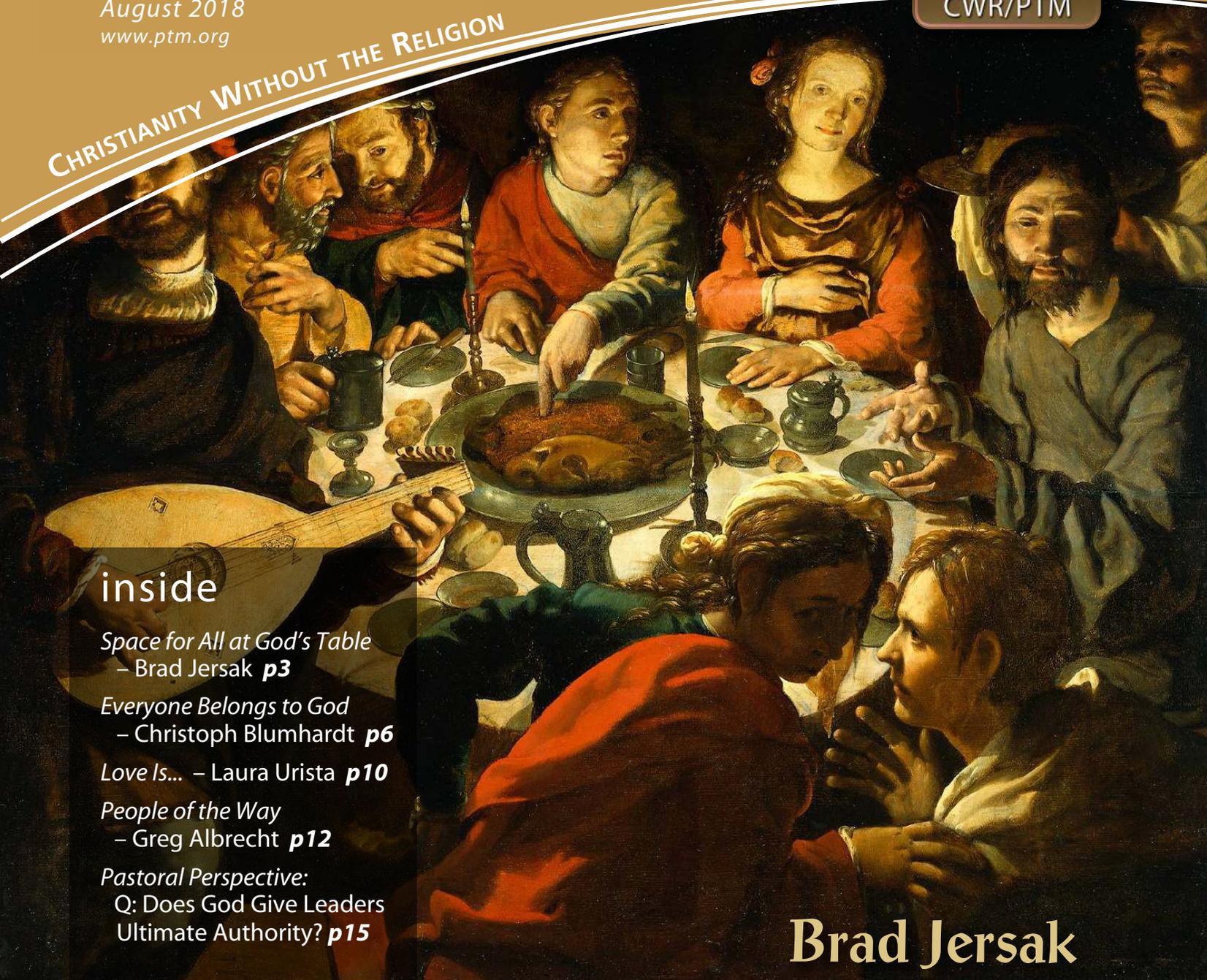




CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



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What Others Are Saying...

Volume 9, Number 4
August 2018
www.ptm.org

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

Loaded with Answers

Thank you very much for the helpful and inspirational articles in the April issue of the *CWR magazine*. That entire issue is loaded with answers to nagging questions I've had from my past understanding about the nature of God.

Wisconsin

Thanks for the April issue of *CWRm*. I especially enjoyed the article by Greg Albrecht, "Who Is Going to Heaven?" I think if you asked many ministers that question, you would get a more definitive answer than the one Greg gave. Everyone seems to be an expert on the subject. If we're going to talk about who is going to heaven, we should keep in mind who and what God is: *love!* Greg's article exemplifies God's love. But more important is what Greg didn't say. It takes a big man to admit he doesn't have all the answers and that only God does. That humility is a sign of God's grace.

New York

Thank you, Greg Albrecht and everyone involved with *CWR/PTM* for sending out such encouraging material.

Washington

Thank you for your prayers and all your literature. The latest issue of the *Plain Truth* is the best I've read in years! I thank God that we've been taught the amazing difference between "religion" and "grace."

California

Gospel in Chairs

I found your "Gospel in Chairs" video by accident. It changed my life! I've watched it dozens of times. I listen to it nearly every Sunday morning when getting ready for "church." I share it with everyone I meet who is "spiritually suicidal." Raised in church, I'd never heard the Good News until I heard you tell it. My favorite part is how you explain that God did not abandon Jesus.

Alabama

A More Christlike God

Reading *A More Christlike God* started a paradigm shift in my understanding. It opened up an entirely new world. I am so thankful the Lord has opened my eyes and I can't wait to see this beautiful gospel permeate the entire church.

Florida

Dear Readers,



Your generous donations enable us to share this Christ-centered gospel and to inspire others to living faith in Jesus Christ.

A big thank you from all of us at CWR!

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Space for All at God's Table

Brad Jersak

"The Jesus Way makes space for all at God's table; it enfolds all people as those whom God loves." —Greg Albrecht

"It's easy to call people out. It's harder to call them in. But confession is a helpful start." —Jarrod McKenna

The Pharisee and the Publican

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

—Luke 18:9-14

Oh, those Pharisees. Dastardly Pharisees! Thank God that I'm not like those Pharisees!

Did you see how I did that? To thank God I'm not like the Pharisee is to miss Jesus' point—is to *become* the Pharisee! Just like the self-righteous, pious Pharisee of the parable, we are prone to fall into the same self-

congratulating presumption by identifying ourselves with the publican, glaring back down our noses at the Pharisees. We despise them to prop ourselves up, practicing exclusion and reserving only our place at the table—*just like the Pharisees.*

Christ told this parable, not merely to "call out" the Pharisees for their hubris, but to "call them in" to the Father's table. He has no desire to see anyone—including them—wallow outside in the cold night of religiosity. And neither should we. If we imagine we're better than they are, we become exactly what we hate—it's ironic.

The Prodigal Son(s)

I speak of the "prodigal sons" (Luke 15:11-32) in the plural advisedly. In some ways, these brothers are as different as Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael or Jacob and Esau. But they also have a lot in common. Both receive their inheritance when the Father divides it between them (vs. 12). Both brothers alienate themselves, "slaving" in their respective fields—the *field of riotous rebellion* and the *field of resentful obedience*. Neither enjoys the warmth and intimacy of the Father's house (vss. 15, 29). Both young men are lost—but

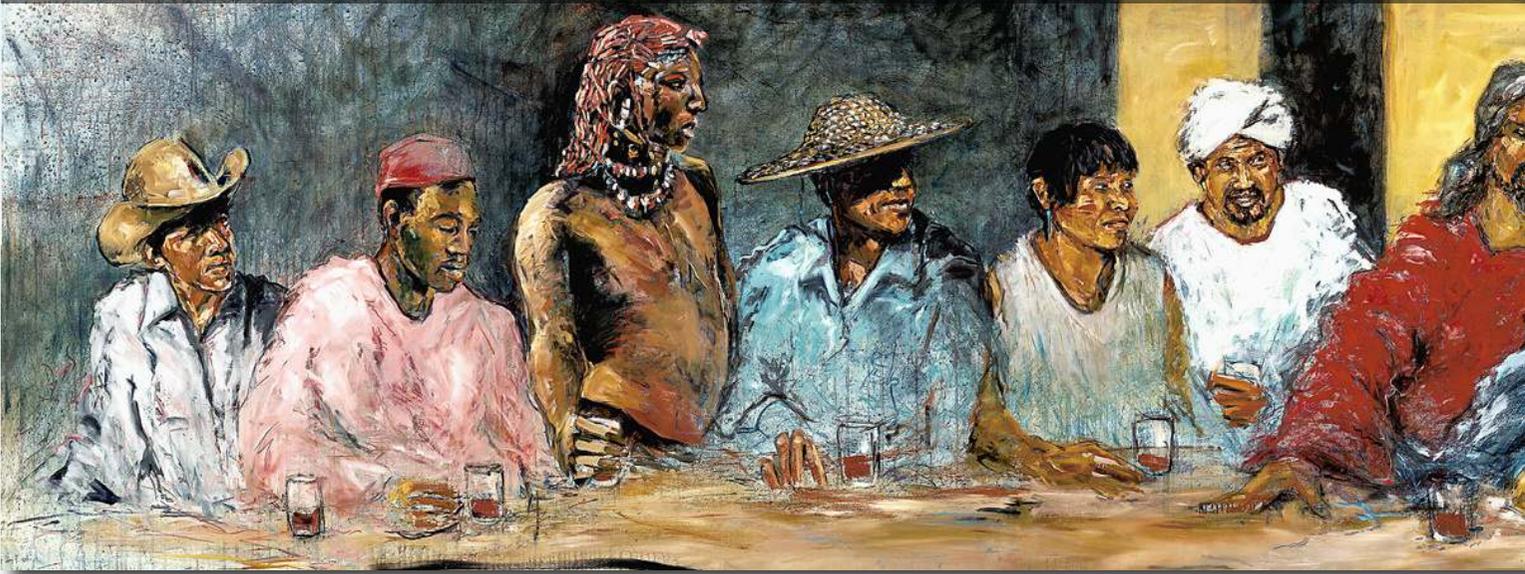


© David LaChapelle

Self-righteously condemning someone for being self-righteous and condemning is like being intolerant of intolerance in the name of tolerance. Get it?

remember, the Father never thinks of them as anything less than beloved sons. He loves both, grieves for both, and in the end, welcomes both! He runs to the younger son "while he is still a

The Jesus Way makes space for all at God's table...



long way off" (vs. 20). And he goes out to the field to plead with the older brother (vs. 28).

As the Father excludes no one in the story, Christ excludes no one with whom he shared the parable. Both Father and Son are celebrating the lost being found and pleading for the elder to join in their joy. There's not a hint of condemnation for either the younger brother or older brother, for the publicans or the Pharisees. Both groups were *"all gathering around to hear Jesus"* (Luke 15:1). All were welcome.

Jesus ate dinner in both Simon the Pharisee's home (Luke 7:36-49) and Zacchaeus the tax collector's house. They received him differently, but he honored both nonetheless. And while it's extremely hard for us, maybe we should too.

Confessions of a Pharisee

Do you feel more at home with the squeaky-clean folks of good reputation? Or with those on the messy margins? Do you rub shoulders more easily with the up-and-comer or the down-and-outer? Do you relate better to the religious elder or the rebellious sibling? Either way, might we

make space for all those who feel most "other" to us?

After years of ministry at the margins, I find it easier to "let my hair down" with the messy—people with disabilities, addictions or in poverty. I feel comfortable because I meet Christ in them. Their social faux pas, painful relapses or hygiene issues don't trigger me. I can be myself around them.

Sadly, I also like being seen in their company because it makes me seem noble, hip and "woke" (hipster lingo for socially aware) to my peers. "Woke" people are admired. "Woke" is the new "righteous." Voila! "Woke" is the new Pharisee!

So, as I'm strutting out my faith, my tattoos and my craft beer, I find my heart cold toward those I judge as more "religious" or "righty-tighty" than me. And there: I've done it again.

I can imagine myself as spiritual but not religious—proud of my "freedom in Christ" and my "pure grace" religion: but if I'm self-righteous and condescending toward "those Pharisees," I'm still enslaved to the religious impulse. I may have switched sides, but I'm still possessed by

the same fundamentalist spirit. And it's not the Spirit of Jesus.

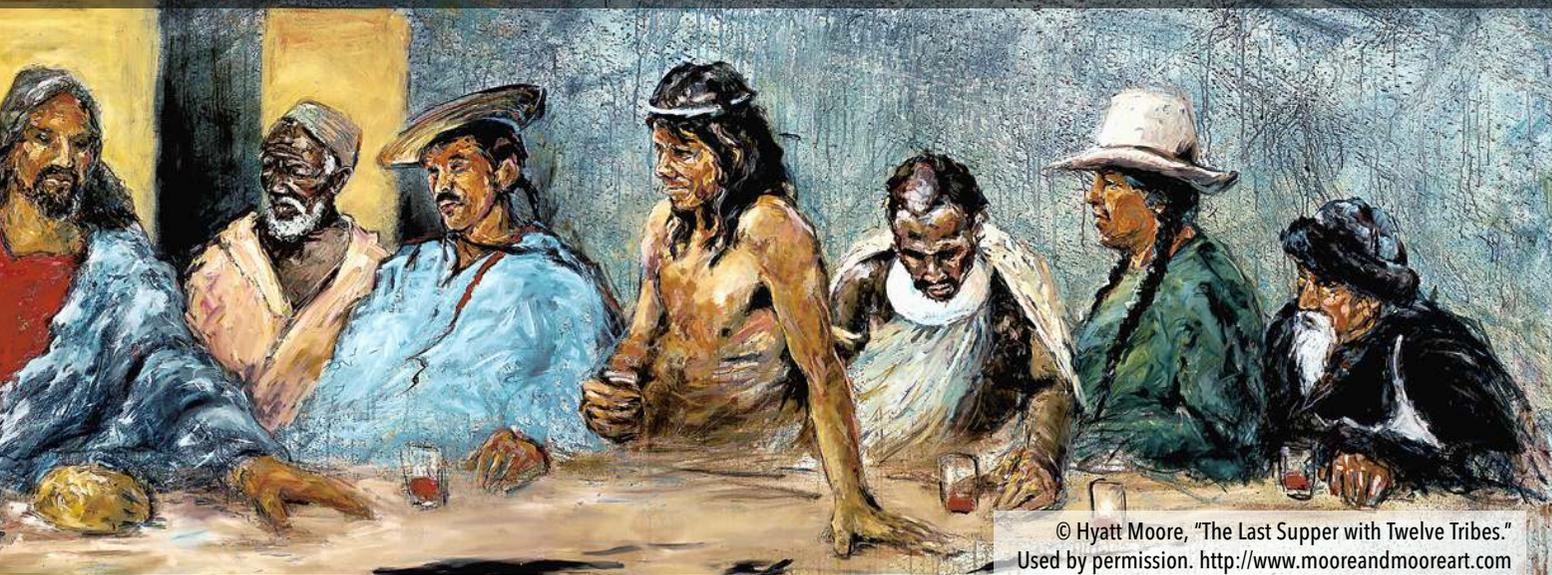
How will this play out? Now I'm feeling resentful toward those "woke folk" who claim to be progressive but are terrifying in their capacity to exclude or devour those who step out of line. Believe me; I've witnessed it. I don't want to be at their table or make space for them at mine. There, I've done it again.

But where do we find Jesus? Again, at a prominent Pharisee's table. What does Jesus say?

"When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."—Luke 14:12-14

I could just take Jesus literally. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. No problem. After all, Eden and I served in a community where they were our central focus. But I know better. For who is so spiritually poor, blind, crippled and lame

Enfolding all people as those whom God loves.



© Hyatt Moore, "The Last Supper with Twelve Tribes."
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(in my eyes) as the last group I turned away from? I can have a warm conversation with a sex addict or a Muslim Imam, no problem. But a tea-totaling, "straight-edge" Southern Baptist? If not, who's the Pharisee? *Lord, is it I?* It is.

Moving On, Not Turning Away

When I pronounce "Ichabod" (the glory has departed) on someone else—the Evangelicals of my childhood, for example—I am on trial, not them. My rejection of anyone I've excluded makes me the goat under judgment in Matthew 25, because what I do to anyone (if they're as sick with religion as I claim), I am still doing to Christ. "Brad, Brad, why do you persecute me?"

When I think of how rotten with religion the church can be, do I hope she dies or do I hope she recovers? Do I call her out or call her in? If reconciliation were possible, would I be open to it? Do I thank God I'm not like her, or can I see how I'm exactly like her? She is the measure of *my* transformation towards love.

Esau's Kiss

There's this tender moment between brothers in the story of Jacob and Esau. After years of estrangement, the younger brother (Jacob) must face Esau, whose inheritance he had stolen. What will happen?

[Jacob] bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother. But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept. —Genesis 33:3-4

When Christ composed the parable of the prodigal son, he borrowed the very same phrase to describe the Father's run, embrace and kiss. Using that phrase in his parable not only shows us the scandalous grace of God the Father—Christ was also exhorting estranged spiritual siblings to that same grace and reconciliation.

Lloyd Evangelical

Today, it helps me to think of my dad, Lloyd Jersak. Since he met Christ as a teen, he's been a faithful, "soul-winning" Baptist, boldly proclaiming the gospel as

he sees it to all who will listen. He excludes no one, calling in everyone from urine-soaked vagrants to obnoxious fundies to a wider vision God's mercy.

He's old—over 80. Forgetful, too. He's famous for locking his keys in the car. Doesn't hear well. He labors along on bad knees. He's survived a heart attack, valve replacement and three bouts of kidney cancer.

Lloyd also loves playing "Amazing Grace" on his baritone—sometimes while driving gravel roads, other times for street-people on skid row. He took it on himself to lace up his skates and organize a town-wide prayer/skate night in support of Humboldt, Saskatchewan after the hockey bus tragedy.

He's an Evangelical. His virtues, vices and maladies may be a parable of all Evangelicals.

I love him. I hope he lives. And I'm way more grateful to be like him than not. Where I'm not, I don't pray, "Thank God," but "Lord, have mercy on me." He can eat at my table any time. So, there may be hope for *this* old Pharisee yet. □

Brad Jersak is editor in chief of CWR magazine.

Everyone Belongs to God

Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt



It's harder to lead people out of the swamp of their Christianity than out of the barbarity of sin and unbelief (Matthew 23). After all, so many Christians have become nothing more than whitewashed barbarians living in self deception.

— C. F. Blumhardt, *Everyone Belongs to God*

By all accounts, the focus and emphasis of Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (1842-1919) on the amazing grace and love of God was and is remarkably similar to our mission in the pages of *CWRm*—faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone. While 2019 marks the 100th anniversary of Blumhardt's death, the relevance of his teaching and ministry rings so true for our day that it seems virtually prophetic.

Early in his adult life, Blumhardt served both church and state. He was a religious professional in the institutional church in Germany and served in civil government as a member of parliament in Wurttemberg, a territory and state within Germany. But as Blumhardt grew in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, he found his Christ-centered faith and devotion alienated him from both organized religion and politics.

Blumhardt became increasingly convinced that the “gospel of the Christians” had little or nothing to do with the authentic gospel proclaimed by Jesus. Blumhardt insisted that the gospel had been adulterated and corrupted by the Christ-less religion that holds sway in much of Christendom.

He left the big business of religion, and even though he was stripped of his credentials and the stamp of approval of religious authorities, Blumhardt continued to teach and write.

His daughter married a missionary who served in China, and the advice he shared in letters written to his son-in-law missionary hit the nail on the head for the world of Christendom in our day. Here are some excerpts:

Our Western Christianity is in a terrible mess. The church is tolerated only because it is the prop of the state and the broader culture. Together, they have become the “ruler of this world” with God reduced to an ornament for those in power. —p. 19

✠ ✠ ✠

The institutional churches, in their so-called wisdom, too often use their power to crush the free stirring of the Spirit, or at best ignore it. —p. 23

✠ ✠ ✠

Why is it so hard for people to imagine anyone coming to God without walking through church doors? —p. 31

✠ ✠ ✠

Aggressive attempts at evangelizing do not spring from the love of God, but from the spirit of business. —p. 45

✠ ✠ ✠

Today's missionaries often make the grave mistake of acting like professors instructing students, while at the same time churches and Christian societies carry on like industrialists, measuring everything in terms of “success.” —p. 58

✠ ✠ ✠

Our task is to spread the gospel of Christ, not the gospel of Christians. —p. 83

✠ ✠ ✠

Give yourself completely to this one fact: God loves the world. Don't let anything interfere with this truth. Even when you can't quite grasp it, believe in God's love, which is for all people. —p. 90

✠ ✠ ✠

Don't consider yourself as blessed and others who don't believe as condemned. Instead, consider everyone you meet who has yet to come to faith to be under God's blessing. Learn to die daily to yourself, for you too, if you are honest, are in some ways a “pagan,” even though you can testify that you have heard and believed in the gospel. Beware of the grave danger of becoming arrogant simply because you know something that others don't. —pp. 110-111 □

Excerpts from Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt, Everyone Belongs to God (Plough, 2015). UBP.

Disconnection: A Likely Cause of Addictions

Michael Peterson & Brad Jersak in Dialogue



“The opposite of addiction is not sobriety. It is human connection.”

—Johann Hari

In an article titled “The Likely Cause of Addiction Has Been Discovered, and It Is Not What You Think,”¹ Johann Hari (author of *Chasing The Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs*) presents a strong case for believing that addictions are rooted, not in chemical hooks, but in disconnection or alienation. The best treatment, he proposes, is human connection. Love is, of course, shorthand for human connection. Drs. Michael Peterson and Brad Jersak reflect on these findings.

Michael Peterson: Two Thoughts

1) First, the author contrasts the traditional treatment approach of bio-behavioral therapies and cognitive interventions over against a love-based approach. The final sentence states,

“For a century now, we have been singing war songs about addicts. It occurred to me as I wiped his brow, we should have been singing love songs to them all along.”

I found this concluding thought intriguing from the standpoint of God’s grace and love—how this statement and general scientific study outcomes both point to the potential power of God’s grace and love. It seems to me that the world was created and runs best when God’s love is reflected, demonstrated and implemented in addictions, healing, marriages—you name it.

When we operate and function on a premise or approach other than God’s grace (generally speaking), we invariably end up in the wrong place or doing the wrong thing. However, even if

we end up in the wrong place (i.e. addiction), God's love can bring us back and heal us. Here we find a problem within "religious institutions" that tend to address "sin" with approaches other than grace and love. Rules, rituals and regulations (i.e. bio-behavioral approaches) executed by religion don't heal, whereas God's grace and unconditional love can and do heal.

2) Second, we have often tried to argue for God's existence through a variety of "proofs," but **might God's existence better be confirmed via the application of love? If God is love, then his creation ought also to work best from a "grace-based, love-based approach."**

This article, in my mind, is like a scientific affirmation of God's grace, but also a point of proof for God's existence. An evolutionary naturalism

to see all of this in action. To heal a nation, family, community or individual, it is the operationalization and outflowing of godly love that leads to better outcomes, lives and relationships.

Brad Jersak: Response

I very much agree with this line of thinking. Moreover, this has been my consistent experience of 12-step recovery, with which I've been closely involved since 2008.

The foundation of the program is our belief that condemnation, accusation and judgment do nothing for the addict. Addiction is a disease over which self-control and self-will are utterly powerless. Nor can addiction be scorned or punished out of anyone.

Addiction, like "sin," requires nothing less than the treatment of the Great Physician through real human connection.

as "God") who can free us from the bondage in which we're hopelessly entangled. Within 12-step fellowships, God or a "Higher Power" is not identified with a particular creed or dogma (so that all addicts feel welcome), but is represented as loving, caring, forgiving and non-condemning (and not many gods fit that bill).

Accepting oneself and surrendering to God's grace and care through the other men and women in recovery is the active ingredient in our healing. We've seen remarkable transformation by the time we come to step 3: "We made a decision to turn our lives and wills over to the care [not the control] of God."

"Care" here means love, grace, acceptance—what Hari's article is talking about. Later, in step 11, we seek through prayer and meditation to increase our conscious contact—*i.e. connection*—with that God. That is, through God's self-revelation, the addict comes to know and experience God's unfailing love and radical acceptance.

I've been active in 12-step recovery long enough to see a variety of dynamics that impact transformation. Four thoughts to keep in mind:

1. If the addict cannot accept that they are powerless to save themselves, they will keep stumbling. While addicts must accept responsibility for their lives and actions, unwillingness to see that grace alone can save them leads to repeated relapses. It's not that they don't participate

WITHIN 12-STEP FELLOWSHIPS, GOD OR A "HIGHER POWER" IS NOT IDENTIFIED WITH A PARTICULAR CREED OR DOGMA (SO THAT ALL ARE WELCOME), BUT IS REPRESENTED AS LOVING, CARING, FORGIVING AND NON-CONDEMNING...

approach makes no sense to the treatise of the author. Rather, a world designed by a God of love to operate in alignment with his being/character makes more sense. Dysfunction at any level within the system (individual, family, community, nation, etc.) invariably leads to sin, death and negative outcomes.

Thinking of the current state of the U.S. right now, we seem

In any 12-step fellowship, we are taught that the character defect lurking at the root of every addiction problem is self-will (autonomy, just as you see it in the fall of Adam). Attempting to strive our way out of any dysfunctional behavior only feeds and strengthens the addiction.

Instead, the solution is belief in a power greater than ourselves (normally referred to



in the work of recovery, but they are participating through surrender to God's love rather than attempting to dig themselves out of their own pit of self-will.

2. If the addict cannot believe that God loves them as they are today, warts and all, they will spurn grace and prolong their recovery. They may believe they are unworthy of God's love. So what do they do? They strive to make themselves worthy, which is a strange kind of pride that refuses to bottom out.

3. All fellowships are expected to embody God's unconditional love. The only requirement for "membership" in a 12-step fellowship is a desire to be free. However, I know that some addicts can become fundamentalists in the program. This too is a sign of pride, so in their impatience with those who relapse, they may communicate shame and rejection. This is not a program

glitch; it is a departure from recovery that makes it religious.

4. Our addiction can become an unexpected blessing. In some recovery programs, the addiction (and the "inner addict") is considered the *enemy* from which God must set us free. That makes sense. But in others, those in recovery reflect on their addiction as a *blessing*, because ultimately, it played a part in God's redemption from the slavery of self-will into the care of a loving God. From what I've seen, the latter is far more effective.

Michael Peterson

When we take God's love out of the picture, we invariably set ourselves up for failure. Moreover, when we accurately define God's love for what it truly is—unconditional, grace-based, relentless, never-ending, all-forgiving, all-merciful, and all-encompassing—and then surrender to it, it transforms us. It

is the power that heals, delivers and comforts. To see God for who God is, is truly a blessing. Often, science itself gives us glimpses of God's amazing love—if we are willing to see it.

By allowing God to work his love through us, by yielding to him, we as counselors, treatment deliverers, friends and relatives can perhaps be an instrument that he uses to help, comfort, encourage and heal others. If the world was created in love and for love, then it stands to reason that the more we yield to that love, the better off we all will be. □

Michael Peterson is a university professor who teaches Behavioral Health & Nutrition.

Brad Jersak is Associate Dean of Stephen's University's Master of Ministries program and an addict in recovery.

Notes

1. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/johann-hari/the-real-cause-of-addicti_b_6506936.html

Laura Urista

Love Is...

Remember the *Love Is...* cartoons from the 1970s? They featured a cute, young newlywed couple learning about the ups and downs of marriage, with a short motto or lesson about love. I saw one of these recently and it made me reflect on how much we humans want to know what love is. Many of us spend a lifetime looking for love in all the wrong places but never finding it. But there's no need to despair—we've been given a detailed description of what to look for!

God's Love Is...

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast. It is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails (1 Cor. 13:4-8).

In this passage, Paul shares 15

characteristics or descriptions of what God's love looks like in action. These descriptions aren't meant to be a checklist of what God requires us to do to earn his love, but rather, descriptions of God's perfect love in practice. The life and love of Christ-in-us fills and empowers us with love for God and love for others—fulfilling what Jesus calls “the great commandment” (Matt. 22:7-39).

It seems to me that the “fruit of the Spirit” described in Galatians looks a lot like these 15 characteristics of God's love:

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 (Gal. 5:22-23).

Have you ever heard of an orange tree producing apples because it tried **really hard**? Have you heard of a grape vine producing bananas because it **pretended** to? Similarly, the fruit of the Holy Spirit is

spiritual and cannot be produced by human effort. We can't work up God's perfect love by trying really hard or pretending—in other words, by faking it. But we have access to God's perfect love as we allow Christ to share his fruit of the Holy Spirit through us.

Remaining in the Vine

In John 15:5, Jesus says, “*I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*”

How do we remain in the vine, or put simply, maintain a close relationship with Christ? It is simple, but that doesn't necessarily mean it is easy! We remain in the Vine (Christ) by spending time talking with God. Prayer needn't be formal or fancy. The example Christ gave us in the Lord's Prayer is a wonderful outline to help guide us in prayer, but it is not a rigid structure we must follow so that God can hear us.

God hears even our silent prayers, and in fact sometimes those are the most heartfelt! He knows our deepest feelings, those we can't find words to express.

Do you have a special person in your life—a spouse, family member or best friend you can't wait to talk to? Do you deeply miss talking with them when you aren't able to be together for a while? That's how God feels about us, and he wants to spend time talking with us often.

If you feel awkward about praying, or don't know what to say, here is something that has helped me. **Just breathe.** Inhale

deeply then exhale slowly—and as you breathe *in* think **Lord live in me**. Ask Christ to live in you, ask him to share his very nature of love with you. As you breathe *out*, think **Lord love through me**.

Ask God to help you allow his love to flow out through you to others. This doesn't mean you have to beg or plead, because he already wants to share his love with each of us and help us share his loving nature. When the great commandment (loving God and loving others) is our focus and top

priority, all other concerns of life just seem to fall into place.

Listen as the Holy Spirit draws you into a deeper relationship with Father Abba and Jesus. Many people find it helpful to keep a journal or diary to write down their thoughts and feelings as they pray and meditate.

When I faced difficult times as a teenager, my sister suggested that I write out my prayers as letters to God. That helped me focus my thoughts and begin to see God as a close friend, giving

me a sense of comfort and peace.

God's love is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and Christ-followers allow him to **live in us and love through us**.

We can serve as conduits or channels through whom Christ's love flows, like aqueducts for his living water.

"Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them" (John 3:38). □

Laura Urista enjoys helping others learn more about God's love.

"I'm still a rookie second officer but even I know it's not supposed to happen like this."

The captain called "Before Landing Check."

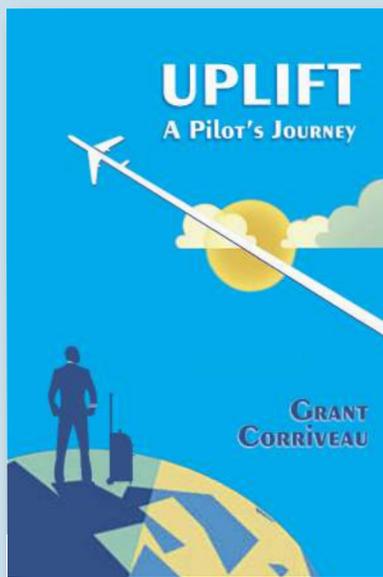
That's normal. The first officer and I moved the appropriate switches, levers and buttons, and chanted the usual incantations. That's normal. The trusty old Boeing 727 responded with its arcane dialect of flashing lights and flickering needles. That's normal. And the all-important landing gear panel is now showing three green lights assuring us that the wheels are locked down. That's normal. But the landing gear control panel is also glowering at us with a trio of red lights, telling us that the green lights are not to be trusted.

"That's not normal."

→ → →

Read the rest of this story as you take off with Captain Grant Corriveau in ***Uplift: A Pilot's Journey***. During your flight, you will be fascinated by many other true stories shared by Grant as he invites you to experience his life-long journey of discoveries.

Warning: keep your seatbelts fastened. There will be unexpected turbulence during your flight.



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Corriveau transparently shares the challenges, adventures and achievements as he advances through the ranks to senior captain. You will fly with him as he

reveals his failures and doubts—his triumphs and close calls. You will share times when Grant's dream almost ended and sit next to him in the jump seat as he candidly shares a pilot's life of continuous training and adaptation to new technology and automation.

Uplift is everyone's journey, told through the eyes and experiences of one pilot's career—one pilot's journey. Come along for the ride and you will be uplifted. —**Order at ptm.org/books**

Most experts agree that between thirty and forty thousand different Christian denominations exist today. Denominations normally have multiple physical locations where their franchises (popularly called “churches”) do business in a building on a piece of real estate. Is your Christianity accurately and completely defined and determined by any one of them? *What kind of Christian are you—and why?*

Once upon a time, long before the institutions we know as churches and their buildings, creeds, traditions and artifacts existed, Christ-followers were known as *people of the Way* (see Acts 18:26; 19:9,

(Philippians 3:13). Christ-followers are “on” *the Way*, moving with a purpose, rather than stationary alongside *the Way*. For Christ-followers, faith is not confined to an ecclesiastical organization. Faith is far more than mental assent to dogmas and creeds—far more than particular rituals or ceremonies.

The Way brings to mind a journey with Jesus Christ, rather than a destination already achieved. As Christ-followers, we are not stagnant; we are growing. We are on the move—“pilgrims” to use a biblical metaphor. We are ambassadors here on earth. While we live within earthly

set of dogmas or doctrines other than Jesus, who is our *Living Stone* (1 Peter 2:4). Jesus Christ is who and what we believe. He is our foundation, he is our center and our core—he is our all in all.

Jesus is not only our guide on our journey, but he is *the Way*—he is the path, he is the road. We are Christ-followers and we are *people of the Way* because he walked this way before us—he blazed the trail before us—and we follow in his footsteps.

As Christ-following *people of the Way*, we are going somewhere. We haven’t fully arrived. In one sense, we are spiritual aliens in the land, the state, the province and the

Greg Albrecht

People of the Way

23; 24:14). The word “way” in the New Testament is translated from the dynamic Greek word *hodos*. It means a road or a *journey*—*hodos* implies travel or movement.

The word “way” implies that Christ-followers are not sitting still. Like Paul, Christ-followers do not believe they have arrived or that they have already been “made perfect”

nations, speak different languages and have distinct customs, we represent the kingdom of God in this world.

People of the Way are not simply those who mindlessly believe and follow religious practices just because their parents and grandparents did. Their faith is their own.

People of the Way are not tied down or tethered to any

country in which we reside. Christ-followers are not the property of any religious entity—we are bought and paid for by Jesus Christ.

What About Church Membership?

Though some people profess membership in an incorporated institution, if they are truly *in*

Christ, they are first and foremost members of the universal body of Christ, which has no denominational boundaries.

People of the Way might be found within the walls of a building or institution that calls itself a church or they may never venture inside such a building or institution. **People of the Way**, the universal body of Christ, may at times be obvious and visible, but they can also be obscure and invisible.

As **people of the Way**, we follow Jesus and as we journey with our risen Lord; we mature in him. He builds us into his temple—a spiritual house where he dwells. *When it*

comes to church membership, Christ-followers must ask if they first and foremost belong to

Jesus or if they think Jesus belongs exclusively to their religious tribe. Whose name most defines your faith—your denominational label or our Lord Jesus Christ?

Following Jesus was considered to be a **way of life** long before Christianity morphed into tens of thousands of denominations, each with their own unique, differing, competing and even contradictory sets of priorities, practices, beliefs and doctrines.

But the priority of defining Jesus as a **way of life** only lasted a few centuries after his birth, life, death and resurrection. Then came the desire to organize into human power structures. The 11th chapter of Genesis tells us that people came together to build a city with “a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves”

(Genesis 11:4). As it turned out, their attempts to organize resulted in the construction of a Tower of Confusion.

Several thousand years later, and a few hundred years following the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, people again attempted to make a name for themselves. They began construction on another Tower of Babel. In an attempt to utilize **the Way** to unify the Roman Empire, the Emperor Constantine made Christianity his state religion.

In many respects, efforts to organize and institutionalize were about making a name for Constantine and his political

Jesus is not only our guide on our journey, but he is **the Way**—he is the path, he is the road.

legacy, rather than faithfulness to following **the Way** of Christ.

So, in Constantine’s time, it was once again said, “Let’s make a name—let’s build towers—mighty churches and cathedrals—to the glory of God or rather, to the emperor!”

Up until Constantine, **people of the Way** generally knew that God is Christlike—but after Constantine’s “conversion,” many began to see him as Caesar-like.

Up until Constantine, Christ-following **people of the Way** had been a persecuted minority movement. They were non-violent peacemakers who cared for each other and reached out with the love of Jesus to those outside their faith and beliefs.

For **people of the Way**, faith was not a matter of buying into acceptable doctrines and dogmas or performing correct ceremonies and rituals.

Christ-following **people of the Way** represented a different way—they did not conform to the religious status quo any more than Jesus conformed to the establishment of the Sanhedrin when he lived and ministered on this earth.

One Way, Two or Many?

The institutional church of the Empire—with all of its bureaucracy, conformity and uniformity—grew and grew for about 700 years. Then the inevitable confusion happened.

Around 1054, through a series of conflicts that featured a backstory of the worst kind of “church politics,” the eastern

Greek church and the western Latin church suffered the “Great Schism.” Now when people thought of Christianity, they thought of separate, competing entities.

Those two streams of institutional Christianity dominated for 500 more years until what is commonly known as the Protestant Reformation. Before the Reformation, there were two institutions, popularly accepted as valid Christian churches. In the immediate wake of the Reformation, a multiplicity of fragmenting movements fought for power and adherents.

A few hundred years after the Reformation, after a violent revolution, democracy was introduced in North America. Democracy dramatically impacted how faith was practiced: the well-established European religious hierarchies scrambled to establish footholds in the New World. The concept of competition and market

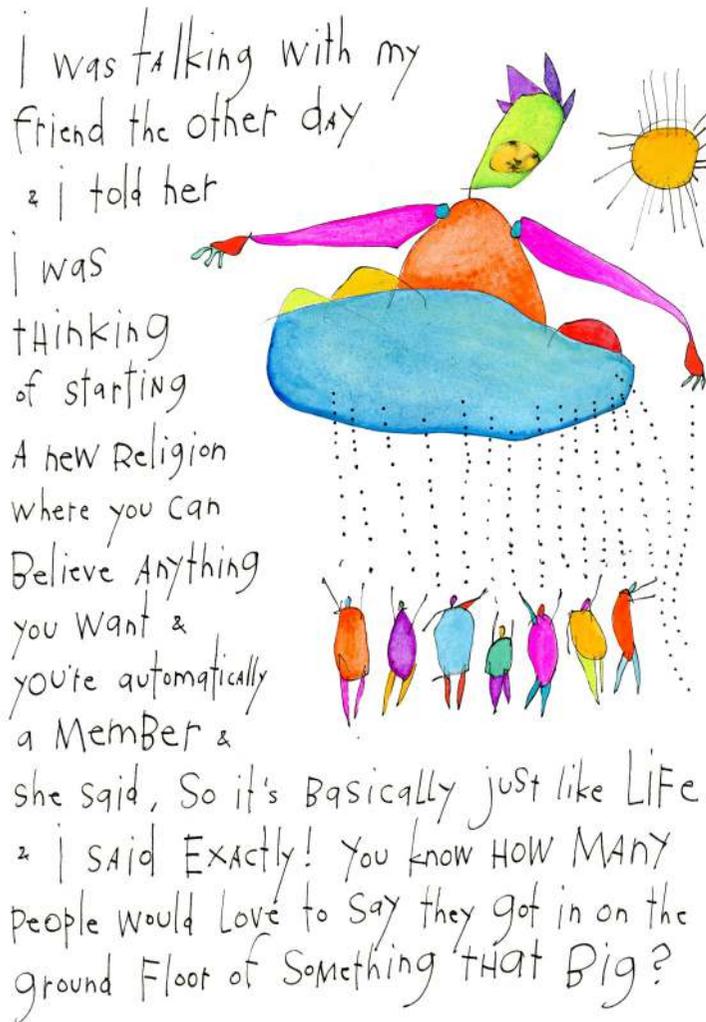
share to the established institutions of Christendom.

In North America, the ideas and interpretations of what it meant to be a Christ-follower exploded and multiplied into a wide variety of denominations.

Within the freedom offered by democracy, capitalism and religious liberty, hundreds of new small business startups offered themselves as Christian options.

And, given these New World freedoms, many movements (including those known as “cultic groups”) found fertile ground in which to flourish. Democracy guaranteed them freedom from the fear that powerful religious institutions could condemn them, subject them to inquisitions or eradicate them by burning them at the stake.

Thus it is that Christianity finds itself in a confusing place in these early years of the 21st century—with 30,000 to 40,000 options. It’s confusing because most of these religious entities, competing for a greater market share, claim to be spiritually superior, more faithful and “more true” than their competitors.



'ground floor'

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I AM The Way, The Truth & The Life

Jesus does not claim to be merely one of these thousands of alternatives. John 14:6 uses the definite article for “**The Way**.”

“The” defines, identifies and limits a particular person or object. “The” house is not just any house. “The” president is one specific individual. “The” way and “the” truth and “the” life is distinct, singular and unique. Jesus is making a bold and audacious claim, is he not?

Further, John 14:6 mentions “truth” and “life” as descriptors, which serve to further explain **the Way**. And who is **the Way**? Jesus says “**I AM the Way**.”

As we follow Jesus on **the Way**, we hear the many voices of spiritual propaganda—lies and distortions—calling to us from the ditches, swamps and dark forests of religious deceit. They attempt to seduce us, inviting us onto dangerous detours away from **the Way of Jesus**.

They make every effort to persuade you and me to leave **the Way** with Jesus, urging us either to sit down and stagnate or lose ourselves on some other path.

As **people of the Way**, we are on the road—we are on a journey. We are ever-growing, ever-maturing in Christ. Life in Christ is dynamic and ever-changing. He is constantly transforming us as he lives within us. Paul explains that Christ is renewing us “day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Jesus is **the Way** and the truth and the life (John 14:6). As we follow him, we grow in him and he grows in us. Metaphorically, we might say that Jesus “grows on us.” Christ-followers must remain Christ-centered and Christ-focused.

For **people of the Way**, Jesus is our core, our center, our goal, our journey, our path and our road. He is our everything, for “*in him we live and move and have our being*” (Acts 17:28). □

Greg Albrecht is President of Plain Truth Ministries.



CWRm

GREG ALBRECHT

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

“Does God Give Ultimate Authority to Human Leaders?”

Question: I have heard people say that they feel the leader of their nation has the God-given right to take military action without having any human question them. This seems to extend ultimate authority to human leaders, in the name of “the Bible says so.” What do you say?

Answer: When it comes to extending ultimate authority without question, people who religiously attend a brick-and-mortar building on a regular basis may be even more likely to blindly follow a charismatic leader. The tendency to radically place faith in human leadership, whether in the religious or secular world, is historically aligned with religious devotion.

We in the West have been especially focused on the radical, militaristic terror supported by some who spend a great deal of time in mosques, listening to religious authorities.

In the world of nominal Christianity, it might be easy to assume that the major reason millions of people have stopped attending a congregation (in this century) is because of militaristic “alt-right” messages from pastors and religious leaders.

But messages of hatred and the condemnation of others draw people like flies, whether the leader is an “alt-right” so-called Christian pastor, an extremist so-called Muslim imam, or a “my way or the highway” far-left activist.

One may rightly recoil at the incongruity of using a church, mosque or temple to proclaim an aggressive and polarizing political view, but the reasons for the tsunami-like exodus of Christian churches run much deeper and deserve more attention than simple political pronouncements.

According to one sociologist, there are as many people in the U.S. who identify as Christian but do not attend a brick-and-mortar

church as those who do—a fact well worth further consideration.

Yes, some do “use” the Bible to justify and permit them to hate and to commit crimes of violence and warfare against those who don’t agree with them. Many within Christendom interpret Old Testament directives, attributed to God, to identify their nation with the Israel of the Old Testament—a huge error in interpreting the Bible. More alarming than that, they completely misunderstand who God truly is.

And there are those who “use” (twist) New Testament passages (especially Romans 13) to justify war. Hence, the so-called “just war” theories. Martin Luther went even further when he wrote of “the Divine Right of Kings,” closer to your concern about granting ultimate authority to a human political leader. In essence, using the Bible, Luther argued that kings and monarchs derive their power from God, and are therefore virtually unaccountable to any other earthly power or governing body.

Sadly, many within Christendom have been led down the garden path when they are taught by their churches or denominations that Christ’s mandate for peace is directed at churches but not states.

The truth is that only Jesus Christ is the King of kings. It is not within the purview of Christ-followers to enforce what they believe to be the kingdom of God over others. Jesus is not anyone’s “trump card” to be used to justify tyranny.

As Christ-followers, we may—indeed we must—be a voice that reminds the state that Jesus reigns as Prince of Peace so that our message might serve the peacemaking voice of Jesus. As ambassadors of the King of the kingdom, in the end, we must obey God rather than man. □

See also Greg Albrecht’s article, “One Nation Under God?” in the June, 2018 issue of CWRm.

All are welcome and invited to join us at **CWR audio**, where we believe church is who you are, God's people by God's grace, more than merely a place where you "go."

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- **SICK** of humanly imposed rules and regimens that put behaving ahead of belonging?
- **DONE** with bad experiences with people who called themselves "the church"?

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CWRaudio *Summaries*

August 2018

Where Are You Going? If you don't know where you are going, in all probability you will wind up somewhere else. Where are YOU going and HOW will you arrive at your destination? *Week of August 5.*

The Secret of Being Content Contentment is not gained or achieved, even through the rigors and rituals of religion. Contentment is a gift of God. *Week of August 12.*

Death, Taxes and Being Hacked We can either place our primary trust in earthly treasures or in heavenly treasures, and the process of accumulating and receiving those treasures couldn't be more different. *Week of August 19.*

You Are Not Alone! Christ-followers are never alone. Their faith is centered in Jesus alone and Jesus is always with them and in them. *Week of August 26.*

September 2018

The Grace Café Bruce Springsteen sings, "Everybody's got a hungry heart." There are two places for us to dine, seeking spiritual nourishment: the Grace Café or the Karma Café. *Week of September 2.*

You're Un-invited! If you don't fall down and worship before the golden calf, you will be asked to leave the sacred place of religion. When push comes to shove, religious authorities often excommunicate and disinvite those who follow Jesus Christ. *Week of September 9.*

Why Doesn't God Say or Do Something? While many foresee God making his will known through dramatic "acts of God" he often works in ways we would not expect. He came to Elijah in a whisper, rather than in the powerful wind, earthquake or fire. *Week of September 16.*

Is Anyone Ever Wrong Anymore? The problem with repentance is that no one believes themselves to be wrong, so they think they have nothing to repent of. *Week of September 23.*

It's Hard to Listen When You're Talking It's possible for prayer to become an overwhelming monologue so that we are so busy talking we can't hear or perceive God's answers. *Week of September 30.*