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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



Using up our Inheritance

Brad Jersak

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Using up our Inheritance

Brad Jersak

MY INHERITANCE

During the past year, I received a modest inheritance after my dad, Lloyd Jersak, graduated into the “great cloud of witnesses” (see Hebrews 12). By ‘modest,’ I mean the sum requires me to steward it well if it is to be spent in a meaningful way. Should I invest it in my grandchildren, renovate my study, or use it on a holiday? In any scenario, I was both grateful for the gift and mindful of too easily “using it up.”



Lloyd Jersak 1937 - 2023

OUR INHERITANCE

Broadly speaking, Western civilization grossly underestimates the magnitude of the inheritance it received from Jesus and his apostolic progeny. We fail to recognize that many of our breakthroughs came, not *despite* the resistance of superstitious

religion, but as a direct *result* of the Jesus Way.

There is a strange “both-and” or “yes-but” involved, but if we can get in behind the corruption and violence of historical Christendom, we may retrieve memories of how Jesus radically modeled the liberation of women, compassion for the destitute, and humanization of ‘the other.’ His welcome to the outcast, the untouchable, the miscreant was in profound and public opposition to popular assumptions in the Roman Empire and Temple establishment. He raised eyebrows (and ire) and captured hearts whenever he proclaimed *God’s alternative society*. His intrinsic humanism included compassion, kindness, generosity and selflessness—a mustard seed vision so compelling that it would win the day. *This is our inheritance.*

After his personal encounter with the risen Christ, the apostle Paul, formerly a deadly opponent of the Jesus Way, became its most prolific champion, broadcasting gospel seeds across the breadth of Roman dominion. His gospel heralded the eradication of every hostile and exclusionary social barrier... in Christ, there is now no longer an us-them, over-under relationship between Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free, barbarian (non-Greek) or Scythian (today’s Iranians)—see Ephesians 2:14, Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11).

STILL ENJOYING OUR INHERITANCE

Given the quick spread of Christianity, this reality should have been enacted more quickly, but cultural transformation is painfully slow. And sometimes it was the ‘Christian’ brand that offered the most resistance to the Jesus Way. Yet the day finally came when women and people of color and those without land were finally recognized as humans, citizens and Christians. The fact that Western cultures regard sexism, racism and slavery as sinful are aspects of our inheritance—the fruit of the gospel.

Then along came the Enlightenment, identified with the great philosophical and political minds of the 17th-18th centuries. They, too, enjoyed the liberating inheritance of the gospel. But they were also keenly aware and deeply critical of the Christendom of their day. They accused the church of corruption, violence, and superstition—and had the receipts to prove it! **Christianity at large had become an enemy of its own inheritance**—the Institution (Catholic and Protestant) was the chief sponsor behind power-hungry kings, religious intolerance, and the use of torture and death-dealing across Europe.

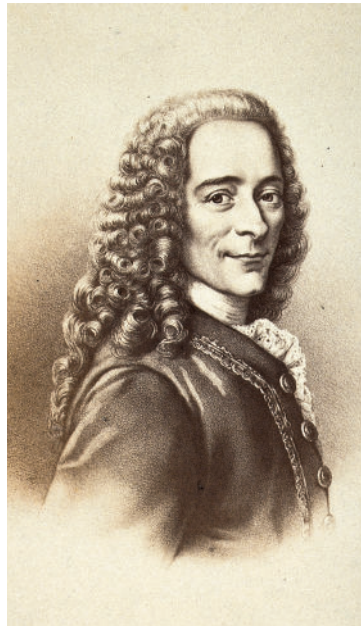
Thinkers such as Voltaire (1694-1778) were scathing in their critique of religion to the point of cynicism, but who could blame them? They worked tirelessly to expunge the state and the populace of religious control, to open their minds to reason and their politics to freedom from church violence and the “divine right of kings.”

But even in secularizing their humanism, we still recognize aspects of our gospel inheritance in the popular Enlightenment slogans such as France’s “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” and Thomas Jefferson’s “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” These were generated outside of Christian faith by proponents of civil religion and in the heat of two bloody revolutions. Nevertheless, they represent post-Christian societies built on gospel foundations—our inheritance—but sans faith in Jesus Christ.

Even today, most of the post-Christian West enjoys *some* of its inheritance, even if unconsciously and without recognition or gratitude, especially ethical convictions around caring for others in the tradition of Jesus’ Parable of the Good Samaritan.

USING UP OUR INHERITANCE

Unfortunately, **a closer look also reveals how the West is using up its inheritance.** What comes after that makes me nervous. For example, Jesus taught us



“Of all religions, the Christian should of course inspire the most tolerance, but until now, Christians have been the most intolerant of all men.”

—Voltaire

the importance of peace and the blessing of being peacemakers. Who wouldn’t want to live in a utopia?

That dream sounds good... until we point out that Jesus (with his brother James and the apostle Paul) taught that we only achieve peace by sowing peace. We do not achieve peaceful ends through violent means. That was Rome’s lie, and it has become our lie. **We’re using up our inheritance.**

Others have pursued justice, and the prophetic tradition (including Jesus’ gospel) teaches us that the means of attaining justice is mercy and forgiveness. But forgiveness is increasingly discarded

as either complicity with injustice (on the left) or compromise with unrighteousness (on the right). Instead, we prefer the justice of retribution, of punishment, of public humiliation, of violence. But the New Testament says, NO. “The wrath of man cannot produce the justice of God.” **We’re using up our inheritance.**

Others proclaim tolerance and love to show off how broadminded they are. They love to be known as “allies” and perform their acts of

charity on behalf of the oppressed group de jour. But when their script requires hatred toward another despised group, when the performance stokes the ego or used to build one’s brand... **we’re using up our inheritance.** Authentic love slides into false love until love itself becomes an object of derision... when the Jesus Way is abandoned for trendy activism, **we’re using up our inheritance.**

ESAU’S STEW

Sad to say, but too often true, just as Christless Christianity was first to abandon its inheritance, so also it can be the forerunner in resisting the Jesus Way. Where Christians cannot force their way on others, they frequently develop a persecution complex, then double down in opposition to perceived threats from “the world.” Ironically, the real threat may actually be the Spirit of Christ, calling us to break free from religious bondage and

calling us to return to the Jesus Way of unfailing love, radical forgiveness and scandalous hospitality.

Tragically, like Esau in Genesis 25, those who claim the “Christian” label may opt to “sell our birthright” in exchange for the savory soup of power, prestige or popularity. At least Esau felt satisfied for a moment. But when our inheritance is used up, traded away, or misused, all that’s left is emptiness and regrets.

CHRIST OUR INHERITANCE

So what’s the good news? I’m grateful to remind you that our inheritance is not actually finite! Jesus Christ is an infinite source of God’s grace and mercy.

Those who turn or return to Jesus find that God’s love is an inheritance that is higher, deeper, longer, and wider than what we can ever earn, spend or squander.

Regardless of the cultural pendulum swings, Jesus is the wellspring of eternal life now, both real and present “to the end of the age.” His table is always open to everyone... even the prodigals who thought they “used up” their inheritance.

The culture in which we live may have forgotten the One whose inheritance they spent, but he doesn’t say, “Too late, too bad,” but rather, throws wide his arms and says, “Whosoever will may come.” □

Bradley Jersak is president of St. Stephen’s University (SSU.ca) and member of the CWRm editorial team.

Science vs. God?

Grant Corriveau

I hear you’re a Christian. You don’t actually believe all that crap, do you?

I’d never flown before with first officer Dan. We’d completed our initial preparations for our early-morning flight. Now we had a few moments in the Airbus flight deck to wait for the final details of aircraft loading to be completed around us. This was a welcome opportunity finally to have a sip of that rapidly-cooling morning coffee I’d carefully stowed in the cup holder beside me and relax just a bit. It was also a good chance to begin discovering something about the other person I would be sharing these cramped quarters with during the long day’s work ahead of us. That’s when Dan turned to me and said, “I hear you’re a Christian. You don’t actually believe all that crap, do you?”

I probably choked a little on my coffee at his direct, though obviously good-natured, broaching of the topic. Religion, along with politics, are subjects that pilots usually avoid because of the many ‘hot buttons’ and our need to work together as a team. That day, however, largely due to Dan’s wide smile and friendly manner of expressing himself, I was more than willing to engage with his question. I appreciated that he was treating me like an adult—not a child with whom he should be careful not to destroy fantasies about Santa Claus and Easter Bunnies.

During our flights together, over the next few years, we had many fascinating conversations exploring truth, reality, and what we can even know about any of it. More interesting still, while our interactions were often passionate, they were never combative or toxic.

Thanks to Dan’s persistent and intriguing questions about my views of the world, I often had to dig deep to “suss out” what I claimed to believe. Sometimes I had to backtrack from positions I realized were untenable. More importantly, I came to realize that it is entirely feasible for people to discuss ‘hot button’ topics respectfully, patiently, and persistently—and to even become friends while doing so.

FROM “IT IS WRITTEN!” TO “SCIENCE SAYS!”

The topics Dan and I covered then are topics I still enjoy digging into today. I do this with friends of various faiths,



worldviews, backgrounds, nationalities, and experiences. Over the years, when it comes to understanding “how we got here,” I have noticed a transition in the Central Story we each carry within. I’ve noticed a tidal shift from “It is written!” to “Science says!” And sadly, both these strong exclamations represent an attempt to stop us from questioning and thinking through the issues. Let me explain.

When I was in my formative years, way back in the 50s and 60s, a religious explanation was widely accepted as the premise for everything. We and our universe were created by a Higher

Being of some sort, and on some deep level, this was **“not to be doubted or questioned.”**

Nowadays, a scientific explanation is most widely accepted. An event known as The Big Bang brought the universe into existence by means not yet explainable, and life within this universe is a random interaction of “the right conditions” along with “eons and eons of time.” This scientific version depends heavily upon Darwin’s Theory of Evolution and accepting it as fully explaining all life as we see it today, in all its profusion and complexity. Somewhat surprisingly, this scientific version also can be expressed from an attitude similar to the religious one: Darwin is **“not to be doubted or even questioned.”** This all suggests to me that while our Central Story has moved on, our human nature remains firmly intact.

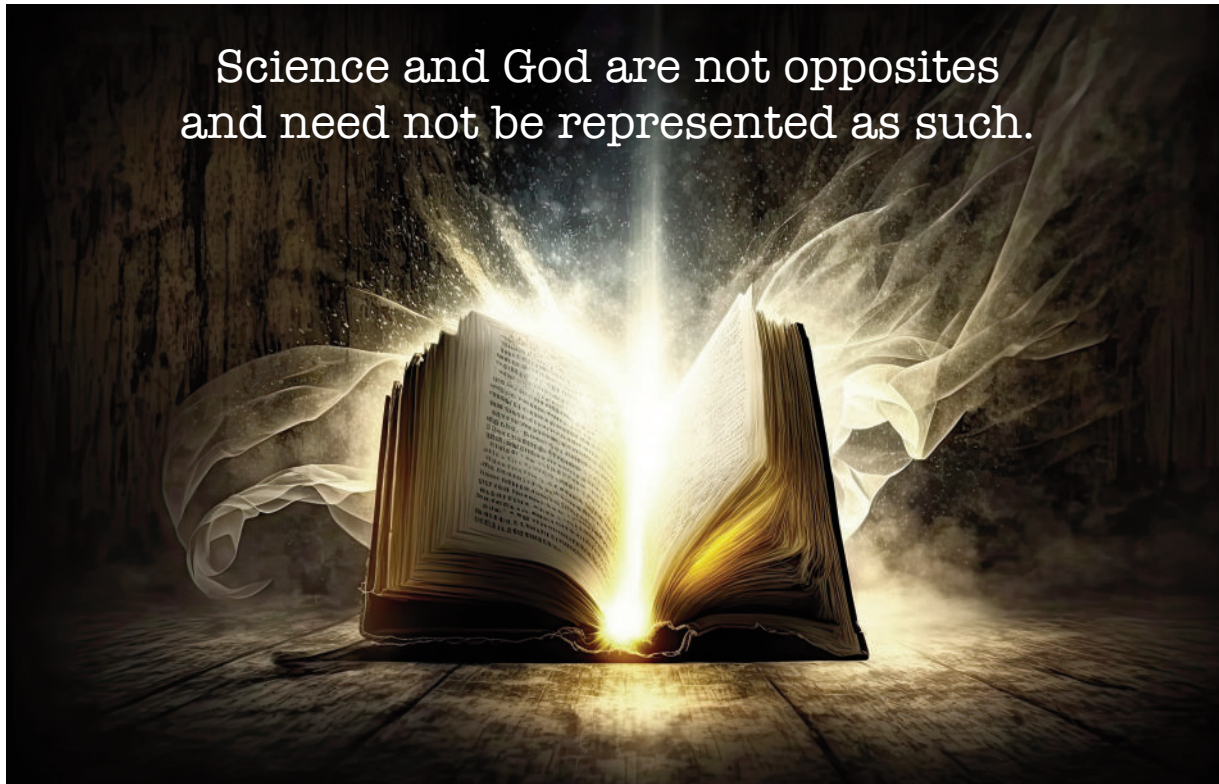
Today, one of the most famous advocates for this scientific explanation, often termed “neo-Darwinism,” is Richard Dawkins. He is best known for his book, *The God Delusion*, as well as his public advocacy for Atheism.

BEYOND DICHOTOMIES

A harshly-polarized and antagonistic atmosphere exists today between these two Central Stories, often characterized as—“Science vs. God.” ***I maintain that Science and God are not opposites and need not be represented as such.*** In general, I suspect that those who promote this dichotomy are revealing how, on a fundamental level, there is an age-old power struggle involved. Humans, once in control of ‘the story,’ seldom enjoy being undermined by a new one.

At any rate, in such an

Science and God are not opposites
and need not be represented as such.



atmosphere, it is more important than ever that those of us seeking to follow Christ conduct ourselves accordingly. We must rigorously avoid being drawn into hostility and ill will towards others. 1 Corinthians 13 says, *"If I ... can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, ... but do not have love, I am nothing."*

With this caveat in mind, and hoping not to merely add 'fuel to the fire' of rancorous arguments, I am encouraged by those well-qualified scientists who find no problems reconciling their scientific activities with their faith in God.

I now believe that
whenever and
wherever
I see 'cruciform'
(self-donating) love,
I see Christ.

EMBODYING CHRISTLIKE LOVE

Throughout my life, I've observed that the way we embody our beliefs often speaks louder than our words. Over several decades, my vision for what it means to 'follow Christ' has evolved. ***I now believe that whenever and wherever I see 'cruciform' (self-donating) love, I see Christ.*** It doesn't matter if the person demonstrating this love calls themselves Atheist, Buddhist, Muslim, Jew, Christian, Democrat, or Republican or

belongs to any particular church or group—or doesn't. When I see Love—I see God. Christ-like love resides deeply within us and is evidenced more by our actions than our words.

I often think of 'Christ in us' like this: Long before we even had a word for gravity, human beings tripped and fell and were hurt or even killed. Gravity just is—whether we comprehend it, or not. So too, I believe that all people are formed in God's image expressly to house the fullness of God's love—whether we comprehend it or not—or have terms for it or not. It just is. At

least, that's how I see it from my perspective, which I strive to keep Christ-centered.

I'm retired from flying professionally now. But Saturday mornings often find me sitting around the table at my local airport flying club. There are usually a lot of loud conversations flowing and some heated

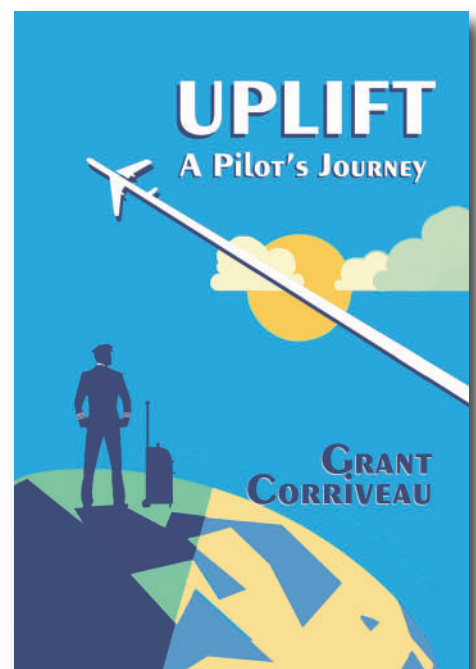
arguments and strong opinions expressed by this mostly old-guys crowd as they deride political leaders or argue about controversial topics. I sometimes find myself praying inwardly: "Lord, help me see this person as you see them and love them, just as you love me."

I've also noticed that whenever a visiting pilot—a stranger to our airport—encounters problems, members of this same group will jump up to help. A flat tire? "I've got a spare in the back of my hangar that'll fit your plane—no problem."

Suddenly, no one cares about

religious or political stripe or ancestral history. The visiting pilot is just another fellow traveler in need of help. And help is given generously, without any expectation of compensation. That's the moment when my head prayer is answered. Some days I "see Jesus" in the most unexpected places.

I know this as a microcosm of what's happening every day in the world around me. Most recently, and close to home, in the wildfires and floods striking Canada and the USA this past



summer, I saw people needing rescue and others rushing in to help. No one was asking about beliefs or politics. They just reach out to help or be helped.

I dream that one day we will experience Emmanuel—God among us—in everyone, everywhere, all the time. Call me a heretic—you wouldn't be the first. □

Grant Corriveau is a retired airline pilot and author of Uplift: A Pilot's Journey. Available at ptm.org/books.



Life without Disclaimers

Steve Brown

*Jesus said, "It is finished."
I am here because I believe that.*

Have you noticed the disclaimers they put on advertisements for medications? *"This product may cause headaches, drowsiness or severe pain...and even death. Consult your physician before taking this or any other medication."*

Translation: You're going to die but it's not our fault.

And then there are the stop-smoking pills people keep pushing on me. "Steve," they say, "I know you want to stop smoking your pipe (no I don't), and these pills will help." Have you ever read the disclaimers on this stuff? "Some people have had changes in behavior, hostility, agitation, depressed moods, suicidal thoughts or actions while using [this product] to help them quit smoking. If you, your family, or caregiver notice agitation, hostility, depression or changes in behavior, thinking or mood that are not typical for you, or you develop suicidal thoughts or actions, anxiety, panic, aggression, anger, paranoia, mania or confusion stop taking [this product] and consult your physician immediately."

As I was thinking about *disclaimers*, I realized that properly understood, the Christian life is a **life without disclaimers**. In other words, I don't have to pretend anymore, make excuses anymore, cover my tracks or protect myself anymore. It's why Paul could call himself "the chief of sinners" and even make an embarrassing confession in Romans 7.

Recently I talked to a good friend who went through one of the most horrifying experiences anyone can face. We talked, prayed and wept together. His sin (and it was bad) was publicly revealed. Not only that, his church required that he confess before the entire church (a practice with which I have some serious problems). We all have secrets that shame us, and the thought of our secrets being revealed to everybody is a nightmare! His nightmare became a reality. That's bad, but God

grew a flower in that horrible soil. Let me give you part of what my friend wrote to his church.

Every part of me wants to flee this town and never have to look anyone in the face again. I've begged God to let me go, but I'm still here. I woke up this morning thinking of the parallels between my life and my father's life and what is happening. I am in the middle of a scandal just as he was over thirty years ago. I always swore I'd never be as stupid as he was, yet here I am. I'm faced with choices: I could blame others as my father did and die a slow, miserable death being eaten away in the acid of bitterness. I could commit suicide, leaving my family with nothing. Or I could give it—my shame, my fear and my guilt—to the only one who can carry it. I'm so tired of trying to hold it together. In fact, I can't anymore.

The words "I am sorry" seem too shallow, and I'm very sorry for not loving all of you. There is no excuse, but there is relief. Jesus said, "It is finished." I am here because I believe that. In this knowledge, I am breaking the generational chains that have held me captive my entire life. I'm finally loved.

Frankly, my friend paid a big price for it (one you and I both hope we never have to pay) but he is now free. The Christian life is living **life without disclaimers**, and it's a pretty "heady" place to live. It really isn't about us—our goodness, our efforts or our knowledge. It's only about Jesus. I don't need disclaimers anymore. Love covers it all. When people accuse you of being a hypocrite or being something less than what they think a Christian ought to be, don't get angry or uptight or bring out some disclaimer that absolves you of responsibility. Instead, say "Bingo! Now let me tell you about Jesus, who loves me anyway." □

Steve Brown is an author, professor and president of Key Life Network.

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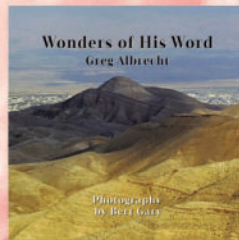
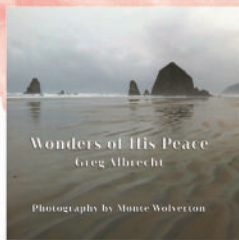
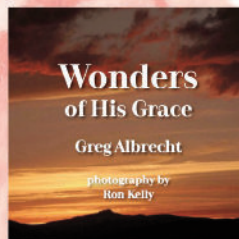
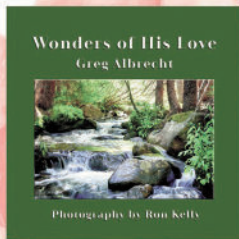
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