

PLAIN TRUTH®

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Enslaved by Religion...

Or Free in Christ?

By Greg Albrecht

Change isn't easy...changing the way you live means changing what you believe about life. That's hard... when we make our own misery, we sometimes cling to it even when we want to change because the misery is something we know. The misery is comfortable.—Dean Koontz, author

most of us don't like change. I don't. I am sick and tired of being told every two or three years that my electronic devices are now obsolete. I have no desire to camp out and wait in line for the latest, greatest Smart-phone. I resent being told that I need to purchase, install and download new

upgrades/software. Why can't they make something that lasts until I die—and then change it?

Change IS difficult for us—but it is one of the core elements of human life. Change happens—more quickly and more often than we like—but it happens.

When it comes to following Jesus, the “same old, same old” is not on the agenda. The grace of God blows like the wind (John 3:8)—God the Holy Spirit empowers us to follow Jesus. As we follow Jesus, the grace of God will take us into uncharted territory, away from the well-worn paths of that “old time religion.”

“Old time religion” masquerading as Christianity has a shameful

history of warfare and hatred. The entrenched religious bureaucracy of Christ-less religion has supported slavery and opposed civil rights, even in the name of Jesus.

Christendom at large has often turned a blind eye and deaf ear to the poor and all those in desperate need of help. Christendom at large has historically ignored the abuse of women and marginalized the needs of children.

Jesus proclaimed that his teaching would be like new wine (Matthew 9:17)—the gospel of Jesus Christ is dynamic and bursts traditional religious wineskins. While life in Christ is filled with adventure and new challenges, Christ-less religion is

adverse to change. Christ-less religion is not going to change what it perceives as a winning game of enslaving people and holding them captive to its laws and superstitions.

Are you comfortable with the misery you experience from religious traditions and customs? Then you will be stuck in the mud of old-time religion. Do you want new life and a breath of fresh air? Seek after the dynamic new wine of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christ-less religion vigorously defends its lifeless, dying beliefs and practices because it is the great beneficiary of its oppressive rules and authoritarian agenda.

inside

Success by Excess Is Not True Greatness p2

Thanksgiving Banquets and the Kingdom of Heaven p5

When Life Downsizes p7

Quotes & Connections p8

Continued on page 3



Success by Excess Is Not True Greatness

During a school vacation, Billy stayed at his grandmother's house, where she introduced him to the game of Monopoly. As you know, the game of Monopoly is about money and power—it's all about acquiring, purchasing and owning more property, more buildings and more companies than anyone else. It's ruthless—one cannot win the game of Monopoly until one bankrupts one's opponents.

During his week with his grandma, Billy learned that she was a Monopoly expert. They played Monopoly every day and she never lost a single game. She never patronized Billy by letting him win. At the end of the week she told him he needed to learn how to play the game and the next time he visited they could play again.

Billy was enormously competitive, so when he went home he devoted himself to the game of Monopoly. He played the game with his parents and with his friends. He learned as much as he could about Monopoly. His goal was to get good enough to beat his grandma. About a year later, during his summer vacation Billy had the opportunity to spend another week with Grandma.

The first morning he was there, out came the Monopoly game, spread out on the dining room table. The very first game they played, it took Billy, now a year older and much more skilled at the game of Monopoly, a little less than two hours to beat his grandmother.

When the game was over Billy's grandma congratulated him about how well he had learned to play the game. Now, she told him, he was

ready to learn the toughest part of the game of Monopoly. "What's that Grandma?" Billy asked.

His grandmother reached over to the side of the table where the empty Monopoly box was, and she started putting all the cards and money and player tokens and game pieces back into the box.

As she was refilling the Monopoly box, she looked Billy in the eye and said, "Billy, the toughest part of the game is that **when the game is over, it all goes back into the box.**"

Those who appear to have more materialistic success in the game of life are just the same as those who lose and fail—**when the game is over, it all goes back in the box.**

Success in our world is normally defined as excess. Success is regarded as a comfortable and secure lifestyle when one has the extravagant resources to meet all their desires, wants and needs. That definition has been the primary definition of success through all human history—success has always been perceived as riches and power.

I have a lifelong devotion to the game of baseball. Baseball is a statistic driven game—a player's performance is judged using many standards of measurement by which abilities and contributions are assessed. Those who follow the game of baseball closely know of these many gauges and yardsticks used to determine success or failure in the game.

One of the most traditional standards and measuring tools that spans the history of the sport is called an "error." An *error* only occurs when a player is involved defensively—trying to catch or field the ball so that the opponents, who

are "at bat" offensively, will not score runs.

Baseball professionals and dedicated fans know that the number of *errors* a player has committed can be misleading. The mere fact that one player has fewer *errors* than another does not make that player a better defensive player.

Many players who are given an error by the official scorekeeper make extraordinary efforts trying to make a great play—but fail. One cannot make an *error* unless one touches the ball. And then, having at least touched the ball, they fail to record an "out."

One can avoid making an *error* by not trying to make a play—but that doesn't mean that such a player is a good defensive player. Many great defensive players have numerous *errors* because they try hard but sometimes fall short.

What is success? What is failure? What is weakness and what is strength?

Our goal as Christ-followers is not to avoid making mistakes and thus "win." Our goal in Christ is not to be physically filled with all of our sensory needs and desires—our goal as Christ-followers is to experience the joy that comes from serving others in Jesus' name.

The primary result of following Jesus is not economic benefits and good physical health. The primary result of following Jesus is service to others in the name of Jesus. □

—Greg Albrecht

Join us for the complete message "Success by Excess Is Not True Greatness" at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of Nov. 11, 2018.

Continued from page 1

Fear of Change

Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.—Galatians 3:23-25

Before **new, vital and dynamic** faith arrived, we were held prisoners by the law of religious expectations and quotas. The law was put in charge so that we might be led to Jesus Christ. Now that Jesus has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

Jesus came and set us free. When we accept, embrace, believe and trust in Jesus we are free (Galatians 5:1). By the grace of God we are free from any system of rules or superstitious religious teachings that might hold us in bondage.

Love replaces law.

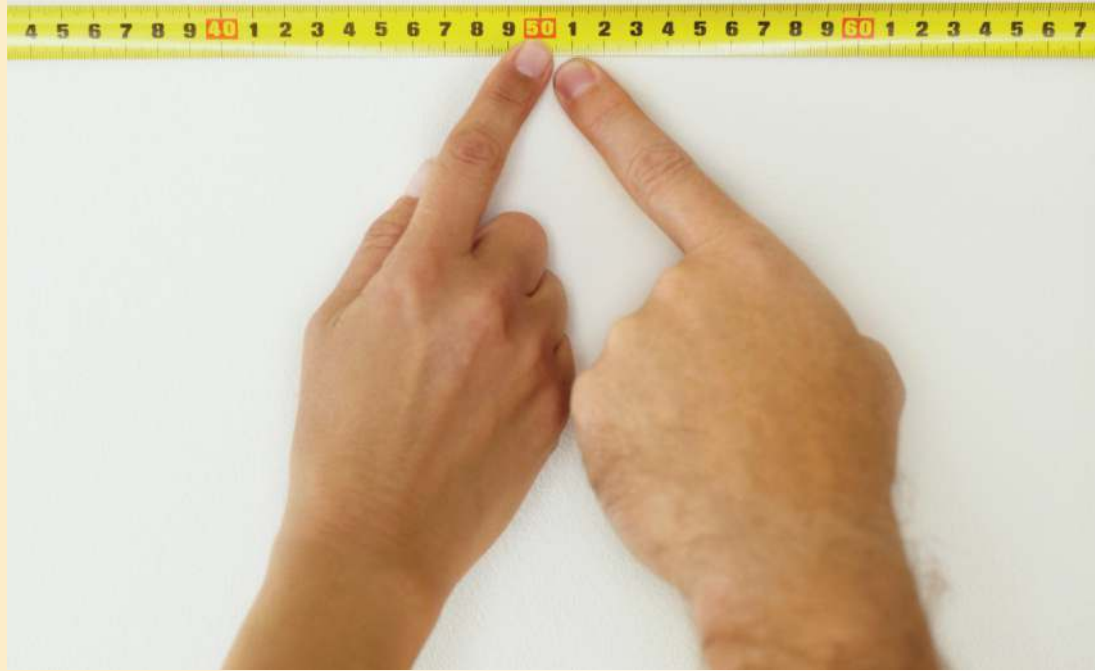
Love is a living relationship—that's why Paul writes about our adoption and transformation from slaves to full heirs of all that belongs to Father God.

Jesus came to offer a complete transformation, a total healing from all relationships solely based on law—to a relationship of love and grace. Jesus offers **new, vital and dynamic** faith rather than the oppression of religious bondage.

Jesus did not come to introduce a new religion to this world. The world has always had more than enough religions that enslave and oppress. Jesus came to bring a new way of knowing and relating to God—a **new, vital and dynamic faith** by grace through faith, in and through the new life of Christ that he offers to all humankind.

When we accept the invitation Jesus gives us to follow him and trust him we are transformed from trying to please and appease God with laws, procedures, rituals and ceremonies. By the grace of God we are spiritually reborn into a relationship of love and grace.

Why do people reject God's grace and remain enslaved to oppressive



By his grace our faith is new, vital and dynamic, rather than a cold, impersonal standard of measurement that deceives us about the nature of our relationship with God...

Christ-less religion? Because slaves are comforted when they can see and feel and touch all of the standards expected of them—religion is all about the externals.

When we are free in Christ, we trust in God's grace and we walk by a **new, vital and dynamic faith**. Because truly trusting God and living by his grace is so difficult, many choose, like the Israelites in the wilderness, to return to slavery. They reasoned that as bad as Egypt was at least there they could calculate and see where their next meal was coming from.

A Living Relationship—Not a Lifeless, Extinct Measuring Stick

Religion: *the traditional and widely embraced but fatally flawed notion that our performance of the right rules and rituals will gain us a higher standing with God than we would have otherwise enjoyed.* Religion insists that our relationship with God is **up to us**.

The Gospel: *God loves us on the basis of his grace. Our relationship with God is initiated and maintained on the strength of his love—not our deeds, creeds, efforts or behaviors.*

God's love is in spite of love, not because of love. Authentic Christianity teaches that our relationship with God is **all about him**.

God's love and grace are alive. By his grace our faith is **new, vital and dynamic**, rather than a cold, impersonal standard of measurement that deceives us about the nature of our relationship with God—and whether he is pleased with us or angry with us.

Of course, those who know no other way of life than the prison of law are outraged at Jesus. That's why people who were slaves of religion crucified him. They were outraged at his teaching of God's grace—Paul says those laws were not only inconsequential, but they were/are a curse (Galatians 3:13).

Christ-less religion believes it can (indeed it believes it "must") be disdainful of all who differ with it, condemning them as "outsiders" and "unbelievers" and "unsaved."

People are content to live under some rule of religious law because it offers them the illusion of security. There are many different measuring sticks and standards of law that

promise, like a mirage in the desert, a mystical and mythical promise *in the sweet by and by*. There are thousands of varieties of religious law, but they are all based on one common denominator—you must obey religious law or God will roast you for all eternity in hell fire.

People today who are religiously brainwashed, who are slaves of legalistic religion, are scandalized by the idea that it is possible to know God and relate to him on the basis of his love and grace rather than by law. What standard, they ask, will we be held to if we don't have laws to tell us what to do, when to do it, how often to do it and how much of it to do?

What is the standard that God uses to measure Christ-followers who have embraced the new covenant? God is pleased with us on the basis of his grace—he does not evaluate us or judge us or condemn us on the basis of laws—we stand before God because of Jesus.

New Wine Into New Wineskins

The word “law” is often used in the New Testament to speak of the old order of things under the old covenant, as contrasted with the new covenant, given to us by Jesus.

The new covenant is not based on the Ten Commandments but rather the new commandments, which are: Love God and love your neighbor. The new covenant is new, vital and dynamic faith.

The new covenant is new wine, because it promises that Jesus will live in us and that by his power and by his love we will be enabled and empowered to do what we can never do of and by ourselves.

The old covenant is: “You must do it or else.”

The new covenant is: “If you accept God's grace, then Jesus will do, as he lives within you, what you can never do.”

That's why Martin Luther boldly proclaimed, “Christianity is not a new law!” Sadly, much if not most of Christendom today, believes and practices legalistic religion.

Many people who think they are practicing Christianity are just practicing another form or permutation of religion—another way of attempting to please and appease God on the basis of human performance.

It's so much easier not to change—it's so much easier to reject Jesus and live by religious rules and regulations. It's so much easier to live by physical, religious standards and guidelines and measuring sticks that tell us exactly how well we are doing, or not.

Embracing Grace and Trusting Jesus = Freedom in Christ

When we fully embrace Jesus, we embrace freedom in Christ. But it's hard to live free, by God's grace. It's so much easier to slave in the fields of religion and its taskmasters.

It's so much easier if your pastor, priest or congregation tells you that you are either right or wrong—because if you “just trust God” how will you have any measuring sticks, standards or calculations?

It's much easier to obey a law we can touch, smell, feel and taste than trust in God's unseen grace.

But the birth of Jesus radically proclaims a new way—the way of grace. Living by God's grace means living in and through Christ, living with our family and friends with forgiveness and grace.

Living by God's grace is a frightening way to live because God's grace means living free—being free in Christ means that we live with and by Jesus. He is our Lord. Jesus alone—not Jesus plus something. Only Jesus.

The problem with living in and with Jesus is that Jesus seems to always do things in unexpected ways—at least by our human standards.



Living by God's grace and being a Christ-follower means living free in Christ, not bound by laws, but trusting in God's love and grace, energized and empowered by our living Lord.

Like loving you and me no matter what. Wow! That's tough to believe, isn't it?

Like showing up as God in the flesh, as a baby, in a barnyard in Bethlehem.

Living by God's grace and being a Christ-follower means living free in Christ, not bound by laws, but trusting in God's love and grace, energized and empowered by our living Lord Jesus Christ.

What will it be for you?

- Moses or Jesus?
- Law or God's grace and love?
- Attempting to earn God's favor

by your religious performance, or accepting and trusting in Jesus, who did and does for us what we can never do ourselves?

• The oppression and bondage of Christ-less religion, or **new, vital and dynamic faith** in Christ? □



Thanksgiving Banquets and the Kingdom of Heaven

By Brad Jersak

I shall never forget my first Thanksgiving celebration in America. As a Canadian, I had already practiced our day of gratitude with a turkey dinner six weeks earlier.

North of the border, our “holy days” focus more on Easter and Christmas, while Thanksgiving is a relatively modest affair—held earlier so we can enjoy red and gold autumn leaves rather than howling blizzard winds.

But this time I was treated to a sunny San Diego Thanksgiving. Wearing shorts in November was the first novelty. Add to that the fervor of a classic American Thanksgiving family gathering and I’m sure I hit first-stage culture shock.

My impression is that this is the nation’s biggest event of the year. Several folks testified that had they not purchased flights to join in the annual reunion, their standing in the family would have been jeopardized.

The “turkey dinner” was more like the feeding of the five thousand. Added to the big bird were platters of chicken, beef, pork and fish along with three kinds of

potatoes, a wide variety of salads, colorful veggies and rich desserts.

The sheer volume of food, the endless table, the ornate decorations and the semi-formal dress code were overwhelming. It was all so BIG!

Not least of which was the family itself. Grandparents, parents and siblings, uncles, aunts and cousins—and swarms of children, nieces and nephews. And though I can “work a crowd,” as an introvert I found myself crowded and stuffed.

Still, I was grateful for the hospitality. Eden and I happened to be visiting the city, serving a ministry at their invitation, and one of my local mentees had enfolded us into his family’s festivities. We were special guests—outsiders included and adopted as family for the day.

My immediate takeaways remain a quarter-century later. First, following the Hebrew prophets, Christ envisions the kingdom of God as a sumptuous banquet. Isaiah the prophet had announced,

“On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a *feast* of rich

food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines” (Isaiah 25:6, emphasis added).

Note also that the table has been set for *all peoples*. It is *radically inclusive*, even of the most unlikely. Jesus prophesied that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the prophets would be there, but also “*people will come from east and west and north and south, and will recline at the table of the kingdom of God”* (Luke 13:28-29).

But Christ’s vision is not merely of a someday kingdom *in the sweet, by and by*. With his arrival, Christ inaugurated the new covenant and declared that God’s kingdom was in their midst.

The kingdom banquet takes on a “here and now” dimension. Even now, Jesus calls us to practice Thanksgiving gratitude by embodying his inclusion, turning strangers into neighbors and neighbors into brothers and sisters.

He says, “*When you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at*

the resurrection of the righteous”
(Luke 14:13-14).

Christ-followers anticipate the Great Banquet by enacting it today, even in this present evil age.

But the breadth of Jesus' inclusive vision also comes with a ***dire warning***:

Those who presume to exclude others might find themselves outside—especially after rejecting the Master of the feast when he had invited them in person!

In Jesus' day, these warnings were not directed at the stereotypical sinners. Those under the greatest threat of being locked out were the religious power-brokers.

Why would we imagine anything has changed in our day? Gratefully, the Scriptures suggest that even those who

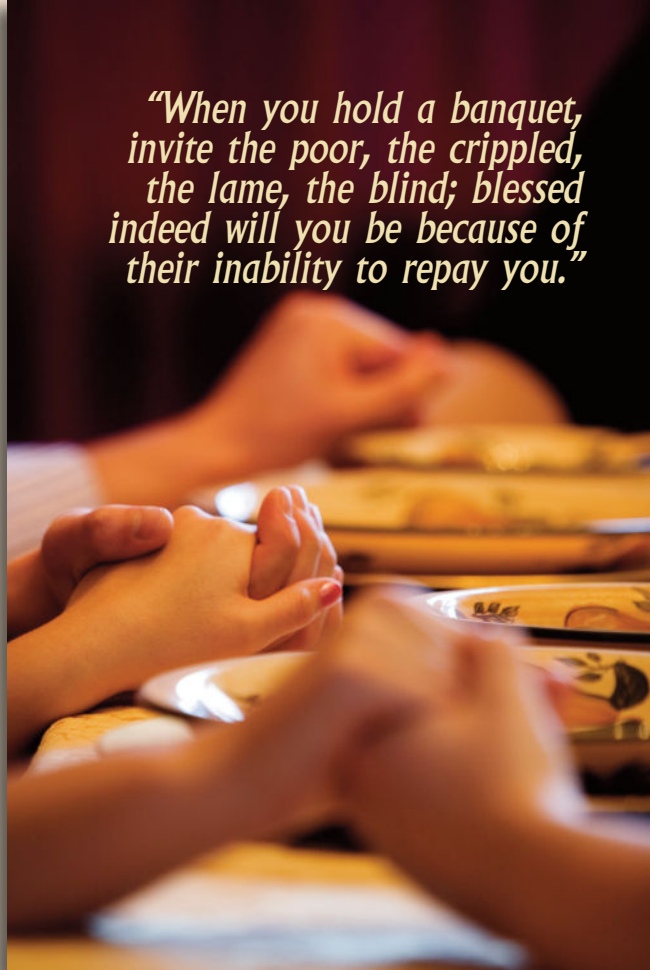
find themselves weeping in the darkness outside the New Jerusalem will, at the last, hear the Spirit and Bride calling:

“Come! Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life”
(Revelation 22:17).

During this Thanksgiving season, let's practice gratitude for the Master of the feast, hold banquets in his name and invite those outliers on his guest list he's asked us to include. By welcoming others, we'll find ourselves welcoming him. □

Brad Jersak is the editor-in-chief of *Christianity Without the Religion* magazine (CWRm).

“When you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you.”



CWRpress

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

An imprint of Plain Truth Ministries



Books make great Christmas gifts!

**Hurry! 50% off these
PTM/CWRpress books!**

Between now and the end of the year we are offering 50% off these books (**now just \$5 each**) including free shipping to addresses in the U.S. **Call us at 1-800-309-4466** to place your order!

A Taste of Grace
Bad News Religion
Between Religious Rocks & Life's Hard Places
Chasing 120
Rejecting Religion—Embracing Grace
Revelation Revolution
Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul (Volumes 1,2 or 3)
The Remnant
Unplugging From Religion—Connecting with God



When Life Downsizes

The good news is that, as I write this, my cheerful cousin Pam is back from the hospital. The way-less-than-good news is that she needed to have both legs amputated below the knees. Beyond that, the good news is that she's facing this traumatic challenge with courage, faith and even a little humor. Pam said, "What the heck. I'm not using these feet anyway."

A few years ago she took a tumble down her steep basement stairs. After spinal surgery, doctors determined she would not walk again. Given her health challenges, Pam could no longer stay in the home she shared with her late husband Tom for some 25 years.

We helped move her belongings into storage, and she was able to move into a residential care home. I regularly spend time in Pam's storage unit on her behalf, sorting through belongings and furnishings, deciding which to sell or consign with antique dealers, which to give to charity, which to dispose of or keep—so that we can further downsize her storage space.

Pam and Tom enjoyed long careers with the phone company. In retirement they were socially active and frequent volunteers in the community. Pam never had children, but she loved them and they loved her. She worked with kids at a day-care facility and served in the nursery at her church. You might say Tom and Pam were "living large." Now, suddenly, she's "living small."

Pam isn't alone. Every week I seem to hear of another friend or relative who is experiencing some kind of life downsizing. In one form or another, it comes to all of us. In fact, if you've been around a while, you've probably endured multiple downsizings—job losses, an empty nest, health setbacks, a divorce, deaths of loved ones. While we can recover from these ups-and-downs of life, some downsizings in this life are more or less permanent.

George Land, an author on growth and transformation, asserts that the most fundamental motivation for humans is growth—or the perception of growth. I think

he may be right. We like to feel like we're making progress—expanding our influence, wealth and power (even the guy who robs you on the street feels like he's growing—at your expense). No wonder life's downsizings are so hard. They make us feel like we're retreating or getting smaller—anything but growing.

But the Apostle Paul reminds us that regardless of our physical circumstances, we are always growing because of our connection with Jesus, who is the author of growth and life. Paul describes just how far Jesus downsized when he laid aside his infinite divine power to become truly human—all for us (Philippians 2:6-8). A couple of chapters later in the same letter, Paul comments, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (4:12). Paul reveals his secret in the next verse: "I can do all this through him who gives me strength."

We don't have to face these experiences by ourselves. God, in the person of Jesus, has been there, done that. As much as we would like to avoid life's downsizings, he doesn't necessarily spare us from them. Just ask my cousin Pam. But I believe she also knows firsthand that he's there with us every step of the way—as one who has experienced it Himself. □

—Monte Wolverton



Monte's cousin Pam with her late husband Tom.



Quotes & Connections



"... the numerous denominations and Christian sects, with all their different creeds and ideas, are one of the greatest hindrances to Christ."
—Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt
(*Everyone Belongs to God*, Page 25)

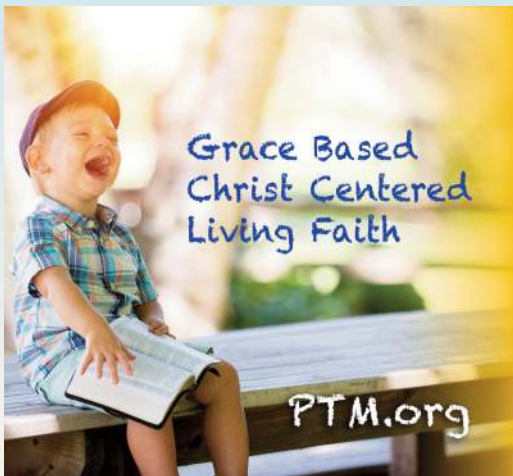
"All great revolutions in men's lives are made in thought. When a change takes place in someone's thought, action follows the direction of the thought as a ship follows the direction of a rudder."—Leo Tolstoy

"Change is not made without inconvenience, even from worse to better."—Samuel Johnson: 1755, in the preface to *A Dictionary of the English Language*

"The human race in the course of time has taken the liberty of softening and softening Christianity until at last we have contrived to make it exactly the opposite of what is in the New Testament."—Soren Kierkegaard

"The world is by no means averse to religion. In fact, it is devoted to it with a passion. It will buy any recipe for salvation as long as that formula leaves the responsibility for cooking up salvation firmly in human hands. The world is drowning in religion. But it is scared out of its wits by any mention of the word grace..."—Robert Farrar Capon

The CWR Bible Survey is a fascinating journey through the 66 books we call the Bible—a journey designed to help you discover the good news that God has for each of us. Available only in pdf form online at www.ptm.org/survey.



Grace Based
Christ Centered
Living Faith

PTM.org

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

with GREG ALBRECHT
& BRAD JERSAK

MISSION STATEMENT

Plain Truth Ministries proclaims Christianity without the religion. We express our Christ-centered ministry as *faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone*.

HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

For an electronic subscription go to www.ptm.org/sub. The Internet allows us to serve readers around the world. Archives of *Plain Truth* are available at www.ptm.org. Printed copies of *Plain Truth* are a benefit mailed to generous, regular PTM Friends and Partners. If you would like to contribute go to www.ptm.org/donate.

TO UPDATE YOUR ADDRESS

Be sure to notify us immediately of any change in your address by calling us at 1-800-309-4466, visiting our website at www.ptm.org/change or writing to *The Plain Truth*, Pasadena, CA 91129.

TO SEND A LETTER OR E-MAIL

Write to *The Plain Truth*, Pasadena, CA 91129, or email us at managing.editor@ptm.org.

The editors reserve the right to print or not print comments so addressed, in whole or in part, as deemed in the public interest, and to print your name and edit the letter for clarity and space. We will protect the confidentiality of correspondence that we deem to be of a personal nature. Correspondence published by Plain Truth Ministries does not necessarily reflect the opinions of Plain Truth Ministries.

EDITORIAL STAFF

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Greg Albrecht
MANAGING EDITOR: Laura Urista
SENIOR EDITOR: Brad Jersak
PUBLISHING AND CIRCULATION DIRECTOR: Dennis Warkentin
ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Monte Wolverton

COPYRIGHT & POSTAL INFO

The Plain Truth is published six times a year by Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129. Copyright © 2018 Plain Truth Ministries. Printed in U.S.A. All rights reserved. Volume 83, Number 6: November 2018. Unless noted otherwise, scriptures are quoted from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers. *The Plain Truth*® is a U.S. trademark.

SUBMISSIONS

The Plain Truth does not publish unsolicited manuscripts. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited artwork, photographs or manuscripts.

PLAIN TRUTH MINISTRIES

The Plain Truth is published by Plain Truth Ministries (PTM). If you are interested in learning more about PTM, visit our website at www.ptm.org (and email us) or write us at Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Plain Truth Ministries gratefully accepts contributions (tax deductible in the U.S.) to further the ongoing work of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. We accept donations in U.S. funds by check, money order or credit card. Please call us at 1-800-309-4466, visit our secure website, www.ptm.org/donate, or write to us at Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129.