

CWRmagazine

August 2019
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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



Healthy Faith or Toxic Religion?

by Greg Albrecht



**The Gospel: Information
or Transformation?**
by Keith Giles
page 6

You may remember the famous first lines of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. But that's only a fragment of the one long introductory sentence to *A Tale of Two Cities*. Here's the full sentence:

(cont'd on p. 3)

What Our Readers Are Saying...

Volume 10, Number 4
August 2019
www.ptm.org

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

Grateful for Greg

I'm so glad I found Greg Albrecht and *Plain Truth Ministries*. Greg's beliefs, stated in the May 2019 *Plain Truth* article, "Not that Kind of Christian," are exactly what I believe. It is a blessing to be able to have *PTM* and Greg in my life.

Texas

Some time ago Greg Albrecht and I spoke on the phone, prayed together and he sent me two books he wrote—*Unplugging from Religion, Connecting with God* and *A Taste of Grace*. I gave these two books to a good friend of mine who found they truly resonate with *PTM/CWR*.

Is there any way to receive replacement copies of those books? * I want to continue with the teachings of *PTM/CWR* but my friend needs them for his relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ. I just barely make ends meet, but I will do what I can to support *PTM/CWR* by word and financially.

Canada

* Thanks to the support of our *PTM Partners*, we sent two replacement copies of Greg's books as requested. Available at www.ptm.org/books

The Power of God's Love

Thanks for the article, "The Power of God's Love," by Laura Urista in the May 2019 *Plain Truth*. She brought out some helpful points we need to remember about God's love. It can be quite a challenge to recognize value or worth in some people! But with Jesus living in us, God helps us see value in all people, and he enables us to love others as he does. Thanks for the reminder.

California

Brad, I want you to know how much I appreciate you. May you always have a strong system of support to highlight your incredible heart and encourage you in truth.

I pray that the Spirit will refresh you and revive in you the strength to love even your critics while you push on in sharing the good news to the oppressed, broken hearted, captives, blind and foreigners.

Pennsylvania

Dear Readers,



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

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Healthy Faith or Toxic Religion?

Greg Albrecht

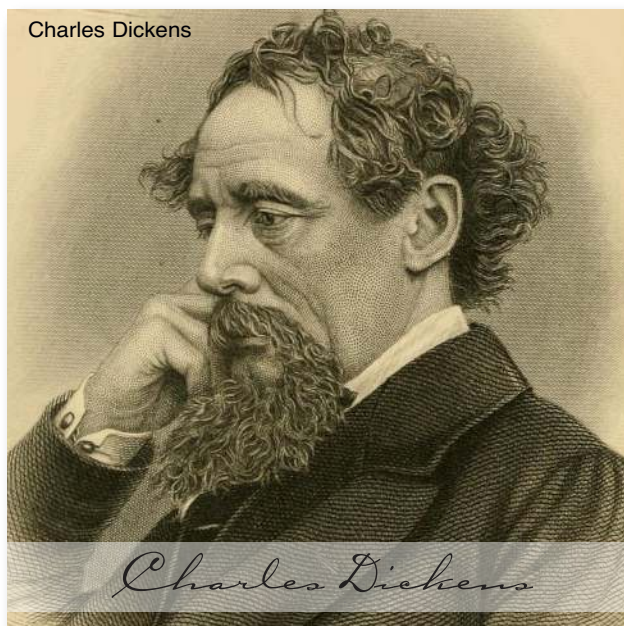
(cont'd from p. 1)

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

A *Tale of Two Cities* is set about 225-240 years ago, in the backdrop of the political/economic/cultural environment in the two cities of London, England and Paris, France, between 1775 and 1790... and Dickens' long introductory sentence is an amazingly accurate description of our world today! Cultural fragmentation, political upheaval, class warfare, racial strife, religious animosity and propaganda ... it all sounds, as the British say, "spot on!"

While there are many culprits for the turmoil and turbulence that defines the "worst of times" in our world today much of the blame can be laid

squarely at the door of religion. Christ-less religion defiles and corrupts authentic faith. Christ-less religion is a breeding ground of pride rather than humility.



Just as a pristine river watered the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:10) so too will "the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal" (Revelation 22:1) flow through the New Jerusalem, in the New Heavens and the New Earth. Sadly, between those bookends of pure, clean spiritual water lies a vast, toxic swamp, filled with the raw sewage of the debris left behind by religion. As we live between the Two Gardens of pure and undefiled faith, symbolized by pure water, we must carefully discriminate between health and toxic faith.

CHRIST-LESS RELIGION

The word "religion" itself, even while it has positive meanings attributed to it, is, at its core, a toxic faith. The etymology of the word goes back to the Latin *religare*—to bind and *religio*—obligation (to the gods). The use of the word "religion" today generally points toward the practices and beliefs individuals accept as being a true definition of what God (or the gods) expects of them.

In its broadest sense *religare* and *religio* span the divides between all

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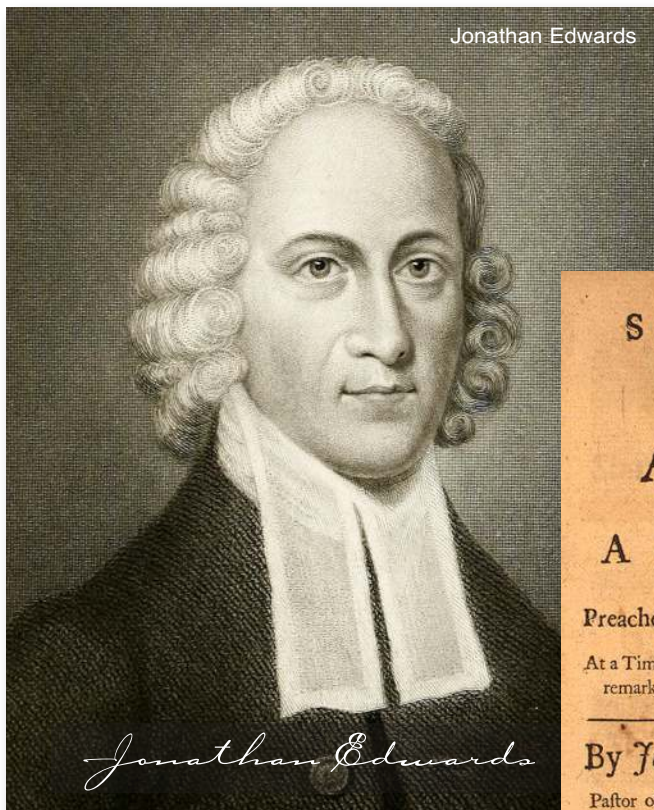
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the world religions. Religion exists, in fact it thrives, within Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Christendom. Christ-less religion is the common denominator, the foundational belief of the overwhelming majority of religious people, regardless of the religious label they adopt. Christ-less religion perceives God (or the gods) as the Divine Being (or beings) who must be pleased and appeased.

Christ-less religion includes churches, denominations and buildings that use the name of Jesus Christ, perhaps often and regularly, but endorse and even enforce toxic faith, rather than healthy faith—which is one of the definitions of Christ-centered faith. Such environments are Christian in name only.



Toxic faith is religious in the sense that religion binds and imprisons its followers in belief systems that control them. Healthy faith is Christ-centered in the sense that it is based on the gospel of Jesus Christ, which, by the grace of God, frees us from religion.

Christ-less religion is a pernicious, lethal belief system based on the premise that humans may begin a positive relationship with God (or

maintain a positive relationship with God) on the basis of human efforts believed to please and appease God.

Christ-less religion is therefore based on the polytheistic, pre-Christian presupposition that the gods must be pleased and appeased. That essential supposition permeates all religion today—including huge chunks of what is popularly called and understood as Christianity.

One might use the word “religion” in a positive and spiritually healthy sense but only if “religion” is qualified such as “Christ-centered religion.” Christ-followers often substitute “faith” for “religion” to speak of their beliefs and practices but even then, it is still necessary to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy/toxic faith.

HEALTHY CHRIST-CENTERED FAITH VERSUS TOXIC CHRIST-LESS RELIGION

1. Healthy, Christ-centered faith is love—for God, above all, IS love.

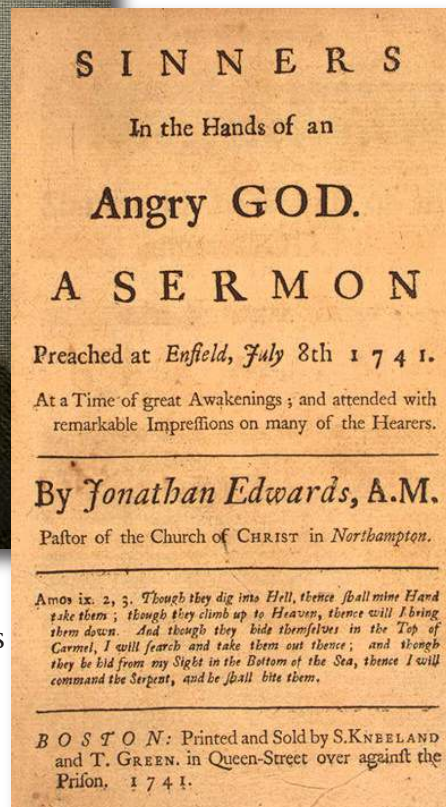
To the degree that our perception of God is

contaminated and corrupted, our faith will be unhealthy and perhaps even toxic. When one’s idea of the nature of God is flawed, then the rest of one’s spiritual house is built on the shifting sands of toxic religion.

Healthy faith experiences God as love, while unhealthy faith perceives God as wrathful, angry, cold, distant and harsh. Toxic faith perceives and proclaims God to be a taskmaster who loves his law more than he does his children—a God who enslaves and punishes.

One of the most corrupt pictures of God ever was preached in a

sermon titled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” The pastor who preached this sermon was named **Jonathan Edwards**, and to



this day his sermon is celebrated by many within Christendom as one of the most powerful, inspiring sermons ever given. Edwards described individuals consigned to hell as hanging over hell precariously, like a spider on a thread.

Here's a brief quote: *Thus it is that natural men are held in the hand of God, over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it, and God is dreadfully provoked...*

the devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them...

My friends—that is not God. *God is not a monster!* If you believe he is, chances are your faith is unhealthy, perhaps even toxic. **God is exactly like Jesus.** If you are trapped by images of a monster God, ask God to reveal himself to you as he is.

2. Healthy, Christ-centered faith is just that—centered and focused on Jesus Christ. Healthy faith has Jesus and the grace, mercy and love of God at its core. The Prince of Peace is himself a river of living water (John 7:37-38), the spiritual Bread from heaven (John 6:37) and our healing Savior who leads us to his rest.

Whereas healthy faith is Christ-centered, unhealthy faith is centered on regulations and rituals, on formulas, traditions and ceremonies. Unhealthy faith (Christ-less religion) is often built on the teachings of a man or a woman who founded a religion. Unhealthy faith may use and appropriate the name of Jesus, while denying who he is. Sadly, in many cases Christ-less religion uses the name of God for human prestige, power, and profit.



John Martin - "Sodom and Gomorrah 1852"

“Nothing good can ever come from a theology build on fear—a theology that so often quickly disintegrates into hate.”

The opposite of healthy faith is of course unhealthy faith, but we must also realize that the opposite of faith is not lack of faith. The opposite of faith is

fear. We see so much religious fear in our world today—religious fundamentalism, radicalized faith, distorted and perverted faith—and those radical expressions, whether at the far left or far right are theologies built on fear.

Nothing good can ever or has ever come from a theology built on fear—a theology that so often quickly disintegrates into hate.

3. Healthy, Christ-centered faith is driven and fueled by God's grace.

Whereas healthy faith is based on God's grace, unhealthy, toxic faith is based on laws and legalisms—within healthy faith one is free in Christ, and finds rest in Christ and experiences the peace of God.

On the other hand, captives of toxic faith are never good enough, never work hard enough and are never able to reach the standards imposed by Christ-less religion. Toxic faith is characterized by programs, procedures and prescriptions.

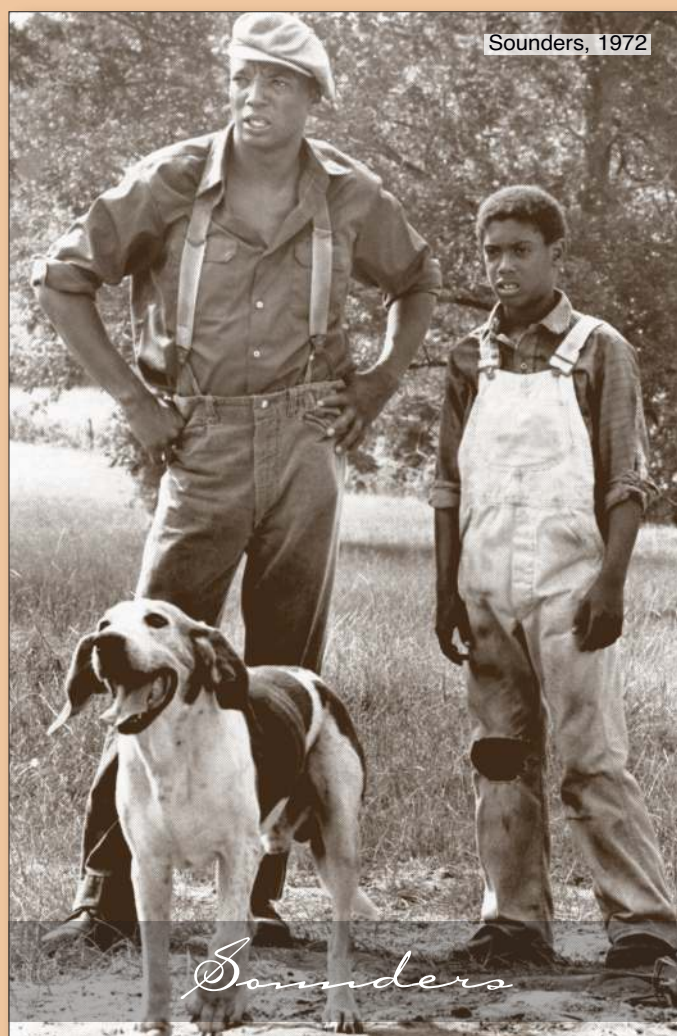
Healthy, Christ-centered faith never inflicts harm and hurt, while unhealthy, Christ-less faith/religion persecutes and wars against all who dare to disagree. Toxic faith is at war with anyone or any system of faith that disagrees with it,

enslaving all those who follow it. Toxic faith is about controlling all who are unfortunate enough to come into contact with it.

In the 1972 movie "Sounder," a black family is depicted as they lived in 1933 Louisiana—in the middle of the Depression and in the middle of the American South long before civil rights. A black man and his son are walking by a segregated church.

The boy says to his father, "Daddy, I ain't never been in that church."

His father replied, "That's okay, Son. Jesus ain't never been in there neither." □



Greg Albrecht is the director of Plain Truth Ministries. You can hear Greg's weekly sermons on CWR audio online at www.ptm.org/cwr-teaching-ministry.

THE GOSPEL:

KEITH GILES

Knowing God is pretty important. In fact, according to Jesus, knowing God is eternal life.

"Now this is eternal life: to know God and His Son whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

But is this "knowing" a reference to gaining the right information about God? Is it about having knowledge? Or is it something more than that?

The word Jesus uses here for "to know" in the Greek is "ginosko" which maps to the same word used in the Hebrew scriptures for the way a husband "knew" his wife in an intimate, sexual way.

In other words, this "knowing" is less like studying for a test and more like connecting on a physical, spiritual and emotional level with God Almighty.

To "know God and his Son" in this way involves an ongoing, daily relationship with him that many would consider a little bit scandalous.

Nevertheless, we are expected to have an intimacy with God that conceives something within us, and that "something" is new life.

This means that knowing God is more about transformation than information.

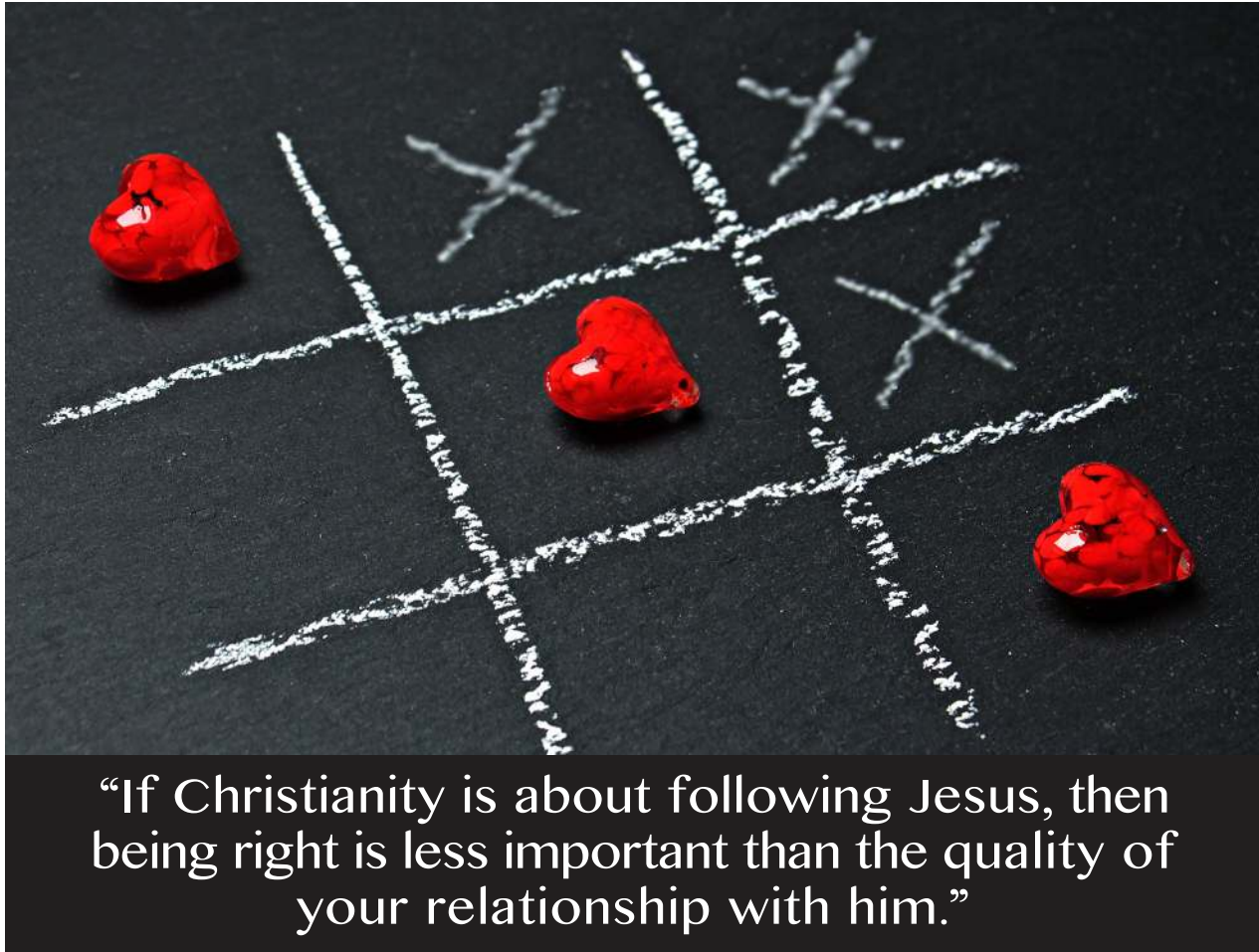
Here's something else about knowing God that you might find interesting:

"No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27).

So, the best way to know God is to know Jesus, and the best way to know Jesus is to listen to his voice, spend time with him and start putting his words into practice.

Let me ask you: "Do you think of the gospel as being more about having the right information about God? Or do you see it as being more about

INFORMATION OR TRANSFORMATION?



“If Christianity is about following Jesus, then being right is less important than the quality of your relationship with him.”

the transformation we experience as we learn to abide in Christ?”

You might be tempted to think that it's both, or that it really doesn't matter how you think of the Gospel, but I believe it matters a great deal.

SALVATION = RIGHT INFORMATION?

For example, if we think of the gospel as mainly information, then we become lawyers and modern Pharisees who argue semantics and debate doctrine. Salvation is seen as having the right information—the right beliefs and doctrines, in the right order.

Those who have different information than we do are heretics. Those who accept our information are “saved” and those who don't are either not truly Christians or their salvation is in question.

But Jesus speaks of a gospel that is based on an intimate relationship with himself. He talks about the gospel as being primarily about transformation, not mere information.

He proclaims the Good News (gospel) of the Kingdom by urging everyone to “think different” (*metanoia* in the Greek, usually translated as “Repent!”).

He points out that it's impossible for a bad tree to produce good fruit and that if you don't first "make the tree good" you'll never produce good fruit.

Through the Gospel, Jesus makes us good trees who can produce the good fruit of righteousness which is pleasing to God (see Matthew 12:33).

Jesus says that life in the Kingdom comes when we "know God and the Christ whom he has sent" (John 17:3).

But remember: that word translated "know" is not about information. It's the same word used to say that "Adam *knew* Eve" and that involves an intimacy; a way of knowing that conceives new life within.

So, we are called to "know God" and to "know Christ" in an intimate way that conceives a new life within us; the same new life of the Kingdom that comes only as we abide in him and he in us. That's a relationship where we are daily learning to love Him more as we come to "know this love that surpasses knowledge" and become "filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19).

INTIMATE RELATION, NOT JUST INFORMATION

Now, *if* the gospel is merely information, then we don't need a relationship with a living person who transforms us. Just give me the information and I'll study it and memorize it and enforce the proper communication of that information.

But if the gospel is about a transforming relationship with a vibrant, fantastic being of light and love, then we will certainly receive information about him, but this will go far beyond mere data and exponentially transcend human knowledge to explode into an intimacy that conceives something new within.

Jesus wants to change us. He wants us to become

more like himself. We should desire that, too. The way we are transformed into his image is to immerse ourselves in him and surrender ourselves completely to him so that he can make us into the good trees that bear good fruit.

"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

Another problem with thinking of the gospel as having the right information is that it can lead us

to place the importance of being right above the command to love others as Jesus has loved us.

See, if Christianity is about being right then it's easier to justify cutting off those people you don't agree with. Because, if you see Christianity as a quest for "rightness" then being wrong is the greatest sin of all.

However, if you see Christianity as following Jesus, then being right is less important than the quality of your relationship with him.

Relationships are messy.

They're not about correctness or accuracy. No one measures their relationships in such terms. Instead, we gauge the health of our relationships based on how open our communication is, and how honest we can be with one another, and how much time we spend together.

Jesus also connects our obedience to his commands with our love for him. It's all through the Gospel of John, especially in John 14.

LOVING OTHERS AS CHRIST LOVES US

He also equates our love for him with how we love one another. If we love one another as he has loved us—which is one of his commands—then we are loving Him by our obedience, and by being obedient we are loving others, too.

Elsewhere, Jesus connects our horizontal



**"The kingdom comes when we
'know God and the Christ whom
he has sent' (John 17:3)."**

relationships with our vertical one towards God. He tells us that we should go and reconcile with our brother before we return to complete our acts of worship.

And the Apostle John pushes it further by saying that if we claim to love God but don't love our brothers and sisters, we're just liars.

So, what should we learn from this? Perhaps that our interpersonal relationships don't need to hinge on agreement with one another.

I can love someone who has the wrong ideas about doctrine. I can fellowship with a brother who sees things differently than I do. I can extend grace to a sister who calls me a heretic.

Are they wrong? Maybe. But perhaps I'm the one who is off base? Until we know for sure, our main goal should be to love one another as Christ has loved us.

Nowhere in the Bible do we get the idea that the gospel is merely about having the correct information.

Instead, it's about having a

transformational relationship with Jesus.

This relationship involves abiding in Christ as He abides in us. Through this process, our sinful self is daily crucified and our spiritual self—the “new creature”—is brought to life within us.

It's a constant exchange of death for life where the resurrection power of Christ is increasingly revealed in us and transforming us into people who are like him.

So, in summary, if the gospel is about having the right information, then being right is everything.

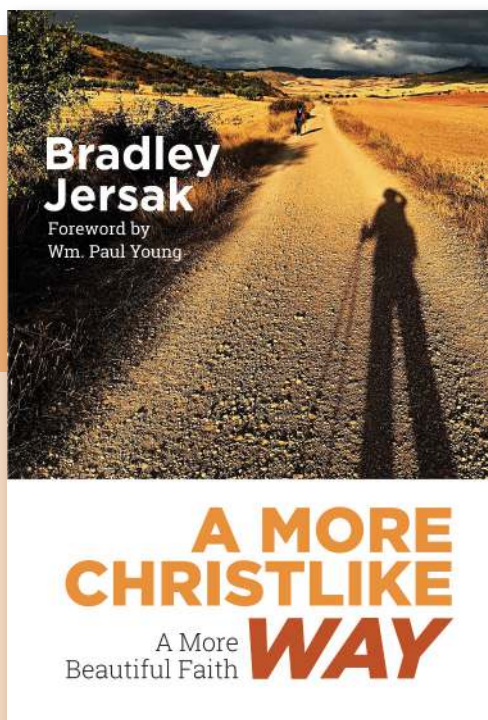
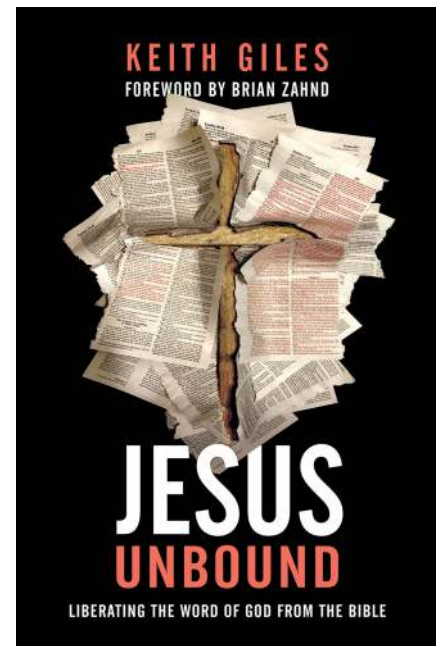
But, if the gospel is about transformation, then being Christlike is everything. Let go of the need to “be right” and begin to embrace the reality of Christ's transformational life in you!

Remember: We're all in process. None of us is right about everything. Thankfully, we don't need to be. We just have to keep abiding in Him. That's where the transformation begins. □

Keith Giles was an ordained minister who walked away from organized church 11 years ago. He started a home fellowship in Southern California that gave away 100% of the offering to the poor in the community.

Today, Keith and his wife help start new faith communities as they await their next adventure.

This article is excerpted from Keith's new book Jesus Unbound: Liberating the Word of God from the Bible (available on Amazon).



Coming Soon!

A MORE CHRISTLIKE WAY

In this sequel to *A More Christlike God*, Brad Jersak explores the *Jesus Way* of cruciform love. After recollecting the Christlike God of triune love and his Way of the Cross, the author offers alternative metaphors to “deconstruction” and critiques four common counterfeits to the *Jesus Way*. He then describes seven facets of a more Christlike Way:

- ❖ Facet 1 – Radical Self-giving
- ❖ Facet 2 – Radical Hospitality
- ❖ Facet 3 – Radical Unity
- ❖ Facet 4 – Radical Recovery
- ❖ Facet 5 – Radical Peacemaking / Radical Forgiveness
- ❖ Facet 6 – Radical Surrender
- ❖ Facet 7 – Radical Compassion / Radical Justice

And finally, Jersak closes with “A More Beautiful Vision: Abba's ‘I have a dream speech’” from the messianic kingdom prophecies of Isaiah.

QUESTION:

“Is Christ IN all people or is Christ only IN Christians or only in some Christians?”

RESPONSE:

A good number of Scriptures refer *exclusively* to Christian believers as being “*in Christ*.” But there is also another set of texts—*inclusive* passages that say Christ united himself to *all* humanity.

Both Scripture sets are true. They are simply referring to different truths. Simply put, some Scriptures define our *Being* (all are *in Christ* through the Incarnation) and others describe our *Relationship* (not all relate to Christ by faith).

If Christ united himself to *all* humanity, is he *IN all*, or is Christ only *IN some*—in those who unite themselves to him by faith? Asked another way, are *all* “saved” but just don’t know it yet? Or are we only “saved” when we respond to Christ? And there the debate rages (sometimes with actual rage!).

The impasse boils down to our age-old propensity for literalizing metaphors, then stumbling over them. It’s only a problem when we think “IN” and “OUT” are literal locations rather than spatial metaphors.

“IN Christ” and “Christ IN you” are metaphors, my friends! Or rather, a whole set of metaphors used in various ways in the Bible—and not uniformly!

Having “Christ IN you” or being “IN Christ” can mean



“Is Christ in all people or only in Christians?”

different things in different contexts. You can have Christ *IN all* in one passage and Christ *IN Christians* in another.

The following categories help distinguish five types of biblical *IN*-ness:

1. UNION/INCLUSION

This refers to the union of the Triune God to the human race in the Person of Jesus Christ. Passages such as Romans 5, 1 Corinthians 15 and Colossians 1 overtly describe how the Incarnation of Christ includes *all* humanity in his work of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Paul says, “*As in Adam ALL die, so in Christ, ALL are made alive*” (1 Corinthians 15:22).

These Scriptures describe how Christ’s universal saving act effects the human race, overcoming and exceeding the curse of Adam. “IN” in these cases speaks to being within the

intentions and effects of God’s saving love—so high, wide, long and deep that it encompasses *all*. This truth needs special renewed attention today.

That said, alongside the all-inclusive embrace of Christ’s cosmic union, we have many other categories of “IN-ness” in the New Testament. While Christ is *IN all* via Christ’s saving work—at least four other “IN/OUT” metaphors are contingent on our response and thus narrower in scope than universal inclusion. Remember, these are metaphors!

2. IDENTIFICATION/ FELLOWSHIP

Just as Christ’s identification with us takes us “into him” (that is, an open door to relationship), so our identification with Christ welcomes him “into us” (into our lives, our mess, our business). Identification treats “IN” not as a place such as my “heart” but as a

description of how I relate to Christ.

Example: Paul, addressing Christians, says: *"I pray that out of his glorious riches Abba may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell IN your hearts through faith"* (Ephesians 3:16-17).

What? Isn't Christ in every heart? Yes, by the Incarnation. Or at least every believer's heart? Yes. By identification. But Paul is suggesting a more specific type of indwelling—through a greater revelation of *Abba's* love by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

The focus on Love and the Trinity in Ephesians 3 describes a kind of "indwelling" of *ever-deepening fellowship*. We come to experience the presence of *Abba's* constant habitation rather than perceiving him as a fleeting Visitor. The revelation of God's love in Christ by the Spirit changes our perspective—that God is not "out there" but "in here"—IN us.

3. AFFECTION/INTIMACY

"Asking Jesus into my heart" has become an increasingly scorned phrase. If Christ is *IN us*, asking him in is redundant. But hang on—it's also a biblical phrase that describes our *affections*.

As a younger athlete, I didn't want competitors to "get into my head." Conversely, as a husband, I definitely want to allow my wife "into my heart."

Similarly, Paul assures the Philippians that even in chains, he carries them *IN his heart* (Philippians 1:7). That is, he remembers his fellowship with

them with joy and affection.

The same holds true of Christ. Inviting Christ IN means welcoming his intimate fellowship. Not all Christ-followers remember this. That's why Revelation 3:20 is addressed to a church. *"If anyone invites me IN, I will come IN, and dine with them and they with me."* IN here describes our experience of active intimacy with the One who's already IN us.

4. ATTENTION/PRAYER/WORSHIP

We also carry someone IN our hearts by remembering them. In the case of Christ, we do this in prayer as we behold Christ on the throne of our hearts. We come before the throne of grace IN our hearts to pray to *Abba* and worship Christ.

"Just as Christ's identification with us takes us 'into him,' so our identification with Christ welcomes him 'into us.'"

News flash: The throne in your heart is not an actual golden chair upon which Christ sits in one of your ventricles! It's a metaphor for eternal life as the internal life. It represents Christ's reign IN us and our internal loving gaze on him.

5. FULLNESS/MATURITY

Being *filled* is a related container metaphor. Paul's letters speak of being *filled with the Spirit* or attaining *the fullness of Christ*. He describes the goal of the church's 5-fold ministry:

"...to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ

may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12-13).

Here, the *fullness* of Christ's indwelling presence is not measured with a dipstick or expressed in terms of quantity. Fullness is a metaphor for maturity and completeness—where we are recognized as *Abba's* children by the image of his Son manifest IN our lives.

SUMMARY

All that to say, let's not get so hung up on spatial metaphors such as "IN vs. OUT" or "FAR vs. NEAR"—as if God were not omnipresent. By his Spirit, God's presence dwells in all places and fills all thing. He is the One "in

whom we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

At the same time, let's not miss the truth of these metaphors:

- As Creator, God is Father of us *all* and IN us *all*.
- As Savior, Christ has included *all* IN him by his saving work.
- Let us ALL therefore come to recognize *Abba's* love, that we might ALL receive Christ's salvation and ALL be filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit. □

Brad Jersak is the author of A More Christlike God and its forthcoming sequel, A More Christlike Way.

The Bible's True Purpose

is to make you feel good about yourself (just kidding)

Pete Enns

From where I stand, the Bible's true purpose is more than supplying spiritual information to be downloaded. It holds out for us an invitation to join an ancient, well-traveled, and sacred quest to know God, the world we live in, and our place in it. Not abstractly, but intimately and experientially.

A quest—meaning this is going to take some time and effort. No “Have a Great Spiritual Life in Five Easy Steps!”

After all, if the Bible's true purpose were to provide us with simple information about what God is like and what God wants from us, then why can the Bible be so easily used to:

- Justify both slavery and its abolition?
- Justify both keeping women subordinate to men and fully emancipating them?
- Justify violence against one's enemies and condemn it?
- Justify political power and denounce it?

The Bible, it seems to me, was never intended to work as a step-by-step instructional manual.

Rather, it presents us with an invitation to explore.

Or better, the Bible, simply by being its ancient, ambiguous, and diverse self, blocks us from the simple path of seeking from it clear answers and rather herds us toward a more subtle, interesting, and above all, sacred quest.

THE GIFT OF WISDOM

That quest is summed up in one beautiful, deep, too often neglected, but absolutely central and liberating biblical idea that shapes everything I have to say in this book: wisdom.

Wisdom isn't some secret key available only to an elite few, but the exact opposite. Wisdom is a gift from God, liberally available to all. It is, as we'll see, a “part” of God that saturates every square inch of the world around us and at the same time invades even the hidden places of our heart, those things we like to keep from others, in order to mold and form us into mature children of God.

To put it in Christian terms, wisdom is what forms us to be

“Shepherding us toward wisdom, kicking and screaming if need be: that is the Bible's purpose.”

pamphlet. The Bible isn't just going to hand us the goods.

I'm not suggesting that the Bible doesn't provide us with any information to enlighten and inspire us or any answers to help mark our path. It does. I only mean that it also provides us with another kind of information, too often brushed aside, that (appreciate the irony) shows us that “providing information” and “giving answers” is not the Bible's true purpose.

Both sides of these (and many other) issues have been embraced with uncompromising passion throughout the course of history by real people, convinced they were simply following the Bible's “clear teaching.” But if polar opposite positions can keep claiming the Bible's support, then perhaps providing “clear teaching” might not be what scripture is prepared to do. Just throwing that out there.

more like Jesus, who, as the apostle Paul put it, became for us wisdom from God (1 Corinthians 1:30).

the Bible were a teacher's edition textbook with the answers supplied in the back. Wisdom is about the lifelong process of

Rule-book answers are immediate, but wisdom takes trial and error over time.

Rule-book answers provide comfort and stability, but wisdom asks us to risk letting go of what is familiar for God's surprises.

Rule-book answers are designed to end the journey, but wisdom shapes us so we journey with courage and peace.

Rule-book answers are limited to specific moments, but wisdom works in all times and places.

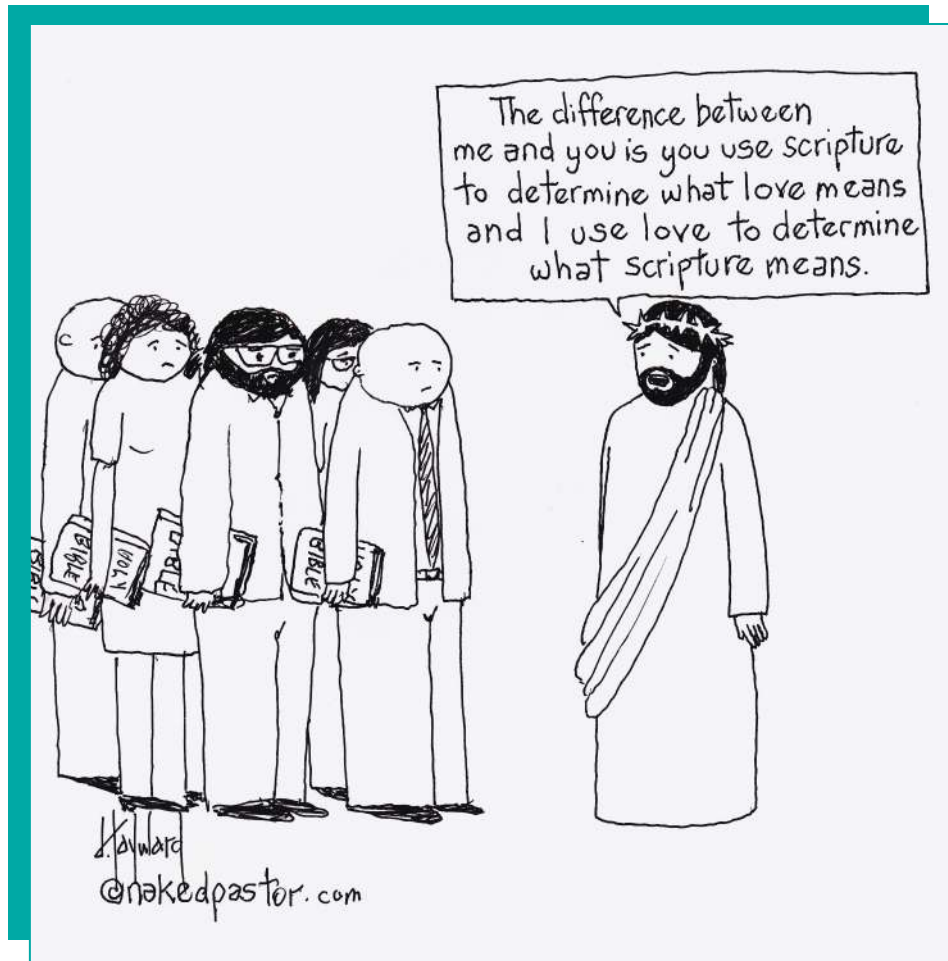
Rule-book answers keep us small, but wisdom gives us the space we need to grow.

Embracing rather than avoiding the Bible's antiquity, ambiguity, and diversity is like shining a light in a dark room, showing us that the Bible is a book of wisdom rather than prescribed answers, and inviting us to accept the sacred responsibility of pursuing wisdom and thereby learning to live well in God's creation.

The path of wisdom isn't a bigger and better "answer," another version of the same quest for certainty. It's a shift in attitude, a new posture for a lifelong journey of letting go of the need for such things. □

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His most recent book is titled How the Bible Actually Works: In Which I Explain How an Ancient, Ambiguous and Diverse Book Leads Us to Wisdom Rather than Answers and Why That's Great News.



Shepherding us toward wisdom, kicking and screaming if need be: that is the Bible's purpose.

The Bible becomes a confusing mess when we expect it to fulfill some other purpose—like functioning as an owner's manual for faith. But when we allow the Bible to determine our expectations, we see that intending to gain wisdom is our proper spiritual posture toward it.

Wisdom isn't about flipping to a topical index so we can see what we are to do or think—as if

being formed into mature disciples, who wander well along the unscripted pilgrimage of faith, in tune to the all-surrounding thick presence of the Spirit of God in us and in the creation around us.

WISDOM OR RULE-BOOK ANSWERS?

Rule-book answers deliver certitude and finality, but wisdom embraces mystery.

Rule-book answers are distant and passive, but wisdom is intimate and learned through experience.

**CWRm****BRAD JERSAK****PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE**

Three Visions of Salvation

Salvation (Greek: *soterion*) is a term found in Luke 2:20; 3:6; Acts 28:28; Ephesians 6:17 and Titus 2:11).

Do you remember back when God's people all agreed about what "salvation" meant and how it is achieved?

Me neither.

But amid the roiling ocean of competing interpretations, we do discern currents—popular themes surface through the cacophony and congeal into doctrinal streams.

Allow me to identify three perspectives on salvation that compete for our attention and form our practices. Since one's image of salvation affects our real life of faith and prayer, it's worth pondering.

1. TRANSACTIONAL SALVATION

Formula: "If you _____, then God will save you."

Metaphors: Legal contract or economic deal-making.

Theological Uses: Atonement theory, revivalism, intercession.

Salvation is transactional when viewed through legal or economic metaphors in which God is viewed as a judge whose justice needs to be satisfied or a creditor who needs to be paid.

In atonement theory, the two metaphors are typically combined as a debt paid through punishment. Only on

receipt of this debt is God willing, able and just to forgive.

Transactional religion makes sense in the context of "old covenant" blessings and curses (e.g. Deuteronomy 28). If we're good, God pays us back with blessings. When we are bad, God pays us back with curses. Because we were not good enough, Jesus had to pay God off with obedience and God had to pay Jesus back with punishment. By satisfying both God's commands and God's wrath, Jesus frees God to forgive humankind. But *only if* they repent and believe (another transaction).

From beginning to end, transactional religion makes us the subject and God the object. We're the actors and God is the reactor. Transactional salvation is a mechanistic, legal fiction where even "grace" and "forgiveness" are dividends contingent on a successful transaction.

For much of Christian history, transactional religion attained dominance, whether through Catholic indulgences, forensic atonement theories or revivalist preaching. But having been thoroughly burned by bad trips through transactional salvation, reformers through the centuries have pushed back with an emphasis on grace that

transcends deal-making and makes God the primary subject, sometimes to a fault. This leads us to our next vision of salvation:

2. UNILATERAL SALVATION

Formula: "God saves you and you do nothing."

Metaphor: Resurrection.

Theological Uses: Grace alone, "finished work," unconditional election.

Augustine of Hippo (400AD) and the great Reformers (16th century) saw through the perils of transactional religion that make one's salvation and assurance dependent on our own goodness or faith. They saw how human efforts to amass merits to pay down the debt of sin or pay off God with good deeds consistently lead to deluded self-righteousness or spiritual anxiety and despair.

They rightly preached that salvation begins and ends with God. They saw that God's love and forgiveness precede our response. God alone initiates every saving work prior to our faith or love for him. Christ died for us (or at least "the elect" ... uh oh!) while we are yet sinners.

Their foundational metaphor is found in Ephesians 2:1-5:

"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ... by nature deserving of wrath. But

because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved."

The "unilateralists" reasoned that all humanity is born dead—a mass of buried corpses, rotting in one global cemetery. Dead people cannot save themselves. They cannot even respond to God. If they rise, it will only be because God in his mercy sovereignly resurrects *some* from the spiritual grave. Any response of faith is nothing more than obedience to God's command that we arise and come forth from the tomb.

Who saves us? In transactional religion, somehow it always came down to us. But in grace alone salvation, Christ is the sole author and finisher of our faith. Our salvation was totally up to him—and he did it! "It is finished!"

"Grace alone" salvation provides a necessary pushback to transactional religion. That said, in our reactivity to "salvation by works" and by totalizing one biblical metaphor, we are prone to stumbling into new errors.

Consider: If salvation is God's unilateral act, we don't move one spiritual muscle in the salvation process—we mustn't! Unilateral salvation suspects any expectation of a response to God's love as a legalistic obligation and dead works.

The collateral damage of this perspective is that authentic freedom, trust and love aren't really involved—either in the fall or in our salvation. We're born dead and come to life only if Jesus says so. While unilateral grace is a great gulp of fresh air to those smothered in transactional religion, it's always in danger of negating the necessary ingredients to every real relationship: freedom, trust and love—in other words, a "reciprocal relationship of willing love."

3. RECIPROCAL SALVATION

Formula: "We love God because God first loved us."

Metaphors: Patriarchal or marriage covenants of divine caregiving and mutual faithfulness.

Theological uses: Freely given, mutually responsive love between the Father and Son (the Incarnation) and between Christ and his bride (covenant).

A common mistaken notion is that God's "covenants" are legal contracts. No, the covenant metaphor describes God's relationship to his people as a spousal relationship. Within that metaphor, God is forever the faithful spouse, idolatry is spiritual adultery and exile is estrangement. The "new covenant" signifies our reconciliation to the heavenly Husband (as in Hosea's prophetic marriage to an unfaithful wife).

God's unfailing love and faithfulness are truly unilateral but our relationship with God was obviously never meant to be one-sided. *God alone saves us but that salvation establishes a reciprocal relationship that is intrinsic to salvation.* Now, "We love him because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

When viewed through the prism of covenant monogamy and willing affection, the ravished bride of Song of Solomon demonstrates this reciprocal love. She's nothing like Lady Hillingdon, whose 1912 journal says, "When I hear his steps outside my door I lie down on my bed, open my legs and think of England."

Yes, the "Savior work" rested entirely in Christ's (the Bridegroom's) hands. But this salvation was FOR something—we "married into" a reciprocal relationship of willing love.

Salvation is more than a wedding already accomplished for us—it's the fullness of an active marriage in which we're participants. It's not just that we *were united* to Christ but that we *are now in union* with him. Christ is more than a wedding day bridegroom—he's our eternal Husband!

"Finished work" salvation rightly points to all Christ forever accomplished at the Cross. It emphasizes our new identity in Christ. But let's not understate how our spousal union to Christ (present and continuous) is the reason, the context and the ongoing blossoming of our salvation. Salvation is an ongoing marital relationship to Christ.

I understand sensitivities to transactional religion that led to our grace-alone commitment. I am also pressing us to see that grace-alone salvation leads to a reciprocal relationship in which a responsive bride is the norm and her loving faithfulness is not condemned as works. In short, salvation bears this fruit: "We love because he first loved us." □

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