

PLAIN TRUTH[®]

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inside

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

Nothing But Jesus

By Greg Albrecht

“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified”

(1 Corinthians 2:2, my emphasis)

Have you ever considered how many New Year’s resolutions are the same year after year? One person put it this way: “My goal for 2023 is to reach the goals I set for 2022, which I should have achieved in 2021 because I resolved to accomplish them in 2020.”

Most New Year’s resolutions are actually not “new”—they are the same old resolutions, recycled again and again. Most New Year’s resolutions are based on self-improvement, increasing one’s diligence and working harder.

In 1 Corinthians 2:2, Paul makes a resolution—he *resolves* to know

Nothing But Jesus.

Paul did not hammer people with fire-and-brimstone sermons about how evil and bad they were.

Paul did not insist that God is filled with wrath, anger and indignation and will torture and burn forever all who fail to measure up if they don’t start doing the right things and living according to religious rules and regulations.

No, Paul preached **Nothing But Jesus. All Jesus, all the time.**

Paul didn’t preach how-to sermons, filled with pointers about how to be a better husband, wife, parent or whatever. Paul preached Jesus.

Paul did not prop people up with false assurances and insipid platitudes—he assured and encouraged, but he did so with the assurances and encouragement that Jesus gives us.

The encouragement and assurances of Jesus are summarized in Matthew 11:28: *Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.* Paul didn’t point people to Dr. Phil, Oprah Winfrey or their religious counterparts.

I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

There are plenty of religious salesmen in our world who pose with their pious posturing. There are plenty of religious con artists who preach a big lie—and that kind of message is

exactly what people want to hear, and for that reason it is a message that is supported and believed.

Paul preached Jesus and **nothing but Jesus. All Jesus, all the time.**

I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Paul did not preach the glories of old-time-religion that is “good enough” for you and me. Paul preached that God in Christ is making all things new.

Paul preached the spiritual transformation that God offers you and me, from Christless religion that captivates us and ensnares us, to the new covenant in Christ, which he gave us in his blood.

I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Paul preached **nothing but Jesus**, which is a new way of life, inviting us all to embrace the risen Lord



A New Beginning

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23, ESV)

I always approach the week between Christmas Day and New Year's Eve with the same set of mixed emotions: On the one hand, the Christmas season is nearly over, and I actually enjoy taking the colorful decorations off the tree, hauling the "now nearly brown" pine tree out to the curb, and tucking the "Christmas Day Decorations" boxes neatly back into storage for the next year.

On the other hand, Christmas Day for another season has come and gone, and it always seems to pass me by so quickly. In fact, it passes by more quickly each year. Have you had the same set of mixed emotions?

I confess, I'm one of those people who likes to take my Christmas decorations down before the start of a New Year.

I often smile as I walk around my neighborhood, in mid-February, and see that one or two of my close neighbors have finally taken their dead, brown, fire-hazard of a Christmas pine out of the house and off to the curb, at long last.

I always breathe a quiet sigh of relief, as the real risk for nearby house fires has lessened, as a result. Mid-February just seems to work for them.

But, that's just not me. I like looking at the start of a New Year as a new beginning. I like that

new beginning to start with a clean slate, not to mention, a clean house.

Taking down my Christmas decorations when I do helps me to focus. That focus gives me a sense of joy and peace.

One of the greatest sources of joy and peace in our lives as Christ-followers is the absolute

Despite our limitations, we live in a perpetual state of new beginning with him... Our new beginning is recurring and perpetual, and it is meant to be enjoyed every morning of every day of the year.

truth that we have experienced and now enjoy a new beginning in Christ Jesus.

Our "slate" and our "house," if you will, has been completely cleaned in him, and we are no longer bound to the rigors and rituals of "sin management" that we were once slaves to in our past, as part of various forms of toxic religion.

We live free and fully in Him. We live as new men and new women in his grace, every day of the year.

I love the poetic imagery of Lamentations 3:22-23. The lament as translated in the English Standard Version reads much less like an honest complaint and far more like a true confession of praise (no doubt, following a lament).

The writer of Lamentations, using the poetic imagery of a new morning, is praising the LORD for his great faithfulness, for his never-ending love and mercy:

His steadfast love never ceases and his mercies never come to an end.

Although the concept of time and the poetic imagery of a morning speaks to us as humans within our limited reality, for him, he lives outside of time and outside of limitation.

Christ Jesus has no beginning and no ending. We do, and we can begin again anew each morning, just as each morning begins a new day.

Despite our limitations, we live in a perpetual state of new beginning with him.

Whether we focus on our new beginning in him during the Christmas season, or just after, or on any day of the year, we feel his joy.

Whether we celebrate our new beginning in him while putting up our Christmas tree and decorations, or while taking them down, we feel his peace.

Our new beginning is recurring and perpetual, and it is meant to be enjoyed every morning of every day of the year.

Our joy comes from his steadfastness. Our peace from his never-ending mercies. We give thanks to God every day that we live in such a perpetual state of grace.

We give thanks for a new beginning in him. Great is his faithfulness! □

—Ed Dunn

Continued from page 1

Jesus Christ, so that he lives his life in us. Paul most definitely did not preach old-time religion and insist those who follow Jesus Christ toe a denominational party line and earn commendation and rewards from God.

Apart From Jesus, Nothing Is New— Just the Same-Old, Same-Old

Long before Paul resolved to know **nothing but Jesus**, Solomon wrote a somewhat dreary, cynical and depressing book called Ecclesiastes. If ever there was someone who knew the emptiness of making New Year's resolutions, it was Solomon.

The book of Ecclesiastes is depressing because Solomon describes the true realities of a life apart from God. And such a life, while true and accurate, is depressing. Make all the resolutions you will, but apart from God, life itself will not change.

What Solomon reports in the book of Ecclesiastes are facts, but Solomon's cynical observations are not a true prescription for what it means to be a Christ-follower.

Ecclesiastes relates the emptiness and misery of a life lived apart from



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Jesus Christ. Ecclesiastes is an account of Solomon looking back on his life.

Solomon's life was filled with wisdom—he was said to have been the wisest of all men. It was a life filled with building and accomplishment. He constructed a temple for God, among many other vast building projects. Solomon was incredibly rich—with his 1,000 women he had it all and did it all. And at the end of it all, Solomon reflects on his life by saying, in Ecclesiastes 1:9:

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.

Solomon is merely echoing the truth of New Year's resolutions—most of the people who make New Year's resolutions make the same or similar resolutions year after year.

There is nothing new under the sun, says Solomon. That is a true observation about human history and civilization. We humans have tried it all—we have attempted it all—

the only new thing left for us in the 21st century is to make slight modifications and improvements based on what has gone before.

But for Paul—and for Christ-followers everywhere who resolve to know **nothing but Jesus Christ** and him crucified, Jesus is forever new—forever transforming and forever dynamic.

Jesus is forever, immortal, eternal and therefore transcends what we see “*under the sun.*”

Nothing under the sun lasts forever. However, while he willingly descended from eternity, from above the sun, into our world limited by time and space, Jesus is not “under” the sun. Jesus fulfills the empty longings of Ecclesiastes.

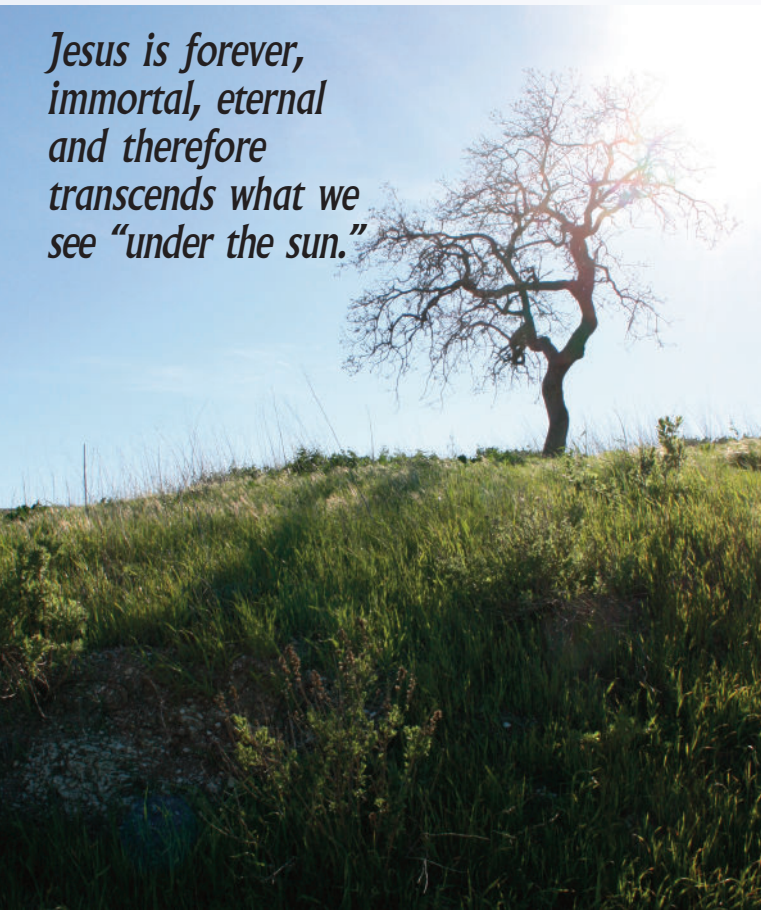
Jesus created the sun. He is the S-O-N of God. He is the Light of the world, the light of all light, the one who alone can give life to the dead. Jesus is making of you and me a new creation—and that new creation is new because it does not derive from the world that is “under the sun.”

Thoughts for This New Year

As you approach this New Year and all the unknowns that it has in store for us, here are three suggestions to keep in mind:

1) **The Past:** When we resolve to know **nothing but Jesus**, then we live for him now and the past has no hold on us. When we resolve to know **nothing but Jesus**, he wipes

Jesus is forever, immortal, eternal and therefore transcends what we see “under the sun.”



away the shame and guilt of our past.

2) **The Present:** When we resolve to know **nothing but Jesus**, we resolve to pick up our cross and follow him. When we resolve to know **nothing but Jesus** we are assured that he is with us and in us as we face the present dilemmas, challenges and struggles of our lives.

3) **The Future:** As we look to the future, we resolve to remain centered in Christ, knowing **nothing but Jesus**. Our Christ-focused resolution comes from our faith and trust that he will empower us and fill us with confidence to reject fear and embrace hope.

Our hope does not lie in human wisdom, logic or eloquence. Our hope lies solely in Jesus Christ. Because we know the Father through the Son, we hear the hope-filled invitation of Jesus, as he gave it in Matthew 11:28: *Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*

Fear is the opposite of hope—fear looks out at the horizon and can see only disaster and heartache. Hope in Christ enables us to see through the fog of fear, through the Light of Jesus we see hope.

Because we live in Christ and he lives in us, we live with hope, not fear. As we **resolve to know nothing but Jesus** we know that this present world is not all there is —God has so much more in store for you and me!

“What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived—the things that God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). □

THE HUMAN RACE IS
POSITIVELY ADDICTED TO
KEEPING RECORDS AND
REMEMBERING SCORES,



IF GOD HAS ANNOUNCED
ANYTHING IN JESUS, IT IS THAT
HE, FOR ONE, HAS PENSIONED
OFF THE BOOKKEEPING
DEPARTMENT **PERMANENTLY.**

-ROBERT FARRAR CAPON

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Loving Doctrine More than People?

by Rachel Ramer

Recently, a friend expressed the anxiety she experienced visiting her parents, since she no longer shares their religious beliefs. They would insert religious comments into conversations and insist she respond when she was hesitant to reveal her views. Attempts at dialogue were futile; they could not simply disagree. Eventually, she despaired and felt compelled to find an alternative family through like-minded friends.

This scenario is multiplied by the many millennials and members of Gen Z currently adopting beliefs and choosing lifestyles not approved of by family. It's not uncommon for Christian parents, pastors, and friends to bear a sense of duty to make their beliefs and their disapproval clear. They may even see this as a form of love.

Unfortunately, conflicts over beliefs often shatter relationships, leaving both parties in pain. Underneath it all is a religious fervor to be *right*.

Why Prioritize Doctrine Over People?

Why have so many Christians hit overdrive in search of correct doctrine? When did this become a priority over relationships?

Growing up within modern Christianity, I often heard the admonition to avoid "being deceived." This was a task I internalized. It also created a

festering doubt: *How do we know we're not the ones deceived?*

Common clarifications pointed to the "plain reading" of the Bible, plus a scaffolding of support including language translation, word dissection, literary analysis, and cultural exploration. We (Christians collectively) had it down to a fine science.

Not being deceived was a bigger task than I realized, because with all the dissecting, we still hotly disagreed about monumental topics like who was headed to heaven and who was not. It never crossed my mind that obsessing about not being deceived could, in fact, foster unintended deception. I simply knew I must be vigilant because this (the truth about God and the universe) was an incredibly important undertaking. Achieving *certainty* was paramount.

Our obsession with certainty found momentum during the Enlightenment. Switching to a foundation of reason added a quest for certainty to both science and religion. While science made significant advancements in medicine and astronomy, leading Enlightenment thinkers (René Descartes, the "father of modern philosophy," included) saw the opportunity to prove the existence of God and defend Christianity. This was an improvement over simply accepting the edicts of church leadership. The outbreak of

denominations expanded this fine-tuning.

Russell Shorto in *Descartes' Bones: A Skeletal History of the Conflict Between Faith and Reason* states, "There seems nowadays to be an ingrained notion that people of that era set reason firmly against faith and the two have ever since been locked in a death struggle."

More accurately, there existed a three-way split: those who incorporated reason to support church teachings, the moderates who believed, "reason would function alongside faith to increase human happiness..." and the radical branch to "bring about the end of traditional religion." (pp. 79-80)

This shift during the Enlightenment to make reason the foundation of knowledge birthed modern atheism, while at the same time exploded into a plethora of Christian apologetics and doctrinal dissection. Of course, reason has an important function and supporting doctrine through reason is not wrong-headed, but it began to warp. Defending doctrine could soon pass as being spiritual; reasoning about God, we discovered, could actually replace God in preeminence.

Simultaneously, the need for doctrinal certainty belied a weakened understanding of faith in a post-Enlightenment world. Faith became the emaciated, crippled companion to reason, equated with superstition for those who rejected

Christianity and touted as the fallback position for Christians when reason didn't quite finish the job.

The problem, as Shorto points out, is that Descartes was caught in a "quest for certainty," which both scientists at that time and Christians adopted, but "things that seem to be...clear and certain are in fact floating on a sea of probability." (pp. 223-224)

The Enlightenment's advancements in science and reason are truly remarkable. God, however, does not fit in a test tube. *Still, this shift in history produced a love for doctrinal correctness and doctrinal identity.*

Identity Doctrine

Within modern Christianity, doctrine is used as a gateway to church membership and is displayed on church websites for brand identification.

"Disciples are known by our love" became "Disciples are known by our doctrine." The admonition to "go into all the world and preach the gospel" became "go and share correct doctrine."

Helping our neighbor became a means to invite them to the right church to help correct their thinking. Yet, doctrine was never meant to be for identity, for an "us vs. them" undertaking where we divide others into those who agree with us about God and those who don't. *The irony is, by trying hard to be exact about the path, we've lost our way.*

The Purpose of Doctrine

Primarily, doctrine puts into words our attempts to describe, to clarify, to foster understanding. Words are symbols of thought, and new ideas routinely replace faulty ideas as we gain understanding. We cannot fully comprehend God, but we can make adequate attempts to capture meaning about God. Jesus provided a clearer picture of God, yet even the disciples, who knew Jesus face to face, often misunderstood him. Doctrine gives us grounding as we continue to learn, to adapt, to seek.

We should strive for correct doctrine, we should reach for illumination, but *beliefs should not be held so tightly that we worship our beliefs about God instead of the mystery of God.* God is much more forgiving or accepting of faulty doctrine than we are because God and doctrine are not the same.

Peter Enns states, in *The Sin of Certainty*, "The deeper problem...is the *unspoken need* for our thinking about God to be right *in order* to have a joyful, freeing, healing, and meaningful faith [italics in original]." Or meaningful relationships.

He continues:

"The problem is trusting our

beliefs rather than trusting God. The preoccupation with holding on to correct thinking with a tightly closed fist is not a sign of strong faith. It hinders the life of faith, because we are simply acting on a deep unnamed human fear of losing the sense of familiarity and predictability that our thoughts about God give us...

We are not actually trusting God at that moment. We are trusting ourselves and disguising it as trust in God" (p. 21).

What About Those Verses?

A well-known theologian, when recently asked about distancing from a friend over doctrinal differences, suggested the person be ostracized according to Romans 16:17: "Watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them." And 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15: "If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother."

The issue with using these and similar verses to prioritize doctrine over people is not recognizing the shame culture in which they were written. Shame was the tool most available to them. In cultures such as ours, this destroys relationships and does not function as an intended safety net. When applied to family and friends, it's a lose-lose situation.

Loving People More than Doctrine

A more significant price to pay than being wrong is losing a relationship. *Obsession with doctrinal correctness sacrifices people and has become a nexus of pain for many.* Loving God does not mean rejecting those who disagree. It means respecting friends and family members. It avoids distorting Christianity where love and grace are expressions of Christ.

God looks at the heart, not a tally of doctrines. In the words of Mike Williams—"When your heart is more gracious than your doctrine, check your doctrine." □

Rachel Ramer is the host of "Lost the Legalism, Kept the Love" on Facebook.



The irony is, by trying hard to be exact about the path, we've lost our way.



Savannah Bananas

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

I'm only seventy-seven. A lot of good years ahead of me. Do I want to continue on in the same direction or perhaps veer off into something new? Indeed, every now and then I contemplate how I might re-invent myself.

I recently talked with a woman approaching seventy who has taken up billiards and plans to join a women's league. She wants to shake up her daily routine. As for me, my best-selling novel exists only in my head, but it sure would be nice to get it published before I reach 80.

More realistic, however, might be overseeing my own five-acre goat farm—also a life-long dream. The biggest roadblock in this instance is husband John. With no deadline, I feel like a teenager with plenty of time to figure out what I want to be. But should I expect the Lord's tender mercies on my dreams of fame or on mere self-gratification?

Today I was inspired by an article in the sports section of our local paper about a minor-league baseball team that left town because the city fathers refused to build a new stadium. For diehard fans in Georgia, the exodus was a sad day—no more cheering on a hometown team. The old weather-beaten stadium, where both Hank Aaron and Babe Ruth had stepped up to the plate, was built in 1926. It is small by today's standards, seating only 4,000 fans, and even those seats had been hard to sell. No longer.

New owner Jesse Cole was determined to reinvent the game and make hometown baseball fun again. It took a few years, but now all the seats in the old stadium are sold out, with tens of thousands on the waiting list and some three million TikTok followers. Indeed, the Savannah Bananas are an entertainment sensation far beyond Savannah, while spreading laughter and good will at home. It's an ideal antidote for hard times churned up every night on national

broadcasts: inflation, fires, floods, election fraud, Covid, racial unrest, war crimes, mass shootings, government gridlock.

Before and during the games, players show off their dance routines and acrobatic skills. Bananas Nanas (women over sixty-five) entertain the fans as cheerleaders, and every game offers new home-grown entertainment. Toddlers in diapers, with parents at hand, are called out to the field.

Team members demonstrate how to do push-ups and encourage them to follow suit. There are howls of laughter from the crowd as some give it their best shot and others wander off like a herd of cats. Soon to follow in the middle of an inning while the opposing pitcher readies himself, the batter drives to the plate in a kid's electric car. Or when an umpire

A feel good headline: Baseball team reinvents itself, inspires millions.

A spot-on headline: Lord crowns hometown frivolity with tender mercies.

calls four balls, the batter may dance, do cartwheels or moonwalk to first base. All part of the good family fun captured on local television.

"Some people think we only recruit guys who do dances," says manager Tyler Gillum. "That's part of it, but you've got to be able to play." Amid all the silliness and crazy antics, however, the coaches and players are serious about winning. After all, it's baseball, not a clown parade. Indeed, the Bananas won the league title in 2021 with a record of 40-10. In late spring of 2022, they were 21-8.

A feel-good headline: *Baseball team reinvents itself, inspires millions.* A less publicized factor is that the team has helped to generate signs of healing in a fractured city due to decades of animosity, inequity and prejudice. A spot-on headline: *Lord crowns hometown frivolity with tender mercies.* □

—Ruth Tucker



Quotes & Connections



“When we judge others, we are trying to fix ourselves by desperately filling the vacuum in our lives with a momentary sense of ethical superiority—the vacuum that our standing in the center as judge produced.”

—Gregory Boyd

“What I object to is people who use the so-called danger of ‘cheap grace’ to browbeat others into thinking there’s some level of performance God expects them to achieve before they can be worthy of grace.”—Robert Farrar Capon

“Jesus produces morality, but morality does not produce Jesus.”

—Greg Albrecht

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”—2 Corinthians 5:17

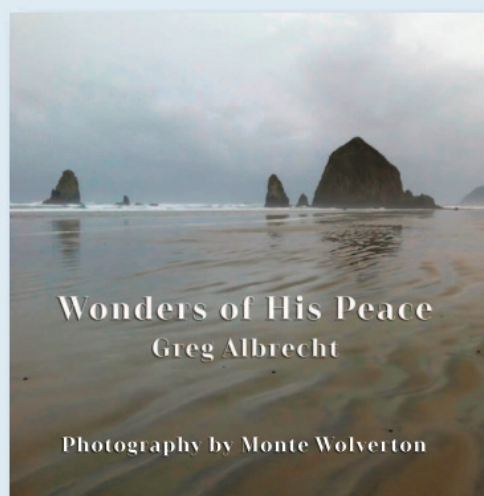
“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...”—1 Peter 1:3

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