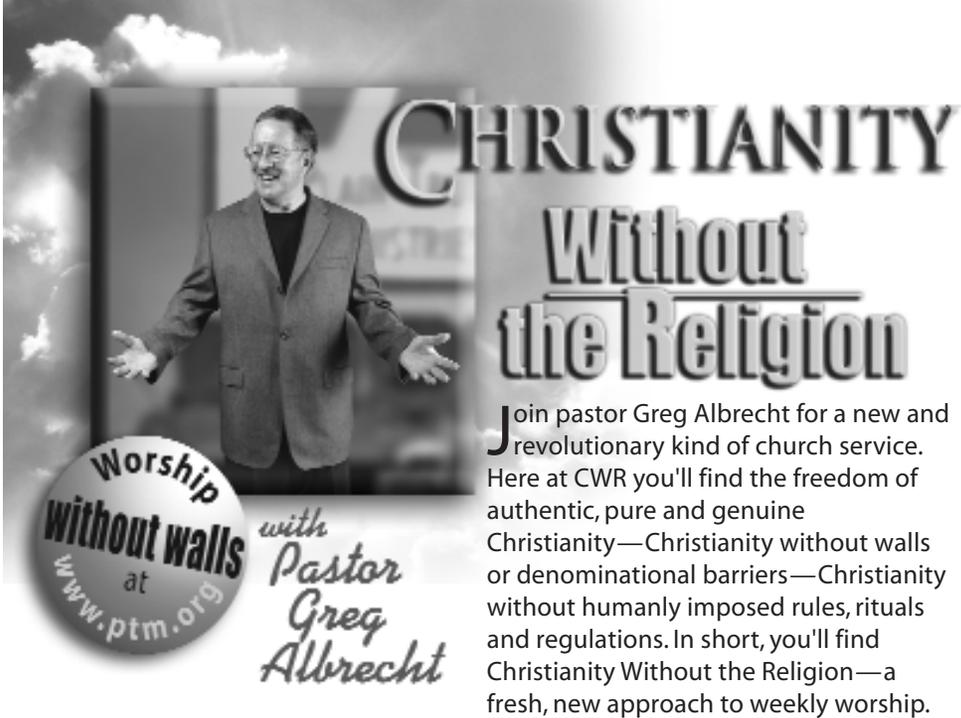
Originally, these stages were not intended to describe the grieving process. Kubler-Ross had observed these stages in her terminally ill patients—not among their survivors. In her own words, they are "an attempt to summarize what we have learned from our dying patients in terms of coping mechanisms at the time of a terminal illness."

These were the stages that patients may go through upon learning that they were going to die. So, more accurately, they are "The Five Stages of Receiving Catastrophic News."

Some authorities caution, however, that these stages are not cut and dried. They point out that:

- We don't have to go through the stages in sequence. We can skip a stage or go through two or three simultaneously.
- We can go through them in different time phases. Some individuals may take far longer to adjust than others.
- The intensity and duration of the reaction depends on how significant the change-produced loss is perceived.
- The final stage of "acceptance" does not represent full healing. It represents the point at which real healing can begin.

For our purposes, we call Kubler-Ross' stages "The Five Stages of Accepting That One's Belief System Is Dead Wrong." It is not possible for those who have spent years of their lives in cults and cultic teaching—believing fantasies and fables—to leave the cult and change their belief system without some sort of adjustment—and serious pain. After all, such belief systems have become part of us—a part of our very identity. When the system is exposed as false or when we leave it behind, we can expect to encounter a time of loss and grieving, and that process will likely follow the phases described above.



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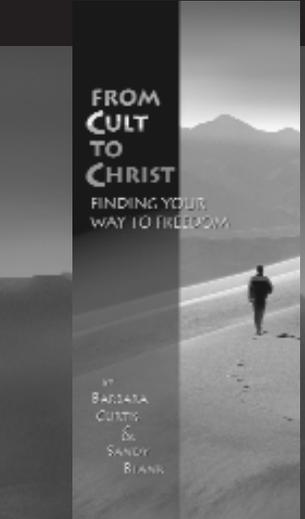
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