

CWR magazine

April 2019
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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

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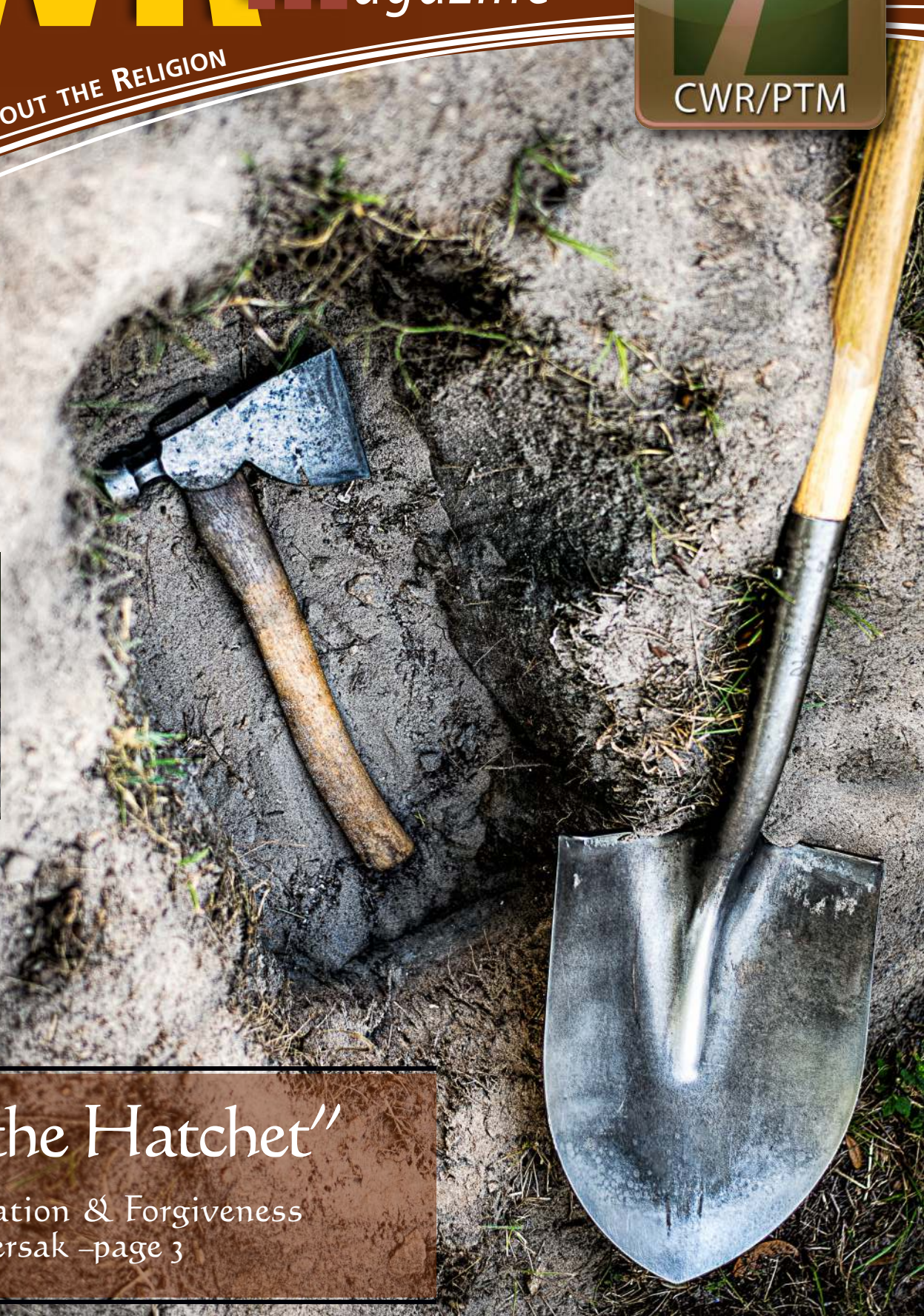
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Volume 10, Number 2
April 2019
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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

Nuggets of Wisdom

Thanks for all the powerful articles in your February issue of *CWRm*. I was delighted to discover valuable nuggets of wisdom on each page, nuggets that I so need to understand at this point in my life. I can't find the words to tell you how much this ministry means to me. It is my sincere prayer that God will keep on blessing *CWR/PTM* so you can continue to bless others with the gospel truth of the *Jesus Way*.

North Carolina

CWR/PTM has made a huge difference in my life and has enhanced my growth in my relationship with God. I don't take lightly all the newsletters, magazines, books and other literature you've sent me over the years. They express your kindness and generosity. May God bless you always.

Texas

Trending: Deconstruction

I have been struggling for the past few years with walking away from "Evangelical Christianity" and embracing a *wider hope* for humanity. I'm still on that journey, but I want to thank everyone on your team for your help in keeping me sane. My relationship with God

and my view of God have changed dramatically. I want you to know how much your articles, videos, blogs and books have helped me in my faith journey.

Email

I have *never not* been a part of the [name of church deleted]. I am now about to leave. I have come to realize that I have been brainwashed and indoctrinated over the last 35 years spent in ministry. I am both terrified and excited about what it really means to follow Jesus, "the way and the truth and the life."

Thanks for your prayers.

Arkansas

The God of Comfort

Thank you for an inspiring article by Greg Albrecht, "The God of Comfort" posted on the *CWR/PTM* website. This is an amazingly uplifting article! What a great display of God's love, care, compassion, comfort and strength. How very true: no matter how dark things seem, our heavenly Father is there for us in so many ways.

Wisconsin

Dear Readers,



Your generous donations enable us to share this Christ-centered gospel and to inspire others to living faith in Jesus Christ.

A big thank you from all of us at *CWR*!

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"Bury the Hatchet" Brad Jersak

"BURY THE HATCHET"

The practice of burying hatchets by First Nations (i.e. Indigenous) chiefs to seal a peace agreement was noted by settlers in the 17th century. In Thwaite's *Jesuit Relations* (1644) we read of chiefs who "Proclaim that they wish to unite all the nations of the earth and to hurl the hatchet so far into the depths of the earth that it shall never again be seen in the future." The exact phrase, *bury the hatchet*, occurs for the first time in *The History of the Five Indian Nations of Canada* (1747).

Burying the hatchet makes for an excellent working definition of reconciliation (making peace) and forgiveness (burying the weapons of violence and vengeance) and echoes the words of Christ, who said,

Blessed are the meek; they shall inherit the land. Blessed are the merciful; they shall receive mercy. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice; they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the peacemakers; they shall be called children of God. —Matthew 5:6,9 my translation.

"BRIGHT NEW DAY"

I met Chief Robert Joseph on the volatile grounds of St. George's Residential School, one of many notorious religious boarding schools where countless Canadian Indigenous children had been taken (from their families), stripped of their culture and language, malnourished,

beaten and molested as part of my country's greatest human rights crime.

Now, the Lytton First Nation was hosting 60 representatives for a "Bright New Day" workshop on the traditional territories of the N'Laka'Pamux Peoples. Half the group were from Aboriginal communities. The rest of us represented governments and businesses with a stake in building relationships with First Nations communities. I was there with my friend, Charles Littledale, a Hydro consultant.

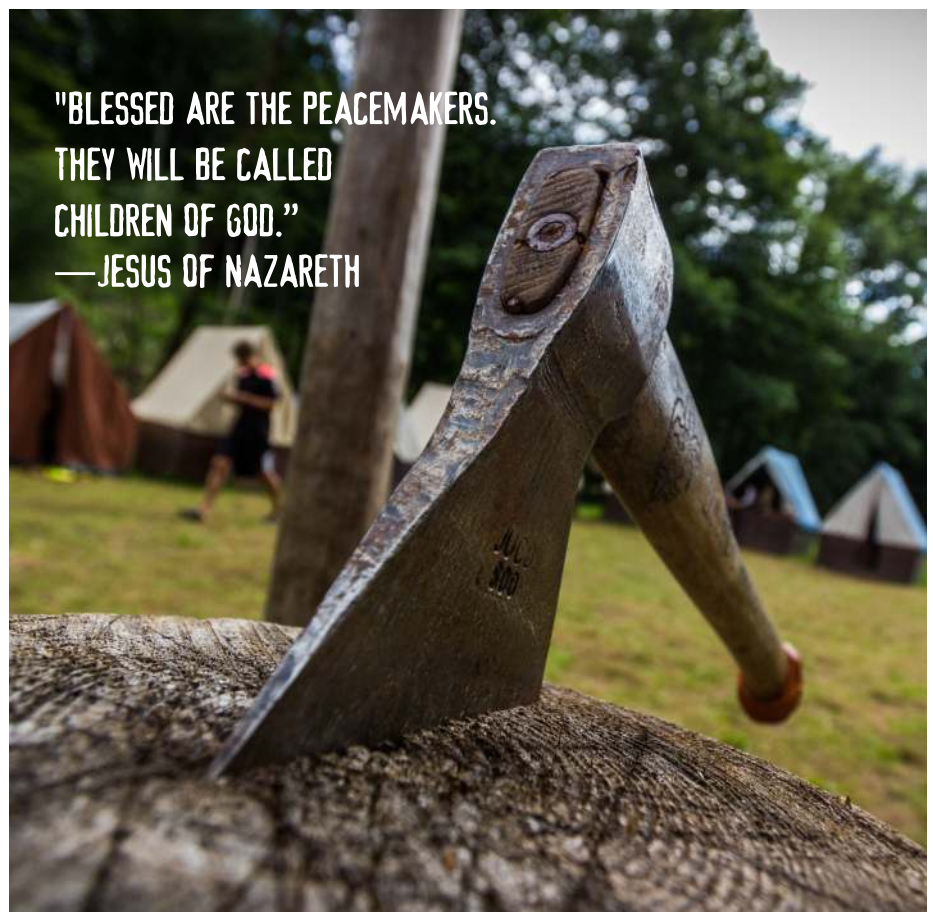
Our major task was to discuss what "reconciliation" means in the aftermath of that cruel and too-recent past. Although I am a

trained theologian, I had no idea how intensely I was about to be "schooled." I hope that sharing my "Bright New Day" experience (with Chief Joseph's blessing) will highlight implications of the Cross for reconciliation and the true nature of forgiveness.

"RECONCILIATION" DEFINED

"Reconciliation comes from addressing a point of pain or silence or frustration between communities, and addressing it together. Bringing people face-to-face to work through these issues is the best way to create lasting change and a future that will be better for all."

—Chief Robert Joseph



During our “Bright New Day” workshop, many non-Indigenous reps typically proposed definitions of reconciliation but the First Nations members started with personal stories of heartache. To them, reconciliation involves real-life struggles, dealing with a host of painful personal and public issues that take great courage to recount. Many had been residents of St. George’s, where they endured isolation from family and culture, all manner of discrimination and abuse, hunger and illness.

Others spoke of tragedies involving domestic violence, substance abuse and broken families. On the public level, they reminisced about the days of roadblocks, tensions around forestry and fishing, and the unresolved matter of rights and land titles.

When emotions showed and tears flowed, these were always acknowledged and honored with a hug from one of the elders.

Personalizing our understanding of and commitment to reconciliation was instructive,

cathartic and yes, included “cringe-moments.” Facilitators created a healthy place for authentic vulnerability. People expressed their hurts and anger without being shut down or tuned out. Some, unable to say the words “reconciliation” or “forgiveness” at first, were finally able to voice their story.

We weren’t merely rehashing old wounds—genuine healing was happening. Nevertheless, I confess to some despair (was it theirs or my own?) when I realized how deep and old and raw the grievances were.

On one hand, several First Nations people described how they were only able to find healing and reconciliation after choosing to forgive and “leave that old sh*t behind.” But one precious elderly woman, whose entire life had been reduced to ruins from a young age, defined reconciliation as litigation, the vow never to forgive and a wish that her offender be “mangled.” For her, it was offensive and ludicrous for someone to say, “Just forgive and move on.”

An iconic Canadian politician, Iona Campagnola, responded by validating her pain: “Some things are unforgivable.”

I wondered to myself, *Can reconciliation really span the polarities of vengeance and forgiveness, or retribution and restoration? Can there be reconciliation without forgiveness? Or does the word reconciliation become so broad as to be meaningless?*

Then Chief Ruby Dunstan challenged me directly. For her, the pressing question was, *“Reconciliation to what?”*

RECONCILIATION THROUGH INDIGENOUS EYES

I would summarize our shared vision of reconciliation after two days as follows. In First Nations context, reconciliation includes:

- **Making peace with the Creator:** It starts with God. Every meeting was blessed in prayer by one of the elders and prayerful songs were offered at the beginning and end of the conference.

- **Making peace with oneself and one’s past:** One’s history cannot merely be erased from memory; nor should it be. But can we relate to the past as the story which brought us to today—or will we continue to be tormented by the past as if it were today? Ideally, reconciling with the





CHIEF ROBERT JOSEPH

past, whatever healing journey that requires, will set us free from being stuck in past pain so we function as whole people.

- **Making peace with each other:** I am most familiar with peacemaking at the individual and family level. But how do we make peace or restore trust with institutions, churches, corporations and governments? This is not a given. Often, the healthiest route is building firm boundaries (with the help of courts and communities) and having sought restitution, agree to part company.

- **Making peace with the land:** For First Nations people, reconciliation includes the role and importance of the land to their history and identity. Historically, unresolved land claims and modern infringement cases put First Nations groups across the table from government and business as enemies—if parties even agree to meet.

But today, there's a growing desire to move beyond adversarial encounters and litigation towards reconciliation and partnership.

- **Making peace with creation:** Related to the land is a renewed and unified commitment to ecological responsibility. God has called us to steward creation and its resources, sustainably and responsibly, rather than exploiting it beyond repair. This isn't a political partisan issue—the Native peoples know it is a Genesis 2 creation mandate.

WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT

How does forgiveness relate to reconciliation? I recall what one bright First Nations leader called her “f-word”—*forgiveness*. By describing what she could and could not offer at her stage in the journey, I saw more clearly *what forgiveness IS and what it is NOT*:

Forgiveness is NOT saying "It's okay." What happened is NOT okay. Abuse and oppression are never acceptable. Forgiveness must not minimize injustice or the damage it does.

Forgiveness is NOT saying "I'm okay." Healing can take years. Genuine forgiveness does not ask anyone to skip any stage of the grieving and healing process.

Forgiveness is NOT saying "You're okay." The offender is not simply off the hook. Repentance includes facing consequences, which may include incarceration, rehabilitation, restitution and restoration.

Forgiveness is NOT saying "We're okay." Forgiveness may include but does not require the victim of injustice to re-enter a relationship with the offender. That may not even be safe. One can forgive and be healed without ever being reconciled.

FORGIVENESS MEANS "LETTING GO"

Forgiveness happens when we *release our offenders to God's judgment*, rather than chaining our hearts to them with resentment. We become like those we resent but become free from those we forgive. So, we allow the Creator to unbind us from them and trust God to heal one and all by his love and mercy. This doesn't mean we bypass human justice systems when necessary. But it means our healing doesn't depend on courts.

**"I WOULDN'T WANT TO HAVE A RECONCILIATION
THAT SIMPLY BALANCES THE LEDGER AND
STILL HAS HATRED AFTERWARDS.
THAT WOULD BE SAME OLD, SAME OLD."
—CHIEF ROBERT JOSEPH**

Forgiveness happens when we *release our burdens* of hurt, grief, anger, loss and sorrow to God's care, rather than stuffing them or fashioning them into weapons. We exchange them for the Creator's love, joy, peace and healing mercy. We look to God, rather than our own outrage and indignation, for strength and

wisdom to fight ongoing battles, lest we perpetuate injustice in our own families and communities.

Forgiveness happens when we *release the debt of the other's offense into God's hands.* Even if they repent sincerely and make restitution, our offenders can never cover the debt of harms done. We must let God bear that burden—ours and theirs. For Christians, the Cross is our most powerful image of this divine "sin-bearing."

Forgiveness happens when we *release our healing into God's hands.* No one's punishment or repentance is sufficient to heal us. Only God can truly do that. Our healing is NOT in the hands of the ones who hurt us. Surrendering to God's care within a community of reconciliation makes healing possible.

Forgiveness happens when we *release our guilt into God's hands.* Many former residents of St. George's saw how their experience there shaped them into abusers, addicts and criminals. When they finally owned and gave their own guilt to God, healing became possible.

Forgiveness happens when, *having let go, we surrender our lives to Christ's love and care.* One man shared the story of how his pain had led him into years of addiction, homelessness and alienation from family and community. In his pain, he had damaged everyone in his life and was ready to take his own life. But God and his community walked him beyond shame and humiliation to receive forgiveness and belonging. His community became the welcoming arms of the Creator, agents of God's restoration and reconciliation.



I am grateful to our Indigenous neighbors for bringing God's light to reconciliation and forgiveness, so central to the Christian gospel. My prayer is that we would receive these gifts—reconciliation and forgiveness—from our Creator and Savior, Jesus Christ, embodied in communities of God's healing love. □

Brad Jersak is editor-in-chief of CWRm and proud father-in-law of an Indigenous Canadian woman.



The Blood Curse LIE

Greg Albrecht

Memorial to the Murdered
Jews of Europe. Berlin.

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!" All the people answered, "His blood is on us and on our children!" —Matthew 27:24-27

A toxic and Christless belief persists within Christendom, fatalistically concluding the crowd's reply to Pilate was a self-pronounced curse on the Jews, an argument for the unfathomable outpouring of hatred of Jews since the crucifixion of Jesus.

MYTH OF THE BLOOD CURSE

The myth of a *blood curse* evolved and gained credibility, casting God the Father in the mold of a vengeful, punitive and retributive god who takes delight in pain and punishment. This myth of a blood curse presumes the horrific pogroms, persecutions and ethnic cleansings the Jews have suffered over the last 2000 years, climaxing in the Holocaust, were their own fault. The *blood curse* proposes all Jewish suffering since Christ's death is God granting their self-condemning wish that the blood of Jesus would be on their hands.

This malignant superstition is also used as a

justification to absolve all anti-Semitism—virulent hatred of Jews—by saying that God uses the hatred or bigotry of other humans to ensure the Jews got exactly what they asked for and richly deserve.

The so-called *blood curse*, the myth that a crowd gathered before Pilate accepted responsibility the death of Jesus on behalf of all generations of Jews, is ludicrous for many reasons.

Three specific reasons speak against the fallacious *blood curse* and its bitter harvest on the Jews.

PRECONCEIVED CONCLUSIONS

First, reading a *blood curse* into Matthew 27:24-27 is an example of how scripture might be used to arrive at any predetermined conclusions in the mind of those who twist scripture to suit their own purposes.

If we impose preconceived notions on biblical passages, we read our biases and prejudices into the text, rather than subjecting ourselves to the potential teaching that springs from that text.

Instead of assuming that God holds all Jews responsible for all time, thus ensuring horrific suffering after a statement made in the heat of

the moment, a Christ-centered interpretation asks us to place ourselves in this crowd. Instead of blaming others, we might consider how we all have times when we embrace Jesus, and other times when we scorn him.

Instead of falling for hateful and vindictive superstitions, as Christ-followers, we are more likely to read ourselves into the time and place described in Matthew 27:24-27. Instead of the despicable conclusion of a *blood curse*, Christ leads us to ask the question posed by the African-American slaves in the spiritual, “*Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?*”

This detestable lie of the *blood curse* on all Jews is a voodoo-like belief. It is an example of the illogical and superstitious notion of what generically is called “collective guilt.”



COLLECTIVE GUILT

Second, *Collective guilt*—assigning blame to whole people groups for the actions of a minority, is itself another attempt to blame and condemn. It lays blame on the whole for the sins of the part. Despite the fact that a small minority of radical Muslims are terrorists, many people today

see any Muslim and instantly judge them as being a violent, bloodthirsty terrorist.

We are all humans, regardless of our religious background and racial heritage. Some Jews today blame all Germans for the Holocaust—even though virtually every German who was actively engaged in the Holocaust is now dead.

I know Jews who refuse to buy or drive a German car made by Volkswagen, BMW or Mercedes. For that matter, I know some American veterans of World War 2 who are not Jewish, but nonetheless refuse to own or drive a German or Japanese car.

Of course, we are free to boycott any product we wish for whatever reason. We are free to avoid violating our conscience, but ***we are not free, in Christ, to condemn all for the sins of a few.***

I was not yet born when the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor happened on December 7, 1941. As I grew up in these United States, I heard the American version of World War 2 so often, read so many books and saw so many World War 2 movies, that it was difficult for me to realize that all Japanese are not guilty of what happened in World War 2.

My wife and I have a dear friend named Jack, who, as a young Japanese American growing up during World War 2, was assigned to an internment camp because the U.S. government was concerned that some Japanese-Americans would be more loyal to Japan than to the

United States. Knowing Jack as a friend helps me realize the stupidity of stereotyping people, pigeonholing everyone of a particular race, culture or religion.

MONSTROUS LIE, MONSTER GOD

Finally, *this monstrous lie of a blood curse on the Jews turns God into a monster.* It crucifies the love, mercy and grace of God and recasts God as a god of evil who takes pleasure in the pain and suffering of humans.

Misunderstandings and perversions of God grow like an out of control Frankenstein monster until a monster-god is mainstreamed and accepted as the norm. Like a plague born by a toxic virus, lies and deceptions about who God is become accepted as truth.

The god created by the myth of a *blood curse* is a tyrannical god who demands that the consequences taken by a few cause misery for many. The preposterous myth of a *blood curse* eventually became accepted as truth and in the process, condoned and excused hatred, warfare and bloodshed. As Jesus said in John 16:2, there would come a day when those who kill others think they are doing God a service.

We are blaspheming God when we, imperfect and finite human beings, undertake to smear and corrupt the name and attributes of our perfect, loving, eternal God. There is nothing on “God’s green earth” that justifies a belief that God holds his children responsible for the mistakes of others. We

are not robots—God has not rigged the final outcome of our lives. To cite C.S. Lewis,

God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go either wrong or right... free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of... creatures that worked like machines would hardly be worth having.

The happiness which God designs for all of his creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to him and to each other in an ecstasy of love

and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this earth is mere milk and water. And for that they must be free.

When we are truly free in Christ, we individually admit and accept responsibility for the consequences of our actions, we surrender our condemnation of others and we certainly do not blame God as the cause of suffering and misery. □

Greg Albrecht is the President of Plain Truth Ministries.

The Sign that Saves the World

Look to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth!

—Isaiah 45:22 —

Brian Zahnd

P eri and I are on our way to speak at the Christ at the Checkpoint conference in Bethlehem and we're spending a few days in Florence, Italy exploring the cradle of the Renaissance.

Visiting the museums and art galleries, I've seen hundreds of crucifixion paintings, and I've tried to view each one with a reverent eye. I never look at depictions of Christ crucified with a jaundiced eye. Their religious nature and ubiquitous presence may illicit a yawn from the secular cynic, but not from me—I'm an incorrigible Christian.

I believe the cross is where Christ saves the world. Looking at the cross with the right eye, the reverent eye of

humble faith, is the locus of salvation. The cross is the sign that saves the world.

The crucifixion of Jesus is easily the most depicted event in

human history. How many billions of crucifixes have been formed, fashioned, carved, and painted over the past two millennia? And yet what is it

that is being depicted in these billions of crucifixes? On a purely objective level, it is the torture and murder of an innocent man at the hands of those who run the world by the means of violent power. The crucifixion is the damning indictment of the world as it has been arranged.

The cross tells us that when the Son of God entered our world—the world created by Cain and all the kings who followed in his bloody wake—our systems of violent empire and sacrificial religion nailed him to a tree. This is the moment when the principalities and powers



Coptic cross in the Temple of Isis, Philae, Egypt

who run the world were put to open shame and their claim of being wise and just was shown to be nothing but an empty sham. What they called wisdom and justice was nothing more than a cheap disguise to hide their naked lust for wealth and power. Paul says the rulers and authorities were shamed by the triumphant truth-telling of the cross.

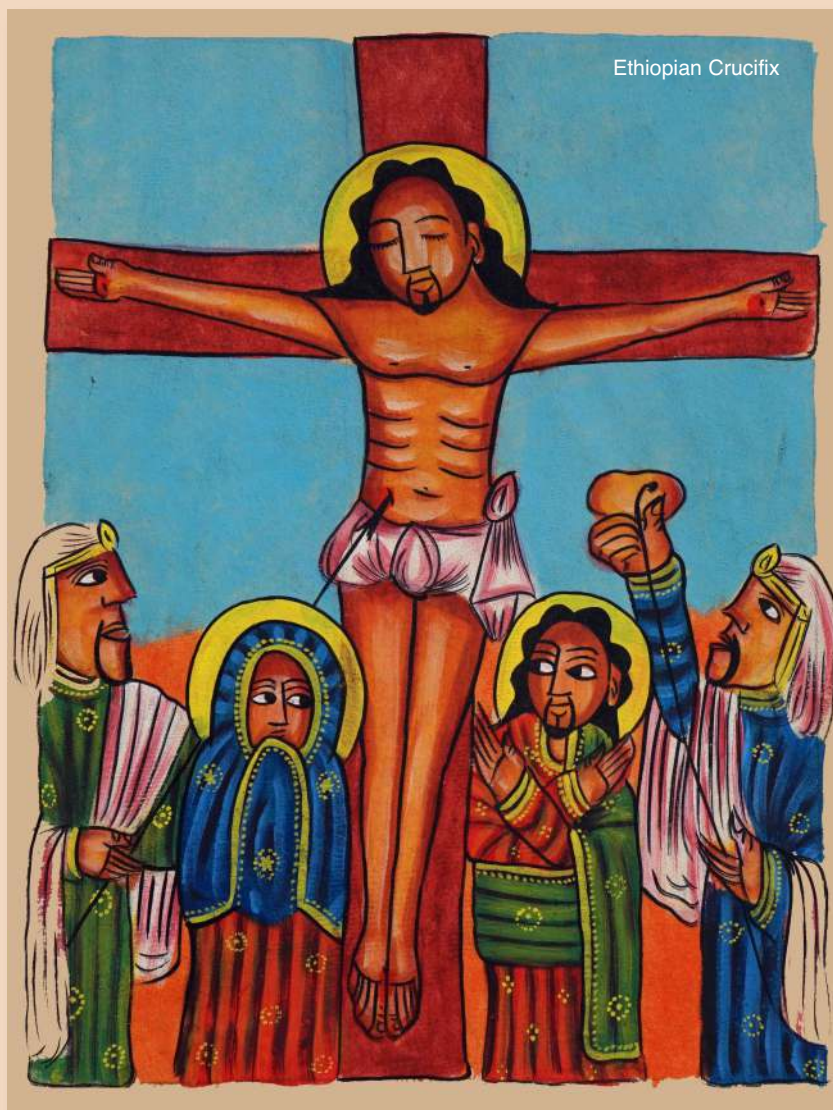
Every crucifix reminds us that our systems of civilization, built around an axis of power enforced by violence, are not to be trusted.

The myths, monuments, anthems, and memorials of every empire are designed to cleverly hide the bodies of the weak who have been trodden down by the mighty in their march to "greatness."

The cross is the unveiling. The cross is the great truth-telling. The cross is the guilty verdict handed down upon empire. The cross is the eternal monument to the Unknown Victim. Yes, the cross is where the world is forgiven, but not before the world is found guilty.

But trite and tidy answers about the meaning of Good

Friday are how we domesticate the cross. This is the bane of atonement theories. Instead of the crucifixion remaining the pivotal event in a compelling story, it's turned into a sterile formula. The cross is diminished to one of the Four Spiritual Laws or a waypoint on the Roman Road. This is how the cross is sanitized and made mechanical.



The storyline is lost and the scandal is swept aside.

I'm not sure why Protestants abandoned crucifixes for empty crosses, but I think it was a mistake. I know that Protestants often argue that Jesus didn't

remain on the cross, but he didn't remain in the manger either, and Protestants don't seem to have an objection to Nativity scenes.

The truth is, Jesus was crucified and this is the epicenter of the gospel. Paul tells the Galatians, "It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified" (Galatians 3:1).

A crucifix replaced with an abstract symbol removes the crucifixion from the story and seems to indicate a move to reduce the cross to a kind of mathematical sign or theological equation. This gives rise to pallid descriptions of the cross like, "God turning our minus into a plus."

Once we do that we can easily lose sight of the scandal of the cross. And the cross is a scandal!

For Christians living at such a far remove from the first century, the depth of this scandal may be hard to grasp, but your hero being crucified would be the last thing a Jew or a Roman living in antiquity would boast about.

Yet the early Christians *did* boast about it. Paul readily admitted that this was foolishness to Romans and offensive to Jews.

(continued on page 13)

THE KILLING HOUSE

WM. PAUL YOUNG

And so we gaze upon the lynchpin, the fulcrum and the crux of the cosmos, that we have killed Ourselves in self-destructive rage, trying to blot out the memory or Our self-consuming shame, to kill Our Life that fought against Our tenacious embrace of death... only to discover that even here We are loved completely, to the same relentless depth that We have always been.

—Wm. Paul Young, Holy Week.



One year ago, I entered again through the checkpoints, body scans and gates onto the prison grounds of Death Row in Tennessee. It is eerie to walk past the killing house, the building in which the executions take place. Here all the modern equipment is ready to resuscitate the doomed man whose heart might stop prematurely. The State wants to have the satisfaction of wielding the sword and not be thwarted by some stress-induced trauma and heart attack. Also in that building are the poisons protocol, a procedure that even includes the ritualistic sterilization of the needles.

We meet in the library. I along with my friends, Wes, and Joe, gather with a dozen men who live here in Unit 2-A, also waiting.

I think that Jesus sends us to those in prison not for their sake but for ours. Their prison is obvious, and while they cannot leave it we often cannot even see our own places of incarceration. We need their clarity, but instead we hide them away, out of sight and out of mind, giving them little voice with which to speak to us, or help us. So, Jesus sends us to them.

For three hours, we are together face-to-face, a handful of brothers who deeply love Jesus and

each other. Three of us have actual execution dates, and without a miracle of human kindness their days are indeed numbered. Here in this room, the cruelty of 'human justice' is unmasked by the simple and intense commitment of these men to life and love and each other. My friend Terry King, has been on Death Row for 34 years, waiting since he was in his early twenties. He is one of the freest human beings I have ever met.

Should we turn a blind eye to injustice, to betrayal, to murder, to abuse? No. That is exactly the point. There should be no blind eyes. And yet human justice stands with eyes covered, blind. With such blindness, we lose sight of our humanity. The restorative justice of God requires eyes that see, not only the victim, but also the human being who is the perpetrator.

True just-love must see everyone. It must take all into account; the perpetrator, the victim, the community, everyone, and seek to restore the broken hearts of every participant and group. You cannot sever justice from love. If you do, no matter how you coat it with moral or religious language, it is masked vengeance enacted to appease the fury of our anger against death, and we will take it out on those whom God also loves.

Perhaps we have mixed intentions? We desire healing for the victim while knowing in our heart of hearts that we have no power to accomplish such a miracle, so we perpetuate the myth that somehow vengeance is healing and restorative. We also know that only love and relationship can heal broken hearts. So, we resort to age-old

If what is normative for the State in its understanding and promotion of 'justice' as punishment and retribution, ought we not immediately to suspect this is contrary and antithetical to the kingdom of Jesus? Is this the best that the world systems have to offer? Justice, bereft of love, is only vengeance. If our understanding

Can punishment, regardless of the amount or its severity, change or untwist the wrong into, right?

Can punishment change and heal the brokenness in me that wanted to do evil in the first place?

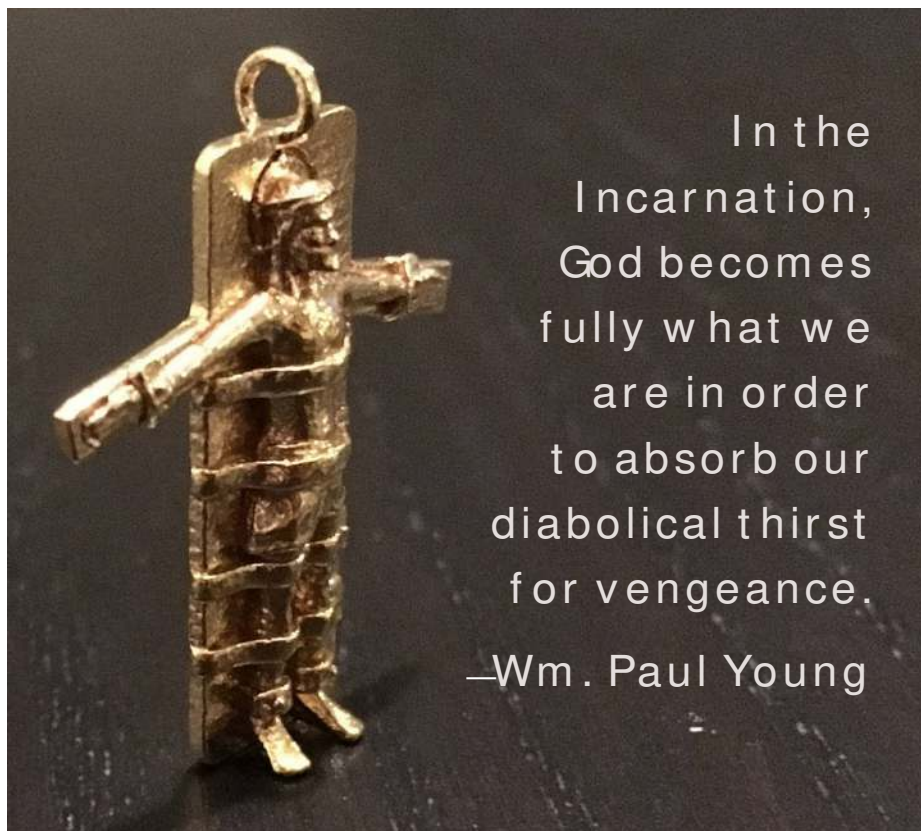
I'm suggesting punishment is powerless to do any of these things. And if I'm right, that punishment has no ability to amend, undo, or atone for evil, then why do we believe that punishment is required for justice to be called justice?"

It appeals to the beast in us that, even if we have not been caught for the evils we have perpetrated, someone else was. How easy it is to find ourselves in the mob of those yelling, "Crucify him, poison him, electrocute him," and then slip back to our routines in which we betray, lie, cheat, gossip and hurt with impunity.

What makes this more pernicious is that many who profess to be lovers and followers of Jesus participate in the perpetration of vengeance on behalf of the State, with the blessing of Religion. And why?

At times, we believe we are the righteous sword of God's justice, and that justice is retributive and punitive. Again, neither has any efficacy to heal or restore. We cannot simply turn away and wash your hands and say, "What is truth?" when Truth himself stands in front of us.

"Vengeance is Mine," says the Lord, and we all sit back and say, "Finally!" But then God adds in the same text, "Repay evil with good!" The vengeance of God is 'Goodness?' The idea is so repulsive and infuriating that in



ways of attempting to restore through sacrifice; the killing of something living to fight what death has perpetrated.

We preach that this is how we balance the scales of justice; that through death we will heal what death has done. How twisted is this? Is that not why Cain kills Abel, because he feels the slight of what he has perceived to be unfair? Is that not why the State and Religion turns upon Life Himself and hangs Him on a cross?

of justice requires that we put to death a human being in order to achieve it, we have sold ourselves a lie; that death can heal, that death can restore, that death can right a wrong. Only life and love have the power to do any of this.

In John MacMurray's book, *A Spiritual Evolution*, there are two brilliant chapters on the nature of Justice.

"Can punishment undo, offset, atone, or make up for sin in any way?"

our next breath we mutter, “If You aren’t capable of vengeance, we certainly are. Step aside and we will crucify him.”

The incarnation of God in Jesus, in part, was to accomplish this: God becomes fully what we are in order to, as us, absorb our diabolical thirst for vengeance, our twisted and perverted sense of justice, and by becoming our scapegoat and sacrifice, destroy the power and false promises of death. This is so we might learn to live with resurrection life, so we would never need to kill another human being again.

Prisons ought not be places of retributive vengeance, but places that create boundaries and discipline for the purpose and intention of healing and restoration. Reconciliation and rehabilitation in the best sense. Every judge and lawyer ought always to have in their hearts and actions the desire to bring healing to every person and situation they serve and protect, not simply be enforcers of State or Religious law.

The world says of these men whom I love, “these are beyond redemption”—therefore, they are dead to us. But it takes time to go through the necessary hoops to sanitize our decision and make it palatable, to baptize it in our Religious/State language so that these killings will be sanctioned and acceptable. And again, here is the exposure and why Death Row becomes an expression of back-handed grace; these men love each other, love God and love humanity. God did this miracle of restoration in spite of

human justice. What has happened in their hearts and in the hearts of many of their victims is true justice.

It is firm-handed love that seeks the wholeness of all involved. It requires forgiveness, confession, repentance, the owning of both the wrongs and the self-righteous judgments. In our punitive vengeance, have we also not become perpetrators ourselves? Who among is without sin and has the right to cast the first stone? If Jesus refuses, where does that leave us? Jesus lives in them, and the State with the support of Religion will crucify him again, and again, and again.

For three hours, we told stories, cried, hugged and finally stood in a circle, holding hands. Each of us has a date with death, it’s just a matter of time. The men pray, profound prayers of trust and hope and forgiveness and kind blessing for those who have chosen to be their enemies.

Our hearts break and in response, our eyes leak as Abu, an elderly dignified man who has travelled the road from mental illness, to Islam and to Jesus, lifts up his powerful voice embedded with the resonance of a life of loss and love, and slowly sings our common language:

*Amazing Grace,
How Sweet the Sound,
That Saved a Wretch Like Me.
I Once was Lost
But now Am Found,
was Blind But Now I See. □*

Wm. Paul Young is author of The Shack and Lies We Believe About God.

THE SIGN THAT SAVES THE WORLD by BRIAN ZAHND

(continued from page 10)

But Paul also said it was the power and wisdom of God, contending that “*God’s weakness is stronger than human strength*” (1 Cor. 1:25).

Paul doesn’t mean that when God is weak, God is still stronger than humans. That wouldn’t be scandalous, that would be just a typical boast about conventional power. Rather Paul is saying that ***God’s power is weakness!*** Think about that for a moment and you will realize that such an assertion is still scandalous today.

We are fascinated by conventional power—power to purchase, power to enforce our will, power to kill—and we are put off by any form of powerlessness.

But it is precisely the powerlessness of God enacted by Jesus on the cross that somehow saves the world. Look long and deeply at the cross and you may catch a glimpse of the greatest mystery of all.

Today, about an hour before I saw Fra Angelico’s *Crucifixion*, I saw Michelangelo’s *David*. No doubt Michelangelo’s marble masterpiece is impressive and the crowds who stood around it taking pictures knew it was a monumental artistic achievement—the iconic embodiment of the Renaissance.

But what moved me most today was standing alone before a monk’s fresco painted above a humble door in a medieval monastery.

David impresses me, but the Crucifixion saves me. □

Brian Zahnd is the pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri.

“No Shadow of Turning”

Felicia Murrell

After reading the novel *Eve*, by Wm. Paul Young, I find myself trying to put into words a reality that our Father impressed upon my heart.

If there is no darkness or “shifting of shadow” and Father and I are face to face, I see no darkness at all. The only way I see a shadow is if I, of my own choosing, turn my back on the light that God is still emitting. The only way I see darkness is if something blocks the light.

As I pondered the thought, I realized this revelation is as true about my relationship with people as it is about my relationship with Father.

When people wrong me, wound me, frustrate me, irritate me (insert any negative

emotion) and in my heart I turn away, then in the turning I no longer see that person through the light of the strength and beauty of our relationship. Nor do I see them through the light of Father’s love and what he believes to be true about them.

That is the place where the accuser of the brethren comes alongside with his whispers to cause doubt, mistrust and disconnection to grow in our heart toward the other person. And as we continue to turn our faces away from light, the lies of the evil one are strengthened and empowered with our agreement and judgment toward the other person.

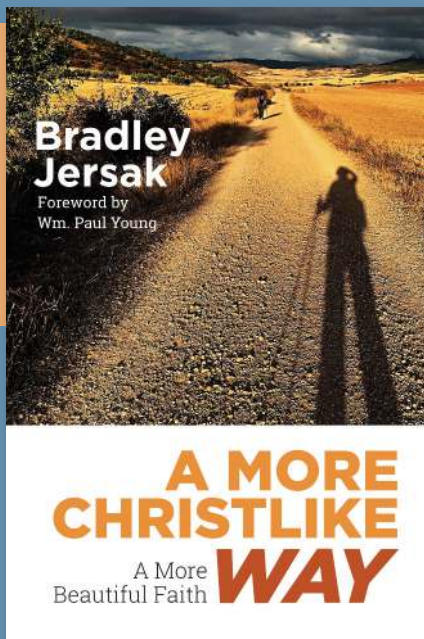


However, when we choose to remain face to face despite discomfort, our eyes remain clear and our whole body is filled with light. In that place, we can see the truth of brokenness—ours and theirs—without expectation or demand of repayment for something they have no capacity to give us. We draw strength from both grace and vulnerability to see beyond their brokenness and character defects to the person’s True Self created in God’s image and we then love as He loves.

I understand now why God has no illusions. There are no shadows to create them. □

Felicia Murrell describes herself an “opinionated, wanna-be muse who is deeply bound to Love.” She is a copy editor and author of Truth Encounters.

She and her husband, Doug are former pastors who make their home in Atlanta, GA.



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More than a Watchmaker

Q Does God control every detail of our lives, with a blow-by-blow roadmap or architectural blueprint? I do believe God cares about every part of my life and has a plan for my life. Psalm 139 in particular seems to back up my belief. Would you please explain this further?

A wide range of viewpoints are proclaimed across Christendom among authors, pastors, ministries and denominations. One extreme says that God is completely uninvolved and unconcerned with his creation. From this perspective, God is perceived as a divine watchmaker who created the universe like a watch, with all its constituent parts. Then, according to this belief, God wound up the watch (today, he would insert the battery) and walked away.

I absolutely oppose such a view, for God himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, became incarnate—"became flesh"—one of us! Further, I believe the risen Lord is still with us, living in us. He never abandon us nor will he ever do so. God is not detached, disinterested, immune or too busy to care. In Christ, God is here, with us, participating in our lives.

On the other extreme is a perception, opposite to the watchmaker God, seeing God as the agent behind every event. This view of God perceives him ordaining every human choice and governing evil itself. In this model, everything we do and everything that happens to us is God's "will."

Not only is this view illogical and completely out of line with life experiences, it is a form of superstition.

An old joke concerns a man who believed God predestined everything in his life. One day the man fell down a flight of stairs, but thankfully, only suffered a few injuries. He dusted himself off, got up and said, "Boy, am I glad that's over!"

The philosophical conclusion that God predestines every detail of our lives is opposed to the fundamental nature of God, who is love. This position imagines God willfully causing hurt, pain and suffering by his "will." So, we have little children being molested, people being raped and a world full of mayhem—by God's will? Wrong! Really wrong, according to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

God, our heavenly Father, does not make all our decisions for us. The gospel of Jesus Christ, as proclaimed throughout the New Testament, says God's "will" risks giving us the freedom to make our own choices in life. For that matter, his "will" even allows the choices of others to impact and affect us. So, how does God actively care for us in a world of choices?

God's love, care and concern is woven into every aspect of our lives like a tapestry. God knows every sparrow that falls (and yet they fall).

He knows every hair on our head (though they fall too!).

As our living heavenly Father, he does not

control or determine every detail of our lives the way an earthly parent might do for an infant (and even then, human parents cannot prevent every disease or accident).

Rather, God's will is for us to grow in Christ, to mature and make our own decisions. His will is that we are more than robots. God's will is for us to know and embrace his love, which passes all understanding—and to participate in his care for the world as agents of his love. His will is that we would know and experience the truth he, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, loves us in spite of wrong decisions we make.

It might be comfortable to think that God controls all aspects of our lives, in some cases absolving us of responsibility for our actions, but the gospel of Jesus Christ, the nature of God and human experience and history say otherwise. □

God's love, care and concern is woven into every aspect of our lives like a tapestry.

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