

PLAIN TRUTH[®]

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

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The first chapter of John's gospel concerns itself with the profound significance of what happened at the intersection of time and eternity, when God in the person of Jesus came into our world to be one of us. The first 18 verses of the first chapter of John are powerful, majestic and in some ways mysterious. As literature, this passage ranks among the most profoundly meaningful essays of similar length.

This passage tells us that God came, in the person of Jesus, to be one of us, as the God-man. Let's just take a moment and try to get our heads around this extraordinary claim of Scripture. The first ten words of John 1:14 is a distillation of the gospel; *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*

God became a human, while obviously remaining divine, for by definition God never stops being God. He is the Word, the Eternal Son of God, the Alpha and the Omega, the Author of the gospel and the main subject of the gospel, the Lamb of God, the Prince of peace, the King of kings, Lord of lords ...as John 1:18 calls him, *God the One and Only.*

One of the great themes of Christmas is that God is for us—God's favor rests on and with you. God has personally delivered his peace, through his presence.

The first five verses of this first chapter of the Gospel of John teach us about the Incarnation. In brief, what Christians call the

The Visitor



by Greg Albrecht

Incarnation is the biblical teaching that the second divine Person of the Trinity became human without giving up his deity. God stepped out of eternity, remaining divine, in order to become something he had never been—human—to become part of his creation. The Incarnation is all about the enfleshing of God, when God came to us, as God in the flesh. The Incarnation is about **The Visitor**, when we became a visited planet.

There are many questions about this voluntary act of love, when God became human.

- Why would God want to become a human being?
- Why would God enter into this world and live as a normal human being?
- Why wouldn't God, who is holy and perfect, stay away from the



4



5



6

corruption, the sin, the muck and mire and suffering and pain that being human entails?

After all, God was fully aware before he

came to us that humans, despite God's love, would reject him;

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.—John 1:10-11

One of the great themes of Christmas is that God is for us—God's favor rests on and with you. God has personally delivered his peace, through his presence.

When God came to us in the person of Jesus, we rejected him, we betrayed him, we abandoned him and we crucified him. We tried to extinguish God, we tried to snuff out the Light of the world.

That's part of the story, but it's only the first act, if you like. In the second great act of God, the glory



Apart From and Before God's Grace

Apart from and before God's grace enters into our lives, we are hard-wired to make every effort to ensure that we are in control of as much of our lives as possible.

Apart from and before God's grace, all of our time, talents and treasures are devoted to our self-centered interests.

Apart from and before God's grace we spend our lives attempting to protect ourselves, build our fortune, secure our possessions and keep all forces that threaten our self interest under control.

Apart from and before God's grace we continually chase the pot of religious gold at the end of the rainbow coalition of its lies, tilting at windmills, trying in vain to punch our ticket for heaven based on our efforts and deeds.

We naturally gravitate to lifestyles that promise us ways to earn more rewards, to "fix" people who do not agree with us. But this world of control is a dark and nasty and unforgiving place. A world run on the premise of control is a world of manipulation, of guilt trips and emotional blackmail—it's world of incentives, report cards and performance reviews and carefully mandated programs based on the premise of cause and effect.

The early chapters of the book of Genesis poetically present the snake in the Garden of Eden as tempting Adam and Eve, assuring them if they ate the fruit that God prohibited, then they would be in control. Control is incredibly intoxicating. Control can turn otherwise nice, easy-going and humble people into insufferable tyrants. That promise the snake

gave Adam and Eve was the beginning of Christ-less religion.

The kingdom of God's grace is not a kingdom of gold stars and blue ribbons for good or exceptional performance, nor is it a kingdom of punishments, time-outs and demerits where God hands out penalties for failure to measure up.

On the other hand, the kingdom of religion is based on the same lie the serpent was peddling in the garden. Because the kingdom of religion is all about controlling as many people as it can seduce with its rainbow coalition of lies, the kingdom of religion promises its followers that they have the power to control life, outcomes and consequences. But the kingdom of religion (and the control it promises) is just an illusion. It's one big fat lie!

Jesus came out of eternity, where time and space are not dimensions, and where *me, myself and I* do not exist as boundaries, and as God in the flesh he came into our world of self-centered control. He brought the economy his kingdom—an economy of no limits, unbounded grace and unconditional love. Jesus embodied the kingdom that is beyond all human control and manipulation. **The kingdom of God is all about grace which defies human control, and Jesus brought that kingdom into a world of control and constraints.**

Grace involves trust, and that means we have to let go of the hold we think we have on life. That's a risk for us. God's love is so vast that his love means he willingly allows for us to take advantage of his good graces. Being forgiven by God is risky for us because while on the surface it's great to be forgiven,

then when we are forgiven it means God might want us to forgive someone we don't want to forgive.

It's good news that God is willing to "take a chance" on you and me even though we have a long record that proves we are not a good credit risk. Jesus died for us long before we made any commitment to reciprocate his love.

Look at the world of religion today—people are being persecuted, tortured, raped, mutilated and beheaded in the name of religion. The world of religious control always wants to have the last word.

But **Jesus takes the world of control and by God's grace, turns it upside down.** The cross of Christ has the final word. Jesus accepted all violence, hatred and recrimination and absorbed it—he sucked it all up, and forgave it all. Like a fire that burns itself out, all human hatred, pride and lust burned itself out on the cross—Jesus willingly accepted it and it killed him, humanly. But it did not win—he did!

Eventually, like the waves of the ocean, God's grace will crash against the sea walls of religious institutionalism, self-centered interests and all the control mechanisms we devise to give ourselves an illusion of safety and security and grace will inevitably erode human self interest and all our control mechanisms. God's grace will always win. □

—Greg Albrecht

Join us for the complete message "Control Freaks and Grace" at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of November 15, 2015.

Continued from page 1

and reality of the Resurrection, we are given absolute proof that the darkness of our world could not overcome Jesus. God could not be minimized, marginalized or overcome by human pride, envy and lust. Once again Light triumphs over darkness, the Light of the risen Lord. The people, as Isaiah prophesied, *walking in darkness have seen a great light* (Isaiah 9:2), the Light of Jesus Christ.

Christmas is not the end, it's just the beginning. Christmas does not exist in a vacuum. Christmas is not simply about the birth of a unique, once-and-for-all baby, it's much, much more than that. Christmas is about God visiting us. Christmas is about **The Visitor**.

As we worship **The Visitor**, we should consider every aspect of the Incarnation; God who is at home in a stable, God whose throne is a Cross, the Creator of all that we see, and all that we don't, stooping down to wash our feet.

Consider God in the flesh who feeds us with his own body and blood. Consider **The Visitor**, God who is omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal, holy and perfect yet who also became flesh. As we consider **The Visitor**, we remember that **The Visitor** did not come to be one of us so that he could lord it over us and treat us as servants, but instead, he came out of eternity into our world to call us his friends

Christmas is about God visiting us. Christmas is about The Visitor... Who is The Visitor? It was the Creator in that cradle.

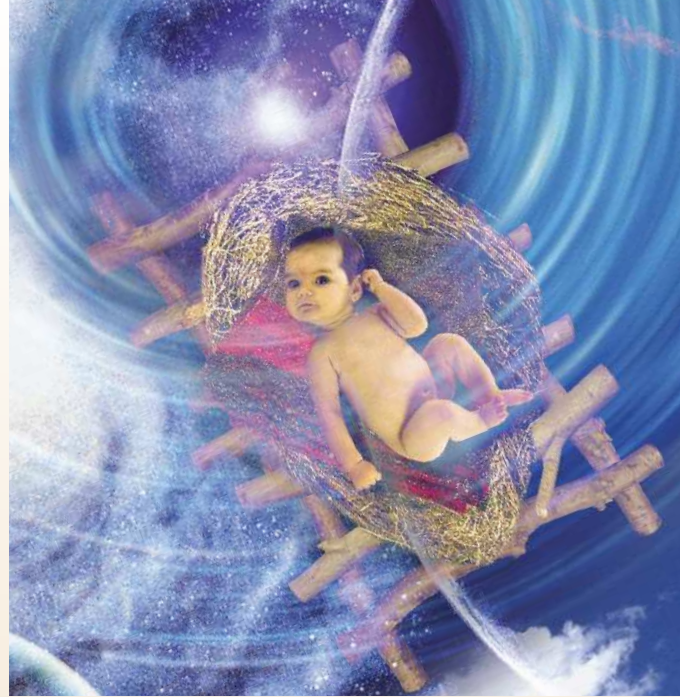
(John 15:15).

The Visitor brought heaven to earth. Moses gave us the law, but **The Visitor** personally delivered his grace and truth (John 1:17). When the law came, it came through Moses the mailman, but when grace and truth came, God delivered it personally.

God, in the person of Jesus, personally delivered grace and truth, so that you may know that God's law has no power of condemnation over you. God's law, delivered through Moses, cannot accuse you, because it was God in that manger.

Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). He didn't come breathing fire. He didn't come filled with threats and condemnation. He didn't come so that we could receive lurid, detailed explanations of the eternal torture that surely awaits us if we don't start obeying the law. He didn't come to reveal an angry and vindictive God.

Jesus came as a breath of fresh air. He came, not to start another religion, but to begin a revolution



that would eventually put religion out of business. He came to bring us into a personal relationship with God.

Jesus came with the incredible message that God really likes you and me. He wants you and me to be his friends.

Who is this Jesus? Who is **The Visitor**?

It was the Creator in that cradle. The first few verses of our passage in John 1 tell us that the universe has not always existed. This passage tells us that the universe we know and which now exists did not come into existence as a result of some meaningless progression of life forms, whose earliest life form was some kind of cosmic blob that somehow just turned up in space some gazillion years ago.

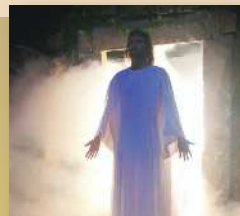
No, the Creator, the one who became Jesus (Colossians 1:15-16), the incarnate God who stepped into time and space created it all. He rolled up his divine sleeves, designed both the visible and the invisible, and then flipped the switch.

The first verse of John 1 calls him the Word—the Greek word used is *Logos*. *Logos* refers to the rational principle of order behind the universe—the English word “logic” comes from the Greek word *logos*.

John is making a distinction between the one God and the first and second divine Persons of the



Will the real
“Word of God”
please stand up!



Jesus alone is the infallible Word of God (John 1:1).

During our CWR/PTM 2015 “Year of the Bible” we will study and examine the Bible (the lower-case word of God) from a Christ-centered (the upper-case Word of God) perspective. The *word* of God is inspired by the *Word* of God. But by God's divine plan, humans have been profoundly involved in writing, editing, translating, preserving and publishing the Bible. Touched by human hands, the Bible cannot be seen as infallible or inerrant. Jesus alone, the Word of God, is infallible and inerrant. Stay tuned during our “Year of the Bible” for Christ-centered perspective, teaching and insight.

Godhead—God the Father and God the Son. God the Son, as the *Logos*, is the intelligence behind all that is. He is the “brains” behind the creation.

When we simply look up at the stars, or when we marvel at the complexity of a leaf that falls from a tree and when we gaze through a microscope or a telescope, we are left with one inexplicable conclusion—everything we see and observe works together, in symmetry and harmony. Everything has been designed. Everything fits together. There are food chains, there are dependencies, there are inter-related issues, more than we can imagine. And they all work together in harmony. What—indeed—*Who* is behind everything we see and everything we don’t see?

The birth of God in the flesh required no human father. He was born of a virgin. He is God from the Father alone and was man from his mother Mary. That miracle has been expressed this way—“God of God, light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.”

What love—what grace—what generosity!

The significance of Jesus’ birth is that the Creator of the universe did not declare himself immune from the human dilemma. He made us the way we are, and out of his overflowing love determined that he would become one of us, to know by human experience what it means to be human. He came to know human pain, suffering and death. He came to join us in our misery and our heartache.

He didn’t sit in a heavenly recliner, with angels peeling grapes for him, feeding him chocolate, content to watch earthly history unfold on his big screen television. He came into our world at the intersection of time and eternity.

No religion teaches that their god(s) became flesh, coming down to live in our slums and ghettos, experiencing poverty and pain. Authentic Christianity alone teaches that God became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Christmas is a time when we remember that God is at home in a stable. God is at home in the lowest of the low places where any human might live, be born or sink to. God stooped down to come and serve us. That’s why **The Visitor** came. □



Fellowship of the Unashamed

According to Bob Moorehead (as noted in his book *Words Aptly Spoken*) the original version of this inspiring prayer/poem was found on the person of a Christ-follower in Africa who was murdered because he believed in Jesus. Many versions and modifications of this prayer/poem exist, with a variety of edits—here’s our version of the original, as cited in “Winning by Losing”—the November 8 sermon at the audio teaching ministry of CWR.

I am part of the Fellowship of the Unashamed. The die has been cast. The decision has been made. I am a disciple of Jesus. Therefore, I won’t look back, let up, slow down, back away or be still.

My past is redeemed, my present makes sense and my future is secure. I’m done with low living, sight walking, small planning, colorless dreams, tame visions, mundane talking and cheap living.

I no longer need preeminence, prosperity, position, promotions, praise or popularity. I don’t have to win, be first, be right, recognized, regarded or rewarded. I now live by faith, lean on his presence and love with patience.

My face is set, my pace is fast, my road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions are few, but my Guide is reliable and my mission is clear.

I will not be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice or hesitate in the presence of adversity. I will not negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity or meander in the maze of mediocrity.

Christ has qualified me to become a part of the Fellowship of the Unashamed. I am his and he is mine. □

Perils of Bible Dissection

by Brad Jersak

In my mind, I see vividly a young man in a white coat, his eyes locked on mine, leaning forward and sputtering loudly and insistently, “What about the spleen?! What about the spleen?!” Only a small laboratory table creates breathing space between us—not enough to spare me from wayward droplets spraying with his words.

On the table lays a frog in a petri dish, pinned back and spread-eagle,

Pinning down, slicing open and mutilating this fascinating creature seemed a grotesque way to understand its essence.

its guts exposed in glorious detail. My nostrils cringe to the assault of wafting formaldehyde vapors. Our amateur biologist wields a scalpel—poking, poking, poking at the mince that had recently been a recognizable and attached organ—and continues to press, “What do you do with the spleen?!”

And I’m puzzled about what to say. Pinning down, slicing open

...with Bible flayed wide, a young theologian is barking at me...“What do you do with this verse?! How do you explain this?!” He wants me to see how terrifically “biblical” he’s being. How so thoroughly he’s refuting me with his holy surgical blade.

and mutilating this fascinating creature seemed a grotesque way to understand its essence. Its breath evacuated, the glistening skin now dull, the frog-song silenced forever. To catch a fly, to hop away, to reproduce tadpoles no more. That’s one mutilated amphibian! And now, the spleen removed and

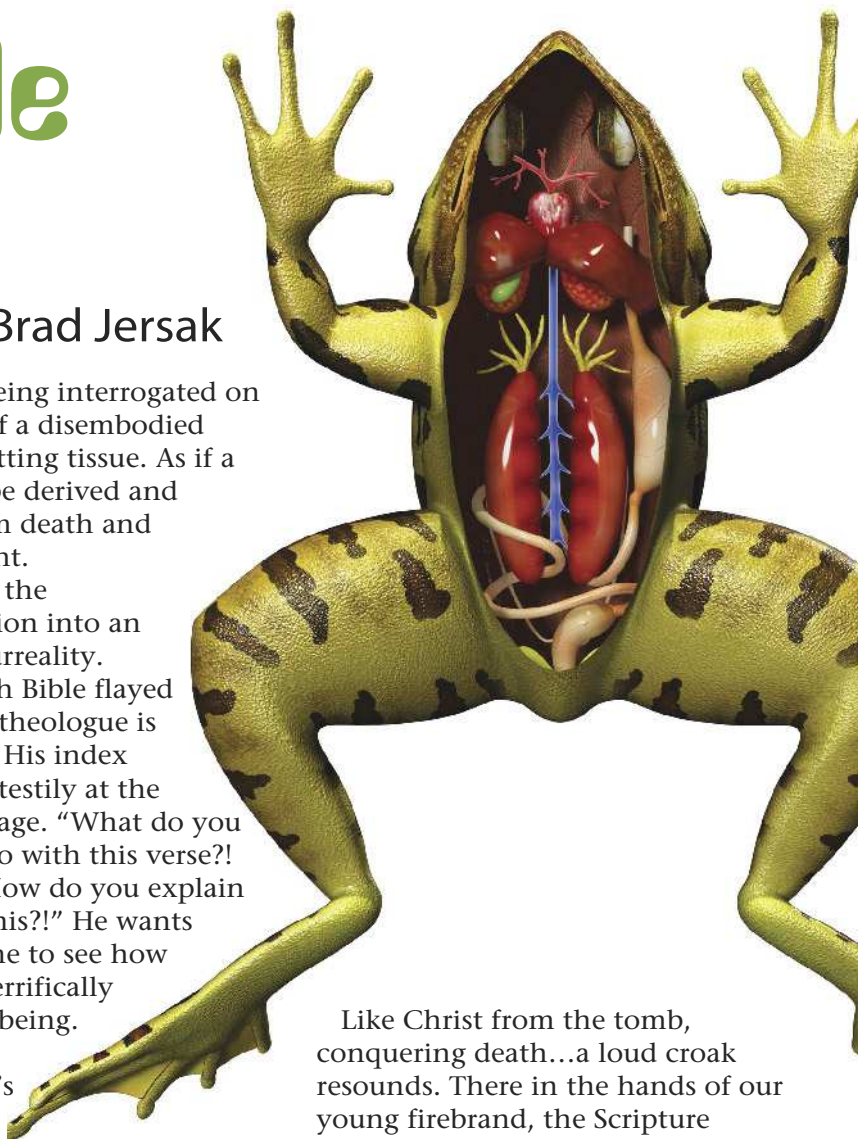
mashed, I’m being interrogated on the meaning of a disembodied fragment of rotting tissue. As if a dogma could be derived and developed from death and dismemberment.

I snap out of the unpleasant vision into an equally sour surreality. Before me, with Bible flayed wide, a young theologian is barking at me. His index finger jabbing testily at the

page. “What do you do with this verse?! How do you explain this?!” He wants me to see how terrifically “biblical” he’s being.

How so thoroughly he’s refuting me with his holy surgical blade. Yet somehow, the smell of Moroccan leather bears the death-taint of formalin and the verse he’s dissected looks like mangled pâté. Previously, I’ve drowned into a faint under

such waves of certitude. Exegesis devolves to an ugly execution. So I pray, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. I thought your words bring life. Can these bones yet live?” Then suddenly, gloriously, a sign and a wonder!



Like Christ from the tomb, conquering death...a loud croak resounds. There in the hands of our young firebrand, the Scripture transmogrifies before my eyes—and with a broad, wry grin, springs from his grasp and escapes free... spleen and all! □



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- *Your God Is Too Small*—J.B. Phillips
- *The Jesus I Never Knew*—Phillip Yancey
- *Beyond an Angry God*—Steve McVey
- *Twelve “Christian” Beliefs That Can Drive You Crazy*—Henry Cloud and John Townsend

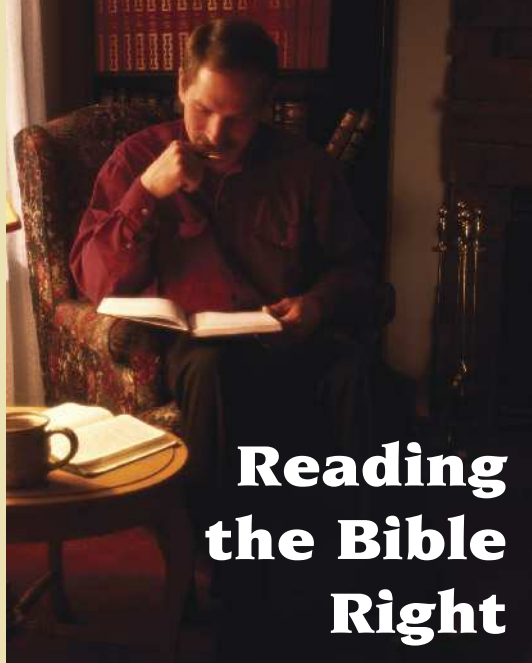
And Don’t Forget!

A More Christlike God—Brad Jersak*
Rejecting Religion—Embracing Grace
—Greg Albrecht*

* Available from CWR/PTM—while supplies last!—www.ptm.org

It's a STORY
 We're telling news here
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 The grand narrative of paradise
 lost and paradise regained
 The greatest "Once upon a time"
 tale every told
 The beautiful story which moves
 relentlessly toward—
 "They lived happily ever after"
 Never, never, NEVER forget that
 before its anything else it's a story
 So let the Story live and breathe,
 enthrall and enchant
**Don't rip its guts out and leave it
 lifeless on the dissecting table**
 Don't make it something it's really
 not—

A catalog of wished-for promises
 An encyclopedia of God-facts
 A law journal of divine edicts
 A how-to manual for do-it-yourselfers
 Find the promises, learn the facts, heed the laws, live
 the lessons
 But don't forget the Story
 Learn to read the Book for what it is—
 God's great big wild and wonderful surprise ending
 love story
 Let there be wonder
 Let there be mystery
 Let there be tragedy
 Let there be heartbreak
 Let there be suspense
 Let there be surprise
 Let it be earthy and human
 Let it be celestial and divine
 Let it be what it is and don't try to make it perfect
 where it's not
 This fantastic story of—
 Creation
 Alienation
 Devastation
 Incarnation
 Salvation
 Restoration
 With its cast of thousands, more Tolstoy novel than
 thousand page sermon
 It's a Story because we are not saved by ideas but by
 events!
 Here's a plotline for you: Death, Burial, and
 Resurrection
 Yes, it's a story—not a plan, not ology or ism, but a
 story
 And it's an amalgamated patchwork story told in
 mixed medium
 Narration, history, genealogy
 Prophecy, poetry, parable
 Psalm, song, sermon



Reading the Bible Right

BY BRIAN ZAHND

of lust and violence
 Really is an exercise in missing the point
 Speaking of missing the point—
 It's not did a snake talk?
 But what the damn thing said!
 Because even though I've never met a talking snake
 I've sure had serpentine thoughts crawl through my
 head
 Literalism is a kind of escapism
 By which you move out of the crosshairs of the
 probing question
 But parable and metaphor have a way of knocking us
 to the floor
 Prose flattened literalism makes the story small, time
 confined and irrelevant
 But poetry and allegory travel through time and
 space to get in our face
 Inert facts are easy enough to set on the shelf
 But the Story well told will haunt you
 Ah, the Story well told
 That's what is needed
 It's time for the Story to bust out of the cage and
 take the stage
 And demand a
 hearing once again
 It's a STORY, I
 tell you!
 And If you allow
 the Story to seep
 into your life
 So that THE
 STORY begins to
 weave into your
 story
 That's when, at
 last, you're reading
 the Bible right
 indeed. □

Dream and vision
 Memoir and letter
 So understand the medium
 and don't try so hard to miss
 the point
 Try to learn what matters and
 what doesn't
 It's not where and when Job
 lived
 But what Job learned
 In his painful odyssey and
 poetic theodicy
 It's not how many cubits of
 water you need to put Everest
 under a flood
 But why the world was so
 dirty that it needed such a big
 bath
 Trying to find Noah's ark
 Instead of trying to rid the world

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God Loves China

China. It might not be at the top of your list of concerns, unless you do business there, or your business competes with Chinese firms, or you are a Chinese citizen, or you are ethnically Chinese.

As a kid in the 50s I cleaned up my plate because “people are starving in China.” Later, my lingering impression of China was one of poverty, starvation and trudging workers in grey uniforms glancing nervously over their shoulders. I knew this had changed over the years, but sometimes change doesn’t sink in until you see it with your own eyes.

Last year I was invited to serve as a judge at the Xaimen International Animation Festival. Xaimen is a city of about 3.5 million people on China’s east coast, an hour by air northeast of Hong Kong. It’s a wealthy city, boasting over 600 financial institutions, 13 colleges and universities and a formidable and growing software industry.

Judges from several nations as well as China worked for three days, reviewing hundreds of works of animation, comic art and children’s books. Translators helped those of us who didn’t speak Mandarin. The festival organizing committee treated us with great honor, and I made many new friends. It was not all work. We explored nearby neighborhoods, spent hours talking over meals, and visited the huge Xaimen Software Parks—sub-cities of high-rise office buildings and apartments where tens of thousands live and work, churning out all kinds of software and computer solutions.

My first shock was the wealth (regardless of China’s recent economic turbulence). The expressways are filled with Chevys, Fords, Hondas, Toyotas, and Porsches. Supermarkets are well stocked and trendy shops line the boulevards. Of course, we also walked through neighborhoods where bicycles and motorbikes were the norm, along with street vendors and low-income housing.

There’s no question that China is here to stay as a leader in the world economy, which might make North Americans nervous. It’s easy to feel threatened from a distance, as you sit in your living room and watch the news. But when you meet the

people of China personally, share a few meals and laughs with them, watch their little kids run and play, see the families, the traffic cops, the merchants, the street vendors and a few seniors walking through the parks—you can’t help but wish them every success.

While I reviewed plenty of comic books featuring fantasy stories and teen social issues, a good half of the children’s books I reviewed supported the family—encouraging respect for parents, care for siblings and general helpfulness. More mature comic books prepared young people for responsibility in the workplace.

My translator, Kiki, explained that the government is emphasizing family loyalty and parental respect. Further, the Chinese government is wisely restoring ancient traditions wiped out during the Cultural Revolution of the 1970s. President Xi Jinping seems to be replacing Mao Zedung with the ancient (and previously discredited) philosopher Confucius as a unifying icon for the nation.

Chinese leadership realizes that strong families are the foundation for an effective nation and a resilient economy. Western nations, by contrast, have largely forgotten that Biblical concept: “Honor your father and mother”—which is the first commandment with a promise ‘so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth’” (Ephesians 6:2-3).

Beyond this, I was surprised when a Chinese citizen (a highly qualified academic working in a major Chinese university) revealed to me he is a Christian. “Jesus has changed my life,” he said. Apparently the Chinese government does not have a problem with faith as long as it doesn’t interfere with the workings of government—and there should really be no reason for that (often it is religion—not genuine faith—that invites persecution by creating a big, unnecessary stink).

At 1.35 billion, The People’s Republic of China is the world’s largest nation. I love China and I know God loves China every bit as much as he loves North America. □

—Monte Wolverton



Quotes & Connections



"Christendom has rejected Christianity."—David McCracken

"My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it."—Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*

"In primitive rituals such as 'Bible roulette' (picking verses at random for guidance) frequently practiced by present-day believers, we see a desperate urgency to get a word from God, especially a word on what is going to happen and what we should do about it. If necessary, some people are prepared to force a word from God or someone else...." —Dallas Willard, *Hearing God*

"I read about an Eskimo hunter who asked the local missionary priest: 'If I did not know about God and sin, would I go to hell?' 'No,' said the priest, 'not if you did not know.' 'Then why,' asked the Eskimo earnestly, 'did you tell me?'" —Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

"The lust for affluence in contemporary society is psychotic. It is time we awaken to the fact that conformity to a sick society is to be sick."—Richard Foster

"That there was no room in the inn was symbolic of what was to happen to Jesus. The only place there was room for him was on the Cross."—William Barclay

Rethinking Hell Conference

Several months ago CWR/PTM was represented at a conference on "Rethinking Hell" held at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Several views on hell were presented by pastors, writers and professors of various doctrinal persuasions.

CWR/PTM Senior Editor Brad Jersak gave a presentation on the idea of "Hopeful Inclusivism" which was well received. Our staff sold several books and distributed free copies of our resource *Eternal Torture: Divine or Human Vengeance?* as well as copies of CWRm.



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Plain Truth Ministries proclaims Christianity without the religion. We express our Christ-centered ministry as *faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone.*

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