

PLAIN TRUTH®

inside

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Creating God in Our Own Image

By Greg Albrecht

"You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."—Anne Lamott

From the beginning of time humans have busied themselves with attempts to bring God down to earth—to shrink him and make him easier to understand—to make him more human. The Old Testament is filled with examples of golden calves, shrines in high places and sacrifices and offerings (some required as a part of the old covenant and others not so much). Appeasing and pleasing God was very much a part of the mindset of the old covenant and of course very much a part of how humans naturally perceive God.

The basic human mindset about God goes something like this:

1) *Of course God is more powerful than we are and much smarter...but*

in many ways he is just like us...only more advanced.

2) *Dealing with God successfully involves treating him like other humans whom you want to impress and please. God is "in charge"—like our parents were when we were young and like our boss is at work. So do what he wants and be on your best behavior when he is "around." That will keep him happy.*

3) *Dealing with God successfully involves "not waking him up" by doing things he does not like. If you wake him up he will not be happy and neither will you.*

But God begs to differ with the way in which we pigeonhole him and turn him into a more "manageable" God.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your

thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9, my emphasis).

Our ways and our thoughts are not one and the same as God's ways and thoughts. God has his ways and his thoughts are incomparably higher than our ways and thoughts. God is not like us.

God is something different. Way better—in fact he is perfect. He is higher and more noble and gracious—filled with love, mercy and grace. He is eternal and immortal—we are not. It might

seem obvious that his ways and thoughts are higher than our own, since he is Creator and we are creatures, but our thoughts and ways don't always assume that to be true, do they?

As a young boy, I used to sit with my mother on my grandmother's front porch, on North 8th Street in Herington, Kansas, as we looked into the summer sky. Herington was and still is a small Kansas town, so neon signs and city lights didn't hamper the magnificent heavenly spectacle presented without charge each night of the summer.

As we sat there, often surrounded by fireflies, my mother would tell me that my father (who was killed when I was only 15 months old) was one of those stars twinkling up in the sky. My mother was my ultimate authority for everything at that time, so for a number of years I thought my father whom I never knew was "up there" with God.

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Heart and Soul

All over this world people are dying from despair and depression. Opioid abuse and addiction is unprecedented, as people vainly attempt to medicate themselves from the pain and heartache of their lives.

Christ-less religion insists that people be convicted of how bad they are. That's no news flash! People already know how bad they are. People already know the bad news. What people need to know is the good news of Jesus Christ, and of the love, grace and mercy of God.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is Christianity without the religion—the gospel is irreligious. Those who discover the gospel of Jesus Christ have the audacity to dig down and discard all the religious rubble that has obscured and buried the gospel in order to finally arrive at the foundation of faith. And that foundation is Jesus!

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:11, *“For no one can lay any other foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”*

The Heart and Soul of the gospel of Jesus Christ is an invitation to become a religious non-conformist—Jesus invites his followers to question and challenge the religious status-quo. **The Heart and Soul** of the gospel of Jesus Christ is an invitation to embrace the grace of God—a radical grace because few people are willing to unconditionally receive God's grace.

Jesus is the **Heart and Soul** of Christ-centered Faith! Christ-less religion dispenses what it calls “god” much like a doctor or a pharmacy does. People feel pain, alienation, shame and guilt, so they go to a brick-and-mortar building

with a sign outside that says “church”—in many such buildings they receive a God-fix. They are told what to do and how often they must do it, in order to please and appease God.

The people leave, their problems are briefly repressed—their problems are sedated—they feel as if they have kept an angry and upset god at bay for another week, and then the next week they need to return to have their prescription refilled.

Of course, many churches within Christendom will teach and preach that God has forgiven us...but when the rubber of their teaching and preaching hits the road, the message is that God has forgiven us *until next week*. Next week we are told we need the prescription filled again...we are told we must beg God for his forgiveness all over again. It's an endless cycle, trapping people in a religious hamster wheel.

A Christian is a follower of Jesus. Christ-followers are not addicted to religion and all of its trappings—Jesus has rescued his followers and set them free.

Christ-less religion, in order to control people, insists that people are bad, rotten and, according to John Calvin, “depraved.” To the degree that people don't already carry a huge load of guilt and shame, when they exit the front door of Christ-less religion that load of guilt and shame will have been multiplied...all the better to control people.

Christ-less religion, in order to control people, will fill them with fear of what God will do to them if they do not do exactly what religion tells them to do.

Christ-less religion is all about the

monstrous myth of eternal torture in hell which, according to religion, God will send you to if you fail to do what religion says (and by the way, God will send you to hell because he loves you).

When one follows Jesus they are saved from the endless programs and requirements of religion. Jesus saves us by detoxing us from religious addiction.

Christ-followers are saved by Jesus from forever worrying about whether God is mad at them and whether they have done enough to please him.

For Christ-followers, Jesus is the center of all reality. For religious captives and addicts, their church and their religious ceremonies and traditions are the center of all reality.

Christ-less religion tries to fix and improve Jesus.

Christ-less religion attempts to confine, control and harness Jesus.

Christ-less religion tries to manage Jesus and turn him into a manageable object—a ceremony, a book, an icon or a ritual.

But Jesus is no religious mascot. Jesus is who he is.

HE IS THE HEART AND SOUL OF OUR FAITH.

Jesus is our rock. Jesus is our foundation. Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith. Jesus is our living water, and he is our Bread of life. Jesus is the true vine, our good shepherd. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. □

—Greg Albrecht

Join us for the complete message of “Heart and Soul” at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of October 6, 2019.

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But as I matured and grew, I realized my father was not a twinkling star any more than Santa Claus delivered presents to all the children of the world on one night. But the idea of God being “up there” stayed with me. Perhaps you have had some similar ideas about God.

The vast majority of people who believe in God believe he is in a singular, precise heavenly location. God is way too small for most people. I once heard an impassioned preacher explain to his congregation that “God is about 6’2” and he weighs about 220 pounds—about the same as my height and weight.”

We do love to shrink God down to our size—we do love to make God into our image and our likeness. The preacher was doing what most humans tend to do—he was making God over into an image that is about the same size as we are—maybe a little bigger and a little smarter, but not that much.

I never knew my earthly father, and while I was taught about God for many decades of my life, I now realize much of what I was taught was erroneous, so I never really knew much about my heavenly Father either. By the grace of God, over the past few decades, I have grown in Christ to know my heavenly Father.

Have you ever thought about the huge difference in knowing about God and knowing God?

One way to think about *the difference in knowing about God and actually knowing God* is to think about the love we humans can experience. One can read about love and learn about love—sometimes the knowledge is accurate and sometimes it is mythical and mystical.

Knowledge, to the degree it is accurate or not, is just knowledge. But when one actually experiences and is immersed and is head-over-heels “in love,” one realizes the distinction between knowing *about* love and being *in* love.

Many people think of God as confined to heaven—sitting on this throne while angels are constantly scurrying around, giving him reports about breaking news from all over the universe—especially what is going on here on earth.

Many people perceive God, after hearing those reports, leaning over, looking out his huge heavenly picture window, peering down at all of us here on earth and frowning. Sometimes they think God must shake his head in disappointment. Their God is too small—he is a disenchanted God who is far away and ashamed and disappointed in them.

“Your God is Too Small”

A few hours ago I was looking for one of my favorite books—with no success. I’ve been drastically whittling down my library of books because 1) I don’t need many of them and 2) I am thinking that now, in my early 70s, is a good time to get rid of a lot of stuff that I have accumulated...so others don’t have to later.

But, and perhaps this has happened to you as well, when one stores a book or other item in a particular place for many years, and then upsets the entire course of human history by moving or discarding said book or item, chaos can result. “*Where did I put that book? That book was a keeper—surely I didn’t throw it away!*”

I finally did locate *Your God is Too Small* by J.B. Phillips, but in all fairness, it is a “small” paperback—perhaps one of the smallest books I own. Ironically, *Your God is Too Small* was lost among bigger books.

J.B. Phillips was a professor of Greek, who completed an excellent translation of the New Testament, and among other books, wrote this compact but profound little book



The BIG God of unlimited grace and unconditional love cannot be tamed by religious authorities, theologians or biblical scholars.

he titled *Your God is Too Small*. He fills this superb little book with stereotypes of God many of us have believed—from a policeman to a doting grandfather to a God who demands absolute perfection to a God who is forever annoyed and aggravated with us.

Many within Christ-less religion have been taught and consequently believe in an angry God who is upset with them—a small-minded little God who is preoccupied with vengeance and payback, rather than the eternal and forever forgiveness revealed to us in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Many who are brainwashed and held captive by religious misrepresentations of God are so busy pleasing and appeasing the God they are already convinced about, they have no clue how to find the God they have never known.

So much about God is revealed to us in and through the teachings of Jesus, but many people completely miss that God because they think they already know him. Sadly, many wonderful people, with distorted ideas about God, are only interested in reinforcing and conforming to the distorted God they know.

The diluted, diminished and devalued mini-god of Christ-less religion is only concerned with maintaining the status quo of religion.

J.B. Phillips wrote *Your God is Too Small* to help us take God out of our pigeonholes and out of the religious boxes into which we and

others have placed him, in the process deflating, dissecting, diminishing and devaluing him.

- We tend to categorize and shrink God. We tend to mash him up into bite-sized chunks. We pulverize him in our blender so that we can digest him more easily.

- We prefer a smaller God because a small God is a God we can manage, control and manipulate. A small God is safe—he does what we want him to do when we want him to do it.

- We like a vending-machine God who will dispense the answers to our prayers and requests when we put it in the right “currency” in terms of prayers and efforts.

- We like to think of God as a genie in a bottle whom we can summon to take care of those bothersome problems we face.

- We like to think that God can be bargained with like we would bargain with a merchant.

- We like to think that we can persuade God like we persuade a friend or family member.

- We like to think that God will be impressed if we do lots and lots of good things, and in fact he will not only be impressed but he will be in our debt—obligated to do what we want because of all the good stuff we have done for him.

God is Big...Really BIG

Each of us must examine our ideas of God and ask where those ideas came from and more importantly, are they correct and valid, according to the biblical revelation of God, most of all in the person of Jesus Christ.

At the end of all examinations of our ideas about God, we will realize many, if not most, of the images of God we've believed are erroneous. Our God has been far too small.

How big is God?

- Big enough to come into our world in the person of Jesus, and to turn it and all of its religions upside down and right side up.

- Big enough to overcome a world of sin, hatred and corruption by his love.

- Big enough to love the entire world—all of it and all of us—without exception.

- Big enough to love us because that's who he is, rather than loving us based on how well we behave and perform.

God is bigger than anything human religion does to define and confine him within creeds, beliefs, practices, doctrines, dogmas and buildings. God is bigger than any religious attempt to fence him in within denominational boundaries.

The BIG God of unlimited grace and unconditional love cannot be tamed by religious authorities, theologians or biblical scholars.

When God grants us deeper insights into exactly who he is (and isn't), we see him as he is, rather than as we have been taught and brainwashed. God can and will radically change our lives when we realize that God is big enough to handle all our doubts and fears and to blot out our shame and guilt.

Many today who are trapped by ideas of a small God see their

situation as hopeless. They are empty and desperate because they believe what they have been told—that God is remote, passive and non-involved.

They believe that God is so small that he is prone to temper outbursts, and if he really gets upset he will come unglued, throw a hissy fit and punish them out of his wrath.

Why Religion Has Failed

Christ-less religion has failed to teach and preach a BIG God because it has not, in the main, come to grips with the fact that **Jesus Christ is the core of our faith.** *Jesus Christ is the center of true faith—not religious rituals, performances, attendance, programs or human virtue.*

When we focus on Jesus as the absolute center and core of faith, we realize that our relationship with God is because of Jesus, not because of anything we can ever accomplish.

When we focus on Jesus as the absolute center and core of faith, we realize that God loves us unconditionally, by his grace and because of his goodness, not because of our deeds and efforts.

When we focus on Jesus as the absolute center and core of faith, we discover that God's love is endless. We discover that God's love is far beyond anything we can ever imagine. We discover that God's love fills our souls and spirits to overflowing, so that our lives are filled with purpose, meaning and significance.

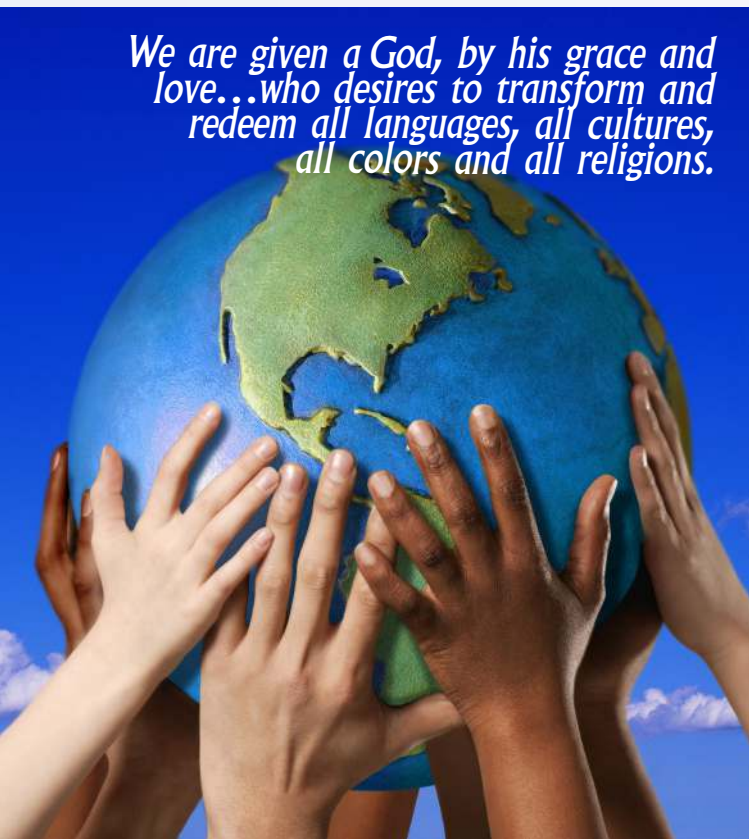
You and I need a Big God. You and I have a BIG GOD!

We have a Big God who cannot be tamed or shrunk down to the size or dimensions of a religious denomination or its dogmas and doctrines.

- We are given a God, by his grace and love, whose relentless love is for everyone who has ever lived or ever will.

- We are given a God, by his grace and love, who loves all people, who desires to transform and redeem all languages, all cultures, all colors and all religions. *Thank God he is God and we are not.* □

We are given a God, by his grace and love...who desires to transform and redeem all languages, all cultures, all colors and all religions.



Blessings and Curses?

By Brad Jersak

QUESTION:

I am currently on my fourth read of *A More Christlike God* and each time I read it, I am getting to know God more and more. Regarding your notion that wrath is a metaphor for God's consent, I wonder how to interpret God's blessings and curses, which God seemed to bring about directly. Can this be reconciled?

RESPONSE:

Re: God's blessings and curses, I think a good way to approach that question would be to take a walk through the Bible as follows:

1. OLD COVENANT PROMISES:

First, notice how the old covenant (Deuteronomy 28 for example) seems to say that IF you are good, God will directly bless your crops with sun and rain, but if you disobey God, he will curse your crops with drought or hail, etc.

Sample Blessings:

And the Lord will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land of which the Lord swore to your fathers to give you. The Lord will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand (Deuteronomy 28:11-12).

Sample Curses:

*The Lord will strike you with consumption, with fever, with inflammation, with severe burning fever, with the sword, with scorching, and with mildew; they shall pursue you until you perish. And your heavens which **are** over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you **shall** be iron. The Lord will change the rain of your land to powder and dust; from the heaven it shall come down on you until you are destroyed* (Deuteronomy 28:22-24).

2. OLD COVENANT GLITCHES:

Notice, next, how an honest reflection by the Psalmist questions the reality of the Deuteronomic covenant from his own experience. He cites examples of the wicked prospering and the righteous suffering. He *wants* the covenant to be true when he thinks he is righteous but is also relieved when he has been sinful that God "did not treat us as our sins deserved."

Psalmist's Complaint:

*For I **was** envious of the boastful, When I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For **there are** no pangs in their death, but their strength **is** firm. They **are not** in trouble **as other** men, Nor are they plagued **like other** men. Therefore pride serves as their necklace; Violence covers them **like** a garment.*

*Their eyes bulge with abundance; They have more than a heart could wish. They scoff and speak wickedly **concerning** oppression; They speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walks through the earth* (Psalm 73:3-9).

Psalmist's Relief

*He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel. The Lord **is** merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive **with us**, Nor will He keep **His anger** forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities* (Psalm 103:7-10).

To summarize thus far, the old covenant promises that God will directly bless the righteous and curse the wicked, using weather phenomena for example, to create or destroy prosperity. But the Psalmist is bewildered and frustrated at how these promises are not obviously fulfilled in his own experience. Sometimes the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper.

This contrast between Deuteronomy and the Psalms can also be seen at times between the patriarchs and the prophets. Again, the patriarchal voice tends to emphasize how God elects to bless his chosen family, while the prophets lament their suffering.

Sometimes these are related to being righteous vs. wicked, but other times, the blessings are pure grace and the curses are pure tragedy, apart from behavior.

3. NEW COVENANT GRACE:

Notice, finally, how Jesus challenges the old worldview with his own revelation of the nature of God. God in his perfect and indiscriminate grace causes the sun to shine and the clouds to rain on both the righteous and wicked. He is good to ALL and his compassion shows no favoritism.

Conversely, when tragedy hits, Jesus rejects the idea that God has selected some for salvation and others for calamity. Tragedy is neither caused by God nor is it selective according to human behavior. To summarize as I did in *A More Christlike God*, "Sh*t happens and God is good."

God's Indiscriminate Grace to All

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not

*even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more **than others**? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect* (Matthew 5:44-48).

French philosopher-mystic, Simone Weil, pointed out that the sun shines and the rain falls on the righteous and the wicked...but so do earthquakes and tornados. God is not the direct cause and we cannot infer who is righteous or wicked according to how life treats them. It doesn't work that way. Jesus addresses this in Luke 13.

Tragedy's Indiscriminate Targets

*There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all **other** Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all **other** men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish"* (Luke 13:1-5).

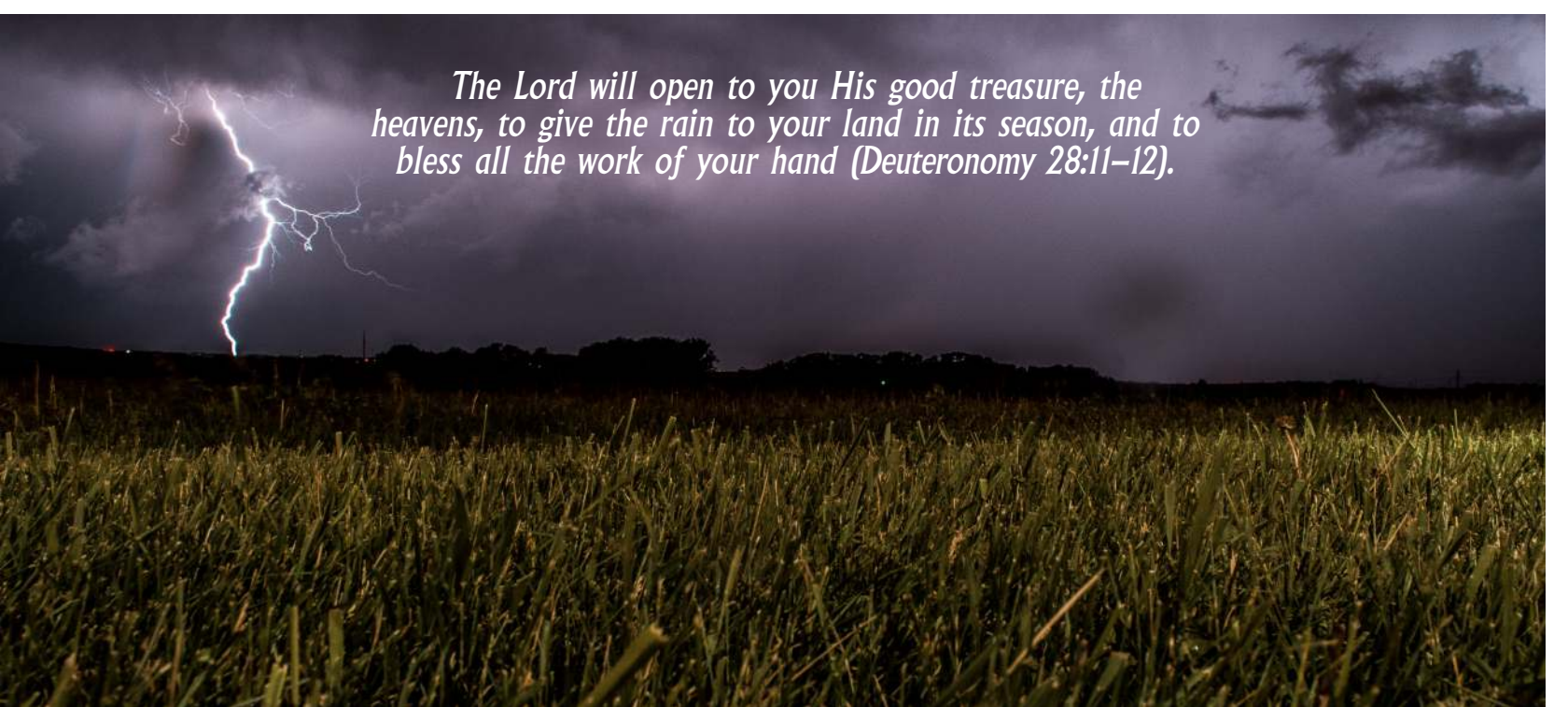
Note: Jesus adds the warning that all alike must repent. He's not saying, "Sh*t happens, so 'let us eat and

drink, for tomorrow we die!" (cf. Isaiah 22:13, 1 Corinthians 15:32). Somehow he concludes that if the violence of man and nature could strike anyone at any time, our response should be sobriety rather than hedonism. He calls us to recognize that if life is so hazardous and fleeting, how we live matters. We will, in fact, *all die*, but we need not *perish*, in the sense of wasting our lives and decomposing. There's a resurrection coming, so let's turn or reorient our lives toward the life of Christ! It's not a threat of divine violence, but an urgent invitation to eternal life...and the randomness of life serves as a wake-up call.

SUMMARY: THREE DISTINCT PERSPECTIVES

So here we have three distinct perspectives. From these, we might derive these principal takeaways:

- 1) The Scriptures show a **developing understanding** of who God is and how God works;
- 2) These **developing understandings challenge each other**, and the authors are not embarrassed about this; and
- 3) **Jesus gets the final word** on who God is and how he works. Whereas the early covenant was transactional, David is already seeing how grace operates above law, and Jesus expresses this through his own perfect revelation. □



The Lord will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand (Deuteronomy 28:11-12).



My Cousin Valerie

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

In the Postscript of my book *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions*, I reflect on hundreds of missionaries over the centuries who made great sacrifices to learn a new language and culture and spend most of a lifetime missing loved ones back home.

I go on to tell how I as a thirteen-year-old felt the call of God and committed myself to be an overseas missionary. But as the years passed by so did that sense of calling. Truth be told, at least half of the outgoing women missionaries featured in my church monthly magazine were single—not good odds. I desperately wanted to someday have a husband and children, thus my turn away from that “call.”

Speaking of myself in the third person, I concluded the Postscript—and the book—with these words:

Only three miles away from her childhood home another young farm girl was growing up—her cousin, Valerie Stelrecht. They attended the same schools and the same little country church. Valerie, too, felt called to foreign missions. She, too, enrolled at the St. Paul Bible College to prepare for her life's calling. And she, too, longed for marriage and family. But her sense of calling to the foreign field came first. Valerie graduated from Bible college and soon thereafter bade farewell to her family and loved ones and set out alone for Ecuador, where she continues to serve today with the Christian and Missionary Alliance. Two young women whose lives paralleled each other's in so many respects. Two young women who felt called to foreign missions. Valerie went. I stayed home.

In the thirty-five years since publication, the book still sells well, not only as a text but for leisure reading, no doubt because there are so many fascinating missionary stories—stories of great courage and dedication, sure, but also of marriage failure, mental illness, ministry quarrels and discord of every stripe.

Over the years as I have taught graduate courses and traveled as a visiting lecturer, I have been asked about such problems. But the most frequently asked question has always related to the final twist—the story of Valerie and me. Students have wanted to hug me and assure me that I should not feel guilty about my choice (which, despite my purposely vague wording, I have not).

I have, however, always had great admiration for Valerie. After serving for many years in Ecuador, she was transferred to the Dominican Republic and ministered there until her

What a delight it was as we witnessed the ceremony, Valerie absolutely glowing and crowned with tender mercies...

retirement in 2017, after nearly a half-century of service. She represented the fear I had of being on the single side of the bus when women missionaries were transported around the world for a lifetime of hard work and loneliness.

But you only have to look at a photo of Valerie to see the joy and contentment she takes with her wherever she goes. She simply shines. And that is no doubt one of the first things Terry noted as he saw her again soon after she retired, decades after they both had graduated from Bible college.

He had served as a missionary in the Philippines with his wife who had died two years earlier. How fitting it was that Valerie's long tenure as a missionary ended with a twist. She and Terry became engaged, a wedding date set for August, 2018.

Despite the inconvenience of leaving our little garden shop for a long summer weekend and making a 12-hour drive back home to Wisconsin, we knew this was an event we couldn't miss. What a delight it was as we witnessed the ceremony, Valerie absolutely glowing and crowned with tender mercies in front of a packed church. □

—Ruth Tucker



Quotes & Connections



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Coming Soon! A MORE CHRISTLIKE WAY

A CWRpress sequel to Brad Jersak's award-winning book, *A More Christlike God*.



"Christianity is in a profound sense the end of all religion... Nowhere in the New Testament is Christianity presented as a cult or as a religion. Religion is needed where there is a wall of separation between God and man. But Christ, who is both God and man, has broken down the wall between man and God. He has inaugurated a new life, not a new religion."
—Alexander Schmemmann

"One of the telltale signs in the contemporary American church that trust in God is on the wane is the meteoric rise of legalistic religion. It will continue to flourish and attract an enormous number of devotees. For legalism is born of fear. It is a religious response to human fear. What makes legalism so attractive is that it meets a basic human need—security."
—Brennan Manning

The Remnant II When Church and State Collude

Now available on Amazon.com

The exciting sequel to Monte Wolverton's novel, *The Remnant*, is now available!

The year is 2145, and planet earth seems destined for a new era of peace and prosperity under one world government and one world religion.

But utopia is illusory, as Church Patriarch and Matriarch Grant and Dana Cochran are about to discover.

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