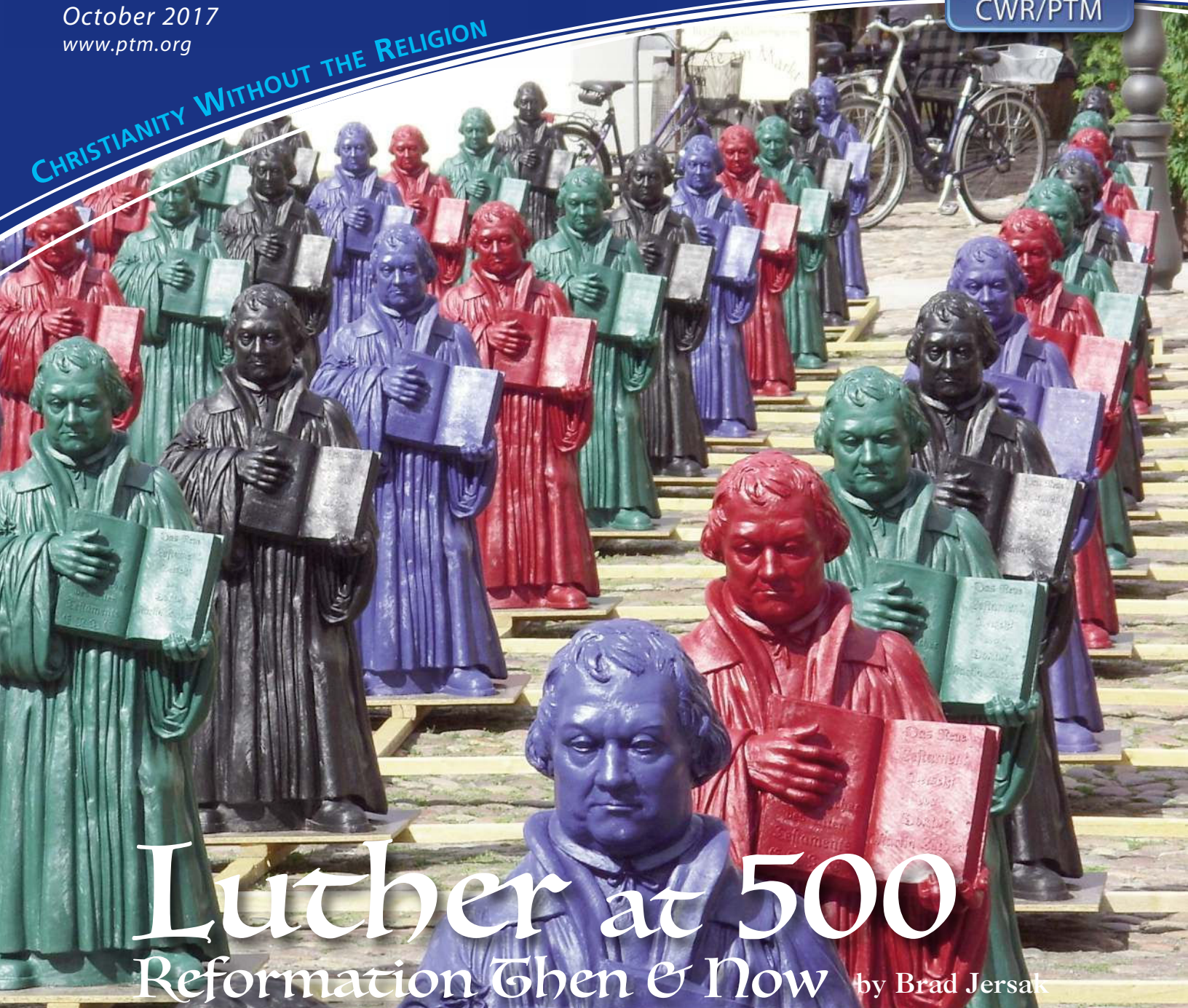


CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



## Luther at 500

Reformation Then & Now by Brad Jersak

**W**hat's troubling you, Brother Martin?" asked Father Johann Staupitz. Was this Martin Luther's 40th confession in as many days? His young novice's obsession with sin was a wearying and neurotic litany of self-loathing.

"What's troubling me? What's troubling me is that I hate God!" blurted the young novice.

*This is new*, thought Johann. "You hate God? Why, pray tell?"

"I am a good monk; I keep the rules of our order so strictly that if ever a monk has earned his way to heaven by monkery, I have. I am killing myself with long vigils, hours of prayer, days of fasting, endless reading, repeated pilgrimages—and other work."

"And other work—yes. Your extreme denial is notable. And troubling. You suffer from sleep deprivation; you're obsessed with self-imposed mental and physical tests; and your compulsive self-

*Continued on page 3*

# What Others Are Saying...

Volume 8, Number 5  
October 2017  
www.ptm.org

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

## Forgiveness...Who first?

Thank you so much for the recent article about forgiveness in the June *CWR* magazine. It was incredibly helpful and encouraging to me, and in God's perfect timing, the issue arrived in my mailbox just when I really needed to read this.

**North Carolina**

Please send me a few extra copies of the June *CWRm*. I am a retired pastor, and I love the cover story about forgiveness. The entire issue is filled with incredible, Christ-centered insights. Thank you and keep up the good work!

**Maryland**

I want to thank you for the article on forgiveness. That was pretty deep. I know I needed to hear that message more, as our heavenly Father and Jesus are our only hope in this life—and for all humanity. May God in his mercy continue to bless you and your staff with wisdom and insight on Jesus—the Word of God.

**New York**

• For more helpful resources about forgiveness (and other topics) visit our website, [www.ptm.org/resources](http://www.ptm.org/resources).

## The Best Father's Day Gift

The article by Laura Urista in the June issue of *CWRm* moved me to tears. It was so beautifully written and so poignant. I loved the way

she tied together the experience she had with her father and with God before going deeper into a relationship with "Abba Father." Even as I type, I am welling up because it's just so special. Thanks for sharing this hopeful message and precious photos.

**United Kingdom**

Thanks for the excellent article on Father's Day, "Lollipop!" We used to call my dear Granddad "Lollypop" since his name was Lyle. I sure look forward to Jesus returning soon so all our precious family can be together again as one big happy family with Papa "Daddy," Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

**California**

## Ministry of Grace

I'm sending a gift of appreciation for your ministry, focusing on God's grace. I enjoy reading the *CWR* and *Plain Truth* magazines. They are so enriching. God is using you to reach many people. Greg, you are truly a blessed servant of the living God, and I pray God will continue to bless everyone involved in *CWR/PTM*.

**Ohio**

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A big thank you from all of us at CWR!

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**COVER PHOTO:** Photo: ©Kati Tuschy, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/katiplanet> UBP.

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# Luther at 500

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flagellation is increasing. Now the brothers tell me they found you lying in the snow all night. Why are you doing this?"

"To atone for my sins."

"Atonement through self-punishment?"

"Of course. As the apostle says, I must mortify my flesh."

"But Brother Martin, true repentance doesn't involve self-inflicted penances and punishments. True repentance involves a change of heart."

"But didn't the Savior say, 'Be perfect as my heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48)?"

***"Your problem is that you've lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter; you've made of him the jailer and hangman of your poor soul."***

"But in context ...," Johann began.

Martin interrupted, "This word is too high and too hard for anyone to fulfill," he complained bitterly. "Any man can get along nicely with those who don't provoke him, but if someone creates the slightest irritation, he will flare up in anger—if not against friends, then he lashes out against enemies. Flesh and blood cannot rise above it."

"And by 'he,' you refer to yourself. To your temper."

"Yes."

"Your violent temper," Johann specified. *Perhaps today, Johann hoped. Might Martin finally come clean this time?*

"Yes," said Martin, looking down quietly. "I hate God and his high and holy demand of perfection. I hate God because God hates me. And I hate myself because nothing I do ever makes atonement."

"Atonement for what, Martin?" *He's so close, thought Johann. So near to the end of himself.*

"It's why I came here to the monastery. I've said it before."

"Say it again."

October 31, 1517: Martin Luther nails 95 theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenburg Germany, sparking the Great Reformation.

"I was returning to university on horseback after a trip home. I ran into a thunderstorm, and a lightning bolt nearly struck me. Terrified of death and divine judgment, I cried out, 'Saint Anna, help me! I will become a monk!'"

That's the story Martin told himself—one he had repeated to every listening ear.

Now, whispered the Holy Spirit. The confessor pounced, "That's how you came here, brother Martin. That's not why you came here. Your conscience is stricken because you won't face the truth."

Martin squirmed. Facing the truth can be a fiery ordeal—some

die never having faced it.

"Brother Martin, if God willed to strike you down, do you honestly imagine his aim is so poor? Or that you could hide from him here? God has no need to punish you; the merits of Christ alone are sufficient and necessary."

Father Johann reflected, "***Your problem is that you've lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter; you've made of him the jailer and hangman of your poor soul.*** Don't you see? Christ is not your tormentor—your conscience is. And has punishing yourself ever appeased your guilty conscience even one iota?"

"No," admitted Martin, eyes brimming with tears.

"You cannot flee or hide from its torment. Your conscience was there—it witnessed the truth."

"I don't want to go to hell!" cried young Martin, scratching furiously at the bald spot on his monk-style tonsured haircut.

"You're already in hell! Confess and be free! Why are you here?"

"To escape judgment."

"To *hide* from judgment."



Joseph Fiennes in the movie "Luther" 2003

"Yes."

"For what?"

"Violence."

"No. That's a half-truth. Confess and be free!"

"For killing a man."

"Half-truth! Confess and be free!"

"I killed my friend."

"How?"

"In a duel!"

"Half-truth!"

"An illegal duel."

"Martin, confess and be free!"

"I murdered him. I murdered my friend," now sobbing.

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"And why did you come here?  
Was it for love of God?"

"No!"

"Was it that you feared God's  
wrath and judgment?"

"Yes!"

"Half-truth! Confess and be free!"

"I became a monk to evade the  
law." *At last!*

"Truth!"

"And now I atone for my sins but  
God will not have it."

"Truth! Neither God nor your  
conscience receive your self-  
inflicted punishments, as if they  
satisfied justice. Mutilating yourself  
will not bring your friend back or  
pay for your sin—your betrayal. But  
the truth—yes, the truth shall set  
you free. Turn your mind from  
obsessing over your sin and onto  
the perfection of Christ."

Later, Martin would say, "If it had  
not been for Dr. Staupitz, I should  
have sunk into hell." But in truth,  
Martin's confession did not free  
him—nor could Fr. Johann's  
absolution. A revelation of Christ  
alone would suffice.

Seeing that Martin remained at  
an impasse, Father Johann knew  
his charge needed a break from the  
cloister and its religious routine. So,  
he sent Martin to Rome on a  
mission with a fellow monk.  
Perhaps the journey to the Holy  
City would have an effect.

When Martin returned, he  
debriefed with his mentor.

"Brother Martin, tell me of your  
journey," asked Father Johann.

The young monk seemed  
radiant, "I've a glorious tale to tell!"

Yet as he began, a shadow quickly  
crossed his face.

"We made the entire journey on  
foot, and found food and lodging  
at monasteries along the way."

"And how were the brothers?"

"I was disillusioned. At each stop,  
I was grieved to encounter their  
luxurious living, their loose morals.  
They showed precious little  
interest in spiritual things. As  
loathsome as my own failure to  
live righteously was, I was appalled

that most of the monks I met had  
abandoned the effort. Nor was it  
because they had discovered grace.  
They were simply lax and lazy."

"And Rome?"

"I was expectant. The moment I  
saw the Holy City, I shouted, "Hail,  
holy Rome!"

"How exciting!" joined in Father  
Johann, a bit hopeful.

"Not for long. The 'holy' city is a  
harlot—the Babylon of John's  
Apocalypse. The more I saw of  
Rome, the more disgusted I  
became. The place is a den of  
iniquity, its priests were openly  
infidel, the services they performed  
were farcical, the papal courtiers  
were shamelessly licentious.

"And the pope—Pope Leo doesn't  
preach repentance for sin. He *sells* it

in the form of 'indulgences.' They  
have a proverb, 'As the money  
clinks into the money chest, the  
soul flies out of purgatory.' You can  
pay your way into a brothel and  
pre-pay your way out of purgatory  
the same day. The first proverb is a  
lie; for when the money clinks,  
greed and avarice grow. But I  
learned another proverb—this one I  
believe: 'If there is a hell, Rome is  
built over it.'"

Father Johann was dubious,  
given Martin's preoccupation with  
sin and perfectionism: "And this is  
your glorious tale?"

"An important piece, yes," Martin  
nodded, "because you see, I had to  
see the Church's debauchery in full  
bloom. At last I despaired of the  
righteousness even of the Church.



Martin Luther was condemned as a heretic at the "Diet of Worms" (1521) and excommunicated by the Pope, making him an outlaw. Frederick III, the Elector of Saxony, had him "abducted" and whisked to Wartburg Castle for protection, where he hid for ten months. Martin was disguised as a knight under the alias "Junker Jorge." He used the time to translate the New Testament from Greek into German. Above: a 16th century altar painting (by Cranach) in St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg. It depicts the Last Supper with Christ on the left and "Junker Jorge" being handed a cup on the right!

This was essential. But for all your wisdom and patient guidance—yes, I see it now—I had still to despair of myself.”

“Do tell!”

“My monumental self-righteousness exerted itself one more time. In Rome, there is a long staircase—they say it was from the house of Pilate. Any who climbs its steps on their knees are promised 1000 years credit of penance in purgatory. I believed it; I hoped it. And so I began to climb, knee after knee, repeating the prescribed prayers with each step.”

“Oh dear,” sighed Father Johann, visibly crestfallen. *Dear God, was it all for nothing?*

“Fear not, Father!” beamed Martin. “I was half way up when these words entered my mind, *‘The righteous shall live by faith.’*”

“The words of the Apostle to the Romans!”

“Yes! To Rome, of all places! A message she needs to hear again! But first I needed to hear it. The righteousness of God is not attained by petty works of human penance—neither our soaring charity, nor my senseless punishments. It is granted freely through the faithfulness of Christ alone. ***Christ alone is the perfection and righteousness of God.***”

“And now at last I see it: I can never earn God’s righteousness—I mustn’t even try. It is given to us freely, by grace alone. And we live it by faith alone, in Christ alone. This is the *evangel*—the good news!”

“And now?” Father Johann asked his zealous young friend, “where will this revelation lead you?”

“By God’s grace, a reformation,” said Martin with grim determination. *“A Great Reformation.”* □

*Brad Jersak is editor-in-chief of CWRMagazine. This article is a piece of historical fiction, citing the following sources, often verbatim:*

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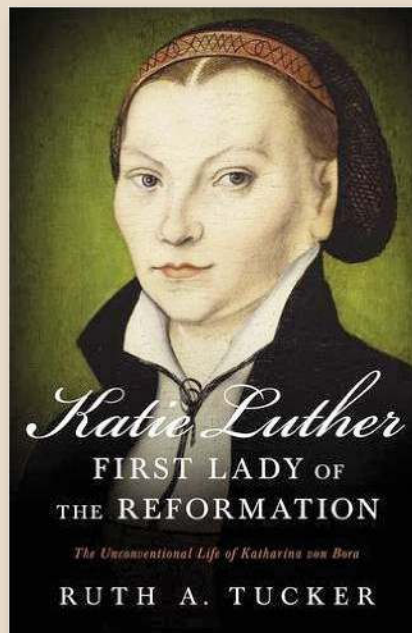
Photo credit: page 3 screenshot of Joseph Fiennes as Luther in “Luther” (*R.S. Entertainment*, 2003).

# KATIE LUTHER

by Ruth A. Tucker

It is critical that we do not seek to mold Katie into a modern-day Evangelical. Martin more easily serves such a purpose in that he was adept at God-talk, emphasized salvation by faith alone, and even spoke of being born again. Not so Katie....

Like most Christians of this era, there is no evidence that she professed to have “a transforming personal relationship with Christ,” and would thus be relegated to the pejorative LCWE [Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization] category of “nominal.”



Religion was determined more by where a family lived than by personal profession of faith, an oddity introduced by Anabaptists. By marrying Luther, Katie joined the Protestant ranks. That there is no evidence she actually made this new faith her own has gone essentially unnoticed by historians.

She was nevertheless the most indispensable figure of the German Reformation save for Martin Luther himself. Take her and their twenty-year marriage out of the picture, and his leadership would have suffered severely. Had it not been for the stability she brought to his life, he may have gone off the rails emotionally and mentally by the mid 1520s. His emphasis on, and modeling of, marriage and family as an essential aspect of his reform would have been lost.

Only Katharina von Bora—no other woman—could have accomplished what she did with this most unstable man. Without her, the Black Cloister would have gone to ruin—the result of which would have been no “Table Talk,” and that is only the barest beginning of what would have been lost if she were taken out of the equation. □

*Ruth Tucker is a church historian and regular columnist for The Plain Truth magazine. One of her many works is Katie Luther: First Lady of the Reformation.*

# 10 Things You Might Not Know About Martin Luther

## 1. The Wittenburg Door

Nailing his 95 theses to the Wittenburg Door was not an act of defiance, but the normal way to start theological discussions. Printing press copies created by a fan made Luther's proposals "go viral" and become controversial.

## 2. Alcohol cures all evils

Luther sometimes advocated drinking. One young man wrote in despair at the prospect of going to hell. Luther advised him to get drunk, as he did when he felt despair.

## 3. A dubious fast-track

Luther was ordained priest with no theological studies (1507). A year later, he was given a bachelor's degree and was teaching in Wittenburg. Three years later, he was awarded his doctorate and appointed chair of theology.

## 4. Katie Luther escaped a nunnery in a fish barrel

Luther's wife was an ex-nun who had managed to escape from her convent by hiding in barrel that had once contained pickled fish.

## 5. The animal activist

While disguised as a knight in Wartburg castle, he refused to take part in rabbit hunting. One ran up his pant leg to escape, but the dogs bit through the fabric and killed it.

## 6. Surrounded by relics

Luther objected to the holy relics in Rome, but the Castle Church of Wittenberg contained over 1500 relics, including bones of saints and splinters of the "true cross."

## 7. Let's talk about sex

Luther was liberal about sex. He said a woman had the right to take on a lover if her husband wasn't able to satisfy her in bed, and the husband should accept this.

## 8. Brilliant linguist and colossal memory

Luther translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into German, which served to unify the German language. He also memorized the entire New Testament.

## 9. Musical expert

Luther was keen on music. An accomplished lute player, he composed countless hymns and he is regarded as one of the most important German composers prior to Bach.

## 10. A mean streak

As Luther gained power with the magisterium, his mean streak showed in foul insults against opponents, open and tragic anti-semitism and cruel calls for violence against the peasants of the Munsterie rebellion.



"Martin Luther: Here I Stand..." was an art installation of 800 figures of Martin Luther. German artist Ottmar Hoerl erected it in Wittenberg's market square from August 14 to September 12, 2010.

© Ottmar Hörl, Martin Luther Here I Stand: [www.ottmar-hoerl.de](http://www.ottmar-hoerl.de); Photo: Christoph Busse

# Reformation Now: Claims and Calls

*“But ‘tis the talent of our English nation,  
Still to be plotting some new reformation.”*

— John Dryden (1631-1700)

Like Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformation featured both breakthroughs and pitfalls. On the upside, who today would argue with its critique of clerical corruption, its repudiation of indulgences, its return to the Bible and its reminder of Paul’s gospel of God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ?

Everyone seems on board. Even Pope Francis is celebrating Luther’s anniversary with the Lutherans this year! Francis has said, “The intention of Martin Luther 500 years ago was to renew the church, not divide her.”

On the other hand, breaking from Rome’s control also initiated a great fragmentation, where each Reformer became a mini-pope or every Christian could be their own pope! Since Luther posted his 95 theses to the Wittenburg Church door, a new sect has formed, on average, twice per week—over 33,000 denominations by some accounts, not including all the self-styled “independent” churches.

As for Luther’s following, today some 70 million believers on five continents identify themselves with one of the many branches of the Lutheran Church.

Now, since 500 years makes for a prodigious landmark, it’s not so strange that calls for a new reformation are being raised by many voices.

Note: that’s in the plural—*many voices*. It seems like everyone has “a dog in this race.” An internet search of “new + reformation” offers browsers a staggering buffet of new (and used) reformations to choose from. You’ve got “last reformation” groups; “new apostolic reformation” charismatics; and there’s a full spectrum of liberal, progressive, emergent, conservative and fundamentalist claims and invitations to their own

patented “new reformation.”

We can excuse the “nones and dones” (*non*-affiliated and *done* with the institutional church) if they don’t jump at every religious “carnival barker” who offers the “one true way” back to New Testament faith (whatever that is). If they’re cynical and jaded by religious shenanigans, they came by it honestly. Yet even they are inclined to think that their exodus marks a sort of post-modern reformation.

Yet even while noting such claims with a dose of healthy skepticism, watchful Christ-followers surely see that something truly has shifted from a slow simmer to a rolling boil in recent decades.

Many have noticed that despite historical roots in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Great Reformation, a whole lot of Christ-less religiosity has come to infect its progeny with the very legalism, moralism and spiritual abuse that Martin Luther protested.

Nor did this arise spontaneously. Some of it was spawned directly by the first Reformers. Martin Luther, John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli (the big three)

never shook the influence of Augustine of Hippo, whose insistence on grace alone came with a heavy price: a notion of humanity that is utterly depraved and a God who loves and elects an exclusive few to salvation, leaving the rest to burn in eternal flames. *Grace alone—for the elite elect alone.*

But now it appears that the Holy Spirit is once again opening spiritual eyes to reform both our image of humanity—where

*everyone* is precious and beloved in God’s sight—and to heal our image of God—the selfless Lover who sets aside privilege to become human and heal humanity.

Through the ministry of CWR/PTM, we discuss this in depth in Greg Albrecht’s books (*A Taste of Grace*, for example) and in my latest, *A More Christlike God: A More Beautiful Gospel*. But these are just two whitecaps in a rising tide that might represent a bonafide revolution of living faith. We’re “singing this song” in unison with a choir of many other teachers, such as Paul Young, Richard Rohr and Brian McLaren, to name a few. Together, we hope to follow Christ faithfully through the next Great Reformation. □

—Brad Jersak



© Reuters, 2016 Photo: Stefano Rellandini



# I Am a Small Boat on a Raging Sea

by Jessica Williams

*I'm in a small boat on a raging sea.  
And it is hard to believe in Jesus.*

I've never seen him—you know?

I have this Sunday-School picture that is stuck in my head but I'm sure it's not what he looked like. And was he really born of a virgin? Was God a baby? Was he crucified? Is he coming back? This—is our faith. Jesus, he did these things, he turned water to wine, he healed the sick and raised the dead. But—none of us were there. I didn't see it.

*I'm in a small boat on a raging sea.*

The waves are big and full of all things.

The brokenness of this world. Girls made into product, stolen and sold, boys sent to war, corruption, greed, violence, abuse, addiction, poverty, politics, pain, religion, racism, rape, starvation, slavery, sickness, shootings—all around us.

*I'm in a small boat on a raging sea.*

The kingdom is now/not yet, illusive and hard to grasp.  
I see it and I don't see it.  
It's but a poor reflection.

*I'm in a small boat on a raging sea.*

And, listen: This boat is made from the trees of my youth, my home. Which is both comforting and haunting all at once.

My foundation is weathered wood and it holds my story, where I've been, this wood matters. There are many weak places beneath me and they make sense of this fear in my heart.

*I'm in a small boat on a raging sea.*

So, if Jesus were in this boat with me? The man, Jesus. I confess even then I am sure I would still freak out. Look at that sea! Jesus is just a man and we all know that some men abandon the ship. The waves are crashing here and it is obvious that I am at risk of dying any second so my question is this:

Does he not care that we are perishing?

Am I loved as I ask it?

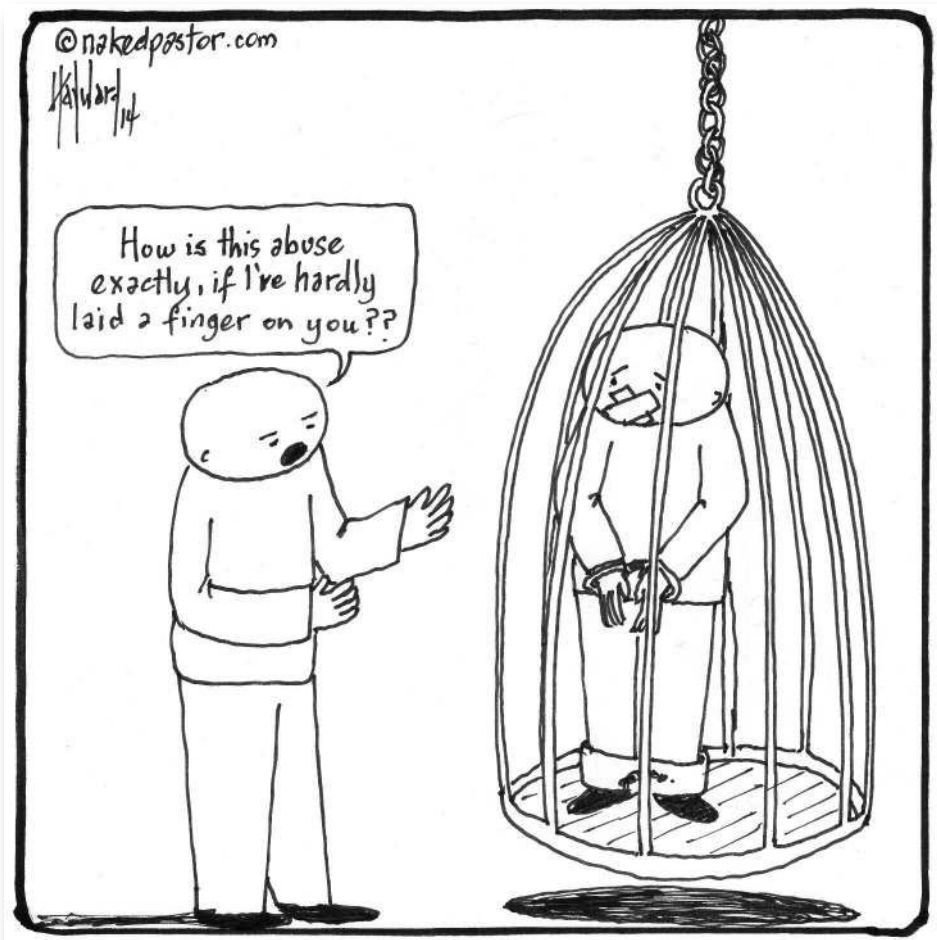
Because, for some reason the only thing that has ever helped this doubt in me is saying it. I have to speak it out. I believe and I disbelieve so if you ask me to only believe I will not make it. But if you can listen to my fear, if I can hand it to you, I will find that inner place of rest. My own sleeping Jesus. And I will see that he in this boat with me will be enough.

But, I will only find my yes after all these no's have been spoken making room in my lungs to breathe in hope. This doubt leads the way to faith. Slowly, it pulls me close enough to understand that if Jesus didn't care about this raging sea I'm in he wouldn't be here with me. But he is. He is Emmanuel. He is God with us. And I will know it as I doubt it.

*I'm in a small boat on a raging sea. □*

*Jessica Williams is from Winnipeg, Canada. She is a doula, a poet and a graduate student in theology at St. Stephen's University (New Brunswick).*





## Religious Trauma Syndrome

Marlene Winell

Isn't religion supposed to be helpful, or at least benign?

In the case of fundamentalist beliefs, people expect that choosing to leave a childhood faith is like giving up Santa Claus—a little sad but basically a matter of growing up.

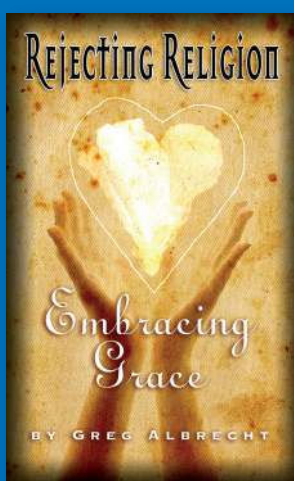
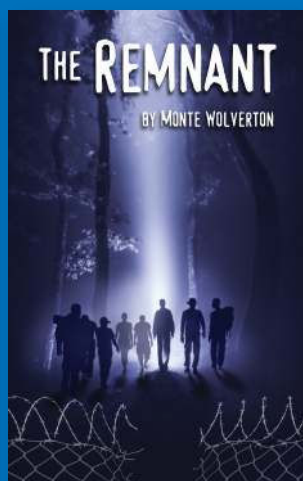
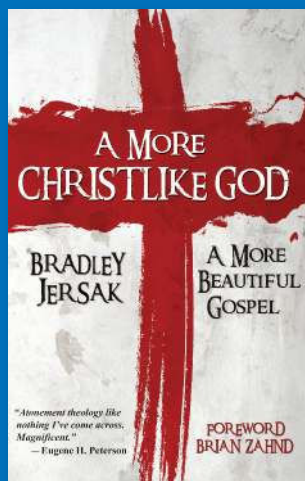
But religious indoctrination can be hugely damaging, and making the break from an authoritarian kind of religion can definitely be traumatic.

It involves a complete upheaval of a person's construction of reality, including the self, other people, life, the future, everything.

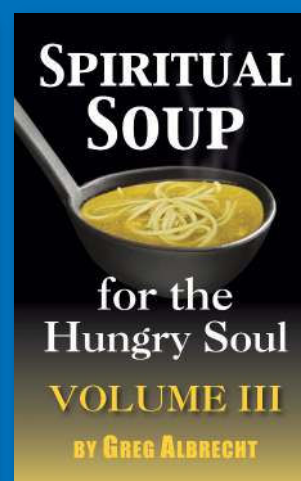
People unfamiliar with it, including therapists, have trouble appreciating the sheer terror it can create and the recovery needed.

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# Connected to the Vine

Laura Urista

**H**ave you ever been reading a familiar scripture and suddenly it's as if someone flips on the proverbial light switch? I experienced one of those "Aha!" moments recently when reading John 15:1-12. I thought to myself, "Hey wait a minute, did it **always** say that?" So I checked several translations just to make sure! In John 15:1-12, Jesus is talking to his disciples about "The Vine and the Branches."

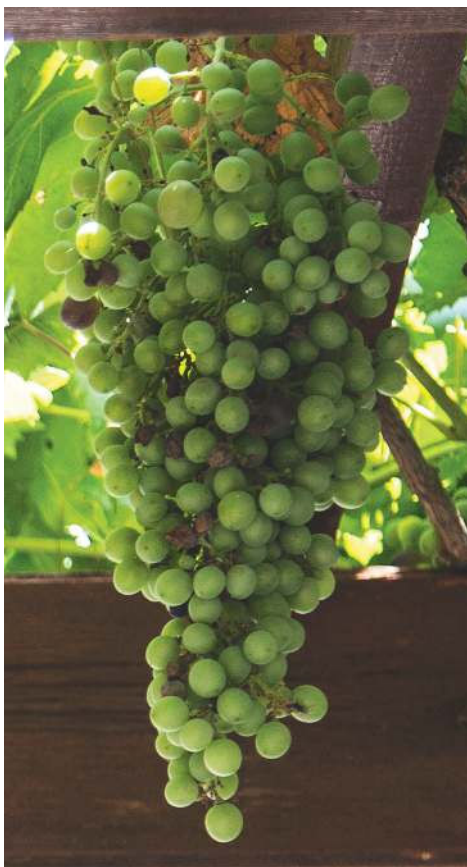
<sup>1</sup> "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

<sup>5</sup> "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

<sup>9</sup> "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. <sup>11</sup> I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. <sup>12</sup> My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

I always thought this passage was mainly about us doing good works and keeping the commandments. But now that I read it with the "light on," I can see it's really about us abiding (living/hanging out) in Jesus' love!

The fruit we will naturally bear by abiding/remaining in his love is not produced because of our own human efforts. It's the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit as described in Galatians 5:22-23—*love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*—the embodiment of **God's agape love**.



In his book *In My Father's Vineyard*, Wayne Jacobsen says, "The call to fruitfulness and the command to love one another are one and the same. *By this all men will know that*

*you are my disciples, if you love one another*' (John 13:35). The fruit the Father desires is the fruit of love. He wants to see his character filling our lives, spilling out like grape bunches on an overloaded vine.

When we love the way God loves, we are bearing the fruit of his kingdom.... The fruit of the Spirit is not what we can make ourselves do for a moment, but what God makes us to be for a lifetime" (p. 60, emphasis mine).

A few years ago, I experienced another incredible "Aha!" moment during a break at a women's retreat. I was passionately praying, "Lord, what do I need to do?" I was focused on trying to do my own good works.

But a thought came into my mind, opposite to what I'd been focused on—like the old Monty Python TV show intro, "And now for something completely different!"

The thought (answer) that came to mind was, "Let **ME** live in you and love through you!" In other words, "Set your mind on things above." *Stop focusing on what you can do and focus on allowing Christ to live in you and love through you.*

Since then I've been daily praying "Lord, please live in me and love through me." It takes less than five seconds, but that prayer has drastically changed my life.

Since I started asking Jesus to live in me and love through me, I have begun to see others by "looking through the eyes of love."

If you're like me and for years *tried* to "bear fruit" (do good works) by your own effort, struggling and failing time after time, why not start asking Jesus to live in you and love through you? □

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**B**eloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love. In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent God's only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent God's Son as expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another. No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and God's love is brought to perfection in us. —1 John 4:7-12<sup>1</sup>

love God." But he says, "There is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends."

Both of these scriptures emphasize the centrality and the importance of love. The beginning and end of everything is love.

Only inside of the mystery of love—mutual self-emptying and infilling—can we know God. If we stay outside of that mystery, we cannot know God.

When most of us hear the word "commandment," we likely think of the 10 Commandments.

But Jesus speaks of a "new" commandment surpassing and summing up the "ten" of the

can never live up to it through our own efforts. We'd like to whittle it down to a little commandment, like "Come to church on Sunday." But who of us can say we have really loved yet? We're all beginners. We're all starting anew every day, and we're failing anew every day.

Loving as imperfect, egoic human beings keeps us in utter reliance upon the mercy, compassion, and grace of God. We can never fully succeed by ourselves.

It seems God gave us a commandment that we could not obey. Perhaps this is so we would have to depend upon the

## Richard Rohr

"Whoever loves is born of God and knows God." Unfortunately, many Christians think, "If I read the Bible, I'm born of God; or if I go to church, I know God; or if I obey the commandments, I know God." Yet John says it's simply about loving. Note that the converse is true also.

*Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love.*

*As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. . . . This I command you: love one another. —John 15:9-14, 17<sup>2</sup>*

We might expect Jesus to say, "There is no greater love than to

# The Greatest Commandments



Hebrew Bible (Exodus 20:1-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21):

*"This is my commandment: Love one another."*

He also says, "The entire law and the prophets is summed up in the two great commandments: to love God and to love one another" (see Matthew 22:36-40).

Perhaps we don't want to hear this commandment because we

Holy Spirit. This is the greatness, the goodness, the wonder, the impossibility of the Gospel, that it asks of all of us something we—alone, apart, separate—cannot do!

Only by living in love, in communion—God in us and we in God (see John 17:20-26)—do we find, every once in a while, a love flowing through us and toward us and from us that is bigger than our own. And we surely know it's not "we" who are doing it! □

**Gateway to Silence:**

**Be the change you wish to see in the world. —Gandhi**

*Richard Rohr is the director of the Center for Action and Contemplation.*

### Notes

1. Richard Rohr paraphrase.
  2. Richard Rohr paraphrase.
- Article adapted from Richard Rohr, "Love Is the Only Message," homily, May 13, 2012, <https://cac.org/love-is-the-only-message/>.



# God is Love, God is Love

Brian Zahnd

**T**he topography of biblical witness is full of peaks and valleys, mountains and plains. The Bible is not flat terrain. The honest reader of the Bible readily admits that the Levitical prohibition against eating shellfish does not reach the same heights as the lofty Christology in Colossians. As we look at the great peaks of inspired biblical witness, none soar higher than the twin peaks of divine revelation given to us by the Apostle John.

*“But anyone who does not love does not know God, for **God is love**. ... We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love. **God is love**, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.”*(1 John 4:8, 16)

Soaring above everything else the Bible has to say about God are these twin peaks found in John’s first epistle:

**God is love, God is love.**

The Arapaho Indians called Longs Peak and Mount Meeker [above] *Nesótaieus*, meaning “two guides.” The two peaks of this towering massif are useful for orientation when traveling in the front range of the Colorado Rocky Mountains, just as the two peaks of 1 John 4:8 and 4:16 are invaluable when navigating our way through the Bible. When the aged apostle put quill to papyrus to tell his readers that God is love (twice), and that to know love is to know God, and that to live in love is to live in God, he was making a daring move—and he dared to do it!

## Higher Up the Holy Mountain

More than a thousand years earlier, Moses reaches his apex of revelation when he hears and reports the voice of God from the burning bush saying, *“I Am Who I Am.”* But John leads us higher up

the holy mountain when he reveals that *God is Love*. These two guides on the holy mountain work together to lead us to the summit of divine revelation: God is who God is—and God is love. If we ever reach the top and catch a glimpse from the *God is Love* summit of the holy mountain, it changes the way we look at everything.

The view from the base of the mountain, or even halfway up, is simply not the same as from the summit. If we can follow John’s lead to the summit of the holy mountain of scriptural revelation, we will see the whole Bible in a new light.

*God is not wrath.* Though we may rightly understand and describe the consequences of divine consent to our own self-destructive will as the wrath of God, the truth remains that God is not wrath; *God is Love*.

*God is not a bloodthirsty deity* requiring ritual killing. Though

this may have been the only way we could understand God four millennia ago on the lower flanks of the holy mountain, the truth remains that God is not bloodthirsty; **God is Love.**

*God is not violence.* Despite the fact that religion has a long history of sacralizing violence by projecting it on God, the truth remains that **God is Love.**

*God does not operate an eternal torture chamber.* However we understand the state of a postmortem soul incapable of love, the truth remains that God is not a sadistic torturer inflicting eternal pain; **God is Love.**

*God is not a killer.* Though many have misread the book of Revelation to such an extent that they think God's final solution for sin is the "Final Solution," the truth remains that God is not a genocidal killer; **God is Love.**

The wages of sin is death—but **God is Love.**

War is hell—but **God is Love.**

Violence is human—but **God is Love.**

## The God We Want

At this point I can hear the critics howl: "You're just making God the way you want God to be!" No. That's not what I'm doing. I was quite content to believe in and preach an angry, violent, retributive God. I did so for decades. I did it convincingly. I did it successfully.

You can build a big church preaching such a God. Fear is a powerful motivator. Religious people generally like to be told that God is like that, as long as the divine disposition of anger is primarily directed toward other people.

The way I wanted God to be was the way I assumed God was: angry, violent, retributive. I knew how to use the Bible to preach God this way and I wasn't interested in changing my theology. If my motivation were to make God the way I wanted God to be, I would still be lifting passages from Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hand of a Angry God" to add rhetorical flourishes to my angry God sermons.

The change that occurred in my theology came about, not by wishing for God to be something other than I

assumed God was, but from actually discovering God as revealed in Christ.

## The God Revealed in Christ

My turn away from an angry, violent, retributive vision of God began after I had turned forty, and while reading Augustine's *Confessions*. Saint Augustine's spiritual memoir moved me to pray what may have been the most important prayer of my life: "*God, I want to spend the rest of my life discovering you as you are revealed in Christ.*" That prayer in June of 2000 launched me upon a journey of theological discovery that I have recounted in my spiritual memoir, *Water To Wine*.

Following cairns set up by climbers of the holy mountain who have gone before me has led me away from the primitive and mistaken notions of an angry, violent, retributive God, and toward the Father who is fully revealed in Christ. The Apostle John says this **God is love.**

In the conclusion of his

"Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" sermon, Jonathan Edwards says, "The axe is in an extraordinary manner laid at the root of the trees, that every tree that brings not forth good fruit, may be hewn down, and cast into the fire."

And I say, "Amen." I thank God that the theological tree that produced the bitter fruit of belief in an angry, violent, retributive God has at last been hewn down and cast into the fire. In my life, the poisonous tree of angry-God theology is now gone. In its place grows the *Tree of Life*—a tree whose leaves bring healing (Revelation 22:2). It's a tree that looks like it once may have been an ugly cross, but is now beautiful and verdant, producing the fruit of eternal life. Planted by the Father himself, this tree is an everlasting reminder that I am a forgiven sinner now being healed in the hands of a loving God. □

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On the summit of Mount Meeker on a day when my son Philip and I climbed both Meeker and Longs.



**CWRm**  
GREG ALBRECHT

## “Should I attend my gay daughter’s wedding?”

**Q** Pastor Greg, please advise me. My daughter has always been gay. I had to deal with this all her life. She had a little girl and left her with me to raise. We don’t live in the same state because of the life she has chosen, but I still love and support her and I have always been there for her. Now she is getting married and cries to me to be there for her. She knows I don’t approve of this. But I told her she will need to deal with God about it. I feel so sad that I pray it won’t happen. I don’t want to let her down with the love I have for her, because I love God more than anything. Please advise me, my heart is broken again.

**A** Having advised parents, and having advised gay people regarding their relationships with their parents and extended family, I have some idea of the depth of pain and sorrow and sense of loss that this kind of situation brings. Allow me to offer a few thoughts for your consideration—thoughts I believe to be Christ-centered:

How you as a parent feel about your daughter being gay—and how your daughter feels about what she thinks you think of her—is a complex situation. We do not arrive at the feelings we have about homosexuality in a vacuum. Society at large influences all of us to feel or not feel a particular way.

Within Christendom, many

proclaim what they feel is right and appropriate, and that influence is also felt—both by those with gay family members and also those who are gay but want some attachment to an established form of Christendom.

Outside Christendom, movies, television and the media at large bombard us with other and opposite messages.

Strong feelings exist on both sides of this issue: feelings of guilt, of shame, of aversion and dislike—feeling hated because they are gay or feeling betrayed because a family member is gay, etc. Most of these feelings are not formed independently—we are being influenced to feel particular ways.

For us, as Christ-followers, the operative question is how Jesus lives in us. How does he empower us to think, act and react? Some say Jesus condemns gays—and that’s all there is to it.

The opposite view is also proclaimed—that in Jesus’ love, he would never disapprove of anyone or condemn any behavior.

As a Christ-follower, I believe there is middle ground. Here are some thoughts in that regard:

**1. God loves the entire world—ALL of us.** That does not mean he condones all behavior, but he loves all despite our behavior, and not because of what God considers to be “good” behavior.

**2. God allows all of us choices.** The evil we see and the problems

we face happen because God allows real human choices. I am not speaking of homosexuality as evil here; I am talking about mass murder, torture, sexual abuse of children, etc.

God could stop wrong choices by simply forcing each of us to behave a particular way. But he doesn’t—and never has. But again, despite the choices we all make, **God loves ALL of us.**

This is not to say God agrees with all our choices—many of our choices grieve him, but God still loves us.

3. You say you love and support your daughter and have always been there for her. Wonderful! As a Christ-follower it seems **you are loving her**, even though you disagree with the type of life she embraces.

4. Yes, your daughter will have to “deal with God”—but then **ALL of us have to “deal with God,”** don’t we? *None of us are righteous, and his grace is sufficient for ALL of us.* God has enough grace and love to “deal with” your daughter. And if I read my Bible correctly and have some sense of God’s nature, he will lovingly reach out to her and touch her life in his time and way. You can rest in Christ, knowing that **your daughter is in good hands**—her heavenly Father’s hands.

5. You did not specifically ask, but in context, your remarks seem to focus on her marriage, and her request that you be there for her.

Some within Christendom say that family, friends and even parents should boycott marriages when they do not approve. The option to boycott has often been applied to same-sex marriages, but also for inter-racial marriages, inter-faith marriages and re-marriages of divorced people. According to some churches, re-marriage of divorcees is adultery—a perpetual state of living in sin.

But how exactly are we, as friends and family of the couple, *helping* or *loving* them by boycotting a marriage we don't condone or agree with? Some respond, "Well, if we attend, they might think we approve." Really? Jesus attended plenty of events—he even visited sinful and spiritually toxic places, but never seemed to be concerned about whether people thought he was condoning their sin by being with them, reaching out to them and making his care and love known.

I know parents of adult children who did not agree—and still don't—with the same-sex marriage of their child. Before attending or not attending the wedding, they talked to their adult child, expressed their misgivings without degenerating into a shouting match, and then either attended or refused to attend, out of love.

Both parties knew how each other felt, and both parties knew the parent's attendance or lack thereof was not a matter of hatred, but a disagreement with their choice. But most of all—the parents made it clear that their love would not change. They communicated that they loved their child despite the choice.

In many cases, parents decided to attend the wedding, even with grave misgivings, because most of all, they wanted their child to know and never doubt their love. I also know gay individuals whose parents did such a thing—and my sense is that there is generally no confusion between the parents and the child—everyone knows how everyone feels. However,

the bond of parent-child was preserved through the willingness of the parent to reach past their absolute disagreement and demonstrate their love.

I do not know all your circumstances—your remarks are brief and I can only speak in broad generalities, based on what I understand of the love and grace of God. I am not telling you how to act or feel, or suggesting that God will not be pleased with you if you do not act or react in a particular way. God knows your grief—he knows the dilemma you feel. I believe from the bottom of my heart that he will empower you, by his grace and through Jesus who lives within you, to come to a decision that you feel is best. And **God will support you.** We are not talking

absolute right and wrong or about whether you decide to attend the wedding or not—we are talking about God's love for you, no matter what—in a similar way that we are talking about your love, given to you by God, for your daughter, no matter what. □

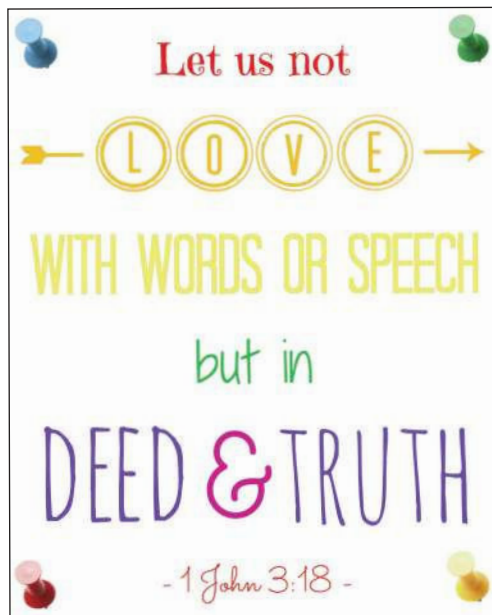
**H**ello Pastor Greg! Thank you so much for your advice. I know that Jesus loves us all, no matter what we do. I know it is all about Jesus' love and God sent his only Son to give us eternal life. That is the most powerful love.

Your advice took so much weight off my shoulders! I don't understand my doubt. It could

be the negative situations surrounding me. I know I am going to be alright and I know that I will spread the love of Jesus Christ, louder and louder. Thank you so much from the bottom of my heart!

I am so proud to be part of CWR/PTM ministries and so proud to have you as my pastor. Thank you again! God and Jesus Christ is what matters most in my life. Without your ministries, I would truly be one lost soul here on earth. My gift from God was to find out the truth and love of Jesus Christ through this ministry. Thank you. I smile with tears.

*"Let us not love with words or speech but in deed and truth."* —1 John 3:18 □



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## **CWR**audio *Summaries*

### **OCTOBER 2017**

**"Good" Christians and Jesus** Sadly, many people think that Christianity is just another role they play, so that they act like a Christian without actually being a Christ-follower. *Week of October 1*

**Walking with Jesus** "Walking With Jesus" is about following and accompanying Christ, and being one with and in him. Our prayer, in the lyrics of that great gospel song, is "a closer walk with thee." *Week of October 8*

**The Case Against Christ-less Religion** Join Greg as he discusses why over 50,000 people a week leave brick-and-mortar churches—and in particular, why he does not describe himself as an "Evangelical" Christian. *Week of October 15*

**No Fear in God's Love** Being driven by fear is part of what it means to be human—beginning to live free from fear is a miraculous gift of God, and can only come from his perfect love. *Week of October 22*

**Treasure in a Jar of Clay** Justified and made right and at one with God by Christ, or by law? Do Christ-followers live life as grace or as karma? *Week of October 29*

### **NOVEMBER 2017**

**Christ Our Universal Hope # 1** In this first sermon of a two-part series, Brad Jersak introduces the beautiful and majestic Christ-centered hope we are given in the gospel. *Week of November 5*

**Christ Our Universal Hope # 2** Dr. Brad Jersak continues and completes a sweeping and glorious survey of unparalleled hope, given by the grace of God. *Week of November 12*

**Generosity Without Expectations** It is one thing to give expecting a return, while "Giving Without Expectations" in exact proportion to the gift given, or even without the expectation of any return whatsoever, is closer to the heart of God. *Week of November 19*

**Christmas—A Confusing Contradiction?** Has your celebration of Christmas become a time when you try to prove your love and earn the love of others—and in so doing, illustrating religion rather than the Jesus Way? *Week of November 26*