

# PLAIN TRUTH<sup>®</sup>

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## CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION<sup>®</sup>

**Logo:** a graphic mark, symbol or emblem used by institutions and enterprises to promote immediate public recognition of their mission, goods and services. In some cases, the logo that defines a company or endeavor becomes more valuable than the combined physical assets of the corporation it identifies.

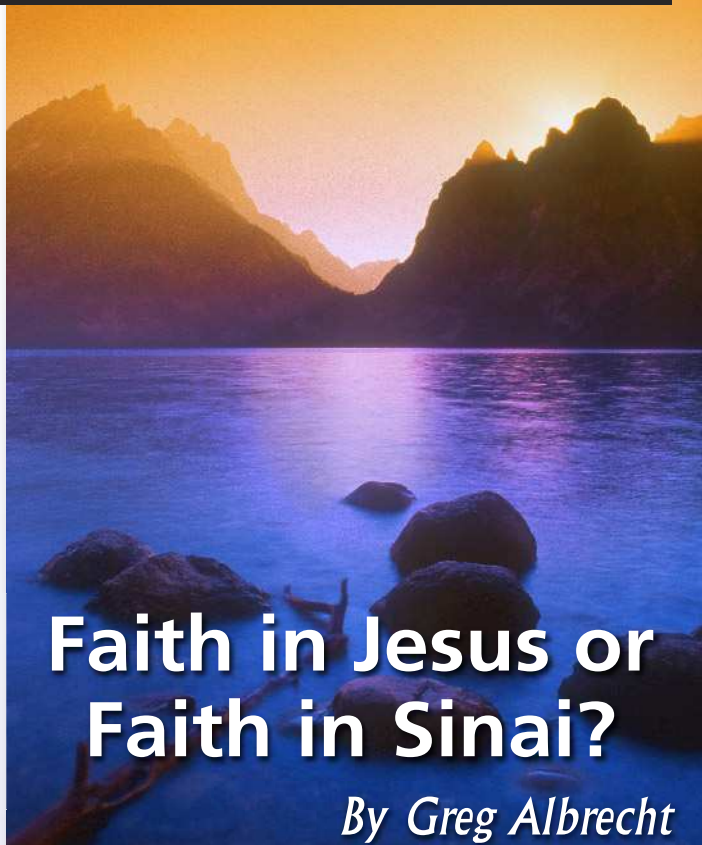
Logos are so instantaneously and distinctively recognized they become part of our language, central to communication in an ever changing world.

The graphic illustration of an apple from which someone appears to have taken a bite brings to mind the Apple computer/tech company and its products.

The words “Walt Disney” over the image of the Fantasyland Castle of Disneyland and Disney World, or appearing at the beginning of a Disney movie set the stage so that the viewer expects a journey into the “magic kingdom.”

The graphic of Golden Arches stimulates brains of people all over the world to fire up taste buds and trigger pleasant memories of “McDonalds” burgers and fries consumed in the past.

Some corporations are so traditional and so historically secure in their particular endeavor that they simply use letters of the alphabet to form an acronym for the longer corporate title of a company—“AT&T” brings phones and cable television and other communication services to mind.



## Faith in Jesus or Faith in Sinai?

By Greg Albrecht

For many who live within the world served by the British Broadcasting Corporation the letters “BBC” bring to mind radio and television programming.

A decade or so ago, while visiting the West Bank, I met with the former president of Bethlehem Bible College and remarked to him that I had seen the acronym BBC on many of the documents of the college—but of course, we joked, the British Broadcasting Corporation was far more likely to be thought of when someone saw those letters appearing next to each other.

Do you remember the logo of the Prudential Insurance Company? Sure—the logo of the Prudential Insurance Company is the “Rock of Gibraltar.” Prudential wants their clients and customers to feel that their investments are safe, stable

and secure—they’ve even used the slogan, “Get a Piece of the Rock.” The Prudential Insurance Company wants us to trust in them, and to believe that they are there for us—they’re not going anywhere—they are a rock.

The faith that God gives us by his grace is just like that—safe, stable and secure—and of course it is faith based on the sure foundation of the Rock of Ages—Jesus Christ, the Rock of our faith.

In the shifting sands of a culture and society where fundamental assumptions about value and identity seem to be changing rapidly, we are thankful that Jesus is our sure foundation.

*You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm, to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded:*

*“If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.” The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.”*

*But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.*

*You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,*

Continued on page 3



## Religion—Where Is the Love?

**W**hy do we speak about “Christianity WITHOUT the religion?” The answer was well-summarized by a slogan on a T-shirt I recently saw someone wearing: *“Religion—Giving Hope to a World Torn Apart by...Religion.”*

Religion, as it is known, believed and practiced throughout this world is a contradiction.

- *It promises hope, but delivers fear.*
- *It promises peace, but delivers violence and bloodshed.*
- *It promises freedom and faith, but delivers authoritarian legalism.*

Why do we proclaim Christianity WITHOUT the religion? Because we are serious about Jesus, the founder of Christianity, who said in John 13:35, “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

We say Christianity WITHOUT the religion because we carefully look at the fruit produced by religion, including huge Christian institutions, and it is difficult to find the love of God.

We say Christianity WITHOUT the religion because religion defines itself by deeds one must do to please or appease God—and such a teaching is in direct opposition to the gospel.

We say Christianity WITHOUT the religion because religion says it is giving hope to the world. Really? Religion is our hope?

How can we have hope in religious institutions that wind up condemning each other, hating each other and sometimes going to war with each other?

How can institutions that produce injury and destruction—

who spiritually abuse their own members—bring about hope?

In the 17th century there was a French explorer named Samuel de Champlain. Champlain often reported back to the old world in Europe about many of his experiences while exploring North America, most particularly Canada.

In his writings he told one story about a community in Nova Scotia that was served by a Catholic priest and a Protestant pastor.

Champlain did not detail the exact nature of the doctrinal disputes between these two religious professionals, but he did explain how they resolved their difficulties. At regular intervals, these two men would engage in a public fist-fight. Apparently big crowds of people would gather at the center of the village or town to cheer on their favorite combatant.

We don’t know what the pastor and priest were fighting about, but we do know they fought regularly. This story is an example, in a nutshell, of the fighting and destruction which inevitably follows in the wake of religion.

**If religion is our only hope, then we have no hope**—because religion either starts or winds up deeply involved in the bloodshed and carnage around this world.

Don’t fall for the idea that some religion is better than no religion at all. Some believe all religion is good just as all water is good.

When water is like the rivers of living water Jesus spoke of, water can refresh and it can cause plants to grow. But water can also be a destructive flood or tsunami, or a toxic, polluted river that brings death and destruction.

Jesus spent much of his earthly ministry helping people to discern healthy faith from toxic faith. He spent much of his ministry revealing the Father, because people of that day had such a horribly contorted idea of who God is—and people still do!

Religion says all those who do not follow its dictates will burn in hell, forever, even while being eternally conscious. *Where is the love?*

Religion says the world must be made over in its image so the whole world will, one way or another, through violence if necessary, become part of its teachings and beliefs. *Where is the love?*

Religion teaches its followers to be skeptical about all outsiders—and through its passionate preaching religion urges judgment on all outsiders. *Where is the love?*

The historic inquisitions of Christendom were founded on the premise that virtually any act (even torture) was permissible if the final end was the conversion of an unbelieving outsider. The end justifies the means, says religion. *Where is the love?*

The world of religion so quickly moves away from expressions of love as primary goals and soon is wallowing in a sea of legalistic swill, a pig pen of trivialities that are meaningless and irrelevant—while justifying abusing, torturing and killing others in the name of God. □

—Greg Albrecht

*Join us for the complete message “Religion—Where Is the Love?” at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of February 12, 2017.*

to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.

*You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*—Hebrews 12:18-24

### The Law or Jesus?

This passage addresses Hebrews in transition, many of whom were trying to straddle the old covenant and the new covenant, so that they had one foot in both. As the past



*Their faith was not grounded in the fear of Mt. Sinai, but the joy of Mt. Zion. Their faith was now fully expressed by the spiritual Rock of Jesus Christ...*

2000 years richly demonstrate, they were not the last to attempt the impossible—to live in both worlds.

Many of the original readers of Hebrews were finding it impossible to follow both Moses and Jesus at the same time. The more things change the more they stay the same—many within Christendom today are still trying to live in two different worlds.

**Mt. Sinai is the logo for the old covenant**—physical stones and rocks (some of which are volcanic) of endless rules, regulations and rituals combined to form the mountain of the old covenant. The original recipients of the book of Hebrews were in transition from the “old covenant logo” of Mt. Sinai to **the “new covenant**

**logo”**—the Rock of Jesus Christ.

The original audience addressed by the book of Hebrews had already experienced the difficulties involved in leaving the laws of Judaism, leaving the trust they had placed in their own abilities to please God by obeying him—as they embraced freedom in Christ, and the grace of God which we are given without merit on the part of humans.

As new Christians they had joy in Christ, they wanted to wholeheartedly embrace God’s grace but there were times when they yearned for the comfort of their old ways and customs.

Their entire belief system about God and how he operates (what he expects and the relationship we humans can have with him) had been shaken, and while what they were now experiencing was wonderful, they were still standing on new and (for them) untested spiritual ground.

**Eventually, all who followed Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant,**

**came to think of and remember him by the image and logo of a cross**—but while Jesus had died on his cross at least three decades before these words were written, it would be centuries before the logo of a cross galvanized Christ-followers.

One of the main purposes of the book of Hebrews was to demonstrate to the original readers and listeners, as well as for all Christians of all time—including of course you and me—that Jesus Christ is superior to all Christ-less religion, with its rituals, sacrifices, traditions, regulations and restrictions.

But their faith was about to be subjected to an earthquake—for the very temple in Jerusalem, where

Jews believed that God himself lived, was going to be utterly destroyed.

Within a few years after the book of Hebrews was written (during the war of attrition waged by Rome against the city of Jerusalem in 69-70 A.D.) the temple in Jerusalem, another symbol—another logo—another emblem of the faith of those who followed the rules of Mount Sinai, was completely and utterly destroyed.

As Jesus prophesied in the second verse of Matthew 24, not one stone of the temple was left standing on another. The book of Hebrews is encouraging these original recipients that what they had now—Jesus—was better than anything they ever had or could ever have in a law-based, Christ-less religion.

### Physical Mountain or Spiritual Rock?

The Hebrew Christians who had fully accepted and trusted their faith to Jesus were no longer fearfully trembling before the old covenant, as their ancestors had done before Mt. Sinai—but instead they were rejoicing at Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, the eternal kingdom of heaven, because of Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.

**Their faith was not grounded in the fear of Mt. Sinai, but the joy of Mt. Zion.** Their faith was now fully expressed by the spiritual Rock of Jesus Christ, the mediator of a new covenant, rather than the rules, regulations and rituals of the old covenant.

There are **two kinds of faith—faith in laws, religious traditions, customs and ceremonies**—or, there is **faith in Jesus**. Faith in laws is built on human abilities to please and appease God by virtue of obedience to law. Faith in Christ is not based on rituals or rules—faith in Christ is based on an eternal relationship of love, an unshakable commitment from God to us.

The faith of a Christ-follower is not solely based on what one reads about God, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, in the Bible—the faith of Christ-followers is far



beyond faith in a book. As Christ-followers our faith is based in and on Jesus Christ alone—*faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone.*

Hebrews 12:18-24 describes the fearful sights and sounds at Mt. Sinai, as the ground shook, with darkness, gloom and storm. It was a terrifying sight—**when humans place their faith in laws rather than Christ humans are destined to live in fear.**

When we place our faith in Christ-less religion, then life is filled with uncertainty and instability. When our faith is in anything or anyone other than Jesus Christ, we live in a precarious, shaky, slippery world of doubt—because our faith depends on how well we measure up to rules and regulations.

When our faith ultimately rests on our own abilities, then we will forever be filled with fear. We will be terrified before an unstable Mount Sinai—our spiritual lives are bleak and dismal because they are based on human ability to please God.

Life in our physical world is shaky and precarious. We live at the mercy of other humans, and governments and religious institutions—and as a result we experience economic depressions, wars, religious animosity and hatred of all kinds. The nature of the physical creation at large is unstable—that's the world into which we were born and the world in which we will die. This world is unstable.

That fact is proven over and over again when earthquakes, tidal waves, tornadoes, hurricanes and floods wreak havoc and devastation. Accidents and warfare claim lives—as do diseases and illnesses of all kinds. Life itself is fragile—far from solid and secure.

### **Faith That Cannot Be Shaken**

*...we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken...* (Hebrews 12:28)

While our grip on life in this physical world is far from secure, we may have, by God's grace, unshakable faith in Christ. At the end of what is often called his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)

Jesus gave the metaphor of a house built on rock contrasted with a house constructed on sand to illustrate the two ways in which faith might be expressed:

*Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash—* Matthew 7:24-27.

You may remember the words from an old hymn, "On Christ the solid rock we stand, all other ground is sinking sand." **If we have faith in Sinai** our spiritual house is constructed on a foundation of sand. **If we have faith in Christ**, our spiritual house is a house whose builder and maker and architect is God—built on the sure foundation of the Rock of Ages. Our faith in Christ centers and grounds us, giving us peace and assurance—a steadfast hope—a living faith.

All four Gospels record the fact of Jesus' resurrection. All four clearly state that he died and was buried and rose from the dead. They also record the incredible change that the resurrection brought into the lives of Jesus' disciples.

Immediately after Jesus died on the cross his disciples were dismayed—they felt lost—they had no hope. But then, when Jesus rose from the dead they were given courage and hope—by God's grace they were given faith in the risen, living Jesus Christ—and that faith was alive, vibrant and dynamic.

The fact that Jesus rose from the dead is the foundation upon which authentic Christian life—authentic relationship with God—is based. Christianity without the living, risen Lord Jesus is dead—**without**

**Jesus Christ Christianity is no longer Christianity**—it might be called Christianity, people might meet in a building which calls itself a church, but without Christ it becomes a human religion, a life of going through the motions.

**Take away the living, risen Lord Jesus from Christianity and all that is left** is Christ-less religion, with all of its control techniques, fabrications, fear and threats.

**Take away the living, risen Lord Jesus, mediator of the new covenant, and we're back at Mt. Sinai, terrified, in fear, without hope.**

**Take away Jesus and all that is left** is an empty shell, a religious system where inmates endlessly go through the motions, endlessly enduring meaningless drills and programs, trudging along in spiritual chains, in bondage to those who lord it over them.

*Take away the living, risen Lord Jesus, mediator of the new covenant, and we're back at Mt. Sinai, terrified, in fear, without hope.*

Faith in Christ is based on the fact that God came to us, in the person of Jesus, to be one of us—to be with us. Faith in Christ is based on Jesus Christ living "with" us.

Our faith in Christ is based on his life "with" us—and of course, he works "with" us in our daily lives. He was not simply with us in a historical sense—not simply with those who knew him personally when we walked this earth—but he continues to be with us now. He is alive—and he is with us.

Faith in Christ is based on the fact that he is now living "in" us.

Here's how Paul expresses this facet of our faith:

*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained by following the law, Christ died for nothing!*—Galatians 2:20. □



# Cargo Cult Christianity— All About Appearances

BY GREG ALBRECHT

*Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.' But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.—Matthew 23:5-12*

**D**uring World War II the American and British military brought the material goods of their culture into the remote islands of the South Seas. These civilizations had never experienced the wealth and prosperity enjoyed by the powers that had recently arrived to occupy their land. When the war was over, the military bases were closed, and there were no more shipments of the material resources to which the inhabitants of these islands had become accustomed.

While soldiers occupied the islands, the lifestyle of the islanders drastically changed. Up until the end of the war some of the soldiers shared medicine, canned food, radios, tents and clothing with the islanders. The locals had become accustomed to crates descending out of the sky, filled with Coca-Cola,

candy, canned meat and all manner of riches and delicacies they had never known. Suddenly the supply of this heretofore-treasure trove of resources dried up.

The islanders longed for the cargo which had once arrived by plane or by ship to reappear. In an effort to cause the resources to return, followers of what came to be called *cargo cults* started to mimic the activities they had observed the soldiers perform, thinking if they acted like the soldiers, the resources would return.

The islanders built landing strips where airplanes could land with the cargo they so longed for—hence the term *cargo cults*. They created replicas of headsets, carving wooden headphones adorned with bamboo antennas. The hand-crafted headsets were worn by *cargo cult* followers who sat in towers, seemingly functioning as air traffic controllers—for non-existent airplanes. They lit up the runways with signal fires and torches, hoping to attract night landings.

Dreaming of the cargo and merchandise they had once enjoyed, and desiring for those “blessings” to return, they staged drills and marches, with sticks substituting for rifles and military uniforms and insignias painted on the bodies of the *cargo cult* “soldiers.” They believed that the occupying armies had some special and unique connection with the gods, and that something they did must have influenced the gods to

rain down material blessings. The *cargo cult* followers seemed to be doing all of the right things. They had created, to the best of their abilities, the same form and appearance they had seen before—but of course to no avail, for the cargo did not materialize. No planes landed. No merchandise arrived.

## Religion—A Form of Godliness

In 2 Timothy 3:5 Paul warns of those who do not love the one true God, who have a form of godliness but deny its power. Religion can deceive us into thinking that the physical, outward, external form (what is seen and touched and felt) is more important than the spiritual, inner, unseen substance. The image that the eye sees is powerful, leading religion to motivate its followers by appearances. Jesus said that “everything” the teachers of the law and the Pharisees did was “done for men to see.”

There are all kinds of “forms” of godliness that are alive and well within Christ-less religion today:

**1) Ritual.** Many feel that if they can just perform the right rituals and ceremonies and duties, in the right way at the right time, then God will bless them with health and wealth—and conversely he won't curse them. Shades of the *cargo cult*!

**2) Attendance.** Many feel that if they just show up, assemble and attend—then that will make God happy. If they just march around in a “Christian” assembly, with their little stick rifles, in “God's Army” then that will keep God happy—at least for one more week when they will need to do it all over again.

**3) Heritage.** Many believe they have a form of godliness because they were born into a particular religion or denomination. They believe that their religious club has “the truth” or “more truth” than anybody else. They belong to or frequent a particular spiritual address because it's the only thing they have ever known.

**4) Liturgy.** Many think candles, bells, stained glass windows, choirs, pipe organs, incense and chanting is

what God wants, and they believe if they engage in such “holy” behavior and worship then God is pleased. Others, who favor a more contemporary experience, feel if they raise their hands to lively music in an exercise called “praise and worship” then their “worship” will ensure that they know God.

## Secondhand Spirituality

The Bible speaks of empty, meaningless religion as being like wells without water. A religious well without water holds the promise of being able to quench thirst—but when the truth is finally realized, such an empty well is but a mockery. Christ-less religion is an empty spiritual well, incapable of dispensing God’s grace.

Apart from God, religious rituals and ceremonies are *secondhand spirituality*—merely going through the motions. All forms of *cargo cult* religion are but a mockery. God is not influenced, conjured up or manipulated through rituals, machinations, obedience, uniforms, behaviors or practices. The power of God is not isolated to musical expression or devout prayer or outward appearance.

## Pseudo-Spiritual Pretenses

In Matthew 23:5-12 Jesus warns about the priority religion gives to concentrating on appearances, and in so doing, missing the real power of God that is often not visible to the naked eye. Jesus warns about a pseudo-spiritual image that can be created by uniforms worn by religious professionals. Such attire creates a holier-than-thou atmosphere. Costumes can then become an essential part of the show, when religious business is conducted.

Most religions have distinctive “garb” or accessories which they use to distinguish and decorate its officials and leaders. Robes, vestments, habits and clerical

collars are among those more familiar to most of us. The teachers of the law, Pharisees, Sadducees and priests of Jesus’ day were no different.

Jesus mentions *phylacteries* or *tefillin*, small leather boxes (still worn today by Orthodox Jewish men) containing selected texts from Exodus and Deuteronomy. Phylacteries are required by Jewish oral tradition to be worn during prayer. Two boxes are bound with leather straps, one to the forehead and one to the hand. You might not see examples of this practice in your day-to-day life. But in the world of orthodox Judaism, it is a daily occurrence.

Apparently the religious leaders of Jesus’ day were purchasing and wearing bigger and fancier phylacteries to distinguish themselves in the practice of prayer. Do better boxes make prayers more effective? Does God pay more attention to the prayers of those who wear broader phylacteries? Does prayer posturing impress God? It is laughable. But it was happening. According to Jesus, prayer competition among clergy is futile religious ambition. Religious arrogance and pride appalled Jesus.

Can bigger phylacteries change the human heart or make a religious leader a better man of God? Some apparently thought so. Jesus could not abide this spiritual obsession without scathing criticism.

## Places of Honor and Important Seats

Jesus accused the Pharisees of loving “the most important seats in the synagogues.” Once again, Jesus expresses his opposition to the love of appearances which religious authorities can find attractive. The Pharisees loved being big cheeses. They loved being in the spotlight. They loved the acclaim of men.

Within the religious culture of Jesus’ day, seating at dinners and banquets was assigned according to social rank. The host was seated in a place of honor, as were the most

*The Pharisees were slaves of empty religion... rather than serving the humble, they ignored the humble to exalt themselves.*

honored guests. The closer you sat to the host, the higher your place in the social pecking order. Jesus accused the teachers of the law of coveting the best seats.

Jesus makes it crystal clear that the Pharisees were slaves of empty religion. They coveted the seats of honor at banquets. Their scorekeeping hearts made them jockey for positions of honor before their honor-hungry colleagues. How sad that rather than serving the humble, they ignored the humble to exalt themselves.

God did not come to this earth, in the person of Jesus, so that we might serve him with peeled grapes, chocolate bars and ice cold drinks while fanning him with palm fronds. He came to serve us. While God desires our love and service, apart from his grace we have nothing he needs. He doesn’t need any product we are capable of producing. What he desires is for us to accept his service, which will transform us from thinking solely of ourselves to being his very children who are humble, internally adorned with the attitude of Jesus, thinking of and serving others, in his name.

God is not interested in anything religion assures us we can earn. Larger prayer phylacteries and places of honor at dining room tables earn nothing before God. What matters to God is transforming us, by his grace, into his very children in whom Jesus lives.

Believe it or not, every year in the Republic of Vanuatu a celebration is held, even to this day, with islanders clothed in what look like old United States Army fatigues and uniforms, marching with bamboo rifles slung across their shoulders. It’s so obvious to sophisticated North Americans, isn’t it? *Cargo cult* religion is superstitious, oppressive religion that holds its people in spiritual captivity. □





## Missed Opportunity

*Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).*

### Monday Morning Bus Stop

*She was ten, plain face, matted hair, crooked teeth, soiled dress, tar-paper shack, father out of work, our nearby neighbors, next stop for school bus.*

*We too scraped by, hand-me-down coats, darned socks, "farmers" the town kids scoffed, though ourselves looking down on that pecking order of low-down dirt-poor poverty beneath us.*

*Monday morning, three kids running, a long rutted driveway, two brothers ahead.*

*Books in her arms, shoes untied, panties falling down. We all laughed as she dropped books awkwardly pulling up underwear.*

*O, to take it back, to somehow take it back, to suck up that decades-old sneer, to travel back in time to that very bus, to do it over, to relive my 12-year-old shameful self, to beckon that sad, sniffling girl to come sit by me and taste a teaspoon of tender mercies.*

**A**fter I wrote this poem some years ago, I knew I had to try to track down Sharon. I wanted to tell her how much I had missed by not seeking her friendship.

So I began my online search, first finding the obituary of her mother Ruth, having known she was killed in the same 2001 tornado southwest of Spooner, Wisconsin that took the life of my cousin Sylvan.

Ruth, I discovered, was survived by her sons and daughter Sharon (and Tom) Warren of Ashland City, Tennessee.

After hours of searching online I called the county library in Ashland City. I was given an old phone number. The trail was getting warm.

After several daytime calls, I got an answer late one evening. Yes, he was Tom. Sharon no long lived there.

Maybe divorced, I wondered. Did he know her phone number? Annoyed, he asked what I was calling for, what I wanted with her, why I was bothering him. I identified myself as a childhood friend.

That sparked a warmhearted half-hour conversation.

Sharon had died the day after

**...O to take it back, to somehow take it back, to suck up that decades-old sneer, to travel back in time to that very bus, to do it over...to beckon that sad, sniffling girl to come sit by me and taste a teaspoon of tender mercies.**

Christmas in 2009, after having walked the dog out in the fields along the nearby Little Marrowbone Creek.

She had sugar diabetes, he told me, and had been putting on a lot of weight. He missed her so much. They had been happily married 26 years.

Her story spilled out: she had worked her way through the University of Wisconsin after a painful childhood—sleeping at night in the attic, crawling through a trap door, no heat, no insulation, bitter cold Wisconsin winters, abuse, wretched poverty.

I listened, stabbed by guilt and shame. She had remained single until she was 37.

And then Tom walked into the

truck stop cafe where she was working.

Tom told me how much he loved Sharon and how proud he was of her—one time running for a seat on the Ashland City council, losing by only 24 votes.

She was a licensed minister, active in the Baptist church, preaching every Sunday afternoon at a nursing home. And she was proud of him: a Grand Ole Opry star.

Well, maybe not a real star. Tom (some twenty years older than Sharon) was a musician who had played bass fiddle and guitar for Lonzo and Oscar, a comedy-singing duo.

He had been acquainted with the young George Jones and was a friend of Hank Williams, Jr., his hunting buddy.

As his story unfolded, I felt relief—and a missed opportunity.

*My Dear Sharon,*

*How I wish I could have shared your sorrow, your success, your joy and contentment.*

*I am poorer for not seeking your friendship, for not offering you tender mercies when you most needed them.*

*Tom tells me you died with a beautiful smile on your face, his only consolation when he found you warming yourself against the wood stove. You'll never ever be cold again. Rest in peace. □*

—Ruth Tucker



## Quotes & Connections



"To continue to eye God primarily in terms of laws, obligations and town ordinances represents a retreat to a pre-Christian level of thought and a rejection of Jesus and the total sufficiency of his redeeming work."—Brennan Manning

"The Lord Jesus is not calling me to self-condemnation and unhealthy guilt. Self-centered guilt closes me in on myself and preempts the presence of a compassionate God. I should not be shocked and horrified that I have failed. Jesus certainly isn't. In His boundless mercy that keeps no record of wrongs, He calls me to repentance, to humbly acknowledge my failure without being unduly disturbed by it, and in the power of His spirit to get on with the compassionate life."—Robert Farrar Capon

"Free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having."—C.S. Lewis

"The law says, 'Do this,' and it is never done. Grace says, 'Believe in this,' and everything is done already."—Martin Luther

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- *The Day the Revolution Began*—N.T. Wright
- *Can You Hear Me?*—Brad Jersak
- *Naked Spirituality*—Brian McLaren

#### And Don't Forget!

- *Chasing 120\**—Monte Wolverton
- *A More Christlike God\**—Brad Jersak

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