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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



CHRIST *or* NOTHING

by Greg Albrecht

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CHRIST

or NOTHING

D*ivide and Conquer* is one of the prevailing influences that relentlessly wars against peaceful co-existence — a calculated plan to break down peaceful and loving relationships. Some fear that the increasingly strident rhetoric of opposing forces in North America may eventually lead to another Civil War. The prophetic lament of Ezekiel echoes in the streets of our cities — *Prepare chains! For the land is full of bloodshed, and the city is full of violence.* — Ezekiel 7:23

Divide and Conquer. Left vs. Right. Republicans vs. Democrats. Muslims vs. Christians. Old vs. Young. Male vs. Female. Race against race.

One of the tactics of *divide and conquer* involves blaming and shaming, name-calling and vilifying the opposition. Those who employ a *divide and conquer* scheme create a seditious, oppressive narrative that fosters mistrust and fear

The gospel is not about overwhelming and defeating one's enemy via violence — it's all about serving others in the name of Jesus.

of “the other side.” *Divide and conquer* is a brutal battle of attrition in which both “sides” blame the other for their problems. Name-calling and blaming escalates until inevitably violence results.

BUILDING OR DESTROYING?

Dividing people leads to a win-at-any-cost mentality and justifies bloodshed in the name of the greater good (sometimes, ironically and pathetically, in the name of God). *Uniting people* involves proclaiming a vision larger than any

human interest and inspiring people to sacrifice and serve others, so that all may be uplifted.

Divide and conquer involves deception and manipulation, dividing people by using the “them” and “us” strategy. *Divide and conquer* feeds anger, fear and ultimately produces violence. Leaders intent on dividing and conquering often build a cult-like following by indoctrinating and brainwashing, giving those who believe in them only one exaggerated side of the story.

Divide and conquer groups, teams, political parties, religions, institutions, companies or nations allow for no middle ground, no compromise, no meeting others halfway — the cause is cast as a war and the followers are exhorted to be all-in warriors, intent on destroying the opposition.

Leaders intent on uniting build bridges rather than blowing them up. Jesus said, “*Blessed are the peacemakers*” (Matthew 5:9). Jesus did not teach his followers to riot, pillage and loot in order to achieve their ends. Jesus gave no directions to his followers about glorifying human leaders who are warriors.

Life in and with Christ is not earned by the rich and powerful elite, nor by powerful empires and their military forces. Life in Christ is a gift of God's grace, not earned or deserved. Life in Christ, the Jesus Way, is in the hands of the poor in spirit, meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful and those who pursue peace (Matthew 5:3-10).

Governments and religions manipulate and control via fear and anger, whereas Jesus invites us to his peace and his rest. Our faith, as Christ-followers, is not based on supporting troops, wiping out terrorists, nor does it consist in placing our ultimate trust and hope in the government or in religion.

Warriors and military leaders who espouse our

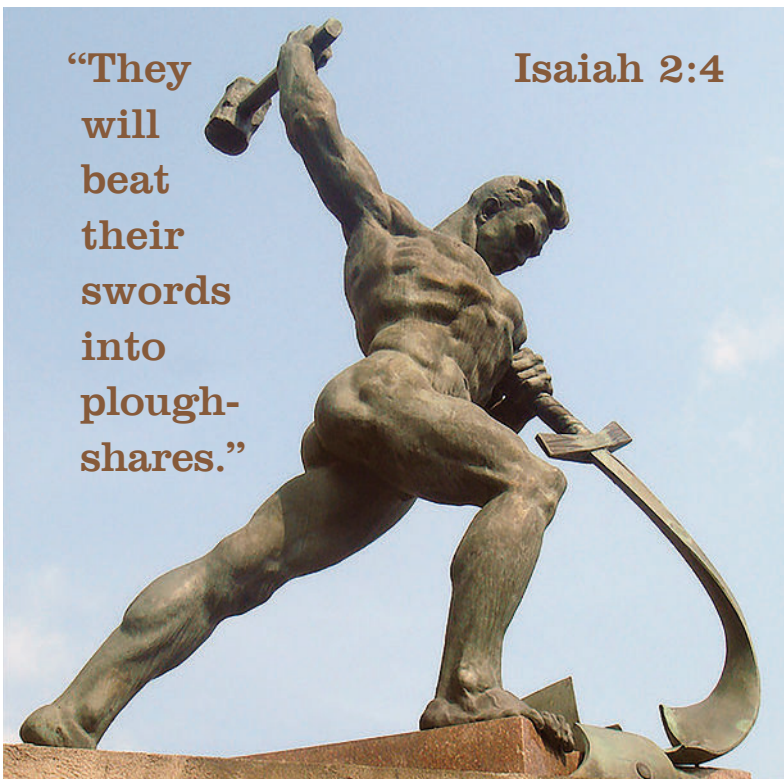
cause and “defend” our country, culture and values are highly esteemed in our world. Men and women of peace are not honored with victory parades — whereas grateful crowds applaud warriors who kill and cripple and maim.

Carl Sandburg, who won three Pulitzer prizes, wrote an epic poem titled “The People, Yes.” He imagined a young girl watching a military parade, and remarking, “Sometime they’ll give a war and nobody will come.” *What if ... they gave a war and nobody showed up?*

What if ... rioters and looters broke the window of a shoe, jewelry or drug store ... but no one followed them in to loot that store?

“They will beat their swords into plough-shares.”

Isaiah 2:4



A FORGIVING LIFE

Jesus’ call to non-violence is neither passive nor is it weak ... it is the power of the love of God, in action. It is returning good for evil. It is standing up to abuse and oppression, not with violence, but with love. Loving one’s neighbor and indeed one’s enemy is the core of being a new man and new woman in Christ — the very center of a Christ-centered revolution.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about winning and defeating one’s enemy via violence — rather in a cruciform, Christ-centered way it is about a

willingness to lose one’s own interests in the greater good of serving another. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not all about winning and crushing and overwhelming — it’s concerned with yielding, giving, self-sacrificing and serving others in the name of Jesus.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is loving people who don’t look like, talk like, think like, believe like, vote like or live like we do. The gospel of Jesus Christ is all about forgiveness rather than revenge — reconciliation rather than retribution.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is about a real God who in the midst of the reality of people’s lives loves them and is with them, during the storms and upheavals and losses and tragedies they face. Being a Christ-follower means that many disciples of Jesus do not have nor will they have, in this life, what some in Christendom would call *their best life now*.

Life is not what you and I want it to be — life is life — life is what it is. History is a record of facts — history may not have happened the way you and I wish it had happened, but the facts are facts. *We are not free, as some seem to think they are, to rewrite history so that it comports with what we believe should have happened.*

George Orwell (1984) said that those who control the present control the past and that control of the past helps shape and control the future. Control is always a key element within politics and religion, but coercion is missing in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Today, in the interests of control and enforcing their perspective (*their truth, if you like*) many engage in massive efforts to discredit the past, rewrite and redact it, and tear down statues and monuments ... as if doing so will reform the world according to the image of those engaged in the undertaking.

Life is life. Truth is truth. It is what it is. Following Jesus is not Hollywood — it’s not a nursery rhyme or a Mother Goose story. Circumstances and experiences that happen in life are real — they are true or false, right or wrong. Love it or not, life is what it is. Accept it and deal with life, with Jesus by your side and living his risen life in you, or reject reality and live in the denial of some false religious or political la-la land.

But here’s what we don’t get to do — and this is

something that is lost on vast swaths of Christendom today — we cannot remake Jesus into our own image. The gospel of Jesus Christ is what it is. Love it or hate it. Accept it or reject it. But *God does not empower us to edit and rearrange the past or the present so that it is more to our liking.*

CHRIST OR NOTHING

All who follow Jesus will experience hardship and suffering — suffering and hardship are part of following him — as Christ-followers, the emphasis in our life is on Jesus and on serving others in his name. We follow Jesus. *All Jesus, All the Time.*

For us, it is *Christ or nothing.* We should not expect that our lives following Jesus will be a day at the beach or a walk in the park — if a religious professional tells you that, they are incorrect and they should either learn what following Christ is all about or they should find a new way to put bread on their table and pay their rent.

We should not expect that our efforts on this earth, in support of a political perspective or party, will turn the world into a utopia. We are not capable of such a thing.

Above all, Christ followers live a Christ-centered life. All else is peripheral. All else is trivial by comparison to the privilege of following Jesus and serving others in his name.

One of the most incredible moments in the 20th century world of higher education took place in January 1968. Malcolm Muggeridge resigned as the



“For myself, I always come back to the King, to Jesus, to the Christian notion ...that sacrifice for others will never fail.”

—Malcolm Muggeridge

Rector of the University of Edinburgh because he would not accept relaxing rules on campus so that students could buy and sell marijuana. He faced the student body in this speech, and courageously, in the face of the heckling, shouting and booing of young people, Muggeridge told them the truth.

Where are the educators and pastors and priests today who will tell our young people the truth, instead of what they want to hear? Where are the politicians and leaders who will tell their constituencies the truth, rather than manipulating them with fear and hatred?

Here’s a short excerpt from the 1968 resignation speech of Malcolm Muggeridge, which some later titled “Christ or Nothing.”

The students of this university are the beneficiaries of centuries of selfless scholarship. You are supposed to spearhead progress and carry the torch of humanity. Speaking for myself there is

practically nothing you could do in rebellion against our impoverished way of life for which I should not feel some sympathy.

But how infinitely sad, how macabre that the form of your rebellion should be a demand for drugs, for the most tenth-rate sort of self-life.

We await great works of art, the spirit of adventure and courage, and what do we get from you? Self-centered folly. You are on a crazy slope. For myself, I always come back to the King, to Jesus, to the Christian notion that all our efforts to make ourselves happy will fail, but that sacrifice for others will never fail.

A man must become a new man, or he is no man. Or so at least, I have concluded, having failed to find in past experience and present dilemmas any alternative proposition. As far as I am concerned, it is Christ or nothing. Goodbye and God bless you. □

Greg Albrecht is president and pastor of Plain Truth Ministries.

Intellectual Honesty: Interpreting the Bible with the Conscience

Richard Murray

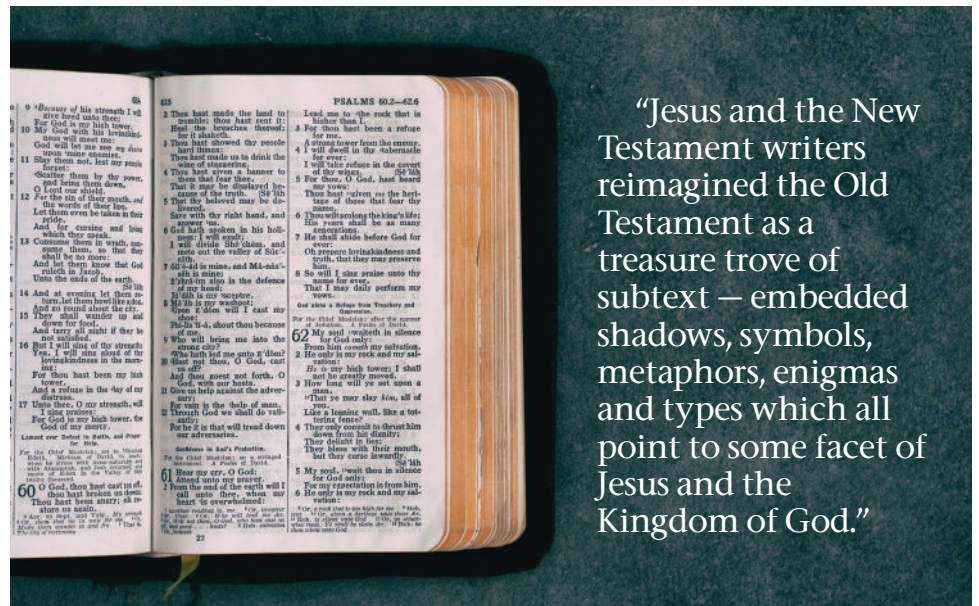
If nothing else, Law School taught me to be intellectually honest about the text of the law — what the text might mean, what it could mean, what it shouldn't mean, and how its various applications could be evolved by engaging it as an open rather than a closed text. The law allows for what is beautifully termed “the enlightened conscience of the jury” to be the ultimate “fact-finding” determiner of whether the spirit of the law has been broken in any given situation.

I practiced law for four years before I encountered Christ. Right after that, in 1990, I left my practice for two years and attended Regent University to obtain a Master's Degree in Practical Theology. Sometimes I asked questions that got me on a professor's bad side.

One such incident occurred during my first week in my hermeneutics class. I was excited because I was sure this class would show me the best way to read the Scripture, particularly the Old Testament. Here the professor said we would learn rules that would keep us from ever quoting passages out of their historical or grammatical context.

There was no place allowed for our conscience to be our illuminative guide in any of these concreted rules. If Scripture, by the surface letter, portrayed God as a child-drowning, infant-burning, throat-slitting, plague-sending, people-smiting killer, then our conscience couldn't dare say otherwise. I thought to myself, “I came to seminary to learn this?”

before entering seminary and had noticed a very obvious thing. When Jesus, Paul, and most of the other New Testament writers, quoted the Old Testament, they broke every rule this professor was advocating. They all routinely took Old Testament Scripture out of its original historical context, out of its original grammatical context, and out of its surface



ILLUMINATING SPIRITUAL DYNAMICS

The more I learned these clinically complex rules, the more disturbed I became. I had studied the Bible with fresh eyes for the previous 15 months

meaning context. Instead, they freely reinterpreted the Old Testament passage altogether whenever they felt inspired to do so. This blew my mind. Below were some of the examples I raised to my professor.

Old Testament “historical characters” were depersonalized to represent New Testament spiritual dynamics. In Galatians 4:21-31, the characters of Sarah and Hagar, along with Isaac and Ishmael, were transfigured by Paul to instead represent two distinct and contrasting covenants. Hagar and Ishmael were translated into the Old Covenant of the law, while Sarah and Isaac were transformed into the New Covenant of the Spirit.

Similarly, entire “historical narratives” were reinterpreted to illuminate our own current spiritual journey as New Covenant Christians (1 Corinthians 10:1-11). Here, the Israelite’s *physical* walk through the waters of the Red Sea in the Old Testament is transfigured into a type of our *spiritual* walk into being baptized into Christ. Elsewhere, in the book of Hebrews, Israel’s Old Testament journey into the Promised land became symbolic of a New Testament believer’s journey to enter into the spiritual and relational rest of God where we cease from our own works and enter into his (Hebrews 4:1-11).

TRANSFIGURING LITERAL MEANING

Old Testament ceremonial “objects” were transfigured to represent some aspect of Jesus and his Kingdom of light. Jesus frequently allegorized objects in the Old Testament. Using key imagery from Old Testament passages which were *only* seen as literal, he would then transpose

their literal meaning into an allegorical application toward himself. He referred to himself as the Temple of God (John 2:19-22), the true manna from heaven (John 6:50), Jacob’s supernatural ladder (John 1:51), the sign of Jonah (Matthew 12:38-40), the I AM burning bush of Exodus 3 (John 8:58) and the brazen Serpent in the wilderness who was lifted up on a pole to provide healing for all (John 3:14-15).

Let’s look at some other examples from the mind of Paul. Literal foreskin-circumcision in the Old Testament transforms into spiritual heart-circumcision in the New Testament (Romans 2:29). The Law written on literal-

The New Testament fills in gaping holes about God’s nature that the Old Testament left us.

tablets of stone in the Old Testament is transposed into the Law of Christ’s love written on the spiritual-tablets of our heart in the New Testament (2 Corinthians 3:3-9). The literal-temple in the Old Testament is transformed into the spiritual temple of our living bodies in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). In fact, Hebrews 9 and 10 transfigures all the Temple objects, the Temple ceremonies, and even the law itself, into allegorical shadows of a greater inner dynamic to be found now only in Christ. Paul confirms this in Colossians 2:17 when he likewise translates the Old

Testament’s holy days, its dietary laws and its religious festivals into shadows of spiritual realities found in Christ. And the list goes on and on.

The point is that all these New Testament applications listed above were all out of context, both grammatically and historically. In short, Jesus, Paul, and the other New Testament writers would have flunked my (and most any other) seminary class on hermeneutics. That should give us pause.

Jesus and the New Testament writers reimagined the Old Testament as a treasure trove of subtext – embedded shadows, symbols, metaphors, enigmas

and types which all point to some facet of Jesus and the Kingdom of God. This is the type of Christ-centered, illuminated interpretation in

which the Old Testament text means *more* or *other* than what it is grammatically and contextually saying.

The New Testament fills in the gaping holes in knowledge about God’s nature that the Old Testament left us. And when these gaps are filled, the semantic content of the Old Testament changes into Christological manna.

And by the way, I never did get an answer from my seminary professor. □

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CWRm

BRAD JERSAK

Pastoral Perspective

What happens to those who die without Christ?

QUESTION: After 40 years as Jehovah's Witnesses, my wife and I are like new kids on the block. Belief in eternal hell was never accepted by the JW's and I certainly cannot accept it today. I would like to know what happens to all those who die and do not accept Christ?

RESPONSE: Among Christians, there is a range of views because the Bible does not give us a uniform answer. There are various images and symbols of the afterlife and human destiny that are difficult to harmonize. Jewish and Christian theologians have debated the question and responded with a host of theological opinions.

Fundamentalist Christianity has historically been dogmatic that its answers were the one and only correct position. But *the reality is that the afterlife is a mystery and we can only be sure of a few major points.*

First, the Bible acknowledges an afterlife, a resurrection, a final judgment and eternal life. Beyond that, scholars fall into three categories:

- **Option A: Infernalism** – Some believe those who die who have not accepted Christ will burn in hell for all eternity. Of these, some think it will be literal flames and others more of a spiritual experience. But these “infernalists” are convinced that it is eternal conscious torment (ECT) with no hope of a “second chance.” This has been the dominant view for a long time but all of us at PTM regard it as morally repulsive because ECT would require us to paint God as a monster unworthy of worship.

- **Option B: Conditionalism** – Others believe that those who die without responding to Christ simply perish into non-being. Another version of conditionalism says they will be resurrected, judged, thrown in the Lake of Fire and there be completely consumed. So in this case, they are destroyed or annihilated permanently, but at least they wouldn't continue on in an endless existence of unquenchable torture. These

positions are currently labeled 'conditionalism' because the condition for eternal life is a response to Christ in this life. It's also called 'annihilationism' because that is what is believed will happen to those who die prior to a faith response.

- **Option C: Ultimate Redemption** – A third group believes that those who die outside of faith will face the judgment seat of Christ and find that our Judge is infinitely merciful. Yes, they may even pass through a cleansing judgment (Malachi 3:1-4) but will ultimately be able to respond when they see Christ and for the first time, understand the gospel. So in this case, there is a judgment followed by mercy – restorative rather than retributive – and while a willing faith response to God's love is required, death no longer separates us from Christ's saving grace because he has conquered death. Yes, there will be tears at lives wasted but in the end, Christ will wipe away those tears in grace so that every knee will bow and tongue confess his Lordship.

When I review these options, I can find a significant array of Scriptures to support any of the three. But if we're going to cherry-pick Scripture, we ought to pick the best cherries that align most closely to the infinite love of God revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Over the years, this has led me personally from *option a* (terrible news) through *option b* (okay news) to a conviction that *option c* (wonderful news) resonates most clearly with the beautiful gospel I've come to see in Christ.

Yes, there are still those scary judgment passages, but they are penultimate (second last) while the passages that include everyone seem to be ultimate (the last word). Today, I lean hard on Jesus' words, “And if I am lifted up [speaking of the Cross], I will draw ALL people to myself.” What if he's right? What if it's true?

And if so, why share this good news? Because eternal life can start now ... and that life is knowing Jesus and the joy of life with him. □

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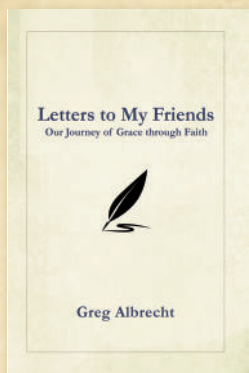
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