

# PLAIN TRUTH®

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inside

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

## Listening to God



*Greg Albrecht*

**M**any believe God makes himself known primarily through catastrophic events—like hurricanes and earthquakes and floods. During such times, the “accepted wisdom” is that God is expressing his displeasure with someone or some group of people.

God, some say, is actively sending a message when the land is dry and parched by drought or when fires rage, destroying homes, crops, animal and human life.

Does God communicate in what insurance companies call “acts of God”? If he does, are “acts of God” the only way he has of communicating (presumably only his displeasure)? Are there other ways God “speaks” to us?

Some would say (I am among

them) that we hear God through the birth of a baby, the love of a child and through a sunrise or sunset. We can, I believe, sense and smell God in the fresh aroma after it rains, and in the forgiving, cleansing purity of a fresh snowfall, its white coat gently covering the barren and besmirched earth.

Many religious professionals who say they speak for God, or at the very least try to explain God, believe God sends messages through loud, attention-grabbing catastrophes and suffering. Some church-goers have been so brainwashed they feel a “good” sermon fills them with shame and guilt. Many evaluate the effectiveness of a sermon based on whether they felt so low and beaten down they could have left the closed door of the church by

slithering, like a worm, under it.

By that token, if “good” sermons are characterized by bellowing and shouting, then, if you have seen any footage of the spell-binding propaganda of hate, swill and rubbish that spewed out of the mouth of Adolph Hitler, you’d think he was an exceptional preacher.

### Noise and Busyness

Our world is filled with noise—the bigger the city we live in, the more people and the more traffic, the more noise we are exposed to—even small towns are overwhelmed by racket and clamor.

One cannot escape the clamor and hubbub of traffic, factory and office, for when one returns home, much racket and commotion continue. Washing machines, vacuum cleaners, microwaves, blenders, televisions and all kinds of sounds from electronic devices seem to be incessant, warring against a quiet place that offers a peaceful sanctuary.

Even as one day becomes another, in the early hours of the morning, there are train whistles, sirens of police and emergency vehicles and sometimes police helicopters whirring overhead.

Lawn mowers and leaf blowers rudely interrupt the blessed quiet of mornings. Houses with children come alive with chatter, arguments and debates. Early in the morning, school buses rumble and giant garbage trucks rattle their way through neighborhoods.

*Continued on page 3*



## One Day at a Time?

It is my honor to write a regular column for the *Plain Truth Magazine* titled, **One Day at a Time**. I've been thinking more and more about why I titled this column as I have. What does **One Day at a Time** really mean, and why is that title and perspective in our lives important?

*Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom* states Psalm 90:12. As I read what the Psalmist wrote of the work and wisdom of numbering, I believe that beginning with the number “one” may well be the best place to start. Living our lives simply and deliberately, **one day at a time**, can offer us a gift of perspective. This daily number of one—this small and manageable increment of time—can offer us a real and tangible peace. How?

Living our lives **one day at a time** can help us to slow down. We can take each day as it comes, rather than being consumed with the content and concerns of the next week, next month or even the next year. Although any one day we face can pose many demands, to-do's and challenges for us, living just today can slow our hearts and minds to focus on what is directly in front of us.

Within that slowing and focusing of our hearts and minds, we can narrow our spiritual practices—our prayers, study and meditations—to the needs, and thanksgivings, of this one day alone. We can be specific with our requests for today, and quietly listen and give thanks for whatever thoughts, insights or answers may come. In so doing, we commune personally

and deeply with our Lord. We enjoy a conversation with him that is new and intentional each day of our lives.

*Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own*, Jesus teaches us in Matthew 6:34.

The “old English” of the Authorized King James Version

**Jesus invites us to live now, today, in the peace and comfort to be found in him, and in this manageable increment of time. Doing so, we can live more simply and deliberately, as he did.**

translates the second sentence as, *sufficient for the day is the evil thereof*. I read Jesus' words to say that even as followers of his, life is full and can have its share of both challenges and joys. As such, I can hear him saying, *let us break life down into a manageable increment of time. Let us walk together today, one day at a time, and let the rest take care of its own*.

Letting the rest take care of its own is no small task. Jesus uses the words, *enough trouble*, for good reason. We can feel his peace and comfort within us when all of life is swirling around us. I often feel as if nothing happens in life until everything seems to happen, all at once and with great intensity. *When it rains it pours* is the old expression. It can all feel a bit overwhelming at times.

Jesus again breaks life down into

a manageable increment of time when he teaches us how to pray: **Give us today our daily bread** (Matthew 6:11, NIV). Jesus knows it's one day, this day today, in which we need to be fed. Not tomorrow, the next day or even the next week. **One day at a time** is how he invites us to live. Living today and today alone. **One day at a time** is how Jesus lived.

As we follow Jesus each day, we live in him and in his peace and comfort. We live in his grace. Humanly, we try our best to follow his lead and example to live as he lived when he was here on earth. And at that, we fail from time to time due to our mortal limitations. Yet, it's his indwelling life within us that transforms us and gives us new perspective. It's his life within us that helps us to slow down, refocus and begin again.

**One day at a time** gives us a place to start. Beginning with the number **one** keeps it simple. When we get caught up in the concerns and content of the future, be that tomorrow, next week or even next year, we lose sight of where, and when, Jesus invites us to live.

Jesus invites us to live now, today, in the peace and comfort to be found in him, and in this manageable increment of time. Doing so, we can live more simply and deliberately in time as he did. We can give thanks for our daily bread, and lean on him in our daily troubles.

When we do stay in touch and keep up with what is happening around us, we can do so from our rest in him. □

—Ed Dunn



Buses rumble on city streets, horns honk and even when trucks and cars are stopped at traffic lights, they are belching exhaust—then the light changes to green. These devices of transportation accelerate and reverberations are left in their wake.

Ironically, the most common remedy to find “peace and quiet” involves plugging into a different kind of noise and busyness. It seems the most widely used cure is the discordant commotion and demands for immediate responses from electronic devices and gadgets.

In all our progress and technology, it seems our appetites (or is it addictions?) for clamor, commotion, hustle-bustle and frenzied activity have increased, and in turn, our desire and capacity for being still have greatly diminished.

Have we been acclimatized to seeking “peace and quiet” by plugging in to more noise, listening to “phones” and virtually enslaved to all manner of electronic devices? ***Does noise equal connection?***

With the volume of sound so loud and almost inescapable, how do we listen for God? Has our cultural noise deafened us to God? How can we hear him?

## Hearing God

I’ve worn hearing aids for about two years. With an assist from these devices, my hearing has improved. Having my physical hearing improved has helped me become more aware of my need to listen more carefully to God.

Of course, God doesn’t need any devices or aids to help him hear me, but I readily admit to being “hard-of-hearing” on many occasions when he communicated with me. I need *spiritual hearing aids* enabling me to listen by grace through faith. Such hearing aids are not humanly produced and marketed. Such spiritual hearing aids are the gift of God.

Some say God is silent, particularly at times of trauma and pain in their lives. Others say they speak for God and will say that they know God better than anyone. They are dogmatic and opinionated. They say they have all the answers.

But the fact is, in spite of characterizations of many who say they speak for God, there are many times in our lives when God seems to be passive or silent. There are many times when he does not answer us when we pray, or, better said, he does not answer us in the way we expect or desire. Surely he hears us—does he have selective

hearing (as many wives conclude of their husbands)?

On our part, we must admit that we only want God to say something when his message benefits us. We are delighted to accept God’s silence when it comes to a past we don’t want to be reminded about or want anyone to know about.

We are thankful God is silent about how bad we have

been—but we would really like to hear him tell us how pleased he is with how good we are—at least when we think he owes us because, in our less than humble estimation, we have done some remarkable, exceptional and wonderful things.

Why does God seem to be silent when we believe he should be recognizing our righteousness and goodness? Why is God silent when we think he should be pinning a medal or ribbon on our chest, or giving us another spiritual trophy for our trophy case? Why is God silent when he could stop pain and suffering?

Why doesn’t God say and do *what* we think he ought to say and do *when* we think he should?

## God Speaks to Us

Some believe that God will make himself known, always, through blessings and curses—they think that God will always give us feedback about our actions. So, when we do the things we are told will make God happy, then the sun will shine and everything in our life will come up roses.

According to this common misunderstanding of who God is and how he speaks to us, when we do the wrong things and displease God, then we will immediately hear from him—we will have bad experiences, the car will break down, the roof will leak, we will get sick, we will lose our jobs. All of that and more will be messages from God trying to get our attention and set us straight.

The idea of a God who always responds with blessings and curses is a pre-Christian idea of God—in fact it is a popular misconception of God that permeates history and is overwhelmingly present throughout all religion in this 21st century. This false idea of God has insinuated itself into many churches within Christendom.

The truth is, when you examine the biblical revelation of God, in the person of Jesus, God is seldom



*Having my physical hearing improved has helped me become more aware of my need to listen more carefully to God.*

loud or overbearing. The obvious question is this: Why are so many people who say they represent God so loud, belligerent, authoritarian and domineering?

The life and teachings of Jesus are evidence that God does what he wants, when he wants and is not captive to our ideas about what he should do and when he should do it.

God does not march to the beat of the religious songs we sing nor does he dance like a puppet on a string when we do what we deem to be righteous, religious things.

When we pray, for example, we do not hear an audible response from God. Neither do we normally discern an immediate answer—and in many cases we never experience the answer we ask and hope for.

***It is a huge mistake to assume that God thinks and talks*** in the same way we do.

***It is a huge mistake to assume that God is dramatic*** and that he uses what we call “acts of God” to get our attention, effectively turning up the volume so we will listen.

The fact is that we, like so many throughout history, are less in tune with God and less apt to carefully seek him out and “hear” him out. God may seem to be silent, but we are not listening—we may have hit our spiritual remote control so that we are listening to other messages, other channels and other programming... thus we are not listening to God.

Rarely does God reveal himself to us with thunderous pronouncements. More often, it is the

“silence of God” that we experience. We often listen most acutely to God in our own silence, when we turn from and mute the cacophony of messages that bombard us from our culture and world.

In I Kings 19:1-13 we read that God came to Elijah in a whisper, instead of the earthquake, great wind or fire. Perhaps God was saying, “I am with you Elijah, even though I don’t dance to your tune or perform according to your expectations. I am with you even though I am not doing the breathtaking, miraculous and spectacular things you think I should.”

***Perhaps God is saying that we can listen to him just as well, or even better, in silence than we can in a noisy world.***

Isn’t that one of the major lessons and incredible counterintuitive insights we learn about God from the revelation of God in the person and life and teaching of Jesus?

Jesus did not come to us in pomp and ceremony and fanfare. Jesus did not hold people spellbound. Jesus performed miracles but his miracles were unexpected, rather than expected.

Jesus was and is the king of an upside-down kingdom—he did not, in his earthly ministry behave like any kind of king anyone had seen or heard of. He does not now work in our lives in ways that we would often expect nor does he always do what we want him to.

God always hears us. He always listens. He forever loves us. May we more carefully listen to him. □

*Greg Albrecht is the President of Plain Truth Ministries and Editor-in-chief of Plain Truth and CWR magazine.*

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## ***Reflections Along the Jesus Way with Greg Albrecht***

***Christianity Without the Religion—Quote for the Day***



# Children and Religious Toxicity

Rachel Ramer

In chemistry, toxicity is the degree to which a substance can cause damage. We often think of this as a quick overload of chemicals or drugs, yet a slow accumulation of a toxin can equal long-term damage, often scarcely noticed by the person being poisoned.

Religious toxicity is similar, and children are particularly vulnerable. Children in homes where religious fervor takes precedence over people learn to adjust to toxicity, to consume it without self-protection.

I grew up in a toxic religious environment. For children like myself, the tendency is to spend a lifetime attempting to recover. Children develop skills similar to those in homes with chemical addictions.

The biggest “ah-ha” moment came when my sister and I saw similarities between children of alcoholics and ourselves, even though there had been no alcohol in our home. The work of psychologist Janet G. Woititz identifies these characteristics for adult children of alcoholics, many of which overlap the list from religious addiction.

Jeff VanVonderen has also contributed to identifying many *characteristics of religious trauma*.

- **Overly submissive behavior**—Cooperative children are pleasant to be around, but overly submissive children lack the autonomy to protect themselves. Even if their

home is generally a safe place, complete obedience sets the stage for possible abuse in present and future relationships. Unfortunately, some materials targeting religious parents encourage unquestioned obedience.

- **Trust issues**—Children are conditioned to accept what the religious community concludes over their own observations and inferences. They develop an inability to trust others outside their religious circle, but even more important, the inability to trust themselves.

- **Black and white thinking patterns**—While this simplicity is normal for children, cognitive and emotional growth means understanding nuance. A toxic religious environment sees nuance as a threat, which keeps children in this underdeveloped mindset far beyond their early years.

- **Minimized emotions or exaggerated emotions**—Religion is notorious for downplaying emotions as unimportant, even casting childlike expressions as childish and immature. At the same time, emotions supporting religious beliefs are weaponized against children, such as the use of shame and “righteous” anger.

- **Depression, lethargy**—Those downplayed emotions often express themselves in despair. Inner criticisms or excessive introspection are the norm. Children often second guess themselves and inwardly adopt the voice of their critics.

- **Isolation**—A highly religious

environment exaggerates protection and turns it into isolation. This can be a component supported by the rise of home education, although the two are not necessarily linked.

- **Indecisiveness**—Children with little autonomy find it difficult to make decisions when given the opportunity. This natural transition to adulthood is thwarted by ultra-religious control.

- **Struggles with reality**—The difficulty in trying to match toxic belief with experience creates a disconnect from one or the other. If they cling to the belief, they struggle with the reality of their experiences.

- **Fear of future events and hell**—Many children from religious homes have an underlying fear not only of what can happen in a current situation, but of the future.

- **Awfulizing**—Awfulizing takes on a life of its own and contributes to living “inside the box.” New ideas die on an altar of fear. The mind jumps quickly to the worst that can happen and the emotions follow. Positive solutions can’t be fully trusted.

- **A critical attitude toward others**—In Dorothy Law Nolte’s poem, “Children Learn What They Live,” she states, “If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn.” A sense of superiority or inferiority (sometimes both) emerges.

- **Adult concerns**—Teachers confirm that students from overly religious homes as young as second and third grade sometimes argue



about doctrine. This mirrors my own experience when I told my school classmates where God stood on issues I had heard discussed in my home.

- **Guilt and shame**—Nolte also states, “If a child lives with shame, he learns to feel guilty.” This guilt expands beyond any wrongdoing to a general sense of being unaccepted. My sister and I had a tendency to say, “I’m sorry,” excessively, not as sympathy to bad news, but as a compulsion to counteract shame.

- **Secrecy**—Shame leads to keeping secrets. What is “unspeakable” in religious homes creates a ripe environment for hidden abuses. We witnessed this with the fundamentalist Duggar family of *19 Kids and Counting* fame, when the oldest son was convicted of possession of child pornography.

Jesus was addressing religious people when he told his disciples: “*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these*” (Matthew 19:14).

### What Can Outsiders Do to Help?

A few years ago, I spoke to a brokenhearted grandmother whose daughter and son-in-law would not allow her to see her grandchildren. The reason? The grandmother was not religious enough. She attended church, but not the “right” church. She was a Christian, but they had their doubts she was a “true” Christian. As a grandparent, she had no legal right to see them. Sadly, some grandparents have to resort to writing letters to their grandchildren to give at a later date, hopefully before their own passing.

When I was growing up, adults in my world saw how my father created an unhealthy religious

environment for my siblings and myself. A few wanted to help, but most adults quietly ignored or even accommodated the situation. One brave person was an aunt, married to my father’s younger brother. They were missionaries in Brazil for many years, so I seldom saw her. On one of her few visits when we were alone together, she told me I could write to her anytime. She didn’t realize my father had already tainted my opinion of her as too liberal/outspoken.

A woman at church also attempted to intervene along with the pastor. But the church had accepted a divorced couple, so we left for a more conservative church with clearly defined marriages where women “knew their place.” Even at age ten, I felt a sense of hopelessness. No one could get through to my dad.

The orchestra director at school was aware of our religious upbringing. He never spoke against my parents, but he knew my father grumbled about some modern pieces the director chose for us to play. How many times did he bite his tongue when he found out our father would not approve of activities normal to most teenagers?

Now, I understand. These adults witnessed spiritual toxicity yet had no authority to address it. They contributed to our lives, but what if they’d done more?

### Avoid Debating Religion in Front of Children

Effective communication uses the concept of *kairos*, a combination of timing and opportunity. Within a religious environment, many of us developed the skill to speak up for the truth but without knowing *when* to speak up. Assessing *when* to say *what* depends on the severity of the situation.


Toxic religious people often claim to be logical, which seems like an invitation to debate, but this is quickly a dead end. They’re not entirely unreasonable, and they have already built an intricate rationale for their ideas. Even if we can see flaws, they will reject dissenting views—and us along with those views.

When parents feel threatened, even by differing ideas, their children also feel threatened. Young children pick up the emotions of an exchange; older children will feel the urge to argue. They’ve inherited a filter—for now. We can consider the ages of the children involved and avoid saddling them with adult issues. They will parrot their parents’ beliefs. This feels safe to them.

### Develop Relationships; Ask Questions

To combat the tendency of ultra-religious parents to isolate, we can look for mutual interests with both parents and children. Do they like to garden? Read mysteries? Play board games? Collect baseball cards? Look for ways to get them into the community such as visiting museums, zoos, or festivals.

Developing relationships is a long game with few immediate results. Unless we can document abuse and/or neglect (which should be addressed



*Someone else has been making their decisions, stripping them of opportunities to grow, to wrestle with choices and to make mistakes.*



immediately), long term relationships with both parents and children are the best tools for effective influence. If this isn't an option, consider new methods to reconnect in the future.

As children grow older, opportunities arise to challenge black and white thinking. Use questions such as, "Have you heard of this other view [or example]?" "Have you thought about what that would mean for [a group of people, another situation]?" "I wonder why [a credible source] would say [the opposite]?" We can allow them to lead if they want to hear more. Usually, one or two children in a family will have what psychologist Daniel Goleman refers to as emotional intelligence, already assessing and experiencing doubts, enough to form questions.

If they're experiencing significant emotional pain, more direct statements are in order. Pain is often a turning point. If we've had a similar background, this is a good time to let them know. We can avoid attacking their parents, while not making excuses for the parents. My mother used to say about my father, "At least he's not an alcoholic." I was glad about that, but it too easily dismissed what we experienced.

### **Encourage Autonomy; Value Emotions**

Someone else has been making their decisions, stripping them of opportunities to grow, to wrestle with difficult choices and to make mistakes. Many

religious systems reach far beyond childhood when it comes to restricting autonomy, even choosing spouses for adult children. Autonomy means they make their own decisions about beliefs, even if they return to the toxicity. We can provide a safe place for choice.

Because they've experienced the minimization of their emotions, children may find expressing themselves difficult. Emotional upheaval might emerge in the presence of a safe person. Guilt, shame, indecision, depression and fear are part of the mix. These may turn to anger as they become aware of the toxicity.

A word of caution: Their situation may trigger *transference* when they begin to trust us. According to the *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, transference is "a patient's displacement or projection...of those unconscious feelings and wishes originally directed toward important individuals, such as parents."

This means we might become the unintended target of strong attachment followed by heated rejection. Therapists know how to address transference; most lay people do not and take unnecessary offense to this common dynamic. Clear boundaries minimize misunderstandings. Children from ultra-religious homes have a greater chance of a well-adjusted adulthood if we demonstrate this through relationships. □

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



## *In Memory of Larry Omasta*

**W**e here at Plain Truth Ministries lost a dear friend, co-worker and partner-in-Christ on March 30th, 2023. Lawrence "Larry" Omasta served as a part-time employee in our ministry for many years, helping each week with the incoming mail, processing of donations, praying over prayer requests, answering phones, as well as assisting with various research and special projects.

Larry was a loving and dedicated husband, father, grandfather, leader and Christ-follower. Prior to joining Plain Truth Ministries, Larry enjoyed a long career in the world of media that spanned over forty years. Having hailed from Western Pennsylvania, Larry was a life-long Pittsburgh Steeler fan, and we joked that he loved Jesus, his family, cups of coffee and his beloved Steelers—in that order!

With an easy laugh, Christ-centered faith and a great perspective on life, Larry, as PTM's resident octogenarian, will be sorely missed. Our thoughts and prayers remain with his family and life-long friends. □





## Quotes & Connections



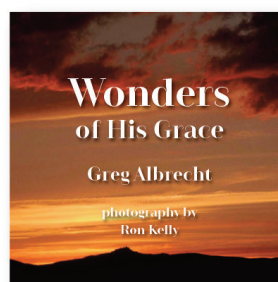
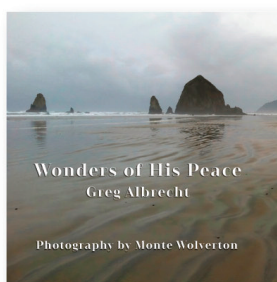
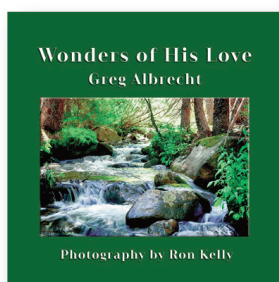
“The gospel of grace is the end of religion, the final posting of the CLOSED sign on the sweatshop of the human race’s perpetual struggle to think well of itself. . . You won’t learn anything positive about religion from Christianity and if you look for Christianity in religion, you’ll never find it.”  
—Robert Farrar Capon

“Every religious club, group, congregation or denomination will in some way, overtly or covertly, offer the hope that a free ticket to heaven is a benefit of membership.” —Greg Albrecht

“God speaks in the silence of the heart. Listening is the beginning of prayer.” —Mother Teresa

“Now and then it’s good to pause in our pursuit of happiness and just be happy.” —Guillaume Apollinaire

“One of the telltale signs in the contemporary American church that trust in God is on the wane is the meteoric rise of legalistic religion. It will continue to flourish and attract an enormous number of devotees. For legalism is born of fear. It is a religious response to human fear. What makes legalism so attractive is that it meets a basic human need—security.” —Brennan Manning



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