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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



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THIS IS WHAT GOD IS LIKE

The most important spiritual need in our world today is for the image of God most people believe is true and authentic to be healed and transformed—so that they know who God really is, and who he is not.

When people start looking for God, they begin their search with a doctrine, a creed or a dogma, a logical set of facts leading to an academic or cerebral decision. But the New Testament speaks of our “belief” in God, and belief has much to do with trust, reliance and assurance. ***Belief in God has more to do with the heart than it does the head.*** Belief is a conviction that God loves you, and thus you trust him, and you are assured that he will take care of you.

Like any love affair, belief in God is more about the heart than it is the head. More than anything else our biggest spiritual need is for an unblemished vision of God—who he is and who he is not.

Many people today are depressed and discouraged—they see little cause for hope—many would say that they have no faith, nor do they believe in God. And big business religion—the institutions of religion—is in large part to blame for this sad state of affairs.

When it comes to an image of God, Christless religion has persuaded the world at large of an angry God of wrath, a monster God who penalizes people in this life and sees to it that those who are really bad spend eternity being consciously tormented in hell. The god of religion is the god of payback. The New Testament however is clear—that’s not who God is. The predominant expression and illustration of the love of God is the Cross of Jesus Christ. The Cross is the once and for all epitome of God’s love, compassion and care for you and me.

Christless religion would have us believe that the symbol or image we should think of when we think of God is a torture rack, hot coals and screams ... but the image that we still use, thank God, is the Cross, isn’t it?

But the Cross itself is the object of great distortion. Many see God as a God of wrath and anger and payback because they believe the Cross of Christ is when Father God took out all his displeasure on God the Son, torturing and killing him, so he wouldn’t have to torture and kill you and me. The belief that undergirds and provides the foundation for all religion is that god, or in some religious belief systems, the gods—ensure that all humans get what they deserve.

KARMA—WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

Karma is an Eastern word borrowed from Buddhism and Hinduism for this flawed assumption that God ensures that humans get what they deserve—but the assumption is not reserved for those religions. All Christless religion (including much of

The God of religion is the God of payback.



Christendom) is based on the idea that “what goes around, comes around.”

Karma is the fatalistic notion that all that we experience is a matter of reaping what we sowed, and that is the primary avenue of thought through which beliefs of God are channeled, whether Islam or Christendom, Judaism, Hinduism or Buddhism.

Karma is the belief that if you do good things then God will ensure you will experience positive consequences—and if you hurt others and cause pain to them, then God will see to it that the same hurt and pain will come back and bite you in your posterior at some later point in your life.

Perhaps you have seen the cartoon of the hungry person walking into a diner hoping for a good meal, only to be greeted by a sign: “Welcome to the *Karma Café*. There are no menus. You will get served what you deserve.”

So would you prefer to go to the *Karma Café* where you will be served what you deserve, or would you prefer to accept the invitation of Jesus to commune with him, at his table—where you most definitely do not receive what you deserve? The God of the New Testament, fully revealed to us in Jesus, God in the flesh says, in effect, “Trust me. Believe me. I am not who religion says I am. I am asking you to dine with me, but it will not be at the *Karma Café*.”

Will it be the *Karma Café* or the *Lord’s Table*? When Jesus invites us “over,” if we ask, “Can I bring anything?” his response, as our gracious host, is “No, just bring yourself. I will provide the rest.”

When we arrive at Jesus’ banquet, he doesn’t demand that we recite terms, phrases or creeds or formulaic passwords or religious recipes as if they contain a magical or transcendental spiritual significance allowing us to gain entrance and buy a seat at his table.

The Lord’s Table is not a spiritual potluck meal where we bring whatever spiritual food we like to eat and drink. Nor is it a spiritual meal where we are asked or invited to help pay the bill. This meal is provided by the love and grace of God.

are several terms used for enacting this spiritual meal, which is of course symbolic without any dependence on its literal definition or elements involved. It is called communion, mass, the Eucharist or the Lord’s Supper. Though the way in which this spiritual meal is celebrated varies in many ways, the common denominator remains the same—it is all about Jesus.

The essence of communion is a symbolic spiritual meal. Communion refers to uniting, being in union with Jesus and with one another—communion



Communion is an act of *commun-ity*.

This meal is at the Lord’s house—we are seated at his table—he is our host—he feeds us with the spiritual nourishment he prepares, which is, of course, himself—he is our entrée, our Bread of life. And again, make no mistake—Jesus picks up the tab for this meal. We are incapable of making any contribution to this meal. We can only receive it with gratitude. God is as far from *karma* as one can get—God is all about love and grace.

Throughout Christianity, there

commemorates the meal Jesus had with his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion and is therefore a meal of thanksgiving for the life he gave for us and the incredible love that motivated his willingness to go to his cross and the significance behind his cross.

Communion is an act of *commun-ity*—it’s a reference to what Christ-followers have *in common* with each other and with God. Again, the primary emphasis of communion is not the physical setting—whether any

other people are literally present, what specific physical items might be used as symbols—the issue is our unity in and with Jesus Christ, and others in whom he lives and who live in him.

Thus, receiving our daily bread from Jesus is a matter of following Jesus into his grand banquet hall, as he leads us to our place at his table. And again, for the record—we don't deserve a seat nor can we pay for the meal that follows. We can't even pick up the tip.

This meal is not about what we deserve or what we have earned.

THIS IS GOD...

In his book *The Crucified God*, Jurgen Moltmann directs his readers' attention to the Cross of Christ and he says, of the Cross, "*This is God and God is like this.*"

If we want to know who God is and what he is like, look at the Cross of Christ and consider the meaning and implications of the Cross. God is cruciform—his love and grace are best understood and perceived through the Cross of Christ, God in the flesh.

This is God and God is like this:

The Cross is the symbol of God's unending love, when Jesus, who healed and restored people, who never did anything to cause pain or hurt to anyone, took all of the evil, all of the hatred and animosity that humans have and accepted it all, effectively demonstrating that love will always win over hatred and violence.

Who is God exactly? *This is God and God is like this:*

On his cross, Jesus once and for all demonstrated that peace, love and grace are stronger than hatred, violence and anger—and

on his Cross he provided the absolute proof that the eternal reality that will win, in the end, is God's love and grace.

Who is God exactly? *This is God and God is like this:*

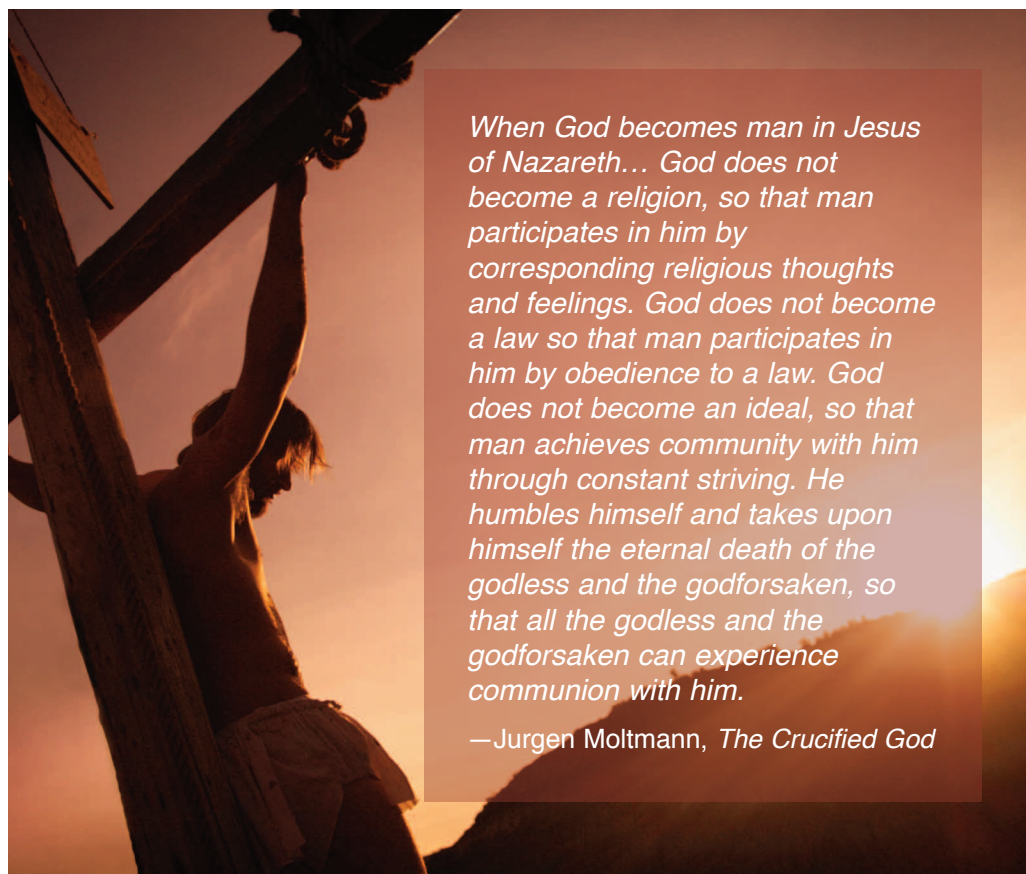
God is *not* forever engaged in making sure that you and I get what's coming to us. God is *not* consumed with making sure we pay all the penalties we deserve—his primary motive is love—his primary care for you and me is his relentless and never-ending love that he will pursue us with so that we might choose his love over the hatred and pain of our world.

Cross of Christ is grace, mercy and love—the Cross of Christ is *not* a penalty Jesus paid because God demanded obedience to his laws.

The Cross of Christ is, *above all*, the love of God fully expressed and made available, at the cost of the death of Jesus, God in the flesh.

The Cross of Christ is, *above all*, when Jesus was lifted up *above all*, so that the love of God could be seen and known as the highest and deepest expression of God.

If God operates according to *karma*—if God insists that we receive what we deserve—if God wants our life to consist of every



When God becomes man in Jesus of Nazareth... God does not become a religion, so that man participates in him by corresponding religious thoughts and feelings. God does not become a law so that man participates in him by obedience to a law. God does not become an ideal, so that man achieves community with him through constant striving. He humbles himself and takes upon himself the eternal death of the godless and the godforsaken, so that all the godless and the godforsaken can experience communion with him.

—Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*

Who is God exactly? *This is God and God is like this:*

The Cross of Christ is *not* an act of God that balances the books—the Cross of Christ is about forgiveness, *not* payback. The

action we take to be countered by an equivalent action that our action deserves—if God operates exclusively by the law of cause and effect—by *karma*, then you and I are in a world of hurt.

But by and through grace, and because of God's love, expressed in Jesus, the gospel proclaims that we do *not* get what we deserve, but instead, by God's grace, he showers us with his goodness and his love.

The gospel says that God will always forgive us, no matter how many times we ask him for his forgiveness. This is why, on the Cross, when Jesus prayed, "Father forgive them..." we hear the answer,

"It is accomplished!" (John 19:30). The gospel says that God's love never ends—the gospel says that the bank of heaven overflows with grace—there is no end of God's favor for you and for me. Let our focus be on the Cross of Christ, and as we look on Jesus the gospel tells us, "*This is God and God is like this.*" □

Greg Albrecht serves as president and pastor of Plain Truth Ministries.

A Father's Gift

by Ed Dunn

I first remember seeing it when I was a small boy. My father kept it on the top left side of his dresser in his and mom's bedroom. At the time, I was all of seven years old. I loved to wear it around the house, as often as my father would let me. I can still remember how my wrist was so small that it barely stayed clasped and in place above my hand.

The item from my father's dresser was a bright and shiny silver tennis bracelet. Dad's tennis bracelet had a small silver plate in the middle of the chain that wrapped around his wrist. On the top-side of that plate, Dad's name had been engraved in tiny cursive letters on its face. On the underside of the plate, the engraving displayed the day and month of his birth, followed by a year. The bright and shiny silver tennis bracelet had been given to my father on the day of his seventeenth birthday.

As a child, I loved my father's tennis bracelet for many reasons:

first and foremost, I share my father's name, as I'm a "Junior" to his "Senior."

I loved how bright and shiny it looked on my undersized wrist, and that he'd received the bracelet as a birthday gift so many years before. Lastly, the tennis bracelet just looked cool to me. I loved wearing such an "adult" piece of finery wherever and whenever I could.

Not long ago, I had the opportunity to visit my parents after a long time apart due to the recent pandemic. It was during this visit that my mother presented me with my great-grandmother Grace's engagement ring. That generous event on the part of my mother, and her continued desire to give things away, got us talking about family heirlooms again one morning after breakfast. Given the context of the conversation, I asked a



question of my father, somewhat sheepishly, that went something like this:

"So... Dad, do you happen to remember that old tennis bracelet you used to keep on top of your bedroom dresser all those years ago... you know, the one with your name engraved on it?"

My father thought for a moment. *"Yes, I do. I haven't looked at that for years,"* he replied.

"Well... given the topic Mom has just initiated, if there's ever a time... down the road... when you might like to give that bracelet away, I'd be more than honored to wear it. The bracelet kinda has my name on it already, and I'd wear it with pride."

As I finished my question, Dad stood up and disappeared into the