



CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

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THE GREAT MIGRATION

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What Others Are Saying...

Volume 9, Number 1
February 2018
www.ptm.org

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

Broken People, Breaking Free

Your writings help me to articulate the gospel as really good news to all the people I meet day in and day out—people wrecked and damaged by how the gospel is preached, particularly here in Northern Ireland. Broken lives who all have a distorted view of God and his love. Our gospel in Northern Ireland isn't good news. I spend my days with people damaged by such teaching. It breaks my heart and I'm crying typing this. On a personal note, I grew up in a horrendous home life—I lived my whole life convinced I was some wretched sinner trying to understand and justify why "God allowed and was in control" of a lot of things that happened. I guess your teachings, your books, your blogs, etc. helped me finally break free.

Belfast

A More Christlike God

I've been reading *AMCG* with a friend. We share our thoughts after each chapter. It has framed the gospel in ways that have brought cohesion to a bunch of thoughts I've had, but I had missed the *kenosis* framework to tie it together. I'm grateful for the effort you put into it. It's a much-needed message for our time.

Texas

I benefit as much from your teaching as anyone I've engaged with. At this point, I have read *A More Christlike God* at least three times front to back, and individual chapters many times more. I trust you will receive this as a positive affirmation, I consider you to be in the top tier of thinkers and communicators of Christian truth.

Cincinnati

Grace Ministry

The monthly ministry letters that Greg Albrecht writes are classics. I started keeping a hardcopy notebook of them and my collection now goes back about 10 years. Of the books, magazines, sermons, daily radio, blogs and so many other resources, I think I value the monthly ministry letters most of all. Thank you, and please don't stop!

Mississippi

Thank you for all the inspirational articles in the December issue of *CWRm*. It's so amazing (and scandalous!) that God loved us so much he humbled himself and became one of us in the person of Jesus Christ. A great reminder as we celebrate the best gift ever at Christmas-time.

Arizona

Dear Readers,



Your generous donations enable us to share this Christ-centered gospel and to inspire others to living faith. A big thank you from all of us at CWR!

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THE GREAT MIGRATION by BRIAN McLAREN

That's wishful thinking, a nonreligious friend of mine said when he heard one of the main proposals of my new book. "You say Christian faith is on the verge of a powerful renaissance, but the facts say otherwise."

Of course, I'm well aware of those facts: Most forms of Western Christian faith are indeed shrinking, wrinkling and fading away. Millennials are indeed migrating out of "organized religion" in unprecedented numbers. We are indeed approaching what Episcopal thinker Ken Howard calls "The Religion Singularity," where the number of denominations and congregations in many regions grows while the number of actual active adherents declines, a

perfect equation for unsustainability.

"Actually," I told my friend, "those facts are not evidence against a spiritual renaissance, but rather prerequisites for it." He looked curious, so I explained that basic systems theory teaches that healthy systems maintain equilibrium. They seek to stay exactly as they are.

"And that's a problem," I explained to my friend. That's why systems tend to punish whistle blowers, reformers, prophets and other enemies of the status quo. That's why a living tradition easily becomes a dead one. It is only when systems are thrown into disruptive disequilibrium that radical change becomes possible.

"So," I added, "those well-publicized facts of decline suggest

to me that the religious system of Western Christianity is only now nearing enough disequilibrium that the kind of epochal change we need is possible."

In other words, *things are only now getting bad enough that Christian faith finally has a chance of getting significantly better.*

It Gets Worse Before It Gets Better

In *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian*, I outline the route many of us are taking to migrate to "better." I sketch out this route as both a participant and observer: I not only advocate for these shifts in theory, but I have had a chance to observe them springing up in practice in diverse



This migration path begins with redefining what Christian faith actually and essentially is...

Thoughtful Christians around the world are coming to see the essence of Christian faith as a way of life, a way of life centered in love.

settings around the world.

This migration path begins (perhaps most controversially) with redefining what Christian faith actually and essentially is. Although it has been long presented as a system of unquestionable beliefs, thoughtful Christians around the world are coming to see the essence of Christian faith as a way of life, a way of life centered in love. To paraphrase St. Paul, “If we have correct beliefs organized in the perfect system, but have not love, we are nothing.”

Such a migration involves making explicit the fact that our beliefs have important social functions, regardless of their validity, and sometimes those functions are actually at odds with a prime directive of love. For example, the policing of belief-correctness empowers religious gatekeepers with the “sword” of inquisition, shaming, expulsion and even damnation. Millions of people respond to threats of excommunication with a shrug: *Why would I want to be part of a group that kicks people out for asking honest questions and reaching honest but different conclusions?* (Their response becomes all the more acute each time those gatekeepers are shown to be hiding all kinds of scandalous behavior under their robes.)

Understanding SBNRs

Many, of course, simply walk away from “organized religion” and join the ranks of the “**Spiritual But Not Religious.**” SBNRs are frequently mocked for being narcissistic, consumeristic and shallow. But I suggest that they are often the opposite. They are looking for a cause beyond themselves that will give them a deep purpose beyond consumption, and frankly, next to nobody is offering it to them. (Except, we might propose,

extremist cults like ISIS.) What better cause might be worth calling people to? *I propose that Christian faith has such a cause buried like a forgotten treasure in its backyard: the cause of becoming authentic lifelong practitioners of*

unpredictability, loving one moment and genocidal the next, derives in large part from an unresolved question in our image of God. Is the God of Christian faith purely benevolent and nonviolent, or not? Is God, as



I propose that Christian faith has such a cause buried like a forgotten treasure in its backyard: the cause of becoming authentic lifelong practitioners of love.

love. If the Christian faith were to define itself as a community dedicated to the formation of people who love in their personal, ecological, and political lives, we would have the makings of a Christian renaissance on our hands.

The other two migrations (theological and missional) flow inevitably from this one.

Our Image of God

Theologically, we must come to terms with the fact that our Euro-American Christian ancestors have often behaved in ways that are the very opposite of love, as any historically-aware Jew, Native American, or formerly colonized African, Indian, Indonesian or other indigenous person can tell you. This historical

author Michael Hardin puts it, Janus-faced, with infinite wrath seething in tension with infinite love? Or is God, as a New Testament writer puts it, “light in whom there is no darkness at all”? To resolve that question requires us growing up at long last in the way we read the Bible, a subject I explore in the book in some detail.

If we make these spiritual and theological moves, we’ll be ready for the missional migration that involves reconfiguring our congregational life around what I call “organizing religion” rather than “organized religion.”

Imagine tens of thousands of pastors and priests organizing their congregants as spiritual activists dedicated to saving the planet from human greed and ignorance, reducing poverty and

increasing economic opportunity, building the conditions for peace, and upholding the dignity of all people (no exceptions). You quickly realize why Christian faith in the West is worth saving, in spite of its deep problems and challenges.

Time To Grow Up

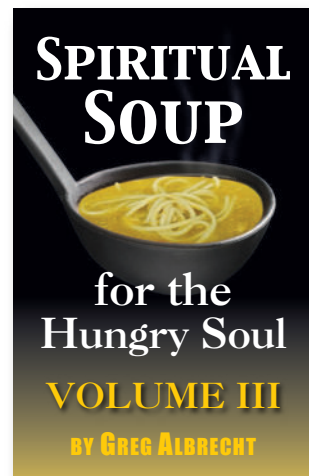
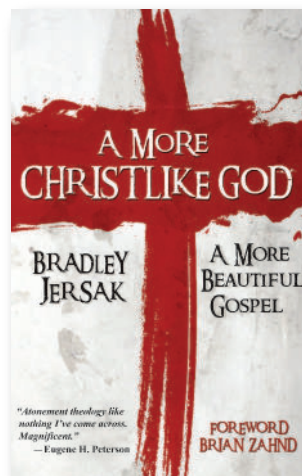
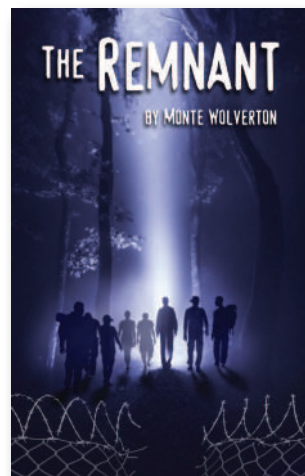
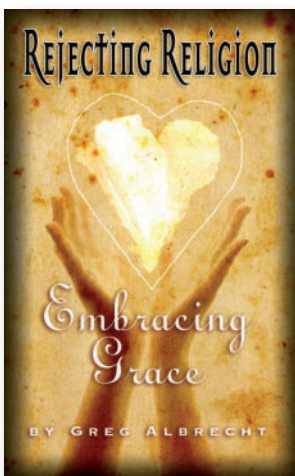
Many of my Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other colleagues see the need for parallel migrations in their traditions, and when we compare notes, we often sense that we are colleagues in a process that Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “the world coming of age.” We have lived long enough with the narrative of decline. It is time to migrate to a new narrative of pregnancy and birth.

I don't claim that such a migration is inevitable: that would indeed be wishful thinking. But I do believe it is possible, now more than ever, and if we are willing to act on that faith, what is possible can become actual and what is now highly problematic can become better. □

Brian McLaren is a popular author, whose latest work is entitled, The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian.

CWRpress

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SOREN KIERKEGAARD: FATHER OF CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT RELIGION

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN BACKHOUSE

CWR magazine is not the first to promote **Christianity Without the Religion**. Some of the 20th century's theological greats—Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth, for example—were great critics of Christless religion as over against the living faith of Christ-centered revelation. But if we were to name “the father of Christianity without the religion” in the modern era, the honor would surely go to the Danish thinker and provocateur, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). He once wrote,

There is nothing so displeasing to God as taking part in all the “religious” Christianity with the claim that this is worshiping God. If you believe, as surely you must, that to steal, rob, commit adultery, and slander is displeasing to God, then official Christianity and its worship is infinitely more abhorrent to him. Again, it is my duty to exclaim, “Whoever you are, whatever in other respects your life may be, by refusing to take part in all this public worship of God as it now is, you have one sin the less, and that a great one.” You have been warned.

A relentless opponent of the Danish Lutheran state-religion, he sowed seeds for today's *nones* (non-affiliated Christians) and *done*s (“done with church” Christians). With that introduction, CWR magazine is pleased to welcome Stephen Backhouse, author of *Kierkegaard: A Single Life* (Zondervan, 2016), to shed more light on this author, his thought and his influence.

CWR: Stephen, could you give us a brief summary of Kierkegaard the man?

Ha! No. I doubt I can briefly summarize Søren Kierkegaard, the funny, cranky, annoying, joyful, worshipful genius who attacked Christendom in the name of Christ and the common man and who

massively overestimated our ability to understand him as he did so. I can tell you that he died in 1855 at the age of 42 after a life of fragile health and probably epilepsy. That he spent almost all his days in Copenhagen, Denmark. That when he died there was a near riot at his funeral because his supporters and his enemies alike were offended he was being given an official Christian burial. That a popular newspaper waged a public campaign of mockery against him. That two generations or so of Danish boys weren't given the name Søren because of the association with him. That he loved—and was loved by—a wonderful woman named Regine but that he broke off their engagement because he knew he was being called to stand outside of the comfortable Christianized life that 19th century Danish marriage represented.

I can tell you that he wrote. A lot. All the time.

“Existentialism” is another way of saying “Existence-ism”... Your existence matters.

That he invented existentialism, that he gave us the idea of “the leap of faith,” and that if

you value “being authentic” or like people who “walk the talk” and “practice what they preach,” and that if you suspect there is a big difference between being a follower of Jesus Christ and being a member of common sense Christian culture, then your imagination has been shaped by Kierkegaard whether you know it or not.

CWR: Kierkegaard has been called the father of existentialism, both Christian and secular. For lay people who've never heard the term, could you define it for us?

I always tell my students that “Existentialism” is another way of saying “Existence-ism.” It's a way of thinking that takes YOUR existence seriously. YOU are more important than any class, family, nation or religion you were born into. The story of YOU includes all these things, but is not exhausted by

them. YOU are more important than any group you happen to be a part of. What is more, your existence matters. You can make real choices and these choices come with responsibility. There is no such thing as an insignificant person, or someone who is only a cog in the machine, despite what we tend to tell ourselves about ourselves. Our groups and societies and systems tend to create narratives that tell their members that unless you subsume all your identity to the herd, you won't be a full person. And we believe it! Kierkegaard was really interested in "authentic identity" which implies there is such a thing as inauthentic identity. Another way of saying this is that for Kierkegaard there are "people" walking around who aren't "persons" yet. Authenticity is a process. A process that is wrapped up in individuals paying attention to the group narratives laying claim on their lives, and getting to the place where they can choose to reject or own these narratives for themselves. ***For Kierkegaard it is not the group in which we live and move and have our being. It is in and before God that all human individuals have their existence.*** Only persons relating to God as individuals (rather than *en masse*) will become Authentic, and this process at its root involves individuals recognizing the choices and responsibility that are inherent in their existence.

Now, the atheist existentialism that most people know about comes from people like Sartre, Camus and Heidegger and their disciples. These guys loved Kierkegaard's emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility and his locating authentic identity in something other than the

culture or inherited system you happened to be born in. What they explicitly rejected and ignored was that Kierkegaard thought all this freedom and choosing happened before the ever-present eye of God, who, by the way exists as a *person*: Jesus Christ. For secular existentialists, you don't become an authentic person till you choose yourself. ***For Kierkegaard, you don't become an authentic person until you choose Jesus.***



CWR: We've seen that he used "religion" as a pejorative and sought for an authentic Christianity in its stead. Or said another way, he claimed that New Testament Christianity was not to be found in the state-church. What were his major beefs with religion?

The first thing to emphasize was that Kierkegaard's problem was with "Christendom," not the

state-church per se.

"Christendom" is a mindset or culture. It's what happens when Christianity becomes inherited tradition, or connected to a particular civilization or set of social moral values. When the "stuff" of Christianity becomes part of our cultural furniture. In Søren's Denmark, the established Lutheran church was a part of how Christendom played out in his context. But you don't need to have a state church to be Christendom!

Any nation that puts god language on its documents and its money, that has churches as landmarks and names its streets and cities after saints, that knows what OMG means or invokes god's blessing in its sentimental songs and bumper stickers or thinks that being patriotic is the same as being Christian is "Christendom." Conservatives are easy targets, but Christendom happens at the other end of the spectrum too. In our Christianized west, all liberal and progressive movements have their roots in the revolution fostered by the early church.

When Jesus is essentially seen as yet another social justice guru, or when specific Christian revelation demanding a personal response is generalized into universal declarations of human rights, you also see "Christendom" at work. ***And Christendom, according to Kierkegaard, is precisely what has done away with Christianity.***

The New Testament puts forward a Jesus who was constantly, potentially, a source of offense to the people around him. A stumbling block. Even Jesus' miracles are not knock-down proof of his divinity. More often than not, they are a cause of offense to the people

who witnessed them (See Matthew 11:4-6).

For the people who knew him, following Jesus didn't mean joining a mass movement going from obvious strength to strength. It meant choosing not to be offended at this normal man with bad breath and a bit of fish in his beard who nevertheless says "Come to me all who are weary and I will give you rest."

Christendom, for Kierkegaard, represents all the civilizing and normalizing tendencies that we humans put between us and the short, sharp, shock of the Incarnation. The Christian

Christendom has done away with Christianity.

CWR: So, the Christian church religion had failed to deliver authentic Christianity. But what was Kierkegaard looking and longing for? What comprises the real deal?

Kierkegaard was not into apologetics. He wasn't trying to prove anything, especially because in a world addicted to common sense (literally the sense we all share in common) "reasonable" Christianity is the death knell to authentic Christianity.

Exercising Holy Spirit gifts. Loving neighbors, enemies and refugees. All the fruits of the Spirit are highly toxic to civilized common sense religiosity if you think about it for a minute. Kierkegaard famously did not have an *ecclesiology*, but that doesn't mean he had no vision for a life lived in imitation of Christ. [Editor's note: "ecclesiology" is theology as applied to the nature and structure of the Christian Church].

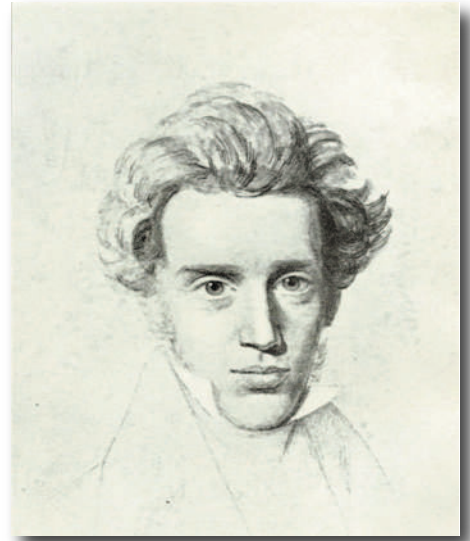
The problem with Christendom and its religion is that it takes away the potential offensiveness of the Incarnation altogether.

religion is one such mechanism whereby Jesus is either made so obviously "God" that belief in him is "common sense," or he's so benign that following him is tantamount to being a moral, civilized citizen. Yet "faith" in Jesus can only happen when it's a right relation to Jesus as he actually is. The person Jesus says he is also God. Does this offend you? Yes? Well then you are a reasonable, normal person. No? Congratulations, you are a *Christ-ian*.

The problem with Christendom and its religion is that it takes away the potential offensiveness of the Incarnation altogether, thus denying the possibility that individuals living in Christendom will get to choose either for or against Christ. This very much includes the mass of people who already think they are Christians, or think they know what it is, thanks to their relationship to cultural religion. Hence Kierkegaard's charge that

Common sense is a fickle, dangerous guide. Why would we try to hitch our cart to that horse? One of Jesus' main activities was to draw people out from—and even set them against—the common groups and inherited traditions which laid claim to their lives. In Kierkegaard's scheme, choosing not to be offended by Jesus necessarily results in people who start to imitate Jesus. By turning to Jesus, you are turning away from other grounds of identity. Thus, the disciples themselves become potential sources of offense to the groups that used to lay claim on their allegiance. But disciples don't cause offense by being jerks, any more than Jesus was a jerk.

Think how easy it is to offend our social, political and religious groups by simply practicing authentic Christian love. Forgiveness. Generosity to the undeserving poor. Mercy to the deserving wrong. Healing the sick.



CWR: In his condemnation of running with the crowd, Kierkegaard called believers to understand they would stand before God as individuals, responsible for their own lives, faith and choices. That makes sense—but is he not also responsible for our radical individualism that has devolved into isolation and alienation? How might he respond to that charge?

Hold on there. If you are a radically isolated individual, then at least part of the responsibility has to lie with you! But I know what you mean.

As I think is obvious by now, Kierkegaard was definitely an individualist. However, he tried to separate people from their herds

not because he hated humanity so much, but because of the opposite. He thought true sociality can only happen when people love each other properly. And ***people will only love each other properly when they have authentic identity.*** The problem with modern life is that we have powerful group-based sentiments which claim to be offering more to individuals than they in fact deliver.

Take patriotism for example. In his book *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard reflected on the *Christ-ian* call to love the neighbor. He wrote this book precisely as his answer to the charge that he was a radical isolationist.

He looked at different types of “love” to see how well they serve “the neighbor.” Some forms of love, like patriotism, like to shout loud and long about how unifying it is, and how good it is for people to be caught up together in a great aggregate, finding their identity in a common love of the group.

Yet, Kierkegaard points out, the logic of patriotic love is the logic of banding together with people who look like me and sound like me as much as possible. But if I’m aiming to love only those who look like me and sound like me, then the ultimate horizon of such a love—*is me*. ***Love based on tribalism is, ultimately, deeply selfish and isolating.***

Incidentally, we can see this in action: despite the story patriots tell themselves, the fruit of fervent patriotic sentiment in a country is never unity. It always leads to factionalism and ever smaller and tighter groups of who counts as a “real American” or a “true Brit” or whatever.

It is significant that ***Jesus commanded love of neighbor not love of nation.*** In fact, he defined the neighbor precisely as the person who does not share your ethnic, political or religious affiliation. The neighbor is to be loved regardless of what group they belong to, and, indeed, it is usually the presence of exclusive group-love in some form or other that has resulted in the neighbor being in need in the first place.

So, one of Kierkegaard’s answers to the charge of alienation is to challenge how well group-based infatuation serves the actual people in front of us, as opposed to some romantic notion of The People. When an individual has truly *become* (or is



Stephen Backhouse

becoming) a *person* in the image of Christ they might not be easily identifiable as a loyal member of their tribe or class, but they sure are good at loving others. This isn’t a theory. You can witness this wherever authentic Christianity takes root. No alienation here!

CWR: For those who’ve embraced the idea of Christianity Without the Religion, what takeaways might Kierkegaard offer us? How might he continue to provoke us?

Another thing I always say to my students is to let Kierkegaard hit them where it hurts. Stand there and take your medicine. He’s only doing it because he loves you! He saw himself as a surgeon who cuts out cancer, or a doctor who makes the patient vomit up the poison. The poison in this case being Christendom.

Kierkegaard can be hard to read, for sure. In an age where “becoming a Christian” was as easy as being born, he wanted to make it more difficult. Also, a lot of his books were written pseudonymously, often as a way to deliberately foster a dialogue with the reader, other Danish authors and even other of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms!

However, nearer to the end of his life he laid off the convoluted texts and wrote more clearly. These writings can be sharp, angry, and often very funny. They are also deeply *Christ-ian* in a way that some people who don’t understand the difference between Christendom and Christianity find baffling. □

Stephen Backhouse is a lecturer in Social and Political Theology at St. Mellitus College, London, England and author of Kierkegaard: A Single Life.

CWR/PTM News, Updates & Coming Attractions

Brad Jersak: Editor-in-Chief

Regular readers of CWR magazine may need no introduction to Dr. Brad Jersak, but to bring everyone up to speed, Brad has served as a writer, consultant and editor for PTM, beginning with his first article in Spring, 2011.

In 2015, Brad wrote his first CWR press book, *A More Christlike God* and then, as of January 2016, PTM President Greg Albrecht asked him to serve as editor-in-chief of CWRm.

Eden, Brad's wife of 31 years, has also written articles in recent issues of the magazine.

This past year has been busy for the Jersak family, with two of their three sons getting married and the arrival of their first granddaughter, all within 2017. □



Brad with Greg Albrecht



Eden & Brad Jersak

CWR Press

In addition to a wide range of electronic and print resources (see www.ptm.org), Plain Truth Ministries publishes six issues of the Plain Truth and six issues of CWR magazine each year. Another media ministry of PTM is CWR press, our book publishing wing.

Recent works have included Monte Wolverton's post-apocalyptic novel, *The Remnant*, and Greg Albrecht has released volume 3 of the popular *Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul* series.

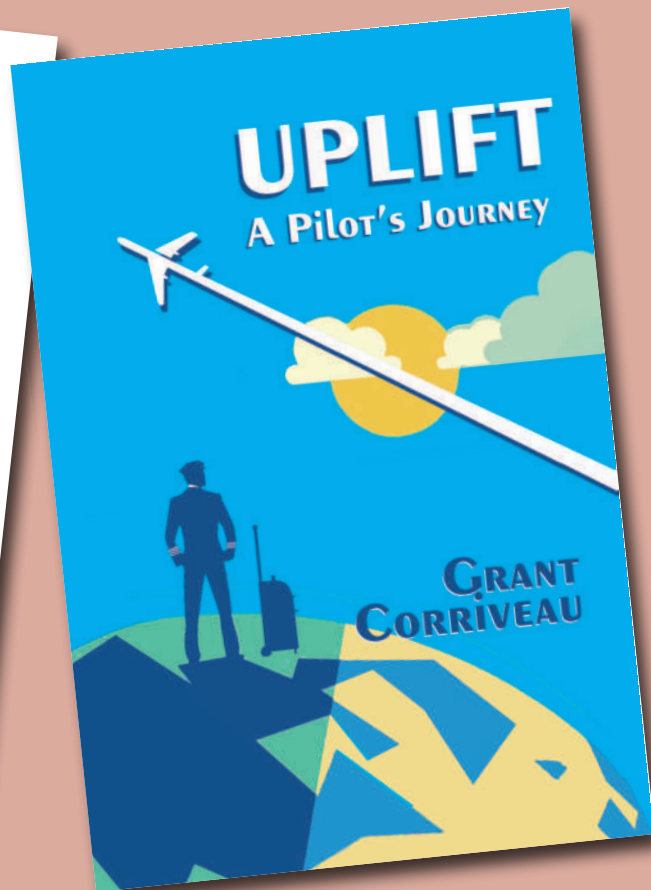
We're also pleased to announce the 2017 translation of Brad Jersak's award-winning *A More Christlike God* into Dutch, under the title, *Zo Zoon, Zo Vader* (Like Son, Like Father). □

2018 Releases

For our 2018 line-up, CWR press is excited to introduce the memoirs of Captain Grant Corriveau, *Uplift: A Pilot's Journey*. Grant's reflections on his life as a commercial pilot are humorous, nerve-wracking and, of course, inspiring.

Last June, Greg and Karen Albrecht rendezvoused with the Jersaks and Grant and his wife France in beautiful Whistler, British Columbia. The goal was, first of all, to deepen relationships—but we also worked together to strategize and clarify the direction of *Uplift* and Jersak's first novel, *The Great Descent*, due for publication down the road.

All in all, it was a productive time in the larger context of PTM's ongoing task of prayerful vision-casting. We want to let our readers know that we're very encouraged. So, stay tuned! □



Greg & Karen
Albrecht

Brad & Eden
Jersak

France & Grant
Corriveau

Inconspicuous Hope by Cindy Brandt

“Whenever I’m approached by an evangelist—by a Christian missionary—I know I’m up against someone so obsessed and narrowly focused that it will do me absolutely no good to try and explain or share my own value system. I never want to be rude to them, of course, but never have any idea how to respond to their attempts to convert me; in short order, I inevitably find myself simply feeling embarrassed—first for them, and then for us both. I’m always grateful when such encounters conclude.”—K.C., Fresno



A few years ago, John Shore collected comments from Craigslist sites all over America asking *What Non-Christians Want Christians To Hear*. The results are cringe-worthy. As a progressive Christian, I consider myself part of a movement to try to revamp the brand of Christianity, defining ourselves as **love over hate, inclusion over wall-building, listening instead of preaching**.

As a faith blogger, tracking these larger trends of religion, getting a feel for the cultural

pulse is at least fascinating to me, and at most helps me to find the role I play in shaping public conversations about faith. As a Christian and a human being, I realize that my scathing criticisms against Christian institutions that systematically harm those within it, is not much more than throwing tiny white eggs against a large brick wall. *Telling atheist friends that no, my Christian faith is about love, feels weak against evidence of Christians spewing hate in the public arena.* For every sensible, compassionate, subversive Christian article I post onto my facebook wall, a host of rhetorical blog posts reaffirming the status quo are shared and retweeted multiple times more. All of this makes me want to immediately run and soak in a swearsy bubble bath.

loudly and harshly against institutional injustices that malign, marginalize, and oppress the vulnerable. **Brutally tear down rhetoric that takes up harmful residence in the tender souls of children and youth.** Keep pointing an accusing finger at the ideologies that threaten our common good. Keep flinging those eggs with as much strength as we can muster against the brick wall, even if just to watch them shatter into fragile white bits without making even so much as a dent, because revolutions can’t happen without brokenness.

But...reserve gentleness and patience for the individuals inside the system. I remember Jesus preaching without abandon against the evils of greed but extending friendship to the wealthy tax collector,

This is how we make important changes—barely, poorly, slowly.

—Anne Lamott

Systems are not built overnight. For an empire to gain the kind of power that warrants its formidable status takes years, generations even, building up a loyal following with impenetrable defensive teaching, institutions, and resources steadily feeding the masses. To change the minds of people who have been taught one thing for several generations is going to take more than one facebook comment. I am reminded of what Anne Lamott says about making important changes—*barely, poorly, slowly.*

This is how not to despair in the laborious work of subverting systems. Thrust all of our angry energies against it. Speak up

Zacchaeus. Jesus’ message was so revolutionary as to upset his contemporary Roman empire, and yet he had great love for a Roman soldier, compassionately healing the centurion’s servant.

This is not to say we must give abundant grace to oppressors. No, I believe we must always side with the vulnerable. *This is to say that we can’t make any progress in changing a system if we forget that systems are made up of individual human beings.* The “masses” can form a terrifying machine, but the persons who make up the masses each contain dynamic personalities, history and stories. And while yes, some perpetuate the poison of a corrupt system, there remains the potential for

every divine image bearer to reflect the goodness of a good God.

People change, even when systems don't.

When we learn to zero in on individuals, our focus shifts from macro-level progress to spotting small pockets of hope.

I do despair, sometimes, that the reputation of Christianity is irreparably damaged, but my hope is kindled when I encounter *Christians from all along the theological spectrum who are speaking and doing beautiful things.*

Even in the darkest periods of human history, there arise individual heroes—there are Oskar Schindlers in Nazi Germany, and Malala Yousafzais in Taliban-controlled Pakistan.

Isn't it hopeful that in every horrific tragedy there are *always helpers to be found?*

I believe our best hope for sustaining a work of *barely, poorly and slowly* changing the world for the better is to counteract cynicism against the system with the enduring hope of every individual light.

This, after all, is the Christian story. That the dramatic reversal of human history comes not through an upheaval of the powerful systems but through unlikely individual characters we encounter in the biblical narrative.

Miracles will come through the ordinary. Heroes come in small sizes. Hope will be inconspicuous.

Pay attention, lest we lose heart. □

Cindy Brandt is an author from Taiwan. She blogs at www.CindyWords.com and writes about "raising children un-fundamentalist."

The Rose by Eden Jersak

I recently had surgery to remove half my thyroid and two growing lumps. When I went in to see the surgeon, I heard some news I hadn't expected.

The good news is that I do not have cancer! The pathology report had taken unusually long—the reason for this was changes to the rules about what constitutes "cancer." In his words, I "dodged a bullet." The sobering truth is that three years ago, I would have been diagnosed with cancer and given aggressive treatment. For now, doctors will monitor my blood-work and my remaining thyroid functions, keeping watch with regular ultrasounds.

With my husband Brad out of town, I planned to go to the appointment on my own, but my friend Lorie graciously offered to accompany me.

I had honestly not expected to hear just how close a call this was, so having a friend by my side was much appreciated. After the appointment, we headed to the coffee shop to sip a nice hot "cuppa," and to enjoy a bit of sun on our faces.

I called Brad with the news and waited for Lorie to bring our drinks to the patio. I was enjoying the warmth of the sun and the view of Mount Baker.

Lorie and I were talking over my results and sipping our drinks when I felt a presence come up from my right.

I looked up to see a homeless man. He was holding a white rose wrapped in a black cloth. He looked at me and said, "I feel like I'm supposed to give you this right now."

I looked over at Lorie and then back to this presence and had no words. He laid the rose down on the railing beside me, and repeated, "I'm supposed to give this to you; it's freshly picked."



I took the flower and laid it on the table. As he walked away, he never turned back, and then disappeared into the parking lot. We were both left speechless for a few moments, and then the tears came.

I have been very aware of God with me in this journey, but that morning's more vivid demonstration of how close he is has me moved to tears again.

I'm so grateful for all the prayers, thoughts, acts of kindness and love I've received. My prayer is that you will be aware of God's presence with you today. I pray that you will be open to receiving God's presence in whatever shape or form it might take, and that you might even be willing to demonstrate God's presence to someone else.

My God's name is Emmanuel, and he is with me. □

Eden Jersak is the author of Rivers from Eden: 40 Days of Intimate Conversation with God.



CWRm

GREG ALBRECHT

“God’s Plan for Your Life?”

Question: Recently, my younger brother’s divorce was finalized. The years leading up to this have been painful for him, like a terminal illness. He did everything he could to keep the marriage going, including counseling (his wife would not go with him), advice from friends and the ministry at his church.

He’s gone through anger, bitterness and depression, and now, unfulfilling dates as well.

Whenever he came to me with these things I tried to point him to Jesus. He’d respond, “He’s not here with me” or “He’s not lying next to me in bed.”

This last Sunday, I decided to ask one of the ministers at our church what he thought about the

situation and what more I might say or do to help my brother.

After a long talk, the pastor said he’d pray for my brother and that I should keep him updated.

Today, he sent me a link to a message by John Piper, entitled, “This illness is for the glory of God.”

The bottom line here is not my brother, although, if you have thoughts that might help, I won’t turn it down. I know he needs a connection with Jesus beyond a passing relationship with church attendance.

The message I listened to said,

“Do whatever it takes to get another person to be passionate about God.” *How do you get someone else to be passionate about God or anything else?*

When I listen to your messages and read books like *A More Christlike God*, I feel as though it’s simple. Just love others as myself (not that loving others OR myself is easy), help where and whenever I can, and God will do the rest.

When I listen to or read other people who are supposed to be in the know, I feel like there’s no way I’ll ever be with Christ. The only thing that keeps me going is verses like John 3:15—“everyone who believes may

dilemma and a conundrum for all of us. What is God doing, or not, and why is he doing it, or not?

These thoughts come to mind:

1) I know the thinking that leads to the advice and preaching shared in the message you referred to. To put it plainly, I absolutely reject the thinking and theology of John Piper, for so many reasons that we discuss in our resources. But then again, he and his followers would absolutely reject mine, so there you go!

But you did ask—so my response is this: that particular message is filled with the classic religious thinking that says

there is a divine reason for everything that happens, and that God is often trying to teach us something.

The thinking is bound up in the

cause-and-effect logic that things happen because of something else—like the physical law that every action causes a reaction.

However, the Bible is clear—Jesus is clear—the gospel is clear:

a) God’s ways are not always easy for us to discern.

b) God is not always trying to “teach us a lesson.”

In fact, many of the trials in our lives are not God’s punishment or correction at all. Many things that happen to us occur by time and chance, caused either by natural events and accidents or by the actions of other human beings.

The grace of God teaches us to surrender to God, to trust him, and to yield our lives to him, knowing we won’t always understand.

have eternal life in him.”

This is a selfish letter, yet something that plagues me always. I can’t live in a vacuum; I need to deal with this feeling of never being or doing enough. At the same time, I believe that ONLY Jesus makes us enough.

So, I hope that I’m not wasting your time, but thank you for your time, as always. You and CWR remain in my prayers.

Answer: Hello, dear friend. You are *not* wasting my time! I am privileged to serve you, in the name of Jesus, as best I can. The question you ponder is a

Some believe that up to eighty percent of all suffering in this world is caused by the hands of other humans (not by actions God takes to punish people).

We, as followers of Jesus, are not immune to the world around us. Accidents happen. Diseases spread. Other human beings are violent and commit crimes against us. Floods, hurricanes and earthquakes befall one and all.

Jesus explained this when he spoke of the tower of Siloam that fell (Luke 13:4). For more, I suggest you re-read my brief article in the July 2017 issue of *Plain Truth* magazine, "What is God's Plan For Your Life?"

2) You mention "God will do the rest." Indeed, that's a central point of trust, for us. There is so much in this world that we cannot do, and we will torment ourselves and stress our lives immeasurably thinking we can, when those things are beyond us.

We surrender all to God. We do not know—and God did not pretend to tell us all there is to know—as to why he does or does not do, or why he does not intervene in so many situations.

The human desire to control our own lives and to provide for our security is so strong that an entire industry stands at the ready to provide false and misleading answers. Sadly, some of that industry exists within the world of religion, where religious professionals give answers in the name of God that are far beyond their paygrade. But people keep listening and coming back for assurances, because their hunger to know is so great.

The grace of God teaches us to surrender to God, to trust him, and to yield our lives to him—knowing we won't always understand.

3) Your letter to me is not selfish—it is human. We all have the same questions you ponder. We all feel that if we would just do more, then God will surely do what we want him to. But no—that is a fool's errand. God already loves us as much as he ever will.

We are not in a position to vainly try somehow, some way, to please and appease him.

Jesus asks us to trust him.

Jesus invites us to believe him.

Jesus invites us to embrace the grace of God.

Some say, "Oh, that's too easy—that's just an excuse."

I reply, "Oh no, it is the most difficult thing in the world to trust, believe, surrender, yield and embrace the grace of God. I'll tell you what is easy: to follow the dictates of religion that suggest if we just do more, run faster, give more, pray harder—

then maybe, some day, if we catch God on a good day, he will give us what we want."

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about what we want or what we think God ought to be doing. Jesus does not sentence us to a religious prison, a chain gang or a salt mine, where we endlessly toil away, watched over by religious overseers, hoping one day that God will give us what we want.

That is legalistic and oppressive religion, not the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is what Paul means in passages like Galatians 3:21-25 (and its larger context) and Galatians 5:1-6, as well as a myriad of other passages, in Romans, in Colossians and in the book of Hebrews.

Jesus alone does for us what we can never do for ourselves. Hold on to that!

4) You are correct—Jesus alone does for us what we can never do for ourselves. Hold on to that! Trust Jesus, put your faith in him,

and not in human authorities. Believe and embrace the grace of God—you will not always be given easy and convenient (as humans would judge them) answers, for that is not part of the gospel. But you will be given the peace of God which passes all understanding.

I hope this helps.

In friendship and in Christ,
Greg Albrecht

Response. Thank you so very much for your letter. I greatly appreciate it and the love that flows through it. I will re-read "What Is God's Plan for Your Life."

Thank you so much for your love and work.

While your messages are clear and pure, it's like putting on white clothing, then going out in the yard to work. Before long, it's not white any longer. Then, we have to go wash out the clothing again. That is exactly how it is with the great message that comes through *CWR*—I need to keep going back to it.

Thank you again. □

"God is ready to assume full responsibility for the life wholly yielded to him." —Andrew Murray

"The man or woman who is wholly surrendered to Christ can't make a wrong choice—any choice will be the right one." —A.W. Tozer

All are welcome and invited to join us at **CWR audio**, where we believe church is who you are, God's people by God's grace, more than merely a place where you "go."

- **TIRED** of hearing of the monster God who threatens to punish you?
- **SICK** of humanly imposed rules and regimens that put behaving ahead of belonging?
- **DONE** with bad experiences with people who called themselves "the church"?

Come and join Greg Albrecht, the voice of CWRaudio—we're about all Jesus all the time! The following guide lays out each weekly CWRaudio sermon for the next two months. Please join us and invite a friend!

CWRaudio *Summaries*

FEBRUARY 2018

Friends, Not Servants Does God tolerate you and me because his job description says he has to, or does he enjoy and love us as his dear children? *Week of February 4.*

"Stick and Stones" In the midst of an embattled world, engaged in a vicious war of words, Paul admonishes us to speak graciously, using flavorful, edifying and uplifting language. *Week of February 11.*

Setting Out for Jerusalem "Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51) – fully committed to his mission and the cross that awaited him, because of his love for you and me. *Week of February 18.*

How Sorry Are You? It is far easier for you and me to accuse another person of being a sorry excuse of a human being than it is for us to seriously consider our own broken and flawed condition. *Week of February 25.*

March 2018

The Universal Body of Christ While some Christ-followers choose to be members of a denomination or a brick and mortar congregation, they are ultimately members of the universal body of Christ, which knows no boundaries. *Week of March 4.*

Amazing Generosity God is the Great Giver, and he is the fountainhead of all our generous giving, which flows to others by his own lavish grace. *Week of March 11.*

Seeing God As He Is The great tragedy that exists within Christendom today is that so many do not see God as he is, they see God the way they have been taught – through their ingrained predispositions. *Week of March 18*

Why Jesus Rode Into Town When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, the crowds saw something totally different than the purpose for which Jesus had come. *Week of March 25.*