

PLAIN TRUTH[®]

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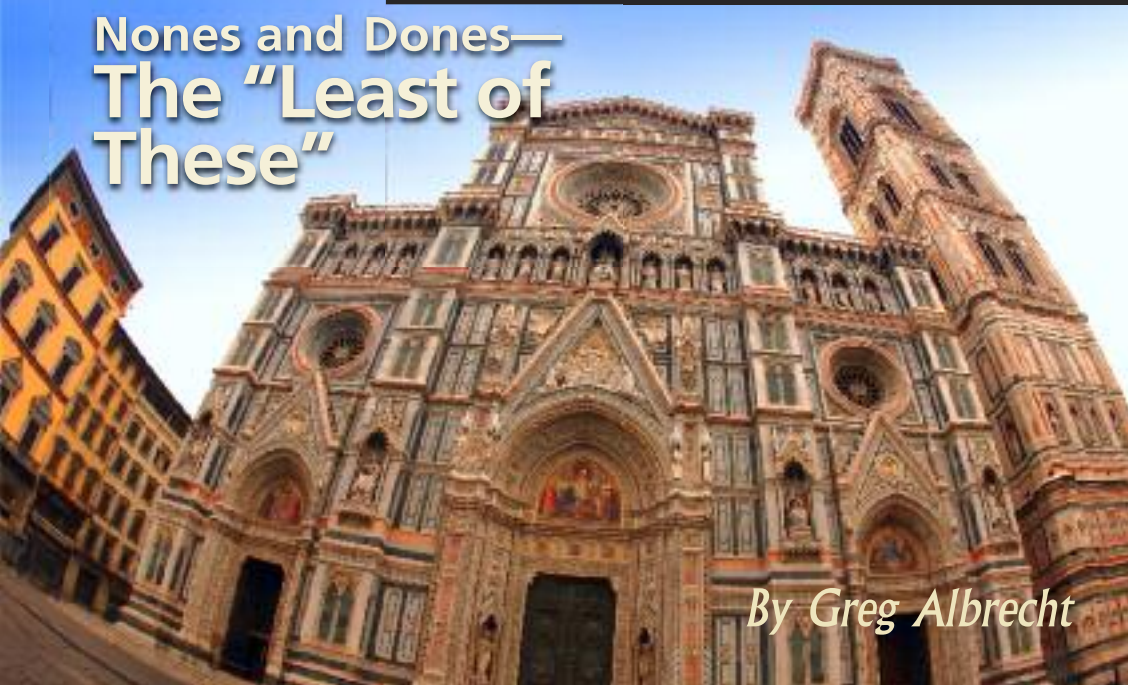
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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

Nones and Dones— The “Least of These”



By Greg Albrecht

“...whatever you did for one of the least of these my brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

Saint Francis of Assisi, according to an old story, was praying in a dilapidated church that was in desperate need of repair. As he was praying he heard a voice saying, “Francis, go and repair my church which is falling into ruin.” Francis immediately went to get his tool chest, and then he heard the voice again, “Not the bricks, Francis. The people are in need of repair.”

Throughout its history the Christian faith has prioritized its missions to help and rescue those who are physically least, last and lost. The legacy of two thousand years of Christianity includes exemplary efforts such as the myriad of schools, colleges and hospitals that have been founded, built and staffed, while ministries like the Salvation Army and so many others have provided deeply

needed and appreciated disaster relief—all in the name of Jesus. But now, in these early years of the 21st century, the organized, visible church at large seems to be turning a deaf ear to a **spiritual disaster of epic proportions**.

Tens of millions of North Americans, whose numbers have been carefully documented and studied by many scholars, authors and sociologists, no longer attend a brick-and-mortar church. Tens of millions feel so battered and bruised by past encounters with a congregation or denomination, they now self-identify as Christians who are *none* (they refuse to be a member of any earthly religious institution) and *done* (they never again intend to darken the door of a brick-and-mortar church).

Tens of millions believe that Christendom at large, in the United States and Canada, has marginalized them and in some cases even abandoned them. Some of these “least of these” are *none*

and *done* because they were offended—while some feel they were used and some even feel they were abused. Some of these “least of these” are *none* and *done* because they feel manipulated and deceived by big-business religion—they believe they were misled.

People in the universal body of Christ are in need of repair today—where are the spiritual paramedics and emergency

medical technicians?

Sadly, the knee-jerk response of many churches and pastors about those who are no longer occupying a space in their buildings is that these former members and attendees are slackers, lazy, indolent and self-centered.

Sirens announcing rescue and repair personnel en route to spiritually help and heal (not to mention offering necessary apologies—requesting forgiveness) ought to be resounding throughout every village and hamlet, and every suburb and metropolitan area. But there seems to be no rush to tend to the battered and bruised brick-and-mortar churches have left in their wake.

More Than Just One Sheep Has Left the Building!

See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one

of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one who wandered off? (Matthew 18:12)

Some scholars believe the number of people in North America who **no longer attend** a brick-and-mortar church has now eclipsed the number of attending church members.

If these estimates are correct, more of the flock, at least the visible flock that Christendom at large identifies as Christians, are gone (from four-walled enclosures) than remain! No one will doubt that the numbers who have “wandered away” far exceed one percent.

Thus in North America today we have tens of millions of *formerly churched* people. Religion at large often categorizes these people as *un-churched*, but these tens of millions of people are **de-churched**.

Un-churched best describes people who never attended a church building, but *these little ones* who no longer attend are **de-churched**—folks who left because of something that happened in the church.

Little ones who were *formerly-churched* either voluntarily left or they were informed they were no longer welcome in a brick-and-mortar church. *These little ones* who are **de-churched** are being called *none* and *done* Christians—*none* (because they are not members of any earthly religious institution) and *done* (because they never again intend to darken the door of a brick-and-mortar church).

Many of *these little ones* remain Christians, in spite of what has happened to them—some of them even say that they now realize they had to leave their hell-on-earth experience called “a church” in order to remain or become Christian.

These little ones believe themselves to be just as Christian as someone who frequently attends a church building. Is “the church” falling into ruin today?

People normally speak of church



as a place to which they “go” and a building they “attend.” But is that usage appropriate to define the church? Is church, as biblically defined, primarily identified as a building and an entity whose members devote themselves to its dogma, doctrine, liturgy and practices? Is that what “the church” is? Consider these two distinctions:

“A” church—an incorporated spiritual/religious entity, located in time and space, on a piece of real estate, in one or more buildings specifically dedicated (some would say “made holy”) as “a” church. “A” church might be one specific group of people (a congregation) or a number of groups that band together (a denomination).

“The” Church—the universal body of Jesus Christ, not isolated by or confined within one denomination. The body of Jesus Christ transcends and defies doctrinal creeds and dogmas. *The universal body of Christ is both visible and invisible*—it is *visible* because it can be seen and known and it is *invisible* because it defies membership data maintained by “a” church.

While membership and attendance in “a” church is optional for Christ-followers, all Christ-followers are, by the grace of God, members of **The Church—the universal body of Christ**. Church, for Christ-followers, is far more than a place to which they travel and a building they attend, if they choose to do so. **Church, for Christ-followers, is what they are.**

Other Sheep

“I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen” (John 10:16)

During Jesus’ ministry, the Jewish religious authorities thought they had a monopoly on God’s work on earth, but Jesus assured the Pharisees (John 10:1) that he had “other sheep that are not of this sheep pen” (John 10:16). Jesus is one shepherd over all his flock, and while some of his sheep think they are the only members of his flock, Jesus has “other sheep” that are invisible and unknown to visible forms of church buildings, membership databases and institutional organizations.

In the Old Testament, the heart of God is revealed toward the least, the lost and the last with the continual repetition that the people of God never forget the stranger (or sojourner), the fatherless and the widow. These people were among the most “at risk” and “vulnerable” in that economy. These people were disenfranchised, alienated and homeless in many cases—they had little or no power, money or influence, but they were God’s little people. “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds” (Psalm 147:3).

In the New Testament that same emphasis and illustration of the heart of God is embodied in Jesus, God in the flesh, who demonstrated his concern for the least, the last and the lost. By contrast, the religious professionals of Jesus’ day were primarily concerned that their followers



Jesus was teaching within this opulent and lavish temple, a massive religious edifice, but Jesus didn't take time to marvel at the stained glass windows or the remarkable architecture.... Jesus pointed out a defenseless woman who was in religious bondage.

bring honor to their religion. Jesus, however, associated with those who were regarded as embarrassing losers, people whom the religious establishment discounted.

Jesus ministered to the hungry and the thirsty, the diseased and sick, the poor and the desperate, the naked and the despised and the imprisoned. *They were all the little ones—the least, the last and the lost.*

And Jesus, of course, loved little children—a revolutionary value in a culture where children were themselves regarded as least and last. Jesus told us that we must be changed and transformed spiritually so that we might become God's spiritual children (Matthew 18:3). John told us that those who receive Jesus are "given the right to become children of God—children not born of natural descent, nor of a human decision or husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:13).

For more than one reason, many Christ-followers have left traditional buildings and traditional ways of "doing church." Many are spiritual refugees, who have been adrift in a sea of confusion after their own denominational ship was shipwrecked or even after they were thrown overboard by the

church they used to attend.

A Grandiose Building & a Poor Widow

In the 12th chapter of Mark, we find Jesus in the temple of Herod with his disciples. The temple of Herod was a magnificent structure, constructed on the largest man-made platform in the ancient world. Mount Moriah in Jerusalem was turned into a massive foundation of about 145 acres (approximately the size of 24 football fields). Architects from Rome, Greece and Egypt supervised the construction—including the precise carving of massive blocks, which when they were installed, were further ground and chiseled into precise joints. The Herodian temple was an unbelievable sight.

As Jesus was teaching in this magnificent temple he said to a "large crowd [who] listened to him with delight" (Mark 12:37):

"Watch out for religious scholars. They love to walk around in academic gowns, preening in the radiance of public flattery, basking in prominent positions, sitting at the head table at every church function. And all the time they are exploiting the weak and helpless. The longer their prayers, the worse they get. But they'll pay for it in the end.

Sitting across from the offering box,

he was observing how the crowd tossed money in for the collection. Many of the rich were making large contributions. One poor widow came up and put in two small coins—a measly two cents. Jesus called his disciples over and said, 'The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford—she gave her all.' (Mark 12:38-44, The Message Bible).

Jesus was teaching within this opulent and lavish temple, a massive religious edifice, but Jesus didn't take time to marvel at the stained glass windows or the remarkable architecture. Inside the lavish and opulent temple Jesus pointed out a defenseless, preyed-upon woman who was in religious bondage. Jesus pointed out one of *these little ones*. Widows were among the most vulnerable in that society, the poorest of the poor.

This woman was being abused by an unrelenting religious system that demanded more and more money in order to feed its insatiable appetites—the NIV translated verse 40 as saying these religious professionals "**devour widows' houses**" (Mark 12:40).

So this widow comes to the temple disadvantaged by her poverty and her vulnerability. At worst she is abused, at best she is pitied. Ironically, this story of this little person, this poor woman who was no doubt browbeaten and shamed into giving so that big elaborate religious buildings could be constructed and maintained is often used today by preachers and religious fundraisers—telling their followers to go and do likewise—to give of all they have, to a religious institution or cause.

It's so easy to miss what Jesus is actually teaching here in this story of the poor widow woman, who out of her poverty, put in everything, all she had to live on! Christ-less religion often places a premium on brick-and-mortar buildings where they hold their services and ceremonies—they have fundraising programs so that they can build grandiose buildings, supposedly in God's honor.

But who is this God to whom they dedicate these outlandishly extravagant religious buildings? It seems as if many of these extravagant and ostentatious religious monuments are dedicated to human vanity and pride—some of the dogmas and doctrines and values taught and practiced within big religious buildings are far from the humble ministry of Jesus, when he declared his love and affection for the little people, “the least of these brothers of mine.”

In this magnificent religious building a poor widow came, truly one of the little people, and gave an offering of “a measly two cents.” Following Jesus' warning about the exploitation of the weak and helpless by religious professionals, with the poor widow serving as an example, the 13th chapter of Mark begins...

As he walked away from the Temple, one of his disciples said, “Teacher, look at that stonework! Those buildings!” Jesus said, “You're impressed by this grandiose architecture? There is not a stone in the whole works that is not going to end up in a heap of rubble” (Mark 13:1-2, The Message Bible).

Where Two Or Three are Gathered

“For where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them” (Matthew 18:20)

Time and time again Jesus revealed his love by ministering to the physically and spiritually vulnerable, oppressed, imprisoned, impoverished and blind. Jesus' esteem for *the least of these* is, of course, in direct opposition with the value placed on things and people by our society.

Have you recognized that there seems to no longer be any such thing as “small?” If you manage to save up enough money for a coffee at Starbucks, you will find three sizes of coffee—Tall, Grande and Venti. *Tall* is the smallest size, *Grande* is the medium size and *Venti* the largest. The word “small” is not in sight at Starbucks (or at many other retail establishments) because when something or someone is considered small or little, by the values of our culture, that something or someone has little or no worth.

That value is very much present within the world of religion—people are impressed by big religious buildings, cathedrals and giant, warehouse-like mega-churches. No one wants to tell a friend that they study the Bible and pray with two or three others (and Jesus!) around their kitchen table. People like to tell their friends that they attend a big church with four services every Sunday, with a total of 15,000 or more in attendance.

Christ-less religion is all about size and numbers—and that's part of the requirements and duties oppressive religion demands of its followers. What does Christ-less religion, impressed and driven by numbers, demand? Its demands include: *Read the Bible more. Pray more. Get your posterior in the pew more often. Spend more time being involved with church programs and activities. Work harder trying to be what God wants you to be. Give more money to the church. Get more new people to come to our church.*

Size matters in Christ-less religion. For Christ-less religion, **big is better**,

*“God resists, refuses, rejects the proud. but he delivers himself up, he gives himself totally to the humble and little. Not only does he not resist them, but he cannot refuse them anything.”
—Brennan Manning*



small is meaningless and inconsequential. By contrast, and what a contrast it is—*the least of these* are continuously highlighted in the Gospels.

These little ones we read about in the Gospels who are *least, last and lost* were insignificant when measured by the traditional values of what made someone important or worthy. They weren't well-known—they blended into the background—but Jesus knew them, saw them and ministered to them.

*Our loving heavenly Father,
Thank you for your inclusive love.
Thank you for the love you have for all of your children, including your “other sheep.”*

You love the stranger, the alien, the homeless and the disenfranchised. You love the fatherless and the widows, the sick, disease-ridden and malnourished. You love those who are impoverished and oppressed.

You love those who have been victimized by big business enterprises, whether secular or religious. Jesus speaks of little people as his brethren, of his love for the “least of these brothers of mine.”

Fill us with the mind of Christ that our hearts might overflow with the compassion and concern of Jesus, for the little people, the least of these, the brothers and sisters of Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. □