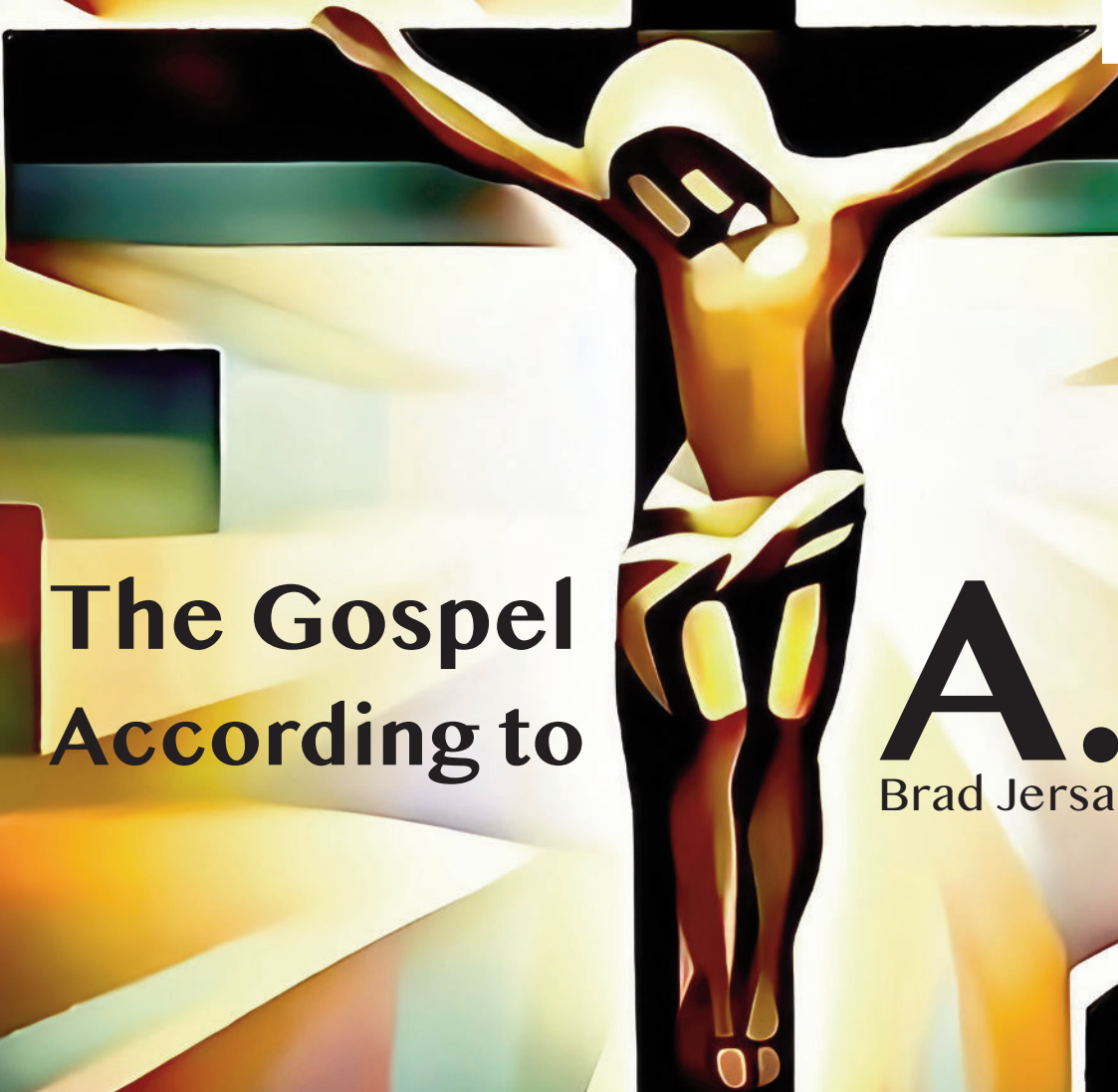


CWR^m magazine

August 2024
Volume 15, Number 4

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



The Gospel According to

A.I.*

Brad Jersak p. 2

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The Gospel According to



by Brad Jersak

Well, I didn't see that coming! For decades, science fiction has forecast the possibilities and perils of artificial intelligence, from do-it-all *Jetsons* maids to *Terminator* robots arising to wipe out the human race. But in real life, the sheer speed of online A.I. advances today are outpacing our ethics and promise to render my analysis obsolete before I can blink—a quaint relic from yester *week*.

I was relatively early to the game of computer-generated images (and their copyright issues). The basic concept is that you feed a verbal description into one of the many “apps” now available and the program tries to create what you want.

On my smartphone, I wrote, “Make a crucifixion scene with radiant light in cubist style.” In half-a-minute, it produced four options to choose from for the front cover of this issue of *CWRm*. The A.I. program also allows you to add more specs or switch themes... I could ask, for example, to include other figures (Jesus’ mother, a few disciples and the Roman centurion) and styles (e.g., paint it as a van Gogh or Picasso).

Another minute and I got four more samples.

Once you get the hang of it, the better (more expensive) versions can be very playful. For example, when fake photos of “Pope Francis as a gangsta” went viral (see image, created by Pablo Xavier, a 31-year-old construction worker in Chicago), they even fooled some people into believing they were real. And that gets quite dangerous when you can produce hi-definition “deep fake” videos of political leaders parroting anything you want or in compromising situations. We’re already there.

You may have also heard about “ChatGPT,” just one name brand among a proliferation of A.I. writing tools. Again, users can load in a request and, using “predictive text” and almost limitless internet

A.I. image by Pablo Xavier - “Gangsta Pope”



content, your A.I. assistant will respond at light speed in countless ways.

For example, I can ask it to summarize any book or topic online, create a summary, add subheadings, and compose it in any style (from Shakespearian poetry to fifth grade reading level). I can ask it to create a bibliography of twenty books or articles on any subject and present it correctly in any academic style. Teachers need to beware because students can even ask it to write essays for them... and likewise, teachers can use A.I. to detect A.I. essays!

There’s no end of help—but sometimes A.I. seems so eager to please that it can make up completely incorrect information, including books that don’t

exist, biographies (including mine) with false facts and serious omissions, or sermons loaded with heresy. In fact, I chatted with two professors at a major seminary who had just read an

“Through Jesus’ teachings, people can find the strength and courage to overcome the negative effects of toxic religion and embrace a life of peace, joy, and purpose.”

—Chat GPT

A.I. homily. The first prof said, “Wow, it pretty much nailed it!” while the second prof grumbled at how completely misguided it was. Lesson: always proofread everything and never take off your critical thinking cap!

I decided to test out A.I.’s writing skills for myself. I asked, “Please write a 300-word description of toxic religion and how faith in Jesus overcomes it.” [Note: I always say please]. In twenty seconds (seriously!), here is what came back... *please*, read carefully and critically!

A.I. ON TOXIC RELIGION AND FAITH IN JESUS

Toxic religion refers to any belief system or religious practice that harms an individual’s mental, emotional, and physical well-being. While religion can bring comfort, hope, and guidance to many people, toxic religion can cause immense damage, including anxiety, guilt, shame, and trauma.

Toxic religion can manifest in various ways, such as rigid dogma, extremist views, intolerance, shaming, and controlling behavior. This type of religion tends to emphasize fear, punishment, and

condemnation, rather than love, forgiveness, and acceptance. Toxic religion often prioritizes adherence to rules and traditions over personal growth, authenticity, and compassion.

Faith in Jesus can overcome toxic religion by promoting a healthy and transformative relationship with God. Jesus’ teachings emphasize love, compassion, and forgiveness as the core of his message. Jesus teaches that all people are created equal and should be treated with dignity and respect. He also emphasizes the importance of self-reflection, humility, and empathy towards others.

Moreover, faith in Jesus can provide a sense of purpose, meaning, and hope to those who struggle with the effects of toxic religion. Jesus offers a path to healing and restoration through his message of grace, forgiveness, and redemption. He shows that God is not a harsh judge but a loving father who seeks to reconcile with his children.

In essence, faith in Jesus offers a liberating alternative to toxic religion by emphasizing a relationship with God that is rooted in love, grace, and compassion. It encourages individuals to embrace their humanity and work towards becoming their best selves, rather than conforming to a narrow set of beliefs and practices. Through Jesus’ teachings, people can find the strength and courage to overcome the negative effects of toxic religion and embrace a life of peace, joy, and purpose.

PTM’S HUMAN ANALYSIS

How did you feel as you read that? What were your impressions? First, credit where it’s due: A.I. delivered a 286-word

article. If only Laura, our managing editor, could count on such conformity to word-limits from her human colleagues!

Second, in my opinion, the content was as good as anything I’ve read on the topic, partly because it relies on key words to dig up information online. It can’t create anything out of personal experience or from the heart. It compiles content written by living experts. I can’t prove it, but given the specific wording in my request, I have a sneaking suspicion Greg Albrecht and the *PTM.org* resources page provided source material.

In any case, I found its presentation so clear, concise and on target that I wish we could hear this perspective from more Christian pulpits. If every preacher and teacher in every church and seminary were convinced of this A.I.’s perspective, I’d be happily out of a job. It’s a beautiful corrective and more Christ-centered than the centuries of bad religion *CWRm* is trying to overcome.

Being willing and able to perceive and articulate a question remains a human trait, virtue or flaw, depending on the heart of the one asking.

—Matthew 5:44-45

Impressed, I forwarded the piece to Greg (whose A.I. biography was also botched). I found his responses poignant.

Greg’s first reaction was that the article was so near-perfect that it could feel like a sucker-punch to the ego! It’s like



A.I. image via Bing.com when asked to draw "The Gospel According to A.I."

on the quality of human queries... to myself, to people I relate with, to the world around me, to God and to Scripture. Maturity moves beyond questioning (the cynic), spouting leading questions ("Don't you think...") or failing to ask at all (know-it-alls). My foray into the A.I. era reminded me of the value of human curiosity, of open-minded research, well-framed questions, and an ear for detail. It showed me *not* to believe everything I read, the need to factcheck, and to give credit to whom it's due. Most of all, it reminded me that beyond getting the facts right, humans need to connect on a heart level, where "How are you *really* doing?" matters far more than "Do you agree with me?"

Homework for those who are curious: Jesus asked 307 or 339 questions throughout the four gospels (depending which A.I. you ask!). It should be easy enough to ask a Chatbot, "Please list every question that someone asked Jesus in the four Gospels."

Then what if we asked it those same questions? For example, "Who is my neighbor?" or "What is truth?"

But perhaps even more interesting, I wonder how it would answer Jesus' questions! "Who do you say that I am?" or "When the Son of Man returns, will he find faith in the earth?"

That may be fun, but in the end, our most pressing questions and most meaningful answers are discovered in conversation with Jesus himself. □

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comparing beach photos of oneself to images of models whose wrinkles and bulges have been airbrushed away! Fair point, I'd say!

Second, he noticed that like Spock of *Star Trek*, the piece lacks emotional connectivity—the empathetic glue needed to cement relationships. Agreed. Indeed, because of this, one can develop a feel for discerning A.I. pieces more quickly than you'd expect. Even when it gets its facts right, A.I. can still lack a palpable human quality... though if you ask for it, who knows?

And finally, I love Greg's final point: "In order for Chat to spew out the 300 words, Brad had to frame and ask the question.

"Asking questions: to perceive and articulate questions remains a human trait, virtue or flaw, depending on the heart of the one asking. The striking lesson for me is less about how well A.I.

...in the end, our most pressing questions and most meaningful answers are discovered in conversation with Jesus himself.

—Brad Jersak

answers questions, but how adept we are at asking them... and not just into the 'ear' of an A.I. assistant."

In a surprising turn, writing this article focused my attention

“Divine Appointments”?

Greg Albrecht

Some people speak fondly of a specific date when God “called” them for the first time. Such memories must have been a long time ago of course because people today mostly receive texts, not calls on their phones. And often, the message is no more than a cute symbol (emoji) or shorthand acronym.

Others refer to times when God set them up with a “divine appointment.” True confession—when I hear *divine appointment*, my eyes rotate like the reels on a slot machine (please forgive the metaphor).

What is a *divine appointment*? Does God schedule your appointment next Tuesday afternoon with ____? Is this an edict? A “do this if you know what’s good for you” announcement?

It seems that *divine appointments* are too often interpreted as confirmation for whatever the recipient was planning to do anyway. And *voilà!*

Their will is validated as God’s will. How terribly convenient!

But when the gospel speaks of Jesus *calling* us to be his disciples, it is more of an invitation than a directive. A bidding, a proposal, an appeal and a request—not a line-in-the-sand command or demand. Jesus opens his arms and beckons us to follow him. It’s a calling, yes, but one to which we are *invited*.

The call to follow Jesus is an invitation to a relationship, wherein we grow and mature in the grace and mercy of Jesus. This growth in our calling is empowered by God’s grace. Our spiritual vision—our eyes—are opened and our blindness healed. We experience spiritual enlightenment.

The narrative we choose about who God is and how God relates to us is important, and the in-house vocabulary we adopt can limit our spiritual vision.

We may become addicted to explanations of God, what God does and how God does it. We may seek absolute, black-and-white explanations from religious authorities who believe they are ordained to unveil all the mysteries of God. *But the mysteries of God spoken of in the Bible are not beyond knowing—they are heavenly truths revealed to lead us out of our blindness and darkness into the Light.*

The mysteries of God and our calling are not revealed through bumper-sticker slogans like “God will never give you more than you can handle,” “God helps those who help themselves” or “everything happens for a reason.” These misleading pseudo-explanations can obstruct spiritual growth. What we need is to hear a gospel that opens our eyes and heals our hearts.

As with his first disciples, so it is today. Jesus calls us into a relationship with him. Let’s hear his invitation, take that call, and follow him! □

Greg Albrecht is President of Plain Truth Ministries.

Art by Oleksander Antonyuk - UBP



Jesus said, “Follow me!”

Running the Race

Ed Dunn

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

—Hebrews 12:1

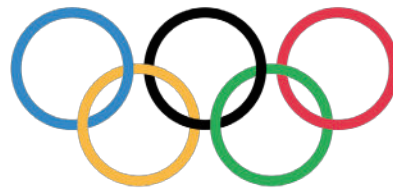
It's not about winning at the Olympic Games. It's about trying to win.

The motto is faster, higher, stronger, not fastest, highest, strongest. It's the trying that matters.

—Bronte Barratt, Australian swimmer and gold medalist



PARIS 2024



It's that special time of late-summer again that only rolls around every four years. For more than two weeks, we find ourselves huddled and glued to our television sets, watching for the exciting, record-setting people, places and times on the screens in front of us. The summer Olympic Games are here again, and this time will be held in Paris, France from July 26th through August 11th, 2024.

**ON YOUR MARKS! GET SET!
HERE WE GO!!**

But Wait! Oh No! A former two-time Olympic gold medalist false starts in the race for which he is favored, and is immediately and unceremoniously ushered off the track and disqualified from the

event. An up-and-coming sprint swimmer, expected to win multiple gold medals, suddenly pulls a back muscle and has to sit poolside for the duration of all of her events. A veteran equestrian show jumper unexplainably falls from his horse, fracturing his neck and is rushed in a frenzy via ambulance to the nearest hospital. *What is happening here?! How can these unfortunate events be taking place?*

I can't recall an Olympic Games where there wasn't some form of a shocking outcome like this for one or more of the competitors. Some events it seems never unfold as they are *supposed to unfold*. Sometimes the champion athlete just *doesn't win*. When this happens, we can be

left feeling a deep sense of personal disappointment. When this takes place, we can be faced with an honest reality of life:

There are times we can't run the race in front of us. Sometimes, we may have to walk, or even sit the race out, altogether.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

—Hebrews 12:1

The Apostle Paul uses such beautiful imagery when he writes of throwing off all that hinders

and entangles us. Having done so, Paul encourages us to run our race with perseverance. He reminds us that we are not alone in our running. Many have run the course marked out for them in life, and many will yet run the race.

As I read this verse, I don't believe Paul's imagery here demands that we must literally run every step of the way in our lives. Sometimes, physically, we can't run every step of the way. Due to unforeseen tragedy or events beyond our control, there are times we end up *walking the race*. Depending on the nature and severity of the tragedy or events, there are times we must simply stop, and sit the race out, altogether.

Years ago, I remember a high school two-mile run I was pushed into running by an over-eager coach. The two-mile run was a distance on the track I truly hated to run. Suffering from a side stitch that just wouldn't quit and shin splints halfway through the eight-lap race, I had to walk for a few hundred meters, and then, eventually, I had to step off the track and stop walking. I felt such a feeling of total dejection and defeat.

In our physical lives, we can be beset by weakness and limitation. We can face hardship after hardship and bear insults, persecutions and endless difficulties. In the face of these realities, we can feel dejected and defeated. Yet, spiritually, we hold close to the greatest comfort. We know that *the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong*, as the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 9:11 reminds us.

Time and chance do indeed happen to us all. Yet, we find great comfort in the truth that Christ Jesus is our speed and our strength. Christ Jesus alone marks out our course in life. He is the author and the finisher of our race. He has already run our race, with and for us, and he is our sure and true victory.

In our weakness and limitation, Christ's strength makes us strong. As we share this strength, this victory with so great a cloud of witnesses, we rejoice that Christ is their strength and victory, as well. As we together share physical weakness and limitation, insult and persecution, so too we share spiritual glory and eternity in and with him. We share a crown that will not perish.

The Olympic Games can inspire us with the motto: *faster, higher, stronger*. The achievements of the greatest competitors can truly take our breath away. Of course, there are no guarantees that the favored champions will win and set new records. But we can watch and we can hope.

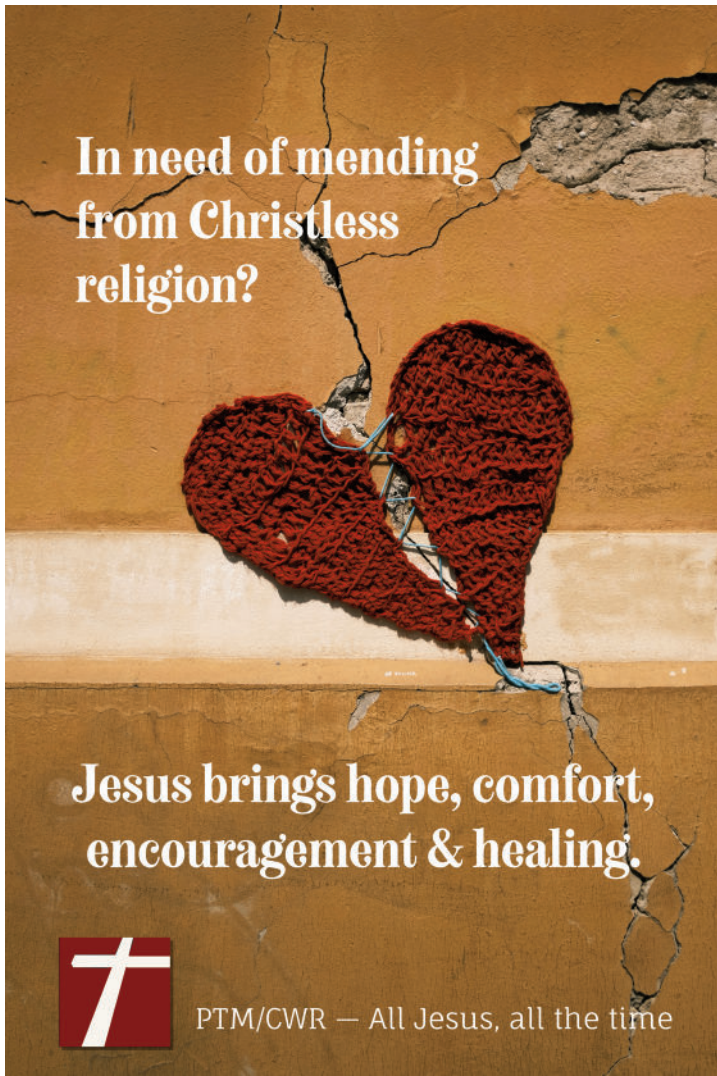
With so great a cloud of witnesses, we all closely watch and rest our hope in the greatest of champions, Christ Jesus our Lord. We huddle together and stay glued to his life, his transforming work in us, and his never-ending love and grace. In him, we let go of dejection and defeat. In him, we celebrate the greatest of victories. And so, we enjoy the splendor, the ceremony, and the excitement of the Games every four years. We celebrate the physical achievements and the new records set. We know that the best of these two weeks of competition is only a pointer.

We rest in the victory we have in Christ. □

Ed Dunn is a vice-president of PTM and an editor for CWRm.

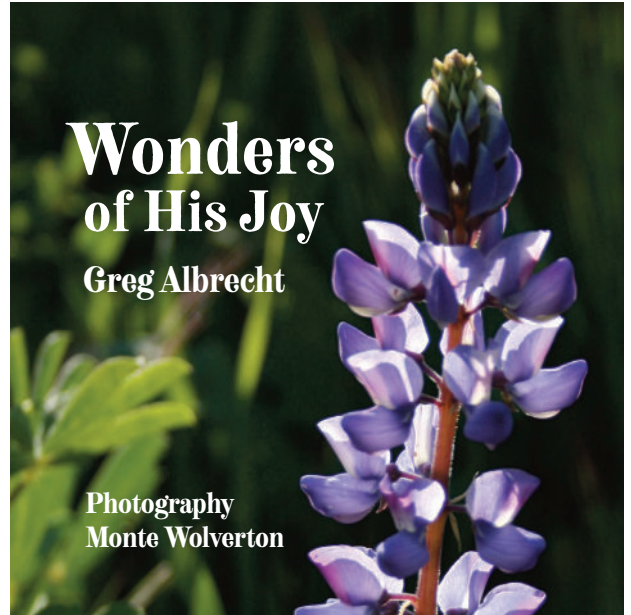


...my power is made perfect in weakness... so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. —2 Corinthians 12:9-10



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