

CWRmagazine



Winter 2016
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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

Dare to Hope

*"Then all people shall see
God's salvation" (Luke 3:6)*

Can All Be Saved?

What Others Are Saying...



CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

Remembering 9-11: 15 Years Later

I've been reading through the Fall issue of *CWRm*, which has aided me in properly processing and praying through the 15th anniversary of 9-11 and matters related to religious violence and the Jesus Way of peace. I highly recommend the good work of PTM/CWR. Thanks!

Ontario, Canada

Thanks for the articles about remembering 9-11. All wars are the result of man's sins—but I believe that not all religions are equal. Muhammad wrote in the Qur'an that to abolish unbelievers is okay. Sin affects all men regardless of where they come from. I'm so glad our forefathers didn't turn the other cheek or we'd all be speaking Japanese or German, and with a whole lot less freedom!

Colorado

I know that some Christians who have guns for self-defense are fully prepared to kill. They believe God expects it and that only cowards won't defend themselves. I say to them, "Why didn't Jesus kill those who came to kill him?" He could have easily killed them all to save his life. Jesus was willing to die for you. God is your defense. You can't be killed unless God allows it.

Email

When Towers Fall

I just had to respond to Brad Jersak's article, "When Towers Fall" in the Fall issue of *CWRm*. I'm sick and tired of self-righteous religious leaders and their guilt trips. I found this article to be both insulting and self-righteous. Much of this article sounds to me like Democratic talking points. Just stick to the gospel—we don't need more preaching about how evil this country is. We hear that all the time! No country is perfect, but I thank God for

the founding fathers. When Christ returns we will have true peace, and not until then.

Ohio

• *Our first allegiance is to the Kingdom of God and the Jesus Way, not to any nation or any party. The Jesus Way revealed in Scripture is overt: Jesus is the Prince of Peace who calls us to be blessed peacemakers—those who follow him by loving God, caring for our neighbors, welcoming the strangers and also loving, blessing and praying for our enemies. He has explicitly called his followers to renounce vengeance and be agents of reconciliation...in this present evil and violent age. These are the politics of Jesus, not of either the Republican or the Democratic parties.*

We affirm love of one's nation. We believe real love does not simply rail against the nation, nor does it sugarcoat its sins. It takes responsibility by addressing, challenging and praying for the sins of its leaders and their decisions, especially when they are corrupt and have deceived the nation into wandering from God.

The biblical prophets demonstrated their love of Israel by addressing the sins of the nation, but more than simply laying a guilt trip, they identified with those sins and repented on their behalf.

CWR/PTM is saying, "Follow Jesus, and beware of the rhetoric of any religious-political alliance, Christian or Muslim, Republican or Democrat, that promotes that from which Christ has set us free."

5 Stages of Religious Violence

Greg Albrecht nailed it with his article on "5 Stages of Religious Violence" in the Fall issue of *CWRm*. I'm so thankful for the new direction of CWR/PTM.

Texas

My oh my, what a great article about "5 Stages of Religious Violence" by Greg

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Albrecht. This article explains the roots of groups like ISIS, Al Qaeda, abortion clinic bombers, the Inquisition, strict Puritans, Christian corporal punishment and our nationalistic violent response to terrorism (Abu Ghraib).

Washington

"Fear Not"

Thank you for the article by Michael Hardin, "Fear Not" in the Fall issue of *CWRm*. This article hit the nail on the head! We need to be wrapping our minds around the "perfect love" of God. We must allow Christ's perfect love in us to cast out the fear of God as well as the fear of "the other," whether friend or enemy.

North Carolina

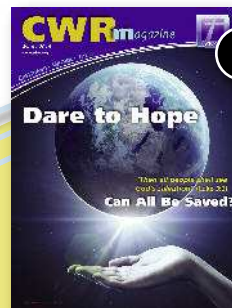
House of Cards

I think it is unnatural for people to have so much negative information. For most of human history people only knew about what was happening in their town or village. The media is wallowing in this mother of all elections. I don't wallow with them, but I believe it is important to have a competent person in the White House—for those of us who live in the United States and for the whole world.

California

The last two issues of *CWRm* have been excellent in providing "grounding articles" in this time of societal and political upheaval. Thank you PTM!

Indiana



Cover Story

The love of God allows, motivates and even obligates us to hope that in the end, the Light of Christ will overcome all darkness and then, perchance, "every heart will prepare him room."

COVER IMAGE BY GALINA PESHKOVA—123RF



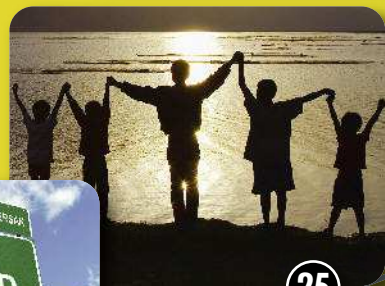
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by Brad Jessak

Dare to Hope



“Then all people shall see God’s salvation” (Luke 3:6).

Vivid childhood memories of Christmas 1969 include my firm commitment to memorizing the epic carol, “Joy to the World,” with the help of opera star Mario Lanza’s brand new Christmas album.

*Joy to the world! The Lord is come
Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.*

Joy to the World

That Christmas Eve, I joined a host of other children—shepherd boys wearing tea towels on our heads, girls in sparkling angel gowns—

caroling this hope and joy to the world...*the whole world!*

God the Word, now “incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,” was and is all about **hope**. The birth of Christ—his “advent”—heralded the arrival of “the Savior of the world”—the whole world!

At that early age, I dared to hope that this joy would literally cover the earth...not just my family or my church or my nation.

One of the child-actors, chosen for her good memory and clear voice, recited Luke 2:10, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for **all the people**”... ah yes, **all the people!**

She continued, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (v. 11). A Savior! I knew what “Savior” meant...I associated that with delicious, sugary Life-Savers! Yes, God sent his Son to be the Life-Saver *of the world* (John 4:14)! Or as I liked to say, *the whole wide world!*

Imagine! The Magi's lone star and then the myriad of angelic lights were God's promise that "the true light that gives light to *everyone* was coming into the world" (John 1:9).

Jesus—"the *Light of the world*"—would shine so brightly that he would eventually extinguish *all* darkness and then "*every eye will see him*" (Revelation 1:7).

Every Heart in the Whole World

At that early age, *I dared to hope* that this joy would literally cover the earth...*not* just my

It has taken me decades to dismantle the gospel-as-threat and recover my original childlike daring. But what if the beloved disciple was right: "In him was life, and that life was the light of *all* mankind" (John 1:4).

family or my church or my nation.

You see, that Christmas my parents received the gift of our first foreign "sponsor child." His name was *Phan van Phu*—a Vietnamese boy about my age. I never met him, but I prayed for him nightly for years and we helped provide for his health and education. He and I would print simple letters, color pictures and mail them to each other. He was my new brother across the sea.

I dared to hope that joy to the world included him—a boy with different skin, living in poverty across an ocean in a nation we regarded as "the enemy." I wasn't even sure which god he worshiped. But when I memorized "God so loved *the world*," *I dared to hope* that meant *the whole world*, and it included him.

I had not yet perverted the invitation to believe the good news into an ultimatum for

bad news. Imagine my joy when he wrote to tell me that his favorite song was, "I am joyful, I sing!"

It has taken me decades to dismantle the gospel-as-threat and recover my original childlike daring. But what if the beloved disciple was right: "In him was life, and that life was the light of *all* mankind" (John 1:4).

Once again, *I dare to hope* because I believe "God desires *all* people to be saved," (1 Timothy 2:4) and "he is not willing that *any*

should perish" (2 Peter 3:9).

I dare to hope because Christ himself promised, "I will draw *all* people to myself" (John 12:32). If God *desires it* and he *wills it* and he *promises it*, dare we hope that God will get his way?

Some might wonder, "Is this guy a universalist?" No, I don't believe I am, especially given the myths that churn around that label (see Robin Parry's article "Seven Myths About Christian Universalism").

Did you know? The love of God allows, motivates and even obligates us to *hope* that in the end, the Light of Christ will overcome all darkness and then, perchance, "*every heart will prepare him room.*"

Then *all* heaven and nature will join Phan van Phu and me in our songs of joy!

Dare to hope, because joy to the world is at the top of Jesus' own Christmas list! Why not add it to yours? □



The love of God allows, motivates and even obligates us to *hope* that in the end, the Light of Christ will overcome all darkness and then, perchance, "*every heart will prepare him room.*"

32 Scriptures that Dare

The Bible dares us to hope that in the *height, width, depth and length of God's love for us*—a love only grasped through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit—there is a *hope for all* far more vast than we could ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:14-21).

The following passages are not random proof-texts gathered into one convenient lump. They represent a sustained biblical testimony of God's revealed purposes in Christ—from Alpha to Omega. Many of them speak of a salvation given, not merely offered, to **all**, not merely a chosen few. They are the Good Shepherd's promise to seek for every last lost sheep *until he finds them*.

Those who humbly hope, pray and preach for the salvation of all find their hope rooted firmly in the Bible. What saith the Scriptures? The following are key New Testament texts that dare us to such hope.

And then *all flesh* shall see the salvation of God (Luke 3:6).

This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that through him *all* might believe.... The

true light that gives light to *everyone* was coming into the world (John 1:7, 9).

Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of *the world* (John 1:29).

For God so loved *the world* that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that *the world* through Him might be saved (John 3:16-17).

The Father loves the Son, and has given *all things* into His hand (John 3:35; 13:3).

We no longer believe because of what you said, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this really is the Savior of *the world* (John 4:42).

For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to *the world* (John 6:33).

All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.... This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of *all* He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last

day (John 6:37, 39).

I am the light of *the world* (John 8:12).

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all men* to Myself (John 12:32).

Jesus knew that the Father had given *all things* into His hands (John 13:3).

For you granted him authority over *all people* that he might give eternal life to *all those* you have given him (John 17:2).

Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore *all things* (Acts 3:21).

As through one man's offense judgment came to *all men*, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to *all men*, resulting in justification of life (Romans 5:18).

He has shut up *all* to unbelief so that he might have mercy on *all* (Romans 11:32).

For from him and to him are *all things* (Romans 11:36).

For since death came through a man, the

Those who humbly hope, pray and preach for the salvation of all find their hope rooted firmly in the Bible.

Us to Hope

by Brad Jersak

resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam *all* die, so also in Christ *all* will be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:21-22).

For God has put *everything* under His feet.... And when everything is subject to Christ, then the Son Himself will also be subject to the One who subjected *everything* to Him, so that God may be *all in all* (1 Corinthians 15:26-28).

He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one *all things* in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him (Ephesians 1:9-10).

And He put *all things* under His feet, and gave Him to be head over *all things* to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills *all in all* (Ephesians 1:22-23).

At the name of Jesus *every* knee will bow—of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and *every* tongue

should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11).

He will transform the body of our humble condition into the likeness of His glorious body, by the power that enables Him to subject *all things* to Himself (Philippians 3:21).

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over *all* creation. For *everything* was created by Him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all *things* have been created through Him and for Him. He is before *all things*, and by Him *all things* hold together ...and through Him to reconcile *all things* to Himself by making peace through the blood of His cross—things on earth or things in heaven (Colossians 1:15-17, 20).

He desires *all people* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4).

We labor and strive for this, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of *everyone*,

especially of those who believe (1 Timothy 4:10).

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to *all men* (Titus 2:11).

He appointed the Son heir of *all things*, and through whom also he made the universe. In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of *all things* (Hebrews 1:2).

He is not willing that any should perish but that *all* should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9-10).

He Himself is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for those of *the whole world* (1 John 2:2).

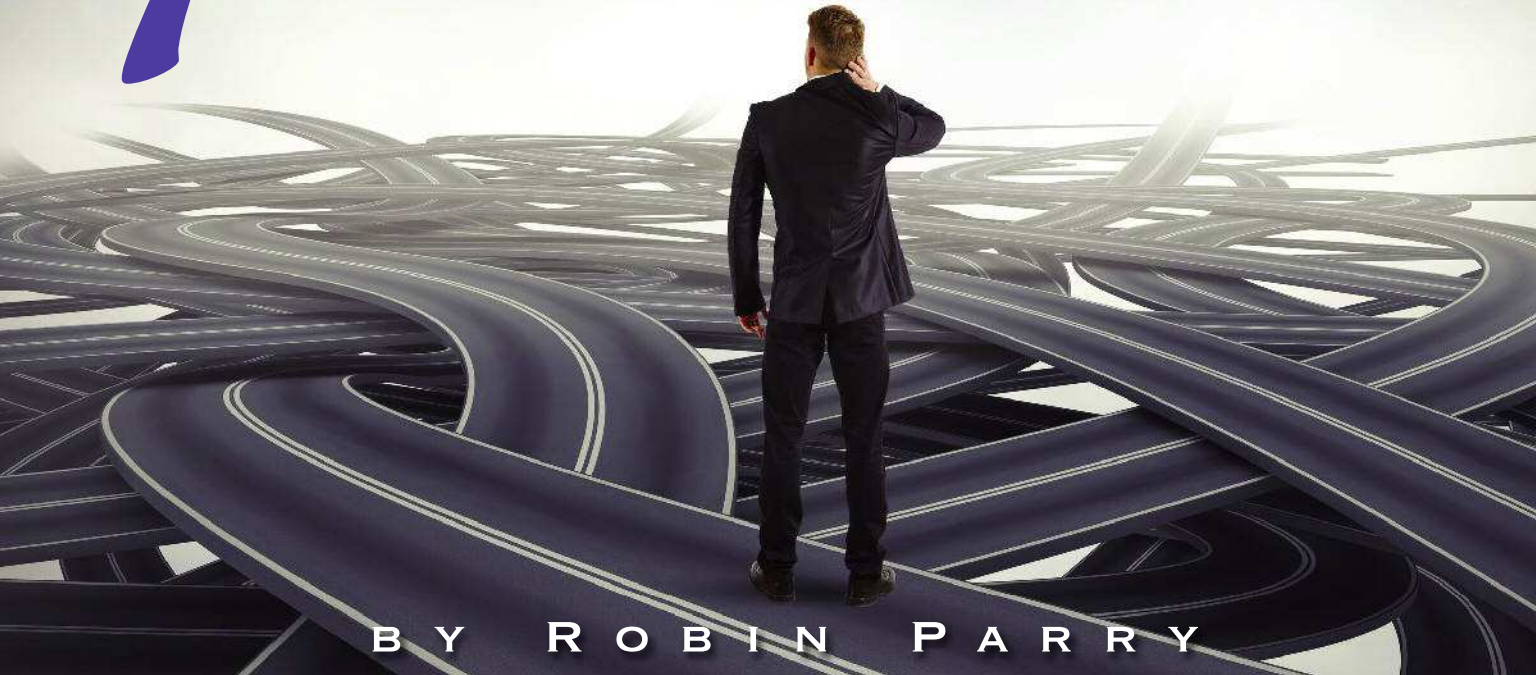
I heard *every creature* in heaven, on earth, under the earth, on the sea, and everything in them say: Blessing and honor and glory and dominion to the One seated on the throne and to the Lamb, forever and ever! (Revelation 5:13).

Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make *all things* new" (Revelation 21:5). □

These passages are not random proof-texts gathered into one convenient lump... They are the Good Shepherd's promise to seek for every last lost sheep until he finds them.



7 MYTHS ABOUT CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM



BY ROBIN PARRY

Editor's Note: Dr. Robin Parry is a speaker, the author of numerous books and an editor at Wipf and Stock Publishers. In this article, Robin addresses persistent misconceptions about what Christian universalists (not to be confused with Unitarians) actually believe.

When discussing “eschatology”—the doctrine of future things—feelings often run high and a lot of strong language gets used. If the church is to have a fruitful discussion rather than bad-tempered battles, it is essential that we have a clear understanding of what “Christian universalists” actually believe. A lot of myths inform the current debate and I want to briefly explore seven of them.

“Christian Universalism”—A Definition

In a nutshell, Christian universalism is the view that, in the end, God will redeem all people

through Christ. Christian universalists believe that the destiny of humanity is “written” in the body of the risen Jesus and, as such, the story of humanity will not end with a tomb.

Christian universalists are (mostly) orthodox, Trinitarian, Christ-centered, gospel-focused, Bible-affirming, missional Christians. What makes them *universalists* is that they believe that God loves *all* people; God wants to save *all* people; God sent Christ to redeem *all* people; and God will achieve that goal.

But seven myths cloud this definition.

Myth 1: “Universalists don’t believe in hell.”

This is too simplistic. Historically all Christian universalists have had a doctrine of hell and that remains the case for most Christian universalists today.

The Christian debate does not concern whether hell will be a reality (all agree that it will) but, rather, what the nature of that reality will be.

Will it be eternal conscious torment? Will it be annihilation? Or will it be a state from which people can be redeemed? Most universalists believe that hell is not simply retributive punishment but a painful yet

corrective/educative state from which people will eventually exit (some, myself included, think it has a retributive dimension, while others do not).

So it is not hell that universalists deny so much as certain views about hell.

Myth 2: "Universalists don't believe the Bible."

One does not have to read the detractors for long before coming across the following sentiments:

Universalists are theological "liberals" that reject the "clear teaching of the Bible."

Surely all good Bible-believing Christians will believe that some/many/most people are damned forever, right? Concerned about universalist claims, David Cloud writes, "It is evil to entertain questions that deny Bible truth."

So, are Christian universalists really Bible-deniers? No.

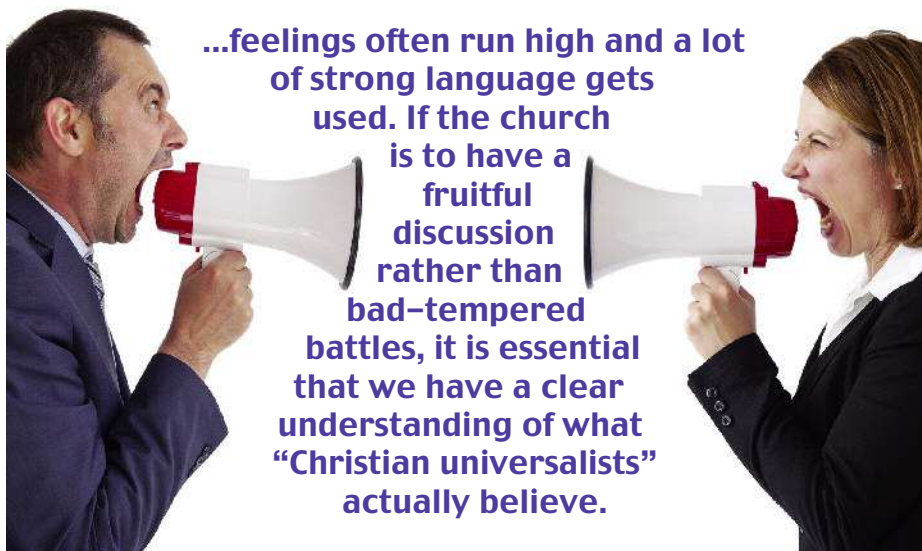
Historically, Christian universalists have been Bible-affirming believers and that remains the case for many, perhaps the majority, today. The question is not "Which group believes the

Historically, Christian universalists have been Bible-affirming believers... The question is not "Which group believes the Bible?" but, "How do we interpret the Bible?"

Bible?" but, "How do we interpret the Bible?"

The root issue is this: some biblical texts seem to affirm universalism (e.g. Romans 5:18; 1 Corinthians 15:22; Colossians 1:20; Philippians 2:11) but others seem to deny it (e.g. Matthew 25:45; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9; Revelations 14:11; 20:10-15).

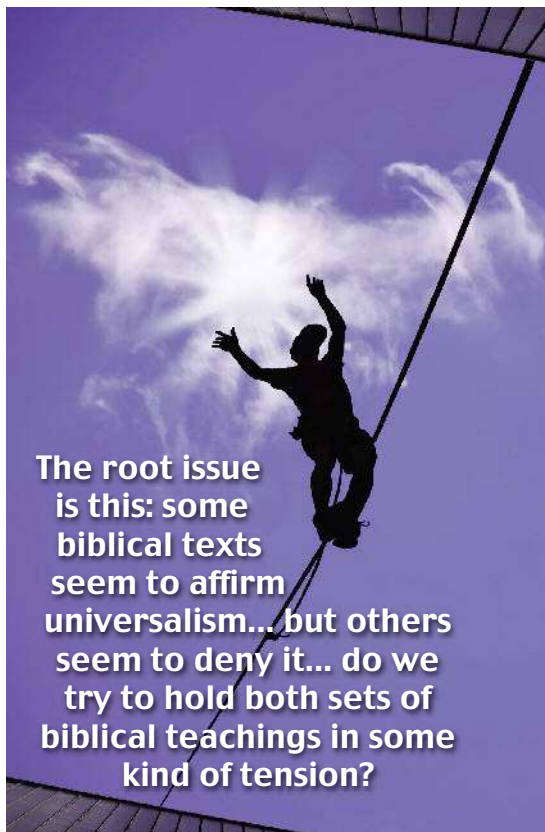
At the heart of the biblical debate is how we hold these two threads together. Do we start with the hell passages and reread the



universalist texts in the light of them? That is the traditional route.

Or, do we start with universalist passages and reinterpret the hell texts in the light of them? That is what many universalists do. Or, do we try to hold both sets of biblical teachings in some kind of tension?

There is also the question of wider biblical-theological themes. For instance, how might reflection on the Bible's teaching about God's love, justice, punishment, the cross-resurrection, etc. influence our theology of hell?



This is not just about finding "proof texts" with which to whip your opponent (both sides are capable of that), but about making best sense of the Bible as a whole. When we follow the big plotline of the scriptures, which ending to the story has the best "fit"? Universalists believe that the ending in which God redeems his whole creation makes the most sense of the biblical "metanarrative" (the big story). Traditionalists disagree.

So, this debate is not between Bible-

believing Christians (traditionalists) and Bible-denying “liberals” (universalists). It is largely a debate between two sets of Bible-believing Christians on how best to understand Scripture.

Myth 3: “Universalists don’t think sin is very bad.”

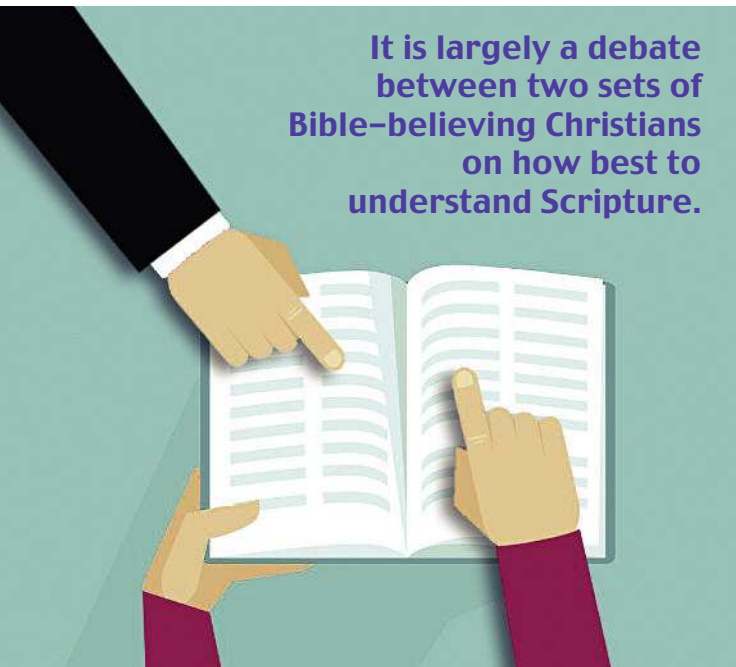
Denny Burke (a New Testament lecturer) thinks universalism’s “weak” view of hell is based on a “weak” view of sin which, in turn, is based on a “weak” view of God: “Sin will always appear as a trifle to those whose view of God is small.”

Universalists “obviously” think sin isn’t something to get too worked up about. After all they believe that God’s job is to forgive people, right?

Once again we are entering

...this debate is not between Bible-believing Christians (traditionalists) and Bible-denying “liberals” (universalists).

It is largely a debate between two sets of Bible-believing Christians on how best to understand Scripture.



the realm of mythology. Propose as strong a view on the seriousness of sin as you wish, and you’ll find universalists who affirm it.

Does sin affect every aspect of human life? Is it an utter horror that degrades our humanity and warrants divine wrath? Does it deserve eternal punishment?

Universalists could affirm all of these things so long as they believed that God’s love, power, grace and mercy are bigger and stronger than sin. Universalists do not have a low view of sin; they have a high view of grace: “Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more” (Romans 5:20).

Myth 4: “Universalists believe in God’s love but forget his justice and wrath.”

We hear, “God is love. But, He is *also* just. God pours out His mercy, but He *also* pours out His wrath.” The implication is that

universalists overplay divine love and forget that God is also holy and just. Right? Wrong. Christian universalists have a lot to say about God’s holiness, justice, and even his wrath. Typically, they think God’s divine nature cannot be divided into conflicting parts in such a way that some of God’s actions are loving (e.g. saving sinners) while others are just and full of anger (e.g. hell).

They see all of God’s actions as motivated by “holy love.” Everything God does is holy, completely just and completely loving.

So whatever hell is about, it must be compatible not simply with divine justice, but also with divine love. This means that it must, in some way, have the good of those in hell as part of its rationale.

Universalists feel that one danger in conventional theologies of hell is they make much of God’s justice and anger, but appear incompatible with his love. Thus, traditional theologies divide the unity of God’s nature.

Myth 5: “Universalists think that all roads lead to God.”

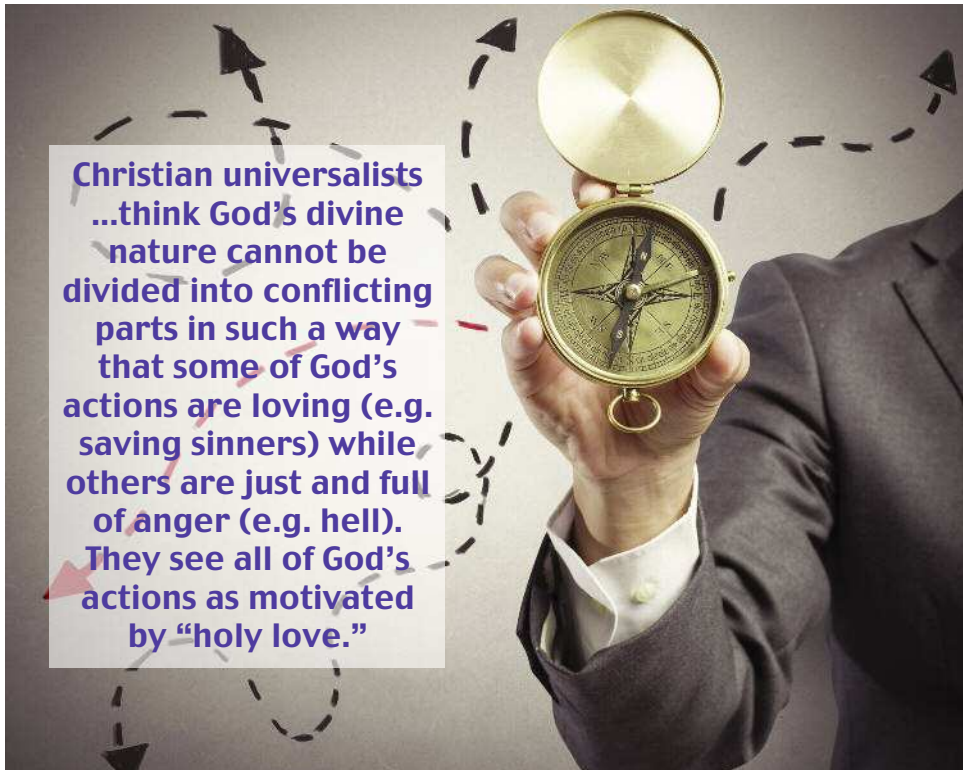
Here is Kevin Mullins’ definition of universalism: “Universalism is the belief that everyone, regardless of faith or behavior, will be counted as God’s people in the end. All roads lead to Him. All religions are just different expressions of the same Truth.”

That idea is what underlies C.R. Parke’s comment that, “If Rob Bell denies hell then he denies the need for a ‘savior’ and makes the sacrifice of Jesus irrelevant.”

Here our conversation partners have confused universalism (the view that God will one day save all people through Christ) with *pluralism* (the view that there are many paths to God and that Jesus is simply one of them).

But Christian universalists deny pluralism. They insist that salvation is found only through the atoning work of Christ. Without Jesus nobody would be redeemed!

Now there is a disagreement between Christians about whether one needs to have explicit faith in Jesus to share in the salvation he has bought. Some Christians, called exclusivists, think that only



Christian universalists ...think God's divine nature cannot be divided into conflicting parts in such a way that some of God's actions are loving (e.g. saving sinners) while others are just and full of anger (e.g. hell). They see all of God's actions as motivated by "holy love."

Universalists feel that one danger in conventional theologies of hell is that they make much of God's justice and anger, but appear to be incompatible with his love. As a result, they divide up the unity of God's nature.

especially worried that if the fear of hell were reduced, people would have little to constrain their sinful behavior. Thus universalism, they feared, would fuel sin.

But the fear of punishment is not the

only motive for avoiding sin. Far more important for holy living—indeed, the *only* motive for heartfelt holy living—is the positive motivation inspired by love for God.

Who, after all, would reason, "I know that God created me, seeks to do me good, sent his Son to die for me, and that he will always love me—so I must hate him!"

On the contrary, the revelation of divine love solicits our loving response (1 John 4:19).

Clearly there is an important debate to be had. But if we desire more light and less heat we need to start by getting a clearer understanding of the view under discussion. □

¹ Adapted from Robin Parry, 'Bell's Hells' in the Baptist Times, 17 March 2011. <http://www.baptisttimes.co.uk/bellsells.htm>.

Robin Parry is the author of The Evangelical Universalist (under the name Gregory MacDonald) and co-author of Four Views of Hell (2016).

those who put their trust in the gospel can be saved. Others, called inclusivists, think it is possible to be saved through Christ even without explicit faith in him.

But we need to be careful not to confuse that discussion with the issue of universalism. The former debate concerns how people can experience the salvation won by Christ. The latter concerns how many people will finally be saved. Two different questions.

Thus, some universalists are inclusivists and others are exclusivists, but neither relegates Christ to the sidelines.

Myth 6: "Universalism undermines evangelism."

One author writes, "I do think the Scripture is clear that salvation at least has some limits. If it doesn't, then preaching and evangelism are ultimately wasted activities."

Why, after all, would anyone bother to go through all the

effort and struggle of evangelism if God is going to save everyone in the end anyway?

Must universalism really undermine evangelism? Not at all. There are many reasons to engage in mission and evangelism, not the least of which is that Christ commands it. And it is a huge privilege to join with God in his mission of reconciling the world to himself. The gospel message is God's "foolish" way of setting the world right so, of course, universalists will want to proclaim it.

Fear of hell is not the only motivation for mission. And, what is more, the majority of universalists do fear hell. While they may not view it as "the end of the road," they still consider it to be a dreadful state to be avoided.

Myth 7: "Universalism undermines holy living."

During the 17th to the 19th centuries many Christians were

by Randal Rauser

"If you want to see folk damned..."

J.I. Packer has long distinguished himself as among the foremost evangelical critics of universalism. At the same time, he also made the following admission:

"No evangelical, I think, need hesitate to admit that in his heart of hearts he would like universalism to be true. Who can take pleasure in the thought of people being eternally lost? If you want to see folk damned, there is something wrong with you!"

...moral outrage at others' sin is often a confession of one's own deeply repressed cravings. Do we ourselves need hell to keep our envy of sinners at bay?

Packer's certainly right about that. And yet, the disturbing truth is that many conservative Christians *don't* want universalism to be true. I wrote about this problem four years ago in "The very worst reason to reject universalism." In that article I noted that acerbic Christian apologist Ray Comfort repudiated

universalism because it entailed that Nazis and pedophiles could end up in heaven. Yes, it does mean that. It also means that acerbic Christian apologists like Ray Comfort can end up in heaven. And even a few tentative apologists too!

I was reminded of this topic the other day while reading the following passage in Brad Jersak's *A More Christlike God*:

"According to Archbishop Lazar Puhalo, moral outrage at others' sin is often a confession of one's own deeply repressed cravings. Do we ourselves need hell to keep our envy of

sinners at bay? One pastor in my city even confessed that without the threat of hell, he would not be a Christian." (20)

The notion that people are most vociferous against the sins with which they most struggle is so familiar as to be called a cliché. The pastor who regularly rails against "demon alcohol" or "lust" invites

suspicions as to his own struggles.

What I find especially haunting is the suggestion that we might need hell to reassure us of our own life decisions to eschew certain temptations (and, dare we say it, our inherent worth and superior moral standing over the "sinners"). Two of Jesus' parables speak powerfully to this. The first is the Parable of the Workers in the Fields (Matthew 20:1-16): *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. 2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.*

3 "About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. 4 He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' 5 So they went.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. 6 About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

7 "Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

8 "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

9 "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. 10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to

grumble against the landowner. 12 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

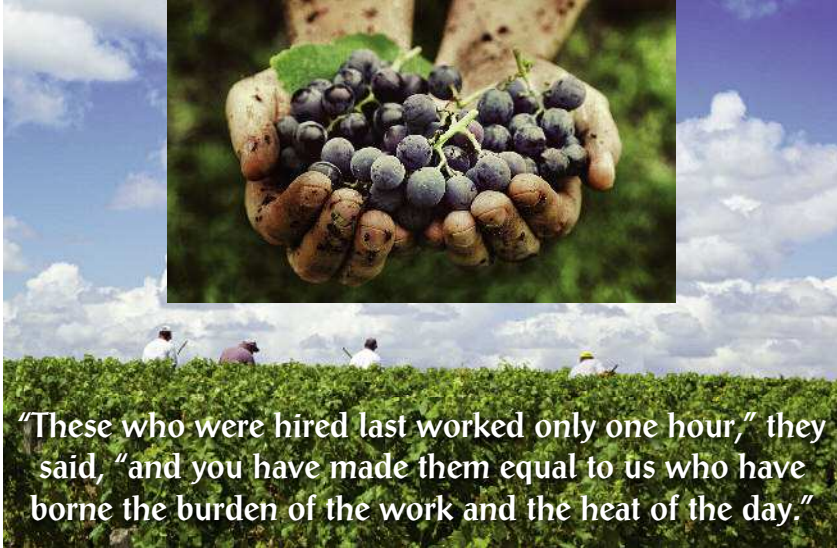
13 "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

I'll be honest. This is probably the parable of Jesus that I find most aggravating. That's why it's also my favorite. It can be as trivial as my resentment at allowing a car to merge in front of me or as cosmic as the thought of posthumous salvation for a damnable wretch. In each case, my own penchant for ungrace is placed on uncomfortable display when I begrudge the traffic merger...or the salvific invitation.

I recently heard a Christian express an objection to universalism that echoes the protestors in this parable. "You mean people could all be saved after they die?" this Christian exclaimed. And then came the key: "Then what's the point of being a Christian now?" Ouch. What a revealing question.

And that question leads me



Two millennia on, these parables retain their power to lay bare the hypocritical heart. And it is disturbing to realize in their illuminating glow how reluctant we all are to see the same grace given to us now extended to others.

straight into the second parable. We all know the parable of the prodigal son, but as many commentators have noted, the older son's response to the younger son's redemption really constitutes a second parable. We'll pick up the story (in Luke 15) in progress:

25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

31 "'My son,' the father said,

'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Do you think the older brother's moral indignation at forgiveness for his younger brother offers an insight into his

own "deeply repressed cravings"? Perhaps he is asking himself: "why did I spend all those years working for my father when I could have partied it up and then been forgiven like my younger brother?"

Two millennia on, these parables retain their power to lay bare the hypocritical

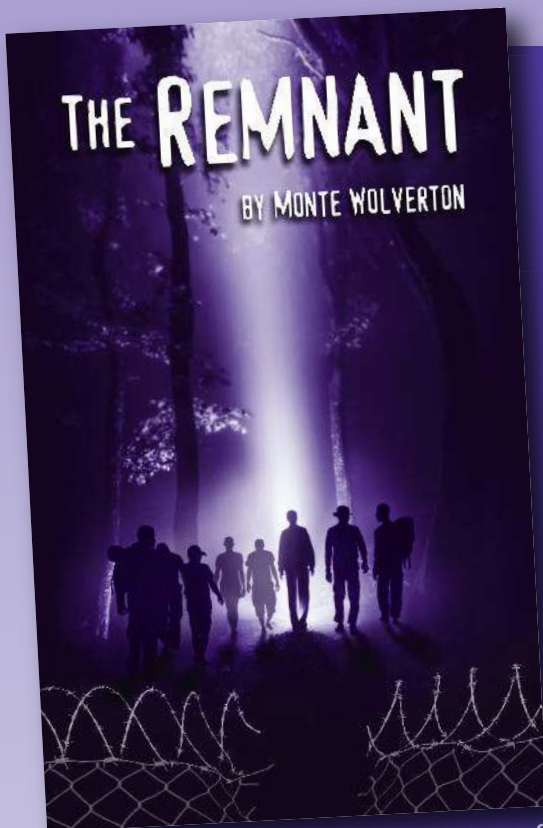
...my own penchant for ungrace is placed on uncomfortable display when I begrudge the traffic merger...or the salvific invitation.



heart. And it is disturbing to realize in their illuminating glow how reluctant we all are to see the same grace given to us now extended to others.

Packer was right. If you want to see folk damned, there is something wrong with you. □

Randal Rauser teaches historical theology at Taylor Seminary in Edmonton, Canada. For more about Randal visit randalrauser.com.



**Available now from CWRpress –
by award-winning author,
Monte Wolverton.**

In the year 2069 the Apocalypse came and went, but Jesus didn't show up, as some expected. Instead, a cataclysmic war, natural disasters and pandemics eradicated 90 percent of earth's population. Now, in 2131, a totalitarian government rules the world from the majestic, opulent capitol of Carthage, Tunisia.

Blamed for igniting the war, religion and religious books are banned. Citizens who will not renounce their religion are sent to work camps.

Grant Cochran, imprisoned in a bleak petroleum camp in what was once North Dakota, leads his family and friends to escape and embark on a long, dangerous quest for a Christian community.

Their resource in this journey? A cherished page torn from the now banished Bible—a remnant of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount handed down from Grant's grandparents.

What readers are saying:

Monte Wolverton finds an intriguing angle to take the reader back to the vibe and feel of the beginnings of the early church. *The Remnant* follows a rogue group of believers on a journey of discovery, risking it all to seek out authentic Christianity.—Chris Dowling, writer/director of *Where Hope Grows*

The Remnant, by Monte Wolverton, is set in the year 2069, the Apocalypse has occurred and a terrible war leaves a totalitarian government in charge. All forms of religion are banned, with the devout being sent to work camps. One such inmate hears rumors about Christian communities in the wilderness, and escapes with his family and friends. It's a novel with enough suspense to keep me interested in what happens next. I sure hope we never live in a world as extreme as in the novel, but like most dystopian futures, it's a portrayal of the worst that could be.—Posted on Motherhood Moment Blogspot

In *The Remnant*, Monte Wolverton looks into the future in which "religion" is blamed for the destruction of much of the world. The author uses this setting to highlight a variety of dysfunctional groups calling themselves Christians, as well as other religions. These encounters reflect what a person might find today. The book is a quick and easy read with a plausible ending given past world events.—Posted at TomLaw.org

While reading *The Remnant* I got the feeling that this novel is going to be big. *The Remnant* should be a good choice for the reader in need of a good book. In this dystopian tale set in a future where religion is outlawed, there are work camps, refugees and a dangerous life outside of the government-controlled areas. You can feel the religious ideals and hope of the main characters (however lost and distant they may seem). The ways in which people in such a setting misguide others is one of the gems in this novel. For fans of avant garde ideas in contemporary dystopian tales I highly suggest this piece. I look forward to the continuation of the story.—Martin Beltov, author

**\$14.00 U.S.—shipping included (\$25.00 Canada)
call toll-free 1-800-309-4466
or order online www.ptm.org/remnant**



Changing Diapers for God

In Luke 2, we read about Jesus' infamous *Home Alone* parody—when his parents realized they had left the boy Jesus behind in Jerusalem. When they found him (let's be honest) he seemed like kind of a smart aleck about it. Though I find that whole story fascinating, what struck me was the silence between his birth and that moment. Matthew and Luke give a few stories about his birth, but once Jesus is presented at the temple and the Magi leave, there's only silence until he's left behind in Jerusalem.

The non-canonical Infancy Gospel of Thomas attempts to shed some light on Jesus' childhood. We find Jesus doing incredible things like breathing life into clay birds, resurrecting a friend from the dead, and, um, cursing a boy to death and causing the dead boy's parents to go blind. Fun stuff.

But, as a parent, it's hard not to think that the Infancy Gospel was written to spice up an otherwise boring time in the life of Jesus. After all, we can't allow our greatest heroes to suffer even a moment of the mundane. If they aren't incredible 24/7, the unimaginable happens—they become ordinary and relatable. And that is just totally unacceptable!

Maybe Jesus put Harry Potter to shame with his awesome miracles as a kid, but I'd wager that the Gospel writers skipped over this period in his life simply because it was, well, boring. At least compared to the rest of Jesus' story.

Think about it. After the Magi left and the angels stopped singing, Mary and Joseph had a lot of less exciting time on their hands—time filled with breastfeeding, diaper changing, losing sleep, washing clothes and failed attempts to get baby Jesus to stop crying.

Now, I know we get squeamish about the adoration of Mary in the Roman Catholic Church. I get it. But if there was ever a woman worthy of our admiration (there have been many), surely Mary is at the top of the list.

Raising a child is hard enough. Add to that a patriarchal society in which Joseph was probably MIA doing other things most of the

time. Combine that with a life of poverty and you've got a potent mix that all but guarantees a long string of difficult, stressful days (and nights). To various extents, we can all relate to that.

But Mary wasn't just any parent—she was **changing diapers for God!** The health and well being of our children depends upon our care for them. But without Mary's willingness to be a parent—to do mundane, everyday things most of us take for granted—without the diaper changes, the breastfeeding, the constant care that cost her (and Joseph) untold amounts of sleep—and Jesus doesn't make it through childhood.

Without years of undocumented, unglamorous work that's not interesting enough to record, Jesus never walks across the Sea of Galilee, preaches the Sermon on the Mount, feeds the five thousand or carries his cross up to Calvary.

Changing diapers may be boring, but without Mary doing that boring work, there is no good news. That's what's profoundly interesting about what the Gospel writers *don't* say. There's an incredibly important lesson in the silence between the departure of the magi and the day Jesus lingered in Jerusalem.

Jesus' birth and ministry get all the headlines, but without those years and years of uninteresting everydayness, there is no foundation for the greatness that was to come.

Those years of monotony may not make for epic story-telling, but they serve as an important reminder that there is something sacred in the messy, the ordinary and the everyday.

Plenty of everyday things we do cause no significant, life-changing ripples. But in an era that's convinced the world can only be changed through extraordinary deeds, the silence surrounding Jesus' childhood reminds all of us of the importance of the mundane.

Simple acts of ordinary love and kindness may not garner much attention, but they're often far more important and world-changing than we give them credit for. □



EXIT

by Stephen Crosby

Nones AND Dones

According to sociologist, Josh Packard, in his scrupulously researched book, *Church Refugees*, there are currently 65,000,000 individuals in the USA who are “done” with church, nearly one-half of those retaining their “faith,” the balance having no “faith affiliation.”

The nones and dones are not rebellious, wounded, bitter, Absaloms, Jezebels and heretics as they are so

often caricatured. They are often the best, the brightest, the finest, most faithful and the most committed to Christ—those who take their faith very seriously. There are another 7,000,000 “on their way” to being done for a total of 72,000,000 nones and dones.

In the United States, there are also approximately 65,000,000 believers who self-identify as being part of an organized church.

Thirty to fifty percent of those who confess Christ in the USA, are **done** with “church,” (organized, institutional religion) or soon will be.

In the light of the number of nones and dones, is not some self-reflection in leadership in order rather than common responses of self-defensiveness, excuses, rationalizations, self-justifications, program-

hubris, because of issues of ego, money, control and power that make self-reflection impossible. It is a form of religious bondage, blindness and

gimmicky quick fixes. We would not dally around the perimeters of our operation, changing fringe features.

We would do a thorough and

If you or I owned a business (and alas, church is often too much like a business) and 30-50% or more of our customers vanished, would we blame our customers?

commitment to the status quo.

The “Dones”— Exasperated with Church and Gone

Could it not be that maybe there is something fundamentally out of whack in our beliefs, values, methods and what we have been calling “church” and “leadership” in the west for a very, very long time?

Could it not be that 30-65,000,000 folks might have a point or two worth considering? Is labeling, black-listing and scapegoating them an appropriate response?

Could it not be that God, by the Holy Spirit, is trying to say something to, and in, existing structures about core beliefs and values, and is he finding a welcome reception?

If you or I owned a business (and alas, church is often too much like a business) and 30-50% or more of our customers vanished, would we blame our customers? Of course not.

We would examine our product, services and market to identify something that has gone awry. We would not be passive. We would panic.

If we lost 30-50% of our client base, we would not fine tune or try to tweak this or that. We would not resort to



...maybe there is something fundamentally out of whack in our beliefs, values...what we have been calling “church” and “leadership” in the west for a very, very long time?

tweaking, accusations and labeling of everyone who leaves as “having a problem with authority” and other slanderous labels?

I propose that thinking 30-65,000,000 people are all rebels, missing God, and “outside of his will,” to be a preposterous and outlandish proposition. It is grounded in

Of course not. We would examine our product, services and market to identify something that has gone awry.

deep assessment of our operation from top to bottom.

Only in the dysfunctional world of religious Christianity would these eminently reasonable actions in the face of evidence not be considered.

We try to tweak existing structures and methods to try to be more “generationally relevant.” We try contemporary worship. We try fixing or amending this or that program, not realizing that all these efforts are just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic: the ship is sinking.

We fixate on changing



The use of guilt, shame, shunning, black-balling, ostracizing and slander of those departed and the pain and damage it causes people.... These things are not of Christ's kingdom.

methodology, never considering our message, values, beliefs, structures and ethics may need a tuneup, overhaul or jettisoning.

Only in the dysfunctional world of religious Christianity do we accuse those we are supposed to be serving and pretend that everything is just fine. God forbid that there might be something wrong with our paradigms, particularly as they relate to leadership.

So, What Can We Learn?

Steve, are you saying God is not

at work in those self-identified as associated with organized churches? No I am not. God can use anything, anyone, anytime, anywhere.

However, we must not confuse the reach of his redemptive goodness with his approbation of those structures into which his redemptive goodness reaches.

There is a difference between what his grace can do with what he is given, and the motion in history of the people of God. There are lots of good, wonderful and faithful people selflessly toiling away, some

very effectively, in very bad systems and constructs.

Daniel was effective in Babylon. Joseph did fine in Egypt. Jesus was not hindered by Jerusalem, nor Paul by Rome. But that is not saying God was endorsing any of the contexts and systems his servants were in.

If we are divinely assigned to a context, that context should not define nor limit our love, power, nor service. If it does, that does not say much about the potency of either our love, power, or service—or perhaps we missed our assignment.

However, there were once thriving apostolic churches in the cities of Asia Minor. Where are they today? Gone. **God's faithfulness and goodness of the moment guarantees no organization or association of believers an indefinite future.**

I am saying that in the face

of such overwhelming facts presented in Packard's book, the very least leaders in the Christian establishment (for lack of a better term), on whatever size, scale, shape or form it manifests can do is some self-reflection rather than scapegoating others.

Let me cut off the: "Why the worry? God will always have his church" voices out there. Of course he will.

The real church is eternal, unstoppable and victorious. God's church is going forward, and God will always have his bride. That is not the point. The issue is twofold:

- The use of guilt, shame, shunning, black-balling, ostracizing and slander of those departed and the pain and damage it causes people. These things are not of Christ's kingdom.

- Assuming that myself personally, or the organization, entity or structure that I am part of is automatically included in that overcoming church, and that the organization is guaranteed perpetuity, because it is "God's church." Not necessarily. If more evidence is required, one need only visit Europe and see the ghostly shells of once vibrant church edifices littering major cities and churches that have been converted to mosques in those same cities.

Lastly, to address the inevitable voices out there that will try to say that we should ignore all this and only "love" and "not speak negatively about the church," or that messages like this are "tearing down the body of Christ," and so forth, I quote here my friend, John Matthews of Kelowna, BC:

1. It is important for people to understand the difference



We try fixing or amending this or that program, not realizing that all these efforts are just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic: the ship is sinking.

between the Church (every follower of Jesus the Christ throughout all time) and the institution frequently called "church" (the human

the associated behaviors or practices of the institution or individuals does not make you unforgiving, someone who "hates your brother," or does

The real church is eternal, unstoppable and victorious. God's church is going forward, and God will always have his bride.

hierarchical institution consisting of many denominations and organizations that usually meets in a building and claims to follow Jesus the Christ). They are not the same thing.

2. Everyone who frequents the institution called "church" and assumes the label "Christian" is not necessarily a follower of Jesus the Christ and therefore not necessarily a "brother or sister."

3. Pointing out the above distinctions and challenging

not love the Body of Christ.

4. It is possible to love the Church while not loving the "church."

Take the time to understand these issues because you will be challenged on one or more of them if you claim to be a Jesus follower. □

Stephen Crosby and his wife Rita have ministered in churches, conferences and Bible Schools in nations on four continents for over four decades. For more about Steve visit www.stevecrosby.org.



This article serves as an “on the other hand” perspective to Steve Crosby’s article “Nones and Dones,” which I affirm. I appreciate how he challenged caricatures and called churches to rigorous introspection. Thus, what follows is *not* a rebuttal—merely further thoughts inspired by his insights.

The *nones* and *dones* phenomenon is surely the most significant news story of American Christianity today. As Greg Albrecht has said, it is a huge tide washing ashore. Some of it is causing damage, while some of it is healing and

cleansing—and CWR/PTM has been part of that wave for at least ten years.

Many factors contribute to the current exodus from the institutional churches (IC) and from faith in Christ as well. CWR/PTM witnesses the

shallowness, irrelevance and corruption. Religious shenanigans that create wounded, angry and disillusioned spiritual orphans. They’re *done* with it—and should be.

On the other hand, to avoid

MANY FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO THE CURRENT EXODUS FROM THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCHES... RELIGIOUS SHENANIGANS THAT CREATE WOUNDED, ANGRY AND DISILLUSIONED SPIRITUAL ORPHANS. THEY’RE *DONE* WITH IT—AND SHOULD BE.

wreckage all the time: good people traumatized by authoritarian control, spiritual abuse, religious striving, self-righteousness, judgmentalism, condemnation, legalism, moralism, exclusion,

reductionism or the charge of “church-bashing,” I will attempt to further nuance the discussion.

1. Let us admit that not all nones leave because of spiritual abuse.

Reasons for this *none* and *done* trend usually give the *nones'* point of view. This leaves such studies with blind spots. The solution is *not* to blame the *nones*, but neither is it wise to leave their reasons unexamined or incomplete. Other factors for the exodus include:

a. Radical individualism in our culture: The church often feeds the very individualism that kills it. Churches have so emphasized “freedom in Christ” and “personal relationship” that it can only encourage an “I, me, mine” spiritual narcissism. “Was I moved? Did the message feed me?”

And when churches do finally teach about a “greater good,” it’s largely focused on its own good—its growth and projects. Critical thinkers see through it as self-serving. Yes, some ministries thrive when they help their members see the bigger world. But if global concerns don’t require churchgoing (or even compete with it)—why bother?

b. Radical consumerism in our culture: Churches that buy into the consumer culture try to market attendance by being relevant and entertaining: “We have great worship, great preaching, great programs. Come to our show!” Attendees buy in—until they realize the entertainment is better elsewhere. Those who drink the Kool-Aid of religious entertainment inevitably abandon it for something more titillating. Or better, they realize Christianity shouldn’t have been a show to begin with, so they pursue something

more nourishing. And again, rightly so.

c. Freedom from attendance taboos: Did you know it used to be illegal to skip church? Then it became legal but still socially unacceptable—a religious taboo. But when the taboo is lifted, attendance becomes truly voluntary (finally!). Within one generation, we’ve watched those who are free not to go stop going. And this is important: *they don’t need a reason*. Sadly, some feel the old

culture and conditions for the exodus.

2. Don’t assume that either churchgoers or *nones* are Christ-less or Christ-centered.

a. Many churchgoers and leaders are faithful Christ-followers: We mustn’t paint all churchgoers with the same brush as spiritual charlatans. Healthy faith communities are often the first harbor and hospital for religious refugees. And as spiritually anemic as many churches may seem, most Christians are just trying

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...IT IS A HUGE TIDE WASHING ASHORE. SOME OF IT IS CAUSING DAMAGE, WHILE SOME OF IT IS HEALING AND CLEANSING...

religious compulsion to give one—to justify themselves. They may even contrive a sad tale of religious oppression when in reality, they were merely bored, offended or didn’t get their way.

In all these cases, note: the IC itself created the context,

to love God, each other and their community in their own humble ways. Churchgoing doesn’t automatically make them religious.

b. Some *nones* leave because they are too religious to stay; some *nones* are still religious: judgmental, condemning and

IN ONE DITCH I SEE A SOULLESS BODY (CHRIST-LESS CONGREGATIONS). IN THE OTHER LIES A BODILESS SOUL (CHRIST-LESS NONES). TO BE A *living* body—THE CHRIST-CENTERED CHURCH—WE NEED BOTH PARTIES, WE NEED CHRIST AND WE NEED TO STAY OUT OF EITHER DITCH.

accusatory. Unable to coexist with their siblings in Christ, they leave, slamming the door, and badmouth other believers. Some even leave because their church was not religious *enough* for them—their pastors were too “soft on sin” and inclusive of sinners. In such cases, leaving church doesn’t automatically make *nones* less religious.

c. Some who self-identify as victims belittle the real victims we seek to reach: I have worked with many victims of truly devastating abuse—spiritual, sexual and physical. I find it belittling of their experience when others “play the victim” in a drama of their own making and then claim “abuse.”

“How did the church abuse you?” “Pastor didn’t visit me enough. I didn’t like the changes. The music was too ____ [fill in the blank].” No, sorry. That’s not abuse.

3. How I see it: One body, two ditches.

a. The church is one body: The body analogy comes to us via Paul (1 Corinthians 12). Paul describes the bodily unity of diverse parts. He warns the Church (both churchgoers and *nones*) not to condemn or exclude each other. We are one; we need each other.

The term “Body” also implies our material and corporate activity in the world, versus a ghostly or abstract existence.

The Body is not actually a building or organization: it is people coming together (*ekklesia*) to experience and mediate Christ’s loving presence into the world—to be the voice and hands of Good News.

b. The church is headed down one road: The road I see has two lanes. IC “churchgoers” may take one lane and *nones* may travel in the other, but as fellow Christ-followers, we journey together on the Jesus Way.

But the road also features two ditches. In one ditch I see a

soulless body (Christ-less congregations).

In the other lies a bodiless soul (Christ-less *nones*). To be a *living* body—the Christ-centered Church—we need both parties, we need Christ and we need to stay out of either ditch.

Most *nones* will never return to IC congregations. What matters is how they return to *being* Church—functioning as and in the universal Body of Christ. Our hope is that CWR/PTM models and facilitates the pursuit of Christ-centered faith. □



CARTOON BY DAVID HAYWARD



CWR_m

CINDY BRANDT

OUTSIDE IN

A Perfect Plan for Your Life?

God loves you and has a perfect plan for your life. This was the alluring evangelical promise dangled before my generation, especially alluring for a child who anticipates a life not-yet-lived. It almost sounds like *God loves you and you will have a perfect life*. But someone, somewhere forgot the memo: *P.S. There is no such thing*.

Yes, the gospel is good news: we are promised redemption, forgiveness of sins, peace and reconciliation. But the Marketing Department goofed up with its choice of words. “Perfect” is elusive, unattainable and an empty promise.

I know this because I grew up and found out life can be complicated. We do the best we can, and we reap the benefits and the consequences. There is no “perfect”—only good enough.

But as a child, I grasped for that perfect blueprint, which in hindsight, looks an awful lot like a moral code. *No smoking, no drinking, no sex, and absolutely no “swearing.”*

What *not* to do was crystal clear. What *to* do was only slightly less explicit. The perfect plan was laid before us in the form of very good examples. For as long as I can remember, I looked up to the platforms where godly leaders displayed lives that abide by the perfect blueprint.

In my teens, they were the class presidents or team captains who talked about Jesus a lot. In young adulthood, they were the eloquent speakers who had kissed dating goodbye and saved sex until marriage, led youth groups and achieved Christian stardom by embarking on missionary or pastoral careers.

I’m describing my own growing up years. I dutifully followed that script. I am not trying to dismiss the testimonies of faithful people who were set before me as examples. But I was raised to conform to a narrative of the good Christian life, and now I am discovering that God is about busting the status quo of those narratives. God wants us to write different scripts, explore off-beaten paths, live fully into

our unique inclinations, and move outward upward, and away from a prescribed life.

To raise children *un-Fundamentalist* is to give them permission to grow without strapping a confining script onto their impressionable lives. Yes, it is responsible to communicate certain boundaries within a family or a community. But ***children are created to be dynamic and diverse and masterful storytellers of their own lives.***

The subtle pressure to conform to Christian culture norms works out well for those who happen to thrive within the script. Not so much for those who veer outside of the boundaries.

I’m thinking of the depressed child who can’t muster up the joyful Christian persona, the authority-bucking teenager who is labeled “the bad Christian,” or the child whose sexuality is slowly lathered in shame.

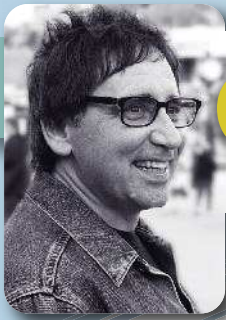
I want my kids to know God is much bigger than we have imagined. I want to show them the blueprint of our cloud of witnesses, but also intentionally place a fresh page before them to work out their own adventure.

I want to spell out **PERFECT** in big, capitalized, bold font—and then cross it out in an even more memorable red brush. To cite Brene Brown, “You are imperfect. You are wired for struggle, but you are worthy of love and belonging.”

Every part of their story matters. When they reign victorious and when they fall, whether they feel God’s presence or wander through the dark night of the soul. They are important because they are real, and they are *you*, and let no one tell you it’s a problem to *be you*.

When my kids leave my home, I want them to know whatever adventure they choose is a sacred calling, because God does not show up only in the “holy jobs.” Whether engineers or screenwriters or nurses or comedians or missionaries—they get to write their story for themselves.

I just feel fortunate to have had a front row seat in these early years. □



Jesus, Son of Adam

So this is Christmas... And I'm thinking about the Immanuel mystery of the Incarnation. The greatest of all the holy mysteries. Immanuel. God with us. With us in our humanity. God who has become one of us.

What if God were one of us? In Christ he is. In the Incarnation we can rightly speak of the humanity of God. O holy mystery! Don't be casual with this mystery.

Unless we enter deeply into the mystery of the Incarnation our Christianity may remain shallow, uninspiring and legalistic. Apart from the Incarnation, we will essentially think Christianity is about rules and rewards and where you go when you die. Presenting the gospel in the 21st century must begin with ...the beginning: the Incarnation. The breath-taking mystery of God joining us in our humanity.

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1).

The New Testament opens—not with a miracle, or even the Christmas story—but with a genealogy. Think about that. Jesus is introduced to us with a genealogy. Which means Jesus has ancestors.

Luke traces Jesus' ancestors all the way back to Adam. Like every human, Jesus is a son of Adam. That's what it means to be human. Christ is fully God and fully human. Early Christians taught,

We...confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man (Council of Chalcedon).

Jesus is the Son of God and a son of Adam. Christ affirms the acclamations that he is the Son of God, but when describing himself he exclusively uses the term "Son of Man."

Interestingly, the term Son of Man in Hebrew is *Ben Adam*—Son of Adam. It's even more interesting when you consider that *adam* (man) is from the word *adamah* (earth). In the mystery of the Incarnation God has fully and forever united himself with the

earthy creation called humanity. (Further, the word human is related to *humus*; earth or soil; and is also related to the word *humble*.)

Yet far too many Christians today essentially deny the full humanity of Christ. They're accidental heretics. So be amazed and let it take your breath away, but don't deny it: God in Christ has become fully and forever human.

God chose to redeem humanity by doing the unthinkable: In the fullness of time God became human—and was found wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger.

Because of what God has accomplished through the humanity of Jesus Christ, we can have a better hope than escaping humanity, we can actually be human.

The problem with religious attempts to escape our humanity is that it forces us to be other than what we are.

Such distorted religion makes us **inhuman**. And from being inhuman, it's all too easy to become **inhumane**. And thus the dark side of religion with its crusades and inquisitions.

Once you understand the Incarnation (that God is with us in humanity) you can never again look with contempt upon your fellow sons of Adam and daughters of Eve.

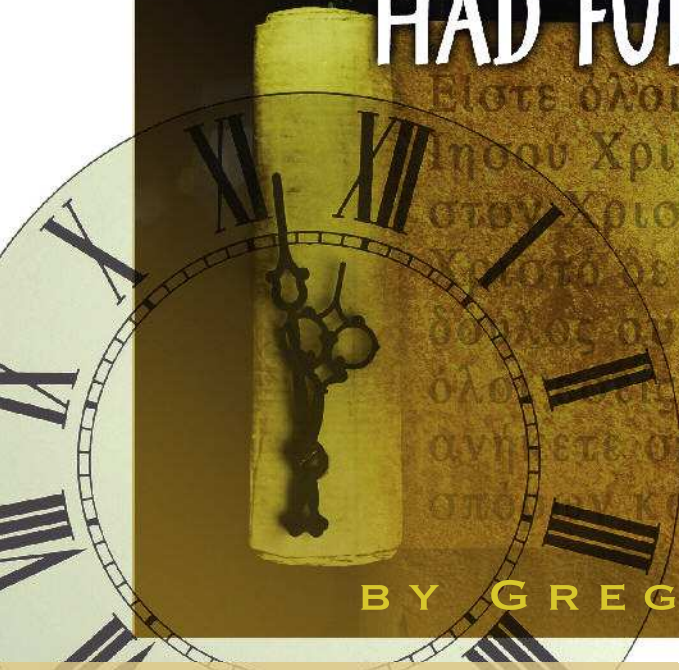
According to Jesus, how we treat the most marginalized of humanity (the impoverished, the imprisoned, the immigrant, and the infirm) is indeed how we treat God (See Matthew 25).

The implications of the Incarnation are staggering. Humanity has failed at being human. We know this from history. But through his life and his cross, through his Incarnation and his Resurrection, Jesus recovers our humanity for us.

Jesus is our Savior. The Savior of Humanity. The Savior of the World.

So whatever you do this Christmas season, be conscious of being fully alive and fully human, and that this is possible because of what Christ accomplished in his Incarnation. In so doing you glorify God as a redeemed son of Adam, as a redeemed daughter of Eve. □

"WHEN THE TIME HAD FULLY COME..."



BY GREG ALBRECHT

*You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But **when the time had fully come**, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.—Galatians 3:26-4:7*

Think back to your youth, perhaps a time when your mother and father promised to take you to the park, or on a picnic or to the circus. You couldn't wait for that time to come, could you? That's the way we were when we were kids—we drove our parents batty by continuously asking them, "Is it time yet?"

Then, when we were in grade school and high school, we asked a similar question every year, as the end of the school year approached. “Is school just about over? Is it time for summer vacation yet?”

Most of the time, when we were young, we were waiting for time to pass so that something else could happen. Have you ever asked a three or four-year-old their age? Be prepared for the most exacting math they are capable of. The youngest will normally pull themselves up to their full height and pronounce, “I am 4 and 11/12.” Just kidding, they’re not that exacting, but would be if they could.

Of course, later in life we don’t want to be 55½, or 68½. We don’t want our next birthday to be our 70th birthday. We want time to slow down.

Children of God

The passage above (Galatians 3:26-4:7) is all about being a child, and it’s all about growing up. It is all about spiritual rebirth, as well as spiritual adoption. It tells us what it means to be one of God’s children, and how we become a child of God.

This passage begins, in Galatians 3:26, with a discussion about faith in Christ Jesus and how that faith allows us to be baptized into and clothed with Christ.

This is not so much a passage about a specific external act of baptism, about how much water is used, about how old we must be, and all the other issues that are often discussed when



...WHEN WE WERE IN GRADE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL, WE ASKED... EVERY YEAR, AS THE END OF THE SCHOOL YEAR APPROACHED. “IS SCHOOL JUST ABOUT OVER? IS IT TIME FOR SUMMER VACATION YET?”

water baptism is discussed. This is, instead, a passage about being completely covered, clothed and transformed by and into Christ, so that **what we were is no longer the issue**, in terms of our identity.

By faith in Christ we enter a new family, as Paul so powerfully and beautifully explains in verse 28. Paul is saying that God’s family transcends physical distinctions, for God’s family integrates all of our physical differences and distinctions so that his family includes rather than excludes. All are welcome. All are invited.

In verse 29 Paul links earlier discussions about what it meant to be a Jew, under

the law, and thus to have Abraham for a religious father. Paul says that those who are in Christ are actually spiritual heirs of Abraham, in the sense that they are heirs of the faith of Abraham. Abraham, as Paul eloquently explains in Romans chapter 4, was justified by God, not by his obedience, but by his faith.

The Bridge from Abraham to Jesus

Instead of seeing the Jew as the owner of the old covenant, and the gentile the owner of the new

covenant, Paul instead, through a Christ-centered perspective of the Old Testament, explains that the promises to Abraham are linked with the blessings we receive in Christ. Paul completely obliterates the argument that one must obey the old covenant rules in order to receive the promises given to Abraham by saying that those who accept Christ become the heirs of the promises to Abraham—for the spiritual significance of the promises to Abraham take precedence over any physical overtones.

So Paul moves the discussion from external human performance, from the idea that “if you keep the law then you will receive

THE GALATIANS HAD BEEN INDOCTRINATED WITH THE FALSE TEACHING OF THE LEGALISTIC JUDAIZERS, WHO TOLD THEM THAT... GRACE WAS NOT ENOUGH... YOU HAVE TO SHOW GOD WHY YOU’RE WORTHY... YOU HAVE TO CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR SALVATION.

physical blessings” to the ultimate fulfillment of any and all promises, by the grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

As we continue reading in the initial verses of the fourth chapter of Galatians, Paul continues to explain what it means to be a child of God. The Galatians had been indoctrinated with the false teaching of the legalistic Judaizers, who told them that their faith was useless unless they earned God’s good graces by virtue of their obedience to the old covenant.

Grace was not enough, said these religious legalists. You have to show God why you’re worthy—you have to demonstrate to him why he should love you—you have to contribute to your salvation.

All in the Family

To combat this heretical, religious counterfeit, this monstrous lie that completely devalues God’s grace, Paul employs the word pictures of sons and heirs, and then more fully develops these word pictures or metaphors. He says that while we are God’s children, we are not his children in the sense of being immature babes who cannot function. If that’s the case, then as children in God’s household we would be no different than slaves.

What Paul is talking about is the transformation that God effects, turning us into mature Christians in Christ, and as a result, full heirs of the promises of God, given to us by his grace. The world to



IT IS ALL ABOUT SPIRITUAL RE- BIRTH, AS WELL AS SPIRITUAL ADOPTION... BY FAITH IN CHRIST WE ENTER A NEW FAMILY...

which Paul originally wrote had several different customs about passing from childhood to manhood.

In Judaism, a boy passed into full adulthood shortly after his 12th birthday.

In Roman society, the father decided when the child would become an adult. Every year, on March 17, a festival was held, and if the father felt the child was ready, the child would be formally adopted by his father as his acknowledged son and heir.

When the father adopted his child, the child was considered to have come of age. The now formally adopted child, heir of the father’s wealth, would receive new clothes (it is interesting that Paul often speaks of an adopted Christian as being clothed in Christ, using that very terminology in Galatians 3:26).

In the Greek world, a minor came of age at about 18 years.

In light of these customs, Paul pictures a small child who is the heir of a big estate. As

long as he is a child and has not been adopted by his father, he is no different from a slave. He has no freedom. He has no inheritance. Paul says that this was everyone’s condition, in terms of their relationship with God, before Jesus came to earth. Before Christmas, that was our spiritual state. Before Christ we were slaves to the *basic principles of this world*.

Religious Principles

Paul uses the word *principles* in Galatians 4:3, and in 4:9, as well

as in Colossians 2:20, to describe the rituals, ceremonies, obligations and duties that legalistic religion says we must obey in order for God to love us. Principles of religion are all about what we can see, touch and feel. When we are in Christ, he transforms us from the inside out, externals no longer control us. We are not slaves—we are free.

A child is subject to principles, and according to the analogy, rightly so, for they have not been accepted by society or by their parents as full adults. Apart from Christ, that’s a perfect picture of our spiritual condition. Apart from Christ, we would still be under the control of taskmasters. Apart from Christ, we would still be no different than slaves. Apart from Christ, we would have no rights, no freedoms, no inheritance.

And now we come to Galatians 4:4, a verse that speaks of the birth of Jesus as happening **When the Time Had Fully Come**.

It was that time when the Father said, "It's time. It's time for me to offer my children their inheritance. It's time for my children to stop being children, and to become full heirs of my kingdom, to receive the full privileges of my family."

It was the perfect time for the arrival of Jesus in terms of cultural and historical conditions. The world was united under Roman rule, experiencing pax Romana, the peace of Rome, a "peace" that

The common language then was Greek, which encouraged communication and proved to be a great advantage to the proclamation of the gospel.

Verse 5 tells us the purpose behind this intricate divine planning, the purpose for which **the time had fully come**.

God intervened in history to change our relationship with him. He intervened in history, coming to us in the flesh in the person of Jesus, so that he could redeem us, purchasing

But Wait Just a Minute!

Let's step back—and ask a few questions: The perfect time? Everything was just right? This was the idyllic intersection of time and eternity? How could Paul have said that?

1) Mary became pregnant before she was married. So Mary and Joseph had to deal with the consequences of Mary being a pregnant, unmarried (at the time of conception at least) teenage mother. How did their families and friends react? What kind of ugly rumors and gossip floated around the neighborhood?

These are hardly optimal circumstances upon which to begin a marriage—God chose these kinds of circumstances? This was a good time?

2) Then there was the difficult journey from Nazareth

IT WAS THE PERFECT TIME FOR THE ARRIVAL OF JESUS... THE WORLD WAS UNITED UNDER ROMAN RULE, EXPERIENCING PAX ROMANA, THE PEACE OF ROME, A "PEACE" THAT RESULTED FROM THE MILITARY SUPERIORITY OF THE ROMAN LEGIONS...



ROMAN ROADS LINED THE EMPIRE... WHICH THE APOSTLES OF JESUS LATER USED TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL THROUGHOUT THE EMPIRE... THE COMMON LANGUAGE THEN WAS GREEK... A GREAT ADVANTAGE TO THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL.

resulted from the military superiority of the Roman legions. Rome had done so much more to make this the perfect intersection of time and eternity. Roman roads lined the empire, enhancing travel and commerce—roads which the apostles of Jesus later used to proclaim the gospel throughout the empire.

The world generally spoke a common language, as it does today. Today the most common language is English.

our freedom from slavery to the law.

The time had fully come to release the gates of religious prisons, to offer freedom in Christ to everyone in bondage to religious principles, laws and servitude.

The time had fully come to change, once and for all, the terms of human relationship with God, from law to grace. Everything had come together in a perfect way in God's plan of salvation for the birth of Jesus.

to Bethlehem, for both Mary and Joseph. They undertook this journey when Mary was about ready to give birth. It was a necessary trip because they had to pay taxes and take part in a census. How did God decide this was a perfect plan?

3) There was no place to stay in the inn, so Mary had to give birth in a stable, with the sights, sounds and smells of animals very much a part of the environment that welcomed the King of kings

and Lord of lords into this world. This was the best that God could arrange? How was that perfect planning?

4) When Herod found out that the King of the Jews was about to be born, he issued a decree that all baby boys in Bethlehem, two years and younger, must be killed. Mary, Joseph and Jesus had to become refugees in Egypt until the bloodletting subsided. If you were a father or mother living in Bethlehem at that time, with a baby boy under two years of age, you wouldn't think of this as when **the time had fully come**, would you?

Paul didn't say **the time had fully come** so that everything would be comfortable and convenient. It wasn't comfortable, snugly, cozy and perfect then—at the first Christmas—and it isn't now.

A "Perfect" Christmas?

You may find yourself in a similar kind of place right now. Things are not going well. You or a loved one may have serious health problems. You may have worries about money. You may have family problems, loved ones are not talking to you because they're upset with you.

And now, it's Christmas time. Oh, great—now when you read magazines and watch television, you're reading about and watching "perfect" families, well-clothed, healthy, in big, warm houses, sitting by nice roaring fireplaces, with new cars parked in the

IF YOU WERE A FATHER OR MOTHER LIVING IN BETHLEHEM AT THAT TIME, WITH A BABY BOY UNDER TWO YEARS OF AGE, YOU WOULDN'T THINK OF THIS AS WHEN *THE TIME HAD FULLY COME*, WOULD YOU? ... THEIR FAMILIES' "CHRISTMAS PRESENT" FROM HEROD WAS THE MURDER OF THEIR BABY BOY.



JESUS CAME TO GIVE THE WHOLE WORLD ETERNAL LIFE... GREATER THAN THE PHYSICAL LIVES THOSE BOYS WOULD HAVE LIVED HAD KING HEROD NOT KILLED THEM. JESUS CAME TO GIVE US A TRANSFORMED LIFE, AN ETERNAL LIFE THAT HE LIVES IN US.

driveway, happy, obedient, well-mannered children running around—you think what a loser you must be, because these images are not even close to the reality of your life as Christmas approaches.

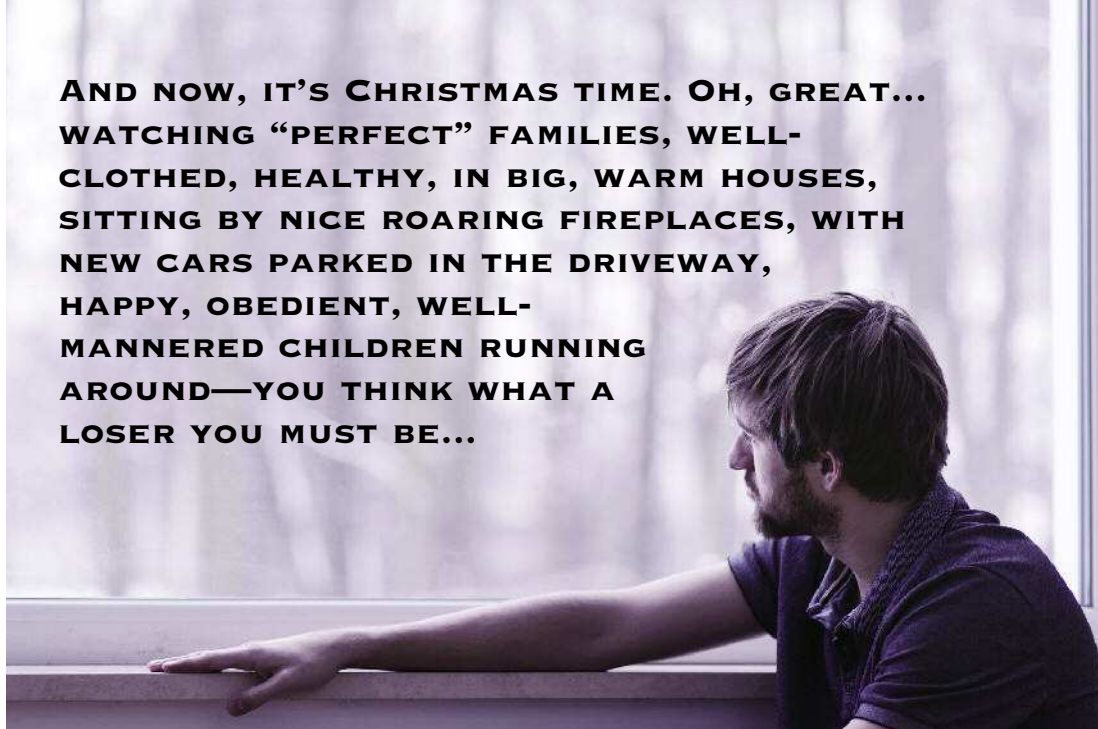
Let's think back to those baby boys in Bethlehem, the ones who were two years old and under who were killed by Herod because Jesus was born. Their families' "Christmas

present" from Herod was the murder of their baby boy. Are you worried about what you are you going to "get" for Christmas?

Think about what those families received—the death and funeral of a little infant. How tragic and heartbreaking is that? This was **the time that had fully come**?

Such things seem unfair to us, but let's turn it around, and

AND NOW, IT'S CHRISTMAS TIME. OH, GREAT... WATCHING "PERFECT" FAMILIES, WELL-CLOTHED, HEALTHY, IN BIG, WARM HOUSES, SITTING BY NICE ROARING FIREPLACES, WITH NEW CARS PARKED IN THE DRIVEWAY, HAPPY, OBEDIENT, WELL-MANNERED CHILDREN RUNNING AROUND—YOU THINK WHAT A LOSER YOU MUST BE...



full rights as heirs of his kingdom. We are now part of his kingdom, even now as we live in our mortal, fleshly bodies. We will inherit God's complete, eternal, spiritual kingdom when Jesus comes again and our bodies are glorified and made immortal. We will live in him and with him forever and ever.

look at it from God's perspective.

The baby boys in Bethlehem did not die in order to save Jesus. They didn't give their blood so that he could escape to exile in Egypt. It was precisely the opposite.

Why Jesus Came

Jesus came, as Galatians 4:5 says, *to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.*

Jesus came so that we might pass from legalistic religion to loving relationship.

Jesus came to free us from our spiritual prisons.

Jesus came to offer us new life, eternal life, to redeem us from the drudgery and bondage of a religious grind, where we endlessly toil in the fields of religious authoritarian slave-drivers, attempting, by the sweat of our brows, to please and appease God.

Jesus came so that we would pass from being cradled in the arms of our physical mothers to being cradled in the arms of God.

Jesus came to give the whole world eternal life, greater than

the physical life its inhabitants would eventually lose, greater than the physical lives those boys would have lived had King Herod not killed them.

Jesus came to give us a transformed life, an eternal life that he lives in us. He redeemed us that we might become sons of God, no longer slaves, so that the eternal life

BECAUSE JESUS CAME AT JUST THE RIGHT TIME—IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME, WHEN THE TIME HAD FULLY COME—WE ARE GOD'S HEIRS, THE FULLY ADOPTED CHILDREN OF PRIVILEGE AND FAVOR, FULL PARTICIPANTS IN HIS ETERNAL KINGDOM.

he gives us cannot be cut down by some brutal tyrant or maniacal killer.

We are heirs of the kingdom, by his grace, and our eternal life cannot be terminated by cancer or by a drunken driver! We are heirs—God will wipe away our tears, so that we will no longer experience pain, mourning, crying or death (Revelation 21:4).

God has adopted us because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. God has given us

Because Jesus came at just the right time—in the fullness of time, **When the Time Had Fully Come**—we are God's heirs, the fully adopted children of privilege and favor, full participants in his eternal kingdom.

The story of Christmas is God the Father saying to God the Son and God the Holy

Spirit—"It's time. It's not just the right time in society, culture and history, it's more than that. **The time has fully come** to do all that needs to be done to make ready the wedding banquet, to send out the invitation, to set my children free from religious bondage and obligation. It's time for all humanity to receive my invitation to become fully-fledged children of my kingdom, children of my inheritance." □



CWR_m

BRAD JERSAK

What Itching Ears Really Want to Hear

As a handful of sand thrown into the ocean, so are the sins of all flesh as compared to the mercy of God.—St. Isaac the Syrian

The people who know God well—mystics, hermits, prayerful people, those who risk everything to find God—always meet a lover, not a dictator.—Richard Rohr

What a beautiful gospel! God, the ocean of infinite mercy. **God, always the lover and never the dictator!** If that is our God, then I want everyone to know and experience him. Nothing about our gospel says, “Well, if God is so loving, forgiving and inclusive, there’s no point in telling others.”

The Christlike God is the best news ever and deserves global distribution. Indeed, that was Christ’s plan from the beginning: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15). Such good news. But what do you think—is it *too good* to be true?

For the past year, I’ve been meditating on a troubling warning from Paul’s pastoral epistles: *For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths* (2 Timothy 4:3-5).

What a sobering message for an evangelist who believes in and proclaims publically the limitless mercies of God! When I preach the bottomless depths of Christ’s love for the whole world, the question inevitably comes, “Aren’t you just tickling people’s ears with what they want to hear?”

We hear that accusation from critics and we hear it from our own hearts...all too frequently. But when I carefully double-check our scriptures, I’m pleased to rediscover that God’s love really is higher, wider, longer and deeper than we could ever ask, imagine, understand...or preach (Ephesians 3:18-20).

The beautiful gospel exceeds our ability to communicate or grasp. *To infinity and beyond!* (With a happy nod to Pixar’s “Buzz Lightyear”).

Back to the Apostle Paul’s caution. Who were these imposters? We’re not sure, but we know that Timothy was resisting religious teachers who were corrupt doctrinally and perhaps morally. They propagated “myths” opposed to the truth, possibly connected to rituals and requirements that puffed up the religious in-group. Parallels abound in our age. But why does religiosity tickle the ears?

Daniel Skillman, author of *Follow the Rabbi*, articulates it so well that I’ve asked his permission to repeat his words:

When I tell people that God loves everyone, always, and forever, and there’s a good chance all will come to embrace that truth eventually, I’m often told that I’m “preaching what itching ears want to hear.”

However, experience has taught me this: itching ears want to hear that someone’s going to be punished. Itching ears want to hear, “You’re in, but they’re out.” Itching ears want to hear about hell—that it’s very hot, and very, very full.

So, no, I don’t preach what itching ears want to hear. I preach that God looks exactly like Jesus, and this is good news because Jesus loves everyone and He will never stop. Few seem to want to hear that. But one day, I think, they’ll be pretty glad about it.

I think I’m starting to get it. **Grace does not scratch the itch of religious performance.** Yet our age-old message is good news, a beautiful gospel announced even in the Old Testament. I leave the last word to the prophet Micah:

Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious acts of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:18-19).

Hallelujah! □

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- Tired of being rounded up by religious authorities who fatten you up with spiritual junk food in their “holy” feed lot?
- Tired of humanly imposed restrictions, walls, fences and denominational boundaries?
- Tired of being told that Jesus can only be found within the confines of a particular parcel of religious real estate?
- Tired of being told God is mad at you and the only way to make him happy is to appease him by continually being in the “right” place at the “right” time doing the “right” things?

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“For Those Who are Banged Up a Little” The good news is that God doesn't throw us away because we're “banged up” a little—the good news is that Jesus came because we are “banged up” a little. Week of December 4

Mission Impossible This classic television show first aired in the mid-1960s, and while its missions seemed impossible, they pale into insignificance compared to the mission impossible of the birth of Jesus—God in the flesh. Week of December 11

One Yet Three Prepare to be enraptured and enthralled by the significance of the mysterious, magical and mystical number “three”—as it applies to the significance of the birth of Jesus for you and me. Week of December 18

Love Came Down—Still Does—Always Will! The Christmas story is not complete without an emphasis on its focal point—God in Christ came down to us with his love. Join us for our Christmas service. Week of December 25

“Today You'll Be With Me in Paradise” As we begin a New Year, we remember the outrageous grace of God extended to a criminal by Jesus—the same grace extended to you and me. Week of January 1

Healthy Faith or Toxic Faith? Join us as we discuss seven signs of healthy faith, as contrasted with seven signs of toxic faith. Week of January 8

Here Comes the Dreamer The world will be changed by those who dare to dream, so as George Bernard Shaw once said, “People who say it cannot be done should not interrupt those who are doing it.” Week of January 15

Jesus or Religion? # 1 Another Gospel Just as healthy food is often sold in the same environment as junk food, a similar dynamic is present with spiritual food. Always closely examine the ingredients and the contents. Week of January 22

Jesus or Religion? # 2 Have You Been Christianized? How did we ever get the idea that human institutions could take something as perfect as the gospel of Jesus Christ and make it “safer” for human consumption? Week of January 29

Jesus or Religion? # 3 “Thank You I'm Not Like Other People” Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Publican insists that Jesus produces humility while Christ-less religion produces arrogance. Week of February 5

Jesus or Religion? # 4 Religion—Where Is the Love? Think with us about that inscription on the T-shirt: “Religion: Giving Hope to a World Torn Apart By...Religion.” Where is the love? Week of February 12

Moving On Life in Christ is a journey, and Christ-followers do not have a reverse gear. We move on and we move forward in him and with him. Week of February 19

10 Religious Lies Many Christians Believe Here are ten religious lies that lead billions of people to march, in lemming-like fashion, right over the edge of a spiritual cliff. Week of February 26