

“What if Jesus Had Never Come”¹*Matthew 13³¹⁻³⁵; Romans 12¹⁻²***Introduction**

I want to invite you to a post Christmas thought experiment. In the words of Beatles star John Lennon, imagine what the world would be like if indeed there was “no heaven, no hell...nothing to kill or die for...and no religion.”

Imagine what the world would be like if Jesus had never been born. **SLIDE**

- Cf. 1 Cor. 15 “what if there is no resurrection”; *It’s a Wonderful Life*...George Bailey.

Among many in the world today the dream of a world with “no religion” persists and has even been sung with religious like fervour at many public gatherings including the opening ceremony of the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea. Ironically South Korea has several national neighbour states that have tried “no religion” for quite some time and they still found an awful lot to kill and die for. The vacuum left by the removal of religion from the public square was filled with the totalitarian state, the loss of freedom for millions, concentration camps, and the most savage wars in history. **BLANK**

Yet religious skeptics and atheists (like Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens) have so loudly and repeatedly claimed “**religion is evil**” that many people have come to believe it’s true, that the world would be a far *better* place without any and every “God delusion”. It has become “politically correct” to call Christianity an oppressor religion with a history of impeding science & freedom.

Now we of all people know that the followers of Jesus Christ have been far from perfect and at times have participated in collective sins we should be ashamed of (cf. Romans 2²⁴ – “*The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.*”). But if the full record were to be examined (not just any deficits), it would show the positive impact of Christ and his followers far, far outweighing the bad. Which is the main reason behind the new six-week series we are starting today, **SLIDE** “What if Jesus Had Never Come”. Here’s a sample trailer... **VIDEO**

¹ <https://www.markalanwilliams.net/post/2014/12/25/what-if-jesus-had-never-been-born/>

Biblical Contact – In her book, Confronting Christianity, Rebecca McLaughlin point out how eight years before the Beatles star John Lennon released “Imagine” another person had gone public with a very different dream. He dreamed that **SLIDE** “*one day down in Alabama [the most racist & segregated place in America] . . . little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.*”² In Dr. Martin Luther King’s vision, such peace & brotherhood sprang not from the loss of faith but from its fulfillment. He shared the prophet Isaiah’s dream that “*one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.*”³ **BLANK** The fullest flowering of the prophet Isaiah’s vision happened in the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus claimed that in him, the kingdom of God was breaking into the world, transforming lives in ways people had never seen before. In Matthew 13³¹⁻³³, Jesus described “the kingdom of heaven” to his listeners using two very simple but power and transformative parables: the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast. Let’s read them together.

³¹ *He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³² Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”*

³³ *He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds (27 kgs) of flour until it worked all through the dough.”*

These parables certainly apply to the lives of the people in whom Jesus and his message take root and grow; but they also apply to Christianity in the world. Christianity’s roots were small and humble. In the words of Isaiah, Jesus “*grew up...like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*”^{Isa.53:2} Most of his early followers also had humble origins, yet as the church grew it

²<https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>

³ See Rebecca McLaughlin, Confronting Christianity, p. 15.

began to grow and permeate the lives and societies in which it took root producing more good than any other movement in history. To get an overview of some of the positive contributions Christ and his followers have made through the centuries, here are a few highlights: **SLIDE**

- **Hospitals** – which essentially began during the Middle Ages, many of which still bear the name of the faith that started them (**St. Paul's**⁴, etc.)
- **Universities** – which also began during the Middle Ages. In addition, most of the world's greatest universities were started by Christians for Christian purposes.
- **Literacy/Education for all** – Charlemagne hired Alcuin⁷³⁵⁻⁸⁰⁴ to provide as much education for the people of the Holy Roman Empire as he could; cf. the Reformation...
- **Codifying and setting to writing** many of the world's languages.
- **Representative government** – particularly as we have it in “the West”
- **The abolition of slavery** – in ancient times and in more modern times.
- **Compassion & Charity** – “good Samaritan law”; cf. St. Paul origins
- **Modern science** – most people don't realize how many of the pioneers of modern science were Christians. Sample quiz - Bible-believing scientists who *founded* the following branches of science:^{Kennedy,101}
 - **Antiseptic surgery** – Joseph Lister¹⁸²⁷⁻¹⁹¹²
 - **Astronomy** – four names loom large in the textbooks of astronomy: Copernicus¹⁴⁷³⁻¹⁵⁴³, Brahe¹⁵⁴⁶⁻¹⁶⁰¹, Kepler¹⁵⁷¹⁻¹⁶³⁰, and Galileo¹⁵⁶⁴⁻¹⁶⁴². Kepler was “the first to explain that tides were caused by the moon.”⁵ But the undeniable fact that these men were devout Christians, which influenced their scientific work, is often omitted in most science texts.
 - **Bacteriology** – Louis Pasteur
 - **Calculus** – Isaac Newton¹⁶⁴²⁻¹⁷²⁷ (& Gottfried Leibniz¹⁶⁴⁶⁻¹⁷¹⁶)
 - **Chemistry** – Robert Boyle
 - **Computer Science** – Charles Babbage
 - **Physics** – In physics the name of Blaise Pascal¹⁶²³⁻⁶² stands out, both for his scientific contributions and for his Christian convictions. Nearly a hundred years after Pascal
 - **Electricity** – Alessandro Volta¹⁷⁴⁵⁻¹⁸²⁷ discovered current electricity (cf. George Simon Ohm^{electrical resistance}; Andre Ampere^{electrical measurements}; Michael Farady^{Electromagnetics})
 - **Oceanography** – Matthew Maury¹⁸⁰⁶⁻¹⁸⁷³

⁴ St. Paul's Hospital's history began when Mother Emilie Gamelin founded the Sisters of Providence in Montreal in 1843. The Sisters of Providence established schools, hospitals, orphanages, homes for the aged and asylums across Canada, the United States, and later in many other countries.

⁵ Alvin Schmidt, How Christianity Changed the World, p. 228.

In the list of positive contributions, we haven't even mentioned the greatest of all, the gift of **eternal life** that Jesus came to bring to *all people*. When Jesus came to earth, when he became human, he gave *all* humans (not a select few—like the rich & powerful & famous—but all people) a dignity and value higher than they had ever dreamed of before. A French engineer and professor from the past liked to ask his new students the question, “What is the most important thing to come out of a mine?” Many named various minerals and precious metals, but he corrected them saying, “The most important thing to ever come out of a mine is the miner.” I agree and I suggest that this view of human life is not as “self-evident” as many mistakenly assume. This view of human life as sacred is embraced only where the gospel of Jesus Christ has had leaven like influence. **BLANK** Prior to the coming of Christ, human life on this planet was incredibly cheap. Life was expendable in the ancient world prior to Christ's influence and even today, in parts of the world where the gospel of Christ and his influence has not penetrated, life is exceedingly cheap (the increasing dehumanization in our own society is making life cheap once again).

You've heard the old saying, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” But when the early Christians arrived in Rome they did not do as the pagan Romans did. They defied the entire system of Rome's morality. As sociology professor Alvin Schmidt notes in his book, How Christianity Changed the World, **SLIDE** “*The low value of life among the Romans was a shocking affront to the early Christians.*” Like their Jewish ancestors, “they believed that people were made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27).”^{p.48} They also knew that God so honored human life that he himself became human in the person of Jesus Christ. Unlike, the Romans, **SLIDE** “*Christians did not hold human life to be cheap and expendable. It was to be honored and protected at all costs, regardless of its form or quality. By doing so, they countered many depravities that depreciated human life.*”^{p.49}

Q – How did the Greco-Roman world depreciate human life? **BLANK** In the ancient world, child sacrifice was a common phenomenon. Archaeologists have

unearthed ancient cemeteries, near pagan temples and near brothels where babies were sacrificed and killed en masse.^{Schmidt,66} It was a dangerous thing for a baby to be conceived in classical Rome or Greece (et al⁶) just as it is becoming dangerous once more under the influence of the modern pagan.

It is estimated that only about half of the children born lived beyond the age of eight,^{Kennedy,10} in large part because of infanticide which as “infamously universal” among the Greeks and Romans during the early years of Christianity.⁷ It was common for sick and unwanted infants to be taken out into the forest or the mountainside, to be consumed by wild animals or to starve. Parents abandoned virtually all deformed babies and often abandoned female babies because women were considered inferior.⁸ Some were killed more brutally as a part of their worship (child sacrifices). For instance, Plutarch^{A.D.46-120} mentions the Carthaginians, who, he says, **SLIDE**

“offered up their own children, and those who had no children would buy little ones from poor people and cut their throats as if they were so many lambs or young birds; meanwhile the mother stood by without a tear or moan” (*Moralia* 2.171D).^{Schmidt,49}

So common was infanticide that Polybius^{205-118 B.C.} blamed the population decline of ancient Greece on it.^{Schmidt,49} **BLANK** By the way, historical research shows that infanticide was common not only in the Greco-Roman culture but in many other cultures of the world as well: in India, China, Japan, and the Brazilian jungles as well as among the Inuit, the indigenous people of North and South America. The early Christians in the Greco-Roman world called the practice of infanticide murder and organized “baby hunts” to find and care for abandon infants. They took these “human castaways into their homes and adopted them.”^{Schmidt,53} Jesus words of warning and words of welcome regarding children were embraced and embodied (Mt. 18 millstone; Mt. 19 “let the little children come to me...for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these”).

⁶ E.g. Prussians and Lithuanians, the Aztec & Maya, the Irish – before St. Patrick brought the gospel they “sacrificed prisoners of war to war gods and newborns to the harvest gods.” (see Schmidt, p.66 for more examples & details)

⁷ Schmidt, p. 49 cites a number of disturbing examples from ancient sources.

⁸ An inscription at Delphi reveals that one second-century sample of six hundred families had only one percent who raised two daughters.(Schmidt,49).

When in Rome, the early Christians did not do as the Romans did, but as Christ did, for they took to heart the words the apostle Paul had written to the church in Rome, *“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”*^{Rom.12:2}

Conclusion

Significant as the influence of Christianity has been in areas like the valuing of all human life, recent trends indicate major dehumanizing trends (cf. Andy Steiger’s recent book, Reclaimed: How Jesus Restores our Humanity in a Dehumanized World) **SLIDE**

In Jesus we find not only that humans are unique, valuable, and bearers of rights and responsibilities, but also that our dehumanizing tendencies--our worst inclinations toward inhumanity--can be redeemed and restored. Jesus enables us to be fully human, and it's in him that we rediscover the kind of relationships and society for which so many people today are longing.

In a world that longs to break free from the influence of any and every “God delusion” I’m reminded of a story that took place during WW II on a remote island in the Pacific. **BLANK** An American soldier met an indigenous person who could read, and saw that the man was carrying a Bible. When he saw the Bible, the soldier said, “We educated people no longer put much faith in that book.” “The man, who was from a tribe of former cannibals, said to the soldier, “Well it’s good for you that we put faith in this book, or you would be eaten by my people today.”^{Schmidt,76} This is only one illustration, but it is an important one that demonstrates both what the world would be like if Jesus had never come, and what it is like because he has come and is continuing his transforming work in and through those who put their faith in him.

- An area of your life or work that you long for Jesus’ transforming power?
- PRAY with open hands...