

# PLAIN TRUTH<sup>®</sup>

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

## Ashes to Ashes

*"...for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."  
(Genesis 3:19, King James Version)*

by Monte Wolverton

The late Irma Nelson had put up a valiant battle against cancer. Forty-five years old and unmarried, she had a sparkling personality and plenty of friends—active in her church and civic organizations, and was a respected professional at the mortgage company where she worked as an underwriter. Her many nieces and nephews were crazy about their Aunt Irma.

Irma's parents, in their mid 80s, were devastated by their loss, so it fell to Irma's brother Doug to make the arrangements. Never having done anything like this, he didn't know where to begin.

The family's pastor seemed like the logical choice to officiate, but he was in Borneo on a two-month mission, and family members weren't happy with the assistant pastor. The funeral home offered

three referrals, but finally Doug decided to have no one officiate. The funeral director offered to help him organize a memorial service to celebrate his sister's life.

Over 150 people attended. Doug welcomed everyone and introduced a video summarizing Irma's life on earth. The funeral director handed a microphone to attendees, who shared memories of Irma.

Cousin Army took more than his share of time, with an opportunity to "witness" to the group, adding his hope that Irma had prayed the Sinner's Prayer before she died, otherwise there might be complications in the afterlife.

Cousin Peggy offered less traditional thoughts, assuring everyone that Irma had transmogrified to another plane of existence.

Finally, attendees were treated to a recorded medley of Irma's

favorite songs by Depeche Mode, Bon Jovi, Devo and the Cars.

In a garden outside the funeral home, attendees wrote messages for Irma on slips of paper, attached them to small helium balloons and released them skyward—much as some imagined Irma's soul had floated off into the blue.

Some thought it was the best service ever. Others were confused because of

the non-traditional format. Yet others walked out less comforted than when they walked in, but they couldn't say exactly why.

Irma's Uncle Larry commented: "It was a nice memorial service, but you know, it wasn't really a funeral, as such."

Aunt Alice was shocked to learn that Irma had been cremated and that the urn containing her remains was not present at the service.

While there was not a thing wrong with any of the arrangements Doug made to honor his sister's life, Irma's service wasn't much like the funerals of 50 years ago. And she's not alone. *Funerals and memorials just aren't what they used to be.*

### Morphing Memorials

When my mom and dad were still in their 40s, they wisely bought plots

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# The Center of the Gospel

**C**hristianity WITHOUT the religion defines Christ-less religion as any systematic method used to either earn or gain favor with God initially, or to improve and maintain one's ongoing standing with God on the basis of deeds, involvement, attendance, performances, rituals and ceremonies.

One of my favorite authors, Richard Rohr, speaks of the “*performance principle*” as the absolute foundation of all religion.

The “*performance principle*” is the myth that leads humans to live lives defined by achievement—it is a myth that is rooted in and driven by fear. Fear is the foundational building block of Christ-less religion.

The “*performance principle*” is a myth that deceives people who are fearful of being punished by God for their sins into thinking that their religious accomplishments will effectively persuade God not to send them to eternal torture in hell. The fabrication of hell is itself another monstrous lie concocted by big business religion designed to control its followers and keep them in line.

The vast majority of people on this planet live lives of slavery to Christ-less religion—as long as they follow the dictates and dogmas of their religion, they assume that *performing* at a high enough level saves them from the presumed wrath of God.

Religious followers assume that they are good because they obey the Ten Commandments, because they perform prescribed rituals, because they do what they

“should” and because they “belong” to a particular religion, denomination or congregation.

Thus people are trapped by law—they believe that by doing good things and by regularly going to a brick-and-mortar church that they will somehow be able to attain worth and earn acceptance from God.

**The cross of Jesus centers us so that we fall in love with God—and we switch our center from our own performance to the perfect, never-ending love of God who loves us in spite of, not because of, our performance.**

Imagine that I'm holding a big sign—**No Religion Allowed Beyond This Point!** Now imagine that the sign is nailed to a cross.

The cross is the end of religion. The cross of Jesus liberates us—it proclaims that the law game is over. The cross insists that it is futile for humans to prove themselves to God.

The cross of Jesus insists that Jesus is our center. Our relationship with God is all about what Jesus, God in the flesh, has done for us—NOT what we are capable of and must do for ourselves.

The cross of Jesus centers us so that we fall in love with God—and we switch our center from our own *performance* to the perfect, never-ending love of God, who loves us in spite of, not because of, our *performance*.

The cross of Jesus centers us so that we surrender to Jesus and to God's grace. *The cross of Jesus changes our focus from a futile and endless quest of trying to convince God to love us to just letting God love us.*

**Before we are centered in Jesus we try to prove ourselves to God—**when we are centered in Jesus we rest in him, we live in his freedom, we embrace his grace—and we know that perfect love casts out fear.

When we are Christ-centered we rest in the love and grace of God—we are centered in his forgiveness and his mercy.


The problem with Christ-less religion at large is that it takes the spotlight off the works of God and places it on the works of humans as seen and known within the systematic procedures and practices of a religious enterprise or institution.

When the spotlight is on the works and the production of a religion, then the focus becomes narrow and exclusive—so that one cannot help but regard anyone apart from one's religion as an outsider, perhaps even a heretic or an enemy.

Ardent and fanatical religious followers thus stress their dogmas, their practices, their holy books, their holy rituals and ceremonies, and they minimize or even forget the love, grace, mercy and forgiveness of God. □

—Greg Albrecht

*Join us for the complete message of “The Center of the Gospel” at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of July 8, 2018.*



...with the passing of each life,  
we need more than ever to be  
reminded of the context—  
the eternity that is in Jesus Christ.

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adjoining those of my dad's parents and his sister, just a few steps away from the graves of my mom's parents and family. Decisions were relatively simple then.

Some six decades later I made arrangements for my late wife. I was shocked to learn the price of a traditional plot—in addition to the hefty expenses of casket, vault and embalming. It would have been enough to give me a fatal heart attack (conveniently right at the mortuary) had my late wife not been okay with cremation.

Her earthly remains are in a columbarium niche in a beautiful memorial garden with the Cascade Mountains in the distance.

No wonder that in 2016 over fifty percent of Americans and over seventy percent of Canadians chose the less costly option of cremation. By contrast, in 1960 less than four percent of Americans were cremated.

Economy is not the only factor driving the move from burial to cremation. Funerals and memorial services are featuring less Christian content and less religious content in general. Hence, people are less adamant about holding to traditional "Christian" burial. For

example, in traditionally irreligious Oregon, in 2015 over 74 percent chose cremation, whereas in traditionally church-going Mississippi, only 21 percent opted for the urn (statistics from the Cremation Association of North America).

Okay—it's understandable why we might shy away from an overtly "religious" funeral. Friends and family may identify with a wide range of metaphysical perspectives, and so we try to make the services more inclusive. After all, who wants to see atheist uncle Gary or Buddhist cousin Ethan rushing out the back door, dismayed by a hard-line Bible-thumping preacher. Fair enough.

But another, more disquieting reason, may be that in our increasingly escapist, fantasy-based culture, we just don't want to face and process the stark reality of death. This may explain why the remains of the deceased are often not present at services, or have already been interred. For some, the presence of remains casts an awkward cloud over a celebration of life.

Yet as Thomas Long observes in *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care*, "A funeral

is, by definition, what we do with the body....It is not a sing-a-long, a prayer meeting, a therapy session, or a memory exercise. It may include elements of all these things, but funerals are about bodies and movement. Funerals are occasioned by a great human necessity, namely that the body of the deceased must be taken from among the living to a place among the dead. This movement of the corpse is the central and inescapable reality, the unavoidable fact at the center of all death rituals."

### **Passing Away in Ages Past**

Death is physical life's great common denominator. The author of Hebrews informs us that "...people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

Throughout history, human beings have acknowledged some form of this truth. Until a century or two ago, incurable diseases ran rampant and lifespans were much shorter. Infants and children commonly didn't make it to adulthood. Death was always real, always present, always knocking at the door.

For millennia, various modes of burial, cremation and exposure went in and out of style, almost



*After the remains of the deceased have been laid to rest...after we begin to adjust to life without the loved one, the questions linger.... Death—the cessation of life that seems like it ought to go on forever demands our attention and pulls our minds like some powerful magnet toward thoughts of eternity.*

always driven by religious dogma about the afterlife.

Even Neanderthals seemed to have had some kind of funerary rituals. The precise way in which one's body was prepared was thought to have eternal consequences.

If you happened to be among the nobility in some civilizations, you could afford much better preparations than the common people, with confidence that you would take your status with you into the afterlife. Egyptians embalmed their dead, with prescribed protocols to ensure a successful journey into the beyond. Early Europeans, Hindus and Central American civilizations among others seemed to believe that the ascension of the soul was facilitated by cremation.

Ancient Israel, like their surrounding cultures, preferred burial. While the Old Testament gives little or no instruction, it contains plenty of accounts of burials, especially in the Old Testament. It was a disgrace to die and be unburied—possibly to be eaten by wild animals. It was preferable to be buried in one's hometown with one's own family. Wealthy families had family tombs. Bodies were laid in the tomb, and after a time the bones were gathered and piled with the rest of the long-deceased family members in another chamber of the tomb, to

make room for incoming bodies.

In Europe, with the advent of Christianity, cremation rapidly went out of style, largely because of its association with non-Judeo-Christian religions. The institutional church encouraged burial, teaching that God preferred to resurrect intact bodies, rather than ones that had gone up in smoke. In the Middle Ages, cremation was made illegal in Europe—except for heretics who could be burned at the stake, as they were thought to be destined for hell anyway. In the late 19th and early 20th century, as cremation gained popularity in the Western world, the church reconsidered its policy, admitting that there was no supporting Scriptural injunction against cremation. Even so, cremation was not accepted by the Catholic church until 1963.

### **Why Do We Even Need a Service?**

I once asked a friend if he was going to attend the funeral of a mutual friend. He answered, "No—I don't like funerals." He had a point. No one likes funerals (except maybe morticians). But, beyond disposing of the body, I can think of four other reasons why we need some kind of funeral or memorial event.

1. To honor the deceased.
2. To exchange emotional support with friends and family.
3. To share memories of the

deceased, reminding ourselves that the life of our loved one counted for something—that his or her life made a difference.

4. To be reminded that our loved one is in the care of God, and that we are destined to be reunited with him or her.

Most western funerals or memorial services cover the first three items well. But sad to say, the fourth aspect is increasingly conspicuous by its absence. Yet perhaps it is the most compelling reason of all for attending a funeral: *we need spiritual reassurance in the face of death.*

After the remains of the deceased have been laid to rest, after the memorial service, after the friends and relatives have gone home, after we begin to adjust to life without the loved one, the questions linger—keeping us awake at night. Death—the cessation of life that seems like it ought to go on forever—demands our attention and pulls our minds like some powerful magnet toward thoughts of eternity. And that's a good thing.

Compared to these issues, questions of burial or cremation, music, venue and flowers become far less significant. That's why, with the passing of each life, we need more than ever to be reminded of the context—the eternity that is Jesus Christ. □





# When Your Time Comes

**F**ew people get around to considering their own funeral. It seems grim and depressing. But really, why should that be? We all treasure photos of deceased family and friends. We enjoy telling stories about them, and we prize the things and accomplishments they left behind. We'll all be joining their ranks someday, so we might as well do a little planning. While you don't want to be a control freak, for every ounce of preparation you do now, you'll save your loved ones ten pounds of hassle and anxiety, easing the stress of decision-making at a painful time.

How you plan a memorial service or funeral is up to you and your family. Scripture makes absolutely no demands as far as format or venue, despite what some of my well-meaning colleagues in the clergy may suggest. But here are a few things to think about for your own memorial service or that of a loved one.

- Consider talking to friends and family about your memorial. Get thoughts down on paper or incorporate your wishes in your will. What kind of music would you like? What photos or videos? Do you have any farewell wisdom you would like to pass on in a written message or video? You'll probably never have a better captive audience.

- Consider providing for expenses in a special account or insurance policy—even paying a funeral home ahead of time.

- Who would you like to officiate? Christ-centered, grace-based clergy should be aware of their audience, choose their words carefully, and send attendees away with hope, assurance and peace of mind.

- Don't be afraid to ask loved ones about their preferences for a memorial service. (Not an easy question to ask. Timing and context are everything.)

- Some people don't want a service at all—an understandable choice. On the other hand, it's a safe bet that even if you are an antisocial curmudgeon, at least a few of your friends and family will crave reassurance and closure in the wake of your exit from this world.

## Burial or Cremation?

It's helpful to remember that what we call heaven is an entirely different dimension. The immortal bodies we are given are incorruptible—not bound by physics as we know them. They exist in eternity—a concept that is far beyond our comprehension.

In light of this, the state of our physical bodies at death is inconsequential. The institutional church was seriously mistaken when it taught and required that bodies be

buried with a “proper” ritual in a certain kind of cemetery in order for the body to be resurrected and reunited with the soul.

History tells us that millions of Christ-followers went to their deaths without a “proper” burial or funeral. The book of Hebrews mentions martyrs who were tortured, who died without their bodies intact, “that they might gain an even better resurrection” (Hebrews 11:35-38). The Bible teaches that, regardless of the state of our earthly remains, in the afterlife God can provide us with an eternal, glorified body.

So when it comes to dealing with our own remains or the remains of a loved one, the Bible does not offer rules and regulations. Decency compels us to treat the remains of our loved ones with all respect, but the question of burial or cremation is a personal decision—a part of our freedom in Christ.

## Ways to Remember

In the accompanying article, Irma's memorial guests tied brief notes to helium balloons and sent them skyward. While this may strike some as bizarre, there are valid reasons for similar symbolic gestures. No one believed that Irma was literally in the sky grabbing messages from popped balloons. But in the face of death, we are often plagued with emotional unfinished business—things we wish we had said or done, conflicts we wish we had handled better. Shared rituals can help us patch those issues, forgive ourselves (or the loved one) and say goodbye. Other activities can help comfort children. The ideas below were gathered from various sources, and some may fit better than others. When combined with the spiritual encouragement of the gospel, a few may help mourners come to terms with their loss.

- Assemble drawings that children created for a departed parent or grandparent. Put them in an album, or print copies as a booklet to be given to friends and family.

- Consider planting a tree with some or all of the cremains of the



*Death is like that. On this end of the birth canal, it seems a scary, dark tunnel we are being sucked toward by an irresistible force. None of us looks forward to it.*

*We're afraid. It's full of pressure, pain, darkness...the unknown. But beyond the darkness and pain lies a whole new world outside.*

*When we awaken after death in that bright new world, our tears and hurts will be mere memories.*

[Taken from *Where Is God When It Hurts?* by Philip Yancey, page 254. Copyright © 1990 by Philip Yancey. Used by permission of Zondervan. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com).] □

—the Editors

loved one. Several companies (use a search engine to look on the Internet) offer biodegradable urns for this purpose. Or course, a memorial tree may also be planted without a person's ashes.

- Give each guest a small bag of forget-me-not seeds to plant in memory of the deceased.
- Give friends and family of the deceased loved one a pen and smooth stone on which to write a memory, quote or characteristic of the loved one. Place the stones in a memorial jar. The stones can be read at the memorial service, or taken home.
- Mix ashes of the departed into a concrete garden sculpture. Some companies will place these sculptures on the ocean floor, where they will become an artificial coral reef.

- Create a memorial quilt using photographs (iron-on and other methods are available for transfer to fabric), art created by the loved one and patches of the loved one's favorite clothing. Display the quilt at a memorial service.

- Assemble a memorial display with mementos of the loved one's vocations, hobbies, interests, travel, military or other public service, accomplishments and honors.

### Is It The End...Or the Beginning?

In several biblical passages, Paul relates the death of our own self-

determined path in life, so that we are crucified with Christ and experience a spiritual rebirth.

In his book, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Philip Yancey compares death to birth:

*Your world is dark, safe, secure... You do nothing for yourself. You are fed automatically, and a murmuring heartbeat assures you that someone larger than you is meeting all of your needs. Life consists of simple waiting—you're not sure what to wait for, but any change seems faraway and scary....*

*One day you feel a tug. The walls seem to press in. Those soft padded walls are now pulsing wildly, crushing you downward. Your body is bent double, your limbs twisted and wrenched. You're falling upside down....*

*Your head is squeezed flat, and you are pushed harder, harder into a dark tunnel. Oh, the pain. Noise. More pressure. You hurt all over. You hear a groaning sound and an awful sudden fear rushes in on you.*

*It is happening—your world is collapsing. You're sure it's the end. You see a piercing, blinding light. Cold, rough hands grasp at you, pull you from the tunnel and hold you upside down. A painful slap. Waaahhhhh!*

*Congratulations, you have just been born.*



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## Between Eeyore and Pollyanna

One of the chapters in my latest book is titled, “Ain’t Nothin’ Gonna’ Work Out Right”—which is more true than most of us would like to admit. What I teach in my book is certainly better than what most Christians have been doing, how we’ve been acting and what we’ve been saying.

Hardly anything is fair, hardly anything works the way we want it to work and nothing is perfect. The late Paul Harvey used to say they called off Christmas because nothing could possibly live up to those expectations. What Paul Harvey said about Christmas and high expectations can certainly be said about life.

In 1 Peter 4:12-13, Peter wrote about this very thing to those who expected Christ’s imminent return and hoped that the kingdom Jesus was establishing would be fully realized with Christ’s enemies finally defeated. Instead, the Christians faced horrible persecution and shattered hopes.

He wrote, *“Beloved do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”*

If he were to write a letter specifically to us today, Peter would tell us not to be surprised when everything didn’t work out the way we expected. But then Peter wrote something quite surprising: *“But rejoice insofar as you share in Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad...”*

What—suffering AND joy?! Peter must have been a masochist. No, he wasn’t. Peter wrote about the joy we find in unfulfilled and unrealized hopes because he had a secret that all Christians share. He knew how the movie was going to end. He knew the director and, because he did, the plot had meaning. That meaning gave Peter joy.

There are two dangers in writing about unrealistic expectations: the danger of Eeyore and the danger of Pollyanna. The trick is to maintain a kind of balance between the two. One Christmas a dear friend and staff member gave me a gift I treasure—a stuffed Eeyore. If you don’t already know, Eeyore is the donkey

in the Winnie-the-Pooh stories who is loyal but walks under a dark cloud all the time.

Frankly, with my deep voice I sound like Eeyore and do a tolerable imitation of him. Not only that, there are elements of Eeyore in my personality. Contrary to Eeyore, there are many Pollyanna Christians who deny the unfulfilled expectations. So how do we stand somewhere between Eeyore and Pollyanna?

It’s important that healthy Christians be aware of the cliff but never jump. Paul wrote, *“The whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we are saved...”* (Romans 8:22-24).

In other words, we should not ignore the groaning, but at the same time we should never forget the redemption. Eeyore sees only the groaning and Pollyanna sees only the redemption. The balance comes from what Jesus said in John 16:33, *“In this world you will have tribulation [groaning]. But take heart; I have overcome the world [redemption].”*

Now a confession: I’m kind of like Eeyore and mostly a “glass half-empty” kind of guy. I don’t teach the biblical message of radical grace because it’s a nice message. I teach it because it’s all Eeyore has. Eeyore says, “Ain’t nothin’ gonna’ work out right. The culture is going to hell in a handbasket.”

But a wise Pollyanna says, “Of course, what did you expect? But try to remember the ‘overcoming the world’ part and quit whining, okay?” Then Eeyore says, “Death scares the spit out of me. All the health foods I eat, vitamins I take and exercise I do won’t change that fact. I feel depressed and hopeless—it’s a dark, dark world.”

Pollyanna says, “You may feel hopeless, but you aren’t without hope. It may be a dark world, but look over there and see the Light!”

He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown



## Quotes & Connections



### Four Lessons on Life:

1. Never take down a fence until you know why it was put up.
  2. If you get too far ahead of the army, your soldiers may mistake you for the enemy.
  3. Don't complain about the bottom rungs of the ladder; they helped you to get higher.
  4. If you want to enjoy the rainbow, be prepared to endure the storm.
- Warren Wiersbe, *On Being a Servant of God*

"Every culture is bound by practices that paralyze the people, just as much as Christians who are in the church's clutches."—Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt, (*Everyone Belongs to God*, page 44).

"If you stumble about believability, what are you living for? Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?"—Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*

"Go figure out what this Scripture means: 'I'm after mercy, not religion.' I'm here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders." —Matthew 9:13, *The Message Bible*

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