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How Great is the Love?

by Greg Albrecht

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!
–1 John 3:1

There's a great story about a little boy who was trying to learn the Lord's Prayer. One night he was kneeling down by his bed, and he prayed: "Our Father who are in heaven, how do you know my name?"

St. Augustine, revered as one of the great theologians of the Christian faith, once said that **Jesus loves each of us as if there was no one else to love.** We can see that reality in the life and teachings of Jesus—time after time we read about people Jesus met who felt and experienced his radically personalized, individual affection—no one they had ever known had talked to them, treated them and took time for

them the way Jesus did.

The eyes out of which Jesus saw and perceived others were never filled with contempt or disdain. Even when Jesus spoke harshly, as he did to religious authorities of his day, he did so out of concern for those authorities and for those who were being oppressed by them—he never spoke harsh words out of hatred or spite.

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What Others Are Saying...

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

Dare to Hope

Thank you so much for the beautiful articles on "Dare to Hope" and "32 Scriptures that Dare us to Hope" in the Winter CWRm. With all the hateful discord going on in our nation (and the world) right now, I think we all really needed to hear this good news of hope. I love the quote on page 5 under a photo of clouds with the light shining through: "The love of God allows, motivates and even obligates us to hope that in the end, the Light of Christ will overcome darkness and then, perchance, 'every heart will prepare him room.'"

North Carolina

"When the Time Had Fully Come ..."

I appreciated the article "When the Time Had Fully Come" by Greg Albrecht in the Winter issue. Thank you for this reminder of why Jesus came at the perfect time in history...to make us God's heirs, "Fully adopted children of privilege and favor, full participants in his eternal kingdom." What a blessing to know and deeply understand God's eternal plan for us. Talk about good news! Thanks to Greg and everyone at CWR/PTM... keep up the good work!

Texas

7 Myths about Christian Universalism

What a great article on universalism. The world has been deceived for so long, It's going to take time for people to catch on to these truths.

Newfoundland and Labrador

Remembering 9-11 and When Towers Fall

The Fall issue of CWRm leaves me with some negative feelings about your claim that Christendom is on the violent, wrong, side of the Cross. I agree that Christians should always seek non-violent solutions, but I do not agree that they should walk away from situations that are proven to harm those who are defenseless. If force is determined to be necessary to overcome a bad situation, then I feel Christians have an obligation to take action. Your articles seem to suggest that Christ would have our country, our

military and we ourselves turn our backs on those who suffer from all sorts of crimes against humanity, when diplomacy is not effective. I do not believe Christ intended that we let others suffer at the hands of those who do them harm, if we can prevent it.

Maryland

• *Indeed, Christ commands his followers to seek non-violent solutions, and Paul clarifies: "Our weapons are not of this world," "Our enemy is not flesh and blood," and "Overcome evil with good." Here, he is speaking to believers across regions, rather than to political powers ... so then it's a question of our first allegiance among competing claims: the call of the Prince of Peace vs. the agendas of the state.*

We would certainly not want to suggest that our countries (plural), our militaries (plural) or we ourselves turn our backs on those suffering crimes against humanity. Rather, we BEGIN by asking how our disobedience to the Jesus Way may have actually caused and escalated such suffering, contributing to the kind of resentment and desperation that enables wicked men to harness terrorist movements.

We would categorically condemn ALL acts of terrorism, and we would also condemn all forms of torture, whether as retaliation to terrorism or a way to prevent it (it doesn't). Yet how is it that white evangelical Christians are the ONLY subculture in America that polls over 50% in favor of torture? Why would they be the group MOST likely to justify it? That fact gives us pause... how did the predominant "Christian" movement in the land come to sound so different from the voice of Christ? How can this be?

That same ethos led Nazi troops to head into battle with "God With Us!" on their buckles. The relative silence and/or compliance of much of Christendom then seems to echo today.

The Editors

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How Great is the Love?

Continued from page 1

The little boy trying to learn the Lord's Prayer said something incredibly profound—what kind of love is this love that God has for us that he would be interested in knowing our name? What kind of love is this love that God has for us that he would love us in spite of knowing all there is to know about us?

From time to time I like to consult *The Message Bible*—translated by Eugene Peterson. It's a translation lovingly prepared by Dr. Peterson in an attempt to help us understand the message of the Bible in language that is more familiar to us today. Here's how Dr. Peterson translated 1 John 3:1:

"What marvelous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it—we are called children of God! That's who we really are. But that's also why the world doesn't recognize us or take us seriously, because it has no idea who he is or what he's up to."

The dimensions of God's love for us—its height, depth, width and breadth are staggering. Again, as that little boy said, "Our Father who are in heaven, how do you know my name?"

What Marvelous Love

1 John 3:1 is one way of expressing our amazement at God's love—that he would stoop down low enough to call us his very own children.

Let me share something Frederic Buechner said in this regard. In his book, *The Magnificent Defeat*, Buechner observes: "We are children, perhaps, at the very moment

when we know that it is as children that God loves us—not because we have deserved his love...but simply because he has chosen to love us.

We are children because he is our father; and all of our efforts, fruitful and fruitless, to do good, to speak truth, to understand, are the efforts of children who, for all their precocity, are children still in that before we loved him, he loved us, as children, through Jesus Christ our Lord."

When we talk about God's love, we inevitably will find ourselves at the cross of Christ—the

When we talk about God's love, we inevitably will find ourselves at the cross of Christ—the greatest singular demonstration of the love of God ...

greatest singular demonstration of the love of God, when God, in Christ, responded to the hostility and anger of humanity toward Jesus with God's love.

Many within Christendom, regardless of their denomination, misunderstand the cross of Christ and what actually happened.

They have been taught that God the Father was so upset with humanity and our sin that he told Jesus that he would have to come down (from his upstairs bedroom?) here (to the kitchen where we have made a big mess) so that the Father could take out his wrath on him, rather than us.

Child Abuse?

So people think that God loved us so much that he beat up on his

Son instead of us, and that Jesus, the Son, loved us so much that he took a beating from the Father that we had coming to us.

But take a step back—that description and definition of the cross of Christ is not an act of love, that's an act of retaliation and vengeance.

If God intended to abuse us, as his children, but stopped short and abused the Son of God instead, then we are not talking love, we are talking child abuse.

Some will say, yes, but God's honor and perfection and holiness had been so offended that something had to be done—his good name had been muddied and sullied by humans so that his reputation demanded redemption.

But again, that's not love.

That's retribution—that's God getting his pound of flesh. That idea of the cross is Jesus getting what we deserved because the Father demanded revenge.

That idea of the cross is the old covenant sense of justice—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Suffering for suffering, pain for pain—so that the scales of justice balance.

But the gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that God is not primarily interested in balancing the divine scales of justice.

According to the new covenant, God doesn't love us by degree—he doesn't love us in exact proportion to the degree of our suffering and pain. His love is without limit—he doesn't need us to love him back in the same way he loves us because he has all

the love there is.

It's not like God has a finite, limited amount of love—say like million dollars' worth of love—but because so much love has been dispensed the heavenly treasury is in debt, like the indebtedness of the United States, for example.

It's not like God has to raise taxes, or take out the debt on us so that the "love treasury" can be replenished. That's our human mind trying to comprehend God—and we can't humanly comprehend God's love any more than we can stretch our minds to understand his eternity—that he has always been and always will be.

Gift Love and Need Love

1 John 3:1 begins by saying, *"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us ..."*

God loves us with what C.S. Lewis calls "Gift Love"—but before we talk about "Gift Love" let's talk about "Need Love"—

and in so doing we might gain a little perspective about the vast differences between human and divine love.

C.S. Lewis says that "Need Love" is born of emptiness.

- **Need Love** sees those objects or persons it values as something it desires and covets to possess.

- **Need Love** tries to appropriate for itself.

- **Need Love** is grasping and greedy—it sucks the very essence out of something or someone to feed its voracious appetite.

There are many times when humans say to another person "I love you" when what they actually mean is that they want to make what the other person is and represents their own, no matter what the consequence may be to that other person.

On the other hand, there is "Gift Love."

- **Gift Love** is divine love—which can be expressed through humans, but only by God's grace, because Gift Love is primarily un-natural for humans. Some

human love, apart from God's grace, might be gift love to some degree—but unadulterated "Gift Love" is a gift of God.

- **Gift Love's** goal is to enhance and enrich another rather than trying to extract value from another.

- **Gift Love** endeavors to increase another rather than to diminish another.

- **Gift Love** is like an artesian well that continuously overflows, while "Need Love" is like a black hole—a vacuum—or a vampire if you like, that sucks dry the very essence of another.

Love Without Conditions or Demands

That's why we often speak of God's love as unconditional love. The cross of Christ was unconditional. The love demonstrated toward all humanity was in spite of the fact that human animosity and hatred was being unleashed against him—so that the loving response of the cross of Christ to the brutality of

humanity was truly, as Jesus taught, turning the other cheek.

The cross of Christ was God saying “I love you” when humanity at large said, “I hate you and I am going to kill you.”

Jesus didn’t demand that we sign a contract before he gave his life—he did what he did out of love without any guarantee that we humans would respond favorably, and love him back.

That’s part of the freedom of God’s love—the grace of God exhibited and demonstrated in his love. God does not force us to do anything—for if force is involved, then by definition, it is not love.

Our relationship with God is not an arranged marriage, where we have no say in the matter—where we are predestined to marry him, no matter what, for what God knows will be “our own good.”

The freedom of God’s love is illustrated in that great parable of the prodigal son—when the father lets the son leave home,

when the father gives him his inheritance even though the father knows the son will waste it away.

The father’s love is illustrated in that he waits for his son to come home—he doesn’t launch an intervention, hiring strongmen to go to that distant country to kidnap his son and bring him home. Of course the father may have reasoned such a kidnapping would have been for his son’s own good—but the father’s love was greater than forcing his son into a particular behavior.

Here’s another quote from Frederic Buechner, from *The Magnificent Defeat*—the same book I quoted earlier:

“Because God’s love is uncoercive and treasures our freedom—if above all he wants us to love him, then we must be left free to love him—we are free to resist it, deny it, crucify it faintly, which we do again and again. This is our terrible freedom, which [God’s] love refuses to overpower so that, in this, the

greatest of all powers, God’s power, is itself powerless.”

God’s love is profound because he refuses to use force or intimidation to make us do what he wants—or even what he knows will be best for us. God’s love is incredible because it makes itself powerless—refusing to use the greatest power in all the universe. That’s exactly what happened at the cross of Christ.

1 John 3:1 lifts and inspires us, challenging us “*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us!*”

Desmond Tutu, that great South African Christian, once said the following about God’s love:

“God’s love is like sitting by a fire in the winter—you are just there in front of the fire. You don’t have to be smart or anything. The fire warms you.”

If you are cold, in need of love, God invites you to sit by his fireplace. He will not force you to do so, but there is plenty of room for each one of us by God’s roaring fire of love. □





Outgrowing the Christian Bubble

Should I let my 12-year-old watch this R-rated movie?" "What are some Christian family-friendly songs appropriate for my elementary-aged children?"

"Can my 8-year-old read Harry Potter?" (YES!)

These sorts of questions plague many Christian parents. At the root of these practical daily decisions is the desire to frame the way our children interact with society at large. On one hand, we want to protect our children by censoring their exposure to the often-brutal realities of our world. On the other, many of us grew up in Christian bubbles, restricted to cheesy Christian music titles and sanitized book selections. We resolved to expose our children to the beauty in art and literature and yes, even the latest Hollywood blockbuster.

What is the sentiment behind the Christian Bubble Makers? Raising children in a sheltered environment enables them to put down strong roots in the Christian tradition. They develop a strong foundation in their belief system so that once in the world, they won't be tousel by the prevailing cultural winds. They'll be able to defend their faith in any situation.

I have heard it described like this: if we can teach them what the "real" God looks like, they'll be able to spot the counterfeits.

The problem is that this setup is inherently defensive. It postures the Christian community as those on the inside venturing out. Before 'the littles' are mature enough to handle the outside world, the bubble is a necessary protective mechanism. Insiders = good, outsiders = bad. Children thrive on structure and categorize by nature. They easily internalize this paradigm from a young age and their life experiences become black and white value judgments.

But unless the child remains in a commune, they inevitably experience a world of diverse values and expressions of life. The stress of categorizing good vs. bad creates a faith crisis that leads either to a rejection of their childhood faith OR a rigid persistence that only the God inside the bubble is real. So God either doesn't exist, or is a very small—the fenced-in God who needs defending at all costs.

Raising children un-fundamentalist means

teaching kids not who God is, but where to find God. Not what God is, but how to spot God. Young children don't need a painstaking theology that delineates each character trait of God. They need permission to discover God for themselves. Parents are much better postured as students of our children, because their delight and wonder in our world have much to teach us about where God is alive and present.

Pay attention to what breathes life into their souls, what makes their eyes twinkle and their laughter infectious. Watch how they give generously, lavishing hugs and kisses. See through their eyes the attention to details we have taken for granted—tiny ants and the big, blue sky.

Show them God's love by loving them, loving others, and pointing out acts of goodness, kindness and justice in this world. Together with them, soak in the beauty of breath-stealing art, jaw-dropping talent, and heart-warming generosity. Then wonder together, "did we just see a glimpse of God?"

Read them stories. Bible stories certainly, but also

fairy tales of dragon warriors and princesses. Tell them stories of our ancestors, of children in Afghanistan and Iceland, of our neighbors down the road. Let them spot the

heroes and the villains and ask them where they see God moving in hearts, in love, in power.

When it comes to God, we are not their teachers, we are co-spectators of God's glory. We are not sending them out armed with a defense of God against the world, but filled with an anticipation of how they can experience God in their world.

Parents are often saddled with anxiety—we want to make sure we teach our children all they need to know within the short eighteen years we have them at home. But when it comes to our faith, we can breathe easy, because our God is not limited to eighteen years of instruction. We walk with our children at the very beginning of their journey, and then watch them dip their toes into how wide and long and high and deep is the love of God.

The question we need to ask when they leave home is not, have you learned everything there is to know about God? But rather, "Are you ready to get started?" □

When it comes to God, we are not their teachers, we are co-spectators of God's glory.

God and fear are often deeply intertwined in our thinking. Fear is closely associated with our default understanding of God. For many people, fear is the instinctive emotional response to thoughts of God. Long-established expressions like “to put the fear of God into someone” illustrate just how intimately the emotion of fear is connected with the idea of God.

And, of course, those wishing to draw on the Bible to support the notion that fear is an appropriate response to God can do so with ease. “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,*” we are told in Proverbs 9:10. And there’s no shortage of accounts throughout the text of scripture where God or his angels appear to strike fear into people’s hearts.

So, fear is typically quite ingrained in our psyche as a response to God, and many assume that the Bible validates its appropriateness.

Fear or No Fear?

And yet ...

The writer of the first epistle of John, shortly after telling us that God is love, has this to say:

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love” (1 John 4:18).

And so we have a seeming paradox: on the one

hand, fear of God is something appropriate and even valuable and necessary; but on the other hand, God is love, and as such, there is no place or reason for fear in him.

For many people, fear is the instinctive emotional response to thoughts of God.

Now, those who hold to a flat reading of scripture in which all parts of the Bible carry equal weight can square this circle relatively easily. This apparent conflict between biblical exhortations to fear God and biblical assurances that God’s love does not include fear is often resolved by concluding that God is only fearful to those who don’t know him or who are in rebellion against him. Indeed, that’s how I myself would have dealt with this conundrum a few years ago. Now, however, it feels to me like a contrived approach and something of a cop-out.

Seeing the Father In and Through the Son

In the magnificent prologue to the Fourth Gospel, the writer makes this astounding claim:

“No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him



BY ROB GRAYSON

FEAR GOD ...

OR FEAR NOT?

known” (John 1:18).

Jesus himself will go on to affirm the same thing a few chapters later:

“No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father” (John 6:46).

Here is a truth we really need to get into our heads and our hearts. What the Gospel writer is essentially saying is this: whatever you thought you knew about God up to this point was at best partial and at worst completely mistaken. Want to know what God is like? God is like Jesus. So forget all your old

thrown in for good measure, we’re missing the radical shift that Jesus and the New Testament writers are at pains to have us see.

Such a radical re-envisioning of our doctrine of God in the light of Jesus’ life and ministry should have major consequences for every aspect of our theology. And one of those consequences, I would suggest, is that we should eliminate any vestiges of fear from our intellectual or emotional response to God. That, I believe, is what the writer of 1 John is trying to tell us in the verse I quoted earlier.

I have quite a simple theory about this. I think it comes down to the fact that our most fundamental conception of God is often that of an authority figure: someone who has the power to enforce his will upon us in ways that may hurt. If we understand authority in terms of power, which we usually do, then fear is a common and in many ways appropriate response. But if God is perfect love, and perfect love casts out fear, then we must conclude that whatever authority God has is of an entirely different nature from authority as we commonly understand it.

Perhaps it’s time to stop seeing God primarily as an authority figure, and to begin seeing him instead as a love so all-encompassing that he would rather submit to his own death at our hands than enforce his authority upon us. Perhaps, for some of us, setting aside an authority-based view of God is a vital step in allowing Jesus to reshape our theology. □

Rob Grayson is a freelance translator from Coventry, England. He likes to write about the reconstruction of faith, theology and Christian culture. www.faithmeetsworld.com.

... the revelation of God in Jesus should herald a dramatic evolution in our understanding of what God is like.

ideas—even the ones you got from scripture—and allow Jesus to redefine your understanding of God.

My point is that the revelation of God in Jesus should herald a dramatic evolution in our understanding of what God is like. If we simply bolt Jesus onto a pre-existing concept of God cobbled together from Old Testament understandings with a bit of Greek-influenced philosophy

Put simply, if thinking about God still triggers a response of fear, you haven’t yet allowed Jesus to fully correct and reshape your theology. Don’t take that as a criticism; just be patient and let Jesus continue to adjust your view. He’ll get you there if you’ll let him.

If there’s absolutely no reason for us to be afraid of God, why do we instinctively tend to think there is?

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“I feel like I never do anything right!”

Q I have been attending a Southern Baptist church for my whole life. But for the past couple of years it seems that the members “just can’t do anything right.”

Yesterday in the bulletin a whole page was dedicated to how the members should act before, during and after church.

It stated that before church we should be quiet and not talk to our neighbors but have respect for the Holy Spirit.

During the service and singing there should be no talking, and we should not put our hymnal in the holder or put on our jackets during the last hymn because it’s disrespectful—that we should wait until after the closing prayer.

And after church, we shouldn’t clog the front area by talking and asking “personal” questions. I still don’t understand that statement.

Oh and then finally came the announcement in the bulletin suggesting that we should stop the “chatting.”

Don’t get me wrong, I definitely think we should respect the service and focus on God, but goodness! Are we not supposed to be friendly?

I feel like I can never do anything right! My heart is torn and I’m so distressed. I would appreciate your perspective and advice. Thank you so much for all you do!

A I am truly sorry to hear about these concerns which seem to be enormously painful for you. First and foremost, a brick-and-mortar church is there to serve the needs of the individual members of the universal church—that is, the body of Christ.

A church building or a denomination is not there to serve its own needs, but to genuinely serve the needs of those who look to it and trust

A church building or denomination is not there to serve its own needs but to genuinely serve the needs of those who look to it and trust it for spiritual nourishment.

it for spiritual nourishment.

Jesus, God in the flesh, came to serve us, not the other way around. We do not find Jesus running around enforcing a bunch of rules.

The primary sense we receive from reading the life and teachings of Jesus is that he loves us and invites us into the kingdom of heaven.

The life and teachings of Jesus do not leave us frustrated or depressed, thinking we have never done anything right or that he is upset with us. That feeling comes to us from the kingdom of religion, not the kingdom of heaven. That feeling came (in the time of Jesus) from the Pharisees who

condemned, belittled and scorned Jesus and his disciples as well as Jesus’ mission and his teaching.

I am well aware that lofty expectations and unrelenting condemnation can erode a lifelong relationship and commitment to a particular church, causing great stress and grief.

Whatever you may decide to do about your physical circumstances, please know that Jesus is not being

represented through constant, continuous corrections you are receiving.

As members of the invisible, universal and

eternal body of Christ, we read that we are forgiven, embraced, welcomed and accepted by Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

If a brick-and-mortar, temporal institution that claims affiliation with the invisible, universal and eternal body of Christ is more about fear than faith, more about control than freedom in Christ and more about legalism than about God’s grace, as God’s children we need not subject ourselves to such an anti-Christ environment.

No human being can take Jesus away from you! □

Many Christians view the call to follow Jesus as some sort of out-of-body, other-worldly affair that shouldn't occupy itself with this-worldly concerns. The Christian life is largely arranged around the concept of escape—we will one day leave this world for good, go to heaven when we die and forever live in some kind of angel-like existence.

Those who frame and understand salvation this way believe the gospel looks something like this:

I am a sinner. Jesus died for my sins. I asked Jesus into my heart to

forgive my sins. When I die I will be removed from this world and will live in heaven for all eternity.

Within this framework, the world is seen as a really awful place that God hates and salvation is viewed as **God's evacuation plan** to one day get his followers out of it.

More than we realize, this understanding of the gospel not only does a grave injustice to God's cosmic redemptive story, a story that seeks to redeem and renew all of creation, but more closely resembles the second-century heresy of *Gnosticism* than Christianity.

Gnosticism and the New Testament

Gnosticism has many facets worthy of discussion, but one of its main features, and one that is particularly relevant to this conversation, is the idea that all matter is essentially evil. Our bodies are evil, the world is evil and both are without value, destined to be destroyed. The only important part of us that really does matter is our immaterial soul. Soul good, body and all matter, evil.

In the past, people who embraced Gnostic teaching treated their bodies poorly

This World IS My Home and I

by Jeff K. Clarke



through malnutrition, even self-mutilation, on the assumption that it didn't really matter what they did to their flesh because, after all, our bodies are essentially evil and destined for destruction.

For many, the body was something they needed to escape from, not something to be honored as a God-given gift, and certainly had no place in God's future plan. The body was a temporary home and the earth was a place they were just passing through. Matter, in all of its forms, was evil, temporary and assigned for destruction.

However, the biblical storyline is quite clear that our bodies and the earth are **not** evil and

something that God, through Christ, by the Spirit, will one day renew and re-animate to reflect the kind of body and creation he envisioned from the very beginning.

We will have our bodies forever. Yes, they will be like Christ's glorified, post-resurrection body, the same, yet different from the body he had during his public ministry, but a body nonetheless.

We will live on the earth forever. It will be a renewed and restored earth, but it will be the earth nonetheless.

Continuity and Discontinuity

This discussion is really about continuity and discontinuity. In the

to annihilate, has not only misunderstood the entire witness of scripture that clearly communicates a different message, a message rooted in Jesus' life, teaching, death and resurrection, but has also misread the end of the story and God's plan to restore the earth.

God's plan has always been and will always be centered in the redemption, restoration and renewal of this broken world and to make it into the place where we will live for all eternity—in a city John referred to as the New Jerusalem.

N.T. Wright put it this way, *The great drama will end (Revelation 21-21), not with 'saved*

am NOT Just Passing Through!

destined for destruction—and that our bodies and world are **not** places from which we will one day escape.

God created the earth and called it **good**. God created human beings and called them **good**. God didn't change his mind half-way through his project and decide to call all matter evil. In fact, if we believe this way, I think we've misread, misunderstood and misinterpreted God's story altogether.

God's Cosmic Restoration Project

My point in saying all of this is simple—matter is not evil, the body is good and the earth is good. God has not abandoned his cosmic restoration project, a project that Jesus inaugurated and which he will one day bring through to completion in the form of a renewed and restored creation. The world and our bodies are not things we will escape from, but

first instance—our bodies and the earth will remain—continuity. In the second instance—both will be different—discontinuity. Both will remain, yet will be renewed and restored.

As Stanley Grenz wrote in his book "Created for Community," *God promises to make all things*

new, not to begin anew. His creation will undergo a transformation, not a complete destruction, as God is not about to abandon his good work.

Any idea that says our bodies are temporary and that they do not have a place within God's plan of cosmic redemption reflects Gnosticism more than it does Jesus and his message of restoration.

Any idea that sees the world as inherently evil, something destined for utter destruction, something that God has destined

souls' being snatched up into heaven, but with the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth.

What does this mean? It means

Jesus came to teach and demonstrate, embody and enact, showcase and reveal, the kingdom of God.

this world is our home and we're not just passing through. Yes, God has a plan to redeem and renew it, but the world will remain. Continuity and discontinuity.

Any idea that says otherwise is rooted in a **Gnostic-way of seeing things** more than a **God-way of seeing things**.

As the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:19-23,

The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the

one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

Why? Because it's longing to be destroyed? No. Because it's longing to be restored and redeemed like the entire universe will one day be, like those in Christ.

Embodying and Enacting God's Redemptive Story

Our bodies are important. The earth and universe are important. For those in Christ, our bodies are with us forever. And, the earth and universe are with us forever.

The gift of eternal life doesn't begin when we die, it began the day we committed our lives to God in Christ and joined his Kingdom project.

We're not just passing through "man's ultimate destiny is an earthly one" (George Eldon Ladd).

God has some unbelievable plans for all of us. Jesus didn't come to set up some sort of **divine escape plan**.

No, Jesus came to teach and demonstrate, embody and enact, showcase and reveal, the kingdom of God. A kingdom that is already here and a kingdom that will one day be here in full. A kingdom we are called to embody now as we point to the completed kingdom on the horizon.

Jesus came to teach and demonstrate, embody and enact, showcase and reveal, the kingdom of God.

As ambassadors, we point people to this kingdom and its King. In all we do and say, we lead

people to our King and to his goal of cosmic redemption and restoration.

As Brian Zahnd once said, "Salvation is a restoration project, not an evacuation project."

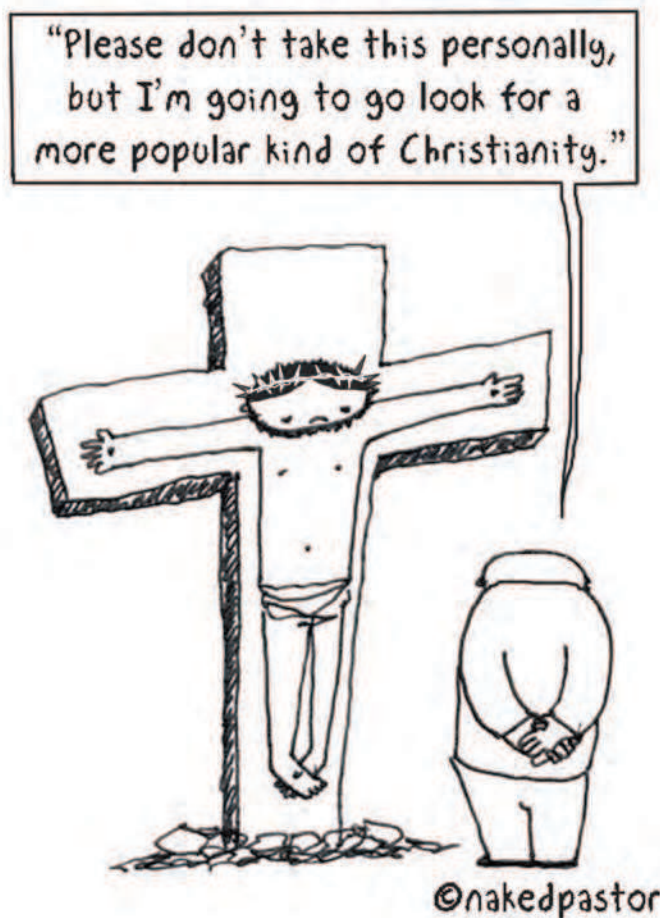
I couldn't agree more.

The earth and our bodies are precious to God. And God has destined both to be redeemed and restored to reflect Jesus' own post-resurrection body, the first fruits that showcased God's plan for the entire universe.

This world is my home and I'm not just passing through.

What a **hope!** What a **vision!** What a **story!** □

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Being Cross-shaped in a World Bent out of Shape

by Josh Valley

I suffered sexual abuse as a child and depression as a 20-something, followed by self-harm, anxiety attacks, insomnia—the pain of being a human being with a broken body in a broken world. The struggles still come without warning. Marriage breakdown and renewal, chronic sleep disorder, weight gain, minor addictive tendencies; it can be tough to be a human trying to follow Jesus in our world today.

Every person has different and unique weaknesses. But whether it's physical or mental suffering we all share the same reality: we are all human. We are all prone to sin and extremely averse to suffering.

Prone to Sin

At this point, you might think I am going to launch into a diatribe about how we need to guard ourselves from temptation and “dig deep” to keep ourselves pure in this immoral and godless world. That's not where this is going. It's not that pursuing purity and holiness isn't important, but I think it is secondary to what I'm calling the (capital S) “Sin.”

This Sin isn't new to our generation—God has been warning about it since the time of Moses.

I'm talking about the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). If Jesus is God, the exhaustive Word of God, the concrete image of the invisible God—if God looks and acts like Jesus—we have replaced him with other gods.

Abandoning Jesus as THE Sin of All Sins

We see other gods reflected in movements like the prosperity gospel, where a genie-god has replaced Jesus—the crucified God

of hope—as the center and focus of our theology and witness in the world.

We see other gods in dispensational rapture theology where Jesus, “the concrete executor of God's love” (Bonhoeffer), is maligned and replaced with a violent End Times Warrior—a wrathful genocidal destroyer—that looks and acts nothing like the New Testament Jesus we have come to know, love and follow.

We see other gods in the fundamentalist movements that have replaced Jesus—the living, superlative and exhaustive Word of God—with a rabid and rigid biblical literalism. This has led millions to believe that God commanded genocide in the conquest narratives and that God can suspend ethics because He is defined by self-determination, not love. Nope. Not Jesus.

We see other gods in the large swaths of politically polarized Christians, of all persuasions, who have replaced cross-shaped discipleship with political partisanship and hate for their enemies.

Finally, we see other gods in how celebrity culture has invaded North American Christendom where pastors are turned into



god-like figures of fame and fortune to be worshiped. This has caused the fabric of Christian community, which is supposed to be held together by Christ-like service towards one another, to be replaced by a culture that praises the exceptional and distinguished rather than serving and honoring the weak and oppressed among us.

The suffering of the Messiah

Jesus has welded his entire being to her at the cross. But there are many attempts to do so—within the world of Christendom. We see it in the movements that have abandoned Jesus-centered Christianity for other gods.

The god of wealth. The god of destruction. The god of celebrityism. The god of literalism. The god of superiorism. The god of religious tribalism. The god of

them rich.

Rather, it's about voluntarily suffering with struggling and weak humanity because we believe God is deeply and daringly merciful in Jesus; it's about offering hope to human beings as disciples who are being formed into the crucified God of resurrection hope.

Christ-followers are identified by and identify with cruciform discipleship and resurrection hope. "Discipleship is a bond with the suffering Christ," says Bonhoeffer. The gospel includes the hope, indeed the Truth, that God is not a force of destruction, but a compassionate Sufferer who offers concrete hope to a suffering world.

Cross-shaped discipleship acknowledges that "God is revealed in the world precisely in those places that the world is most prone to ignore: in suffering, rejection, and scorn," says

David H. Jensen in *Religionless Christianity and Vulnerable Discipleship: The Interfaith Promise of Bonhoeffer's Theology*.

Yes. We are all, to some degree, whether "the world" or the world of Christendom, bent out of shape. Embrace the grace of God, live out your faith as a Christ-follower and allow him to become his cross-shaped handiwork. □

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was God's plan from the start and nothing could get in the way of that. Hear me. It was the *only* way. In accordance with the Law and the Prophets, Jesus said: "The Son of Man **must** suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he **must** be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Luke 9:22, emphasis mine). It was a **must**. "It was divine necessity that Jesus had to suffer and be rejected," writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Costly Discipleship*.

It is impossible to tear Christianity away from the crucified God of hope because

political partisanship.

These gods are not the God of the Bible revealed in Jesus as the crucified God of love and hope.

Cross-shaped Discipleship

When we Christians place Jesus at the center of our theology and ethics, we will learn cross-shaped discipleship in a world bent out of shape. Our message as Christ-followers is not centered in celebrity pastors, human privilege and economic power.

Nor is it about warring against "godless" culture, nor is it about peddling a proclamation to sinners that a God is coming either to destroy them or to make



Ghouls, Ghosts ...and Gospel!

T rue story: I recently attended a friend’s 50th-birthday party—a backyard barbecue for family, friends and neighbors. The forecast said rain, so our host rigged up an enormous tarp that spanned half the yard. When the torrents burst forth, we huddled happily beneath our cozy shelter.

My wife, Eden, and I sat next to a couple and the wife’s mother. It was obvious to my religious radar that these were not “Christians,” though such assumptions fail repeatedly. Anyway, I’m better at asking questions than carrying conversations, so we got them talking about their greatest passion: Halloween.

More specifically, this threesome (a blue-collar foreman, his wife and mother-in-law) run a popular, elaborate “Haunted House” every October 31. They recruit volunteers from the neighborhood (as ghouls and goblins) and charge an entry fee or take donations. The funds are donated to a children’s hospice—a place for sick kids (usually terminal) and their families to stay during treatment. It’s really a beautiful labor of love.

When I affirmed their dedication and compassion, the backstory came out. The husband said, “I’m a Christian, but I left the church long ago. Both my mom and dad were ordained ministers in the Salvation Army. She felt the call to ministry when she was fifteen after God healed her of blindness (after ten years!). The first sight she saw was a drunk, stumbling in the street outside their home. She (and dad later) dedicated their lives to love the down-and-outers in the inner city. When I was six, I was helping them lead services in the streets. I picked up my compassion from them. And I still always have time for the homeless.

“But,” he continued, “I was also exposed to the worst sides of Christianity—scary stuff. Over time, I noticed how people in these churches were more unhappy and less compassionate than those outside. So I finally left.”

Then the mother-in-law shared. “I used to attend a Bible study. We were reading about battles in the Bible. I spoke up and said, ‘Hey, I think war is war. And war is

always awful. And who are we to say this group is better or more righteous than that group?’ So the Bible study leader pointed to the door and said, ‘There’s the door. Use it.’ She kicked me out there and then ...and I’ve never gone back.”

I was flabbergasted. When faithful questioning becomes spiritually illegal, that’s the first sign that you’re in a toxic context and it’s high time to make a quick exit.

Here were two classic *done*s—done with the shenanigans of religious mini-kingdoms that look nothing like Christ. Then the wife spoke up. “I just see myself as spiritual. I believe in God but I think it’s about loving others.” She was a *none* (not affiliated with any religious corporation or institution).

I paraphrased a favorite passage, “John, the apostle of love, wrote, ‘Anyone who loves knows God, because God IS love.’ And he also says, “The one who says they know God—but doesn’t love—is a liar.”

So here were three lovely, compassionate, caring people who don’t feel safe in a Christian fellowship. It’s a quandary...and I said so:

“Well, the last thing you need is someone trying to herd you back into a religious pen. But honestly, I do worry about the *nones* and *done*s in isolation. I worry about their lack of...”

“...community,” suggested the wife, nodding.

“Yes,” I said, “They often have no infrastructure to do Love’s work in the world. Yet here you are! You left the institutional church but you’ve taken God’s love with you... and now community is emerging around you. Ironically, the hospitality, compassion and community are happening around the event [Halloween] many Christians are afraid of!”

“What cinched it for me,” said the husband, was when my daughter (six at the time) was invited to speak to the whole school assembly, telling them why it’s important to love others and help sick children. The principal sent her home with a donation and a note that said, ‘Whatever you’re doing to parent this child, keep doing it.’ And so the same compassion I got from Mom has now been passed on to her.”

That’s how I saw the gospel peaking out from between ghouls and ghosts. It was beautiful! □

*John, the apostle of love, wrote,
“Anyone who loves knows God, because
God IS Love.”*

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