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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



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"You Don't Love Me!"

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"YOU DON'T LOVE ME!"

If you are a parent or a spouse or a grandparent, you have no doubt heard the manipulative ultimatum, "*You don't love me!*" from a family member who attempts to guilt you into doing what they want you to do. When you were growing up you may have heard the accusation, "*You don't love me!*" from a parent who expressed disappointment in your behavior. You may have been the target of the painful announcement, "*You don't love me!*" which was quickly followed by a reprimand for your shortcomings—"after all I have done for you."

The statement, "*You don't love*

me!" is often a contrived strategy designed to coerce another person into appropriate behavior, at least according to the person using the tactic. Does one find and maintain true love via emotional blackmail? Is giving someone (whether that someone be a spouse, a child or a friend) exactly what they want *true love*?

True love of course includes gifts, but *true love is never for sale*. Gifts are often given to others in return for what the giver believes is love, but gifts in that context prove only how much someone is willing to pay to achieve the illusion and feeling of love.

"*You don't love me!*" might be used by a teenager as a complaint or a recrimination directed at a

parent, when the parent doesn't allow the teenager to stay out later, go to unsupervised activities and eat as much junk food as the teen desires. Teenagers, desperate to get their own way, often complain to their parents that their friends all get to have more freedom, and that those friends feel sorry for them because they have such unloving, uncaring "stone age" parents.

The definition of love, at some point in the 20th century Western culture, continuing to gain momentum into this 21st century, has experienced a radical shift favoring love as at least partially identified by self-centered entitlements one receives. The proof and

illustration of love came to be popularly understood as a favorable response to benefits one receives from another. Such a definition of love reduces it to a transaction, not a self-sacrificial gift. The condemnation of another's failures "*after all I have done for you*" is based on a definition of love and relationship as transactional—a contract.

Several generations in Europe and North America have grown up believing that their parents owe them, the government owes them, their school owes them and then later, if they marry, their spouse owes them. Sadly, the generations before them have permissively indulged them and now they exist in a miserable bubble of entitlement. Thus, they have come to believe love is defined by the benefits and entitlements they are owed.

Many today speak of their search for a "soul mate"—an elusive dream-person whom they characterize as satisfying.

Employees feel justified in doing as little as possible on the job because they feel that their employer is rich anyway, and their employer owes them. This explosion of self-centered "love" has been accompanied by an ever-increasing emphasis on rights—so that many today believe they have "rights" no one else in history ever had. It seems many North Americans believe they *deserve* "rights" and "entitlements" the majority of other humans on earth never will enjoy.

Self-absorbed people feel entitled to have everything when and how they want it, and are therefore often depressed and bitter, because in their estimation they will never achieve the admiration, attention and love (as they define it) they feel they so richly deserve—and *it's all someone else's fault!*

TELLING GOD HE DOESN'T LOVE US?

When it comes to our relationship with God "you don't love me" is a charge many feel justified in laying at his feet when they attempt to pressure, bargain and demand that he gives them what they want. On the other hand, the mind of Christ stands opposed to this grasping, manipulative focus on self-interest. The mind of Christ is filled with vulnerability and humility, the complete opposite of a grasping, self-absorbed focus.

"*You don't love me!*" is a transparent attempt by someone who feels unloved and demands the love they feel they deserve. In the spiritual sense, the

accusation, "*You don't love me!*" is often leveled at God by someone who attempts to gain God's favor by living by law, not by grace. "*You don't love me!*" is a demand and "*after all I have done for you*" a complaint directed to God.

We spend so much of our lives hoping to be recognized and rewarded ... and there is nothing inherently wrong with being recognized and rewarded, and certainly nothing wrong with recognizing and rewarding and thanking others. But the recognition we receive from other humans feels good for a moment, and then, like the wind, it is gone. Like the labels on food one purchases in the grocery store, human approval often has a shelf-life, an expiration date.

This mushrooming love affair with "me, myself and I" has negative consequences in our recognition of the love God has for each of us. Self-absorbed people (and we all are, naturally, at some level self-absorbed) want God to love them because of who

The real, but hard truth is this: Everything we have and everything we have accomplished—all our trophies and achievements—will one day be but ashes. By contrast, God's love and grace never fades away, nor will it vanish into thin air.

they are and what they have done—human pride craves divine recognition.

We crave the recognition of others, we crave it though it is fleeting and one day forgotten. One day the accolades we desperately care about will be empty and meaningless. We look for love, as that old song goes, in all the wrong places, because we are physical and highly susceptible to the fool's gold of the cheap, the passing, the quick and the transitory.

When we look for love in all the wrong places we invariably will feel let down, empty and disillusioned... so we move on, looking for another cheap thrill, another cheap religious pill or prescription or drug that will give us a temporary high. But we will always come crashing down when God is not at the center of our quest for love.

When it comes to trying to be good, we run in vain to please religious laws and standards, only to find that we are incapable of measuring up to such standards and we feel shame and guilt for our failures. Once again, only God's love and grace

fulfills us and gives us eternal treasures that will never pass away.

VULNERABILITY, KINDNESS, GENEROSITY & GRATITUDE

Prideful selfishness is a spiritual disease. What is the cure?

Vulnerability, kindness, generosity and gratitude!

When Breath Becomes Air was written by Paul Kalanithi, just after he had been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Actually, his wife Lucy helped him write the book, and contributed her own thoughts. Paul was 36, growing in immense prestige in his profession as a neurosurgeon. He and his wife had just welcomed their little daughter into the world.

And then came Paul's out-of-the-blue diagnosis of stage four metastatic terminal lung cancer. His wife Lucy wrote about what happened and how it affected their lives: *"His cancer diagnosis was like a nutcracker, getting us back into the soft nourishing meat of our marriage. We hung onto each other for his physical survival and our emotional survival, our love stripped bare. We joked to close friends that the secret to saving a relationship is for one person to become terminally ill. Conversely, we knew that one trick to managing a terminal illness is to be deeply in love—to be vulnerable, kind, generous and grateful."*

Each one of us, apart from God, apart from Jesus, the Great Physician, is terminally ill, spiritually. The recognition of our plight is very much a part of

deepening our relationship with God. Knowing and fully being at peace in God's love entails recognition of total dependence on God for everything, and that he gives his love in the time and manner he best determines. God's love is not given to us because it can be earned and deserved, but because his love is not measured or assessed by how humans (including Christ-less religion) assign worth.

There are times when we feel God doesn't love us because he



doesn't seem to be doing what we feel he should. But we are using the wrong standards—the wrong measurements—the wrong devices—to identify, define and recognize his love.

Though we as humans do accuse God that he doesn't love us, that is not the case at all. It's just that his love is not based on our performance and deeds, and his rewards are not a pat on the back, a raise, a trophy, or a miraculous healing from a terminal health condition.

God's love is the gift of

himself—he gives us his life. He gives us his death, in the person of Jesus. Jesus announced his love for you and me on the top of a hill, stripped naked and impaled to a cross. Some were jeering and making fun of him—telling him to save himself. Irony of ironies—the human response to the greatest demonstration of love ever was catcalling and condemnation.

As Jesus died on his Cross, there was no gratitude or recognition about the earth-shattering love being demonstrated.

There was no commendation or applause from those who stood by. It was the once-and-for-all event when God loved us first, in the way he determined. And the aftermath? The Jesus Way has been lived ever since, for almost two thousand years now, by Christ-followers. Christ-followers have no need to manipulate God. We're not able to send the Father, Son and Holy Spirit away on a guilt trip. We never need accuse

God of not loving us. God knows. You and I know. *God loves us!*

The miraculous and beautiful reality enabled by the Cross—this monumental, once-and-for-all demonstration of divine love—produces in the lives of Christ-followers vulnerability, kindness, generosity and gratitude. That's the mind of Christ and the love of our Lord and Savior—lived in us by God's grace. □

Greg Albrecht is President of PTM and CWRm's Editor-in-Chief.

God, the Lover of Life

Richard Rohr

Love is who you are. When you don't live according to love, you are outside of being. You're not being real. When you love, you are acting according to your deepest being, your deepest truth. You are operating according to your dignity. —Richard Rohr

Drawing from my many years of teaching, I can honestly say that the most powerful, most needed and most essential teaching is always about love. *Love is our foundation and our destiny.* It is where we come from and where we're headed.

As St. Paul famously says, *“So faith, hope, and love remain, but the greatest of these is love”* (1 Corinthians 13:13).

My hope, whenever I speak or write, is to help clear away the impediments to receiving, allowing, trusting and participating in a foundational love. God's love is planted inside each of us as the Holy Spirit who, according to Jesus, *“will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you”* (John 14:26).

Love is who you are. All I can do is remind you of what you already know deep within your True Self and invite you to live connected to this Source.

The first letter of John reminds us, *“God is love, and whoever remains in love, remains in God and God in her or him”* (1 John 4:16). The creation story in Genesis says that we were created in the very *“image and likeness”* of God—who is love (Genesis 1:26; see also Genesis 9:6). Out of the Trinity's generative, loving relationship, creation takes form, mirroring its Creator.

If we are truly created in the *“image and likeness of God”*—then our family of origin is divine. We were created by a loving God to be love in the world. Our core is original blessing, not original sin. Our starting point is positive and, as it is written in the first chapter of the Bible, it is *“very good”* (Genesis 1:31). We do have a good place to go home. If the beginning is right, the rest is made considerably easier, because we know and can trust

*God, lover of life,
lover of these lives,
God, lover of our souls,
lover of our bodies,
lover of all that exists . . .
In fact, it is your love
that keeps it all alive . . .
May we live in this love.
May we never doubt this love.
May we know that we are love,
That we were created for love,
That we are a reflection of you,
That you love yourself in us
and therefore,
we are perfectly lovable.*

*May we never doubt this deep and
abiding and perfect goodness.*

We are because you are.

the clear direction of our life's tangent.

We must all overcome the illusion of separateness. It is the primary task of faith to communicate not worthiness but union, to reconnect people to their original identity *“hidden with Christ in God”* (Colossians 3:3). God's job description is to draw us back into primal and intimate relationship.

LOVE IS WHO YOU ARE

Love is not really an action that you do. Love is what and who you are, in your deepest essence.

Love is a place that already exists inside of you, but is also greater than you. That's the paradox. It's within you and yet beyond you. This creates a sense of abundance and more-than-enoughness, which is precisely the satisfaction and deep peace of the True Self. You know you've found a well that will never go dry, as Jesus says (see John 4:13-14). Your True Self, God's Love in you, cannot be exhausted.

Material gifts decrease when you give them away. Spiritual gifts, by contrast, increase the more you use them. Yes! You get more love by letting it flow through you, just as modeled by the Trinity. If you love, you will become more loving. If you practice patience, you will become more patient. If you stop the Divine Flow, you will be stopped up (“sin”).

understand the command to love one’s enemies, it has to disregard the message as naive, which is exactly what most of Christian history has done.

Jesus’ rather clear teaching on love of enemies has been consistently ignored by all the mainline churches. Christians have been fighting one war after another, and excluding, torturing, and killing enemies right and left because the false self can never understand the

gospel. Yet we have been baptizing, confirming, giving communion to, and even ordaining false selves throughout our history. It is probably unavoidable, and God surely must be patient.

Once, after I gave an anti-war sermon, a businessman came up to me and said, “Well, Father, maybe in an ideal world. . . .” I know he meant well, but that’s what we’ve done with most of the teaching of Jesus. We interpret his meaning for some ideal world. Of course, the ideal world

is never going to come so we can just ignore 99% of the actual teaching of Jesus, as the institutional church (and I too!) have usually done. We concentrate instead on things that Jesus never once talked about, like birth control, homosexuality, and abortion—bodily “sins” because the body can most easily carry shame. We shouldn’t disregard bodily shame or addictions, but they are not the core problem.

Jesus focused on issues of power, prestige, and possession—which all of us have largely ignored. I don’t think the church has had intentional bad will. It has simply tried to get the false self to live the gospel, and that will never work.

In other words, we’ve tried to have a church without fundamental transformation. □

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Love is not really an action that you do. Love is what and who you are, in your deepest essence.

Love is a place that already exists inside of you, but is also greater than you.



Love is not something you can bargain for, nor is it something you can attain or work up to—because love is your very structural and essential identity—created in the image of the Trinity. When you are living in conscious connection with this Loving Inner Presence, you are in your True Self. God is forever united to this love within you; it is your soul, the part of you that always says yes to God. God always sees God in you—and “cannot disown God’s own self” (2 Timothy 2:13).

Many Christians live with a terrible sense of being rejected, because their religion is basically a worthiness game where no one really wins. That’s precisely not the Good News. It’s bad news.

The gospel will always be misinterpreted by the false self in terms of some kind of climbing or achieving. Since the false self can’t even

"God is love, but..." Nothing!

Brad Jersak

"Everything before the word 'BUT' is meaningless."

I've heard the above quote elsewhere as *"Nothing someone says before the word 'but' really counts,"* and especially when an affirmation of love is immediately followed by its negation. The aphorism is loaded with wisdom and experience. Even if you feel that love compels you to bring a word of critique or correction, *if you use love as your opening salvo to bring someone down, you'll bring love down with them.* It's a major relational mistake... unless it's a case of deliberate 'gaslighting,' which is simply abusive.

How much more so with God! Does Jesus say, *"God so loved the world BUT..."* (John 3:16)? Did John say, *"God is love BUT..."* (1 John 4:16)? No. God's love is unconditional. God loved us *before* we ever loved God (1 John 4:19). Christ died for us even when we were *powerless* and *ungodly* (Romans 5:6-8). God even reconciled us to himself while we were still *hostile* toward God (Romans 5:10).

So, while God's love certainly does call us to reciprocate in love, trust, surrender, and obedience (see John 14:15 for example), that's an *"if..., therefore"* willing response. *Not* and *never* a caveat "BUT." In truth, our failure to respond in kind does *not* annul God's love, grace, or forgiveness. God's mercy endures how long? *Forever!* And since that is true, and no BUTS about it, of course we're called to orient our lives toward perfect Love.

If you have been told *"God loves you, BUT,"* it's possible that you've received a dose of spiritual abuse that we associate with *"Christless religion."* Or perhaps

you've afflicted others with your own version of *"God is love BUT..."!* In either case, this cartoon by David Hayward has just the solution. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all too happy to remove whatever BUT is sabotaging your experience of the Good News that *"God loves you BUT nothing."*

As one friend put it, *"The only 'but' I care about is Ephesians 2:4— 'BUT GOD... who is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us...' So God has a big 'but' too!"*

Who knew! But Amen! □

Brad Jersak serves as pastoral scholar of Plain Truth Ministries.



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52 Weekly Meditations



Ruth A. Tucker

Foreword by Greg Albrecht

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