

PLAIN TRUTH®

inside

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

“Thank God
I’m not like...”

Avoiding Religious Pride

By Greg Albrecht

He told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people: “Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: ‘Oh, God, I thank you I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.’”

“Meanwhile the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face on his hands, not daring to look up, said, ‘God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.’”

Jesus commented: “This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up flat on your face, but if you’re content to be

simply yourself, you will become more than yourself” (Luke 18:9-14, Eugene Peterson, *The Message Bible*).

The classical name of this, one of Jesus’ best-known parables, is “The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.” As we consider how Jesus’ masterfully woven story might apply to our lives, one of the first steps we should take is to identify the original audience. To whom did Jesus address this parable and for what purpose? In this parable, those questions are answered by Luke before he quotes the parable given by Jesus.

As noted above, *The Message Bible* (Luke 18:9) translates Luke as saying Jesus told this story ... to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral

performance and looked down their noses at the common people. We’ll come back to that word “performance.”

In the first sentence of this parable, Jesus depicts two people going to the Temple to pray. The Jews in the original audience believed the Temple to be the most holy religious place in the world. We can safely assume before Jesus had finished the first sentence, the listeners would have concluded both men were engaged in a virtuous religious exercise. Then, in the second part of the sentence Jesus appears to make it easy for both his original audience, as well as all those who

would read the parable down through the centuries, to pinpoint the good guy and the bad guy.

Because we are familiar with the lesson of this parable, you and I know the roles that Jesus assigned the two main characters in this parable. But, had we been part of the original audience when Jesus introduced the characters, we would have immediately concluded the hero of the parable to be the Pharisee.

After one sentence the original audience surely determined the protagonist/good guy of Jesus’ parable to be the religious professional, the highly esteemed person who could always be seen doing all the right things and participating in all the right and appropriate religious rituals and

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Is It True?

The next time you are in the checkout line at the grocery store imagine turning to the person next to you and joyfully announcing “Christ is risen!” Can you picture the bewildered expressions of your fellow shoppers?

Imagine you are taking a walk and when someone passes by you greet them by saying, “Christ is risen!” Some of those people would ignore you, and perhaps walk a little faster to put more distance between them and you.

Is it true that Jesus was resurrected? **Is it true** that Jesus is now alive, with his same physical body made immortal, a body that is incorruptible, impervious to aging, disease and death?

Did you know it’s easier and far more comfortable to think of Jesus as dead than alive? People dying and staying dead means life goes on the way we experience it...everyone eventually dies. When people die they are buried or cremated...and they stay where they are placed. That’s how life and death work.

But, **if the dead don’t stay dead, what can you count on?** If only one person never stayed dead, then that changes everything, doesn’t it? *Jesus died, but he didn’t stay dead.*

In the 27th chapter of Matthew we read about Jesus appearing before Pilate, the Roman governor. It was the custom at the Jewish Passover, which was all about their deliverance from Egypt, that the Roman governor would release one prisoner, chosen by the crowd assembled before him.

Before Pilate asked the crowd if they wanted him to release Jesus, or Barabbas, a notorious prisoner according to Matthew, here’s what

we read in Matthew 27:19:

“While Pilate was sitting on the judge’s seat, his wife sent him this message: ‘Don’t have anything to do with this innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.’”

In his drama, “The Trial of Jesus” English poet and playwright John Masefield built a fictitious discussion based on this verse—a dialogue he imagined between the Roman centurion who was in charge of the crucifixion, and Pilate’s wife.

Masefield has the centurion returning to report to Pilate that Jesus had been crucified and was dead. When Pilate’s wife sees the centurion she draws him aside and asks, “Do you think he is dead?”

The centurion replies, “No, lady, I don’t.”

Pilate’s wife is now more fearful than ever, and apprehensively asks the centurion, “Then where is he?”

The centurion answers, “Let loose in the world, where neither Roman nor Jew can stop his truth.”

When we say IT IS TRUE that Jesus is risen, many in our world will say, “I don’t believe it. That’s just a part of your faith, but not mine.”

We might be tempted to conclude that our modern generation is skeptical and lacks faith. But no, such is not the case. Faith and belief are alive and well—it’s just that they have been transferred to other sources of power than God.

In our modern world, we believe when we flip the switch in our apartment or home the lights will go on...we believe when we turn the key or push the button the car will start...and we believe when we turn the handle on the faucet water will come out. Our modern world

universally believes in the power of the Internet and Google, but many people don’t believe Jesus was resurrected.

Sometimes people believe what they want to believe. **Many people then wanted Jesus dead. Many people today want to believe Jesus is still dead.** But Jesus didn’t remain where they put him.

It’s far easier and far more comfortable to think of Jesus as neatly tucked away in a tomb somewhere, because if he is risen that means he is alive. *He died, but he didn’t stay dead.*

Matthew 27:21 says when Pilate asked the crowds which of the prisoners—Barabbas or Jesus—he should release—the crowds chose Barabbas, a notorious prisoner. When Pilate asked the crowd what they advised him to do with Jesus, the crowds screamed, “Crucify him.”

Is it true that he is alive?

The truth is, as we read in 1 Peter 1:3-4, *The resurrection of Jesus gives us new birth—new life—into a living hope and an eternal inheritance that will never perish, spoil or fade.*

Since it is true that JESUS IS RISEN you and I have a living hope beyond whatever best life we can find, build attain or hope for now—and our living hope will never perish, spoil or fade! Since it is true that JESUS IS RISEN, he has conquered death and the grave, and he lives now and forever—and so can you and I! His resurrection changes everything, for the better, forever! □

—Greg Albrecht

Join us for “Is It True?”—the 2019 Easter message at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of April 21, 2019.

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ceremonies. Who in that original audience, after hearing the first sentence, didn't want to be like the Pharisee?

Identifying the bad guy—the villain—would also have been a no-brainer to the first century audience to whom Jesus originally gave this parable. Tax collectors were no-good, ruthless, greedy, immoral people who were authorized to demand and collect taxes and were commonly believed to skim a little profit off the top before turning in the money to the authorities. Who wanted to be like that guy?

The First Curve Ball

But Jesus turned the tables on his listeners, didn't he? The rest of the parable illustrates, through their respective prayers, **the person assumed to be the good guy was actually the bad guy**, and the one everyone automatically thought would be the bad guy was the good guy. Jesus never stops turning the tables of Christ-less religion. Jesus does not throw the "pitch" religion expects him to throw.

In this short story with a huge lesson, Jesus has both of these men going to the temple to pray and he summarizes their respective prayers. The Pharisee was an actor—he "posed and prayed," much like members of the Academy of Motion Pictures who attend their annual award ceremony.

Every year, usually in early March, the motion picture industry throws itself a party and presents awards to...its own members. The centerpiece of this annual ego orgy hosted by the Motion Picture Academy is a statue called an "Oscar," given to individuals anointed and proclaimed as "stars."

The Pharisee was widely acclaimed and hailed as a religious star. As an actor (and he was!), the Pharisee was at the top of his profession. He never missed a line. He positioned himself in a favorable way in public places. His performance was everything

Christ-less religion had written in its script. He delivered his lines flawlessly—his nailed his religious performance. The Pharisee showed up at the right time in the right place looking the way he should, saying what was expected. He was at his best when he was on the stage with everyone watching.

The Pharisee prayed, "Oh God, I thank you I am not like the other people." The Tax Collector prayed, "God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner."

A Pharisee is hard on others and easy on himself, but a spiritual man is easy on others and hard on himself.—A.W. Tozer

Jesus depicts the Tax Collector as being acutely aware that he is not deserving of any Gold Stars in Sunday School. He knows full well he will not be receiving any award at the Religious Oscars and he knows no one wants to see him seated in the front row. So he slumps in the shadows of the Temple.

The Tax Collector knows he is not qualified even to look toward heaven when he prays. He simply asked God for mercy, admitting that he was a sinner. He didn't feel worthy of even looking toward God and he knew full well that he had no long list of religious accomplishments to present to God.

The Pharisee on the other hand, even while appearing to go through all the motions of praying, is so offended by the presence of the Publican in his "acceptance speech" for his award that he can only thank God that he is not like robbers, evil doers, adulterers, or heaven forbid, like this tax man.

The Pharisee arrived at the Temple (the Oscars) in his spiritual limo. The crowds cheered as he walked down the red carpet. The crowds were in awe as the well-rehearsed Pharisee pretended to be interested in his fans by posing for a few photographs. Then the Pharisee walked to the best place in



The gospel of Jesus Christ does not confer awards because actors flawlessly recite the lines religion writes for them or because they perform the ceremonies and rituals religion dictates.

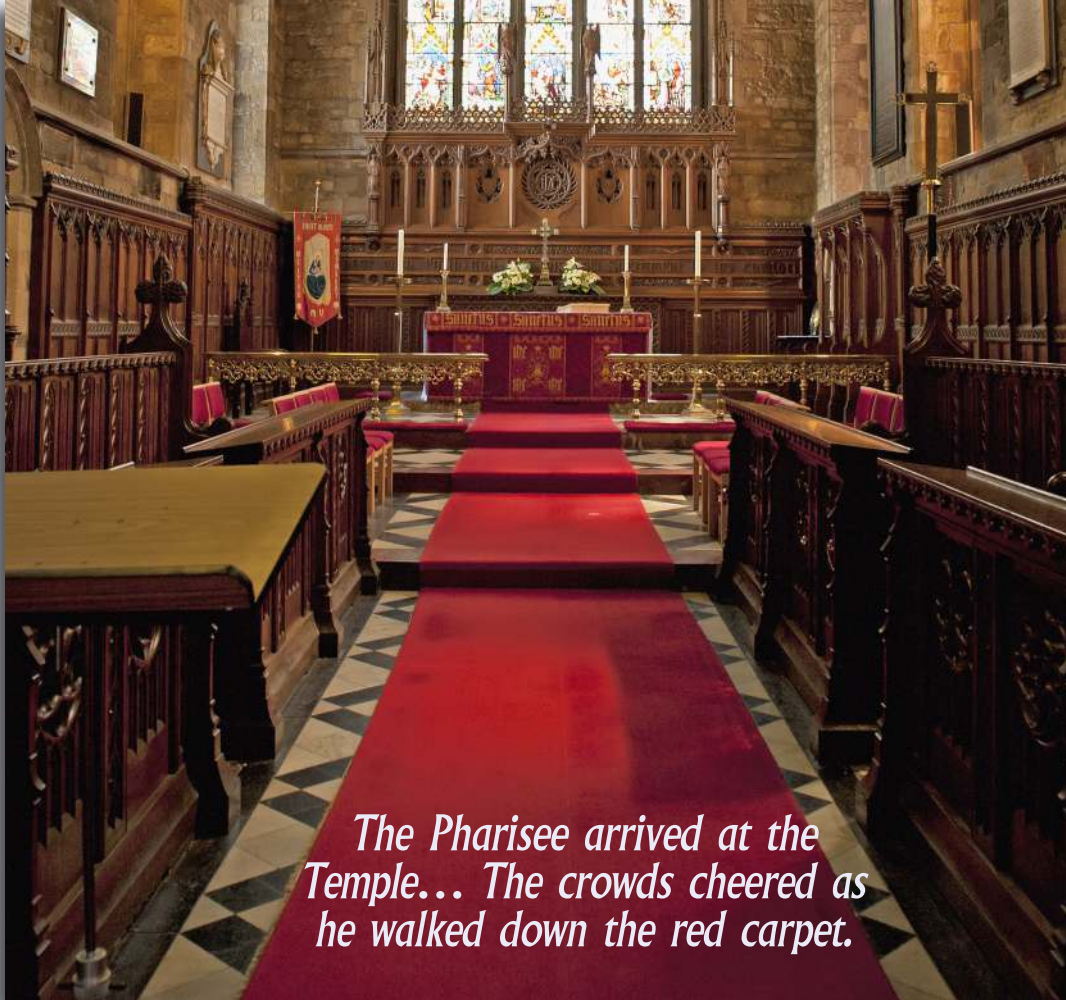
the Temple—to the front row where the television cameras could easily find him. The Pharisee seemed self-assured that even God was one of his fans. The Pharisee didn't wait for God to announce his award—he preempted God, took over the microphone and announced to God (and everyone else) that he fasted twice a week and paid tithes.

The Pharisee wasn't praying to God—he was praying to himself on the altar and stage of the god of religious performance. The Pharisee's prayer was all about making sure everyone else saw him doing what was considered the right thing, at the right time in the right place.

The prayer of the Pharisee was, "Thank God I am not like other people." The Pharisee was so filled with a false sense of spiritual confidence that he was handing out the religious best-performance Oscar to himself—in his mind, his religious performances exalted him far beyond the despicable Tax Man.

The Second Curve Ball

The original readers began by identifying with the Pharisee in the



The Pharisee arrived at the Temple... The crowds cheered as he walked down the red carpet.

parable, but then they realized Jesus had thrown them a curve ball—so as they heard the prayers of the two men, they switched allegiances. Now the original audience no doubt identified with the humility of the Tax Man. As Jesus concludes the parable, he provides the warning...*If you walk around with your nose in the air, you'll wind up flat on your face.*

But now comes the second curve ball that tempts us to swing and miss. The original readers (and you and I) start to feel superior to the Pharisee because we are not nearly as filled with pride as he was.

The second curve ball that we might swing at and miss is when we jump into the opposite dugout and “judge the hell” out of the Pharisee.

In such a scenario we pray *“Thank God I am not like that Pharisee.”* It is so easy to be overwhelmed by the devious twists and turns of spiritual pride. When we think we are right and we are sure that others are wrong, we wind up making the same error as the Pharisee.

So how do we read this parable? Again, we ask, why did Jesus give this parable? He gave this parable as a clear warning about the ever present danger that trust in religious performance will lead to pride, posing and posturing, whereas the heart of Jesus is humility, as displayed by the Publican.

In this parable Jesus counters the popular belief that this Pharisee and all Pharisees who follow him “act” just like God wanted.

If God only cared about religious activities, then the Pharisees would have been heroes of the faith.—Francis Chan

- The gospel of Jesus Christ overturns the belief of Christ-less religion that acting and performing is pleasing to God.

- The gospel of Jesus Christ does not confer awards because actors flawlessly recite the lines religion writes for them or because they perform the ceremonies and rituals religion dictates.

- The big-business enterprise of Christ-less religion can produce arrogant people who believe that they and their denomination alone

have a monopoly on God. They sincerely believe God loves them and no one else—or at least they believe God loves them more than anyone else. Therefore, in the arrogance of their religious posturing they say, *“Thank God I am not like other people.”*

- Christ-less religion can produce judgmental people who try to shame and stigmatize those who are not part of their denomination or church. They preach against people whose sins they believe to be the worst of all sins, rather than trying to serve them in the name of Jesus.

- Christ-less religion goes to incredible lengths to evangelize the “unsaved” (anyone not a member of their church)—attempting to persuade them to join their church—telling them unless they join, they will burn forever in the eternal conscious torment of hell.

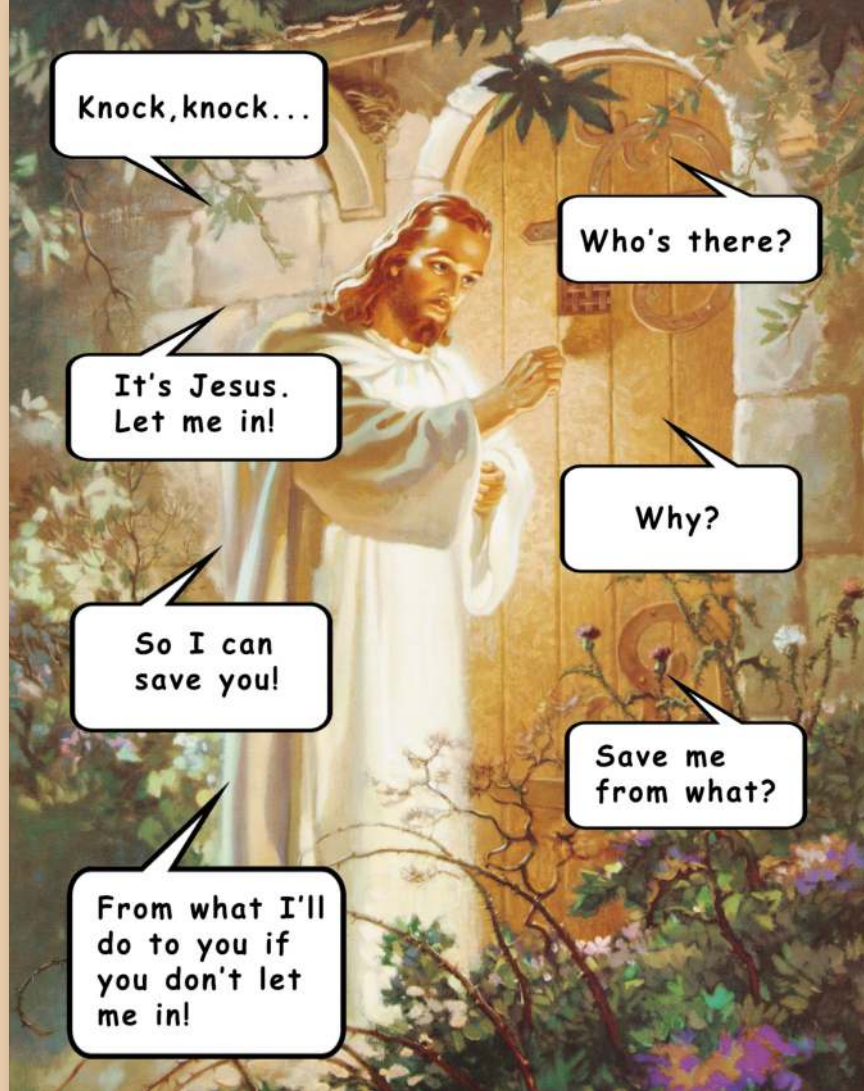
Ironically, many of these zealots are already held captives in the hell of religious legalism, even as they try to convince others to join them in their misery. We recall the words of Jesus: *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are”* (Matthew 23:15).

- Christ-less religion makes people confident of their own righteousness rather than being thankful for the righteousness of Jesus Christ, offered and given to whomever he wishes, whenever he wishes, by the grace of God.

- Christ-less religion gives people a false sense of spiritual confidence through deception and lies, telling its captives that all the religious stuff they do, the rituals they perform, the laws they obey, the programs they follow and the ceremonies in which they participate make them unique, more loved by God, special and in short leads them to pray *“Thank God I am not like other people.”*

So, will we choose the humility of Jesus or the pride of religious performance? □

Does God Save Us...



from God?

Brad Jersak

Twitter statement: “God saves us from God. The One who mercifully drags us out of the rebellious city is the same One who rains down fire upon it.”

Thus wrote a popular tweeter whose handle I’ll withhold out of respect and concern. *God saves us from God?* How so?

Penal substitutionary atonement (PSA—see page 6) continues to be the most popular Western answer to the question, “Why did Christ die?” and is the primary interpretation for Scripture’s assertion that “Christ died for our sins.” Rather than treating it as one of many atonement theories, major denominations are now doubling down, dogmatizing PSA as non-negotiable, essential to the gospel and thus, to salvation. If it IS the gospel, then those who don’t affirm it are not even considered “saved.”

PSA as the uncritical masses understand and proclaim it is

neither necessary nor glorious, yet remains stubbornly popular. We hear it from 10,000 pulpits, public broadcasts and now social media across popular Christianity.

Theologically Perilous

The prevalent expression of PSA can be distinguished by its insistence on “wrath appeasement,” which puts God on par with a virgin-hungry, pagan volcano god. Yet beneath the question of wrath lurk deeper theological perils—ancient heresies already refuted by the early church. These errors resurface in PSA and need to be challenged.

Specifically, intrinsic to common PSA is a dangerous suggestion that the Trinity and/or the person of Christ can be divided. These errors appear inescapable for PSA and I’ve yet to see a response that takes them seriously.

TRITHEISM [the three-gods heresy]: First, no matter how we spin the Son’s willing conspiracy with the

Father to sacrifice himself for humanity, if Father and Son are separated in any way during the Passion, the indivisible unity of the Trinity is severed. If the Father afflicts something on the Son that absences the Father from the Son’s experience, whether an outpouring of wrath or actual abandonment, then the Trinity—“one in essence and undivided”—suffers a rending (however brief) and the three persons are no longer one inseparable God. That’s Tritheism, a formal heresy that we need not retry, if apostolic orthodoxy means anything to us.

ARIANISM [the inferior son heresy]: Second, pop-PSA reads Paul’s statement that Jesus became sin and a curse *literally*, as if he were transformed into something other than God—*less than* God. PSA says a holy God cannot tolerate sin and must punish it—he can neither look on it nor overlook it. Thus, as Christ bears and becomes sin—when PSA’s all-holy Father unleashes all hell on

the sin-cursed Son—Jesus becomes something different from the Father. Someone *less* holy and *less* divine than God, at least for several hours. As Christ hangs on the Cross under the judgment of God’s wrath, how can he remain “fully God”? By this logic, he can’t. That’s a form of Arianism, an error refuted prior to the close of the New Testament.

NESTORIANISM [the divided Jesus heresy]: One workaround to this problem is to divide the person of Christ himself. Christ is both fully human and fully divine, so it’s tempting to divide the two natures and assign sin- and wrath-bearing to his human nature alone.

If only his humanity “becomes sin” and endures the Father’s wrath, then Christ’s divine nature remains untainted. But this proposition again divides what can’t be divided: the one Person, Jesus Christ. As Cyril of Alexandria said, *Christ is one*. The two natures of Christ cannot be separated without making Christ two persons. That’s Nestorianism, another refuted heresy. To imagine the crucifixion event as solely the experience of Christ the human, rather than Christ the one divine-human Person, is to cut him in half.

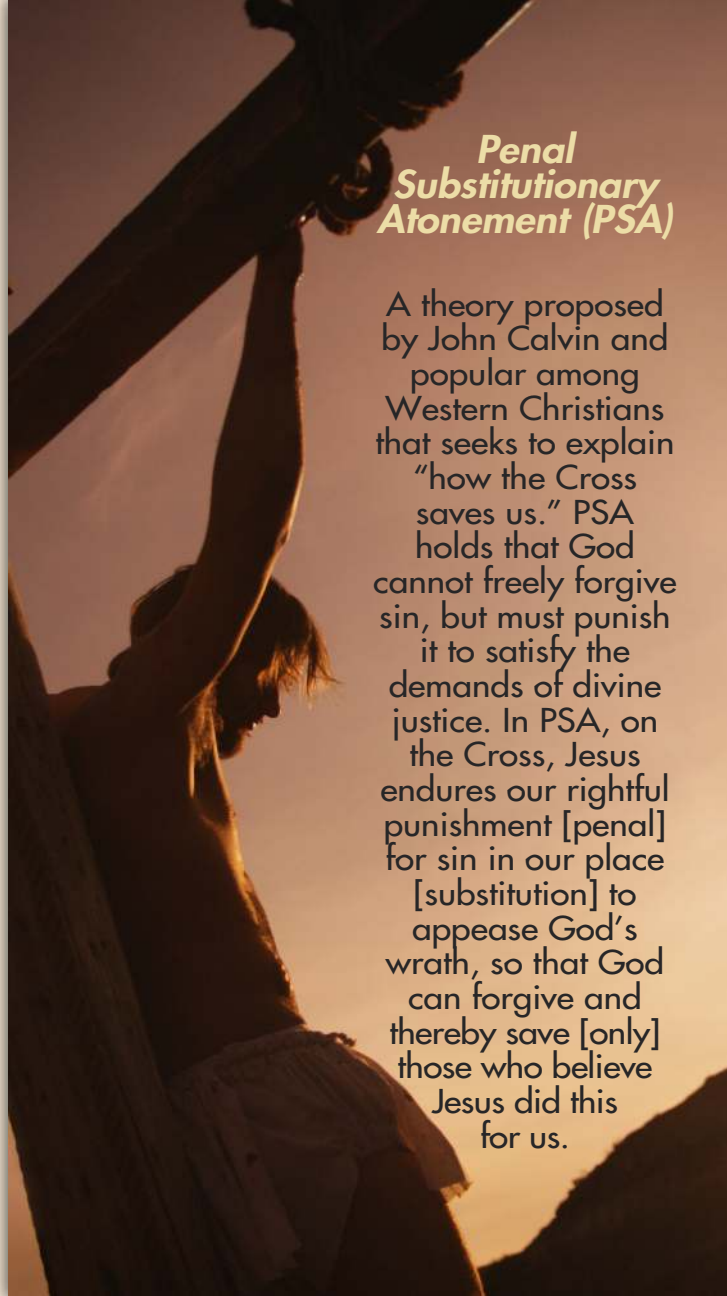
Either God hangs on the Cross or God does not hang on the Cross—PSA cannot have it both ways. And when they look for alternatives, ex-PSA adherents often flail about with no clear vision of the Cross.

As I said in *A More Christlike God* and will review in my soon-to-be-published *A More Christlike Way*, the Cross is not a revelation of God’s wrath, but of *his self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love*. And the Cross is not Jesus’ way of saving us from his angry Father. Rather, as Paul says, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting our sins against us.” Where is Christ on Good Friday? He’s there, on the Cross, the Lamb who was slain, taking away (not punishing) the sins of the world (and not just the Christians). □

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Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA)

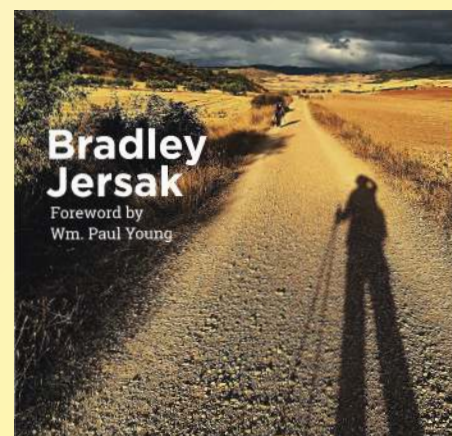
A theory proposed by John Calvin and popular among Western Christians that seeks to explain “how the Cross saves us.” PSA holds that God cannot freely forgive sin, but must punish it to satisfy the demands of divine justice. In PSA, on the Cross, Jesus endures our rightful punishment [penal] for sin in our place [substitution] to appease God’s wrath, so that God can forgive and thereby save [only] those who believe Jesus did this for us.



COMING SOON!

A More Christlike Way by Brad Jersak

The highly anticipated sequel to
Brad Jersak’s award-winning book,
A More Christlike God.



**A MORE
CHRISTLIKE
WAY**
A More
Beautiful Faith



Human Sacrifice

In the U.S., we too often take freedom of the press for granted, but not so in certain Latin American countries where expressing an opinion can be dangerous. Last year I was invited to join an international group of political cartoonists in Mexico City to discuss such issues. I enjoyed seeing old colleagues, getting to know new ones and desperately trying to recall the Spanish I learned 50 years ago.

Between meetings, we explored cultural and archaeological treasures of the city. I was astounded by its art, museums, restaurants, architecture and robust economy. I was fascinated by the rich history that lay everywhere under our feet. Central Mexico City is literally built on the foundations of the Aztec (Mexica) capital of Tenochtitlán. Many of the streets we walked follow those laid out in 1325 by brilliant Aztec engineers.

Even in 1519, when conquistador Hernán Cortés and his soldiers arrived in Tenochtitlán, they were amazed by the city's size and vibrancy—beyond anything they had known in Europe. But, brutal warriors though they were, they were horrified by what they witnessed at the Aztecs' great temple: human sacrifice and ritual consumption of the flesh/blood of victims.

Human sacrifice made perfect sense to the Aztecs. The gods had sacrificed to create the world, so it was only proper that humans should be sacrificed for the nourishment of the gods. Without a constant supply of human blood, the world would be plunged into eternal darkness and everyone would die. Since the Mexica ruled a vast empire, there was no shortage of sacrificial victims in the form of criminals and prisoners of war—although good citizens were honored to present themselves as sacrifices. Suffering, they were taught, would gain them admittance to heaven.

Not all the Aztecs' oppressed neighbors shared this perspective, and Cortés took advantage of that fact to supplement his army from disgruntled Central American tribes. Tenochtitlán eventually fell, temples were razed and great churches were built in their place using some of the same blood-soaked stones.

It took me less than three minutes to step

across a small plaza from the ruins of the ancient Templo Mayor to the huge Metropolitan Cathedral and Tabernacle. Five hundred years ago, natives who were forced to make the same walk discovered that institutional Christianity held similarities to their old religion. The Roman Catholic heaven and hell seemed to echo those of the Aztecs. Even Jesus struck a chord in that he was a sacrificed God whose flesh and blood were ritually consumed.

There were major differences however. Few if any Aztec gods demanded sacrifice for personal misbehavior—or sin. That was the main feature of biblical sacrifice. Yet Scripture states **that not only does God prohibit human sacrifice** (Leviticus 18:21; Deuteronomy 12:31), **he disdains blood sacrifice in general** (Psalm 5:17; Isaiah 1:11; Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13). Such sacrifices are powerless to forgive misbehavior (Hebrews 10:4,11). At best they are metaphors. Were the newly Christianized Aztecs confused? Maybe. Like many in institutional religion, they just went with the flow.

The assumption behind all humanly-initiated sacrifice is that God needs something—and we can make a deal with him to obtain something for ourselves. Depending on what we've been told, we might think he needs our money, our time, our livestock or even our blood. In return we might expect forgiveness, prosperity, a happy afterlife or simply assurance that the universe is going to keep running.

We are not in a position to make any deals. That's why Jesus' sacrifice is the only one that really counts. At once human and God, he not only remedies human sin, he establishes God's acceptance and love for every human being who has ever lived. That includes brutal conquistadors, bloody Aztec priests and poor sacrificial victims. Further, he invites us all to join him as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1). Since there is no longer a need for humans to attempt the impossible task of reconciling themselves to God, Jesus' resurrection permanently pulls the plug on all other sacrifice—and on all religion. □

—Monte Wolverton



Quotes & Connections



"When we read the New Testament accounts of Christ's death, we are struck by both the ugliness of the crime and the beauty of the One who endured it. We note the irony of how an instrument of torture becomes a work of art.

I will usually use the word *crucifixion* to refer to the sinful act of evil men who tortured and murdered the Son of God. When I mention *the Cross*, I will have in mind the self-giving, servant-love of Christ, in which his blood symbolizes his mercy and forgiveness poured out onto the world. In other words, the crucifixion is what we did to him—we took his life. The Cross is what Christ did for us—he gave his life."—Brad Jersak (*A More Christlike God*, page 91).

"Christians are still angry at the world for being so bad, and the world is angry at Christians for thinking Christians are so good... Of course God doesn't hate the world; we hate the world. And we like to think that God agrees with us, that God is on our side." —John Fischer

"If I am not careful, I can decide that I am really much happier reading my Bible than I am entering into what God is doing in my own time and place, since shutting the book...will involve the very great risk of taking part in stories that are still taking shape. Neither I nor anyone else knows how these stories will turn out, since at this point they involve more blood than ink..." —Barbara Brown Taylor

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