

PLAIN TRUTH[®]

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

What Is and Who Is the Church?

By Greg Albrecht

The visible church is all the people who get together from time to time in God's name. Anybody can find out who they are by going to look.

The invisible church is all the people God uses for his hands and feet in the world. Nobody can find out who they are except God.

Think of them as two circles. The optimist says they are concentric. The cynic says they don't even touch. The realist says they occasionally overlap.
—Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*

What is the church? Many would say it's obvious WHAT the church is. When one sees a sign in front of a building that identifies it as a church, or when one sees distinctive architecture, with, in many cases,

stained glass windows, or even more commonly, a steeple and a cross on the top, then that's a church.

Is the church accurately recognized as a self-identified and/or distinctive building?

Is it possible to post a sign identifying a building as a department store when in fact the building is a barn for horses and cattle? Is it possible to assume that a building whose architecture might lead us to assume it is a bank is actually a doctor's office?

Who is the church? Many would say it's obvious WHO the church is. They say a building is WHAT the church is and the people who attend and frequent that building is WHO it is.

Can we conclude (as many do) that Christians are Christians only if (and perhaps when) they are in a church

inside

Break It Up p2

My Two "Moms" p5

Buzzy p7

Quotes & Connections p8

building? Does it conversely follow that all those people inside the church building are Christians, just because they are physically present?

Can someone be a Christ-follower if they never attend an appropriate, recognized or approved building on a regular basis? Can someone be or remain a part of the church—the body of Christ—without attending a building?

It's been said that one can sit and stand in the barn for weeks on end, but standing in the barn will not turn one into a horse or a cow. You can go and sit with the chickens and learn to cackle like a

chicken but being around chickens will not transform you into a chicken.

The Body of Christ

In 1 Corinthians chapter 12, Paul speaks of the church as the body of Christ, and he embellishes and extends this metaphor through an examination of the human body.

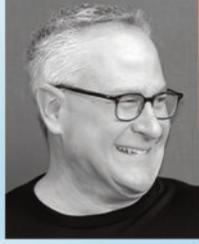
He makes two key points:

1) The body (both physical and spiritual), though one, is made up of many parts:

...there are many parts, but one body (1 Corinthians 12:20).

Within Christendom some churches believe they are the true church. They don't believe they are "a" church and thus part of "the" church. They say they are

Continued on page 3



Break It Up

We received a distressing email from our Mom the other day. Both the tone and the content of her words as we read them on the screen were uncharacteristic, and alarmed my brothers, sisters and me to the point where we needed to pick up our phones.

Over a series of calls placed at different times from different coasts, we needed to check in with her and make sure she was okay.

Our Mom's message expressed a deep concern for everything that has been taking place in our nation of late. The political divides, the racial divides, the economic divides, and the fact that no one seems to be listening to anyone else, anymore, were all pressing issues of great concern to her.

She lamented how far we've gone as a country, so fast, and that, not in a positive or productive direction. She then went on to worry about the world her grandchildren would inherit, and what chance, if any, they might have to make a difference in their lives, and in the lives of others. Each thought she expressed conveyed that she was completely and deeply serious.

I know my Mom to be a realist. Better said, I know her to be an optimistic realist. But with all that has been shifting and colliding all at once these days, I also know she spends far more time than she once did in front of her favorite television, in front of her favorite news and news-related programming. "Um...Mom, I have an opinion...if you would care to

hear it," I offered cautiously after we'd spoken for ten minutes or so.

"Sure son, what would that be?"

Trying not to come across as a "know-it-all" type of son, I suggested, respectfully, that maybe it would be okay to *break it up*, to unplug for a bit and turn off the news at various points throughout the day. I suggested that the news

As Christ-followers, Jesus reminds us that, "...in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, NIV).

is quite often negative, by design, and wants to keep us, not only glued to it, but in a constant state of fear and negativity.

I encouraged her to "pick up a great book again, listen to some beautiful music or watch an old favorite classic movie."

I did stop short of appropriating a quote from William Shakespeare and passing it off as a direct reference to our 21st century American media: "It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Although Shakespeare's quote may be how I see the noise the media loves to create around us, I realize I may not speak for her, or for anyone else for that matter.

Regardless of our political leanings, whether Republican, Democrat or Independent, liberal or conservative, the news and news-related programming never

seems to stop pushing its agenda. The media thrives in a time like this, a time where there is never a shortage of content to cover. So often, the content is downbeat and downright sad.

So often the media tends to focus on the problems, and not nearly enough on positive and creative solutions. I know for me, I've had to *break it up*, and at times, just turn it all off.

It can all be far too much to handle. It can be far too much to manage. That doesn't mean we don't keep in touch and remain aware of what's going on in the world around us.

We do. We need to.

But we can do so in a way that serves both ourselves and the real and honest challenges we face. We can *break it up*, unplug from time-to-time, and respond from a place that's not rooted in fear or negativity.

As Christ-followers, Jesus reminds us that, "...in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 NIV).

That's for sure—and that's a great and reassuring comfort to us.

In Christ, we can come from that place of peace, from that place of comfort, no matter what the news media may be covering, and no matter how they may be doing so.

When we do stay in touch and keep up with what is happening around us, we can do so from our rest in him. □

—Ed Dunn

Continued from page 1

THE church—the “only true church”—and feel justified attacking, belittling and even trying to destroy *other* parts of the body of Christ.

In the context of such arrogant institutions, I use the term “*other*” generously, because if an entity that claims to be part of the body of Christ is actually attacking other churches, then can we believe them to be part of the body?

A healthy part of the body of Christ does not attack its own body. The hand does not try to cut off toes from the foot, the foot does not kick the shin or the knee of the other leg, hoping to damage it. That would be spiritual mutilation of the body of Christ.

When a group of people who call themselves a church relentlessly attacks and demeans and belittles “*other*” churches, then one has to wonder if they really are part of the body of Christ.

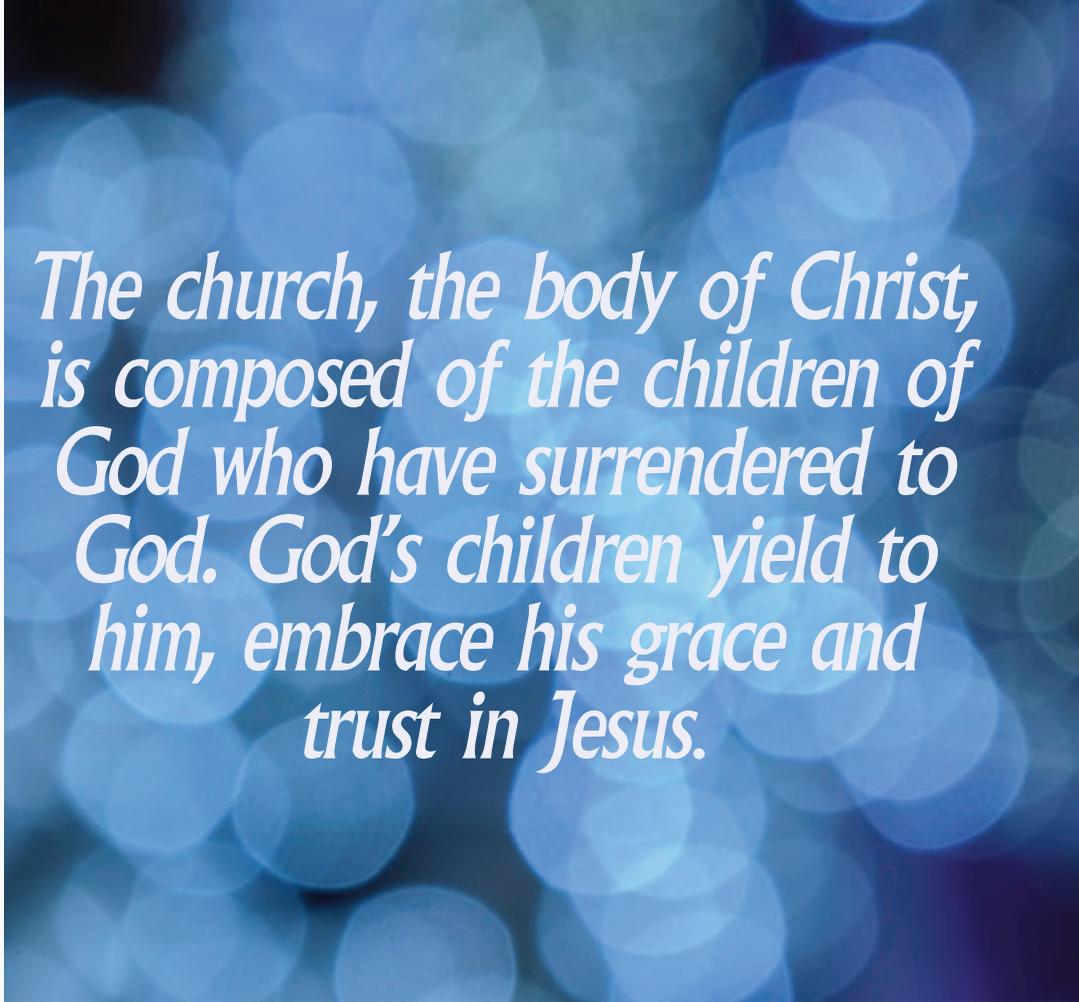
2) God has arranged the parts of the human body and of the spiritual body of Christ:

“But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, everyone of them, just as he wanted them to be”
(1 Corinthians 12:18).

Can someone who is not pleased that others are also a part of the body of Christ be a part of his body if he/she is not willing to accept and give honor to other parts of his body?

It pleases God to have many parts in the body of Christ, just as it pleases him for each of us to have many parts in our human bodies. Paul says God has actually *arranged* many parts of the body of Christ, so if someone, individually or collectively, is saying that other parts of the body have no right to exist, or they are inferior in some way, might they be taking issue with an *arrangement* that pleases God?

One of the central, core



The church, the body of Christ, is composed of the children of God who have surrendered to God. God's children yield to him, embrace his grace and trust in Jesus.

traditional and historical beliefs of Christianity that has stood the test of time is what is generically called ***the universal church***. The universal church transcends all definitions, specifications and limitations humans might place upon it.

The universal church, by its very nature, is known and unknown to humans—it is visible but more than that, it is invisible. For as many Christ-followers we know, there are so many we do not.

What Is and Who Is the Church, the Body of Christ? Four Points to Remember

1) The church, the body of Christ, is composed of the children of God who have surrendered to God:

God's children yield to him, embrace his grace and trust in Jesus. God's children are new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). God's transformed children surrender the illusion of the power and authority that religion claims

to have over people to regulate and enforce behavior.

2) The church, the body of Christ, might be found in geographical places and in specific buildings, or it may not be:

For the first three centuries after Jesus, those who wanted to join together with other Christians for fellowship, prayer and Christ-centered discussion did so, but NEVER in a building that was designated, defined or described as a church.

For some 300 years after Jesus no one went to church, in terms of going to a building that was solely dedicated to being a church, because there were no such things as church buildings.

For some 300 years, Christ-followers met together in a wide variety of places—including by the side of a river or in someone's house. In a similar way, today, we can and we do, meet together in a wide variety of places (including online!) as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The body of Christ is not exclusively in one place to the exclusion of another. Jesus transcends doctrinal and geographical walls of separation (Ephesians 2:11-16).

By God's grace we are the church, as Jesus lives in us. Buildings, ceremonies, creeds, traditions and rituals may or may not be helpful to our walk with Jesus.

We are only the church if Jesus lives in us... he enables and enlivens us to be part of his universal body of Christ-followers.

The church—the body of Jesus Christ—is who we are in Christ far more than it is where we go and what building we attend and what ceremonies we perform and those we don't.

3) If you are a member of a physically incorporated institution, you do not "belong" to that institution:

In the ultimate sense, you and I only belong to Jesus. While I belong to my wife and my family, in the ultimate sense I belong only to Jesus.

In my own case, I am not affiliated with a church or a political party because, among many reasons, I am not owned by them. I don't belong to them. I am bought and paid for by Jesus alone (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Join and be a member of a physically incorporated group that calls itself a church if you wish, but take care it is a healthy, grace-based and Christ-centered institution.

If you choose to be a "member" of a physically incorporated group that calls itself a church be assured that the only membership that counts, now and forever, is membership in the universal body of Christ.

No membership in any physically incorporated institution that calls itself a church is

necessary to award or validate your membership in the body of Christ.

4) The head of the body (his church) is Jesus Christ. No Jesus, no church:

Jesus is the head of his spiritual body, "the" church. Jesus is the rock upon which his church, his body, is built. Jesus is the true vine, and without being attached to him no branch is alive in him, but rather dead.

Without Jesus there is no church. The parking lot might be filled with hundreds of cars. The music might be incredible and uplifting. The preaching might be encouraging and entertaining.

The ceremonies might be impressive, the bells and whistles awe-inspiring and the architecture and adornments of the building breathtaking. But without Jesus there is no church.

No Jesus, no church. But where Jesus is, you'll find the church. □

CWRpress

Now Available: Letters to My Friends by Greg Albrecht

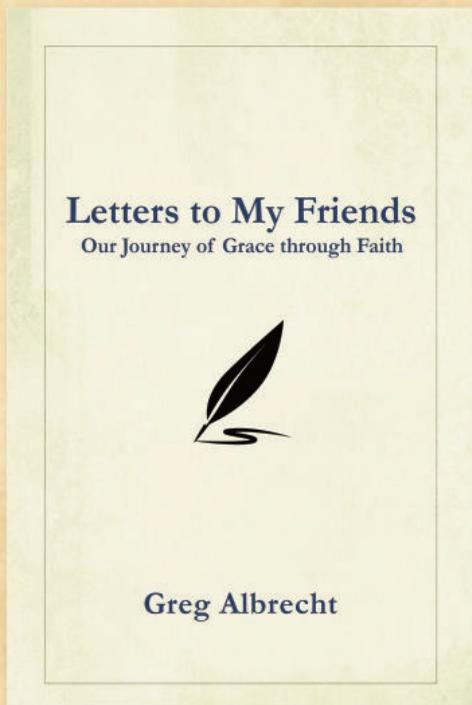


Remember when you saved special letters and tied them, like treasures, with a ribbon in a big bundle?

Is letter writing a lost art? After all, when emailing or texting, one doesn't need to bother with spelling and grammar. And now over 3,000 emojis-graphic images that follow the maxim that a picture is worth 10,000 words—are available on electronic devices saving the creative effort involved in creating word pictures.

Greg Albrecht has reviewed hundreds of inspirational and uplifting letters he has written for more than two decades. Since the last years of the 20th century, he has been sending a monthly "snail mail" letter to thousands of mail boxes (and more recently posting them electronically as well). He has selected a number of these messages and organized them, calling the collection *Letters to My Friends*.

**Order your 1st edition collector's item
on Amazon or by calling 1-800-309-4466!**





My Two “Moms”

By: Laura Urista

My mom, Charlotte Jean (“Jeannie” to those closest to her) passed away nearly nine years ago. If she had lived, she would have celebrated her 95th birthday a few months ago. My mother-in-law, Teresa, would have been 88 years old this year. But, as I write this, she died just a few weeks ago.

As I think about *my two “moms”*—these two wonderful matriarchs I was blessed to have in my life—I am struck by the stark contrast in my unique relationships with each of them.

“Jeannie”

My mom and I had what most people would consider a fairly close relationship, but like many mothers and daughters, we excelled at “pushing each other’s buttons.” I’ve heard it said that a mother knows exactly how to push your buttons because she programmed them for you. As I grew up, I learned the hard way that there are just some things it’s better not to talk about. It simply isn’t worth all the emotional drama or fall-out. So, while we got along fine most of the time, and there was a lot of love and affection between us, there were also many things “better left unsaid” between me and my mom.

When Mother’s Day would roll around, I always struggled to find

just the right card that showed my love for my mom but still rang true. Some cards were just “too perfect” to fit our complicated relationship. The first Mother’s Day after Mom died, I found myself walking the aisles of a local drugstore, looking at cards and trying to find just the right one, when it suddenly dawned on me that I would never send her a Mother’s Day card again.

For months after Mom died, I had a recurring dream that went like this: I would try and try to call her on the phone, but something prevented me from getting through. Either I dialed the wrong number, or I searched everywhere but couldn’t find the phone, or the phone would ring and ring but there was no answer. After the dreams, I would wake up in a panic, and it took a long time to fall back to sleep.

I finally decided to ask my daughter, Tawny, (who has a Master’s degree in Psychology) if she had any advice. She told me it seemed like I had some things on my mind that I never got a chance to talk to my mom about, and she suggested I write a letter.

After getting my feelings out and putting them down on paper, she recommended that I destroy the letter. It seemed simple, but it was one of the most difficult things I have ever done.

But it worked! Shortly after writing that letter and destroying it, the recurring dreams stopped, and I haven’t had one since.

“Teresa”

My mother-in-law, Teresa, grew up speaking Spanish, and she didn’t speak English too well. I took four years of Spanish in high school, but I don’t speak Spanish very well. So, for the past 37 years we did a lot of hugging, gesturing and



Me with Mom (Jeannie) celebrating her 85th birthday.

laughing—just trying our best to have a conversation in mixed English and Spanish.

But we didn't talk about things on a deep level. We mostly talked about the family, and she would ask about how our two kids were doing. Yet, deep down I felt like I could tell Teresa anything. Maybe because we didn't speak the same language, I knew she wouldn't judge and critique me or harp on me about how to do things "the right way."

We never had an argument, which is almost unheard of for a mother and daughter-in-law! What a contrast to the relationship between me and my birth mom.

I have a lot of respect for *my two "moms"* and the sacrifices they made for their families. I am thankful beyond words for the many lessons they taught me—by their examples and by their words—about love, self-sacrifice, loyalty, commitment, generosity, faith, kindness and much more.

I hope and pray that I have lived and will continue to live up to their examples, and I hope I will pass the lessons down to my own

children and grandchildren.

This Mother's Day I'll probably again walk the aisles of a drugstore looking at cards I wish I could send *my two "moms."* Wherever they are, I hope they know how much I love them, although I'm sure I never said it enough.

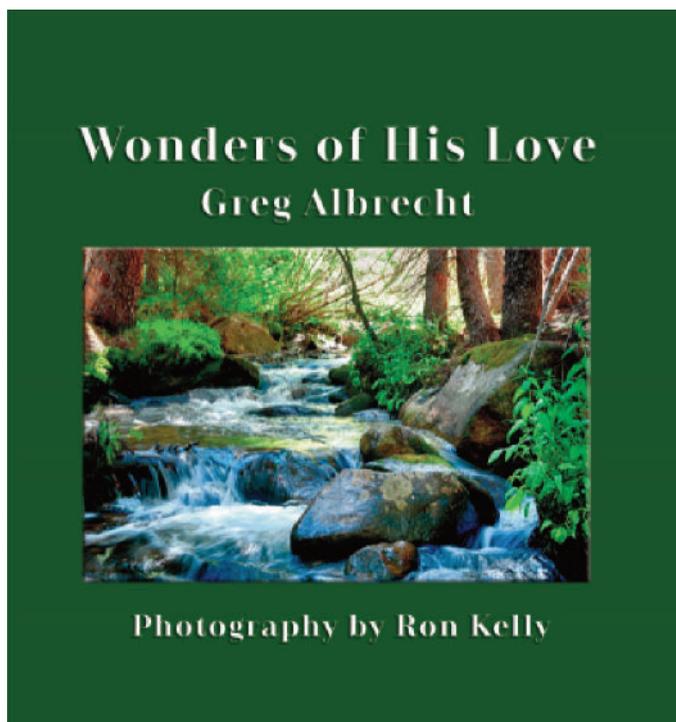
I miss them both so much, and I long for the day when we'll all be together again, and there will be no

more sorrow, no more pain... *"in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trump, for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible and we shall all be changed"* (1 Corinthians 15:51-52, KJV). □

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



Tawny with her grandparents at her graduation from Loyola Marymount University (with Master's degrees in Psychology and Special Education) on Mother's Day, 2014.



Coming Soon!
***Wonders of
His Love***
by Greg Albrecht

featuring the
photography of
Ron Kelly



Buzzy

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

Countless verses have been written on the puppy and the kitten. These are the first lines of a poem written by my eighth-grade Latin teacher who was hands-down the most popular poet at the middle school located high on a hill in the small town of Spooner, Wisconsin.

He would often read one of his poems before he put on his stern face and ordered oral exercises in declining nouns and conjugating verbs. Students repeatedly asked him to write a poem for them. He knew better. Do it for one, you've got to do it for all. I was very specific in my request, however, begging him to write a poem about Buzzy. Finally, after months of refusal, he handed me a hand-written poem on lined notebook paper titled: "Why I can't write a poem about Buzzy."

As a young child my favorite book had been *Heidi*, the story of a Swiss orphaned girl who lived high in the Alps. The text and pictures always identified her with goats. I dreamed of being a Heidi. Then the May 1954 issue of *National Geographic* had a cover-story of two women and their goats in rural New York—women who operated Thunderhill Farm. (I still have that issue in safe-keeping.) After reading the article and looking at the pictures, I was never the same. I wanted a goat.

Four years passed before my parents consented. My grandfather kicked in the two dollars, and that spring he took me to a farm several miles away where we purchased a darling little white female barely a month old that I bottle-fed through the summer. I named her Buzzy for a high school cheerleader who had been very kind to me.

For miles around, I became known as the girl with the goat. Buzzy and I explored every hillside, field, stream, riverbank and trail on our 200-acre forested farm. True, she jumped on our car and over the fence into the garden,

infuriating my folks. But who could not laugh at and love Buzzy?

I've always been somewhat bothered by the biblical take-down of goats. Had Jesus played with his own pet goat, might he have sent the sheep to perdition rather than the goats? In fact, today, sheep are far less prized than goats. Goats are more profitable for their milk, cheese and meat—even for shearing. They are rented out to clear brush and they "make adorable pets," according to an online site, "because of their ability to form close bonds with their owners." How well I know. Buzzy and I were almost inseparable.

In my teacher's poem, he stated that poets have written about every animal from the walrus and eel to "humpy dromedaries" and

For miles around, I became known as the girl with the goat. Buzzy and I explored every hillside, field, stream, riverbank and trail on our 200-acre forested farm.

"giraffes six meters high." And that there are "lines on lions penned by literary giants." So why can't he write a poem about Buzzy? The last lines say it all: "But never has a bard of note said anything about a goat."

For years, I had tried to make contact with him. Then, having improved my own skills and with better Internet access, I found him in California. To my great disappointment, however, I learned from his daughter that he had just recently died.

I was devastated—if I had only tracked him down a year earlier. I told his daughter about the poem and after I sent her a copy in the mail, she called back with her mother on another line. I listened to stories from both of them, and I shared my own memories.

All three of us were crowned with tender mercies that afternoon as we laughed together about his clever poem and how much it had meant to me over the years. □

—Ruth Tucker



Quotes & Connections



"If our doctor rejected out of hand the medical advances of the past three hundred years, we would quickly find a new doctor. If a corporation employed children in barbaric conditions, ignored the rules of safety and poisoned our land and waterways, it would be penalized. But take an ancient doctrine, insist it originated with God, devise a ritual that enforces it, wrap it in a prayer, reward those who perpetuate it, and condemn to hell those who don't, and what you have is a significant portion of today's church."—Philip Gulley, *If the Church Were Christian*

The Church is not a religious community of worshippers of Christ, but it is Christ Himself who has taken form among men.
—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

A mother's arms are made of tenderness and children sleep soundly in them.—Victor Hugo

It is important that we never separate our love for God from our love for others...it is impossible to ascribe ultimate worth to God while refusing to ascribe ultimate worth to those to whom God ascribes ultimate worth.—Gregory A. Boyd

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