

CWRmagazine

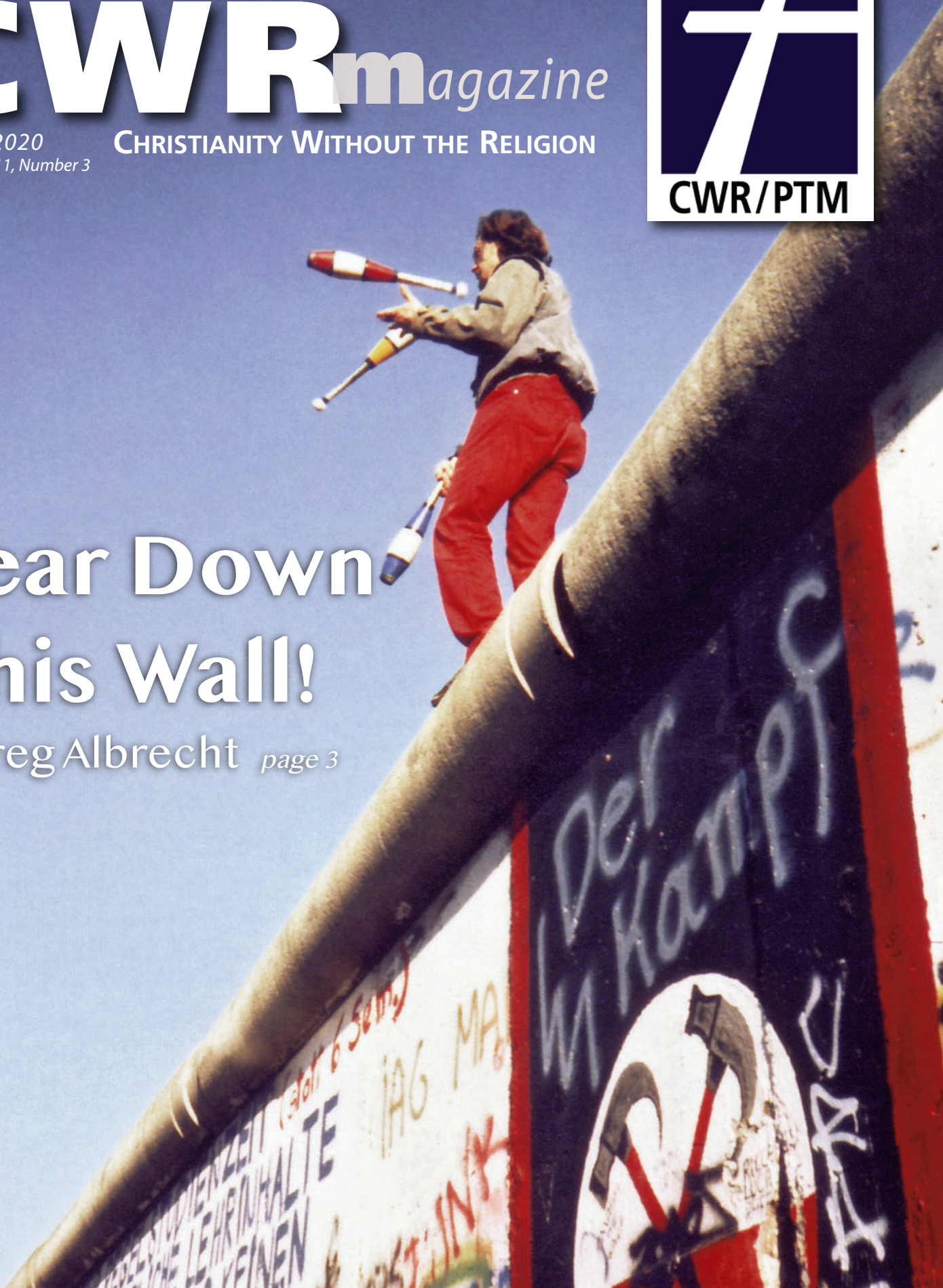
June 2020
Volume 11, Number 3

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



Tear Down this Wall!

Greg Albrecht *page 3*



What Our Readers Are Saying...

“Irreligious Christian”

I want to thank PTM (and especially Greg Albrecht) for the phrase “irreligious Christian.”

Ever since I first heard him use the phrase, I have realized how it identifies and describes my own faith.

Recently, I was having an online conversation with a longtime friend who, by her own admission, has never even come close to being a Christian, however that term may be defined. She sees so clearly many of the shortcomings, flaws and fallacies of Christendom. When I told her I was an “irreligious Christian,” she could immediately see exactly what I was saying.

Once again, PTM/CWR’s Christ-centered focus is so helpful to me.

Michigan

February Highlights

I read the February CWR magazine this morning. Brad’s article on “The Mystery of the Trinity” was the best concise explanation I’ve ever read on this difficult subject!

I will keep it for those in my adult Bible study class when the subject comes up.

Greg’s excellent article on God’s love vs. anger was equally positive.

One thought that came to mind was a future article on just what is “the wrath of God.” Since

this expression occurs several times in the New Testament (I think especially of Revelation), what it is as well as what it is not would be helpful.

British Columbia, Canada

Global Impact!

I thank God for the great ministry you are doing. I have only recently discovered your website and all of its resources. They are a spiritual treasure!

As a pastor, I have been telling those to whom I minister that they should listen to and read all that you provide. I am also using Greg Albrecht’s sermons and articles as a resource in my own preaching and teaching.

I just wanted you to know how far and wide your ministry is reaching and how it is positively affecting lives. So many people need to hear about the love, mercy and grace of God rather than the wrath and anger that is the typical message they hear!

Our prayers are with you.

Zambia

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/PTM!

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Tear Down this Wall!

Greg Albrecht

TEAR DOWN THIS WALL!

On June 12, 1987, standing in front of the Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin, Germany, President Ronald Reagan, addressing General Secretary Gorbachev of Soviet Russia (who of course was not present), said, “Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

The Berlin wall had been constructed in 1961 in the divided city of Berlin by the East German Communists (who were occupied and controlled by the Soviet military) to deny freedom to its citizens who obviously preferred to live in the prosperous and free West Berlin and West Germany.

History teaches us that the building of physical, emotional and spiritual walls has been a consistent human activity. Walls create and solidify division—they send a message of hostility and rejection and often engender anger and violence.

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—remember that at that time

you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to



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Berlin Wall, Nov. 9, 1989

you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

– Ephesians 2:11-18

Paul, the author of the book of Ephesians, explains that non-Jewish Christians, the primary audience to whom he was writing, had often been called those who were “uncircumcised” by the Jews. To be “uncircumcised” was a derisive and derogatory term proclaiming racial and religious separation. The use of such a term or a similar one today would be considered at the very least politically incorrect, and more than that: demeaning, hateful and racist.

The word “circumcision” was, of course, a reference to the covenant that God gave Abraham—a circumcision covenant whereby Abraham and the male members of his household circumcised themselves as a physical and everlasting covenant as a sign of their

intimate, spiritual relationship with God.

Circumcision of the male anatomy became a physical sign that Jewish males were God’s people—and it came to be seen as a sign that others who were “uncircumcised” were not as special or unique as the Jews, the people of God of the old covenant.

Paul says those who were Jews and followed the practice of circumcision were *those who call themselves the “circumcision”*—and then he said of circumcision, parenthetically, *which is done in the body by human hands.*

A PHYSICAL SIGN OF SEPARATION, A HUMAN ENDEAVOR

While God directed circumcision under the circumcision covenant (Genesis 17), who performed this ritual of circumcision? As Paul says, circumcision is done *“in the body by human hands.”*

Circumcision is a religious act, a ritual and

ceremony followed to signify separation.

Adding to this separation accomplished by humans, in verse 14 we read of “the dividing wall of hostility” that existed at the time Paul wrote—a wall between Jews and Gentiles.

A WALL OF RELIGIOUS AND RACIAL HOSTILITY

Walls divide people religiously and racially and they create hostility, and if division and hostility are already present, walls promote and incite further division and hostility.

Walls are human endeavors.

During the time of Jesus, and about 30 years later, when this letter to the Ephesians was written, there was a stone wall of separation in the Herodian temple in Jerusalem. Non-Jews from any race or religion could enter a great courtyard of the Temple area...but, those who were not Jewish were forbidden to enter into the inner courts. Warning signs were placed on the wall of separation.

In 1871 an engraved limestone was discovered in Jerusalem, and the inscription is currently in a museum in Istanbul, Turkey. The inscription reads: *No foreigner is to go beyond the balustrade and the plaza of the temple zone— whoever is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his death which will follow.*

THE TEMPLE WAS THE CENTER & HEADQUARTERS OF JEWISH FAITH & RELIGION

Most Jews then believed the temple to be the place where God lived, and while Jewish religious professionals may have admitted that God was bigger than any building, they still would have said that the temple hosted God, kind of like a hotel, when he visited the earth.

Who built the temple? *People. Did God command anyone to build the temple?*

No!

Did God ever say that he was exclusively available only in this holy building called the temple, or any religious building, for that matter?

No.

That bold statement that God did not command the building of a temple might astound you—but do your homework. Study your Bible. The book of Exodus tells us that God directed the children of Israel, whom he had just saved from Egypt and all of its physical and spiritual bondage, to build a tabernacle.

The tabernacle was a tent—not a building. The tent was wherever the nation was—it was not on so-called holy ground as a place to which humans must pilgrimage. The nation of Israel was on a pilgrimage to the Promised Land and the tent-tabernacle, a portable place of worship, went with them.

HUMANS TO GOD— “WE NEED A TEMPLE AND WE NEED A KING”

During a time when Samuel, one of the most beloved of all the judges, revered as a prophet, had become old and appointed his sons as judges, the nation of Israel—

specifically leaders they called elders—went to the aged Samuel and said they would not put up with the chicanery and corruption of his sons. They insisted that Samuel install a king—they wanted to be like all the other nations around them.

When Samuel consulted the Lord, the Lord told him if a king is what the nation of Israel wants—then that’s what they will get. But he told Samuel to let them know that choices have consequences, and to warn them a king would not solve all problems. A king would be no walk in the park. Despite the warnings, the nation of Israel wanted a king and Samuel anointed a man named Saul to be their first king.

Whose idea was it to have a king? *The people. Did God command them to have a king? No—the people wanted a king and God consented to their wishes.*

Many kings of Judah and Israel followed—but the

**Walls promote & incite
division & hostility.
Walls are human
endeavors.**

monarchy was not God's idea.

It was approximately 1100 BC when Saul started his reign, and 40 years after that, King David succeeded Saul, and about 40 years after that event Solomon succeeded his father David. Solomon built *the temple that God did not command, but conceded to*, somewhere around 1016 BC.

Before Solomon completed the temple, his father, King David, originally thought it would be a good idea to build God a house. David had already moved the ark of the covenant to his capital city of Jerusalem, but

GOD DOESN'T LIVE IN HOUSES BUILT BY HUMAN HANDS

One day, many years later, God in the person of Jesus, God incarnate, the God-man, walked the land of Israel. In John 4:19-24 we read that Jesus told his disciples that the day would come when they would no longer worship him in Jerusalem—but instead they would worship him just like they had in the days of the tabernacle, when God was with them, wherever they were, rather than in a so-called holy place.

In him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

— Ephesians 2:19-22

David felt it should be housed in a magnificent temple, not a temporary tent.

King David had just finished building a magnificent royal palace, and as is recorded in 2 Samuel 7:1, during a conversation with Nathan the prophet, David said, *Here I am living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent.*

David decided to build a holy place—a spiritual edifice. God, through his prophet Nathan, said “no” to David. He said “no” because **God never wanted a temple**. He consented to the temple built by Solomon—he accommodated human wishes.

Still later in the New Testament, in the seventh chapter of the book of Acts, just before Stephen was stoned to death by religious professionals who were threatened by the walls-must-come-down message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Stephen said, as we read in Acts 7:48, *The Most High does not live in houses made by men*. In 1 Corinthians 6:19 Paul says the temple of God is what God makes and produces within those who follow Christ.

We do not presume to build a temple for God—rather, God builds his temple in us.

NOT A PLACE WE GO—THE TEMPLE IS WHAT WE ARE

God is not all about building walls to separate and divide. God does not need a religious temple or church building—he lives wherever he wants, he is not isolated to places built by men.

The Most High does not live in houses made by men.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of his household, built on the foundation of his apostles and prophets, with Christ himself as the chief cornerstone. In him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

—Ephesians 2:19-22

In and through Jesus Christ, God reconciles all who will accept his invitation. God abolishes barriers. God has no need for commandments and regulations that erect a dividing wall of hostility. God has no need of religion and all its buildings, ritualism and icons—they are rendered null and void by the cross of Christ.

In Christ, we are all brought near for he is our peace and our rest. We are, by the grace of God, one in and with Jesus—in sacred and blessed union and communion with him. □

Greg Albrecht is President of Plain Truth Ministries and Editor-in-Chief of CWR Magazine.

“IF YOUR BROTHER OFFENDS YOU . . .”

Two perspectives on Matthew 18 discipline

“If another disciple sins against you,” Jesus continued, “go and have it out, just between the two of you alone. If they listen to you, you’ve won back a brother or sister. But if they won’t listen, you should take with you one or two others, so that ‘everything may be established from the mouth of two or three witnesses.’ If they won’t listen to them, tell it to the assembly. And if they won’t listen to the assembly, you should treat such a person like you would a Gentile or a tax-collector. I’m telling you the truth: whatever you tie up on earth will have been tied up in heaven; and whatever you untie on earth will have been untied in heaven.”

—Matthew 18:15-18 (NTE)

PRACTICING MATTHEW 18 WITHOUT A BLUDGEON BRAD JERSAK

QUESTION

I am part of a Christian group going through some unresolved conflict. One side keeps trying to use Matt 18:15-18 like a sledgehammer against the other. How do we read this passage in context when people try to weaponize it?

RESPONSE

The analogy of the bludgeon really brings into focus the legalistic ways that even Christ’s

directives can be misused to perpetuate the very spiritual abuse he condemned. The letter kills. Whatever Christ is doing in this passage, he is NOT giving a green light for us to join the “accuser of the brethren” in the ministry of condemnation!

You know you’re interpreting Christ wrong when your practice contradicts Jesus’ other statement two chapters later:

“Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the

rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’”

—Matthew 20:25-28

If someone is using chapter 18 to violate Matthew 20, it’s an

obvious misuse. Note: Christ not only says, *Don't lord it over*, but *"Don't even exercise authority over!"* So, whoever is directing the use of Matthew 18 must do so as a servant of all involved.

That said, I don't want to slither away from the weight of Christ's directions or use Matthew 20 to negate the Matthew 18 process. But I've witnessed the misuse of chapter 18 as both obsessive stalking and ganging up. For Christ-followers, bullying is off the table. Rather,

we need to look first of all for Christ's intention. What is he up to? What's the goal? What is he correcting?

IT'S ABOUT RESTORATION

The verses immediately preceding this paragraph speak of leaving the 99 sheep to find the individual who's wandered off, with the goal of reconciling them to the flock.

The immediate context is restoration. *Christ is all about restoration and reconciliation.*

And that's also the stated goal in the verses you mentioned: winning back our brother or sister. Winning! Bludgeons don't win anyone. As Paul wrote, *"Don't you know that God's kindness is meant to bring you to repentance?"* (Romans 2:4. NTE). For both Christ and Paul, the winsome kindness of God is expressed through the kindness of Christlike disciples.

That tone, rather than a legalistic algorithm for chastisement, needs to come into



the verses we're considering. Religiosity turns "discipline" into punishment rather than practices that nurture flourishing disciples!

BOTTOM-UP PROCESSES

Christ is advocating for a bottom-up process of servant-love, and he's resisting a top-down imposition of authoritarian control.

The spirit of what Christ is getting at is that we don't need to rush into gossiping about people, telling on people or ganging up on people when we pick up an offense. He's saying start the reconciliation process at the most personal and private layer.

Only if you can't get anywhere privately and can't let it go do you ask for more help. The others you bring aren't about amassing a gang to create heavier pressure but about having others as witnesses who mediate to avoid escalation.

And only when this small group mediation/intervention fails—as in the case of unrepentant and brazen incest in 1 Corinthians 5—the group conscience of one's broader community may be required.

But do you see Jesus' point? *He's not providing a mechanism for escalation. Just the opposite—he's putting the brakes on it.*

LETTING BE AND LETTING GO

If having witnessed that the offender is unrepentant and hard-hearted (which may also, sneakily enough, turn out to be the offended one!), in the spirit of

Christ, I suspect "treating them as you would a pagan" (NIV) is NOT so much about exclusion or shunning or excommunication. I believe Jesus is teaching us to set healthy and compassionate boundaries in our relationships and releasing us to move on from intractable situations or irreconcilable relationships (rather than obsessing with fixing what we can't repair).

To use the prodigal son as an example, it's not that the Father kicked him out or consigned him to the pigpen. He didn't torment the son from the fence of the pig pen. He saw when it was time to let them go and let him be. And he allowed the son to ripen toward his own readiness for reconciliation. *He gave him the dignity of finding his own bottom.*

This 'letting be' needs to center on 'letting go' of our expectations of the other through which we came to be offended. I'll repeat that: when we are offended, two problems persist—the other's offense (which may be very real) and our own expectations (which may be utter fantasies).

If I'm the one who's committed the perceived offense, I may wake up to my wrongdoing and own the offense. I've been offered an open door to reconciliation and restoration. I can repent and renew the good relationships that I'd sabotaged.

On the other hand, if I'm accused but suspect that I'm not really the problem, I could say, "According to Matthew 18, you're offended, you've approached me

and your witnesses concur.

I don't see it that way. This feels like religious control and I can't bend on this. Thankfully, Jesus tells us what to do next: we part company until we see a path to reconciliation. Until then, Jesus says let me be. I trust that if I'm wrong, he'll work with me now and I hope you can make space for him to do so. *That's my boundary and I hope you'll honor it.*"

TRIPLE CONTEXT

As a sidebar, I'd add that we have here two immediate contexts:

Jesus instructs his disciples firsthand on the foundational principles of his kingdom.

But Matthew is also recalling Jesus' words to instruct his own community at least a generation later. He is working with existing faith communities and their new disciples. He wants them to know that when conflict arises, Jesus' words, properly obeyed, will cut off gossip, tattling, end-runs to leadership, perpetual stalking of your offenders and top-down religious control. In just these few verses, we're gifted with a good and orderly process as we seek to de-escalate conflict.

Today, in whatever forms we happen to fellowship, Matthew 18 models for us Christ's personal humility and his call to love one another. *It's not about bringing the muscle—it's about dialing down the energy.* And that means everyone needs to leave the bludgeon at home. □

Brad Jersak learned to practice Matthew 18 discipline the hard way: through 20 years of pastoral ministry.

The heavy-handed application of Matthew 18:15-17 leaves a trail of pain, broken relationships and spiritual carnage. Religious authoritarians use Matthew 18 to silence dissenting speech and to label people as troublemakers—sources of contamination in the assembly that must be purged.

Speech is articulated thought. Articulated thought calls to action. Action shapes reality.

TRESPASS-OFFENSE-SCANDAL

In Matthew 18:1-14, Christ has expressed his identification with “little children” and what it will take to inherit eternal life. He talks about “offending” these same little ones. In 18:6, he shifts and talks about interpersonal “trespasses”—offenses—literally: scandals. Petty interpersonal offenses and “hurt feelings” are not included. Neither is disagreeing with your “pastor.”

These are all legal terms. We are dealing in these passages with civil/criminal trespasses in a Mosaic context. You do not go to court/jail for “insensitivities” toward another believer in the community! The context is the disruption of community due to actual, objective loss in a legal sense. In our culture, the closest equivalence would be civil or criminal offenses, not petty local church squabbles.



Script-torturing Matthew 18

Stephen Crosby

Whoever controls speech, controls reality. Misguided leaders use Matthew 18 as a speech/thought-control template. They can manipulate a group of individuals and thus control and shape a community's experiential reality: a reality that too often accrues to the material, social, or psychological benefit of leadership.

This is an unfortunate and illegitimate understanding and application. It betrays the Spirit of Christ, even while professing fidelity to the text. Let's briefly examine this passage paying attention to its culture and context, and try to distill some legitimate application.

He is talking about behaviors of a scandalous nature that would breach the peace of the community.

The cultural backdrop for “trespasses” was the Mosaic Law. How do we know we are dealing with Mosaic law moral/criminal/civil offenses and not minor psychological hurts? Matthew 5 might inform our understanding of this passage as it is almost a mirror version of Matthew 18.

In Matthew 5:22, Jesus refers to being called before the “council” That was the Jewish Sanhedrin, the elders who adjudicated issues of the Mosaic Law. Verse 25 uses the words: *adversary, officer, judge* and *prison*.

TAKE WITNESSES

If a first attempt at peacemaking has been unsuccessful, involve others in the community. This was a very Jewish/Semitic practice. The law said there was to be no “ruling” without the presence of two or three witnesses. It does not mean taking two or three skills with you who are on your side, to beat the other person down until they agree with you.

TWO OR THREE AGREEING

This is not a make-a-wish prayer formula for three people in a circle singing praise songs. Rather, the peace of the

community is so important to Christ that he makes this promise (my paraphrase):

“Wherever two are three of you are concerned about the unity of the community, where you had to ‘make judgment’ in a case, and you are in agreement on it, I will stand behind your judgment.”

“Concerning the maintenance of the unity of the community, just ask, it will be done for you.”

A MANDATORY PROTOCOL?

Some think Matthew 18 is a mandatory protocol that must be followed to adjudicate all local church conflicts. If that is the case, and it is to be rigidly and legalistically applied, Paul apparently “failed Matthew 18” because he received a second-hand report from those of Chloe’s house (1 Corinthians 1:11) concerning the behavior in the congregation in Corinth. Gossip and not following the “steps of Matthew 18,” are grievous sins in many Matthew 18 disciplinary environments. Well, apparently Paul did not understand Matthew 18—at least not the way we commonly interpret it.

Paul did not “go to the source” by talking directly to the offenders and let them give “their side of the story,” and then take witnesses with him for stage two, and then bring it before the whole congregation for stage three of Matthew 18!

He simply believed people talking about other people, and acted on it! He wrote a letter based on the second-hand report which would have been read in public—a clear-cut violation of

Matthew 18 according to typical applications!

TREAT THEM AS UNBELIEVERS

Beyond the technicalities of the text, I think God is a realist when it comes to human beings and their interactions with each other. Brad Jersak has wisely understood the passage as such in this way:

“I suspect ‘treating them as unbelievers’ is NOT so much about exclusion or shunning or excommunication. I believe Jesus is teaching us to set healthy and compassionate boundaries in our relationships . . . Matthew 18 models for us Christ’s personal humility and call to love one another, it’s not about bringing the muscle—it’s about dialing down the energy. And that means everyone needs to leave the bludgeon at home.”

I agree with Brad.

For us, “treating like tax collectors and Gentiles” means: have no contact, turn them over to Satan, or worse—condemn them to hell. In their world, the spirit of Matthew 18 was not a ban on all contact, but rather about maintaining social boundary markers regarding Mosaic uncleanness, particularly in table fellowship. Table fellowship was a huge ethical deal in their world that is not so much so in ours. Some rabbis taught that to eat with a Gentile was a crime worse than murder and a capital offense (worthy of a death sentence).

Well, Jesus is our pattern in all things—the same Jesus of Matthew 18.

How did he treat tax collectors and Gentiles? By extending

grace, forgiveness, and table fellowship to them. He ate with them. He didn’t blackball them.

This is one of the accusations against Jesus: “He eats with sinners.” It is critical that we keep this in mind when someone tries to interpret and enforce Matthew 18.

CONCLUSION

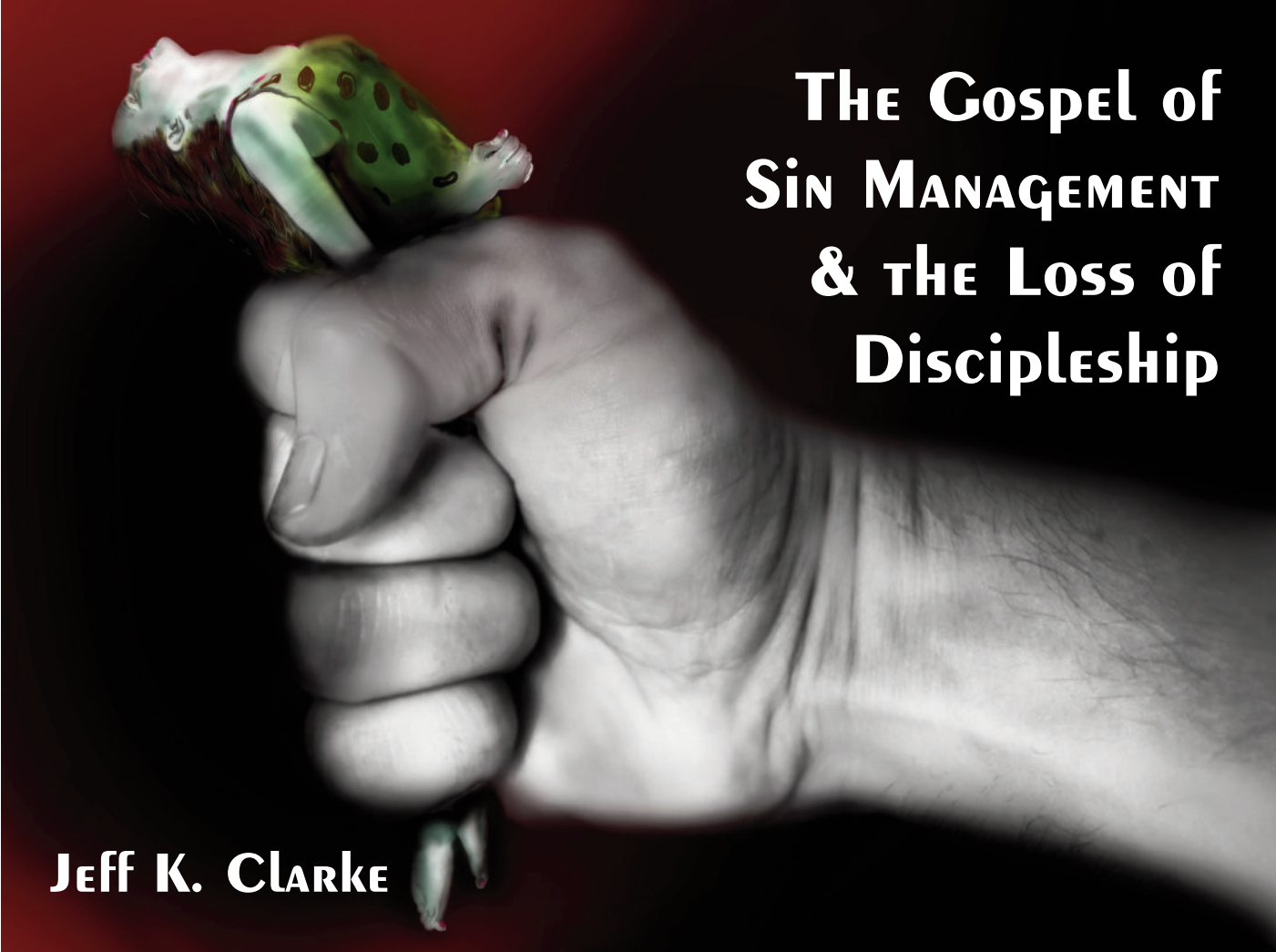
Perhaps human reality dictates that close communion with a person is not possible—for whatever legal, spiritual, or interpersonal reason. It is bound to happen. It does not mean we treat people like moral contaminants.

Rather, Matthew 18 presents the extenuating lengths we must go to in order to bring peace and restitution. Peter understood the implications: “Lord, how often do I have to forgive?” (Mt. 18:22). We know the answer.

Matthew 18 is a less-than-ideal necessity to maintain appropriate boundaries to assure the well-being of individuals and peace in the community when all other long-suffering and forgiving attempts have failed because of human weakness. It is not a mandatory judicial protocol for every situation in community life.

One thing is certain: Matthew 18 does not apply to the systemic abuse of people by ecclesial leaders. Systemic abuse and corruption are to be exposed: shouted from the housetops by anyone, at any time. □

Stephen Crosby expands on these themes in his book, The Rescue of Matthew 18.

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a small, green frog with dark spots. The frog is held in the palm, with its head tilted back. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the texture of the hand and the frog's skin.

The Gospel of SIN MANAGEMENT & THE LOSS of Discipleship

Jeff K. CLARKE

When we reduce the gospel story to salvation and salvation to personal forgiveness and personal forgiveness to a plan of salvation that focuses exclusively on getting people to make a decision (what Dallas Willard referred to in *The Divine Conspiracy* as the gospel of sin management), we essentially de-storify the gospel of Jesus and offer people what proves to be a serious mutation.

We move from the birth of Christ to the death of Christ and forget the in-between life of Jesus. As a result, we end up living as though the middle section (i.e., his teachings,

miracles, healings, and other kingdom-of-God-has-come indicators) has no inherent significance and salvific import (check out N.T. Wright's *How God Became King*).

When we couple this with our North American preoccupation and unhealthy interest in numbers, we end up trying to compel as many people as possible to make a decision (whatever it takes), but only end up presenting a powerless, lopsided, half-story.

However, our methods of persuasion ask people to make a decision, not for Christ alone, as the goal of the gospel, but to avoid hell (fire insurance), make

us happy, help us find a mate, heal our marriage, etc, setting people up for failure. Then we add up the 'salvations' as though numbers indicate success.

The problem with this emphasis is that the correlation between those who make a decision and those who become mature students of Jesus is not high. In fact, some statistics show that as many as 50% of those who make decisions do not become "the disciplined."

As Scot McKnight wrote in *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited*,

"... we cannot help but conclude that

making a decision is not the vital element that leads to a life of discipleship.”

He goes on to say,

“... getting people to make decisions that is, ‘accepting Jesus into our hearts’—appears to distort spiritual formation.”

Why? Because it diminishes the significance of discipleship and does not require “the decided” to become “the discipled.” It also creates a false sense of security—“I made a decision to follow Jesus, so I must be safe”—while at the same time removing the element of personal responsibility.

However, by reducing the

story of Jesus, a story that calls people to a life of devoted discipleship, to a system of salvation that only asks people to make a decision, we effectively short-circuit the power of the gospel.

As McKnight says,

“... we have created a salvation culture, not a gospel-discipleship culture.”

However, the ‘just believe and you won’t go hell’ approach is one that Jesus never employed. His approach was simple, yet demanding—“**follow me.**” If you want to be my disciple, consider the costs, and place me first. And, if you cannot make that kind of commitment, you cannot be my disciple (see Luke 14-25-35).

That message sounds very

different from the de-storified, don’t-go-to-hell, ask-Jesus-into-your-heart-message that has permeated much of Western Evangelicalism.

Maybe we need to re-capture Jesus’ discipleship message if we truly desire people (and ourselves) to follow him along the path of discipleship.

Maybe we need to begin creating a gospel culture of discipleship that sets people up for a lifetime of loving devotion to Christ and his church, rather than a short-lived, saved-from-our-sins, get-out-of-hell-free-card, system of salvation.

Maybe we need to re-consider the cost. □

This article first appeared on Jeff K. Clarke’s “Jesus (Re)Centered” blog April 9, 2017.

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A More Christlike Way: A More Beautiful Faith



Earlier this year, Brad Jersak’s latest book, ***A More Christlike Way*** (CWRpress, 2019), was awarded the Illumination Book Awards’ 2020 Enduring Light Gold Medal.

A More Christlike Way, the highly anticipated follow-up to *A More Christlike God*, is already receiving high praise and it promises to impact the lives of readers in a similar way. Students and seekers of Jesus will be thrilled with the transforming insights in both of these Gold Medal Award winning books

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Amazon & [PTM.org/books](https://www.ptm.org/books)**

The Mystery of Suffering

Richard Rohr

It is much easier to appreciate the glory of Jesus' resurrection than his painful crucifixion. Yet, Mark's Gospel, written around 65 to 70 AD, focuses on Jesus' "suffering servanthood."

Christians believe that we are "saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus." The key is to put both together. We need to deeply trust and allow both our own dyings and our own certain resurrections, just as much as Jesus did! This is the full pattern of transformation. If we trust both, we are indestructible. That is how Jesus "saves" us from meaninglessness, cynicism, hatred, and violence—which is indeed death.

"God is Light," yet this full light is hidden in darkness (John 1:5) so only the sincere seeker finds it. It seems we all must go into darkness to see the light, which is counter-intuitive for the ego. We resisted this language of "descent" and overwhelmingly made Christianity into a religion of "ascent," where Jesus became a self-help "savior" instead of a profound wisdom-guide who really transforms our minds and hearts.

In recent centuries, reason, medicine, technology, and efficiency have allowed many modern, middle- and upper-class people to rather "successfully" avoid the normal and ordinary "path of the fall."

Yet the perennial and mature tradition of all world religions, and even the modern addiction recovery movement, believes that growth comes through some form of "falling upward," not climbing upward, which is all about ego.

Many of the happiest and most authentic people I know love a God who walks with crucified people and thus reveals and "redeems" their plight as God's

own. For them, God is not observing human suffering from a distance but is somehow in human suffering with us and for us. Such a God includes our suffering in the co-redemption of the world, as "all creation groans in one great act of giving birth" (Romans 8:22).



Is this possible? Could it be true that we "make up in our bodies all that still has to be undergone for the sake of the Whole Body" (Colossians 1:24)? Are we somehow partners with the divine? Of course we are! In fact, I think that is the whole point. The mystic knows there is only one suffering and we all participate in it together: the eternal suffering love of God.

Jesus takes on our suffering, bears it, and moves through it to resurrection. This is "the paschal mystery." We too can follow this path, actively joining God's loving solidarity with all suffering since the foundation of

the world. Jesus does not ask us to worship him. He asks us to follow him by trusting and allowing this risky but revealing journey. If God is indeed Infinite Love, then humans and all of creation are *infinitely becoming*—which is the core meaning of "theosis" (the process of salvation).

When I was young, I was taught that in heaven we would look at God for all eternity (the "beatific vision"). This sounded rather boring to a little boy. Perhaps heaven is not seeing God for all eternity, but seeing like and with God for all eternity. □

Richard Rohr is the author of Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life. This article is used by permission, adapted from Daily Meditations, January 24, 2018.



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GREG ALBRECHT

President of PTM

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

Politically Charged Conversations

Q **UESTION:** Over the past few years, as political differences have intensified and arguments become more passionate, I have found it increasingly difficult to bite my tongue when illogical and just plain false statements are made.

This dynamic even “rears its head” in our small group where we are supposed to be studying the Bible, talking about God and sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I don’t want to say something I will regret and will only cause alienation. Sometimes I think the only recourse I have is to avoid places where such conversations take place—but then where does one find such places? How can I handle such situations in a Christian manner?

R **ESPONSE:** This topic is surely one of the most difficult and contentious issues of our time.

I believe that a Christ-follower may be more liberal than friends and family or more conservative than friends and family and still be a Christ-follower. Christ-followers are not political yellow pencils.

Within reason, excepting fanaticism (and definitions of fanaticism vary!), we can differ about political opinions while remaining respectful and understanding. **Unfortunately, some feel as if their task is to bulldoze everyone else into submission so that all agree with their political perspectives.** This “warfare” happens within Christendom as well—in fact, in some quarters, especially within Christendom.

Why would I want to pass on my own stupidity or ignorance to someone else?

Paul spoke about this general perspective as

he discussed “disputable matters” (Romans 14:1).

I hear you—I believe I best reflect the Light of Jesus Christ when I maintain neutrality on political topics. As the old saying goes, why not say little or even maintain silence and be assumed as wise rather than opening one’s mouth and remove all doubts.

When I do give in and join the fray, after it’s all over I invariably feel dirty, as if I have lowered myself into the gutter.

In such settings my goal is to be as polite as possible, try to listen and perhaps ask questions—the problem with my questions is, depending on how opinionated and dogmatic the discussion becomes, the more probing and challenging my questions become. My desire to stay out of the heat of political battles does not always work. The spirit is willing, but the flesh, especially the (my) mouth, is weak!

Is it best to avoid and withdraw from people who tend to be fanatical and extremely opinionated about their political beliefs? Sometimes it might be necessary—even for one’s own health. But there are many times in which a Christ-follower can model and reflect the peace of Christ, and empowered by Christ, be a peacemaker.

I realize such a result is not always possible—sometimes it seems almost impossible. I do know some people with high blood pressure whose health dictates that they avoid confrontational discussions.

May God speak in and through us. May God give us wisdom in what we say and how we express our thoughts. May Christ in us, the Prince of peace, live in us in such a way that we, as his sheep, finding ourselves among wolves, might be **“shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves”** (Matthew 10:16). □

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– Week of June 21

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– Week of June 28

July 2020

Above All Other Flags
– Week of July 5

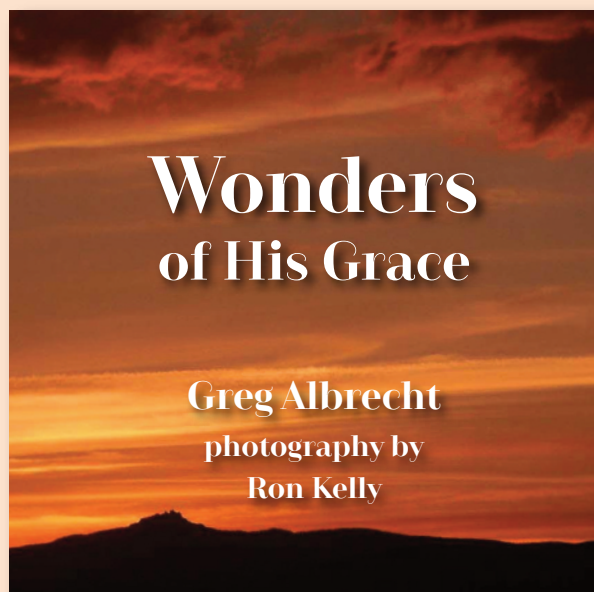
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