

# CWR<sub>m</sub> magazine

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



## *Using up our Inheritance*

*Brad Jersak*

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# Using up our Inheritance

Brad Jersak

## MY INHERITANCE

During the past year, I received a modest inheritance after my dad, Lloyd Jersak, graduated into the “great cloud of witnesses” (see Hebrews 12). By ‘modest,’ I mean the sum requires me to steward it well if it is to be spent in a meaningful way. Should I invest it in my grandchildren, renovate my study, or use it on a holiday? In any scenario, I was both grateful for the gift and mindful of too easily “using it up.”



## OUR INHERITANCE

Broadly speaking, Western civilization grossly underestimates the magnitude of the inheritance it received from Jesus and his apostolic progeny. We fail to recognize that many of our breakthroughs came, not *despite* the resistance of superstitious

religion, but as a direct *result* of the Jesus Way.

There is a strange “both-and” or “yes-but” involved, but if we can get in behind the corruption and violence of historical Christendom, we may retrieve memories of how Jesus radically modeled the liberation of women, compassion for the destitute, and humanization of ‘the other.’ His welcome to the outcast, the untouchable, the miscreant was in profound and public opposition to popular assumptions in the Roman Empire and Temple establishment. He raised eyebrows (and ire) and captured hearts whenever he proclaimed *God’s alternative society*. His intrinsic humanism included compassion, kindness, generosity and selflessness—a mustard seed vision so compelling that it would win the day. *This is our inheritance.*

After his personal encounter with the risen Christ, the apostle Paul, formerly a deadly opponent of the Jesus Way, became its most prolific champion, broadcasting gospel seeds across the breadth of Roman dominion. His gospel heralded the eradication of every hostile and exclusionary social barrier... in Christ, there is now no longer an us-them, over-under relationship between Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free, barbarian (non-Greek) or Scythian (today’s Iranians)—see Ephesians 2:14, Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11).

## STILL ENJOYING OUR INHERITANCE

Given the quick spread of Christianity, this reality should have been enacted more quickly, but cultural transformation is painfully slow. And sometimes it was the ‘Christian’ brand that offered the most resistance to the Jesus Way. Yet the day finally came when women and people of color and those without land were finally recognized as humans, citizens and Christians. The fact that Western cultures regard sexism, racism and slavery as sinful are aspects of our inheritance—the fruit of the gospel.

Then along came the Enlightenment, identified with the great philosophical and political minds of the 17th-18th centuries. They, too, enjoyed the liberating inheritance of the gospel. But they were also keenly aware and deeply critical of the Christendom of their day. They accused the church of corruption, violence, and superstition—and had the receipts to prove it! **Christianity at large had become an enemy of its own inheritance**—the Institution (Catholic and Protestant) was the chief sponsor behind power-hungry kings, religious intolerance, and the use of torture and death-dealing across Europe.

Thinkers such as Voltaire (1694-1778) were scathing in their critique of religion to the point of cynicism, but who could blame them? They worked tirelessly to expunge the state and the populace of religious control, to open their minds to reason and their politics to freedom from church violence and the “divine right of kings.”

But even in secularizing their humanism, we still recognize aspects of our gospel inheritance in the popular Enlightenment slogans such as France’s “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” and Thomas Jefferson’s “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” These were generated outside of Christian faith by proponents of civil religion and in the heat of two bloody revolutions. Nevertheless, they represent post-Christian societies built on gospel foundations—our inheritance—but sans faith in Jesus Christ.

Even today, most of the post-Christian West enjoys *some* of its inheritance, even if unconsciously and without recognition or gratitude, especially ethical convictions around caring for others in the tradition of Jesus’ Parable of the Good Samaritan.

## USING UP OUR INHERITANCE

Unfortunately, **a closer look also reveals how the West is using up its inheritance.** What comes after that makes me nervous. For example, Jesus taught us

the importance of peace and the blessing of being peacemakers. Who wouldn’t want to live in a utopia?

That dream sounds good... until we point out that Jesus (with his brother James and the apostle Paul) taught that we only achieve peace by sowing peace. We do not achieve peaceful ends through violent means. That was Rome’s lie, and it has become our lie. **We’re using up our inheritance.**

Others have pursued justice, and the prophetic tradition (including Jesus’ gospel) teaches us that the means of attaining justice is mercy and forgiveness. But forgiveness is increasingly discarded

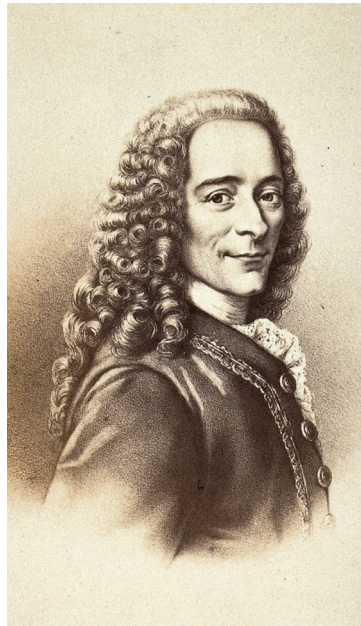
as either complicity with injustice (on the left) or compromise with unrighteousness (on the right). Instead, we prefer the justice of retribution, of punishment, of public humiliation, of violence. But the New Testament says, NO. “The wrath of man cannot produce the justice of God.” **We’re using up our inheritance.**

Others proclaim tolerance and love to show off how broadminded they are. They love to be known as “allies” and perform their acts of

charity on behalf of the oppressed group de jour. But when their script requires hatred toward another despised group, when the performance stokes the ego or used to build one’s brand... **we’re using up our inheritance.** Authentic love slides into false love until love itself becomes an object of derision... when the Jesus Way is abandoned for trendy activism, **we’re using up our inheritance.**

## ESAU’S STEW

Sad to say, but too often true, just as Christless Christianity was first to abandon its inheritance, so also it can be the forerunner in resisting the Jesus Way. Where Christians cannot force their way on others, they frequently develop a persecution complex, then double down in opposition to perceived threats from “the world.” Ironically, the real threat may actually be the Spirit of Christ, calling us to break free from religious bondage and



*“Of all religions,  
the Christian  
should of course  
inspire the most  
tolerance, but until  
now, Christians  
have been the most  
intolerant of all  
men.”*

*—Voltaire*

calling us to return to the Jesus Way of unfailing love, radical forgiveness and scandalous hospitality.

Tragically, like Esau in Genesis 25, those who claim the “Christian” label may opt to “sell our birthright” in exchange for the savory soup of power, prestige or popularity. At least Esau felt satisfied for a moment. But when our inheritance is used up, traded away, or misused, all that’s left is emptiness and regrets.

## CHRIST OUR INHERITANCE

So what’s the good news? I’m grateful to remind you that our inheritance is not actually finite! Jesus Christ is an infinite source of God’s grace and mercy.

*Those who turn or return to Jesus find that God’s love is an inheritance that is higher, deeper, longer, and wider than what we can ever earn, spend or squander.*

Regardless of the cultural pendulum swings, Jesus is the wellspring of eternal life now, both real and present “to the end of the age.” His table is always open to everyone... even the prodigals who thought they “used up” their inheritance.

The culture in which we live may have forgotten the One whose inheritance they spent, but he doesn’t say, “Too late, too bad,” but rather, throws wide his arms and says, “Whosoever will may come.” □

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# Science vs. God?

Grant Corriveau

**I** hear you’re a Christian. You don’t actually believe all that crap, do you?

I’d never flown before with first officer Dan. We’d completed our initial preparations for our early-morning flight. Now we had a few moments in the Airbus flight deck to wait for the final details of aircraft loading to be completed around us. This was a welcome opportunity finally to have a sip of that rapidly-cooling morning coffee I’d carefully stowed in the cup holder beside me and relax just a bit. It was also a good chance to begin discovering something about the other person I would be sharing these cramped quarters with during the long day’s work ahead of us. That’s when Dan turned to me and said, “I hear you’re a Christian. You don’t actually believe all that crap, do you?”

I probably choked a little on my coffee at his direct, though obviously good-natured, broaching of the topic. Religion, along with politics, are subjects that pilots usually avoid because of the many ‘hot buttons’ and our need to work together as a team. That day, however, largely due to Dan’s wide smile and friendly manner of expressing himself, I was more than willing to engage with his question. I appreciated that he was treating me like an adult—not a child with whom he should be careful not to destroy fantasies about Santa Claus and Easter Bunnies.

During our flights together, over the next few years, we had many fascinating conversations exploring truth, reality, and what we can even know about any of it. More interesting still, while our interactions were often passionate, they were never combative or toxic.

Thanks to Dan’s persistent and intriguing questions about my views of the world, I often had to dig deep to “suss out” what I claimed to believe. Sometimes I had to backtrack from positions I realized were untenable. More importantly, I came to realize that it is entirely feasible for people to discuss ‘hot button’ topics respectfully, patiently, and persistently—and to even become friends while doing so.

## FROM “IT IS WRITTEN!” TO “SCIENCE SAYS!”

The topics Dan and I covered then are topics I still enjoy digging into today. I do this with friends of various faiths,