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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

The New Math of the Gospel of John



By Greg Albrecht

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God (John 1:1).

In the verse above, we discover three phrases used to describe the totality, complexity and wholeness of the Word of God.

The context leads us to conclude the Word is the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the second person of the Triune God.

1) *In the beginning was the Word,* and 2) *the Word was with God,* and 3) *the Word was God.*

Three phrases describing one of the three divine Persons of the One Triune God. One yet Three. Is it $1+1+1=3$ or is it $1+1+1=1$?

Three is a number of harmony and completion. The number three

means all—past, present and future. Our physical universe is composed of time, space and matter. As our boundaries and limitations, time, space and matter define human existence.

- **TIME** has three dimensions: past, present and future.

- **SPACE** can be described by three dimensions: length, width and height.

- **MATTER** exists in three states: solid, liquid and gas.

1+1+1=1

Our human efforts to count, measure and comprehend God always fall short of defining the totality of who and what he is. As we search the Scriptures and then historic Christianity, that “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1)

who have gone before us, and as we come to increasingly know and love God, we discover God is one God, who exists eternally as Three Distinct Persons, co-essential and co-substantial, perfectly of one mind, heart and soul—perfectly united and harmonious. Three Holy Divine Persons, one yet three!

Isaiah 6:3 describes seraphim, angelic beings, singing *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.*

Revelation 4:8 describes angelic creations—the four living creatures singing, *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is and is to come.”*

Here’s one of the majestic and soaring refrains within the lyrics of the incomparable hymn, *Holy, Holy, Holy:*

Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty.

Holy, Holy, Holy! Merciful and mighty!

God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Let’s look more closely at The New Math of the Gospel of John, particularly as taught and expressed in this first chapter:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (vs. 1).

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (vs. 14).

Continued on page 3



The Joy of Thanksgiving

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving... (Psalm 95:1-3, NIV)

*Now is no time to think of what you do not have. Think of what you can do with what there is.—Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea**

An amazing thing happens when we offer thanksgiving to God. When we give God enjoyment, our own hearts are filled with joy.—William Law

I can still remember several unmistakable signs that Thanksgiving Day would soon be upon us. I remember a cold so bracing I thought I caught the scent of ice in the air with each deep breath. I recall the smokey smell of neighboring fireplaces, lit with all manner of hardwoods cut from the dense woods around our house. I can still see the damp grayness to the tree bark, with virtually no leaves left on a forest full of outstretched branches. The first real snowfall of the season. Pumpkins piled in careful clusters around the front door of our home. And Mom, busy in the kitchen baking baskets of warm crescent rolls and colorful tins of brown-sugared apple crumble.

These unmistakable signs of Thanksgiving Day served as precious memories; memories which usually preceded more precious memories to come.

Mom, with her fresh baked goods, along with Dad and the five of us kids, would pack the car with youthful exuberance and far too

many over-stuffed over-night bags for the long weekend ahead of us.

We were off to the waters of the Chesapeake Bay, to visit our aunt, uncle and two cousins closest in age. We were off to celebrate our favorite annual tradition.

Thanksgiving Day had come once again, and with it, the aroma of oven-roasted turkey and cornbread dressing, a hotly contested football

Joy comes from within, not from without. Joy is a fruit, a gift of the Holy Spirit and resides in our hearts. As a child, feeling joy and feeling thankful seemed almost inseparable.

game between the Dallas Cowboys and the Washington Redskins (as they were called at that time) and the calm gray waters of the Chesapeake Bay. Together with family again, these precious memories filled our hearts with joy.

As a child, I remember the feeling of joy, as a strong emotion, first, just before I felt thankful. In a way, it was as if the feelings of thanksgiving or thankfulness were fueled by an overwhelming sense of joy in my heart, joy in my spirit, joy from the inside out.

As I felt that joy, I remember a flood of people, special places and treasured possessions for which I was deeply thankful. That joy helped me to see my life clearly and to be thankful for all that I had been given.

Joy comes from within, not from without. Joy is a fruit, a gift of the Holy Spirit and resides in our hearts.

As a child, feeling joy and feeling thankful seemed almost inseparable. The joy of being alive. Being thankful for my family and close friends. Feeling joy for the gift of good health. Being thankful for the special Thanksgiving Day at hand and the blessings of a warm home and plenty of delicious food to share.

Now, nearly fifty years later, I still see joy and thankfulness as almost inseparable. The feeling of joy still proceeds a flood of people, special places and treasured possessions for which I am deeply thankful. I am thankful for the memories from my childhood.

I am joyful for the many blessings in my life, including the fact that I've had fifty-four Thanksgiving Days to celebrate and appreciate.

As Christ-followers, we share the joy of Thanksgiving in our LORD. We share in his joy. Whether we sing or shout aloud or experience that joy quietly within, in our hearts and spirit, we all give thanks for our lives in him and his life in us.

We remember Jesus at Thanksgiving. We use the joy of Thanksgiving not to think of what we do not have, but to think of how we can share all we've been given.

As we give our joy and thanksgiving to Jesus, he gives his joy and thanksgiving right back to us. And for that, we can be joyful and thankful each day of the year. □

—Ed Dunn

Continued from page 1

1) In the beginning was the Word

The same three words, “In the beginning,” introduce the book of Genesis and the Gospel of John. In the book of Genesis, “In the beginning” primarily refers to the physical creation, while here in the first chapter of the Gospel of John those three words focus on a new spiritual creation.

The Word of God is the *Logos*—that’s the Greek word translated as “Word.” *Logos* embraces a great deal of meaning and substance—but let’s just pause and hover over the obvious. Word implies communication. The Word of God is the speaking, the communicating God—the God who connects rather than hides, the God of conversation rather than silence, the God of reason and thinking rather than the God of anger and wrath.

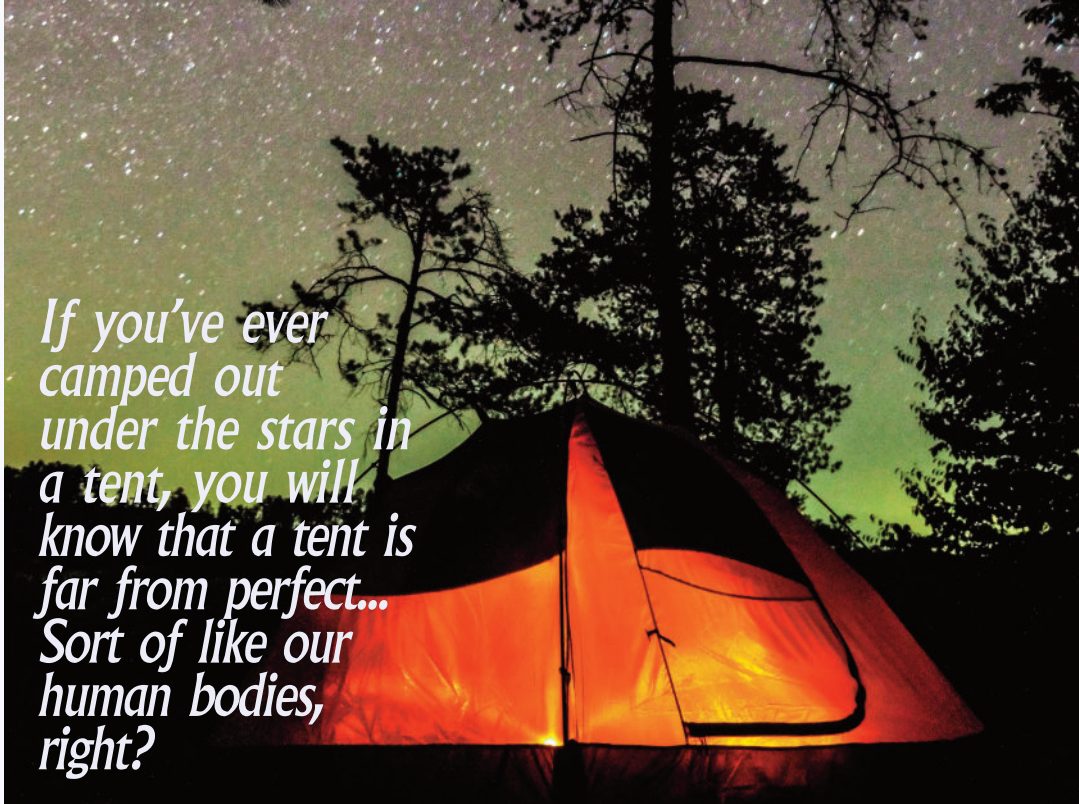
The *Word* was in the beginning, he was the Creator God. John 1:3 says *through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*

As we think back to the first chapter of Genesis we remember the oft-repeated phrases “And God said” or “Then God said.” See, for example, Genesis 1:3; 1:6; 1:9; 1:11; 1:14; 1:20; 1:24; 1:26 and 1:29.

In the Gospel of John, we read that when God came to us personally one of the defining ways in which we came to know him was as “The Word.” As God in the flesh, Jesus, the Word of God, was a Master Communicator. Read his stories and parables. Read how he both listened and responded—how he taught and how he answered questions. How he interacted. How he reasoned and debated. Jesus—The Word (Communicator) of God.

The physical creation recorded in the first chapter of Genesis was, as John 6:3 says, made through the Word of God—*without him nothing was made that has been made.*

The spiritual creation introduced in this first chapter of the Gospel of John is centered in and on the Creator of all things, the ever-



If you've ever camped out under the stars in a tent, you will know that a tent is far from perfect... Sort of like our human bodies, right?

existent Word of God. This spiritual creation is spoken of in verses 12 and 13 of this first chapter of John:

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of a human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

2) And the Word was with God

The entire existence of the Word was toward Father God—the twin ideas of *connectedness and union* as well as *belonging and relationship* are a part of what John 1:1 means by saying the *Word was with God.*

The Word was *with God* in an intimate way—in union with, in relationship with, connected to and belonging to God. The Word was NOT *with God* in a casual way, randomly or haphazardly spending a little time over at his house, emailing or texting him or just having coffee.

The word “*with*” in the phrase *And the Word was with God* indicates both equality with God as well as distinction of personhood. The word “*with*” therefore is communicating that the Word was equal to God while having a distinct Personhood. Three distinct

Persons share one divine identity. Whatever Father, Son and Holy Spirit DO in this world, because of their divine identity, they do together without division, despite their distinct personhood.

We understand from this second phrase that “the Word” was not an impersonal idea or a philosophy, but an eternal, divine Person, who is one with Father God while at the same time distinguishable from the Father.

3) And the Word was God

To erase any doubt about the divine, eternal identity of the Word, John 1:1 says “the Word was God.” All that can be said about God is said in and through the Word.

John 1:1 does not claim Jesus is *like* God, John 1:1 is saying that Jesus, the Word, *is* God.

Of course, all of the verses between verse one and verse 14 of this incredible prologue of the Gospel of John reveal more about Jesus—but for the sake of brevity, we will now skip to verse 14 where the descriptions of the Word builds on what was revealed in verse 1.

Here in vs. 14 we read that *the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*

Made his dwelling among us literally means “tabernacled

with/among us.” The first readers of the Gospel of John would have read these words in the light of the Bible they then knew, which was the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, the glory of God was revealed in the tabernacle.

God in the person of Jesus—God who is the Word, came and pitched his tent with humanity—he brought his glory to this earth and became one of us, in all that it means to be a human. After saying that the Word made his dwelling among us, John tells us that we have seen his glory—the *glory of the one and only Son* (John 1:14).

That’s what the birth, life and death of Jesus is all about.

The Human Birth of the Word

The Lord of Glory came into the very life you and I live—in his humanity he fully entered into all that it means to be a fragile and vulnerable and corruptible human. He not only came to visit and see what it’s like to be a human, but he came for the long run. He came to stay. He came into our lives and

promised never to let go of us. Even in his gloried and resurrected state, Jesus, the Word, forever remains fully divine and fully human!

If you have ever camped out under the stars in a tent, you will know that a tent is far from perfect. When it’s cold outside, the temperature in most tents is also cold—when it’s hot outside, the inside of a tent offers no air conditioning. When it’s raining, well, most tents eventually have a few holes allowing for the rain to invade any space we thought was to some degree comfortable. Sort of like our human bodies, right?

When God in the person of Jesus tabernacled with us by becoming one of us he made himself vulnerable. That’s what the birth of Jesus is all about.

When we follow Jesus, we become more and more like God—and in so doing we discover what it is like to live a full life of generosity, sharing, caring and giving—and that such a life involves suffering, as indeed it did

with Jesus, the Word of God. Generosity, self-sacrifice, serving and suffering for us is part of the glory of God revealed to us in the tabernacle of Jesus.

Most of us have imbibed from the cup of pain, sorrow and grief. After drinking deeply of this cup, your ability to empathize and understand the hurt and pain of others increases exponentially. I have always loved the way Eugene Peterson, in the *Message Bible*, translated John 1:14 into the more commonly spoken English. I think he captures the vulnerability of the Word made flesh.

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.

He moved into YOUR neighborhood.

- If you live in a small apartment, he moved into an apartment just down the hall—the same size, with the same modest furnishings you have.
- If you are living in an assisted living facility, Jesus moved into the room right next to yours.
- If you live in a mobile home, then Jesus backed his mobile home onto the pad right next to yours and used the same hook ups for water and power you do.

He came *to understand us*. It is amazing to comprehend the incredible lengths to which God went in order to become one of us. He came *to be understandable to us*. He did not remain aloof and distant, outside of the dimensions we experience, but he came into all of those dimensions so that, as Jesus so often said, he could be more fully revealed.

Jesus said on many occasions he came to reveal the Father. If you want to know God, then you will want to study and read all about Jesus, for God is Christlike. **The Word of God is what God has to say about himself.**

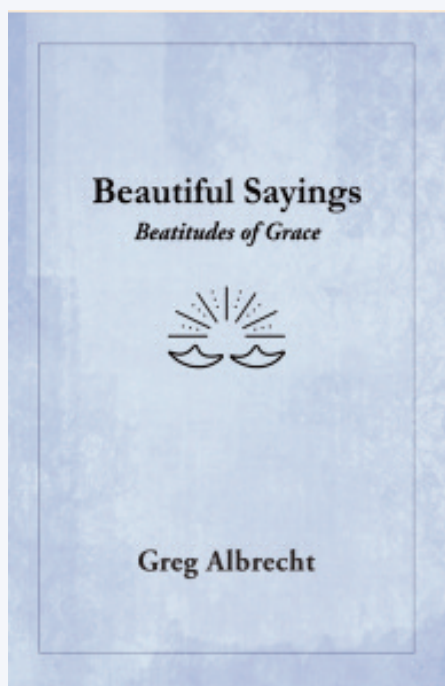
In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen. □

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Money Can't Buy Me Love

Steve Crosby

The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls...

So wrote Simon and Garfunkel in their 1966 hit song, *The Sound of Silence*. If we pay close attention, we will find that the secular artists (poets, musicians, authors, etc.) of a culture often speak kingdom values and insights to the people of God with a clarity not found among the people of God.

A Boy and the Beatles

I grew up in the sixties listening to the Beatles. In terms of teen-idols, I wanted to be them. Like so many at the time, I picked up the guitar and played in various bands for many years. Lennon and McCartney wrote a tune that went to Number One called: *Can't Buy Me Love*. The refrain said: "Money can't buy me love."

Now, that did not stop them from gladly raking in multiple millions! But the line still expresses a kingdom-of-Jesus value. As the fabricated image presented to me by good marketing lost its hold on me, I learned of their true back-stories. John Lennon's was particularly

painful. It shaped his persona and music. I have lived long enough to be eternally grateful that *I wasn't them*. Because *money can't buy me love*.

A few years ago, I saw an interview with a man who was the Lennons' private photographer after the Beatles broke up. Post-break-up, John retreated to a happy life of being nothing other than a house-dad.

The photographer relates an account of how John would carry around a Polaroid instant camera with him for hours a day. (Yes, it was the seventies.)

He would take endless pictures of Yoko and their baby son, Sean. He would spread the pictures out on a table, covering the entire table top. He would stand there, staring at them, and mutter to himself over and over: "I have a family, I have a family."

This is poignantly insightful about John's painful past. But it also hit me like the proverbial ton of bricks: "John would sell everything he had, to have what I have enjoyed freely for forty-five years: a family who loves me." I wept with thankfulness. *Money can't buy me love*.

Not Every "Happy Family" is a Happy Family

I saw a recent interview with Donny Osmond of Osmond fame. He tells the story of how he had a best friend when he was about five years old. In his middle-aged adulthood, Donny could still recall the day and moment of his father coming and taking him away from his friend to rehearse with his brothers. He related how much it hurt and how he wished he could have just had a friend.

The interviewer asked him a great question: "After all the fame and money you have as a result of all that rehearsing, how do you feel about your father's decision?" His response stunned me: "I would trade it all in, right now, for that friendship." The drop-dead sincerity in Donny's tear-filled statement was not hyperbole. It could be felt and it broke my heart. I wept for him, and again with thankfulness for what I enjoyed so freely. *Money can't buy me love*.

Closer to Home

What I do for part-time work sometimes involves coming in contact with very wealthy people.

This includes having access to their private financial details. I recently did a transaction for someone who lived in a brand-new mansion worth several million dollars. He earns more in a month than most of us could earn in two-three years of full-time work.

As I reviewed his financials, I noticed a divorce along with alimony and child support payments. It got me thinking: "This man has everything this world could offer in terms of wealth. Yet I have what he can't buy: a family who loves me." *Money can't buy me love.*

True Treasures and The Other God

Why do the tentacles of mammon so easily wrap around the hearts of believers? Why do the children of God spend so much time and effort chasing the same values of our culture? It's because mammon is a spiritual power. It competes against Jesus for lordship in us. Jesus was painfully clear when He spoke of the impossibility of serving two masters: God and mammon (Matthew 6:24).

Mammon includes money, but it is broader than that. This is why Jesus spoke more about this topic than any other and the Scriptures (particularly the Gospels) speak more about the sin of greed/avarice than any other topic.

The English rendering of avarice for the Greek term is not inaccurate. Yet, it often doesn't "stick." If you ask anyone: "Do you

consider yourself a greedy person?" I cannot imagine a positive response from anyone. We all adapt to the comfort level that we believe we have earned or to which we are entitled: "Of course, you and I are not greedy, but those horrible other people are! Our monetary desires are 'reasonable, correct and proper.'"

The word Scripture uses has the idea of "much-having" or inordinate craving for wealth. The idea is one of unrestrained, undisciplined, conscienceless, and all-consuming pursuit of wealth. Frankly, this defines the so-called "American Dream." It is not that wealth itself is inherently evil (though it carries with it its own troubles and responsibilities). What the Scriptures so strongly condemn is the acquisition of wealth **that does not consider the lack of others around you**. Even the Scriptural ban on usury (charging interest) is in the same category. In their time, people only borrowed money in crisis. They didn't "take out loans" for capital goods like we do. The prohibition is about getting rich at the price of another's misery. That is what is forbidden.

How Should We Respond?

Poverty isn't intrinsically holy and riches do not prove spiritual blessing. How can we navigate the sweet spot between two extremes and loosen the hold of mammon on our lives? Here are a few things I practice. You might consider

something similar for yourselves.

1) I practice the routine confession that I am vulnerable to, and under the sway of, mammon. I do so in a condemnation-free way. I do not have a higher opinion of myself than I should in this area. I "keep it in the light" before God. I acknowledge the reality of the spiritual powers that come with money. The values of the American Dream are in the DNA of my consciousness, and yours, working there whether we know it or not. I just have to admit that. I believe doing so opens up the power of the grace of God in my life in a practical way.

2) Develop the discipline of regular and routine giving: money, time, and talents. I have experienced more hate-mail from Christians when I touch this subject than any other.

The attitude is: "No one is going to tell me what I need to do with my money. The Holy Spirit will tell me." Well, that usually translates into: "The Holy Spirit is telling me to not do much, and not often." There is nothing "legalistic" about routine disciplined giving. It is an act of spiritual liberation.

3) Respond to Holy Spirit promptings to give. Doesn't this contradict what I just said? No it does not. It is not either/or. It is both/and.

Regular disciplined giving addresses just that: transformative, character producing, discipline. Holy Spirit-prompted giving illumines "exceptional opportunities" to give in addition to my routine giving.

I have found practicing these things helps me get Lennon and McCartney's one liner deeply embedded in my emotions: *money can't buy me love*. This makes it easier for me to let go of it, emotionally. These spiritual disciplines are part of my routine, daily existence in a state of spiritual warfare against the power of mammon. □

Stephen Crosby is an author and the founder of Stephanos Ministries.





I Wonder

We're heading toward winter, and in just a few weeks some of us, like it or not, will be engulfed in snow. My dad, for one, liked it. For me as a kid, that didn't seem remarkable because—sleds, toboggans, snow forts, snowball fights, snowmen, snow days and so on. But as I got older (during the times in cooler climates), my appreciation of the white stuff began to wane. Slippery streets, chains, snow tires, shoveling, getting stuck, freezing pipes...

At some point I wondered about my father's delight with snow. Every winter, well into his 60s, he would watch the weather forecasts with anticipation, and when snow began to fall he would gaze happily out the living room window. He would grab his 35mm Ricoh and shoot photos of the front and back yards and the neighborhood covered in snow. He would comment in detail about it in letters.

Why? I think he was one of those people who don't lose their sense of wonder as they age. How did he manage to keep that sense when so many of us seem to let it slip away?

I can think of times when my own sense of wonder took a back seat. Those were the times when I was on a treadmill of doing stuff—overly busy with the nuts and bolts of life.

Not that anything is wrong with taking care of business. We should be taking care of business. Every day. But there's that passage where Jesus cautions a lady named Martha who was frantically preparing a big dinner for him. "You are worried and upset about many things," he says, "but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Your sister, Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-41).

Martha was scattered and distracted by the many nuts and bolts of producing a feast for Jesus. A worthy task, and who deserved a feast more than Jesus?

But her sister Mary was focused on one thing—Jesus himself. A dinner, after all, is temporary—"taken away." A relationship with God is forever.

Which brings us back to our sense of wonder. Whenever I carve out a little time to relax with nature—whether it's watching snow fall, trees moving in the wind or water cascading over ancient rocks—I discover I'm really contemplating the nature of God. Even then, we might get distracted by nuts and bolts, such as whether the lawn needs watering or mowing. But if we can calm ourselves and look beyond all that, then our sense of wonder emerges.

Wonder happens when something is beyond our scope—beyond our control. It happens when we humbly realize we don't need to know all the answers, and therefore must resign ourselves to God.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, "*The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship.*"

By contrast, when we believe we have all the answers—when we view the world through lenses of arrogant certainty, dogma and control—we are also inclined to think we've earned everything by our own hard work and accomplishments.

Wonder allows us to recognize that most (if not all) of what and who we are is not of our own doing. We are, in fact, fully dependent on God and on each other. The natural outcome of this perspective is gratefulness and thanksgiving.

My father's sense of wonder didn't end with snow. He seemed to be fascinated with every aspect of creation, noticing ordinary things most of us take for granted, which caused him to be grateful for them. He told me once that even in late middle age—and despite his various ailments—he still felt like a kid. I suspect that was his sense of wonder talking.

Maybe this is part of what Jesus meant when he said "...unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3, RSV).

I believe we must all eventually take this wonderful turn. □

—Monte Wolverton



Quotes & Connections



"X is the Greek letter "Chi" which is the first letter of the word Christ. Thus, Xmas is shorthand for Christmas, taking only about one-sixth as long to write. If you do your cards by hand, it is possible to save as much as seventy-five or eighty minutes a year.

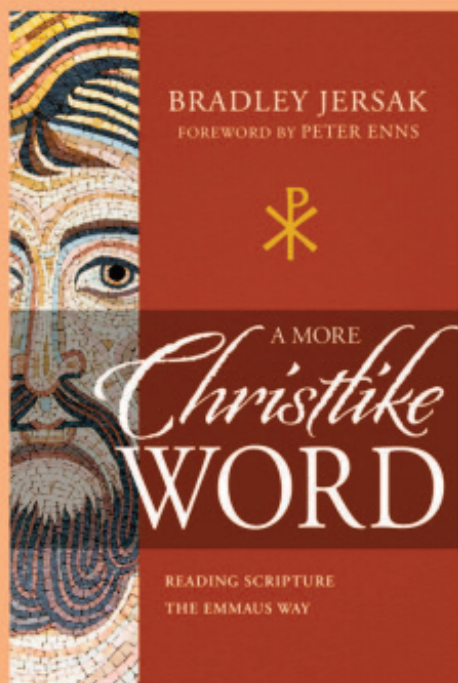
It is tempting to think that what you do with this time that you save is your own business. Briefly stated, however, the Christian position is that there's no such thing as your own business."
—Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*

"We tend to forget that happiness doesn't come as a result of getting something we don't have, but rather of recognizing and appreciating what we do have."—Frederick Koening

"I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder."—G.K. Chesterton

"Gratitude is a quality similar to electricity: it must be produced and discharged and used up in order to exist at all."—William Faulkner

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