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Why did Jesus Die?

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Volume 9, Number 2
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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

God With Us

I really enjoyed the article by Eden Jersak and the part about the Mennonites. Greg Albrecht probably remembers that the area in Kansas where he spent some time as a child is basically Mennonite country. My mother grew up as a Mennonite in south central Kansas and this article brought back some good memories.

Texas

A More Christlike God

I recently read your book *A More Christlike God*, and I was glad to have someone finally break down “penal substitutionary theory” for something *better!*

I wish I had read your book years ago. Now I’m watching the videos by you and Greg Albrecht on your website and have subscribed to the *CWR* blog.

I currently have embraced the faith after spending the past seven years on a detour with a church that says “we’re not legalistic.” But their conservative interpretation of Scripture totally led to legalism and I almost gave myself an ulcer.

But then I found your blog and your book. It was a great read and was comforting as well. Take care!

New York

A Spiritual Feast

I just received and read both the *CWRm* and *PT* magazines. You give us so much important

information to ponder. Your magazines always provide a spiritual feast. I’m so thankful for how God uses you to feed my mind, soul and spirit. Keep up the good work!

Arizona

Your articles are very inspiring and have taught me things I never learned in a church. I look forward to reading the *CWRm* and *Plain Truth* magazines every month.

Pennsylvania

I am overwhelmed with the love you teach about Jesus and God! Thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart!

Delaware

The October issue of *CWR* magazine was excellent as usual. I enjoyed the article “God Is Love, God Is Love” by Brian Zahnd. The first thing I learned in Sunday School lessons is that “God is Love,” and that means God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. It troubles me that the Holy Spirit teaches all truth but many denominations are slow to receive it. Thank you also for all the articles in the November *Plain Truth*, bringing us back to the basics.

Saskatchewan, Canada

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A big thank you from all of us at CWR!

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Why did Jesus die? by Brad Jersak

Question: “If Jesus’ death on the cross was not punishment for our sin, in our place, as our substitute, to appease the wrath of God against sin, then why did Jesus die?”

How many times have I been asked that question since 2003—the year I finally let go of penal substitutionary atonement in my theology? The question almost wants to be rhetorical, as if I should be stumped by this “show-stopper.” As if there could be no other possible reason, meaning or significance for the Cross of Christ on the original Good Friday. Indeed, the question often comes as an accusation, as if abandoning the predominant Christian script is heretical and doing so makes us “enemies of the cross.”

N.T. Wright, in his book *The Day the Revolution Began*, struck a similar nerve with his critique of a “gospel” that implies, “God so hated the world that he killed his only Son.” Of course, laying bare that image of God draws charges of straw-manning—but if Wright is wrong, then I will rejoice when evangelists stop communicating that very impression. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is far more beautiful than what Wright identifies as the “paganized” message of wrath-appeasement through divine violence.

But many faithful Christ-followers have been so conditioned with this ethos of the Cross that they must still sincerely ask, “Then why did Jesus die?” If God the Father was not exacting his “pound of flesh,” what exactly was God’s Good Friday mission?

In this article, I will respond to

that question from three cohesive perspectives.

Why did Jesus die? Because we killed him!

The Gospel of John and his first epistle present the Incarnation as a love-gift from heaven. God gives his Son—which is to say, gives himself—to the world as a revelation of divine love and his decisive saving act. More on that shortly. The Light of life and love entered this world, but our darkened hearts neither recognized nor received him (John 1:9-12).

Thus, Jesus died because we rejected God’s love and killed God’s Son. Stephen calls the crucifixion a betrayal and a murder (Acts 7:52)—the homicide and “deicide” (murder

of a deity) of the God-man.

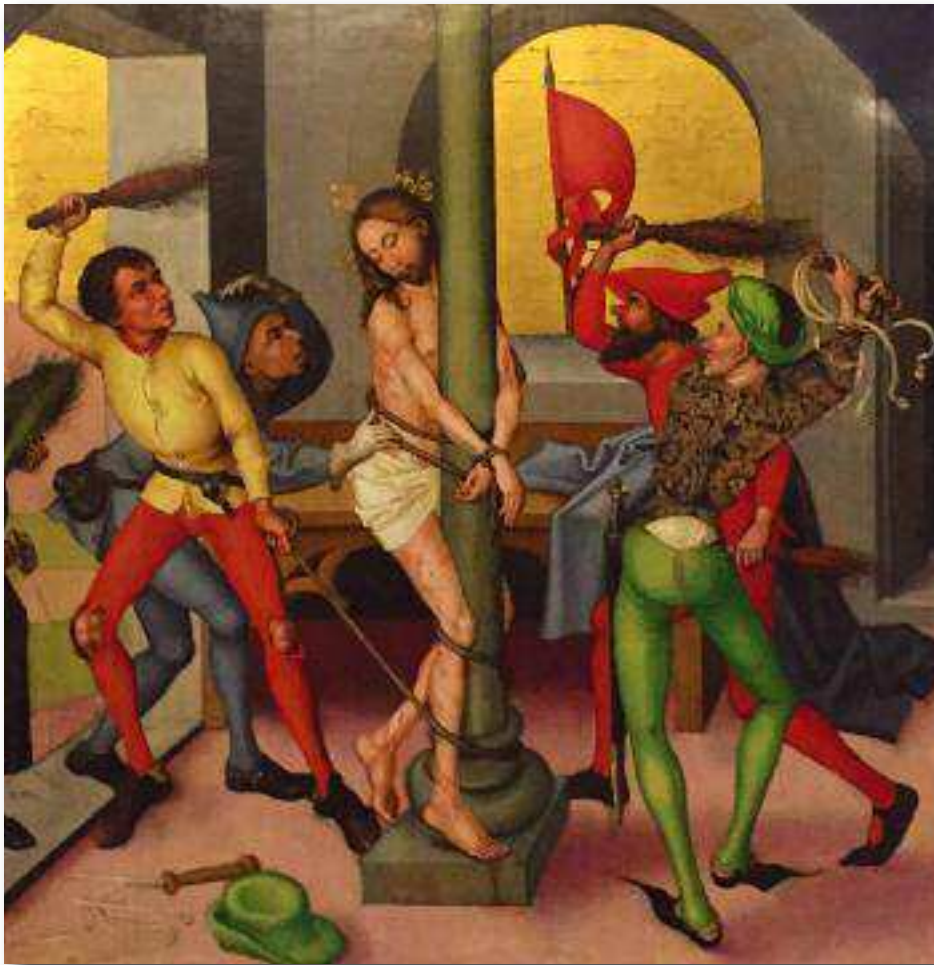
Yet even then, John insists, the darkness could not overcome this Light of love and life (John 1:5). Sure, the religious-political establishment could reject divine love and kill the Christ, but they could not *take his life* (John 10:18).

Rather, Christ lays down his life willingly as a revelation and an act of God’s love, then takes it up again (the resurrection) to distribute that love to the world.

Why did Jesus die? To reveal God as Love

The Cross then, ironically, becomes our primary revelation of the nature of God as eternal and infinite love. Paul describes this love as wider, longer, higher and deeper than we can grasp or





back to creation. Indeed, it flows from all eternity within the community of Triune Love.

“The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8) shows us that God’s immutable (eternally constant, ever-flowing, never static) nature is self-giving love.

- **God is radically forgiving love because God in Christ forgave and reconciled the world to himself, not counting our sins against us (2 Corinthians 5:19).**

On the Cross, we hear Christ’s great cry echo across the ages, *“Father, forgive them!”* (Luke 23:34). A 9-year-old boy named Malachi once grilled me on this text. He asked, “When Jesus prayed that prayer, do you think the Father answered?”

I turned the question back on him and he concluded, “Yes, I think he answered with a yes, because the Father loved Jesus and Jesus always prayed in the will of his Father.” Smart kid.

He then asked, “Who did Jesus mean by *them*?”

Again, I deflected to Mal, who felt *them* must include all the conspirators: the temple authorities and Sanhedrin, Pilate and the Roman soldiers, both thieves and even Judas Iscariot. And if the Father did forgive them, even while Christ was being tortured, is there anyone he can’t forgive?

Further, if God forgave and reconciled them—even while they were still his enemies (Romans 5:8-10), what does that mean? If the Father did not charge them with that sin (see Acts 7:60), does any condemnation remain for anyone? If Adam’s sin infected the whole of humanity, how much more would Christ’s life-giving blood cleanse them! (see Romans 5:18).

God’s forgiveness is universal.

imagine (Ephesians 3:17-20). Paul prays that the Holy Spirit would supernaturally fill our vision of God with a greater revelation of love than we now conceive. In other words, if you can imagine God as more loving than you already believe him to be, *you must—because he is!* And how shall we posture ourselves to catch this vision? At the foot of the Cross.

In *A More Christlike God: A More Beautiful Gospel*, I unpack this revelation of a “cruciform” (i.e. cross-shaped) God as self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love. Let’s discuss each of these elements briefly.

- **God is self-giving love because God-in-Christ has poured himself into the world as love.**

Paul says, “... although he existed in the form of God, he did not regard

equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:6-7 NASB).

“Emptied” (*kenosis*) here does not imply that Christ emptied himself of his divinity, as if he were emptying a bucket—quite the opposite. Think more in terms of an eternal spring of infinite mercy, poured out in a constant stream—a never-failing waterfall of God’s loving-kindness. His mercy endures for how long? *Forever!*

Thus, the self-emptying love of God is not only an event in time at the Cross. Rather, the Cross is a window through which we see that God has always been *kenotic* (self-giving love). God’s self-giving love was there at the Cross, in the Incarnation, and all the way

This does not negate the call for a response—indeed, God’s radical forgiveness induces faith far more effectively than terrifying threats of everlasting, fiery torture. Fear might make us obey God (for a time, begrudgingly). But we love God because God first loved us (1 John 4:19)—a love inspired most powerfully by a vision of the Cross (Zechariah 12:10; 1 John 3:16).

As the hymnist wrote, “Amazing love! How can it be that thou my God shouldst die for me!”

• **God is co-suffering love because God in Christ assumed “the likeness of sinful human flesh” (Romans 5:3).**

The divine Word descended into the depths of the human condition, experiencing the full range of our suffering. He co-suffered (literally “com-passion”) in solidarity with us, empathizing with us in our mortality to raise up human nature with himself.

As the author of Hebrews writes, “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15-16).

Does God suffer? This is theologically tricky, because God cannot be diminished. But in his suffering, Christ reveals the empathetic love of God. God’s eternal, loving nature includes the capacity to become human, to suffer and die—so the Incarnation is itself both a divine and necessary act for God to be God!

Therefore we say, *in Christ, God suffered in the flesh*. In so doing, he ransomed us from death.

Why did Jesus die? To rescue us

The misuse and overuse of the word “saved” among Christians has made it a problematic cliché. When we read it in the New Testament, the Greek word *sozo* may be rendered save, deliver, heal or make whole. I’ll use the term “rescue.” **Jesus died to rescue us. But NOT from the Father!**

The Father/Son relationship is no good cop/bad cop scenario. Christianity is not

some pagan mythology of casting the pure virgin into a frothing volcano. Jesus is not a codependent son, staying the angry hand of his volatile Dad.

Even Paul’s statement in Romans 5:9 that God saves us from “the wrath” does not mean God saves us from himself, but rather, from ourselves—from “*the wages of sin*” (Romans 6:23)—from destruction and death. These are the enemies that God in Christ rescues us from.

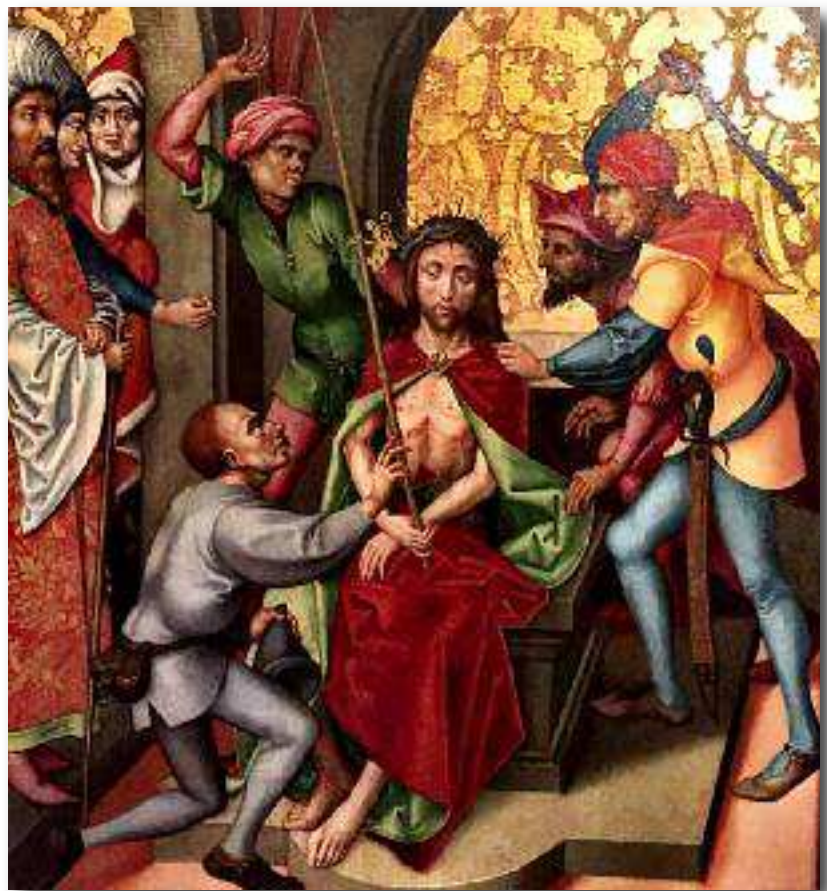
“*Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death*” (Hebrews 2:14-15).

The victory of Christ is no mere atonement theory. It is the gospel itself! At the Cross, Jesus tells us, “*the prince of this world is driven out*” (John 12:31); at the Cross, sin is forgiven; at the Cross, death dies. *Decisively*.

As a three-year-old acquaintance declared, hands raised high, “Jesus is the Winner!” God wins! Life wins! Love wins! This is the cruciform (cross-shaped) victory of God.

To sum up, we ask again: **Why did Jesus die?** Because we killed him. But more than that, in Jesus’ death we see the face of God—the final revelation and decisive act of God as *kenotic* love, cruciform love, victorious love. □

Brad Jersak is editor in chief of CWR magazine. Paintings by Caspar Isenmann (mid-15th century), exhibited in Unterlinden Museum, Colmar, France.



LAZARUS' STORY IS THE WORLD'S STORY

KENNETH TANNER

John tells us in the last line of his Gospel (John 20:25) that there are many stories about Jesus that he had to leave out.

He says the world could not contain all the books that could be written. And in a sense, that is not hyperbole, because every story about God or man or the cosmos in all the libraries of the world—every story that offers forgiveness or healing or justice or deliverance or mercy or truth—is about Christ.

And yet I want to suggest that the Gospel story about Lazarus of Bethany retells the scriptural story of God and man and the world from beginning to end. This Gospel story contains the entire library of the Bible in one chapter!

Lazarus is Adam and Eve and Abraham and Sarah and Samson and Delilah and David and Bathsheba and Daniel and Isaiah. Lazarus is, in the words of Ezekiel, “the whole house of Israel” (Ezekiel 37:11).

Lazarus is you and me, and

everyone one who has ever lived or ever will live.

Like Genesis, the Lazarus story of John 11 begins with a diagnosis of the human condition, and of the disposition of the heart of God towards humanity even in this horrific illness we bear. We are told that Lazarus is sick. And we are told that Jesus loves Lazarus. It's important that we know both of those things.

We are sick with death. And God loves us, even in our illness.

“Master, the one who you love so very much is sick” (John 11:3).

These are the words of Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, to Jesus. You remember Mary, the woman who Luke tells us “lived a sinful life,” the one who anoints the feet of Jesus with perfume and dries them with her hair. And Jesus loves Mary in all

her illness and Mary loves Jesus because the one who is forgiven much loves much (Luke 7:47).

John tells us that Lazarus is ill. He has contracted the same disease that infects every man, woman and child. He is infected with death. And just as in Genesis, we who are dying, alienated from the God who made us from nothing for love alone, are given a promise:

“This sickness [of Lazarus's] is not fatal. It will become an occasion to show God's glory by glorifying God's Son” (John 11:4).

The Son, we are told in the beginning of the Genesis story, will crush the head of the serpent, the source of death, his final enemy—he will trample the snake who seeks to steal, kill and destroy humanity.

And as the story of Lazarus continues, we are told that God in Jesus Christ will draw near to Jerusalem—he will approach danger and death,

putting himself in harm's way, risking his life in order to heal and save Lazarus.

“Rabbi...the

Jewish leaders are out to kill you, and you're going back?” (John 11:8).

While the disciples think Lazarus is simply taking a nap and that there's no earthly reason for their Rabbi to risk so much, Jesus is serious. He always is when he's talking about death. He knows the reality of our situation. He knows Lazarus is dead. He knows we are dying.

In this Gospel story that tells the whole story of Scripture, there is also the great mystery of God's inexplicable waiting in the face of death. Jesus does not go immediately to Bethany.

God knows Lazarus is dying and yet he lingers. John's Gospel tells us that when God in Christ finally arrives, Lazarus has been dead four days.

This is not news to us. The whole house of Israel is dead. All of those people who fill the pages of

Scripture are dead. So many have died. And so many are dying. And so many are still waiting. Waiting for God.

Israel waited for centuries for the Messiah. And we wait. The world waits.

We wait in all the cemeteries of the world, and beside every tomb. We hope and we doubt and we grieve and we cry. But we do not cry or wait or grieve alone.

But I am getting ahead of the story John tells. We have to wait some more. Before we get to the tomb of Lazarus, we must meet Jesus on the road. And in the figure of Martha we hear our own grief and our own perplexity in the face of death:

“Master, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21).

Where were you? What took you so long? Don't you know we needed you? If you had only been here. These and many

other words we speak at the graves of our loved ones, and over the destruction and death already present in our personal histories.

And yet what a beautiful, astonishing reply Martha receives, a reply that reveals the character of God and the character of the new humanity that is present among us in Jesus:

“You don't have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25).

This is *the* question life poses to us. This is not just God's question for Martha. **This is the question our human existence poses to us.**

Do we *trust* in the face of our collective illness amid a broken world that Jesus Christ is Life

and Resurrection? Can we reply as Martha replies?

“Yes, Master. All along I have believed that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who comes into the world” (John 11:27).

Martha is the voice of Spirit-enabled response to this startling declaration of Jesus. And by the same bounteous Spirit we join her.

And the *reason* we can hope even as we wait? We have hope in the middle of a fragile and grief-stricken world because we do not wait alone.

We wait with God. We wait with a God who weeps with us as one of us:

“Jesus wept” (John 11:35).

I imagine that Christ stood there by the tomb of Lazarus and just sobbed, like a baby. This is not only Jesus the human friend of Lazarus, who on many occasions enjoyed laughter and wine and late night conversation with his

companion. This is Jesus, the God who made Lazarus, who loves Lazarus. This the God and the human who loves us.

And we are told by John not only that God is sad. We are told that he is “deeply troubled.” We are told that he is angry. But not at Lazarus, and not at humanity. His anger is directed at God's enemies: death, hell and the grave.

This gospel about Lazarus reveals God's radical identification with death-bound humanity, a humanity personified in Mary and Martha and Lazarus—I will say it again because the Gospel says it—whom Christ loves.

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And Christ Jesus loves us, too. He weeps with us at the tombs of our beloved dead. And he not only cries. He is angry—angry at death, that has taken his friend and left his loved ones in such grief.

And so, here at the end of the story, we find ourselves standing with the mourners by the simple cave cut out of the hillside in Bethany, and the heavy stone has been rolled against it. And Lazarus has been dead four days and he stinks so bad because death reeks.

And there in the human flesh of Jesus is the God whose habit is forgiveness. And there Christ stands with conflicting emotions by the tomb of Lazarus, and by every tomb—the ones that are still marked, the ones we visit from time to time, and by the countless tombs that are lost to the decay of time. Here, at the tomb of Lazarus, God stands by the common grave that is the lot of all humans.

And we hear the majestic Voice, the divine Voice of a Lamb slain before the foundation of the world, the human Voice of the Word that in the beginning spoke the worlds into being from nothing for love alone, and he shouts,

“Lazarus, come out!” (John 11:43).

We hear the great Voice of God that calls us back to being forever. Jesus says, *“Take off his grave clothes and set him free,”* and his words are a universal declaration. The resurrection word to Lazarus is also our resurrection word. Jesus takes from us all the grave clothes that bind us to death.

And it does not matter if our bones have become dry dust swirling in a valley or shifting silt at the bottom of the ocean, and it matters not if there’s not one trace of our DNA to be discovered. His love can call us back to life from nothing.

Listen to this prophecy in Ezekiel:

“Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act” (Ezekiel 37:11-14).

And so today, with Martha we trust that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. That *he is Resurrection*. That *he is Life*. And the promise is that he will raise us too, because Resurrection is what Christ is and what Christ does. And not only “some day”—his Resurrection Life resides in us now. □

Kenneth Tanner is pastor of Church of the Holy Redeemer in Rochester Hills, Michigan.

Coming Soon!

From the trials of flight training to the triumphs of flying for one of the world’s great airlines for 30 years, Captain Grant Corriveau has been continually *uplifted* by his love of flying and by those with whom he has shared his experiences en route. His memoirs share that *Uplift* with readers.



The Most High does not live in houses made by men (Acts 7:48).

Stephen's spirited defense of his faith, answering to the criticisms of the religious authorities of his day, was considered so heretical that the leaders of big business religion stoned him to death (Acts 7:57-60). They did not have him stoned—they disposed of him themselves.

Perhaps one of the most shocking statements Stephen made that upset the religious apple cart concerned the attempts by religion to confine God to its buildings, creeds and practices. Stephen insisted that God is not confined to the literal boundaries of a building or the theological boundaries of an organization or denomination.

The popular definition of "church" is a building and/or a religious organization. Many seem to visualize a church somewhat like a club—a club with a religious emphasis. Of course, many religious buildings have a distinctive style and architecture and are easy to identify, resulting in their being thought of as a church. Church buildings within Christendom often feature a cross, stained-glass windows and some prominently displayed religious figures or symbols.

Those who frequent church buildings are often defined as "members"—somewhat like members who affiliate with clubs and political parties. During church "meetings" or "services" members normally sit and listen politely, a captive audience to a speech (called a sermon or homily), then sing a few more songs, say a prayer or two, give their weekly dues

(called offerings) and then head for home.

BUT—*the church* is not a building. *The church* is not identified by a sign outside of a building or by a steeple that soars above a building. *The church* is not a legally incorporated entity. One may be a member of *a church* and not be a member of *the universal body* of Christ, which is *the church that really counts*. One may be a member of the

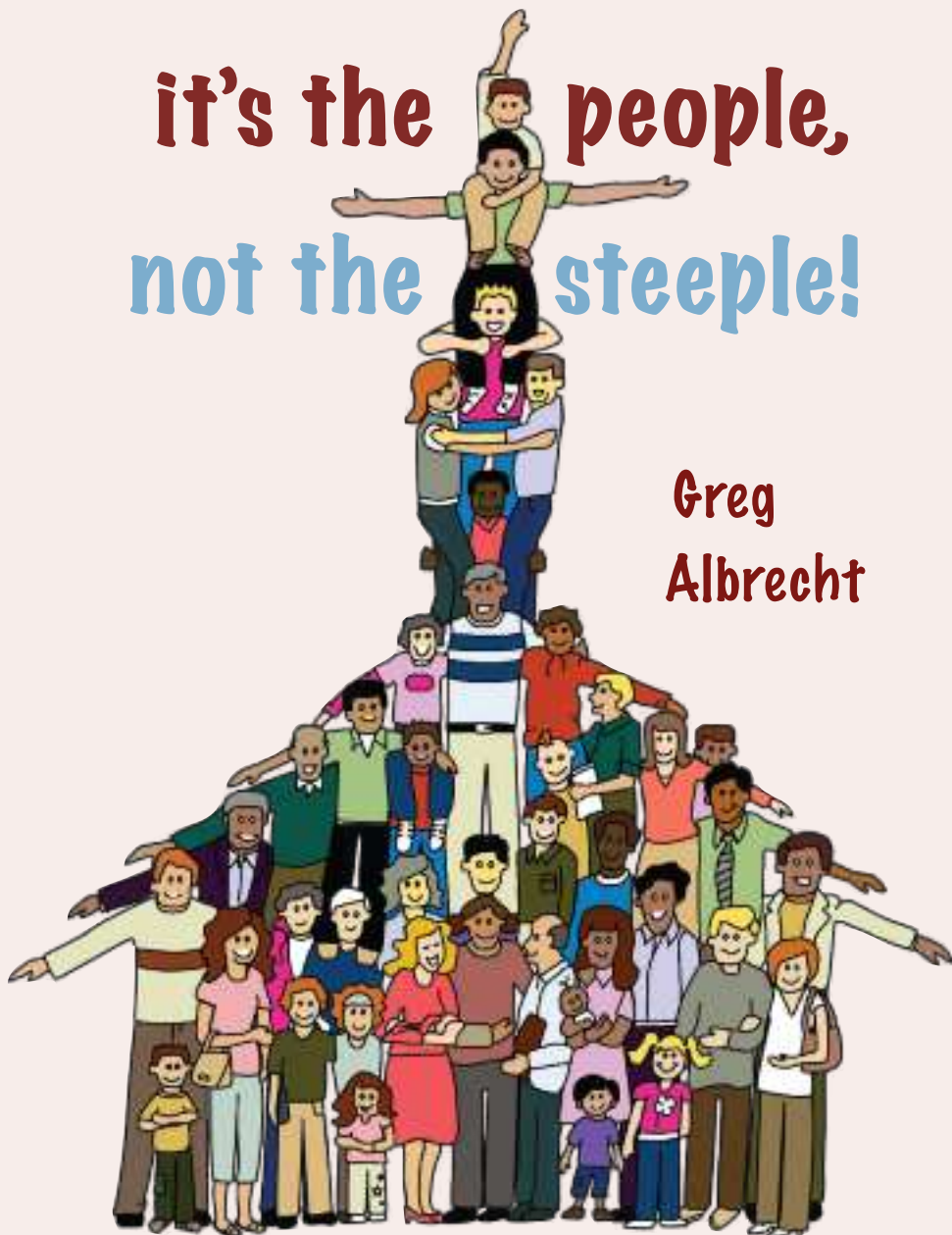
universal body of Christ and thus free in Christ (Galatians 5:1) to affiliate with a church. But one's membership in a church is not required or a necessary prerequisite for membership in the universal church founded by Jesus Christ.

The church is described in the New Testament as the body of Christ, the body of which he is head (Ephesians 1:22-23, 4:15-16, Colossians 1:18). Every Christ-follower is the church—by the

THE CHURCH:

it's the people,
not the steeple!

Greg
Albrecht



grace of God, not because of (and even in spite of) membership in a church, political affiliation, age, gender, race or any other characteristic.

Christ-followers are *the church*—it is not a building to which we travel or a denomination or legal entity to which we belong. Members of the body of Christ belong to Christ. As the head of the body, Jesus Christ lives through his church. The universal body of Christ is the living representation and reflection of the Lord Jesus.

This universal body is composed of believers not only of this age, but all those Christians of the past, and all those who will live in the future. They constitute one large family—the family of God. Some believers are children, others are senior citizens. They come from every race, tongue, tribe and place.

Whether the church is in Indonesia or Japan, Germany or Russia, Africa or North America, the desert or the mountains—regardless of the languages or cultures—Christians are part of this body. The church includes believers who are part of many different denominations.

Though they may look and sound differently across the world, those who have trusted in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation are part of his body.

You are the church—the church is not a place or a building you attend or to which you travel. The church is within you, by the risen life of our Lord

Jesus and by the grace of God.

Whose Idea Was the Church?

On the day of Pentecost, a few weeks after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, believers who had been waiting for the coming of the promised Holy Spirit suddenly experienced his arrival (Acts 1:5, 2:2).

With great signs and wonders, the church was inaugurated. A loose collection of individuals



was suddenly, miraculously knit together into one marvelous body by the divine act of God. *A brand new family had been born—a new society had been created*—not another religion.

The church was founded but no vote was taken. The church was founded but no by-laws had been agreed upon. There were no stained glass windows, no steeples, no choirs and initially, no one even took an offering! But the universal body of Christ had miraculously begun.

Later, the apostle Paul made it clear that the body of Christ, a metaphor for the church, had begun at that historic moment when God joined all the believers together in what he

called the baptism of the Holy Spirit. **The birth of the church was God's idea.** It wasn't started by a group of religious leaders trying to exert control over their adherents.

Explaining this brand new community, Paul described how the church is one body, with the same characteristics of human bodies:

"The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

When a person becomes a Christ-follower, they are placed into the body of Christ on earth, not by church policy or group vote.

Membership in the body of Christ is not determined by the will or decision of a pastor or a priest, nor is it

based on the amount that one donates—membership in the church is given by the grace of God and by an act of God the Holy Spirit. Members are spiritually born into the church and become a vital and necessary part of the body, the church. The church encompasses all believers in Christ.

It's the People, Not the Steeple

The body of Christ was God's idea! God calls humans to his church and places them within it.

"But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Corinthians 12:18).

The church is not a club that we join—the church is a divine community to which we are called and invited. The church is far more than a building or a denomination. The church is far more than a place where we go and a club we affiliate with through membership. ***The church is what we are, by God's grace, far more than it is a geographical location!***

Meeting certain requirements or performing specific rites and rituals do not obligate God to give us membership in the universal body of Christ. Merely attending services in a building that calls itself a church does not make one a Christian.

As Billy Sunday, an evangelist of an earlier generation in America once said, "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile." We are placed in the universal body of Christ when we place our trust in Jesus as our Savior and surrender our lives to him.

Some have the idea that the church is a place where Christians gather together to put up walls in an attempt to keep the world out.

Occasionally, they venture out far enough to make some judgment upon society, then dash back to the safety and cover of their church fortress.

There are many who attempt to "do" church this way. Their concept of church is a "holiness club" whose membership standards and requirements insist upon near-perfect behavior as determined and policed by its hierarchy and authorities. Yet God's purpose for the church is much different. The church isn't a sacred holding tank for Christians until their death. ***It is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.***

Many people fail to understand that the church is not a trophy case or a sacred museum where perfect Christianity is displayed. Rather, the church takes place in the lives of people who are being transformed, slowly and imperceptibly, from who and what they once were into who and what God makes of them.

The New Testament is frank and honest about the failures and shortcomings of New Testament Christians. Those who commit themselves to the universal body of Christ are enabled to reflect the Light of Christ to others and Jesus himself lives within them so that they become more forgiving, kinder and more compassionate. One of God's great strokes of counterintuitive genius is the reality that he uses imperfect people, like you and me, as his tools to help others become aware of his forgiveness, patience and love.

Christ-followers are the church. Christians may be Christians without ever attending a geographically-located church—and tens of millions are.

It is not church attendance that makes someone a Christian, but placing their trust in Jesus, and his work on the cross. There are no "second string" Christians, those who just warm the bench while others do the important work. God has given each Christian some special and unique ability or gift of service to be useful to the whole body. All Christians, regardless of how, when and where they reflect the new life that Jesus lives within them, are part of the universal body of Jesus Christ. □

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"It's the People" Test Case "Menno-Nones"

In the December 2017 issue of *CWR magazine*, Eden Jersak shared the story of her Mennonite family's flight from the Ukraine ("God With Us"). One unspoken element of that experience might help us understand and speak to the "nones" (Christ-followers not affiliated with a church) of our day.

The Mennonites were joined with each other, rather than to any institution. Their sense of community may provide a model for those who are done with institutional church attendance.

After the Russian Revolution, the Communists confiscated all Mennonite church buildings and converted them into granaries. Eden's ancestors could not "go to church" at all from at least 1917-1943. This is a recent historical example of a people group who managed to "be the church" without going to a building or even attending services. The Mennonites' faith survived and flourished without any reference to church buildings, services or denominational ties.

Oma Wiebe, Eden's Grandma, never once visited a church building or service from the time she was eleven-years-old until she was at least 37. We are not sure when Oma got a Bible, but once she did, she read Bible stories daily for herself, to her children and grandchildren.

That, plus the rich Mennonite hymns (which Eden remembers her Oma singing continually), sustained not only their faith, but their lives.

Their faith heritage was built, not on "church attendance" or denominational loyalty, but on scripture, song, loving families and God's presence despite persecution.

They were simply Christ-followers who lived together in close-knit communities, practicing the Jesus Way in daily life. □



In February, 2012, five members of the masked female Punk Band “Pussy Riot” entered the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow and performed an obscenity-laced song, protesting the Russian Patriarch’s open support for Vladimir Putin’s re-election, calling him “A miracle from God.” Three were arrested for “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.” Two served 2-year prison sentences. Was this an act of blasphemy? Or, as the above photo “mash-up” suggests, might we also draw parallels to Jesus’ “Temple Incident”?

In today’s climate of heightened political rancor, some believers use the cleansing of the temple Gospel narrative as a proof text to justify all manner of egregious and violent behavior toward others—“After all, Jesus whipped people, didn’t he?” The cleansing of the temple account is one of the favorite proof texts of those who want to try to deflect the potency of Christ’s clear ethical commands to overcome evil with good and to love one’s enemies.

The NEB version translates Psalm 69:9, “*The zeal for your house shall destroy me.*” According to the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), within one week of the cleansing of the temple, Jesus is dead.¹ The Synoptics make it clear that this event sealed his fate. His first public sermon in the synagogue (Luke 4) and the cleansing of the temple stirred visceral human hatred unto murder. Why? What was it about those events that stirred such deep hatred among “normally decent” people? What was going on? How should we understand the cleansing of the temple narrative in the light of illegitimate attempts by so many to justify their violence and hatred by claiming Jesus as their model?

1st Century Background

At the time of Christ, the institutions of religion, commerce and politics were not separate entities as they are (supposedly) in our day. They were embedded together in the Temple and operations associated with it: touch one and you touch them all. The cleansing of the temple was not just a dust-up over religious ritual. It was a confrontation with principalities associated with the order of their world: religious, commercial and political. It was a cosmological statement. We know it was not just about zealotry for religious reform because there is not a shred of evidence to suggest that anything permanently changed. It was “back to business as usual” the next day. Something else was going on.

The cleansing of the temple is a bit of a misnomer. It occurred in the outer court. This is the space that was specifically dedicated for the

THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE: DOES JESUS SANCTION VIOLENCE? STEVE CROSBY

Gentiles. Gentiles could gather in the outer court for prayer, but they were not allowed elsewhere.

Imagine a Gentile trying to pray in a space crowded with animals and their sellers! Hear the noise! Smell the odors! Be sure to watch your step! At the very least we see here Jewish indifference, if not outright hostility, toward the Gentiles. “It is okay to defile your space, but not ours”—us versus them.

The phrase “den of robbers” is not merely rhetorical flourish.

The English “robbers” is the Greek *lestes*. The term refers to those who in their zeal for holiness had become freedom fighters for God (or terrorists if you will). There is an implied association with violence that “thief” does not connote. In other words, it is not just thievery as in breaking and entering, but thievery plus violence against persons. Robbers stored their ill-gotten gain in their “den.”

Jesus made an evaluative statement of who the temple proprietors were as people and what they were doing. They had enriched themselves in exclusionary zealotry at the expense of the least among them.

Jesus specifically quotes Isaiah 56 about Yahweh’s concern for the nations, the Gentiles. Where it occurred (the outer court of the Gentiles) was as significant as what was occurring (commerce associated with sacrifice).

Just as when Christ quoted Isaiah 61 in the synagogue in a way that showed compassion for the non-Jewish world (God was not going to “even the score” with the Gentiles), so here, his concern for the welfare of those whom the religious establishment considered “less than” precipitated his death.

Not only was Jesus dealing with the exclusionary practices of the sacrificial system and the rapacious greed associated with it, but he also suspended the sacrificial system itself. He forbade anyone to carry a “vessel” (*skeuos*) through the Temple courts. The NIV translates this term as “merchandise” as though he were stopping shoppers in a modern mall, but the term refers to vessels used in the sacrificial process. *The entire sacrificial machinery temporarily ground to a stop. It was a foretaste of a cosmically altering act that would find its fulfillment at Calvary.*

History of Interpretation

Up until Augustine, *no one* interpreted the cleansing of the temple account in John 2:15 to condone violence or even implied that Jesus had struck any human beings.² In the first 300 years in the life of the Church, Origen was the only person that we know who commented on this passage, and he gave it a purely spiritual rather than literal reading. Cosmas Indicopleustes writing ca. 550 CE argued:

What is alleged is false, for he did not in any way strike a human being, but he adopted an admirable and becoming and appropriate course, for he struck the brute beasts only, as it is written: “And having made a whip of cords he expelled all from

the temple, both the sheep and the cattle.” But the rational beings he neither struck nor pushed away, but chastised with speech, as it is written: “And to those who sold doves he said, ‘Take these things hence, and do not make my Father’s house a marketplace.”

Augustine was the first to use this passage to justify force, including the just use of force in war. Was Augustine justified in doing so? A quick look at the grammar of the passage shows that he was not.

Nathan W. O’Halloran’s³ reading of the Greek word *pantas* indicates that Jesus took some ropes he found lying around “to drive out the sheep and oxen, like any shepherd or cattle herder would do,” followed, no doubt, by their owners. He also notes that the Synoptics do not make mention of a whip; and that Mark uses the word “drove,” as it was used elsewhere for the spirit “driving” Jesus into the

desert, or Jesus himself “driving” out demons.

O’Halloran identifies the actions of Jesus with a calculated prophetic action evocative of the temple condemnation in Jeremiah 7:1-15, which Christ also cites during the incident.

The cleansing of the temple is a unique, one-off, prophetic statement challenging the authority structures of the cosmos: the unholiness of sacrificial religion in league with mammon, and by inevitable association in their culture, political power.

withholds the truth from them, etc. These things were normal in interpersonal interchanges of his day, being the expression of the cultural practice known as challenge and riposte—insult and counter-insult. Understanding the cultural role of insults helps us unpack what can seem to us to be not only rude and insensitive, but also unloving behavior. It is not.

Behavior that to us may seem socially inappropriate is not necessarily unloving in the kingdom. Clearly, irritating people and making them unhappy is not outside of the love of God. Jesus made a career

Even if Christ had hit people with the whip (which the text does not indicate), using that analogously as justification for war or other violent acts is absurd. Going from throwing crooks out of a building to dropping an incendiary bomb on people is not a rational leap. Ethical debates about “just war theory” can occur, but not with the cleansing of the temple narrative as a proof text.

Conclusion

The cleansing of the temple incident is a prophetic statement, particularly regarding God’s concern for the poor, the widow and the Gentiles, all of whom at the time would have been considered “less than, other-than,” disenfranchised classes.

It is always an exegetical mistake to normalize a one-off and isolated passage. This passage is not normative interpersonal behavior for followers of Christ. Using it to justify outrageous and even violent behavior is lazy interpretation and ethically inexcusable.

Advocating God’s care for, and inclusive goodness to, those the establishment deems unworthy stirs the deepest hatred and violence in human hearts. This is the “doctrine” that got Jesus killed. Those who would desire to emulate him can expect similar treatment from the religious establishment.

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Endnotes

1. I believe all the Gospel accounts of the cleansing of the temple are a single event.
2. Andy Alexis-Baker, “Violence, Nonviolence and the Temple Incident in John 2:13-15,” *Biblical Interpretation* 20 (2012) 73-96.
3. Nathan O’Halloran, “Jesus, the Whip, and Justifying Violence,” *The Jesuit Post, Patheos*, March 7, 2015.

THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE IS A UNIQUE, ONE-OFF, PROPHETIC STATEMENT CHALLENGING THE AUTHORITY OF THE STRUCTURES OF THE COSMOS...

It serves as Jesus’s final public sermon and statement of his eternal antipathy toward the systems of this world and its values, including the practice of sacrificial religion. It is his confrontational swan song, not a passing pique of emotional irritation rooted in anger. It is a thoughtful and purposeful action intended to be read by all.

What about Christ’s Severity Elsewhere?

We have established that the scripture doesn’t say specifically that Jesus used a whip on people. Nonetheless, turning over the tables and driving out the animals and people is a severe act. When dealing with the establishment powers of his day, Jesus was often severe. He insults people, calls them names,

of it and was crucified for it. The point is that the love of God demonstrated in Jesus does not preclude stirring negative emotions in others. Jesus is not Mr. Rogers with a beard!

Now, this can be a precipitous slope—establishing a precedent to be a bully, literally or emotionally, and to think of oneself as God’s instrument for correcting the world.

That is why a one-off example from Jesus’ life is not the norm for our behavior. Our norm is the greater body of Jesus’ ethical teachings. They may at times be punctuated by confrontational, peacemaking truth-telling. The practice of *agape* does not preclude confrontation in our human interactions.

Regardless of how some translations handle this passage, there is no reason to believe that Jesus used a whip on people.



CWR_m

GREG ALBRECHT

“Who’s going to heaven?”

Q Who goes to heaven, where is it and what will it be like?

A We really have no idea about who goes to heaven, or even when and where “heaven” is. The last chapters of Revelation suggest that God will bring his heaven to this earth. What does that mean exactly? Is it literal or symbolic?

The question about “going to” or “getting into” heaven preoccupies people within religious circles when little is known about the afterlife.

What we can know and be assured of from the New Testament is that those who trust and believe in Jesus and who embrace the grace of God will be with God forever.

We often use the term “heaven” in a generic way to speak of the afterlife and I understand this—but there are many potential problems.

One problem concerns the geography or location of heaven. Some believe that heaven is a “place” where God is, as opposed to other places where he is not. But the Bible insists that God can be and in fact is anywhere he wants to be, as opposed to confined to a celestial destination.

Then, within the body of Christ there is the issue of “who” will be allowed into heaven—who will have reservations made in their name? Some denominations seem to feel, if you listen to their rhetoric, that the only ones who will be allowed into heaven are their members. Then the issue of “who” begins to be defined by degrees, from being a little more inclusive to a lot more inclusive.

But Jesus, the Good Shepherd, says that he has “other sheep” (John 10:16). This statement was addressed to Jews of his day, that Gentiles were his sheep as well. And that no doubt is part of what Jesus meant. But he said “other sheep.” So what of the Jews? And what of faiths other than Christianity?

The human tendency is to reserve “heaven” for those who think like us, go to the same church, synagogue, temple or mosque—and

while the New Testament speaks of Christ-followers being with God forever, it does not do so in an exclusive way. It gives us no indication that God cannot be God—imagine that!

God is who and what he is—and what he is, in his essence, is love.

We have no specific indications about who exactly is “in” and what exactly is required of those who will be “in” heaven. We do know that we’re called to trust and believe in Jesus, and to embrace the grace of God. But no lists are provided so that we might identify those who are “lost,” as much as some Christians seem to desire to identify others as “lost.”

I suggest we leave such matters for God, for whether we leave them to him or not, they belong to him, and they are completely outside of our pay grade to determine. □

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Red Letter Christians Under Attack! Christ-followers adamantly believe they are who they are in Christ because of what God has done for them. The world at large, including much of Christendom, believes that what we do and how we behave determines who we are. *Week of May 20*

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