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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

One Nation Under God?

Greg Albrecht page 3

What Others Are Saying...

Volume 9, Number 3
June 2018
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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

An Inspiring Issue!

The articles in the April issue of *CWRm* were so inspiring! I especially enjoyed “Why Did Jesus Die?” (by Brad Jersak) and “The Lazarus Story” (by Kenneth Tanner).

Thank you to everyone at *CWR/PTM* for helping us better understand the depth of God’s love for each of us, and as it says at the end of Kenneth Tanner’s article, that “his Resurrection Life resides in us now.”

—North Carolina

All your materials keep me connected. I read it all, some several times. I like the monthly magazines very much. I love and pray for all of you at *CWR/PTM*.

—Saskatchewan, Canada

The articles in *CWRm* and *PT* are really helpful, encouraging and proof there is still sanity. Our prayers are being answered—the gospel is being preached and published around the world.

—Nevada

Thanks for all the magazines, monthly letters and sermons. Your articles and letters are well-written and easy to understand. Not a bunch of religious “mumbo-jumbo.” We pray for everyone involved at *CWR/PTM*. Keep up the good work!

—Georgia

Keep on keeping on—keep sharing the best news ever—the mystery of the Gospel. Keep talking about the New Covenant and God’s grace.

—New Jersey

I don’t know what would have happened to my life if God had not brought you into it with your wonderful news of the love and grace of God, and the amazing life he has planned for us. I am now living in a world of peace, joy and love I never could have dreamed of.

—Kentucky

This is an amazing media-ministry. The many resources you provide are all about Jesus and all about God’s grace. Keep up the great work!

—California

A More Christlike God

I have never experienced the Cross as Jersak explains it! What can I say? Here is another life-changing paradigm leap! What inner peace and joy it brings through the revelation of who the Father *really* is!

—Oregon

Dear Readers,

Your generous donations enable us to share this Christ-centered gospel and to inspire others to living faith in Jesus Christ.

A sincere thank you from all of us at *CWR*! God’s great grace to you today!

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One Nation Under God?

In the early years of the 21st century, **9-11-2001** stands as a chilling, three-digit descriptor of the nightmare of religiously motivated hatred and the outrageous mass murders that continue around the world. The barbaric and cowardly act of terrorism remembered as 9-11 stands as a defining moment—and inspires many interpretations.

Immediately following 9-11, two well-known American religious professionals alleged that God allowed the attacks to happen because, while they presumed God had once protected the United States, now they believed God was so angered by our growing acceptance of abortion and gay rights that he had removed our so-called “hedge of protection.” Their grim pronouncement was that 9-11 stood as a proof that our nation is not “under God” anymore.

They were, of course, brazenly misrepresenting God. In an outrageous, blasphemous and bizarre judgment on their part, they were guilty of idolatry, remaking God into their own religious image. I refer to these preachers as “religious professionals”—but not because I believe they knew what they were talking about. I call them religious professionals because unfortunately, they made a living from religion—and by all accounts, a lucrative one.

Along with millions of others who share their superstitious and off-the-wall ideas of who God is, these so-called “evangelists” seemed to believe that God sits on his heavenly throne, peering down on all our

corruption and evil, getting more and more livid. Then sooner or later, our heavenly mad dad just loses it—he goes ballistic and rains down what many describe as his holy, perfect and entirely justifiable wrath.

A Nationalistic God of Wrath?

I don’t believe in a God of wrath—not as religionists typically understand and define wrath. I don’t believe he goes ballistic. The God I believe in never loses his temper. I don’t worship a God who favors the United States or any other nation with any so-called “hedge of protection” that he does not provide for other nations. ***Why should God respect citizens who hold passports from the United States more than any other nation?***

Even more to the point, do we as Christ-followers worship our nation? Or do we worship Jesus, our supreme and sovereign king, our one Lord and only Savior? Since the time of Christ, this question has been a classic dilemma. And beyond Christianity, it poses a classic problem for religion at large: does the nation in which a person lives—and the culture and religion that pervades that nation—dictate who God is and how he is worshipped?

The real and present danger is that when human beings substitute their faith in God for faith in their religion or their nation, then God, country and religion are co-mingled.

When God, country and religion become one and the same thing, the lesson of history is that horrific

suffering and bloodshed inevitably follow. Violence is directed at the minority who think or believe differently than the majority.

How can Christ-followers think God loves them more than anyone else? How can Christ-followers perceive their nation to be worthy of special blessings from God while citizens of other nations are not?

Our Pledge of Allegiance to the King of the Kingdom of Heaven

The New Testament teaches Christ-followers to be good citizens of the countries in which they live—as long as the

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government doesn't try to force them to do things that violate their conscience.

That said, I absolutely respect and support those who feel their faith in God forbids them to salute the flag or recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

Yet some who protest the flag or the Pledge of Allegiance have used a bully platform for their own agendas, acting out in irreverent and scandalous ways.

Again, the New Testament is clear: Christ-followers should seek to be productive and supportive citizens, never as destructive anarchists bent on violent revolution.

The Pledge of Allegiance to the flag of the United States of America is often interpreted as a religious vow—a sacred ritual—even a sign of righteousness. And some who see it that way believe God is more pleased with those who say the pledge than with those who do not.

Really?

Here's the current version of the Pledge of Allegiance—a

version which has been authorized for use since 1954:

*"I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, **one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.**"*

Really?

"One nation under God...?"

Really?

"Liberty and justice for all"?

How can we say that our entire nation is under God? That's an impossible belief. That's absolutely ludicrous. Americans are not one nation under God—nor have we ever been one nation under God.

Is it a fair and true assumption that the more religious, more "Christian" a nation is, the more peace-loving and nonviolent that nation turns out to be?

The most recent data I've seen shows that the Democratic Republic of the Congo boasts one of the highest per capita allegiances to Christianity—95.7% "Christian." However, the

Congo is also near the top of the list of the most dangerous places to live on earth.

Mexico supposedly has a 95% Christian population, but the drug wars and cartels maintain one of the highest murder rates of any country on earth.

Some of the most destructive wars in human history have been waged by "Christian nations"—World War 1, World War 2, the Napoleonic Wars, the American Civil War and the Thirty Years War were all waged by armies in which the majority of combatants on both sides claimed to be Christians.

Back to the Pledge of Allegiance. Can we seriously claim that our nation affords "liberty and justice for all"?

In our freedom-for-me-but-not-for-you society, it seems to be a requirement that everyone tolerates "our side" while refusing to tolerate others.

Thus, our so-called "freedom" becomes entirely self-serving—tolerance becomes one-sided and not extended to those who disagree. The same tolerance one group demands and feels entitled to is often despised and denied to the other.

Is mandated, intimidating conformity really "liberty and justice for all"?

Our pledge as Christ-followers is not to any nation or state. While the Bible calls us to be good citizens of our earthly countries, our true and eternal citizenship is in heaven.

Our primary pledge as Christ-followers is to Jesus Christ. He alone is our Lord and our Savior—the one and only King of the kingdom of heaven.

As Christ-followers, our pledge to Jesus as Lord stands on the

"...our pledge as Christ-followers is not to any nation or state. ... Our primary pledge as Christ-followers is to Jesus Christ."



WE MUST OBEY GOD RATHER THAN MAN



WILL IT BE
 Ana Puncochar
 (10 years old)

Shall it always be
 in this world
 Injust
 Ignorance
 To woman kind
 Overpower
 To male kind
 Understatement
 To child kind

How can our pledge talk of
 justice for all
 When this may never be a
 reality

If no being has will
 to step up to this
 We will
 Underestimated
 Child

You may be brave
 But only the bravest step up
 for what is right
 Only the strongest admit that
 they too have weaknesses
 These bravest
 Are small

These strongest
 Are short
 But

These bravest
 Are smart
 These strongest
 Are brave
 Smart enough not to pretend
 to be another
 Brave enough
 To not try to be anything
 But themselves

If nobody stands up
 We will
 And we're not afraid to

So shall it be
 That you stand
 Or we stand
 For liberty and equal rights
 for all
 Man
 woman
 child

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When God, country and religion become one and the same thing, the lesson of history is that horrific suffering and bloodshed inevitably follow.

two "great commandments": to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength—and to love our neighbors as ourselves. If we are committed to that pledge, we will be good citizens of virtually every free nation on earth.

If we pledge allegiance to Jesus, we will stand up for the rights, privileges and humanity of others—even those who are not like us at all. And because we are free in Christ, we will not allow others to bully us down the slippery path of political or religious conformity—even under banners of one-sided "freedom" or "tolerance."

Our spiritual pledge of allegiance follows Peter's response to religious authorities, "We must obey God rather than

men!" (Acts 5:29). We obey God rather than nationalism. We obey the God revealed in the person of Jesus, rather than the God that religious professionals fabricate to achieve their own goals. We obey the King of the kingdom of heaven.

In Christ's own words, "Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things [the true liberty, justice and security you seek] will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

In today's vernacular, the sense Peter conveyed was just this:

"When push comes to shove—if it comes to a conflict between God and country or God and religion—we must obey God." □

Greg Albrecht is president of Plain Truth Ministries.

THE LAST CHRISTIANS

ANDREAS KNAPP



Andreas Knapp is a poet, priest and popular author based in Germany. He left his secure post as head of Freiburg Seminary to live and work among the poor as a member of a faith community called “Little Brothers of the Gospel.”

Today, he shares an apartment with three brothers in Leipzig’s largest housing project, where he ministers to prisoners and refugees.

His latest book, **The Last Christians**, recounts the stories of refugees in his neighborhood and of displaced people in camps in Kurdistan, northern Iraq.

CWRm caught up with him for the following interview.

CWRm: How did you come to encounter and write about *The Last Christians*? And why do you call them that?

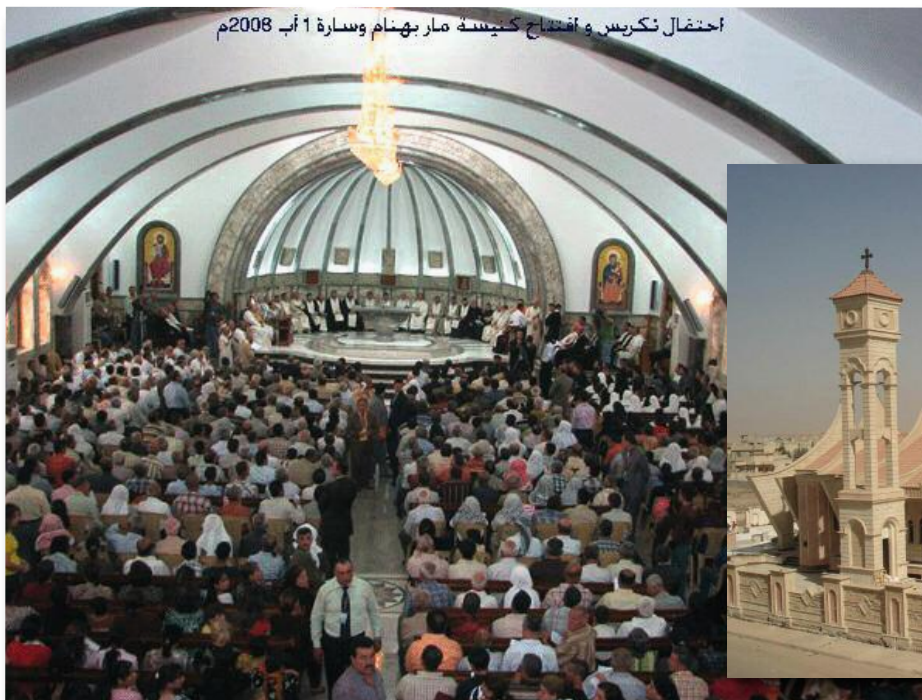
Andreas: I live in a neighborhood in Leipzig, Germany, where many refugees have arrived in the

last three years. My new neighbors come from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Most of them are Muslim, but I have also encountered Christians who have suffered great discrimination and persecution, most recently under the terrorism of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. I was very affected by their stories, and I felt they should be written down and preserved.

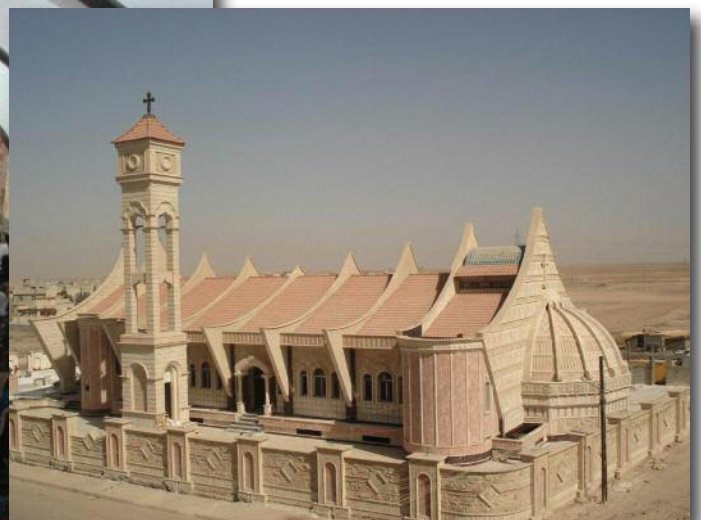
I was also fascinated by the history of the Christians of the Middle East, especially when I discovered that there are still communities that speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus. I was touched as I heard these believers reciting the Lord’s Prayer in the language of Jesus and the early church. I call them “the last Christians” because their communities are destroyed and they have had to emigrate all over the world.

CWRm: Who are these Christian groups?

Andreas: The Aramaic or Syriac Christians are descendants of very old churches, dating back to the first Christian communities, such as Antioch



Church of Saints Behnam and Sarah in Qaraqosh, Iraq





Funeral Procession for Archbishop Paulas Faraj Rahho, who was martyred in Mosul, Iraq in 2008.

and Damascus. They still use the language of Jesus in their liturgies—and some of them in everyday speech. The old Syriac churches spread over a large region that today comprises Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and southeast Turkey.

But permanent discrimination and growing persecution are driving the Syriac Christians from their home countries, especially Syria, Iraq and Turkey.

The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch shares a theological and pastoral communion with the Coptic Church of Egypt and the Armenian Church. There are differences in geography, language and culture, but they recognize each other as authentic churches and the members of these churches receive communion mutually.

CWRm: Tell us more about the last Christians' historic roots.

And what is their faith like now in the 21st century?

Andreas: Historically, the ancestors of Middle Eastern Christians generally date back at least 1400 years, because after the rise of Islam no one was allowed to convert to Christianity. During this entire time, there was strong social pressure for Christians to become Muslims.

The Syriac churches have a rich spiritual and philosophical history. Their monasteries preserved the writings of ancient Greek and Persian philosophy, mathematics and medicine. Syriac Christians translated Aristotle and Hippocrates into Aramaic and then Arabic. As missionaries, they traveled to China, India and the Philippines.

Today's Middle Eastern Christians keep alive this spiritual tradition. When ISIS demanded that they convert to Islam in order to remain in their

houses and keep their jobs, they decided to leave their homes and all their possessions. A bishop in Iraq said to me, "They lost everything—except their faith."

CWRm: What has been happening to them?

Andreas: When the original Christian region of Syria was conquered by Islam, the Christians became second-class citizens. They had to pay a special tax for practicing their faith and endured discrimination in everyday life.

In the long story of Islam, there have been some periods of greater tolerance. But the last centuries have seen an increased number of massacres. For example, in 1843 thousands of Aramaic Christians were brutally slaughtered by Kurds in an area to the north of Mosul. The women and girls left behind



Destruction of Mar Gorgees Church, Mosul, Iraq

CWRm: Following these events in the media is confusing to us. What should we watch and listen for that might bring clarity?

Andreas: For a long time, Western media showed relative indifference to the fate of Middle Eastern Christians. Believers living in the Middle East have no lobby in Western society.

Recently I have noticed an increasing attention to the suffering of these Christians. I listen to the reports of NGOs working in the Middle East and I

appreciate the news of the “*Society of Threatened Peoples*” (Germany). News reports by various Christian denominations also help spread the word.

were abducted and forced to convert to Islam. And anyone who protested was burned.

In 1900, around 20 percent of those living in the area now known as Turkey were Christian. But it wasn't long before the national mania to create an exclusively Turkish state led to the first genocide of the twentieth century. The First World War kept public attention well away from what was happening in the remoter regions of the Ottoman Empire. Overshadowed by the atrocities committed against the Greeks (approximately 350,000 dead) and Armenians (about 1.5 million dead), the 1915/16 genocide of around 300,000 Aramaic Christians has barely registered in the global consciousness to this day.

Now, a hundred years later, Christians are once again being shot, beheaded or crucified.

CWRm: How can we in the West best help? Is anything you've seen effective?

Andreas: As Christians, we try to follow the example of Jesus, so we must help all refugees without asking about their nation, religion or language.

But we have to help the Christians in a special way—not because they belong to the same religion as us, but because they belong to a threatened minority.

Muslim refugees are more likely to find other countries in the Middle East where they can live in peace. That some very rich Arabic countries accept so few Muslim refugees is a scandal—and



Andreas Knapp



Refugee camp in Ankawa, Iraq

I don't understand why international policy doesn't put them under pressure. But for Christians, there is no place in the Middle East where they can live in religious freedom.

After the liberation of Mosul and the Nineveh Plain, some Christian families returned to their homes. They found them burned and their churches destroyed. There are initiatives to help them and I think these are worthy of support.

I'm afraid that it is too late to save some Middle Eastern churches in their homelands. Too many of their members have fled. There are some bishops, such as Cardinal Sako of Baghdad, who are fighting for the survival of their congregations. We can support these efforts to help Christians to remain in their villages or to return from the refugee camps.

They need economic and also political security. We should help them reconstruct their churches, build schools and create an economic future.

“The Middle Eastern Christians have remained faithful to their origins in Jesus. They do not return hate for hate. And they invite us to rediscover Jesus’ gospel of love and peace.”

We should also be helping Christians who are refugees in Europe or America because they have no hope of returning to their homelands. We can support them in their efforts to found Syriac communities and to maintain their culture and their faith.

CWRm: How has this experience changed your perspective and impacted your heart?

Andreas: I'm very touched by the Middle Eastern Christians and



Photograph by Allen Kakony

Christians displaced by violence take refuge in places of worship.

their faithfulness. They chose to lose their houses, their country and even their lives so that they wouldn't lose their faith. I wonder how I would react if faced with that alternative: remain in your house and country if you convert to Islam, or remain faithful to Jesus and

witness to love and nonviolence; he preached reconciliation and peace.

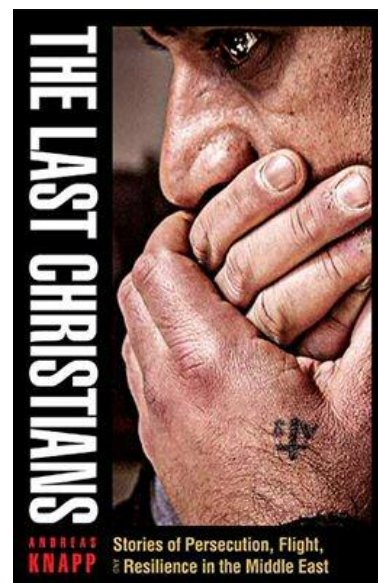
The Middle Eastern Christians have remained faithful to their origins in Jesus. They do not return hate for hate. And they invite us to rediscover Jesus' gospel of love and peace. □

Andrew Knapp serves immigrants and refugees, including Muslims and persecuted Christians. He is the author of The Last Christians.

leave everything behind.

So the faithful attitude of these believers is a challenge to take my own faith seriously. I ask myself: Is my faith really my greatest treasure, or is it only a secondary addition?

These exiled Christians are coming from the Middle East, where Jesus was born—the cradle of Christianity. They remind me of the origin of my faith. And they remind me that in the beginning of our faith, there was a man in whom people could recognize the presence of God. He bore



The Matrix

Distinguishing between Reality and Illusion

-Michael Peterson-

The Matrix trilogy (1999) with Keanu Reeves tells the story of a computer programmer, Neo, who begins to question the reality around him and eventually learns about the Matrix.

The Matrix is a false perception of the real world. It constantly invades people's perceptions of their lives, environment and reality. Morpheus, who rescues Neo, describes the Matrix as *"everywhere around us. It is in the room we are in; we can see it when we look out our window or when we turn on our television set. We can feel it when we go to work, when we go to church, when we pay our taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over our eyes to blind us from the Truth."*

The false world of the Matrix is an illusion, perpetrated by powerful others seeking to hide reality from us. The Matrix twists and contorts reality, controlling thoughts, perceptions, attitudes and behaviors to conform to its illusion.

The parallels today are almost too numerous to mention. We are saturated with endless streams of information, flooding us with news and entertainment. We are constantly being influenced via

the Internet, "news" sites, programs and social media. Our mobile phones keep us ever connected to the Matrix.

Living in the false perceptions that surround us, what we have come to call "media" determines what we think about, how and when we think about it.

As a college professor, I have observed the increasing influence of the media in the lives of college students. Typically, students find it extremely difficult not to check their phones and social media sites every 10 to 15 minutes. During

"THE MATRIX IS EVERYWHERE AROUND US. IT IS IN THE ROOM WE ARE IN; WE CAN SEE IT WHEN WE LOOK OUT OUR WINDOW OR WHEN WE TURN ON OUR TELEVISION SET. WE CAN FEEL IT WHEN WE GO TO WORK, WHEN WE GO TO CHURCH, WHEN WE PAY OUR TAXES. IT IS THE WORLD THAT HAS BEEN PULLED OVER OUR EYES TO BLIND US FROM THE TRUTH."

class, students can be seen constantly surfing, checking email, looking at Internet sites or social media. They are somewhat addicted and feel almost obligated to keep in touch and respond to this media world where they are consumed by an alternate reality made up of

digital information. In that "matrix," they are easily swayed by the prevailing information they consume.

The Matrix shapes their perceptions, often in direct conflict with their own, not by their own reason, logic and experiences. Of course, it is not just college students who are susceptible. We all can easily be passive participants in the Matrix and fall prey to misinformation, fake news and false realities.

Fake News, False Realities

False realities have been around for some time, and are often created by institutions or individuals of influence. Government agencies, media companies, religious institutions, medical science and educational systems have all been guilty of advocating false realities and promoting illusions that cause us to experience negative outcomes. False realities created and promoted by the Matrix influence voters, increase violence and create division. It is no accident that our nation is more divided than ever, and the media has played a leading role.

Those people who are courageous enough to think outside the box, and do their own thinking, logical reasoning and

fact checking are hard pressed to accept the alternative reality of the Matrix advanced by so many areas of our culture. Medical science is not immune to the Matrix, as evidenced by the testimony of the former editor of the prestigious New England Journal of Medicine, Dr. Marcia Angell:

"It is simply no longer possible to believe much of the clinical research that is published or to rely on the judgment of trusted physicians or authoritative medical guidelines. I take no pleasure in this conclusion, which I reached slowly and reluctantly over my two decades as an editor of The New England Journal of Medicine." (Marcia Angell, MD, *The New York Review of Books*, January 15, 2009).

The illusion of health and healthcare is something that we wouldn't expect, but for those of us who work in the health professions, it is something we know to be true. Medical science journalism is highly suspect.

Politically Correct

The Matrix is always at risk of being exposed, so political correctness has become the law enforcer. To question conventional wisdom risks being punished with the wrath of those who control our "culture" and our "reality." Hence, national security or immigration measures are twisted to become racist; questions about the sanctity of marriage or gender fluidity risk labeling someone a homophobe or transphobic. Questioning climate change risks being labeled a "denier" and non-scientific. Questioning the efficacy of vaccines for your child makes you a poor parent and a health "wacko." Labels such as "Nazi," "racist," "homophobe" or even "Christian" are ways people are kept within the Matrix.

In fact, "Christianity" itself is now being described as a "white supremacist" religion by some media, academic and cultural elites.

It is not just the pressure of the Matrix to control our perceptions of reality. We also can become willing partners through our exorbitant pursuits of entertainment, amusement and escape. The advancement of

virtual reality technology is now making this even more exciting and tempting to the point where even our social and sexual needs and desires can be satisfied via an avatar.

We may literally be able to immerse ourselves in a false reality. For some, even the technology we currently have has led to increased addiction, depression and mental illness. What will happen when virtual reality becomes mainstream? Apart from technology, many seek solace through drugs, alcohol or amusing pursuits—these are just other ways to engage in the Matrix.

The Way Out

Ultimately, the question is, "how do we disengage from the Matrix?" The picture I have painted is somewhat bleak but it is not a foregone conclusion. The real issue we face is being able to determine the difference between the lie (Matrix) and the truth. The very first step is to accept the truth—and for Christians, the ultimate truth is that Jesus Christ is the Son of God; Jesus is the way, the life and the truth. He is the light that shines in the darkness. He is the gate; he is the exit door. Once that truth is accepted, we can begin to look at our lives and see the Matrix in which we exist through the reality and lens of Christ.

God gave us minds with which to reason, apply logic and weigh information. Learning to think well is a skill that we all need to develop. It was no small thing for Solomon to ask for wisdom—the ability to think, judge and make determinations as a king. We should be no less shy in asking God for that same wisdom. Learning and being unafraid to ask questions, or to question information is vitally important.

The Spirit of truth (John 14:16) produces a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7). The Spirit of truth empowers us, helping us identify basic logic fallacies with which we are bombarded by the media and the Matrix. God empowers us to distinguish between reality and fabrications, lies and truth.

As we grow in Christ, we also grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). And it is through Christ and by the grace of God that we can escape the Matrix and finally see reality. □

Michael Peterson works in higher education, encouraging students to pursue truth.

When Words Fail



J. LeBron McBride

We pray in the name of the one who is the life and the light of all, Jesus Christ, Amen.



Life doesn't always go as we think it should. Have you ever gone to the store and somehow ended up with one of those shopping carts that has one bad wheel? You push it along and it squeals its presence to everyone. Every time you turn a corner you can imagine someone saying, "Oh no—here comes squeaky!"

Sometimes the shopping cart wheel makes a *thump*. I got one at the store just this week. Every time the wheel went around it went *thump*. Ninety percent of the wheel was okay, but then there was a *thump*. So there I went—*thump, thump, thump...*

Isn't that illustrative of life itself? A lot of life goes well but then there are the thumps. Sometimes I want to say to God, "Lord, just stop giving me real life

Do you ever get confused by life and not know which way to turn or who to go to for help? Does it sometimes seem that all you can do is gurgle some ungodly sounds from somewhere deep in your soul and you don't want anyone else to hear such awful noises?

When words fail and all we are capable of is moaning and groaning, can we expect anyone, even God, to understand? Yes, God hears our deepest hurts. God is always listening.

Consider this meditation and reflection on the moans and groans too deep to bear.

wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.



...sometimes all we can do is groan our pain.

...but the Spirit intercedes for us through wordless groans.



Scripture: Romans 8:22-27

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we

Prayer:

Oh God, there are times when we have unspeakable sorrow and hurt and no one understands or seems to even care. May we somehow find the light of your love shining in the midst of the dark moments of life.

illustrations! I can find them somewhere else!"

Sometimes life is much more serious than the illustration I've mentioned. Sometimes we use harsher descriptions, such as "the bottom fell out," "the rug was pulled out from under me," or "my world was turned upside

down” to communicate the depth of the painful side of life.

At such times, the noise becomes an overwhelming *thump, thump, thump* that never seems to stop!

At such times the ten percent of life that is “out of round” grabs our attention and will not let go. We limp through each day. Questions about survival, the fairness of life or how we could have prevented the difficulty fly rapid-fire through our minds.



Christians are not excluded from these dilemmas, as some would falsely have us believe. We too may feel that our world has been turned upside down. We too experience emotions that overwhelm us. We too can be angry at life or at God for the hand we’ve been dealt. We too can grope around in a stupor and have difficulty finding our way.

Our faith may be shaken, our

such pain that words failed. The pain was too great, the emotions too deep. We hurt and sometimes our hearts break but we can find no words to express it and no one who can even hear it. We struggle for breath and it feels like our life is being smothered.

Have you ever experienced this? Have you ever been there? I dare say some who are reading this are there right now.

Always remember that in any given group, some there are in the midst of such a hell. The person beside you, in front of you or behind you may desperately need your smile, a warm handshake or your embrace. Never forget that you can be a refuge for many a hurting soul.



During those times when we are speechless because of life’s tragedies, God hears our groans and understands them. When we recall the suffering of Jesus, we see

we talk to somebody who is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.”

Let that sink in for a moment. Tillich goes on to add, “It is God himself who prays through us when we pray to him. God himself in us: that is what Spirit means. Spirit is another word for ‘God present.’”

This is the faith we hold dearly, that God hears our groans and is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. God knows. God cares. God understands. God is present, groaning with us when actual words are not available.

The deepest and darkest nights of the soul are understood by our God. That is truly good news when there is nothing else to cling to.

This is the beauty of our faith!

“We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans” (Romans 8:26).

Sometimes our feelings are too deep for words. But there is a God



assumptions shattered, our peace disturbed. Our faith can assist us, but we are human as well.

In those times, sometimes all we can do is groan our pain. There are no words. Maybe you have not been through such a time and if so, I am glad. But I have been with those who faced

that God intimately knows our groans and exactly what they mean. *God knows the language of groaning.* The apostle Paul says the Spirit uses the language of moans and “intercedes for us through wordless groans” (Romans 8:24).

Theologian Paul Tillich wrote in *The New Being*, “When we pray,

in heaven who cares and understands.

Cry out to God, even if only with great groans, deep moans or the frailest whimper. Do so and the Spirit will speak for you! □

Adapted from J. LeBron McBride's new book, Coming Back to Faith.

COMMUNION + IN THE ER + NAN KUHLMAN

Our young adult son limped out to the kitchen, digging around in the cupboard until he found the Ibuprofen. “What’s hurting?” I asked him.

“It’s this spot on the back of my leg,” he said as he grabbed some water from the fridge to wash down the clear, blue capsules. “I’ve had it a week or so, and it’s really starting to bother me.”

“Let me take a look,” I said, my mothering instincts rising to the fore. He raised his sweatpants to reveal a lump the size of a golf ball and a half. It was an abscess, with a sister abscess located a few inches below on his calf. “Why didn’t you say anything? This looks really bad.” Scary news stories about people losing limbs and lives to flesh-eating bacteria filled my head, and my stomach clenched.

“I had a couple lumps last week, smaller ones, but they went away on their own,” he continued. “These two have just gotten bigger, and they make it really hard to walk.”

He had been dealing with extreme eczema and using a super-steroid cream prescribed by a dermatologist to bring down the inflammation that made him scratch his arms and legs until they bled. The side effects of this cream stated that secondary skin infections were possible, and he was living proof of that.

Thankfully, my son had no fever, although he admitted he had a low-grade fever a few days before. Because of the holidays, our primary care physician’s office was closed, so we ended up in the ER.

As we waited in the examining room for the doctor, I tried to prepare him for what was ahead. I had had abscesses as the result of severe mastitis nearly twenty-five years before, and I remembered clearly the pain that was a part of draining the infection, cleaning the wound and packing it with cotton string to continue the draining.

“It’s going to hurt a lot when the doctor gets that infection out and then has to clean the wound. He or she will probably give you something to numb the cut, but it won’t really help that much.”

He nodded his head. Of all our children, he has the highest pain tolerance. I hoped that would help. The doctor came in and explained what she was going to do, reiterating what I had just told him. He watched as she used a scalpel to make a small incision in his calf; I kept my eyes on his face.

As she began to push the infection out, he closed his eyes and winced though he made no sound. Tears began to roll down my cheeks, and I could no longer sit idly by as the doctor and two nurses worked on his legs. I stood

beside the doctor, putting one hand on my son’s shoulder and the other on his hand that he held stiffly across his chest. I wanted to pray; I wanted to breathe and bring a sense of peace, but all I could do was cry and keep my hands firmly on him so he knew he was not alone.

Then I thought about taking communion, where we take the bread that represents Christ’s broken body and the wine or juice that stands for his shed blood, and it came to me that this sacred ritual helps us remember that God Incarnate knows what it’s like to suffer.

Just as I hadn’t forgotten the pain of my abscesses, so Jesus has not forgotten how it feels to hurt, whether physically or emotionally. When we eat the bread and drink the wine, we are reminding ourselves that when we suffer, we are not alone. Jesus is standing there, beside the doctor and nurses at work, a hand on our shoulder and a strong, warm hand holding our hand.

After we left the ER, I said to my son, “I hope I didn’t embarrass you when I held your hand in there,” suddenly aware that he was no longer a child.

“No, I needed something right then,” he said. We all need something when we’re in pain, a comforting presence to assure us that we won’t suffer alone.

Communion reminds us of this; receiving the bread and the wine into our bodies can serve as our reminder that our God “became flesh” to show solidarity and presence in the midst of a suffering world. □

Nan Kuhlman is an academic writing instructor for Azusa Pacific University (Azusa, CA). She also teaches academic writing online for Northwest State Community College in Archbold, Ohio and Indiana Tech in Fort Wayne. Nan has been freelance writing for over 20 years.



CWR^m

GREG ALBRECHT

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

“I was tempted and I caved in to sin.”

Question: Greg, your ministry is the one I listen to most often. Without going into detail, I was inadvertently tempted on Facebook last night and caved in to sin.

I have a question. Would you say that our sins decrease as we grow in Christ, but we never become sinless while we still live in the flesh?

Even though sinning less often, I feel more guilt and shame now than I did before believing! On the subject of works versus grace, you indicate that we work with God, empowered by the Spirit, and are saved by grace because of “human limitation,” which is not salvation by “works,” but by grace.

I’m really feeling bad about last night and although I need to keep drawing closer to God, I wanted to discuss this with you as my minister of choice!

Answer: It is an honor and privilege to serve you. We all “cave in” to sin of some description. It seems, based on biblical logic, that we would grow in grace and in knowledge so that over time, we would sin less than we once did. I believe in general that diminishing and decreasing sinful behavior is a fruit of God’s Spirit, but sin of all kinds is an unpredictable “wild card” that sneaks up on us with often devastating results.

So, we should never expect that we are rid of any kind of sin, but we should, I believe,

thank God for helping us overcome to the degree that we can. We should always hope for less sin and for progress with the specific addictions that may plague us.

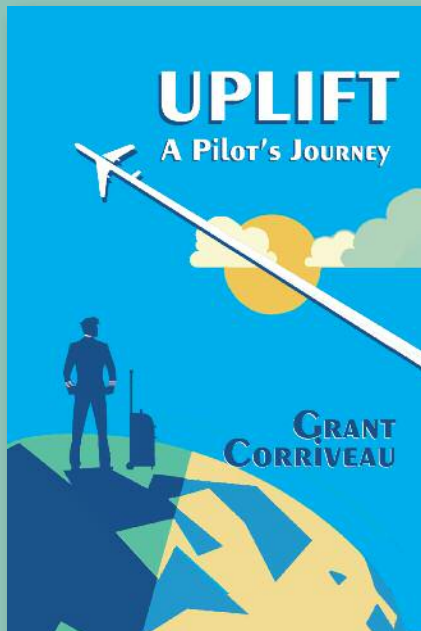
But, as with driving a car, we continue to respect the potential and awesome destruction that our flesh is capable of producing.

Still, God will never give up on you or me, so let your shame and guilt be short-lived by giving it all to Jesus, who will always exchange our sin and shame for his righteousness and goodness.

Response: Thanks so much. “Unpredictable wild card” was just what I needed to hear!

While knowing that the flesh will never be entirely free of sin, I’ve been wondering which sin will rear its ugly head. I wonder if and when it will ever diminish from my life. And I pray it will become less of a struggle!

How ironic that today’s radio program was on the subject that I’m thanking you for covering right now. Thank you for your friendship and consoling me in my time of need! ☐



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CWRaudio *Summaries*

June 2018

Prepare to be Unprepared – When we live by faith, not by sight, how absolutely prepared can we be for the unforeseen? Life, by its very nature, is unpredictable—something always goes wrong. *Week of June 3*

"By What Power or By What Name?" – Who or what is your ultimate authority? Who pipes the tunes to which you dance and who plays the music to which you march? *Week of June 10*

"The Living Years" – George W. Bush once said, "We judge others by their group's worst example, while we judge ourselves by our best intentions." On this Father's Day, we'll consider what that truth has to do with children and parents. *Week of June 17*

The Gospel is *Not* a Band-Aid – Some people apparently feel that God fits neatly into their hip pocket, right there with their Smartphone, because it seems he agrees with virtually every decision they want to make and everything they desire. *Week of June 24*

July 2018

Freedom... For What? – Why God determined to give human beings freedom might be the greatest mystery in human existence. *Week of July 1*

The Center of the Gospel – As important as it is, it may be shocking to discover that feeding the hungry and helping the poor is not the heart and core of the gospel. *Week of July 8*

Getting the Cart Before the Horse – Grace-based faith is all about what God has done in Christ to rescue and redeem us—prior to any response on our part. *Week of July 15*

"Leave It To Me" – Join us as we take a careful, Christ-centered look at the Parable of the Weeds, one of the kingdom-of-heaven parables in Matthew 13. *Week of July 22*

"He Is Who He Is" – God is not who you think he is or who you would like him to be or who you have been told he is—God is who he says he is. *Week of July 29.*