

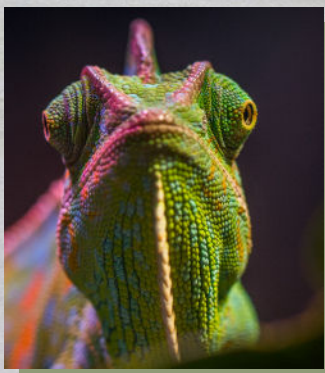
CWRmagazine

February 2020
Volume 11, Number 1

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



GOD LOVES EVERYONE! GREG ALBRECHT



Religiosity is Adapting

by Brad Jersak
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What Our Readers Are Saying...

The Truth About Condemnation

I read your article, "The Truth About Condemnation" in the October 2019 issue of *CWRm*. God's love and mercy are central in that article.

Why can't *everyone* come to know God's grace and mercy, even if it means doing that in the next life? God is much more powerful, loving, understanding and his ways of making that happen are past our finding out.

Some people would think I'm a bit deranged if they knew that I have hope for all of those people like Hitler, Pol Pot, Lenin, Stalin, the drug lords, Mafia and terrorists who have wreaked so much suffering and fear in our world. Aren't they worth saving too?

Pennsylvania

Light to Our Darkness!

I've just finished reading *The Plain Truth* that arrived in the mail today. The articles are always my favorite and I must admit yours is now the only publication I take time to read.

You have all contributed so much to our lives since we discovered Brad Jersak's *A More Christlike God*. As soon as *A More Christlike Way* became available, we purchased copies that my husband and I read aloud each morning.

You have contributed greatly to our walk away from religion in the freedom to see God as revealed in Christ. We and our

home group family are eternally grateful to you for bringing light to our darkness!

Arizona

I have been reading *A More Christlike Way*. Thank you so much for putting pen to paper on this work. It is inspiring me, encouraging me and certainly shaping many beautiful and exciting questions. Enormous gratitude and thanks!

England

Love & Marriage—50 Years of Lessons

At nearly 75-years-old and married to the same woman for over 47 years, I have never heard or seen a better description of marriage than the one Greg Albrecht presented in the November 2019 issue of *Plain Truth*. I laughed, I cried, I recalled and recoiled. I learned a lot and I loved every word. So many truths in one small article that could replace volumes of marriage books. I think it should be required reading for any couple planning to marry.

South Carolina

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GOD LOVES EVERYONE!

God loves YOU! Red, black, brown and white— young and old—male and female—rich and poor—politically liberal, moderate and conservative—God loves you!

God loves all who are trapped by religion—including Muslims and Buddhists and un-Christ-like people who identify as Christians. He loves Democrats and Republicans. He even loves racist, *old white males* like me (more on that later—stay tuned).

The first six words of John 3:16 tell you and me, “*For God so loved the WORLD...*” Wait! Be honest! Are you happy that **God loves everyone?**

Our loving heavenly Father God loves all his children. God loves his children despite what they do and how they behave. He doesn’t love the hatred and the bigotry and the violence and the warfare advocated and practiced by so many, but **God loves everyone** because his love does not depend on the behavior of his children. Why does he love you and me?

Because God *is* love, not

by Greg Albrecht

because our actions cause him to *have* love for us.

God doesn’t love the addictions that ensnare many addicts—he doesn’t love the deceptions that ensnare people in superstition, shame and guilt—he doesn’t love the promiscuity and anything-goes permissiveness that envelops the world in the name of what is falsely defined as love.

But **God loves everyone**, and that includes addicts and slaves of all kinds.

God doesn’t love us *because* of what we do, he loves us *in spite*



of what we do. God loves us despite all the bad things we do.

God loves us despite our belief that he owes us a reward for all the good things we do.

God loves us because of who he is, not because of who and what we are or how hard we try to please him. You don't have to love God first before he will love you.

Six words. *"For God so loved the world..."*

How can that be?

LOVE WINS! AN ANGRY GOD IS A HOAX

None of us fully comprehends how, nor do many even believe God actually does love everyone because they do not accept and believe the predominant definition of God—***God is love.***

God *is* love is an entirely different dynamic than saying he *has* love.

Sistine Chapel Ceiling Creation of the Sun and Moon by Michelangelo Buonarroti



You will quickly discover that people get angry with anyone who tries to take away their angry God!

Many people who are ritual-observing, ceremony-compliant, dues-paying members of religious institutions believe that God is angry with virtually everyone except their holy huddle. For that matter, they believe they and their own religious tribe barely escape the wrath of God because of their submissiveness to religious dogma and authority. While they believe they only just escape the wrath of God they

believe “others” who do not measure up to their religious standards are “un-saved”—“un-believers”—“pagans” and “heretics” and they absolutely believe such unfortunates are eternally and forever “lost” and doomed to eternal conscious torment in the hell of their angry God.

Try convincing and persuading someone who believes in an angry God filled with wrath that **God loves everyone**. *You will quickly discover that people get angry with anyone who tries to take away their angry God.* Many believe in an angry God because they need an angry God. Ironically, they need a God of hate to help them feel better! Christ-less religion and polarizing political perspectives (sometimes coexisting in one very toxic mix!) are quick to accommodate such a desire.

As a Christ-follower, I have grown weary of the relentless attacks launched by people who say they are Christians. The goal of these unremitting attacks is to inform and warn really, really bad “other” people they need to know that God is really upset with them. These “other” people are perceived as obnoxious “really bad sinners.” Those who describe themselves as moral, upright and faithful believe when God finally loses his patience, his wrath will be unleashed on homosexuals and people who have had abortions.

Those who succumb to the delights of being judge, jury and executioner (in the name of the angry God of their religion) believe they are helping to purify the world of “bad” people. Prioritizing homosexuality and abortions as being the worst of the worst of all sins is blatantly unlike God, but that doesn’t stop Christ-less religion from focusing its sights on gays (both men and women) and everyone who has ever had an abortion (which of course would only be women so as almost invariably is the case, Christ-less religion once again holds women to a higher degree of culpability than men, but that’s not breaking news).

While such condemnation is pathetic in that it comes from a segment of people who call themselves Christian, of recent date, another strident voice of condemnation has come from another quarter, and this group is about as far from being Christ-followers as North Korea is from Kansas. The focus of this decidedly non-Christian and, for that matter, non-religious group is *old, white males*.

WHAT? GOD LOVES EVEN ME?

During a discussion with a new acquaintance in which I challenged some of her views, it became obvious to me that she considered the fact that I am an *old white male* as de facto proof I am a hateful and bigoted racist.

When I pointed out that her judgment of me was itself

racist (I'm white), sexist (I'm male) and based on age discrimination (65 is fading fast in my rearview mirror), she was not amused.

I decided not to add fuel to her tirade by telling her that not only am I an *old white male* but I attended second and third grades at Robert E. Lee Elementary in Rosenberg, Texas. I realized the revelation that *I once lived in Texas and attended a school named for a Confederate Civil War general* would have confirmed to her that I am without a doubt a hateful and bigoted racist.

She was already infuriated with me because I am an *old*

believe God can love me because I am an *old white male* who isn't a member of their political party. If that is the criteria for God's love, I am out of luck because I refuse to be a member of any political party. As Groucho Marx used to say, "I refuse to be a member of any club who would accept me as a member."

Not only do some definitely-not-religious people believe there is nothing about me God or anyone else could love (because I don't share their ideological perspectives), some religious people grudgingly admit that God, on one of his "good" days, might hold his nose and admit

God loves us and invites us to accept and believe in Jesus, that we might be delivered from religious snobbery and pride, hatred, bigotry, murder, war, lust, greed and self-centeredness of every size, shape and description. God loves everyone and invites all of us to be delivered from racism, including racists who don't hesitate to condemn and denounce all who fail to agree with them as racists.

God loves us and invites us to accept and believe in Jesus that he might lift us out of the evil, the corruption and the perversion, the name-calling and the condemnation that envelops us as surely as the air that we breathe. God calls us to freedom in Christ, a freedom that delivers us from the oppression of abusing and mistreating others who differ from us.

Sadly, the human condition seems to include belittling and demeaning others, simply because they are different. It seems natural and increasingly common today for people to despise those who are not their same age, color or gender.

But God's love for you and me and the entire world is absolute, unconditional and unwavering. Jesus reveals the love of God for us. As we walk with and follow Jesus, he is our goal and our focus. It is in Jesus, by the grace of God that we find, discover and experience the gospel—and one of the great summaries of the gospel is that **everyone is loved**—"for God so loved the world..."□

Greg Albrecht is president of Plain Truth Ministries.

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened by the yoke of slavery.” –Galatians 5:1

white male, so I did not bother to tell her I stand, with my hand on my heart, when the Star-Spangled Banner is played. I did not bother to tell her that I am one of those hateful, bigoted racists who believe in the absolute historical proof of the Holocaust and that I support the right of the nation of Israel to exist.

I did not wish to intensify the differences we had, so I did ask her why so many self-described enlightened and progressive North Americans label everyone who doesn't agree with them on every topic as racists. Her remarks gave me the clear impression that she dismissed me and "my kind" as not being "woke" (and it's true, I do take more naps now than ever).

It appears some people don't

to liking me. But even then, they urge me to join and attend a church (in fact, they urge me to become a member of *their* church) so God will love me more ... even on his "bad" days.

I refuse to capitulate to such contrived, un-Christlike religious demands. Paul extends the ramifications of the gospel of Jesus Christ, "*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened by the yoke of slavery*" (Galatians 5:1).

God loves everyone—how can and why does God do that? I don't know and neither do you—but I do know that he doesn't need my permission or anyone's permission to love everyone. That's one of the reasons he is God and you and I are not!

RELIGIOSITY IS ADAPTING

BRAD JERSAK



In our long-term quest to pursue *Christianity Without the Religion*, we've noticed that Christless religion can adjust itself to shifts in popular culture. In other words, religiosity is quite capable of adapting to new forms and expressions, while continuing to wander far from the Jesus Way.

As I've visited 10-20 different congregations per year for the last 30 years, I can testify to real changes in church culture over that time—some changes for the better and others not so much. Nonetheless, religiosity is always looking for a fresh foothold.

LESS PROBLEMATIC TODAY

1. *Less Money-Grabbing*

Despite religion's reputation for being a money-grabbing industry, I can report that with few exceptions I no longer encounter heavy-handed offering appeals in local congregations. Not because faith communities aren't in great need of money. Rather, the money rhetoric has toned down because most churches know they can no longer get away with it. Some churches I know still pass an offering plate, but that is increasingly rare and the invitation to give is far subtler than it was previously (of necessity).

NO, CHRISTLESS RELIGION
NEVER JUST DISSIPATES
INTO THE ETHER.

IT IS A CUNNING CHAMELEON,
EVER CHANGING ITS COLOR
FOR NEW HABITATS.

2. *Less Legalism*

Nowhere I go do the churches directly promote ritualism or legalism as ways to gain merit with God. That's too obvious. Yes, we still have faith practices (congregational prayers, songs and Scripture reading) that are expressions of faith. And we still have a sense of Christian morality (right and wrong is not out the window). But most churches know that making these a ladder to heaven in the age of "grace alone" is a turn-off and likely to empty the pews. Religion has moved on from the old church's "indulgences" tactics in a major way.

The exception to this is when the rituals and rules are transposed into new super-spiritual lingo (mainly connected with revivalism). For example,

“passion for Jesus” and being “radically sold out” may sound saintly but can become clichés for the new legalism. In other words, “striving” sounds bad, so now we “press in.” “Law-keeping to earn merits in heaven” sounds awful, but “pressing in for a breakthrough” is so spiritual. And thus revivalism becomes the new legalism.

No, Christ-less religion doesn't just dissipate into the ether. It is a crafty and cunning chameleon, ever-changing its color for new habitats.

MORE PROBLEMATIC TODAY

Over time, Christ-less religiosity has advanced on new fronts that are more obvious now than they once were. Some examples:

1. Consumerism

It has been popular to sneer at the expensive cathedrals built by serfs in the middle ages, but are modern multiplex monstrosities and their overhead so dissimilar? No sooner do eyes roll at priests wafting incense than the worship pastor is installing a smoke machine. As hymn books are being demoted to doorstops, the CCM industry (contemporary Christian music) vies for Top-40 sounds, styles and rock star status.

I believe that God loves and inspires beauty in our lives and in our worship. I have no quarrel there. But I would pay close attention to how religion is finding new inroads into the faith through performance orientation and consumerist culture. Too often, churches are assessed by how they scale in their entertainment value. “What I got out of it” or whether “I was moved” depends on if I experienced goosebumps or “liver shiver” and assume that as the work of the Holy Spirit.

2. Moralism

While avoiding legalism (gaining merit through law-keeping), there is still a very strong pull toward moralism (belonging by behaving). Legalism and

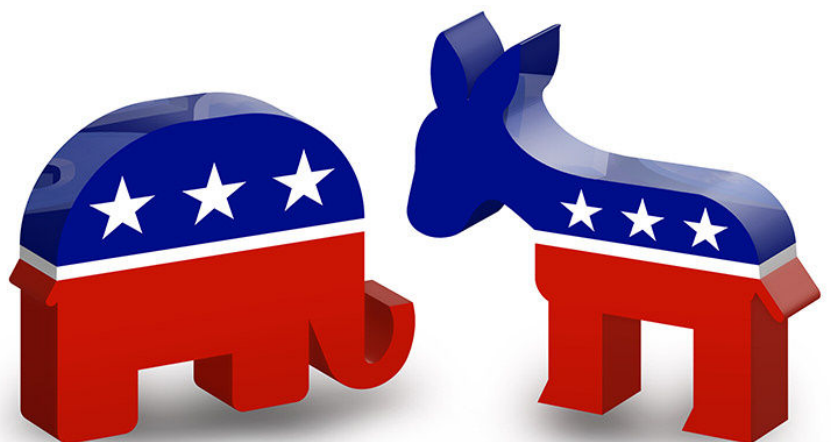


moralism sound similar, but even “grace alone” people who deny being legalistic can still be very exclusive and condescending toward messy and marginal people—those less “holy” than them. This still marks a profound in/out division (the same wall of partition Christ destroyed) that leaves strugglers feeling “less than” while those who play by the script are rewarded with social standing. This

phenomenon can be especially prurient—a word that describes Christianity's undue emphasis/obsession with sexuality. Moralism is Christ-less religion in its willingness to pick up stones. Christ is so clear about checking the beam in your own eye and letting our voyeuristic judgments fall from our fists.

3. Politicization

I have noticed a marked increase in politicized faith, where our morality is NOT derived from the Sermon on the Mount or Christ's ethical teaching. Rather, these days it simply mirrors the popular political and ideological trends that dominate the most recent polarizing culture wars. My sense is that the political right and the



DukeHenry

ideological left are not only at war with each other across the nation but together, conspire to co-opt and dominate the front end of religious discourse. In my recent book, *A More Christlike Way*, I describe how the left-right spectrum is itself a matrix of tribalism and the most obvious expression of what the apostle John condemns as “the world” [system]. The “world” wants to displace Christ in determining Christianity’s moral imperative ... and I’m afraid that’s already a done deal. We want to call Christianity back to Christ himself as the first determiner and final judge of what is right. Hint: Love God, love your brother and sister, love your neighbor, love the stranger and love your enemy.

4. *Divine Retribution*

Finally (for now), I see Christ-less religion surging among those who are doubling down on divine retribution. Just when I thought we were beyond that... No, a new “skinny jeans fundamentalism” struts across the big stage. Some of the fastest-growing churches in North America are thriving on a market that wants to push back hard against postmodernism and the perceived liberalism of those who preach the beautiful Gospel of God’s infinite love. They wave their fists at this gospel and condemn the so-called “hippie Jesus.” It’s now become common to hear them deride what they’ve coined as “*the God is love heresy.*”

Their increased emphasis on God’s wrath against sinners,

penal substitution and eternal hellfire finds purchase in the ready soil of hearts weary of “50 shades of gray” and craving authoritarian leadership. Yes, immorality is a real problem these days. But no, Christ-less religion is not the solution!



The good news is that the tide has turned. The apostolic truth that *God IS love* would have been strange news to the Christ-less religions of the ancient world. But prophets like Abraham, Moses, David and Hosea began to catch glimpses of the grace that would arrive in the person of Jesus Christ, love incarnate. He showed us that God is about restoration, not retribution. The *Abba* Jesus revealed is nothing like the imaginary competitors who thrive on wrath.

The great tragedy is that even Christianity quickly reverted to pagan notions of an angry god who needs appeasement through violence. That image held sway for many centuries but it is fast fading in the light of the glory of the Father’s great love. Even my agnostic friends know that if

there is a God, that God is kind, welcoming and merciful. Their intuitions of God are far more Christlike than what they’ve heard from Christ-less religion.

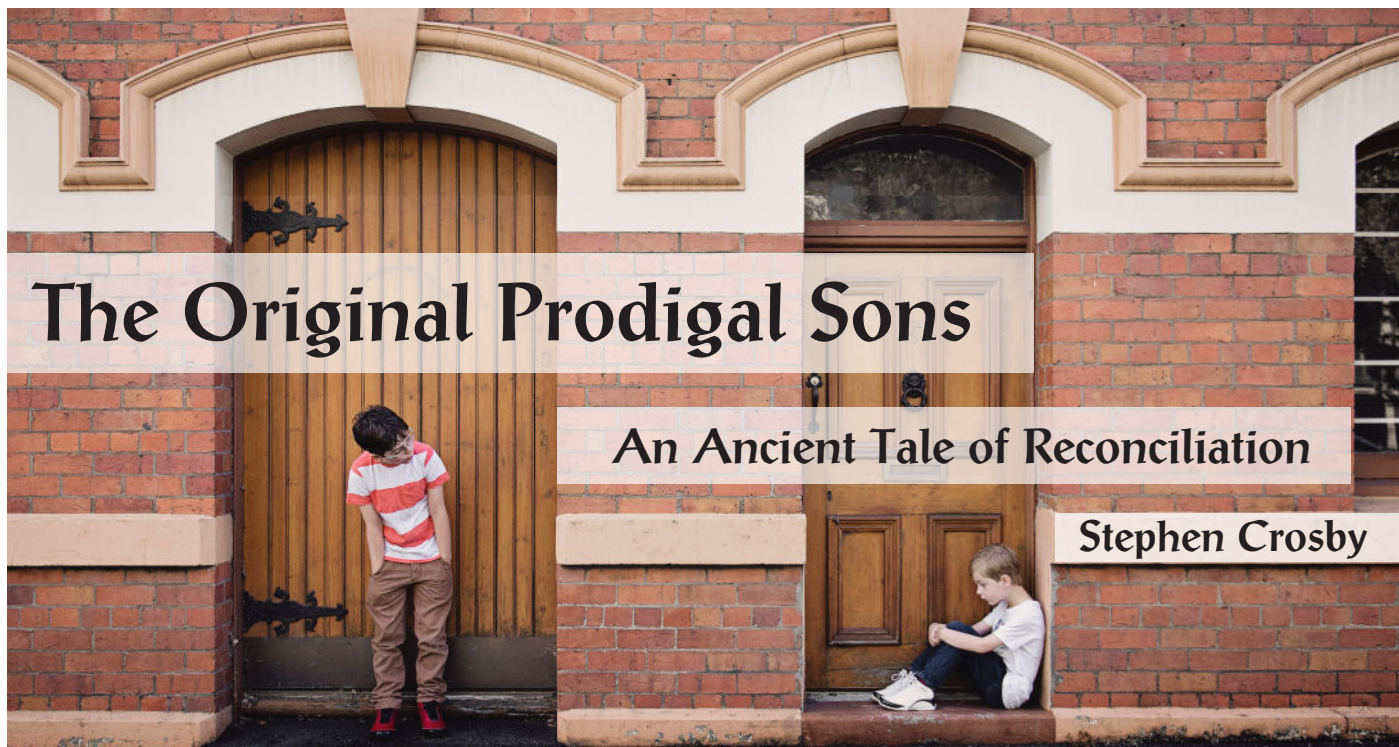
Indeed, I suspect the time has come for toxic theologies of divine retribution, eternal fiery

torment and angry moralism to take their turn on the defensive. Those who slander the good news of God’s grace are now ensnared in a perilous error. It’s time for them to repent of the ways their “gospel” has created generations of fed-up atheists. It’s time they see that love wins!

SUMMARY

Yes, religiosity is alive and well, but we can learn to sniff out its sneaky inroads into the most popular and powerful streams within Christendom and into ourselves. Resistance isn’t futile but it does require vigilant discernment. May God grant us mercy to follow the Jesus Way. □

Brad Jersak serves as editor and art director for CWR magazine.



By God's grace, we are empowered to grow in *grace-ness* (graciousness) toward others—even those with whom we may disagree or those who may have hurt us. Anyone can theoretically wax eloquent and preach a great sermon or write an inspiring article about the values of love, peacemaking, inclusivity and reconciliation. But when there is an emotional, psychological or relational price to be paid to realize these virtues, many go AWOL.

RECONCILIATION'S PRICE

It seems we understand a little about loving the Lord. Loving our offending brother, less. Loving each other in a cruciform way (loving each other as Christ loves us)—well, very few have a graduation certificate from that program.

The familiar story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 32-33 has some lessons for us regarding the

cruciform cost of being peacemaking ministers of reconciliation.

Jacob conspired with his mother to cheat Esau out of his birthright and blessing. *“Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he could no longer see...”* (Genesis 2:11). In the story, Isaac gave Jacob at least three distinct opportunities to honestly identify himself—he didn't. This was not a one-off moment of weakness. This was lying with malice and intent—good reason for an offense.

Speaking as a patriarch, Isaac prophetically blesses Jacob in disguise as Esau. He tells Jacob some things that we must catch: God said, speaking through Isaac: *“Many nations will serve you and peoples will bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers...”* (Genesis 25:29).

Years of sin pass and Jacob has a divine encounter with the messengers of God at the

beginning of Chapter 32. If we had been Jacob, we would have written a book about our encounters with angels and might have booked a bus and rented a tent to launch our revival ministry.

When angelic messengers told Jacob that Esau was coming to meet him, he was justifiably



afraid that Esau might kill him. So Jacob gives his servants a very specific message to convey. In it, Jacob *identifies Esau as lord and Jacob as his servant!* (Genesis 32:18).

RECONCILIATION: YIELDING THE RIGHT TO BE RIGHT

In a sense, he offers to Esau that which God had given to him, which was rightly Esau's to begin with! Jacob did not demand Esau agree with him over the issue that brought the division. *He yielded his right to be right.*

Restoring a broken relationship has to be more important to us than winning a doctrinal argument. It does not mean that what we may believe is neither true nor important. I do not think that Jacob had any doubt of the reality of what was his, even though he got it through deceit. But *emotionally and interpersonally—he let it go—he let it go so deeply that he was willing for a role reversal to take place, just so he could be restored to his offended brother.*

The story unfolds as Jacob puts together gifts for Esau. *The gifts cost Jacob something.* They represented two things: the fruit of his life's energy and work and the genuineness of his repentance.

CHEAP REPENTANCE

God does not need us to “make good” to him in order to forgive us. However, other humans may need us to do so.

Cheap repentance—“I said I am sorry, so you have to forgive me”—is no repentance at all. The

cycle of repentance (confession, repentance, and restoration) is not complete until, if within my power to do so, I restore—make whole—those whom I have hurt. Their restoration has to be more important to me than my right to be right.

The story in Genesis 32 continues when Jacob has another divine encounter—wrestling with God at Peniel—and there he has a name change. This kind of reconciliation is humanly impossible. It is no small coincidence that it is *after* Jacob has an awareness of his relational alienation, and *after* he has given up his right to be right, and *after* he has accepted the cost of reconciliation that he has a name change. The personal transformation we may desire is inextricably linked to our relationships with others. Being a follower of Jesus is not a personal piety society. It is about having right relationships with God *and* humanity.

In Genesis 33, as the gift caravan approaches Esau, everyone bows before Esau multiple times. Esau in turn greets Jacob with a kiss. There is a cultural nugget we must see here. For Middle Eastern people, a kiss was the way you greeted a social equal. Bowing, prostrating oneself, was the way an inferior acknowledged a social superior.

Jacob let Esau have the “upper hand.” He did not berate him with the blessing he received from Isaac about being lord and his brothers serving him! Jacob let Esau have the honor that God had promised to himself. Jacob was okay with it. He didn't react.

GOD'S PRESENCE IN RECONCILIATION



We will never know the depths of God's love in relational reconciliation if we are unwilling to let go of who is the “rightest” about the Bible. Even the one who may indeed be right must be willing to seem to lose the point. This is Calvary-style love on planet earth.

Finally, and most profound to me, Jacob says to Esau: “*When I saw you, it is as if I had seen the face of God*” (Genesis 33:10). Jacob had metaphorically “seen” or touched the essence of God. The fruit of Jacob's spiritual experiences was *seeing that in the offended other, God is present.*

Sometimes when other parties are involved, reconciliation will not be possible. I get it. However, we can deal with our own hearts and come to grips with this Genesis version of Saul of Tarsus' Acts 9 encounter on the road to Damascus. Jesus did not confront Saul about being “born

Continued on p. 13

DECONSTRUCTION -a poem-

DEBBIE HUGHES

Deconstruction,

it's like a tornado destroying the family home
that's been there for generations.

The porch swing
your mom and dad courted on.

The door your parents carried you through
when you came home from the hospital
as a newborn.

The place you rocked your own babies
and maybe mourned lost loved ones.

The place you have lived, worked and bled,
pouring everything you have into the soil,
actively participating in every detail.

Now it's wiped away.

Gone.

You can't go rebuild somewhere else.

NO, it has to be rebuilt right here.

From the ground up, where your roots are.

Before you load up all the waste,
you reevaluate
and pull from the rubble an old teddy bear,
christening gown, wedding album,
Bible and works of art.

The stuff of home.

There is something so remarkably beautiful
in all of this.

As you sit covered in dirt, sweat and tears,
holding these soiled treasures you've
recovered, you are so grateful for something
to remain familiar.

When all else feels lost.

Start reconstruction right there.

Build something new and yet familiar.

Lay those stones on your deep foundations
that have lasted through the ages.

Build new walls reinforced with steel.

Walls with new materials you have not used

before, materials you did not have access to
previously.

Adorn your new walls with beautiful new
accents and conversation pieces.

Paint with colors
you may have never used before.

Mix in the old with the new.

ANCHORED on the bedrock of your roots.
Never tearing up your foundation but
rebuilding something utterly beautiful.
A beacon for the world and safety for many.

Above all else make the roof strong!
Strong enough to keep out the elements.
Strong enough to protect the house
and all in it.

Strong enough to withstand
the fiercest of storms.
Though the storms may rage outside,
you are safe in your home.

You will do all you can
to protect those inside.

A haven in the midst of chaos.

Throw open your gates
while remaining on watch
against the wolves.

Welcome the wounded and cast-offs
as you remain ever watchful for the thief
or anyone who comes to do harm.

Not in my house and not on this watch! □

Debbie Hughes is a Christ-follower and a poet. She and her husband live in Sunset, TX.

For more on "Deconstruction," see Brad Jersak's cover article in the February 2019 issue of CWRm. Find it at: www.ptm.org/magazine/february-2019.

“Deconstruction” -defined-

by Sean Davidson—excerpted from
Brad Jersak’s *A More Christlike Way*

One thing “deconstruction” does not mean is a cynical, angry interlude on the way to militant progressivism.

At least it wouldn’t have meant that for *Jacques Derrida*, the French philosopher who coined the term. Deconstruction, for Derrida, isn’t about manning the barricades. It’s about learning to slow down, to attend closely to the way we use language. It is to be mindful about how we discuss and practice truth and meaning.

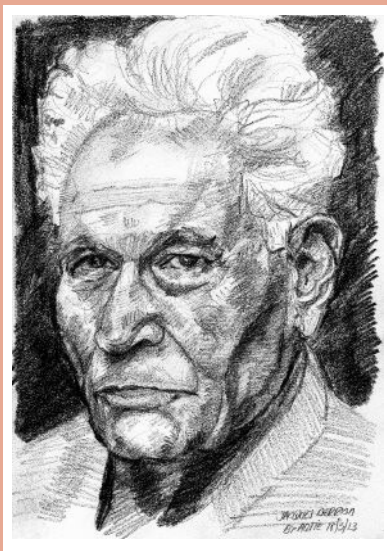
This has important implications for theology. If you pay close attention to Derrida, he doesn’t try to disprove truth claims—nor does he try to prove them. He remains open to truth and meaning.

The point of deconstruction is to unmask claims to truth that pretend to stand on their own, independent of conditions and contexts.

The pop version of “deconstruction” fails to appreciate these dynamics in its own discourse. For many post-Evangelicals, deconstruction tends to be practiced as an intermediary stage of doubt and cynicism in the service of militant progressivism. That form of deconstruction is a construction that Derrida himself would have deconstructed.

I know there have been very real abuses in the church. I’ve lived through enough of them to have my own struggles and misgivings. What troubles me is the strident reactionary and rationalistic spirit as recourse. I can understand that to an extent, given the experience of spiritual abuse. But not as a concerted strategy for moving forward in faith, hope and love. There’s too much about this spirit that seems fueled by the very thing it’s supposing to resist.

Derrida’s original practice provides a much-needed corrective—it not only helps to critique institutionalized problems, but also reactionary solutions. It forces us to consider genuine alternatives that are less about ideological tactics and posturing and more about participation in the gospel. □



The Original Prodigal Sons

Continued from p. 11

again” to “go to heaven when he died.” Rather, Jesus confronted Saul with the reality that he completely associated and identified with the “less than other”—the ones Saul considered enemies, worthy of death.



By God’s grace, we may look at those who offend us and say: “When I saw you, it is as if I had seen the face of God.”

Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount, “Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.” This simple but costly discipleship is how Jesus describes the Jesus Way, the Way of the Cross where we “take up our cross” and follow him. □

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BRAD JERSAK

The Mystery of the Trinity

QUESTION: I'm trying to comprehend the mystery of the Trinity. How do we comprehend God the Son and God the Spirit without demoting them to less than God the Father?

RESPONSE: The good news is that you don't have to figure it all out from scratch.

Historically, it took Christianity's very best minds 300 years and even then, "it's a mystery" was one of their major conclusions. *Mystery*, for them, referred to what we can't know by reason but have learned by revelation" (i.e. the Scriptures).

What we can do is start with some really basic confessions, which require faith in the revelation of Scripture and some critical analysis thereafter. We can't rationalize these mysteries with finite arguments. But here is a basic set of faith statements, known by revelation:

1. We worship one God.

We always start with the One. We don't have three gods. That's

tritheism. How many Gods? One. One nature. One essence. One substance. One being. One. And that divine essence is 100% love. There can be no inferiority in that Oneness. Indeed, it's more than the Oneness of unity, like you and I could enjoy. It is the Oneness of Invisible Union, where all the activities of the One God (Father, Son and Spirit) are without division.

2. That One God has revealed Godself as eternal, triune love.

This eternal love subsists of three co-eternal persons (not parts) in a community of other-centered, self-giving love. The One God is said to be triune and tri-personal. If God were a monad (one solitary person), he could not be love because he could only love himself, which isn't really love. God IS love because Father, Son and Spirit are self-giving, co-eternal, infinite love, forever sharing One divine nature.

It is extremely difficult for us to imagine One divine Being as also a Divine Community of Persons, but so the Scriptures and the Body of Christ (by the Spirit) have revealed. One God,

One Love, revealed as the indivisible Father, Son and Spirit, co-equal and co-eternal.

We attempt poor analogies of the Trinity by speaking of the complexity of human nature, which subsists of spirit, soul and body, or of mind, emotions and will. But even when these are at war within us and subordinate one to the other, we recognize we normally still live as one, indivisible human nature, however conflicted. Such analogies can help us conceive of oneness in diversity but to be truthful, they also usually just lead to new heresies.

3. Where did the Arian heresy arise?

That is, where did some Christians stumble into the subordination (or inferiority) of the Son or Spirit? Well, they wouldn't have so long as they remembered God is One nature and Christ is One person. But the moment they compromised or waffled on those revealed truths, they could stumble on two possible points.

a. They might think that the Father sending the Son or the Son sending the Spirit implies

subordination and inferiority. Similarly, they might think the Son's begottenness of the Father or the Spirit's procession from the Father implies inferiority.

But why should it? Even in our human relationships, if my wife sends me to the store for groceries and I consent to go, have I conceded inferiority? My submission to her wishes is based on mutual love among equals, not subservience as a lesser human. And even less so if she actually goes with me (as the Son does nothing apart from the Father). Sadly, not all men/husbands have understood this.

My wife and I also begat three sons, does this make my sons inferior human persons to me? And even less so as they are adults who have become my co-equal brothers in Christ. No, neither sending nor begetting need imply subordinationism.

And this was the point in the line from the Nicene Creed that says Christ is "*Light from Light, True God from True God.*"

The analogy is that sunlight proceeds from the light of the sun, but both are indivisible light. As our sun shines, the sun itself and the sunshine it sends share one essence: the light. Photons are photons.

This too is a limited analogy, but it at least highlights how Light = Light even as the sun sends sunshine. And what do you know? This is exactly what the book of Hebrews says:

"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3). The being and the image are one. *"Anyone who*

has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

b. Alternatively, Arians (past and present) might also suppose the Son's human birth and his submission to the Father implies inferiority. This is slightly more difficult, because Jesus said, *"If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father; for the Father is greater than I"* (John 14:28).

As the early church puzzled over this, they remembered again that we must start with the principle of One. Father and Son are One. One God. One Divine Nature. And the Son IS the Image of the Father.

Jesus said, "*the Father was greater than I,*" not because he is less than fully God or a lesser god, but because Jesus was also a man. As a man, he recognized God as greater than man.

The Son is, first of all, one indivisible Person. That one Person is both fully God and fully human, *indivisible* and not to be thought of in parts.

If we accept that, we're fine. Then we can move forward: this One God-man shares one divine nature and identity with his Father, and yet Christ *also* related to his Father as a human, as humanity. He imaged God *to* humanity and vicariously submitted to God the Father *for* humanity. Creator and creation were united in the one Person, divine nature and human nature subsist in the one Person, AND [here's the

paradox] the human nature submits to the divine both in Christ and in Trinitarian relationship.

So, we believe that Jesus said, *"The Father was greater than I"* (John 14:28), not because Jesus is less than fully God or a lesser god, but because Jesus was also a man. As a man, he recognized God as greater than man.

A Mystery above our paygrade!

Like I said, it's a mystery above our paygrade, but Christ-followers came to believe this because all the alternatives either compromised Christ's humanity

or deity, making him less than fully human or less than fully divine. If the goal is to get our heads around it, we'll be frustrated because it truly is beyond us.

But if we make it a matter of faith and theological conviction, our guiding principle is the unity of the Trinity and the unity of the Person. The rest falls into place if you make the other truths subordinate to those two premises. And as faith statements, they really are premises. □

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