

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

SYMPATHY

EMPATHY

SYMPATHY

PITY

# He's There



*For You and With You*

...AND THEY SHALL CALL HIM  
EMMANUEL, WHICH BEING  
INTERPRETED IS, GOD WITH US.  
—MATTHEW 1:23, KJV

# What Others Are Saying...



## CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

### Inspired, Infallible and Inerrant

Thank you for the wonderful article by Greg Albrecht, “Inspired, Infallible and Inerrant,” in the Fall 2015 issue of *CWRm*. It was insightful and refreshing!

**Indiana**

Thanks for all the articles you’ve published during PTM’s “Year of the Bible.” They’ve helped me understand that the Bible is the written word of God, but *Jesus* is the Living Word of God. I agree with the conclusion of Greg’s article “Inspired, Infallible and Inerrant” in the Fall *CWRm*: “...the Bible is not on the throne, but rather Jesus alone is king, he alone is Lord...some have transferred the fervor and zeal that belongs to Jesus to a book. Jesus is the Word of God.”

**California**

### Timely Insight

I recently received the Fall *CWRm*, and each and every article is so timely and filled with insight. I feel like a little kid when I see it in my mailbox, and have the pleasure of reading it article by article. I am always being filled with deeper understanding. What a wonderful staff and teachers. Your materials are really delightful to receive, and they encourage me on my journey. Thanks for the inspiration your dedication delivers.

**Arizona**

The great articles in your magazines make me think! They also help bring us back to Christ, and that’s what we need. Thank you for being led by the Spirit!

**New York**

### Soup Kitchen

I want to thank the PTM staff for allowing God to use you to provide the

daily bread for all who are spiritually hungry. Without your “soup kitchen” many of us would never get fed anything “nutritious.” My donation is but a crumb compared to the need, but I pray that God would increase all of our tiny morsels as He did the loaves and fishes, so that many would be brought to his table to eat and be filled.

**Wisconsin**

### Can We “Make” God Love us More or Less?

I want to thank you for your recent articles “Can We ‘Make’ God Love us More or Less?” and “God Gave Them Over.” I made copies of them for two Bible studies that I lead. I’m hoping to help others understand how God can love us totally and unconditionally and His love is not swayed or changed by the things we do or don’t do. These two articles together help make it plain the way God can love us and yet deal with us when we choose darkness instead of light.

**Nebraska**

### What the World Needs

I started reading your magazines, letters and booklets about ten years ago—because I knew that something was really wrong about my spiritual life. Given the many rules and restrictions of the church I had been a member of for about 40 years, I knew that something about my relationship with God was wrong. I came to you because my friends said you could help. And while I liked what you said, it never really hit home—until a few months ago.

Then the penny dropped! I am finally beginning to fully realize the grace of God, the new covenant, what it means to rest in Christ and the incredible love God

has for us all. So why did it take ten years? Perhaps because I had been indoctrinated for over 40 years with legalism and performance-based religion! This message is truly what the world needs, and I know it is specifically what people who’ve been through the religious wringer (like I have) need.

**Email**

### A More Christlike God

I really enjoyed the new book by Dr. Jersak, *A More Christlike God*—what an eye-opener! God is just like his son Jesus Christ—He always has been. God is love through and through. Mankind has gotten a lot wrong, especially about the Father.

**Pennsylvania**

I was the pastor of a church for almost thirty years. I have never, ever fully understood, known or experienced the incredible joy of the Lord and the freedom we have in Christ until I read several books by Greg Albrecht, and heard him speak—and until I read Brad Jersak’s latest book, *A More Christlike God*, and his articles. I am overwhelmed and amazed about how much there is about God that I have never known. What *CWR/PTM* proclaims is such a breath of fresh air. I thank God for this amazing ministry!

**Canada**

- See page 9 of this issue for details about how to order *A More Christlike God*.



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## Cover Story

*Climbing down into a pit in which*

*someone has fallen is an accurate description of what actually happened when Jesus was born. The entire new covenant is all about empathy, for it is based on the fact that God in the person of Jesus came down, out of eternity, to be WITH us.*

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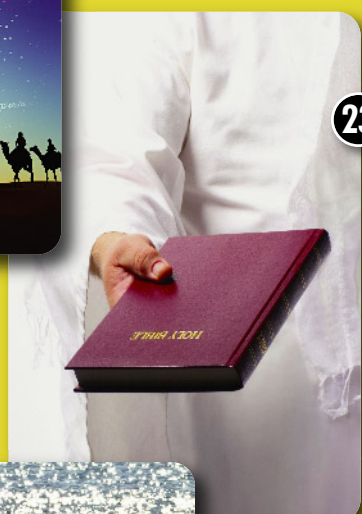
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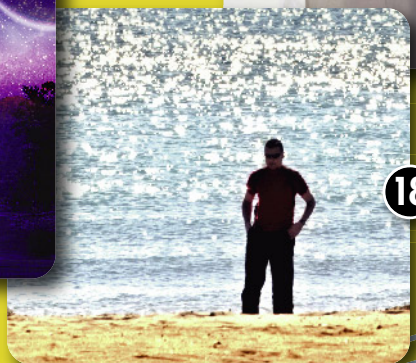
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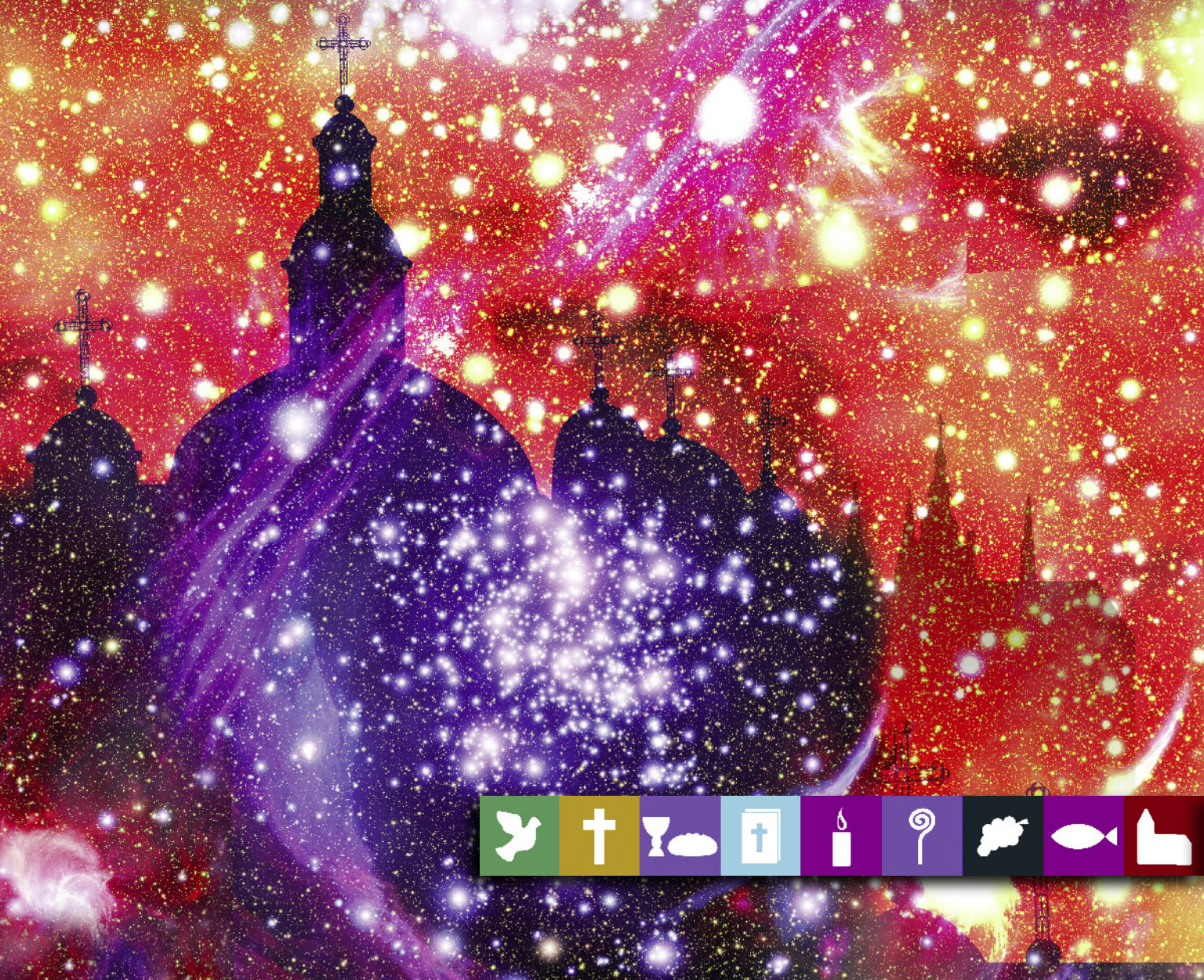
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# God... MORE THAN A "CHRISTIAN"?

BY BRAD JERSAK



After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

—Matthew 2:1-2

dropped by a Saturday morning garage sale today. It felt a bit creepy to me because one table was stacked high with occult books about Tarot cards, witches' spells and astrology manuals. But it also reminded me of the Eastern-religion Magi who tracked down the Christ-child, using astrology. They didn't merely use the star as GPS; somehow their divinations "told them" to look for the "king of the Jews." We often call them "wise men," but "magi" is actually the plural form of "magus"—i.e. magician or sorcerer (as in Acts 8:9-24).

### Holy Pagans

In the Bible, we sometimes have interfaith run-ins with "holy pagans"—people of other faiths who are recognized as knowing God. And not just seekers; some were even priests, like Moses' father-in-law, Jethro (Exodus 2, 18)—a priest of Midian revered in the Druze religion. Or Melchizedek, to whom Abram offers a tithe and the Epistle to the Hebrews recognizes as a "type" of Christ (Hebrews 2). From Job to Cornelius, we have God-fearing outsiders who nevertheless "had God's ear." The biblical tradition of holy



## THE BIBLICAL TRADITION OF HOLY PAGANS INCLUDES ALL THOSE WHO SOUGHT AND FOUND GOD 'BEYOND THE BOX.' TO STATE THE OBVIOUS, NONE WERE JEWISH OR CHRISTIAN WHEN THEY FIRST FOUND GOD.

pagans includes all those who sought and found God "beyond the box." To state the obvious, none were Jewish or Christian when they first found God.

### God Is Not a Christian—Bishop Desmond Tutu

A book containing some of Desmond Tutu's talks is titled *God Is Not a Christian: And Other Provocations*. Provocations indeed! Bishop Tutu is one of history's most significant peacemakers. He is known for his key role, alongside Nelson Mandela, in dismantling apartheid in South Africa. He established the historic "Truth and Reconciliation Commission," averting a looming civil war. Yet this advocate of tolerance is also not afraid to "poke the bear." It's what makes him one of the few authentic national prophets of our era.

"God is not a Christian." Provocative, yes. But worthy of serious consideration. How might that claim be true?

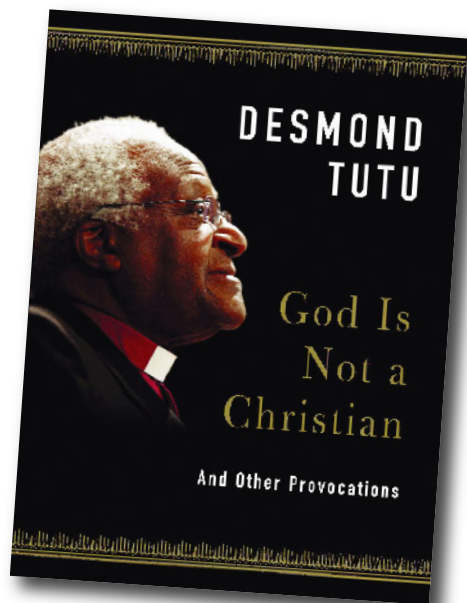
Not that God is anti-Christian, or that faith in Christ is misplaced. Not at all. But considering the magnitude of Christ's saving power and the breadth of his divine love, then the enormous embrace of his outstretched arms does intimate God is *more than a Christian*.

### God Is More Than a Christian

"God is more than a Christian." Provocative, yes... if we regard Christian faith as an exclusive, us-them religious monolith. Tutu crosses those boundaries repeatedly. He chums and *fellowships* with the Dalai Lama, which of course leads to charges of pluralism and heresy.

"God is more than a Christian." Notice: when Tutu claims God is not a Christian, he doesn't say, "*I'm* not a Christian." He remains a robe-wearing, creed-citing, liturgical bishop in the Anglican Church! How does he maintain his particular faith while also





## HE REMAINS A ROBE-WEARING, CREED-CITING, LITURGICAL BISHOP IN THE ANGLICAN CHURCH! HOW DOES HE MAINTAIN HIS PARTICULAR FAITH WHILE ALSO BELIEVING GOD IS BIGGER THAN THE CHRISTIAN LABEL?

believing God is bigger than the Christian label?

How might we imagine a God big enough for everyone—*more than a Christian*—while holding high the unique truth claims of Jesus Christ? Can we

you are born in Pakistan, you will probably follow Islam. In India, most are Hindu. These demographics should undermine our dogmatism. We are so sure our faith has the monopoly on truth. Why? Isn't one factor our place of birth? Be honest.

I was born to sixth generation Baptists. That had *some* influence on why I "chose" Baptist faith and baptism. What if I was born to Buddhists in Tokyo? Tutu warns, "You could so easily have been an adherent of the faith that you are now denigrating, but for the fact that you were born here rather

rule applies to faith as much as to ethics. Christ's love takes us beyond violence against other religions and destruction of others' shrines.

Like Paul in Athens (Acts 17), we dialogue as careful listeners and joyful sharers of good news. Paul didn't leave the gospel of Jesus Christ behind. Nor does Tutu, as we'll see.

3. **"We must hold to our particular and peculiar beliefs tenaciously, not pretending all religions are the same."** Genuine respect for other faiths does not pretend we agree on everything. We mustn't ignore the unique core of our own faith or dilute the distinctive convictions of other religions, just for the sake of a bland pseudo-unity. Tolerance is expressed in genuine openness that shares who we really are. If we all water down our convictions to a vague

## HOW MIGHT WE IMAGINE A GOD BIG ENOUGH FOR EVERYONE—MORE THAN A CHRISTIAN—WHILE HOLDING HIGH THE UNIQUE TRUTH CLAIMS OF JESUS CHRIST? CAN WE PROCLAIM CHRIST'S EXCLUSIVE LORDSHIP ALONGSIDE HIS INCLUSIVE LOVE?

proclaim Christ's exclusive Lordship alongside his inclusive love? I propose a generous "Christ alone, but not Christians alone" faith that stays tethered to our own convictions.

In 1989, Tutu addressed other faith-leaders in Birmingham, England. He suggested five points on how *God is more than a Christian*:

1. **"Accidents of birth and geography determine to a very large extent to what faith you belong."** That is, if you are born in Italy, you will likely identify as Christian. If

than there." So humility is in order, and empathy for those whose faith was born elsewhere.

2. **"Acknowledge others for who they are in all their integrity, including their conscientiously held beliefs."** Tutu exhorts us to welcome others as they are, respect them for who they are, and "walk reverently on what is their holy ground" (metaphorically and literally).

We should respect what is sacred for them, as we would want them to honor our most precious beliefs. The golden

## I PROPOSE A GENEROUS "CHRIST ALONE, BUT NOT CHRISTIANS ALONE" FAITH THAT STAYS TETHERED TO OUR OWN CONVICTIONS.

common ground, we are either being dishonest or we've actually lost our faith. If so, fine, but don't expect that of others.

4. **"We should in humility and joyfulness acknowledge that the supernatural and divine reality we all worship transcends all our categories and imaginations."** Without



surrendering the unique truth claims of Christianity (that Jesus Christ alone is God incarnate), we also acknowledge that our faith, like others, seeks to worship the transcendent God, who is beyond anyone's comprehension—big enough to love all of us and welcome our seeking, even when it's wildly misinformed and poorly directed.

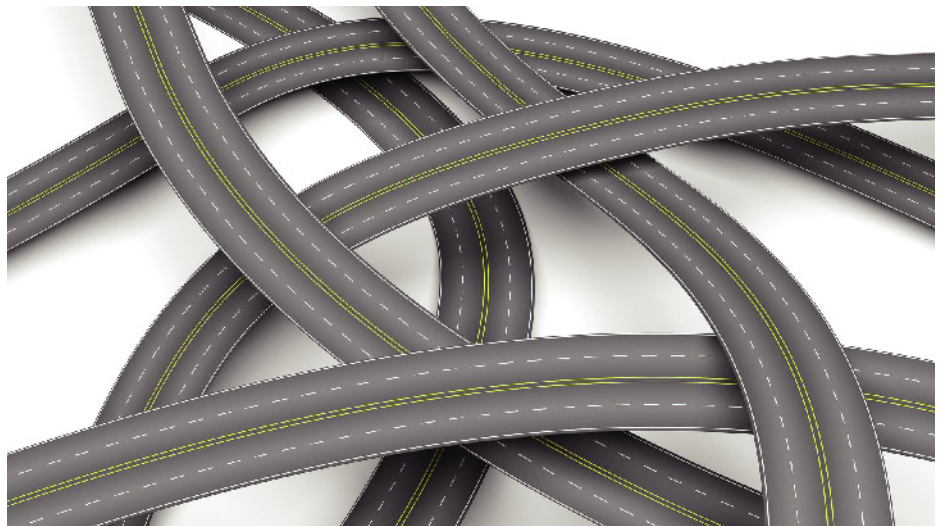
Jesus, speaking to the Samaritan woman, saw beyond the religious monopolies of particular temple establishments:

"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and *has now come* when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth" (John 4:21-24).

True worshipers might even call God by the wrong name, believe he has too many arms, or that he's a white male! Whether our prayers are cries of desperation or hymns of adoration, the voices of God's many children reach God's attentive ears and stir his parental care.

Jesus promised, "Those who seek will find." Can we at least believe God will find those who seek him (and already has)? Riffing off John 1:9, Tutu says,

"Surely we can rejoice that



**"DOES THAT MEAN THAT ALL PATHS LEAD TO GOD?" JESUS REPLIES, "MACK, MOST PATHS DON'T LEAD ANYWHERE, BUT I WILL GO DOWN ANY PATH TO FIND YOU." — FROM *THE SHACK*, BY WILLIAM PAUL YOUNG**

the eternal Word, the Logos of God, enlightens everyone—not just Christians, but everyone who comes into the world; that what we call the Spirit of God is not just a Christian preserve, for the Spirit of God existed long before there were Christians..."

5. "We have enough that conspires to separate us; let us celebrate that which unites us..." Tutu notes that "in the classics of various religions in matters of prayer, meditation, and mysticism, we find substantial convergence, and that is something to rejoice at." In fact, the resemblance across the mystical and monastic traditions of different faiths is uncanny—as if "those who seek shall find" were true on a universal scale! Who knew?

Many faiths (when healthy) also hold in common the centrality of love and compassion. Apparently, "*love is more than Christian*" too.

1 John 4:7 is clear: "*Everyone who loves* has been born of God and knows God." John didn't say, "any Christians who love," for like God, love is far grander than my spiritual tribe.

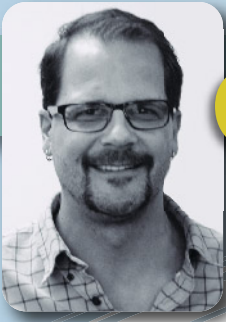
### ***The Shack*—Do All Paths Lead to God?**

Is God more than a Christian? We conclude with a scene from the bestseller, *The Shack*, by William Paul Young.

"*The Carpenter*" (Jesus) is speaking in very inclusive terms, even about other faiths. The protagonist, Mack asks, "Does that mean that all paths lead to God?" Jesus replies, "Mack, most paths don't lead anywhere, but I will go down any path to find you."

Said another way, when the Good Shepherd descended into our ditch, that doesn't mean our ditch led to him. But he can hear the sound of bleating anywhere. He seeks and saves the lost sheep, because they are his to begin with. □



CWR<sub>m</sub>

BRAD JERSAK

## When Poetry Devolves Into Doctrine

**N**erd alert: I'm one of those rare birds who enjoys curling up by the fireplace with a dusty theology textbook (with everlasting footnotes, which I savor). I'm also very awkward when it comes to poetry. I know this is a problem. I'm a big fan of doctrine of a *certain type* because *sound* doctrine should not be a religious straightjacket into which we cram God. Rather, when I say "doctrine," I think, "the truth-claims of Jesus Christ." What Jesus said about himself and showed us about his Father is perfect theology—do we really want to leave that behind? Would discarding Jesus' truth-claims make us less "religious"?

And what might take its place? I suspect untethered experience and self-made religion would quickly join forces to occupy the vacuum. If we define *healthy* doctrine as the truth-claims of Jesus, we won't become religious—such "doctrine" actually serves to guard us from religion!

Although I'm no poet, I do know poetry when I see it. I know poetry speaks heart to heart in beautiful word pictures and soulful metaphors. I wish I were more poetic. I wish *doctrine* were more poetic. Sadly, too many Bible interpreters don't know poetry when they see it and ruin inspired verse by reading it literally and building doctrinal phonebooks out of it.

This practice is disastrous. Why? First, reams of Scripture are poetic and must be interpreted poetically. Biblical poetry includes rhymes and rhythms, praises and dirges, parallelism and acrostics, metaphors and symbols...from the creation story (Genesis 1-2) to the flight from Egypt (Exodus 15), most of Job and all the Psalms. But also nearly all of the prophetic books: from Isaiah to Malachi. To literalize biblical poetry into wooden doctrinal statements deprives it of its beauty and grossly misinterprets Scripture.

**Even worse: ignoring the poetic element leads to misrepresenting God!** If we read a poetic metaphor about God literally, bingo: we've created an idol...always something smaller and probably meaner than God!

The Old Testament frequently says God repents, either of something he has done—including creating humans (Genesis 6:6-7)—or relents, which is repenting of something he was going to do (Jonah 3:9-10). Scripture says God "changed his mind"—happily, almost always in favor of showing mercy. But does God ever *actually* repent, relent or change his mind?

Just as many passages, quoting God himself, flatly deny this: "I the Lord *do not change*; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed" (Malachi 3:6). "Jesus Christ is *the same* yesterday, today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8), as is "the Father of the heavenly lights, who *does not change* like shifting shadows (James 1:17).

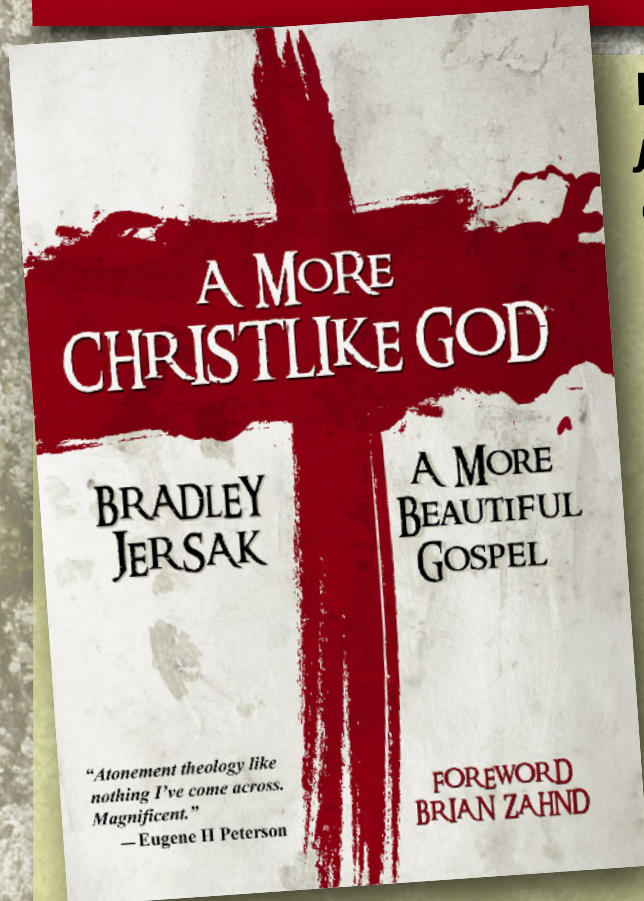
These sound like blatant contradictions, but ancient interpreters said, *No*. The former are examples of poetic speech describing human experience: "We deserved and expected God's judgment, but we received grace and mercy instead. God must have *changed his mind*." The latter are truth claims (doctrines) about God's nature. "God *never* changes and he is *always* merciful. So we receive mercy."

Tragically, the *poetry of wrath* often devolves into a *doctrine of wrath*. As Scripture unfolds, *wrath* is understood as a metaphor describing the consequences of my own sin. I dig a pit; I fall in it (Psalm 7:14-16). **So *wrath* actually describes the wages of sin (Romans 3:23), *not* the nature or character of God.** God is never literally vengeful or violent. God is love. But when we reject love and choose self-will, the self-destructive results are called *wrath*.

Devolving the poetry of wrath into a doctrine about God reduces him to the likes of pagan gods, such as Molech and Zeus. So much so that St. Cassian called it "blasphemy and idolatry." No, our God is love—always has been, always will be. While sin is ugly, and its consequences constitute a sort of *wrath*—our God is none other than everlasting Love. The beautiful gospel is about the God who came in person to save us from *wrath*—not from God—to overcome the devastation of sin and the curse of death. □



# A MORE CHRISTLIKE GOD



**What is God like? A punishing judge? A doting grandfather? A deadbeat dad? A vengeful warrior?**

'Believers' and atheists alike typically carry toxic images of God in their own hearts and minds. The Christian gospel has repeatedly lapsed into a vision of God where the wrathful King must be appeased by his victim Son. How do such 'good cop/bad cop' distortions of the divine arise and come to dominate churches and cultures? Whether our notions of 'god' are personal projections or inherited traditions, author and theologian Brad Jersak proposes a radical reassessment, arguing for *A More Christlike God: A More Beautiful Gospel*.

## **Endorsements:**

Brad Jersak has spent his life among Evangelicals as a pastor, evangelist and writer. Mostly he has immersed himself in the company of the poor, the addicted, the outsiders. He is determined to recover the essence of

the "beautiful" gospel for all of us. The conspicuous mark that characterizes every page of this winsome witness is that this is a "lived theology."

— **EUGENE H. PETERSON**, Author of *The Message Bible*

With theological integrity and open-hearted compassion, Brad Jersak creates a beautiful space for Jesus to challenge our views of God. A breath of clean and clarifying air.

— **WILLIAM PAUL YOUNG**, Author of *The Shack*

Brad Jersak has given us a gift of greatest value: a fresh vision of God, Christ, the cross, Scripture ... and ourselves. He demonstrates the rare ability to take deep theological issues and make them understandable to everyone. He represents a new generation of Christian theologians whose work, I believe, is both desperately needed and wonderfully liberating.

— **BRIAN D. McLAREN**, Author of *We Make the Road by Walking*

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# He's There



*For You and With You*

G R E G   A L B R E C H T

“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.” *To Kill a Mockingbird*

**J**ob’s friends sat on the ground with him as Job grieved the tragic and sudden death of all his children while he stoically endured his own health crisis consisting of “painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head” (Job 2:7). Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar said nothing to Job for seven

days and nights because they saw “how great his suffering was” (Job 2:13). They offered a comforting presence, but then, when they finally spoke, they provided a textbook example of failing to climb into the skin of someone who is suffering pain and heartache.

Job needed encouragement, but all he received was condemnation. Assuming God was punishing Job, Job’s friends jumped to a religious conclusion (of course neither you nor I have ever done such a thing!) and on that basis critiqued and judged Job. Perhaps it was Job who first coined the phrase “with friends like these, who needs enemies?”

When contemporary Jews read this story about Job and

his friends, they no doubt think of their custom of grieving death, known as *sitting shiva*. *Shiva* is the Hebrew word for seven, and thus this Jewish custom involves a period of one week when family gathers around a close family member when grieving the death of a loved one.

The custom is called *sitting shiva* because those who mourn with the person who has suffered a loss sit on low stools or even on the floor, and in so doing 1) they symbolically depict the emotional reality of being brought low by grief and 2) they portray their connection with the one who is grieving. *Sitting shiva* is one example of climbing inside the skin of

...AND THEY SHALL CALL  
HIM EMMANUEL, WHICH  
BEING INTERPRETED IS,  
GOD WITH US.

—MATTHEW 1:23, KJV



another and walking around, in an attempt to connect and to reach out with love and support.

The protocol involved in *sitting shiva* with those who are grieving is to remain silent unless the person who is suffering deep pain and loss begins a conversation, and thereby indicates that they want to talk.

Such a protocol helps to safeguard against offensive, silly and even deeply painful things from being said when one is searching for “the right thing” to say.

Contemporary rabbis explain that *sitting shiva* is not for the dead; it’s for the living.

In our 21st century North American culture we often hear

someone expressing gratitude for a friend/spouse/sibling who is “always there” for them. During our own dark and difficult times, a friend or family member who is “always there” is willing to spend time with us on the phone, to meet us and share a cup of coffee and to just be with us, even *if there are no words*. Someone who is “always there” identifies with us enough to be with us and they are often said to have *empathy*.

### Sympathy and Empathy

The classic definition of *sympathy* is similar to *empathy* in the sense that it also describes the connection between people when both have similar feelings and experiences. Sometimes the two words are used as synonyms, and while there are aspects of *empathy* and *sympathy* that are synonymous, there are also critical differences in the definitions of these two words as we use them today.

*Empathy is the emotional reality that happens when one*

*about and acknowledging the reality experienced by another.*

*Sympathy* involves feeling badly about suffering experienced by another.

*Empathy* involves identifying with the feelings and experiences of another in such a way that one is infused by, permeated with and steeped in similar feelings, emotions and experiences of the person who is suffering.

*Empathy* is all about a choice to feel the pain of another, rather than simply knowing about/acknowledging that pain.

*Sympathy and empathy* can be progressive stages, with *sympathy* as the first emotional response one has before one might progress to empathy. Sadly, many people in our me-first world of this 21st century seem to seldom feel or express *sympathy*, but even when *sympathy* is expressed and experienced, it is even more rare that it matures into *empathy*.

*Sympathy* feels FOR another whereas *empathy* feels WITH another.

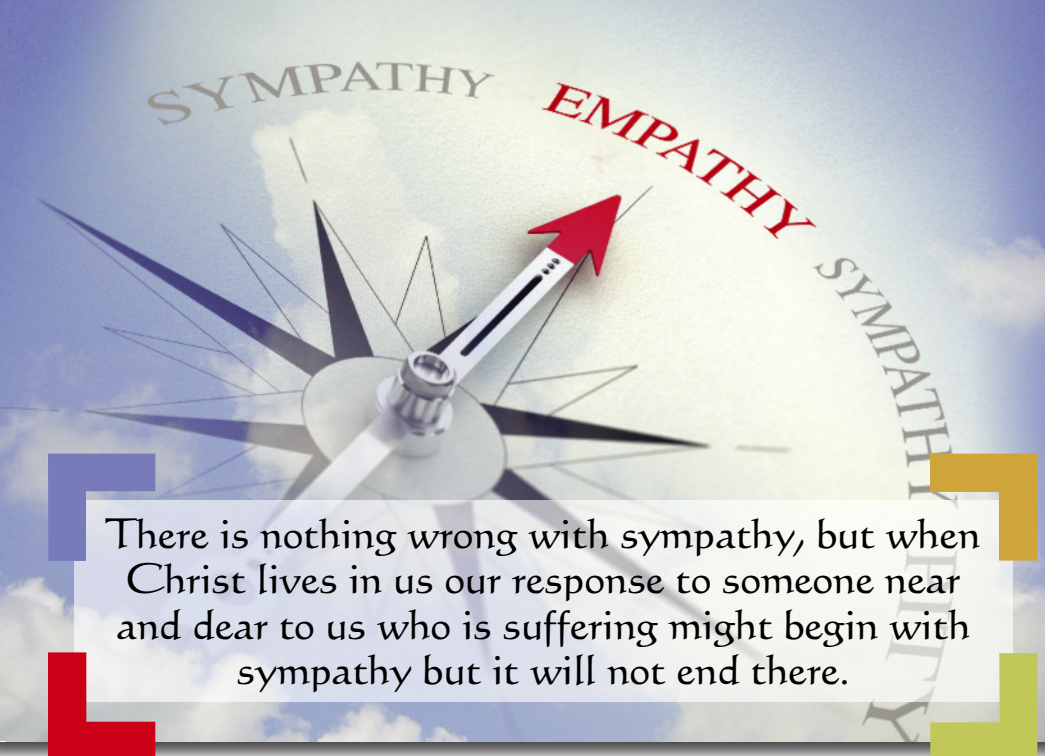
*Sympathy* alone can lead to actions that are not productive or helpful—for example, we might feel sympathetic for a

Empathy is the emotional reality that happens when one imports the feelings, emotions and experiences of another into one’s own life.

*imports the feelings, emotions and experiences of another into one’s own life. When a person has empathy they either have experienced or express and communicate a desire to enter into, in some way, the suffering or pain of another.*

*Sympathy* involves knowing

person who is panhandling. Feeling badly FOR the person and perhaps feeling guilty that you are not experiencing the hard times he or she is, you give a panhandler some money which they may promptly use to feed their alcohol or drug addiction.



*Expressing sympathy alone can enable one to encounter suffering, and then move on with life unencumbered by the difficult situation that presents itself.*

*Empathy, on the other hand, is no quick or easy transaction—among other things, empathy is not fully transmitted via monetary means. Empathy normally means moving out of a “comfort zone.” When we express, communicate and impart empathy, the physical and/or emotional-spiritual distance between us and the person with whom we empathize is*

There is nothing wrong with sympathy, but when Christ lives in us our response to someone near and dear to us who is suffering might begin with sympathy but it will not end there.

In such a situation, *sympathy* also allows us to escape from an uncomfortable situation. Because it is uncomfortable to be in the presence of need and pain, our sympathetic emotions make us easier prey for beggars to get what they want—which in the case of an addict is another hit or high to help them, in turn, escape their own pain.

A beggar who wants to escape his/her pain might be playing/preying upon another, manipulating them into sympathizing with what might be or seem to be dire straits. However, the person who might express *sympathy* toward a beggar, in the form of a monetary gift, may actually be motivated to do so by their own guilt more than their desire to help someone in need.

*Sympathetic reactions* to beggars and monetary transactions that follow are usually quick and anonymous. In many North American urban settings, a *sympathetic transaction* might take place as the beggar stands on a traffic

island between several lanes of cars going in opposite directions. The driver of a car waiting for the light to turn green may extend a dollar bill out the window, sympathetically helping the person who seems to be in need. In such a case *sympathy* is convenient for the driver of the car—no time is necessary to get to know the person who appears to be in need or pain—

just a dollar or two held out a car window. Then, in a few seconds, often after a quick “God bless you” on the part of the recipient, the *sympathetic transaction* is completed.

A *sympathetic transaction* involves a payback—an immediate release of pressure or obligation—the sympathetic act makes the person imparting help in such a way feel better.

narrowed. We sit down and spend time with the person in need. We feel WITH them rather than simply feeling FOR them.

Walt Whitman described *empathy*: “I do not ask the wounded person how he feels; I become the wounded person.”

Through his business interests in South Africa, Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902) became

Expressing sympathy alone can enable one to encounter suffering, and then move on with life unencumbered by the difficult situation that presents itself.

one of the richest men in the world (the former Rhodesia was named after him). Rhodes believed in proper etiquette and was always appropriately dressed for the occasion. The story is told of a young man who had been invited for a formal dinner party at Rhodes’ home. The young man neglected to allow for enough time in his travel plans and

A person who empathizes WITH you vicariously enters into your sufferings and pain with you...

arrived in town only a few minutes before the dinner was scheduled to begin. He had no time to change from his casual, wrinkled travel clothing.

As a butler ushered him into the opulent mansion, the young man became acutely aware that his fears had come to pass—compared to everyone else, he looked like he was dressed like one of the gardeners of the fabulous estate. All the guests were attired in formal wear, while the young man was still wearing his wrinkled suit in which he had slept and traveled.

After what seemed like a long time, Cecil Rhodes walked down his grand staircase, and his guests were amazed to see him wearing a shabby and wrinkled old suit. The young man later learned that Rhodes had been attired in formal evening wear, and was at the far end of the room when he saw the embarrassing predicament of his young guest. Rhodes had quietly excused himself and changed his clothing to make his under-dressed guest feel comfortable, at ease and welcome.

Rhodes did not simply feel FOR the acute embarrassment his young guest felt—he determined to feel WITH him, and in so doing evidenced the heart and soul of Jesus, who came to be one of us, exactly like us, inside the same skin, wearing the same clothing, breathing the same air, eating the same food, experiencing the same pains and heartaches.

Jesus came as one of us to be WITH us.

### Empathy and Sympathy in a Health Crisis

To further illustrate the differences between feeling WITH (*sympathy*) and feeling FOR (*empathy*), let's assume you are living with a serious, perhaps terminal health issue. One of your friends or family members might sympathize with you in that they acknowledge your condition. They may be able to recite a dictionary like-definition of your medical condition. They may even take the time to gain more knowledge so that they can accurately describe your pain and suffering. Because they know about and recognize the severity of your situation they comfort and encourage you in a variety of ways. They feel FOR you.

*Sympathy* may also mean that friends/family members actively respond to you. They may send flowers, cards and even make meals and deliver them. A sympathetic person

“I do not ask the wounded person how he feels; I become the wounded person.”

— *Empathy* described by Walt Whitman

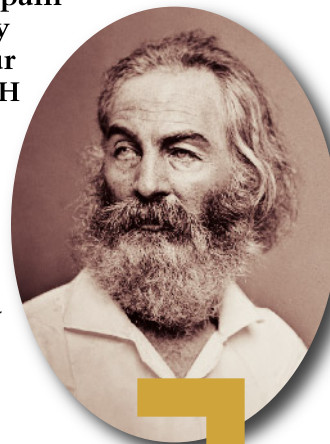
may call you on the phone. But someone's identification and connection to you ends with *sympathy* if they merely feel FOR you but they won't “sit with you” for hours and hours on end. It is neither easy nor quick for someone to

“climb inside another person's skin and walk around.”

However, when a friend or family member not only sympathizes, when they not only feel FOR you but when they feel WITH you, their feelings spring from a deeper spiritual place, and as a result they empathize with you. When someone empathizes they personally relate WITH you perhaps because they or someone close to them has experienced and endured the same thing you have.

A person who empathizes WITH you not only sympathizes FOR you because they know all about the condition facing you, they will consciously make the choice to move closer to you, to be present WITH you. **A person who empathizes WITH you vicariously enters into your sufferings and pain with you—they experience your sufferings WITH you.**

My wife, Karen, has had three horrific encounters with cancer. She had surgery on one side of



her neck for head and neck cancer in 2002, and then again in 2010 another far more complicated surgery on the other side of her neck for the same kind of cancer. Following the second surgery Karen endured, five days a week for a

period of six and one half weeks, the hell of having radiation oncologists incinerate and scorch her head, neck, throat and

necessary, another kind of radiation (cyber-knife) after that.

We had hoped that the cancer was gone. We had hoped that we would never

her, feeling WITH her. In most of those cases the people who were able to impart *empathy* had either personally experienced some similar terminal situation, or they had endured something similar with a close family member or friend. It seemed that they were able to give *empathy* because they had the abilities and resources to do so. Many of them knew that the most desperately needed support at such a time isn't just promising to say a prayer or light a candle, send flowers or cards or deliver meals—although those expressions are wonderful and helpful.

Many of those who empathized knew that it's all about "being there"—feeling WITH in addition to feeling FOR. *Empathy* is all about the choice of living WITH the life situation of another, the willingness to join oneself to another to be WITH them.

### Counter-Productive Non-Empathetic Words

There were times during Karen's ordeals with cancer when she wanted to talk, and then there were times when she wanted people, including myself, to just be WITH her. There were times when *there were no words*—there were times when she was all talked out—there were times that nothing more could be said,



"The Power of Empathy"—an online video from the Royal Society for the Arts and Brené Brown

Author and professor Brené Brown explains the difference between *sympathy* and *empathy*.

mouth. She wanted to quit many times during this ordeal, but somehow, by God's grace, she continued the course of treatment.

A little less than four years later, in January 2014, a regular scan that is a part of her ongoing surveillance program revealed a lesion on Karen's lung—and the follow up biopsy revealed that it was a malignant carcinoma. It was the same exact kind of cancer she had endured previously. The cancer we had hoped had been completely annihilated by the hell of radiation had somehow survived and moved (metastasized) to another part of her body.

We went back to the drawing boards. A board of doctors examined her tests and her history and recommended 12 weeks of chemotherapy and, if

again have to deal with this particular problem—but the cancer was back. So once again, we climbed into the boxing ring for round three—and once again the treatment protocol Karen received knocked her down, but she got up time after time. Bloodied and beaten and finally bald, she endured the ravages of chemotherapy.

In the presence of pain and grief, some people feel a religious compulsion to discuss and explain what they believe to be God's will.

During all three of these rounds we had incredible support. We experienced many examples of what Karen felt as *empathy*—people who "sat" with

and there were times when anything at all that could be said would be inconsequential, perhaps trivial and even counter-productive. There were times

when *sitting shiva* was the best.

Well-meaning individuals, driven by the desire to say something that would somehow fix or improve Karen's health or emotional well being would suggest alternative treatments that they believed to be superior to the medical treatment we had chosen.

In so doing, without realizing they were doing so, they were judging the decision and course of action we had taken, essentially saying we could have made a better and wiser choice. In some cases, such advice seemed to imply that had we correctly chosen this course of treatment we were now hearing about, Karen would not have been experiencing the hell she was.

Some well-intentioned people, searching for the "right" things to say often said something like "I know how you feel." But those can be heard as empty words uttered by someone who really has no idea at all! Ironically, those who really did seem to know something of how Karen felt explained that they had a past encounter with a situation *something like* the one she was enduring, and they said things like "as a result, I have a little bit of an idea about how you must be feeling."

Of course, Karen and I have learned over many years to translate the intent of a person who wants to say they care but chooses inadequate ways and words to do so.

***In the presence of pain and grief, some people feel a religious compulsion to discuss and explain what they believe to be God's will.*** People may announce that a specific event is or was God's will—but what may be intended as an

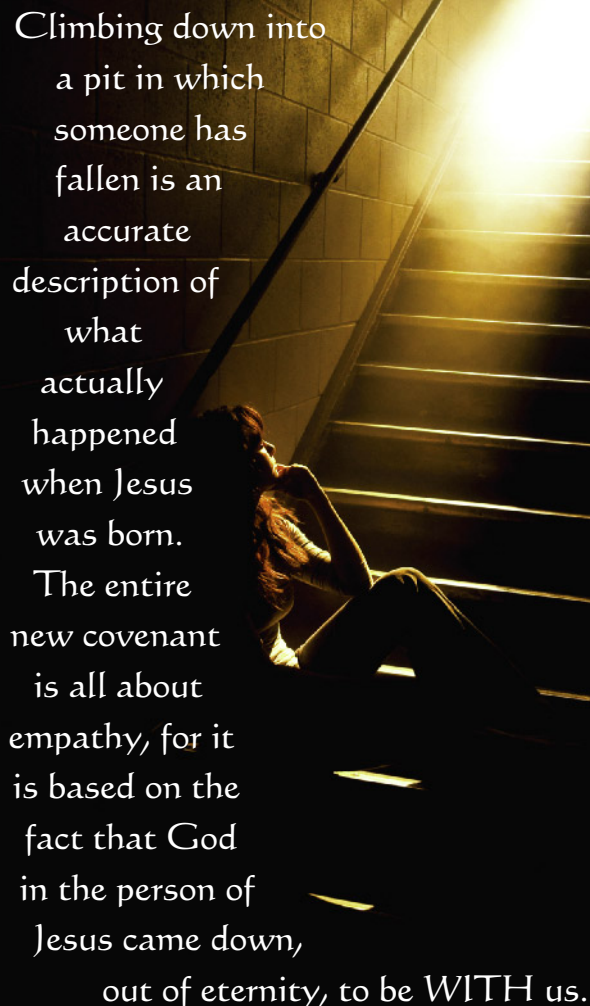
enlightened announcement may not only be grossly incorrect, but can strike those who are suffering as disingenuous and arrogant.

Sometimes, in the presence of pain and heartache, a person might attempt to comfort another by reminding them that things could be worse. In such cases, the "assurance" might begin with the phrase "at least"—"*at least* you have some friends who care for you—when I had an operation no one even visited me"

[said at the bedside of a person recovering from a surgery for cancer]. Sometimes a person may determine that the person who is suffering needs to quit feeling sorry for themselves and will thus assure the person in pain that "We all have our problems, you know."

### **Climbing Down Into the Pit**

The Royal Society for the Arts produced a video animation (available online) based on a lecture given by author and professor Brené Brown during which she explained the difference between *sympathy* and *empathy*. The animation depicts a fox falling to the bottom of a deep pit. The bear is a friend of



Climbing down into a pit in which someone has fallen is an accurate description of what actually happened when Jesus was born. The entire new covenant is all about empathy, for it is based on the fact that God in the person of Jesus came down, out of eternity, to be WITH us.

the fox, and knowing his friend is in pain, in a dark and lonely place friend, the bear climbs down into the pit with him and says, "I know what it's like down here. You are not alone."

The fox has another friend, a gazelle. The gazelle proves to be more like an acquaintance—we might call the gazelle a "fair weather" friend. The gazelle walks by and hears sounds from the bottom of the pit, so she leans over and looks down from the top of the pit, from the place where the fox fell, and observes her "friend" the fox suffering. "Ooh, that looks bad," the gazelle says. "I've got a sandwich, do you want me to send it down to you?"



There was a distance between God and humanity in the old covenant—in fact the distance was prescribed and enforced. But God came near and he sat down WITH us in the new covenant.



encounter a physical or spiritual

God came near and he sat down WITH us in the new covenant.

One of the most loved of all the parables of Jesus expresses the *empathy* of the Good Samaritan who stopped what he was doing to be WITH the person who had been left for dead (Luke 10:30-37). On the other hand, religious professionals that the original readers and listeners of this parable would have expected to render significant service failed to make the effort. Two religious leaders saw the plight

brother or sister who is destitute, in immediate need of food and warm clothing, and responds to such a person by saying “go in peace, keep warm and well fed.”

This term “go in peace” used by James is a terminal response—an end of the encounter is signaled by the person who can help but does not. Today, we might say something like “good luck”—or, far more common in a Christian setting and culture, someone might say to a person who is suffering “I’ll pray for you.”

There is nothing wrong with

Professor Brown explains:

- An expression of *empathy* creates connection, whereas an expression of *sympathy* can often create and produce a lack of connectivity.

- *Empathy* comes from someone who is willing to fully embrace and embody the perception of another person. *Empathy* is climbing down the ladder into the pit.

- *Empathy* resists the desire to determine why another person is in a predicament. *Empathy* resists the seductive temptation of judgment and instead embraces and shares in the suffering.

Climbing down into a pit in which someone has fallen is an accurate description of what actually happened when Jesus was born. The entire new covenant is all about *empathy*, for it is based on the fact that God in the person of Jesus came down, out of eternity, to be WITH us. There was a distance between God and humanity in the old covenant—in fact the distance was prescribed and enforced. But

There is nothing wrong with assuring someone that we will pray for them...but sometimes people say “I’ll pray for you” and then they seldom, if ever, do so.

of the poor soul, but while they may have had *sympathy*, they passed by on the other side of the road, failing to express *empathy*.

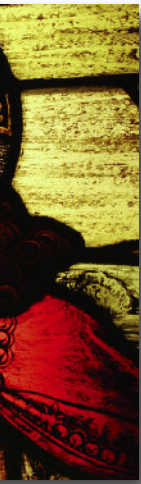
### I’ll Pray for You

In the book of James, 2:15-16, James notes how empty and trivial it is when someone might

assuring someone that we will pray for them—of course, if we do say we will pray for someone we really should follow up and actually pray for them, shouldn’t we?

But sometimes people say “I’ll pray for you” and then they seldom, if ever do so—they say “I’ll pray for you and you’ll be





in my thoughts” because they feel that’s the right thing to do and say to someone who is suffering.

And sometimes, let’s be honest, saying “I’ll pray for you” enables us to have a way of graciously leaving an uncomfortable situation without further identifying with the suffering and pain. We might say that telling another person we will pray for them is *sympathy*.

**There is nothing wrong with *sympathy*, but when Christ lives in us our response to someone near and dear to us who is suffering might begin with *sympathy* but it will not end there.**

*Sympathy* alone doesn’t represent much of an imposition on our time and resources.

*Sympathy* is normally the first step before *empathy*. We say that we will pray for someone and then we do. And then we go beyond prayer, we identify with the individual—we connect with them—we feel WITH them.

*Empathy* doesn’t necessarily mean that we do something physical, for in many cases the person who has fallen into the pit lives thousands of miles away from us (or they may live only a few miles away, but we are bedridden ourselves). But this next step of *empathy* can take place even though one is not physically present.

**Christ-centered *empathy*** means that our momentary pleasures will likely be inconvenienced.

**Christ-centered *empathy*** means that we will make the difficult choice of shouldering

## EMPATHY IS...

- *Empathy* is not someone who has it all together fixing someone who is falling apart.
- *Empathy* is more than words—*empathy* is presence.
- *Empathy* speaks with the eyes and adopts a posture that connects with another.
- *Empathy* is the decision to project into the pain of another rather than merely observing it from a distance.
- *Empathy* is listening with the heart rather than evaluating with the mind.
- *Empathy* is more about being with another in silence than it is about fixing another with words.
- *Empathy* is the conscious choice of sitting with another and embracing their pain with them—*empathy* does not involve discovering reasons for the pain or helping to take it away.
- *Empathy* is **your pain in my heart**.

*Those who hunger for empathy care little or not at all about how much someone knows about their dilemma, rather they desire to know how much another cares for them.*—Adapted from a similar observation by Theodore Roosevelt

the load of another, bearing their pain WITH them rather than simply assuring them we will pray FOR them, and then returning to our daily activities.

**Christ-centered *empathy*** means that even while we normally physically leave the scene of suffering, we don’t leave it emotionally.

**Christ-centered *empathy*** is a choice—a choice to consciously identify WITH suffering and feel the pain of another.

### Christmas and Empathy

The celebration of Christmas is, at its heart, a celebration of the birth of God in the flesh, when Jesus came to identify WITH us—to sit WITH us—to be one of us. **Jesus did not come merely to feel FOR us, he came to feel WITH us.**

*Empathy* is the core of who Jesus was (and is). When God, in the person of Jesus, became

a human, one of his own creation, he identified and embodied who we are.

The celebration of the birth of Jesus is our joy that Jesus did not conveniently only feel FOR us, he felt (and continues to feel) WITH us. He came near—he didn’t watch pain from a distance, but embraced it, he climbed down into our pit, and of course ultimately he accepted all of our pain and suffering on his cross.

The grace of God is a divine gift, like a bridge that enables us to cross over from *sympathy* alone or like a ladder that enables us to climb down, fully embodying and embracing Christ-centered *empathy*.

*Empathy* describes the actions of God in his incarnation—who, in the person of Jesus, came to sit with us and to be Emmanuel, God WITH us—to intimately experience what it is like to be a human being. □

# Why I Still Believe

**S**ome of my best friends (and even a few relatives) are atheists. No, really. My experience with people who choose *not* to believe in a supreme being doesn't fit the conventional

atheists/agnostics than I do around some Christians. Oh-oh. You're wondering about me. But don't worry. I am not now, nor have I ever been, an atheist or even an agnostic.

But wait—there's more. I've read many books by popular atheist apologists such as Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins

desperate grasping at straws—as if the authors are trying to overcome their own uncertainties and doubts.

I am reasonably sure that I exist. Beyond that, all I have is my five senses, and I can't be a hundred percent sure that they are true and accurate—much less second or third-hand information from books, word-of-mouth and the media. I simply don't have enough information to conclusively prove something as ineffable as God's existence. But that doesn't mean I don't believe in him. **My belief in God does not rest on propositional logic.**

God, of course, fully understands why some choose not to believe in him, and I suspect he's not intimidated by that. He's well aware that more than a few of my atheist and

**G**od, of course, fully understands why some choose not to believe in him, and I suspect he's not intimidated by that.

agnostic friends have suffered tragedies, losses and disillusionments in life that have affected their faith. They conclude that God is not interested in them, their struggles in

**I've read many books by popular atheist apologists...I have learned much from them and discovered many new perspectives. My faith was not destroyed. If anything, it seemed to be strengthened and matured. They are not my enemies.**

Christian stereotype. Maybe I'm missing something, but most of my atheist friends have proven to be generous, ethical and principled. As far as I can tell, many enjoy good marriages and are successful in their professions. Many are clear, rational thinkers. Most of them seem to respect the fact that I believe what I do.

I realize that there are atheists who are stingy, unethical and whose personal lives are plagued by chaos and immorality. But to be fair, this describes a few professing Christians I have known. These issues are just part of the human condition. Frankly, at times, I feel more comfortable around some

and Daniel Dennett. I have learned much from them and discovered many new perspectives. My faith was not destroyed. If anything, it seemed to be strengthened and matured. They are not my enemies.

## **"Proving" God Exists?**

By now you may have figured out that the thoughts I want to share with you will not include logical proofs of God's existence. Years ago I thought I knew how to prove God's existence, but now I realize it's way beyond me. Hundreds of books attempt rational proofs for God. Sadly, the ones I've read are sprinkled with circular reasoning, faulty logic and

# in God

by Monte Wolverton

**I**n spite of the fact that this "job description" of the Supreme Being is not the one revealed by Jesus, this is the kind of god often touted by religious institutions.

particular or the sufferings of humanity in general. Sometimes their disillusionment is spawned by early and painful experience with legalistic, performance-based religion.

## Giving Up on God

My father, for example, was raised in a devout, institutionally Christian family. While my grandmother and aunt diligently attended a Methodist church, my grandfather enjoyed branching out and visiting local camp meetings. Writing in his journal at the age of 15, my father reported, "I gave myself to God." He also wrote that he might become a "preacher" someday (which actually happened, much later). But within the year, my grandfather would abandon his family. A couple of years later my aunt would tragically die in her early

twenties. After these painful events, my father would give up on God for over a decade.

My uncle Gary became an atheist for different reasons. As a young man he was offput by the mistreatment of workers by unscrupulous businessmen. This was in the first part of the 20th

**M**iddle-men minions of a religiously predictable and satisfying god are always eager to help us learn what buttons to push to get the best results from him...

Century, before the labor laws we take for granted today. From his vantage point, institutional Christianity was more concerned with preserving the status quo than bringing about reform. His experience led him to conclude (correctly) that "religion is the opiate of the masses"—a tool for the powerful to keep

the common people under their control.

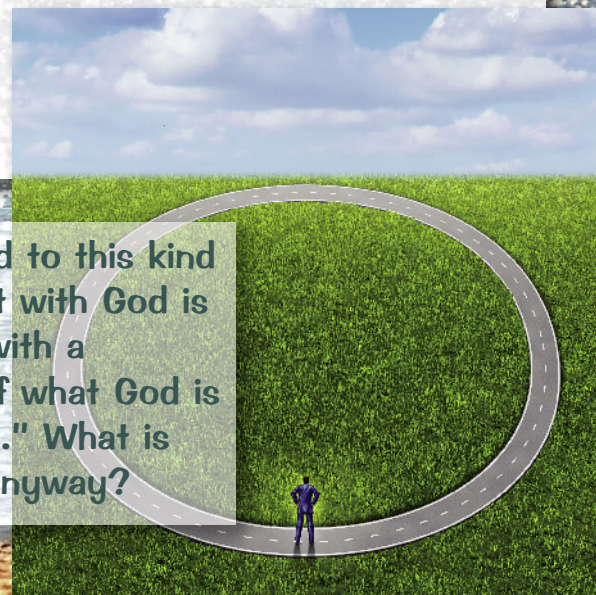
## God's Job Description

I wonder if the road to this kind of disillusionment with God is not paved with a misunderstanding of what God is "supposed to do." What is God's "job," anyway? We imagine it is his job to make things better for us—to make the world a better place for humans to live. We also might imagine it's his job to

create and enforce standards of behavior. When human beings are unjust and wicked, we expect God to punish them. When human beings are good and kind, we expect God to reward them.

Of course, if we haven't been good, we expect to be

**I**wonder if the road to this kind of disillusionment with God is not paved with a misunderstanding of what God is "supposed to do." What is God's "job," anyway?



able to do something to atone. Some kind of sacrifice, ritual or observance should do the trick. After that, we expect to be able to ask God for things, and we expect that he will deliver in a timely and appropriate manner.

In spite of the fact that this “job description” of the Supreme Being is *not* the one revealed by Jesus, this is the kind of god often touted

**But read your newspaper or click on your news app. The innocent are suffering, the guilty are not being brought to justice—and darn it, this god is not answering prayers to our satisfaction.**

by religious institutions. Middle-men minions of a religiously predictable and satisfying god are always eager to help us learn what buttons to push to get the best results from him (if you’re not getting good results it’s because you didn’t push the right buttons).

It’s complicated, you know. This god is a stickler for protocol. These things must be done at precisely the *right time*, in precisely the *right way* and with precisely *right attitude*. *Otherwise there’s hell to pay*. And it’s no one’s fault but your own.

**This god is a stickler for protocol... Come to think of it, this god operates pretty much the same as the gods of pagan religion.**

Come to think of it, this god operates pretty much the same as the gods of pagan religion. They grudgingly reward good, furiously punish evil, and perfunctorily answer a prayer

now and again in return for an occasional sacrifice.

### **Reality Doesn’t Fit the Stereotype**

But read your newspaper or click on your news app. The innocent are suffering, the guilty are not being brought to justice—and darn it, this god is not answering prayers to our satisfaction.

Apparently, he has failed miserably at making the world a better place. So when atheists disbelieve in this kind of god, frankly, they’re right. He doesn’t exist.

My faith in this kind of god began to unravel a few decades ago. In my case, the

unraveling did not occur because of painful personal tragedies, nor did it occur because of my outrage at oppression and injustice in the world. It occurred because I was forced to face catastrophic flaws in my belief system.

Thankfully, I was blessed to be in a position where supportive friends and family helped me work through the issues and catch sight of the real God, even as the unreal god faded away. Confidence in him would sustain me through later personal adversities.

So far I’ve offered reasons

**Apparently, he has failed miserably at making the world a better place. So when atheists disbelieve in this kind of god, frankly, they’re right. He doesn’t exist.**

not to believe in the god of human expectations and institutions. But what about reasons to believe in the authentic God of grace? Why do I still believe in this God? At the risk of opening myself to all sorts of criticism from people who are much more intelligent

than me, I'll give the only answer I've been able to come up with so far: Because I want to.

I know, it sounds way too simple. I guess it boils down to something Julius Caesar observed: "Men willingly believe what they wish." At some point, after all the discussion, argument and pondering about the nature of God, we have to decide what we wish to do, out of our own free will.

### **Belief in God**

1) Do we wish to believe in no God at all? 2) Do we wish to believe in an angry, vindictive, persnickety, quid-pro-quo god? Or 3) do we wish to believe in a caring, forgiving God who has a good purpose behind his creation, and behind this challenging world we live in—a God who walks with us through all our suffering as well as our joy? Please note that *the first two options are not supported by the New Testament, but the third one is.* If we choose it we may end up making radical changes in the way we approach our fellow human beings.

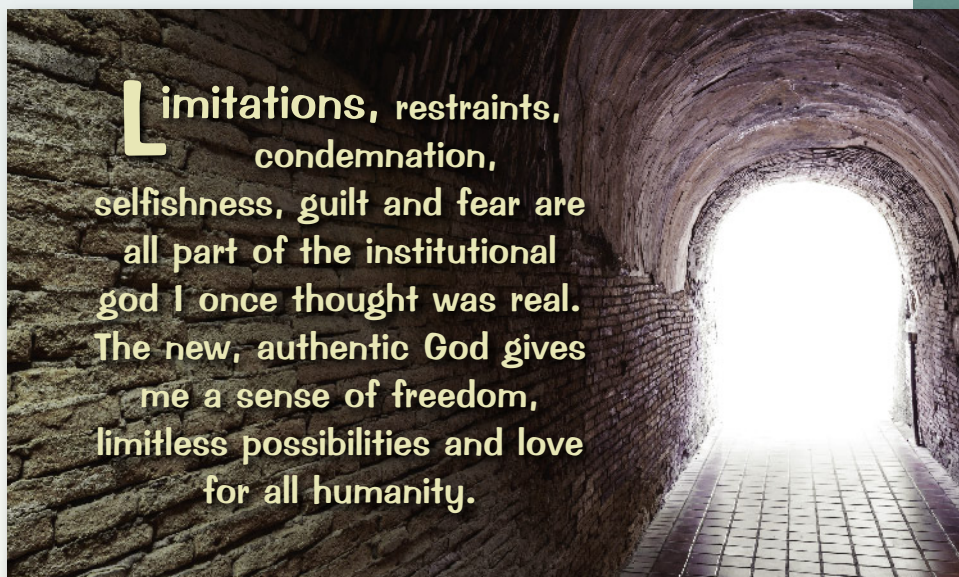
I'm not at all concerned with the eternal disposition of my atheist or agnostic friends, or for that matter, of anyone. My confidence

in the God of mercy and grace assures me that they will be well taken care of.

**After having believed in the religious god for a good portion of my life, I**

condemnation, selfishness, guilt and fear are all part of the institutional god I once thought was real.

The new (in my experience), authentic God



**wish to believe in the God of grace.** The one who revealed himself in the person of Jesus, whose "job" is not always to prevent us from suffering, but to experience our human suffering with us—and teach us about his nature in the process.

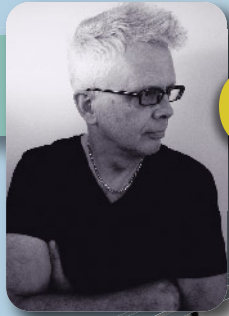
Such a belief is both a gift from God, and something we decide to do out of free will. Some of my atheist friends might think I'm limiting myself, but I don't look at it that way.

Limitations, restraints,

gives me a sense of freedom, limitless possibilities and love for all humanity. Who wouldn't want to believe in Him? □

*Award-winning author, syndicated editorial cartoonist and Associate Editor of Plain Truth and Christianity Without the Religion magazines, Monte Wolverton lives with his wife, Kaye, in southwest Washington, near Portland, Oregon—the least religious U.S. city according to the Public Religion Research Institute.*



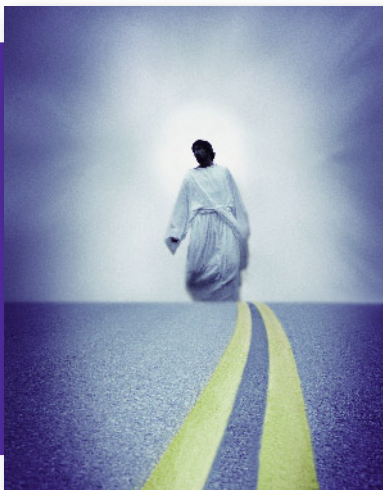


**CWR**<sub>m</sub>

DAVID HAYWARD

THE NAKED PASTOR

# Uphill From Here?



## COMING IN 2016! OUR PATH: THE JESUS WAY

THE *JESUS WAY*—WHAT JESUS IS ALL ABOUT



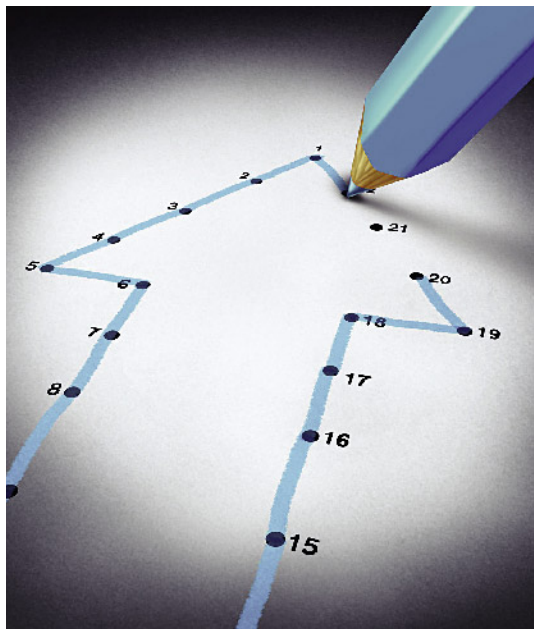
Looking at which Scripture passages Jesus emphasizes (remember, the Hebrew Bible is his only Bible!) shows he clearly understands how to connect the “three steps forward” dots that confirm the God he has met, knows, loves, and trusts. At the same time, Jesus ignores or openly contradicts the many “two steps backward” texts.

He never quotes the book of Numbers, for example, which is



by Richard Rohr

...Jesus doesn't quote from his own Scriptures when they are punitive, imperialistic, classist, or exclusionary. In fact, he teaches the exact opposite in every case.



Luke 4:18-19): “The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me. He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, and to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord.”

But Jesus plays fast and easy, as they say, and quotes selectively! He appears to have deliberately omitted the last line—” and the day of vengeance of our God” (Isaiah 61:2b)—because he does not believe in a God of vengeance at all.

We can only safely read Scripture—it is a dangerous book—if we are somehow sharing in the divine gaze of love. A life of prayer helps you develop a third eye that can read between the lines and find the golden thread which is moving toward inclusivity, mercy, and justice. I am sure that is what Paul means when he teaches that we must “know spiritual things in a spiritual way” (1 Corinthians 2:13).

Any “pre-existing condition” of a hardened heart, a predisposition to judgment, a fear of God, any need to win or prove yourself right will

Jesus knows how to connect the dots and find out where the text is truly heading... He knows there is a bigger arc to the story, one that always reveals a God who is compassionate, non-violent, and inclusive of outsiders.

rather ritualistic and legalistic. He never quotes Joshua or Judges, which are full of sanctified violence. Basically, Jesus doesn't quote from his own Scriptures when they are punitive, imperialistic (“My country and religion are the ‘only!’”), classist, or exclusionary.

In fact, he teaches the exact opposite in every case. This is hard to miss. And our job as Christians is to imitate Jesus!

Jesus does not mention the list of 28 “thou shall nots” in Leviticus 18 through 20, but chooses instead to echo the rare positive quote of Leviticus 19:18: “You must love your neighbor as yourself.” The longest single passage he quotes is from Isaiah 61 (in

Jesus knows how to connect the dots and find out where the text is truly heading, beyond the low-level consciousness of a particular moment, fear, or circumstance. He knows there is a bigger arc to the story, one that always reveals a God who is compassionate, non-violent, and inclusive of outsiders. (Such passages are already found in the Hebrew Bible!) He knew how to “thin slice” the text, to find the overall pattern based on small windows of insight.

He learned from Ezekiel, for example, that God's justice is restorative and not retributive.

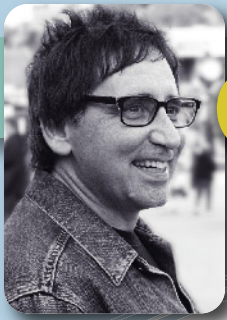
God *punishes* Israel by loving the Israelites even more! How did we miss that one?

corrupt and distort the most inspired and inspiring of Scriptures—just as they pollute every human conversation and relationship. Hateful people will find hateful verses to confirm their love of death. Loving people will find loving verses to call them into an even greater love of life. And both kinds of verses are in the Bible! □

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*Fr. Richard Rohr is an ecumenical teacher and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He is the author of many books, including Immortal Diamond: the Search for Our True Self.*





# CWRm

BRIAN ZAHND

AXIS OF LOVE

## God Is Just Like Jesus

**W**hat is God like? For those of us who believe that God is somehow at the foundation of existence, meaning, and self-understanding, it's an all-important question. So how shall we answer? Our options are endless. Human inquiry into the divine has produced a vast pantheon of gods—from Ares to Zeus.

Of course, the Christian will have an instinct to look to the Bible for the definition of God. I understand this instinct and in one sense it is correct; but it may not yield as clear an answer as we think. Even while speaking of the “God of the Bible” we can cobble together whatever vision of God we choose from its disparate images.

*Even if we restrict our inquiry into the nature of God to the Bible, we are likely to find just the kind of God that we want to find.*

If we want a God of peace, he's there. If we want a God of war, he's there. If we want a compassionate God, he's there. If we want a vindictive God, he's there. If we want a God demanding blood sacrifice, he's there. If we want a God abolishing blood sacrifice, he's there.

Sometimes the Bible is like a Rorschach test—it reveals more about the reader than the eternal I AM.

How are we to discover God as God is? As a Christian, pastor and preacher, I recommend that we look to Jesus for our answer to the question.

What if God is like Jesus? Jesus audaciously made this claim: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” What if that claim is true? Ah, that is the good news! God is like Jesus! This is Christianity.

As Christians we worship Christ, not the Bible. The Bible is the inspired witness to the true Word of God who is Jesus. *What the Bible does infallibly is take us on a journey that culminates with Christ—but it is Christ who fully reveals God.*

The revelation of God could not be contained in a book, but it could be

contained in a human life—the life of Jesus Christ.

### God is like Jesus.

Jesus is the Message of God. Jesus is what God has to say. Jesus is the full and faithful witness to how God is to be understood.

Jesus didn't come to save us from God (as some deplorable theories would lead us to believe)—Jesus came to reveal God as savior. Jesus didn't come to enable God to love us—Jesus came to reveal God as love.

Jesus didn't come to reconcile God to the world—Jesus came to reconcile the world to God. If Jesus' life is the definition of God, the defining moment of Jesus' life is the cross.

God is not like Caiaphas needing a scapegoat to take the blame. God is not like Pilate requiring an execution to satisfy justice. God is like Jesus, absorbing, forgiving and taking away the sins of the world.

A return to the revelation that God is revealed in Christ could not be more timely. Western Christianity is in a crisis. It can no longer retain credibility and be transmitted to succeeding generations on the authority of tradition alone. Critical questions are being asked and Christianity must gain its adherents based on its own merits.

Fortunately Christianity is up to the task. But not just any Christianity; the Christianity up to the task is the Christianity grounded in the confession that Jesus is the icon of the invisible God.

I am in full sympathy with those who find a “Sinners In the Hands of An Angry God” Christianity repellent and in need of being jettisoned. I too have pitched the theologies of an angry, retributive deity back into the dark sea of paganism.

The good news is that buried under centuries of misconstrued Christianity there is a beautiful gospel just waiting to be discovered.

Let the journey begin. □

Excerpted from the foreword to *A More Christlike God*, by Senior Editor Brad Jersak.

A person in a yellow shirt sits on a wooden dock by a lake at night, looking up at a starry sky. A large planet is visible on the right, and a bright starburst illuminates the scene. The sky is filled with stars and a purple nebula. The person is holding a small lantern.

# God Is Love... & LOVE NEVER ENDS

by Brian Zahnd

Why is there  
something instead  
of nothing?

The only answer I can  
imagine is Genesis 1:1: "In  
the beginning God..." But  
why would God say, "Let  
there be light" and

initiate Creation? The only answer I can imagine is God is love.

*What is light? God's love in the form of photons.*

*What is water? A liquid expression of God's love.*

*What is a mountain? God's love in granite, so much older than human sorrow.*

*What is a tree? God's love growing up from the ground.*

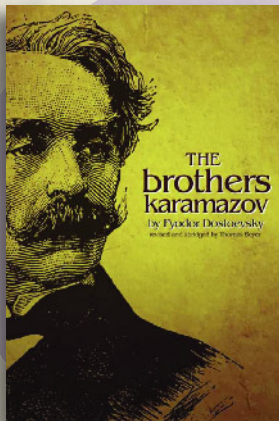
*What is a bull moose? God's love sporting spectacular antlers.*

*What is a whale? Fifty tons of God's love swimming in the ocean.*

As we learn to see Creation as goodness flowing from God's own love—we begin to see the sacredness of all things. As Dylan and Dostoevsky say, *in every grain of sand.*

All of creation is a gift—a gift flowing from the self-giving love of God.

Why is there light and oceans and trees and moose and whales and every grain of sand? Because God is love—love seeking expression in self-giving creativity. Unless we understand this we'll



misunderstand everything and misspend our lives. In our misunderstanding and misspent lives we harm Creation—including our sisters and brothers, all of whom bear



**AS WE LEARN TO SEE CREATION AS GOODNESS FLOWING FROM GOD'S OWN LOVE—WE BEGIN TO SEE THE SACREDNESS OF ALL THINGS. AS DYLAN AND DOSTOEVSKY SAY, IN EVERY GRAIN OF SAND.**



the image of God.

*Love never ends.*

**At the end of all things there is love. Love abides. Love endures. When the last star burns out, God's love will be there for whatever comes after.**

In the end it all adds up to love. So when you are calculating the meaning of life—if it doesn't add up to love, recalculate, because you've made a serious mistake!

Existence only makes sense when seen through the lens of

**"LOVE ALL OF GOD'S CREATION, BOTH THE WHOLE OF IT AND EVERY GRAIN OF SAND. LOVE EVERY LEAF, EVERY RAY OF GOD'S LIGHT. LOVE ANIMALS, LOVE PLANTS, LOVE EACH THING. IF YOU LOVE EACH THING, YOU WILL PERCEIVE THE MYSTERY OF GOD IN THINGS. ONCE YOU HAVE PERCEIVED IT, YOU WILL BEGIN TIRELESSLY TO PERCEIVE MORE AND MORE OF IT EVERY DAY. AND YOU WILL COME AT LAST TO LOVE THE WHOLE WORLD WITH AN ENTIRE, UNIVERSAL LOVE."**

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

love. At the beginning of time there is love. At the bottom of the universe there is love. It's in God's ocean of endless

love that we live and move and have our being.

Admittedly freedom allows for other things

**"IN THE FURY OF THE MOMENT I CAN SEE THE MASTER'S HAND IN EVERY LEAF THAT TREMBLES, IN EVERY GRAIN OF SAND."**

— Bob Dylan, *Every Grain of Sand*



too (from cancer cells to atomic bombs)—but at the bottom of the universe it's love all the way down. Cancer cells and atomic bombs will not have the final word. Love alone has the final say.

*"Unless you love, your life will flash by."* (Thank you, Terrence Malick.)

Love alone gives meaning to our fleeting fourscore sojourn. Why? Because everything else returns to dust. It's love alone that never ends. It's love alone that is greater than the grave. Death severs all, save love. We remain connected to our departed loved ones by the unseverable bond of love.

*Love remembers.*

God's love is great enough to remember all and to *re-member* all. If Creation is an explosion (or rapid expansion) of God's love (and I believe it is)—New

PHOTO BY ALBERTO CABELLO



**Why is there  
light and oceans  
and trees and  
moose and whales and  
every grain of  
sand? Because God is  
love—love seeking  
expression in self-  
giving creativity.**

Creation (or resurrection) is the triumph of God's endless love

perfection in the love of God.

It's a journey that will take us a lifetime, and perhaps longer.

But the trajectory is clear: We are always moving toward the way of love.

If what we're doing, praying,

it is too easily forgotten.

*Loveless orthodoxy is death.*

We've all seen those who in the name of Jesus have perfected meanness. The iconic and tragic-comic example would be the Westboro Baptist folk—but there are plenty of

other less egregious, but still tragic, examples.

The journey of faith almost always begins as somewhat elitist (I'm saved!)—but it always

over death.

This is the question: Which is endless, Love or Death? The answer is Love. If God is love and if love never ends and if the meaning of being is love—and if Jesus is the supreme incarnation of God's eternal love—then that should tell us something about what it looks like to follow Jesus. Following Jesus is a journey toward

preaching, saying, isn't moving us toward love then it's not the true way of following the love of God who is Jesus Christ.

This needs to be said, because

moves toward becoming egalitarian—Peter learning Gentiles are accepted by God. Love triggers the divine and deep (but often repressed)

**Jews...Muslims...Hindus...Buddhists...Atheists. I'm thinking of specific people...friends. But will they be saved?! That's not my business. My business is to love and point to Jesus.**



**IF CREATION COMES FROM THE EXPLOSIVE EXPANSION OF GOD'S LOVE—I FIND IT SIGNIFICANT THAT WE LIVE IN AN EVER-EXPANDING UNIVERSE...IT'S NOT STATIC, IT'S EXPANDING...AT THE SPEED OF LIGHT!**

instinct that all things belong. All God has created is good. Sin is the corruption, the hole, in the fabric of God's goodness.

*You too belong. You too are accepted. I will make room for you.*

Over time, as we are properly formed, love will elicit this kind of language. Love is open.

What about the borders of your love? Are they shrinking? Static? Expanding? Who are you embracing in love—fewer people? The same people? More people?

I'm not worried about having borders of love that

**TODAY I FIND IT MUCH EASIER TO LOVE PEOPLE WHO ARE VERY DIFFERENT FROM ME. I'VE LEARNED TO GENUINELY LOVE PEOPLE OF OTHER RELIGIONS—AND STILL CONFESS JESUS IS LORD.**

Love is expansive. There is a largeness to love. Sin is mean, petty and small. The whole world of Hell in C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce* was no bigger than a grain of sand. *Selah.*

If Creation comes from the explosive expansion of God's love—I find it significant that we live in an ever-expanding universe. The universe is not

are too broad. Loving too many people will hardly be a crime at the judgment seat of Christ.

In my earliest days of following Jesus I had an air of triumphalism—I'm on the winning team! But as I mature I find triumphalism shrinking and love expanding. Today I find it much easier to love

**I'M NOT WORRIED ABOUT HAVING BORDERS OF LOVE THAT ARE TOO BROAD. LOVING TOO MANY PEOPLE WILL HARDLY BE A CRIME AT THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST.**

shrinking, it's not static, it's expanding...at the speed of light!

God is love. God is light. God's love is expanding at the speed of light.

And what is the wrath of God? The love of God wrongly received. **Either we go with the grain of love or we suffer the shards of self-inflicted harm.** And that you "did it to yourself" by resisting God's love makes it no less of a judgment.

people who are very different from me.

I've learned to genuinely love people of other religions—and still confess Jesus is Lord. Jews... Muslims...Hindus...Buddhists ...Atheists. I'm thinking of specific people...friends.

*But will they be saved?!*

That's not my business. My business is to love and point to Jesus. I do believe that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end.

Back to the question about

our borders of love—why would our borders of love shrink and not expand? Only one answer: Fear.

As I observe the world—politically, socially, economically, religiously—I observe there really are only two forces that move people: Fear and Love. So when you observe the events that make news (especially if there's controversy)—ask this simple question: What's at work here? Fear or Love?

Then ask yourself another question: What's moving me? Fear or Love?

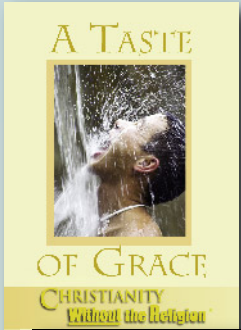
Finally, make the decision to move with love and refuse to respond to fear. You can afford to make that risky move because...**God is love and love never ends.** □

*Brian Zahnd is the lead pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri. He is also the author of several books, including Radical Forgiveness, Beauty Will Save the World and A Farewell to Mars.*

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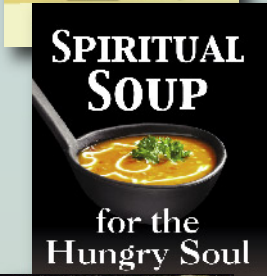
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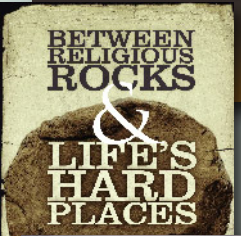
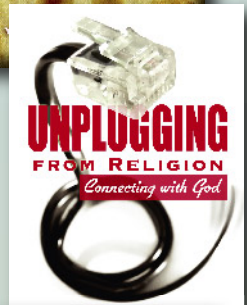
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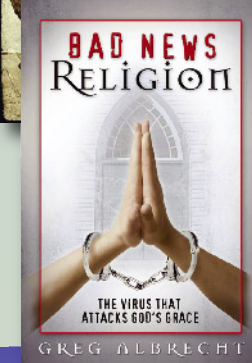
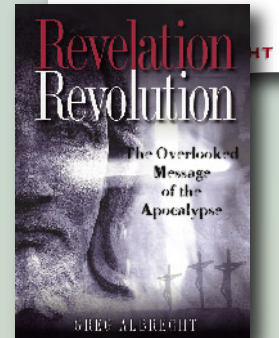
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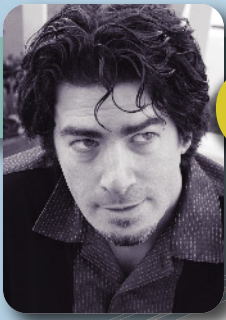


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# CWRm

DEREK FLOOD

## You Are Worth More than Chewing Gum!

**Y**esterday, I was walking through a park and heard a street preacher saying, “If you’ve ever stolen a stick of gum, then you are guilty of sin! If you’ve ever looked at Facebook at work, then you’ve stolen from your employer, and that’s sin!”

Of course we all know where he was headed: If we have sinned—even with a trivial infraction like a stick of gum—then God who is holy must punish us for all eternity in Hell unless we accept Jesus right now.

I mean, seriously, gum? Why can’t God just get over it? Is God less moral than all of us are? This is not a picture of holiness; it is a picture of a petty tyrant. Aside from the horrible picture of God that this gives us (and honestly, who could ever love, trust and feel safe around a God like that?), what this ultimately does is trivialize sin. It makes sin into a petty infraction of little consequence.

We live in a world with real hurt. All you need to do to see this is read the headlines, and you will see story after story of terrible injustice, violence and suffering throughout the world. So much so it can be overwhelming. When we spend the time to really listen to those around us, we will hear stories of deep hurt, broken families, broken people. We do not need to make up fake problems about chewing gum.

There are plenty of real problems and hurt in our lives. Jesus does not focus on gum, or even going too far with your girlfriend in Junior High, or dropping an F-bomb when you stub your toe. His overwhelming focus was on things that have deep and devastating effects on people’s lives—the alienation and estrangement that can come from poverty, sickness and injustice. That’s what Jesus spent the majority of his time focusing on.

They matter more because they have more profound consequences. If you feel worthless, condemned, cut off, this is devastating in a way that affects the whole course of your life. And here’s the thing: Jesus did not tell people that this was a sin. He did not tell them to

repent of this. Instead, he demonstrated the care and nearness of God to them. He healed the wounded and embraced the untouchable.

Read the gospels and note that Jesus spends the vast majority of his time demonstrating God’s love to those who feel cut off due to suffering and injustice, and relatively little time telling people to repent. In fact, when he does tell people to repent it is almost always addressed to the religious people who were shutting out the poor and the least!

God is not a petty legalist who is angry about every stick of chewing gum. It’s just the opposite: God wants us to care for each other. God wants us to care for those whom we value the least. If God cares about sin, it’s because God cares about you and me.

**God is not a petty legalist who is angry about every stick of chewing gum. It’s just the opposite: God wants us to care for each other.... If God cares about sin, it’s because he cares about you and me.**

“As you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.” God cares because God loves us, and wants us to stop hurting each other. So what we need to learn is how to love like Jesus does. That has nothing to do with rules and everything to do with relationship.

The focus therefore is not about how “good” you need to be in order to make it into heaven, or on whether God can overlook that bad thing you did. It’s not about using Jesus as a legal loophole so you can get your ticket to heaven. That ultimately leads to self-focus, and we need to instead be relationally focused.

We need to care about hurting each other, we need to be active in making things right. Because, to paraphrase Jesus on the mount: *You are worth much more to God than chewing gum!* □

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- Tired of being told that Jesus can only be found within the confines of a particular parcel of religious real estate?
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You'll find a summary of each weekly *CWRa* sermon for the next three months below. Join us and tell a friend!

**The Carnal God** Because of the infinite love of God, Jesus was incarnated as God in the flesh—so that he might fully know us and so that we might know him. Week of December 6.

**Christmas Reminds Us...** The unending, eternal truth and beauty of the birth of Jesus stands in stark contrast over against the ugliness, hatred, oppression, abuse and warfare of our world—the good news is that Jesus not only came into the world of the first century, he still comes to ours. Week of December 13.

**The Vulnerable Love of God** Our tired, sin-sick old world needs far more than another message of condemnation—thus on this Christmas, as Christ-followers we choose to light a candle rather than curse the darkness. Week of December 20.

**Dark Nights Will End—The Son Will Rise!** In *Les Miserables*, acclaimed novelist Victor Hugo said “even the darkest night will end and the sun will rise”—echoing the proclamation of Isaiah, “the people walking in darkness have seen a great light.” Week of December 27.

**The Treasure of Grace** Our immediate reaction when we hear of buried treasure is to think of swashbuckling pirates who are walking on the wild side. But Jesus offers a different take on buried treasure. Week of January 3.

**God Loves and Likes You!** It might seem that God loves us because he has to—that's who he is. But it's more than that! If he likes us then he really wants to be around us—if he likes us he can't get enough of us! Week of January 10.

**Dream on With Jesus** Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream and so do we, as Christ-followers. Dreamers are often misunderstood and despised. Jesus had a dream, and that dream is alive as he lives within us. Week of January 17.

**Set Free From Sins** Join Greg as he shares four principles that explain how God forgives us and sets us free and how he empowers us to share and pass along his forgiveness to others. Week of January 24.

**The Anchor Holds** Let the winds of change blow. Let the waves of the sea toss us here and there. Let the uncertainties of this life come—and they will! We have Jesus, the Anchor of our souls. Week of January 31.

**Love is Tough** Paul Simon and the Beatles provide lyrical illustrations as we ponder the tough and vulnerable love of God as it lives in us in the risen life of our Lord. Week of February 7.

**More Than Fans** There's nothing wrong with being a member of Jesus' fan club, but Jesus asks us to be more than fans. Week of February 14.

**Coloring Outside the Lines** The religious professionals of Jesus' day were upset with him because his way of life was outside the lines they had drawn. Jesus refused to conform to their religious expectations. Week of February 21.

**Tender Mercies** Following Jesus is not a matter of finding the right path and doing all the right things—it's not about reforming our bad habits, it's about him transforming us. Week of February 28.