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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

Mothers and the Grace of God

By Greg Albrecht

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the man a piece of her mind when he took out the last cookie, *broke it in half*, and offered her the other piece. He picked up his electronic tablet, put his half of the cookie in his mouth, smiled at her and walked away.

She was so steamed that her temperature was hotter than her now lukewarm coffee. Flushed with anger, indignant about how presumptuous that man had been, she decided to get up and leave as well.

As she got up from the table, she took her magazine and put it into her shopping bag, where she discovered her unopened bag of cookies.

Many times in our lives, we are just like that exhausted lady in the mall. So often in life, when we dig into a “bag of cookies” assuming we paid for with our hard earned money, we later find out that the cookies we consumed were a gift from someone else—someone who didn’t seem to mind sharing with us!

On Mother’s Day it is customary (what a superb custom!) to remember all the literal and metaphorical cookies we have eaten from the bag of cookies our mothers produced and provided. It is wonderful that mothers are honored, with cards and flowers, on Mother’s Day.

If you are a mother, I hope and

She pulled into the mall parking lot only to find that it seemed everyone else in town must have decided to go shopping on the same day at the same time. She finally found a parking place, braved the bustling crowds, visited several stores and struggled to find and purchase the items she wanted.

After a few hours she was exhausted, so she decided to stop for a coffee break at the food court. After purchasing a cup of coffee and a little bag of cookies, which she put in her shopping bag, she sat down at one of the crowded tables. Sipping on her coffee, she took out a magazine and started reading and then reached into the bag and took out a cookie.

A few seconds later the man

sitting directly across from her, who was engrossed in his electronic tablet, reached into the bag and took out a cookie as well. She marveled at his arrogance, helping himself to her cookies. Somehow she found enough self-control not to tell the man off.

She kept reading her magazine, (according to my unimpeachable sources the magazine was either *The Plain Truth* or *Christianity Without the Religion* magazine) reached for her coffee and then into the bag of cookies, removing another. Within a few seconds, the man reached into the bag as well, helping himself to another cookie. Now she was really getting upset. There was only one cookie left in the bag.

This stressed shopper was just about to come unglued and give



A Transformation—Not a Transaction

Ephesians 2:8-10 teaches us that we are saved **BY** grace **FOR** works—contrasted with the completely erroneous idea of the virus of legalism, alive and well within so much of Christendom. The performance-based legalisms of Christ-less religion propose and insist that we are saved **BY** works **FOR** grace. Paul teaches us in Ephesians 2:8-10 that we are saved **BY** grace **FOR** the works that God determines for us, so that we may become his workmanship. To underline this critical truth of the gospel—we are saved **BY** God's grace, **FOR HIS** works—not by **OUR** works.

Our salvation is a *transformation* of grace, not a *transaction* of works. God's grace and the *transformation* he works and produces in our lives is not a spiritual reality we earn, as if by a transaction. Our *transformation* is a gift of God's grace. We don't make Jesus Christ our identity as a result of a *transaction* whereby we do, produce or earn something of eternal and lasting value. Christ is given to us by the grace of God—we are *transformed*.

The *transformation* we receive by the gift of God's grace happens to us—it is not something we do for ourselves. We are the recipients of God's *transformation*—he is the active agent. Children don't do anything to determine or earn or guarantee their birth. No *transaction* on the part of an unborn child is a part of their birth. God does the work from the start to the finish.

Here's the problem we must always watch out for: *transactions* are part of the foundational teaching and superstructure of religion.

Transactions are the glue that holds the entire religious building together. Christ-less religion is not really about *transformation*—it is about a *transaction*. *You do this and then God will do that*. Christ-less religion is all about control—it's an illusive mirage we are promised providing we undertake the necessary *transactions*.

Transactions are the substance of what it means to be human. In order to live, one must breathe, one must drink and one must eat. In order to live one must avoid serious injury and harm. Physical life is entirely transactional. But our *transactions* have nothing to do with the grace of God. One of the best illustrations of how far Christendom has strayed from the grace of God and the *transformation* he alone can give is the cross of Christ.

The cross of Christ, when understood in a Christ-centered perspective, is reconciliation with God that happens when he freely forgives us. His reconciliation is revealed in the love of God, poured out for us on the cross.

But listen carefully, ***here's how Christ-less religion has turned the cross of Christ into a transaction:*** within Christendom at large, most of the emphasis on the cross of Christ is about a *transaction*—it's about repayment, reparations and satisfaction achieved through the violent punishment of an innocent victim—that is Jesus Christ. This *transaction* is often called “atonement” within Christendom. It suggests the imagery of a heavenly courtroom presided over by God, the judge in which the offended party (who happens to be God, the judge) receives reparations to

compensate his wounded honor (that is, our sins).

In the old covenant there was one day a year, a day of Atonement, (called *Yom Kippur* in contemporary Judaism) when the shedding of animal blood was believed to appease God so that he would forgive all the sins of the past year. However, since humans are absolutely imperfect, the old covenant accounted for human enslavement to sins and dysfunctions. The Day of Atonement had to happen every year—once-a-year bloodshed was necessary so that God would once more be satisfied and appeased.

With that very imagery of the old covenant Day of Atonement in mind, the ninth and tenth chapters of the book of Hebrews assure us that our relationship with God as his children is completely based on the love and mercy and grace of God. Hebrews says that Jesus has invalidated all the *transactionalism* of the old covenant—he came to us once and for all.

Jesus does not offer himself on his cross once a year. Rather, as we read in Romans 8:9, Christ lives in us, by the grace of God—nothing we can do, nothing we can earn can pay for such an eternal, priceless gift.

Jesus has come once and for all, *transforming* us by the love and mercy and grace of God. This is the love of God that passes all understanding. □

—Greg Albrecht

Join us for the complete message “A Transformation—Not a Transaction” at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of May 27, 2018.

pray your children will honor you, today and every day—that they will call you and send you cards and flowers. But you are not my only focus in this article. Let's consider 1) our mothers and 2) our God.

We give thanks for grace we receive physically and grace we receive spiritually.

As we celebrate and honor our mothers, drawing from the story of the woman who discovered she was accidentally eating someone else's cookies, *it is far better not to expect others to honor us but to graciously give thanks for those who served and nurtured us.*

Martin Luther said that of all the images of Jesus Christ, his favorite was one Jesus gave of himself, as a mother hen protecting her chicks.

If you are a mother, this Mother's Day you might direct your attention away from how your children may or may not recognize you, and any disappointment you may experience.

Instead why not 1) *direct your thoughts toward your own mother.* And of course, all the rest of us, male and female, who are not birth mothers, are well-served in also directing our thoughts toward our own mother—whether she is alive or has passed away.

More importantly, 2) *give thanks to God for his "mother love"*—for his parental love—for his faithful, unfailing, no-matter-what love—for his matchless amazing grace.

Everything Comes From Someone Else

In the midst of a discussion of partisanship and self-interest, Paul posed a spiritually incisive question to the Corinthian Christians:

"What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Corinthians 4:7).

Apparently many in Corinth were infected with spiritual pride—boasting about their

talents and abilities—and proud of their affiliations with leading lights in the early Christian movement.

A spirit of pride—a party spirit—had overwhelmed the Corinthians. They were arguing about which Christian teacher was the best.

They were boasting of their presumed superior knowledge, filled with condescending contempt for those who were not just like them.

The Corinthians, to use a baseball analogy, "woke up" on third base and thought they had hit a triple. Instead of overtly telling the Corinthians how self-absorbed they were, Paul asked them a rhetorical question: "What do you have that you did not receive from another person or source?"

In the case of the woman at the food court, she assumed she was eating cookies she had purchased, and was upset that someone else was enjoying them. Turns out she was the one helping herself to cookies that belonged to another!

Each of us have received everything we have from God, and nothing we have (or appear to have) gives us any right to boast.

- Everything—*everything*—that any human has is a gift of God.
- Everything is of grace; nothing is deserved, nothing is earned, in the ultimate sense.
- Anything that we can ever do or have or produce or possess is based on a gift we originally received. We would be nothing apart from the gifts of God.
- Of course, life itself is a gift of God.



Understanding God's Love and Grace Through Our Mothers

As we give thanks today for our mothers, we give thanks to God, who after all, gave us our mothers. God determined that he would create us, bringing us into this world through another human whom we call our "mother."

Our human life is a gift of God, but God used our mothers to bring us into this world. We did not *earn, choose, nor did we deserve* to come out of our mother's womb (John 1:12-13).

We came out of the womb covered by the love and grace of our mother. We didn't come out potty trained, or knowing how to feed ourselves or how to walk and talk. We came out of our mother's womb in continuous need of our mother's care and nourishment.

Hopefully, our mothers cared for and nourished us without condition, and loved us no matter what we did in life. We understand much of God's love and grace through the love of our mothers. Mothers, after all, start loving us long before they ever see us.

Mothers love us throughout our lives no matter how we might behave, and no matter how we might forget to thank them for their love. In the best case:



A mother's love is like God's love... Whether the son or daughter winds up sitting in a chair as a doctor...or sitting in the electric chair...a mother's love continues.

A mother's love is like God's love, in that no matter where her child goes in life, mother love will continue, unabated.

Whether the son or daughter winds up sitting in a chair as a doctor, a lawyer or a senator—or

whether the son or daughter winds up in the electric chair—a mother's love continues.

I read a survey that asked parents how they would feel if their son or daughter murdered someone. Ninety-six percent of the mothers surveyed said that they would continue loving their son or daughter no matter what, while only fifty-seven percent of the fathers said the same thing.

If you are a parent, you know that there are no guarantees in parenting. We can do what we consider to be a wonderful job of parenting—we can train and care for and love and educate and prepare our children. Then, after all of our work in preparing them for life in this world, our children can and will make their own decisions in life.

The decisions our children make don't always seem to be based on the love and preparation we gave to them—for they aren't robots. They are living, breathing human beings, and they make their own choices.

If you are a parent, you know that children do not arrive in this world filled with gratitude. As they continue their lives, as they grow up, our children may never express gratitude and love equal to that which we convey and give to them.

Of course, as parents we don't love our children expecting a *quid pro quo* return from them—that is not the nature of parenting. And it's not the relationship we have with God either. He loves us no matter what.

Like the story of the woman eating from someone else's bag of cookies, all of us can carelessly assume that we deserve the blessings in life we enjoy because we are responsible for them.

Paul asks: "What do you have that you did not receive?" A good question for Mother's Day. Please give it some thought. □

- Mothers do not love us in return for our love.
- Mothers do not stop loving us if they feel we are not doing enough to show them our love.
- Mothers love their children unconditionally.
- Mothers love their children because they are hers, just as God loves us because we are his children.


There's an old story about an angel who was assisting God as he was finalizing all the plans for the creation of this universe. According to the story, God was working hard, burning the candle at both ends. The angel assisting God told him that he was working too hard and that he should go to bed and get some sleep.

God replied, "I can't. I'm so close to creating mothers who will be so much like myself."

Then the angel took a look at the sketch of a mother on God's heavenly drafting table. The angel ran her hands across the face of the model of the mother God was creating and said, "I feel a leak or something. What's this liquid on her face?"

God said, "It's not a leak, it's a tear. It's a tear of sadness, of pain and of disappointment—but most of all it's a tear of joy and happiness—it's a tear of a mother's love."


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Five Generations: A Legacy of Love

by Laura Urista

One of my most treasured possessions is a black-and-white photograph of five generations of women in my family. Over the years several people have mentioned to me how unique and rare it is to have a five-generation photo. Pictured above are my great-great-grandmother Mietz (seated in the middle), my great-grandmother Fiebick (seated on the far left), my grandmother Olga (affectionately called “Grandma Dee Dee”) standing, and my mom, Charlotte Jean, holding my oldest sister, Sandy, on her lap. This photo was taken in the summer of 1946.

I wish I knew more about these wonderful ladies of my lineage. I do know that great-great-Grandma Mietz and great-Grandma Fiebick both lived to be over 100 years old. Grandma Dee Dee lived to be age 96 and my Mom lived to be age 86.

Grandma Dee Dee used to tell me she was “thankful we come from good German

stock.” In the late 1800s my great-great-grandparents were among the many “Germans from Russia” who fled to the United States in hopes of a better life for their family. They homesteaded in Wells County North Dakota, near the town of Fessenden, where my sister Sandy still lives to this day.

I enjoy watching the “Little House on the Prairie” TV shows, and I regularly record them. Set in the late 1800s in Minnesota and North Dakota, these stories by Laura Ingalls Wilder give me a glimpse of what the lives of my great-great grandparents might have been like—homesteading, farming and raising a family amid unsettled land, harsh winters, wild animals, in an area still inhabited by Native American tribes.

I can’t even imagine the hardships they faced every day of their lives, just to survive and raise their family—the next generation.

I feel so blessed that I had a close relationship with Grandma Dee Dee. I can still hear her soft German accent as she sang a lullaby to me: “*Du, du, liegst mir*

in herzen” (you, you live in my heart). When I was a teenager, she left me with many cherished words of wisdom that have served me well in life.

I especially remember one time when my dad (overly zealous for the “one true church”—the one he belonged to, of course) ridiculed Grandma Dee Dee for giving a little money to several small churches in Fessenden. He said she was foolishly “casting pearls before swine.”

I felt bad for Grandma, and after Dad left the room I asked her why she didn’t stand up to him. She smiled at me and said, “It’s more important to be kind than right. Don’t worry, dear. God knows what He’s doing with my money. I think all these churches are doing a little good for our town in their own way. God will use it for good.”

Those words deeply resonated with me, and the sharp contrast of the kindness shown by Grandma Dee Dee compared to the judgmental, critical spirit displayed by my dad made a strong impact on my young mind.

What’s so important about being “right” anyway? I know so

many folks who continue to loudly argue with others long after they've made their point, all in an effort to have the last word and be "right." It's almost as if they are addicted to being "right" while smugly concluding everyone else is "wrong."

And of course, legalistic religion further fans the flames of that addiction to be right and appear better than others, so that those enslaved by toxic religion really do believe God "is on their side."

Kindness—A Fruit of the Spirit

Kindness is a fruit of God the Holy Spirit. No amount of being theologically correct, or belief in the "right" dogmas can impart kindness.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."

Laura ("Gaga") with Grandbaby Heather, December 2017.



Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." (Galatians 5:22-25).

Christ lives in us, and as we surrender to him, he loves through us—enabling us to treat others with the Spirit-filled heavenly kindness, grace and love that's beyond our human efforts to produce on our own.

Letters to Heather

Now I'm a Grandma myself, and my granddaughter Heather (age 20 months in the photo below) calls me "Gaga."

I hope that someday Heather will come to see me as an example of love, grace and kindness and a valuable source of wisdom—like Grandma Dee Dee was for me.

I'm writing a book titled *Letters to Heather*, and I pray that it will be a source of joy and inspiration to her someday. I'll share an entry from last December as a preview here:

"Dear Heather, Pops and I are so excited to see you again! We sure wish you lived closer! But for now we are just happy we can see you whenever we are able, and even more so on special occasions.

In just a few days you'll be here to celebrate Christmas with us.

Right now all you can really understand is that we love you and we have yummy foods, pretty clothes, toys, books and other presents for you and your parents.



Laura's daughter, Tawny, with "Dee Dee", July 1989.

But someday you will learn the deeper meaning of this special day that represents the birth of baby Jesus, our Savior, the son of God who loves you even more than Gaga and Pops!

Through God's son, Jesus, he made a way for us all to be together with him and enjoy his love and his presence forever.

Heather, when you get back home and I can't be with you, it makes me really sad. I wish I could be with you all the time and I miss you SO MUCH!

I think that's how God feels when we do things that separate us from Him—things that aren't good for us or others. He's not angry with us or ready to punish us, like some people might say.

He loves us all and misses us. He wants us to do the good things that will keep us and his other children happy and healthy. But we'll talk more about God's love in the future. Big hugs and kisses!

Love, Gaga." □

Laura Urista is the managing editor of Plain Truth and Christianity Without the Religion magazines.



Conforming and Performing

Just about every day I drive past a huge, sparkling megachurch in a pastoral setting less than two miles from my home. I watched it go up—an impressive effort, largely by volunteer labor. It’s probably not a denomination you’d recognize. Members are concentrated mainly in three areas of the United States, and Southwest Washington State is one. Within 20 miles of my living room there are six congregations of this denomination—each with thousands in attendance.

They profess to worship Christ, yet their traditions deviate from mainstream Christianity. According to former members, rules and regulations include: no TV, no hair cutting for women, no instrumental music, no dancing, no pants for females, no make up (also for females, I presume), no high heels, no Christmas trees or decorations (wreaths are okay), no Internet, no organized sports, no movies—and of course no missing of services. There are more, but you get the idea. While some of these are expectations (not codified rules), failure to conform brings consequences.

Personally, I wouldn’t have a problem with the ban on high heels. I haven’t worn them since my Beatle boots in the ‘60s. But the rest of these rules would be hard to take. The irony is that these folks trust their church to keep them and their kids safe from the spiritual viruses of materialism, greed and immorality. But that same church is deeply infected with the virus of performance-based religion.

Oddball churches are not the only groups obsessed with performance. It can be rampant in any denomination—hardline or progressive. We won’t even talk about the protocol-based religions outside of Christianity. As a graduate of authoritarian, institutional religion, I feel queasy as I drive by this megachurch and see the parking lot filled all day and into the night, three days in a row, for their semi-annual conferences. Such total immersion effectively keeps members from questioning, thinking, contemplating and allowing the Holy Spirit to expand their minds.

Why do we fall into these situations—aside from being born into them? You’ll know why if you’ve ever gone through a season of chaos or confusion. Maybe you made some bad decisions. You think God is upset and you’re looking for a way to “get right” with him again. Your life is a mess and you long for peace, harmony, structure and security.

One day you’re driving down the road and you see a sparkling new megachurch! Obviously, they couldn’t afford it if God weren’t blessing them, so you drop in for services. They’re delighted to see you. They seem so well-behaved and disciplined. Their kids are all under control. This would be the perfect place to get your own life under control. Then maybe God will be happy with you again.

Once you’re in, you cruise along blissfully for a while—with a sense of belonging, close friendships and sincere purpose. But dare to skip a few services, watch a film, cut a rug, strum a guitar, neglect a tithe or question a dogma—and then the social pressure, judgmental gossip and finally the crushing power of church leadership descend on you. Only then do you realize you’re staring into the ghastly face of religious tyranny. Awkward.

There oughta be a law, you think. But think more and you’ll realize that state religions—or laws mandating one faith and forbidding others—are in themselves performance-based religion. As long as we have freedom of faith, we will have performance-based religion. We all end up experiencing it in different ways, and ultimately learn the difference between it and freedom and faith in Christ.

So there the church sits amid peaceful trees as the daily drama plays out—of exclusivity, striving to perform, condemnation and guilt. Sad that this painful ordeal is unnecessary for Christians, when Jesus himself offers freedom from all this. *“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery”* (Galatians 5:1). □

—Monte Wolverton



Quotes & Connections



"All I am I owe to my mother. I attribute all my success in life to the moral, intellectual and physical education I received from her."
—George Washington

"A mother is a person who, seeing there are only four pieces of pie for five people, promptly announces she never did care for pie."
—Tenneva Jordan

"Our task is to spread the gospel of Christ, not the gospel of Christians."
—Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (*Everyone Belongs to God*, page 83)

"Trust him. And when you have done that, you are living the life of grace. No matter what happens to you in the course of that trusting—no matter how many waverings you may have, no matter how many suspicions that you have bought a pig in a poke with no pig in it, no matter how much heaviness and sadness your lapses, vices, indispositions, and bratty whining may cause you—you believe simply that Somebody Else, by his death and resurrection, has made it all right, and you just say thank you and shut up. The whole slop-closet full of mildewed performances (which is all you have to offer) is simply your death; it is Jesus who is your life." —Robert Farrar Capon (*Between Noon and Three*)

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