

# PLAIN TRUTH®

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

## Politics and Religion as Usual

Greg Albrecht

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imagined a headline something like: "Jewish Teacher Tells Rome to Take a Hike." If Jesus encouraged Jews not to pay taxes to Rome then Rome would quickly take action. The occupying military powers of Rome would not put up with insurrection, so if the big-business religion of that day could trap Jesus in a way that made him look like a rabble rouser, Rome would waste no time in executing him.

***It was politics and religion as usual.*** But Jesus 1) avoided the trap, 2) exposed their dirty tricks and 3) called their bluff:

*That's when the Pharisees plotted a way to trap him into saying something damaging. They sent their disciples, with a few of Herod's followers mixed in, to ask, "Teacher, we know you have integrity, teach the way of God accurately, are indifferent to popular opinion, and don't pander to your students. So tell us honestly. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"*

*Jesus knew they were up to no good. He said, "Why are you playing these games with me? Why are you trying to trap me? Do you have a coin? Let me see it." They handed him a silver piece.*

*"This engraving, who does it look like? And whose name is on it?"*

*They said, "Caesar."*

*"Then give Caesar what is his, and give God what is his."*

*The Pharisees were speechless. They*

*Continued on page 3*

**T**he popularity and following of the outsider threatened the establishment, and the institutions and traditions it held near and dear. The market share of the outsider's public support was growing.

He came from an obscure and remote place far outside the Jerusalem beltway. He didn't have tradition and custom behind him like the power brokers in Jerusalem did, but it didn't seem to make any difference. The people loved this populist *outsider*.

It almost seemed like *the outsider* had come from another dimension—no one had mentored him and no big donors or influential cronies supported him.

He didn't think like the movers and shakers did, he didn't act like they did, and he didn't talk like they did. But so far, all their efforts to discredit him had failed. These

muck-rakers had thrown mud and muck, but it didn't stick.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. They decided to force his hand. The trap they devised was a perfect "catch 22" dilemma—no matter how *the outsider* responded, as his political and religious opponents prepared for their ambush, they could already visualize headlines in the *Jerusalem Post* the next day.

They would ask Jesus if the Jews should pay taxes to Rome. If he said "yes" then the headline above the story would be something like: "Turncoat Traitor Supports Paying Taxes to Rome." If that's how Jesus responded to their trap, then his answer would be the straw that broke his back. His popular support would evaporate and in no time they could find a way to get rid of him once and for all.

If Jesus said "no" then they



# Hope, Comfort, Encouragement & Healing to Be Found in Christ

*For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10).*

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28).*

I love to picture the story Luke 4:14-30 paints. Imagine the moment—put yourself in the middle of a crowded synagogue. You are surrounded by groups of curious Nazarenes waiting to see and hear what might happen next. The atmosphere inside the building is charged. The buzz around this man, Jesus, has been positively electric. ***Who is this man, Jesus, really? What will he say and do next?***

Jesus then stood to read and found the place in the Isaiah scroll that had been handed to him and read aloud for all to hear: *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me... to proclaim good news to the poor... freedom for the prisoners... recovery of sight for the blind... to set the oppressed free... and to proclaim the Lord's favor* (Luke 4:18-19). When he finished speaking, Jesus handed the scroll back to the attendant and sat down.

The story tells us that every eye in the place was fixed on Jesus. Everyone in the room was wondering about him, about this man, Jesus, asking themselves and anyone else around them, ***Isn't this Joseph's son? How... can he teach so well? How... can he be so bold?*** Using the tension of the moment, Jesus simply said, *Today, this*

*scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.* You can imagine the collective gasp, followed by outrage, and read how the story concludes—with the angry crowd trying to run Jesus out of town by way of a cliff! Of course, they did not succeed.

Jesus used the moment to be crystal clear about his mission. He made no bones about letting the crowd know exactly why he had come.

Although the crowd could not, or would not, recognize him, Jesus announced that he had been anointed. Jesus had been sent and had work to do—the work of giving ***hope, comfort, encouragement, and healing*** to all who would ***come to him***.

Not a week goes by here at CWR/PTM when we don't talk about the joy of our mission in Christ. We preach and teach ***All Jesus, All the Time***. We stand together with you, our Friends and Partners, for ***Faith Alone, Grace Alone and Christ Alone***.

We are unapologetically *Jesus-y*, without all the *-ese, speak and language* used so commonly in the world of big business religion. We believe in the good news of Jesus' true gospel and delight in the good works of sharing that gospel with the world.

How can sharing the good news of the ***hope, comfort, encouragement, and healing to be found in Christ*** ever be wrong? In our world of warfare, political upheaval, runaway inflation, global disease, and the constant disappointments of misguided Christless religion, can Jesus'

words, *"Come to me,"* not lift the spirits of all who are weary and burdened?

How can *he not be exactly Who is needed right now?* The plain truth is: ***He is exactly Who we need right now.***

Do you have family or friends who may have been hurt or abandoned by Christless religion? Do you know someone who feels they are no longer in Christ just because they don't go to a church building on a regular basis?

Or perhaps, someone you know is just honestly overwhelmed by all the fears and stresses life today can present.

We here at CWR/PTM stand ready to help. We offer anyone in need the ***hope, comfort, encouragement, and healing to be found in Christ***. We invite everyone to come to him.

My column, *One Day at a Time*, is introducing a four-part series that will focus on the ***hope, comfort, encouragement, and healing to be found in Christ***.

This series will encourage our readers that we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus. We together, as Christ-followers, are ***saved by faith in him*** (and that is a gift). We receive and share that gift of salvation and good news of the ***hope, comfort, encouragement, and healing of Christ*** with the world.

We are blessed by our Father to come to Jesus, and to do the good works he has prepared for us to do—the good works of sharing his Son with all. Thanks be to God! □

—Ed Dunn

Continued from page 1

went off shaking their heads  
(Matthew 22:15-22, *The Message*).

## Strange Bedfellows

There's another presidential election just around the corner. The air waves are filled with acrimonious recriminations. Each party continues to do its best to expose the candidate of the other party—to make them look weak and dishonest. In the best traditions of muck-raking, politicians from both sides are doing whatever it takes to make the other side look bad. It's all about uncovering some heretofore unknown embarrassing behavior and thus catapulting your candidate into the lead. The dirty business of politics can make for strange bedfellows.

Politics and institutionalized religion never change. They are filled with scams, abuse and corruption. They were in the time of Jesus. The Pharisees, an influential religious authority at that time, were disturbed about Jesus' popularity. Believing "the enemy of my enemy is my friend"—an adage that was old even then—the Pharisees and the Herodians, bitter enemies, snuggled up for a short term dalliance.

Jesus was drawing great crowds, and he was against both the political power structure believed in by the Herodians and the religious power structure of the

Pharisees. The kingdom of God preached by Jesus would spell the end of both religion and politics—so religion and politics jumped into bed in a "one-night stand," joining forces to eradicate Jesus and his kingdom. It's still the same today.

Jesus had two responses to their trick question: 1) *Give Caesar what is his, and 2) Give God what is his.*

Jesus' statement on politics: **Jesus didn't jump into bed with the government.**

Jesus' statement on religion: **Jesus didn't jump into bed with religion.**

Nothing in Jesus' response to this trick question posed by his enemies (or any of his comments elsewhere in the Four Gospels) could be remotely interpreted as to giving his absolute support to the business of religion or politics.

## Fast Forward to November 2024...

If you are a citizen of the United States, and a registered voter, you have four choices this November: 1) Vote Republican, 2) Vote Democrat, 3) Vote for individuals and concerns you feel deeply about, regardless of party label, or 4) Don't vote at all.

Which one would Jesus favor? He



did not nor does he tell us... we have our own choices to make. Any one of the four options above might be better or worse, but no one option is more holy or righteous.

Jesus did not endorse political parties or religious institutions. Jesus did not propose or support legislation. He never attempted to change the government.

When people expected Jesus to become politically aligned or to advance the cause of his kingdom in the ways they were accustomed, he retreated. He cared for people in need, but he did not make their predicament a political cause.

Regardless of where you live and the color and size of your earthly passport, if you are a Christ-follower, then this election (and all elections) reminds you of one and only one thing—Jesus and Jesus alone is Lord.

The really sad and pathetic thing is when Christless religion unreservedly jumps into bed with either the kingdom of a government or a particular political candidate, or with a particular denomination or spiritual leader, thinking that God is glorified in such alliances and allegiances.

There is only one kingdom and that kingdom is given to us, by the grace of God. The kingdom of God is "from another place." The kingdom of God is our spiritual country and our ultimate destination. All else is but rubbish. ☐

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# The World's Story Told Well

Ken Tanner

**W**hen we tell the story of the world well, it is converting, not condemning. The world's true story gives life everlasting.

And we cannot tell the world's story well—we cannot tell our story well—if we do not tell God's story well.

After all, God's story is our story, and our story is God's story.

In Jesus Christ, in whom all things—humanity among them—are brought to perfection. So it is vital to tell the story of the human God as well as we can because it is the story of Jesus that makes sense of God, humanity and existence.

The person of Jesus is the great lantern that lights our path on the way to dying as he dies so that we might be human as God is human, to live as he lives, from age to age.

When the story of Jesus is told poorly or badly—on occasion, diabolically—we call that “heresy.”

Heresy harms humans because it distorts our portrait of God's character and darkens our understanding of ourselves as humans because we are all made in the image of God.

The first thing to say about heresy is that it is an expensive word. It should almost never be used.

We know this because no one has an infinite grip on the mysteries of God and the world. The best Christian teachers confess they only get glimpses of the glory of God.

We also know this because history shows that the word has been employed egregiously. One of the first Christians, arguably the best reader of our Scriptures, and one of our wisest pastors, was condemned by the church as a heretic: Origen of Alexandria.

There is such a thing as heresy. It is a choice to ignore the story that the Creeds tell, the consensus story that emerges from storytelling and sacraments down the centuries, and across languages and cultures, the story of our best hymns and icons, a story that has always had good teachers and wonderful actors, a story that is still told and enacted well today.

The best way to avoid heresy is to immerse oneself in the great conversation about Jesus that has gone on in the church since Pentecost and in Israel since Abraham and Moses, to enter the spaces of prayer and adoration of Jesus across the body of Christ that the Spirit is bringing into all truth.

Be cautious and sparing with the word “heresy,” even as our Lord pardons our misunderstandings and failures.

Christ is all and in all, and he will perfect everything that concerns us and the world. His life and death, resurrection, and ascension bring the world's story to a very good end. □

*Kenneth Tanner pastors Church of the Holy Redeemer in Rochester Hills, Michigan.*



# Friday Mornings With the Rabbi

Greg Albrecht

**A** Jewish rabbi lived a long, long time ago in a little village in Russia. Every Friday morning he vanished—no one seemed to know where he went. Most of the people in the synagogue respected him so much they started to think his Friday morning absences were times when he went to heaven to personally talk with God.

One day a newcomer came to the village. His skepticism about faith in general caused him to doubt the stories of the rabbi spending time with God on Friday mornings. So one Friday morning the newcomer decided to follow the rabbi to see what he was up to.

The somewhat cynical new village resident arrived at the rabbi's house before the sun came up, and waited for him to come outside. When the rabbi emerged from his house he was not dressed like a rabbi—he was dressed like a poor peasant. In today's world one might see a person dressed as the rabbi was and presume him to be a homeless person.

The suspicious village newcomer watched the rabbi carry an axe into the forest, chop down a tree and then cut the tree into firewood. The rabbi then gathered up the firewood and walked to a little shack in the poorest part of the village, where an old woman and her sick son lived. He stacked up the wood, which was

enough for cooking and warmth for a week, and then he quietly returned to his own house.

The service, the love, the self-sacrifice and the humility of the rabbi so impressed the newcomer that he decided to stay in the village and learn of God from the rabbi. The former skeptic was intrigued that faith wasn't just something that the rabbi practiced on Friday mornings—his faith was a way of life.

History provides endless stories and illustrations of famous, wealthy and attractive people obsessed with “me, myself and I.” Many who are rich and famous often fall prey to thinking their genius and their hard work earned them their fame and fortune.

Sadly, giving thanks to God and sharing their blessings with others in need are often not a priority in their lives. When an endless quest for more defines a life, rather than thanksgiving and gratitude, sad and empty stories of greed and futility often result.

I often think of an inscription in a museum of the American Wild West in Deadwood, South Dakota. The prospector hoping to live to enjoy his riches is portrayed as saying:

*“I lost my gun. I lost my horse. I'm out of food. The Indians are after me. But I've got all the gold I can carry!”*

## **Doesn't Religion Always Put God First?**

*“For what I received I passed on to you*

*as of first importance: that Christ died for your sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...”* (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Is an emphasis on the life, work, teachings and primacy of Jesus automatically the priority of churches that define themselves by the buildings in which they meet and the programs they sponsor and promote? Is it a foregone conclusion that churches are, de facto, by their very nature, Christ-centered and Christ-focused? Is God always first in religion?

A *Doodlesbury* comic strip once portrayed the state of many brick-and-mortar churches today.

The first frame was of a typical New England church building nestled near a lake and a forest—the sign outside announced “Little Church of Walden.”

The next frame illustrates the long-haired, bearded pastor, wearing a clerical collar, reading announcements to a congregation. He is, as the term is generically used today, “woke.”

The pastor begins his discussion of the weekly activity calendar by saying “This Monday we have a lecture on nutrition from a celebrity chef.”

He continues, “Then on Tuesday and Thursday we will have our usual 12-step program evening get-togethers.”

One of the church members interrupts asking, “Pastor, will the 12-step programs be about drugs or sex addiction?”

The pastor responds, “We have cut down Drugs and Sex Addiction to nine steps, and they are offered Friday evenings at 6:30, right after organic co-gardening. Then on Saturday night we have aerobics and yoga. Any questions?”

One of the parishioners asks, “Yes, is there a church service?” The pastor answers, “Canceled. There was a conflict with the self-esteem workshop.”

### **Have You Tasted Jesus?**

There’s an old story about a lecture given by a celebrated theologian at the University of Chicago Divinity School. The theologian attempted to explain the thesis of his newest book—that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a myth—it never happened. The progressive theologian was attempting to prove that the resurrection—you know, the resurrection that Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 is to be of “*first importance*”—the theologian was attempting to prove that it never happened.

He quoted learned scholar after learned scholar, he referred to the original languages of Hebrew and Greek in which the Bible was written, all in an undertaking trying to prove that the early Christians just invented the story of the resurrection as a way to attract people to Christianity.

At the end of his attack, dedicated to destroying the resurrection, he asked his audience if anyone had a question. An old preacher stood up in the back of the auditorium.

“Doctor, I have just one question.”

The old preacher took out an apple from the sack lunch he was carrying and took a bite.

“Doctor,” he continued, CRUNCH/MUNCH... “my question is simple.” He took another bite of the apple... and chewed... CRUNCH/MUNCH.

“I’ve never read those fancy books you mentioned, and I don’t know any Hebrew or Greek.” He paused and took a few more bites... CRUNCH/MUNCH.

The preacher finished the apple and held up the core: “All I want to know is this: The apple I just ate—was it bitter or sweet?”

The theologian paused for a moment before answering and then said, “I cannot possibly answer that question because I did not taste your apple.”

The white-haired preacher dropped the apple core into the paper bag that contained his sack lunch, and he calmly said to the learned theologian: “You have not tasted my apple, and neither have you tasted my Jesus.”

The audience of grad-school students training for the ministry and many pastors who were in attendance erupted in cheers. The theologian left the platform.

### **Thanksgiving Flows From God**

*It’s inexpensive and easy to build a spiritual house based on lies and delusions, but it’s drafty to live in.*

Spiritual houses built on anything other than Jesus Christ are flawed, according to Jesus’ warning in Matthew 7:24-27, they are built on sand and they will come tumbling down during the storms of life.


All authentic faith and belief is centered in and on Jesus, who is the only foundation that endures all. All else will fail or be destroyed. All other spiritual dwelling places are but religious houses built on sand. All else will one day be but dust in the wind.

When it comes to thanksgiving and gratitude, all is centered in and on God, who is responsible for all that we are and all that we enjoy.

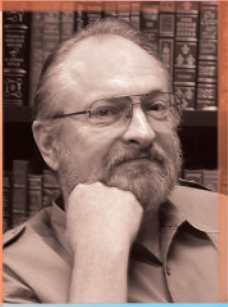
True thanksgiving and gratitude is based on God as pre-eminent and of “*first importance*”—true and lasting thanksgiving and gratitude is actually a gift of the grace of God, for without God we are not only incapable of true thanksgiving, but without him we have no one to whom we may direct our thanksgiving.

The gratitude that God produces in us by his grace involves humility about who and what we are and how important we are, and it involves serving others in the name of Jesus in a spirit of self-sacrifice.

Most of all, when God is number one, as he was with the rabbi in the little Russian village, we are not simply thankful for what we possess and enjoy. Most of all, we are thankful and grateful because of what we have been given—the beauty of life, the majestic love of God and his amazing grace that energizes us to serve others. □



*True and lasting thanksgiving  
and gratitude is actually a gift of  
the grace of God.*



## Rehearsals

A few years ago I began performing songs twice a month at an open mic night at a local tap-house. The event is run by pros who play a few tunes themselves, run the sound system, offer occasional accompaniment and generally set an upbeat tone for the evening. Occasionally I'll play something I've written, but mostly I'll cover arcane rock songs from the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s. Normally there are eight or ten amateur (and pro) musicians who do three songs each. If you're thinking karaoke, don't. This is much different. Some even get booked for paying gigs, but others never will. I won't say which category I fall into.

Yet it's also work. A few folks show up and wing it, but I follow a more rigorous way. I plan my playlist a couple of weeks in advance. I record and mix my own bass, drums and backup vocals well ahead of time. And then I rehearse and rehearse and rehearse. I tweak lyrics, keys, chords and rhythms until the product feels presentable. That's *the way* it works.

The more I rehearse to an imaginary audience (and my dog), the less anxious I feel about the actual performance. The reason I might feel anxious (aside from some rudimentary sense of professionalism) is that I don't want to look completely stupid—which ensures that I rehearse even more. But the reality is that even if I think I have it perfect, the final performance will *never be perfect*.

You've heard the old aphorism, *practice makes perfect*? It doesn't. I'll forget a line, botch a chord or have an equipment malfunction. I may have to improvise, or even start the song over again! In any case, the audience is often too busy talking and drinking beer to notice. I could sing complete nonsense and many wouldn't know the difference. I think it's more accurate to say (in my case) *practice makes adequate*—or on a good day, *not bad!*

Even so, all of us find ourselves rehearsing something all the time. If you want to be a lawyer, you'll do mock trials in law school. If you want to be a soldier, you'll endure basic combat training. If you want to be an athlete, you'll condition and compete. If you want to be a chef, you'll labor for years over a hot stove. If you want to be a pilot, you'll spend countless hours in a flight simulator. Name any

profession, and you'll rehearse for years before you are prepared to deal with whatever challenges the world throws at you. Even then, you're still rehearsing. Name any major life event, and you'll find yourself mulling it over ahead of time. That's *the way* it works.

Which brings us to Christianity. Can you rehearse to be a better Christian? Well, not the way you might think. Some try hard to become better Christians through rigorous rehearsing of self-improvement and good behavior. Nothing wrong

**So the way to rehearse for Christianity is to rehearse Jesus—his birth, his humanity, his work, his ministry, his teaching, his love, his sacrifice, his resurrection, his ascension and sending of the Holy Spirit.**

with self-improvement or good behavior, but *that's not the way* to become a “better” Christian. Our behavior (what we do or don't do, or how well we do it) has *nothing whatsoever to do* with becoming a follower of Jesus. It has everything to do with faith in what Jesus has *already done*, what he is doing and how well he did it (perfectly).

So *the way* to rehearse for Christianity is to *rehearse Jesus*—his birth, his humanity, his work, his ministry, his teaching, his love, his sacrifice, his resurrection, his ascension and sending of the Holy Spirit. Thankfully, *this way* is covered in the annual cycle of celebrations that Christians have observed for two millennia. *This way*—this story—has taken the form of the written and spoken word, music, art, symbolism and even architecture, expressed diversely in countless traditions and cultures. There are few places on the planet where these resources are not available in *some way*, even if you're merely contemplating the life and teachings of Jesus in your own living room.

Isn't that something to be radically thankful about? *By the way*, what we do (our better behavior) proceeds naturally from our thanksgiving for what Jesus has already done. That's *the way* Jesus works. □

—Monte Wolverton



## Quotes & Connections



"Many examples of excess we see in our Western world lead us to conclude that having 'too much' may lead to unhappiness.... let us give thanks that most of us have neither poverty nor riches (Proverbs 30:8). We are thankful that there is no spiritual gap between the rich and the poor in the kingdom of heaven. All are invited and welcome at the table of the Lord." —Greg Albrecht, *Letters to My Friends: Our Journey of Grace Through Faith*

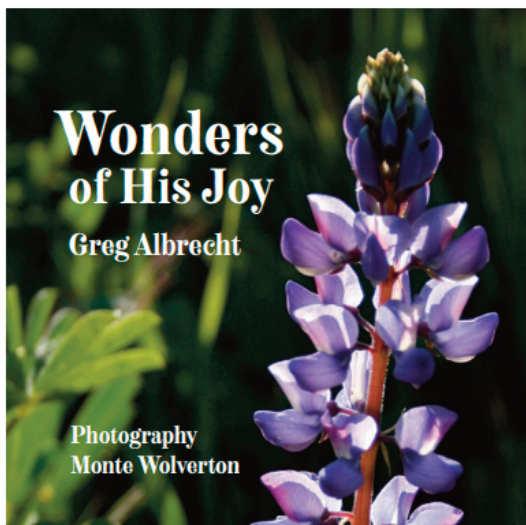
"Christmas is God lighting a candle; and you don't light a candle in a room that's already full of sunlight. You light a candle in a room that's so murky that the candle, when lit, reveals just how bad things are." —N.T. Wright

"The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from." —Frederick Buechner

"To speak gratitude is courteous and pleasant, to enact gratitude is generous and noble, but to live gratitude is to touch Heaven." —Johannes A. Gaertner

"In religion and politics people's beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second-hand, and without examination, from authorities who have not themselves examined the questions at issue but have taken them at second-hand from other non-examiners, whose opinions about them were not worth a brass farthing." —Mark Twain

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