“I once heard an immigrant rabbi make an astonishing statement. ‘Before coming to America, I had to forgive Adolph Hitler,’ he said. ‘I did not want to bring Hitler inside me to my new country.’”1
As a young boy I read one of the earliest versions of *Anne Frank—The Diary of a Young Girl*, and I struggled to reconcile a loving God with the unimaginable evil of the Holocaust. It was the first time I doubted the existence of God.

Half a century later, I still wrestle with the implications of the Holocaust—the carefully orchestrated, systematic persecution, torture and mass murder of some six million Jews by Nazi Germany. While comprehending the enormous evil of the Holocaust is a dark journey, the reality that some have been able to forgive such monstrous crimes is a glimpse into the wonders of God’s grace.

Under Adolph Hitler, the Nazis proclaimed the Jews to be genetically inferior and a threat to the purity of the German race. The Nazis also included other groups in their mass extermination campaign, often called the Final Solution. Gypsies, Poles, Russians, Communists, Socialists, homosexuals, religious dissidents such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, mentally and physically disabled Germans, as well as all “enemies” of the state who did not support the Nazi hate campaign were also targeted.

When Adolph Hitler came to power Otto Frank was a German Jewish businessman who lived with his family in Frankfurt, Germany. He was a military veteran who courageously fought for his country in World War I. Seeing the evil scourge of anti-Semitism growing within the country he loved, Otto Frank determined to get his family out before it was too late.

Thinking he had found a place of safety Otto Frank moved his family from Frankfurt to Amsterdam in December 1933 and January 1934. In May 1940 German Nazis occupied Holland and started a deliberate and inexorable program of restricting freedoms to Jews. *Anne Frank—The Diary of a Young Girl* tells the heroic story of Otto Frank, who, unable to
leave Holland, in July 1942 provided a hiding place for his wife Edith, their teenage girls Margot and Anne and a few family friends.

In July 1944, less than three weeks before Nazi occupation forces discovered the Frank family (many scholars believe they were betrayed) and transported them to a holding/transit camp the just turned 15-year-old, wise beyond her years, Anne Frank entered these words in her diary:

“It’s really a wonder that I haven’t dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can’t build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery and death. I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us, too. I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again.”

—Anne Frank

...the reality that some have been able to forgive such monstrous crimes is a glimpse into the wonders of God’s grace.

...the Holocaust is one of the great historical lessons of what happens to pernicious, toxic and evil ideas that are not challenged. All ideas have consequences, and there is no doubt that religious ideas have real and tragic consequences.

According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, between 1933 and 1945 Nazi Germany established a vast network of some 20,000 concentration and death camps to imprison its many millions of victims. Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka, Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen and other death camps have become symbols of notorious evil, seared in my generation’s consciousness, as well they should be.

The Holocaust is perhaps the single most carefully documented crime of all history, both by the perpetrators and the victims. The German Nazis kept careful records of the evils visited on those they tormented, tortured and murdered. Jews around the world, since the Holocaust, have made an incredible effort to build on the records of their tormentors and compile an exhaustive, beyond dispute record of the hell that erupted in the 20th century. They have done so, with the watchword, lest we forget.

Yet today, democratic countries across Europe are embroiled in debates about whether to remove the Holocaust from educational curriculum in schools because the topic offends many in the Muslim population, who claim that it never happened. In a related discussion, there are some who are already claiming that the terrorist bombings of September 11, 2001 either never happened, or were a public relations stunt aimed at discrediting Muslims!

In April 2009, at the United Nations, the dictator/strongman of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad proclaimed the Holocaust to be but a “pretext of Jewish suffering.” Many Holocaust deniers insist that a vast Jewish conspiracy counterfeited all of the documentation that supports the historicity of this great tribulation.

The Holocaust must be remembered, but not for the purpose of endlessly dragging the German...
Yet, the Holocaust is one of the great historical lessons of what happens to pernicious, toxic and evil ideas that are not challenged. All ideas have consequences, and there is no doubt that religious ideas have real and tragic consequences.

**Religion’s Role in The Holocaust**

Religion (the traditional, widespread human belief that performance of the right rules and rituals will gain a higher standing with God than would have otherwise been enjoyed) assumes to mediate between God and humans, to speak for God and to dictate “his” demands.

The rapacious demands of institutionalized religion hold one of the sordid secrets behind the Holocaust. Beyond its wretched, vicious and shameful past, self-serving religion continues to exploit, molest and violate human bodies and souls, in the name of God.

Much has been written of the complicity of Islam as well as the twin “pillars” of Christendom, Protestantism and Catholicism, in the horrors perpetrated by Hitler’s Germany.

“Although the Catholic Church’s leadership openly condemned many aspects of Nazi policy, it issued no official condemnation of the regime’s eliminationist persecution of the Jews…. The Protestant hierarchy was even less forthcoming regarding the fate of the Jews….“

The night of Jesus’ betrayal, on the eve of his arrest, trial, torture and crucifixion, Jesus told his disciples, “They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God” (John 16:2).

Anyone familiar with basic history will remember the Catholic Inquisitions, when torture was used to extract an acceptance of “Jesus Christ”—so that the soul whose body was being tortured would be assured of an eternity with God in heaven—rather than an eternity of torture in hell. It made perfect sense at the time. A little torture now will save an eternity of torture later.

Two toxic, religious presuppositions fanned the flames of the torture inflicted by the perpetrators of the Inquisition: 1) God had given an exclusive franchise here on earth to the Roman Catholic church, so that they and they alone would represent him. They believed their human leader, the pope, to be (as many today still believe him to be!) the vicar of Christ on earth. 2) Anyone who died before becoming a Catholic would roast in hell.

**Schindler’s List (1993) directed by Stephen Spielberg**

The American Film Institute (AFI) has awarded *Schindler’s List* eighth place on its list of best American films of all time. The film received seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director. *Schindler’s List* tells the true story of Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson), a previously unsuccessful German businessman, who was willing to build his personal wealth through the tragic suffering of others. Schindler followed the German army army to Krakow, Poland and became a war profiteer.

Schindler bribed German army procurement officers and then purchased a factory in Krakow to produce mess kits for the army. He hired Jewish laborers from the ghetto because he could pay them less than Poles—in fact he paid them nothing, their “wages” were paid to German officials.

It’s not clear when Schindler’s rush to riches first started to be inconvenienced by his conscience. Shortly after SS Captain Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes) finished Plaszow, a new forced labor camp just outside of Krakow, the Jewish ghetto in Krakow was liquidated. The elderly and infirmed were murdered, along with anyone who dared to protest the brutal massacre.

Schindler watched the massacre from the hillside overlooking Krakow. From that moment on Schindler realized that the men and women who were virtual slave laborers in his factory would not survive unless he did something about it. Schindler’s factory workers, along with other Jews who survived the liquidation of the Krakow ghetto, were moved to Plaszow.

Using special favors, bribes and kick-backs, Schindler arranged with Captain Goeth for his workers to leave the camp every morning, work in his factory during the day, and then return to the camp at night. Schindler was inexorably drawn to identify with the plight of his workers and to see the evil of Hitler’s Final Solution.

Given his contacts within the German army, Schindler became aware that the occupants of the forced labor camp would all soon be put on trains for Auschwitz, the closest death camp. Oskar Schindler made a list, and paid a massive bribe to Goeth for each worker on that list. Captain Goeth was led to believe that Schindler moved his workers (all those on his list) to another factory he owned in Czechoslovakia. Schindler’s true purpose in bribing Captain Goeth was to move his workers into a safer place, albeit still under Nazi control.

Schindler used a large portion of the ill-gotten wealth he had accumulated to rescue and redeem the Schindlerjuden (Schindler’s Jews) from Auschwitz. About 1200 Jews on “Schindler’s list” spent the rest of the war in relative safety, some deliberately making defective armaments for the German army. Schindler exhausted the rest of his fortune bribing Nazi officials and guards at the factory in order to protect his workers in the safe haven of his Czechoslovakia munitions factory.

After Schindler and his factory workers listened to a radio broadcast of the German surrender, and the end of World War II, he gathered the workers together, and told them that they were now free, but that he must flee. The advancing Red Army would hunt him as a fugitive—a Nazi party member and a war profiteer.

As Oskar Schindler left his factory the 1200 Jews he saved lined up around his car. They presented him with a ring they secretly made from fillings from one worker’s gold dental bridge. The ring was engraved with a message from the Talmud—“Whoever saves one life, saves the world entire.” Schindler collapsed, overwhelmed with sorrow that he did not do more to save others from the inhuman brutalities they experienced.
forever and ever—subjected to eternal torture.

Both of these fatally flawed religious assumptions are alive and well today, and they continue to lead to untold bloodshed. Fanatical, religious zealots will eventually use extreme measures against those who disagree with them. It was, of course, religious attitudes, assumptions, beliefs and practices that caused so-called moral, good religious people to crucify Jesus, God in the flesh.

When Adolph Hitler came to power in Germany in 1932, the vast majority of Germans identified themselves as patriotic and conservative Christians. Hitler was able to enflame the smoldering fires of Christian anti-Semitism which had existed from the very beginnings of the organized Christian church.

“European anti-Semitism is a corollary of Christianity. From the earliest days of Christianity’s consolidation of its hold over the Roman Empire, its leaders preached against the Jews, employing explicit, powerfully worded, emotionally charged condemnations. The psychological and theological need impelling Christians to differentiate themselves from the bearers of the religion from which their own had broken off, was born anew with each generation, because as long as Jews rejected the revelation of Jesus, they unwittingly challenged the Christians’ certitude in that revelation....The psychological logic of this antagonism was reinforced by a second, related parallel logic. Christians conceived of their religion as superseding Judaism. Therefore, Jews as Jews ought to disappear from the earth. They ought to become Christians. But Jews adamantly would not....”

Four hundred years before Hitler, Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer, who rightly called attention to the abusive authoritarianism of the Catholic church, was unable to completely reform his own anti-Semitism. Agreeing with the all-pervading myth that the Jews were adversaries, Luther said, “They hold us captive in our country. They let us work in the sweat of our noses, to earn money and property for them, while they sit behind the oven, lazy, let off gas, bake pears, eat, drink, live softly and well from our wealth. They...mock us and spit on us, because we work and permit them to be lazy squires who own us and our realm.”

Bonhoeffer and Niemoller: Religion-less Christianity

One of Hitler’s greatest victories was his triumph over the soul of Christianity in Germany—the majority of those who called themselves Christians capitulated to his demands. While not everyone agreed with each decision that increasingly dehumanized Jews, the majority of Germans, including judges, professors, priests and pastors, went along with Hitler’s hate-filled agenda.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemoller were exceptions. Bonhoeffer resisted the Nazis from the beginning, believing that Christ alone was King, and that no government could exercise ultimate spiritual control over Christians. The Nazis responded by forbidding Bonhoeffer to preach or teach (much like anti-Semite Mahmoud Ahmadinejad does with anyone who resists him in today’s Iran).

Bonhoeffer became a part of the German resistance and was eventually taken to Ravensbrook concentration camp. Since his death, Dietrich Bonhoeffer has grown to be a legendary pioneer in the reformation of Christianity. His term “religion-less Christianity” has inspired me, as I see the need to move away from unquestioned obedience to institu-
One of Hitler’s greatest victories was his triumph over the soul of Christianity in Germany—the majority of those who called themselves Christians capitulated to his demands.

Bonhoeffer believed that he must resist Hitler’s evils—as a Christ-follower he could see no other alternative.

Martin Niemoller was another German pastor who refused to go along with Hitler’s tyrannical evils. He protested Hitler’s invective and his increasingly anti-Semitic regulations. Like Bonhoeffer, Niemoller was arrested and imprisoned in a concentration camp. Like Bonhoeffer, Niemoller realized that we may be truly free in Christ.

Bonhoeffer believed that he must resist Hitler’s evils—as a Christ-follower he could see no other alternative.

The poem First They Came is attributed to Niemoller, although many versions have been duplicated and exact authorship is a matter of debate. The poem describes how Germans passively allowed the increase of evil, as the Nazis purged unwanted groups in German society.

First they came for the Communists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak for me.

In her book, Tramp for the Lord, Corrie tells the story of how she came face to face with one of the most cruel Ravensbrook camp guards. It was 1947, only three years after the former guard participated in the brutalities that, among other things, took her sister Betsie’s life.

“It was in a church in Munich that I first saw him—a balding, heavy-set man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken…. And that’s when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; and pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man.

The place was Ravensbrook and the man was making his way forward had been a guard—one of the most cruel guards. Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: ‘A fine message, Fraulein. How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!’

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze…. It could have been many seconds that

Ten Boom, born in Holland (1892), was eventually taken to Ravensbrook concentration camp.

Unlike Anne Frank, Corrie Ten Boom survived her brutal experience in a concentration camp. After Ravensbrook was liberated, Corrie lived the rest of her life writing and speaking about the forgiveness we may have in and through Jesus Christ.

When the Nazis invaded Holland (the Netherlands) in 1940, Corrie was age 48 (in 1940 Anne Frank was 11). Corrie and her family became active in the Dutch underground, helping to rescue many Jews from death at the hands of the Nazi SS. Many Jews survived because of a hiding place that had been built into a wardrobe in Corrie’s bedroom (hence the name of her well-known book, The Hiding Place).

With the help of a Dutch informant the Germans arrested the Ten Boom family on February 28, 1944. Corrie’s father died in prison, and her sister Betsie died while she and Corrie were held in Ravensbrook concentration camp in Germany.

After the war ended, and after she was released, Corrie returned to Holland to help other concentration camp survivors. Before her death in 1983 she traveled the world for speaking engagements, discussing God’s love and forgiveness, and she authored a number of books.

There is no question that God gave Corrie Ten Boom the gift of his forgiveness, and he did so because she came to the end of her rope. She tried to forgive, but realized that she could not bring herself to forgive.
God’s forgiveness breaks the chain of an eye for an eye, by transforming our pain. If our pain is not transformed by God’s grace, then we will transmit that pain.

he stood there—hand held out—but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do….

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. ‘Jesus help me!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.’

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. As I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arms, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart.’

I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then. But even so, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and I did not have the power….”

Forgiven Only As and When We Forgive?

Corrie Ten Boom so clearly illustrates forgiveness which is a gift of God’s amazing grace—forgiveness which is so confused by the Christless religion within much of Christendom. Christless religion believes that God will only forgive us as and when we forgive others, and cites Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 6:12 as proof:

“Forgive our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Those who accept and believe a Christless interpretation of this passage unwittingly turn God’s forgiveness into a conditional act, which depends on human merit. But if God will only forgive us as and when we forgive others then his forgiveness depends on an action we must first take, and which, in turn, gives us the power to earn God’s forgiveness.

What Jesus is saying in Matthew 6:12 is that God makes it possible for us to forgive others. The only true, lasting and eternal forgiveness a human may offer another human is a gift which only God can give. Apart from God, humans are incapable of offering divine forgiveness to another. Just as Corrie Ten Boom found it impossible to humanly forgive her former tormentor, so we, too, are incapable of mustering true forgiveness from within our soul.

God does not wait to see if we will forgive others before he forgives us. If his forgiveness was conditional upon our perfect forgiveness of others, then no human would ever forgive others. His forgiveness is conditioned and based on his goodness, not our own. His forgiveness is given to us by his grace, not because of any action or behavior we can humanly produce.

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

While suffering the most excruciating death any human could ever experience, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). But surely those who beat and tortured him, those who nailed him to the cross, and those who insulted and cursed him as he hung dying, knew what they were doing. What did Jesus mean?

I believe that Jesus was saying that they had no idea that they were actually taking the life of God the Son, in the flesh, their own Creator, the second Person of the triune Godhead. Jesus knew that many humans had some responsibility for killing him. Yet Jesus was clearly stating that God’s forgiveness does not depend on human abilities. God’s forgiveness is unconditional—no matter how much culpability you or I may have.

That’s why you and I cannot give divine forgiveness to another human, apart from God’s grace. We cannot give what we do not possess.

We cannot participate in God’s forgiveness unless we have first accepted his grace, which itself entails an acceptance and even a surrender on our part—a realization that we do not have what it takes to forgive others, or for that matter, ourselves.

God’s limitless love means that his forgiveness is inclusive, rather than exclusive. It’s not just for people who have all their doctrinal ducks lined up, or who memorize the right creed, say the right prayer or sing the right tune.

God’s forgiveness breaks the chain of an eye for an eye, by transforming our pain. If our pain is not transformed by God’s grace, then we will transmit that pain. Will we, apart from God’s grace, be consumed by the pain of what we have suffered, and it will be manifested as hatred and vengeance.

There is no question that God gave Corrie Ten Boom the gift of his forgiveness, and he did so because she came to the end of her rope. She tried to forgive, but realized that she could not bring herself to forgive by her own strength.

The Holocaust teaches us that no human remedy—no religion—no rituals—no penance—no human atonement—is enough to bring us to God.

Only God can do that. Only God can give us forgiveness. It takes God to forgive the evils of The Holocaust—and he has. It happened on the cross of Christ.

It is only by God’s grace that the Holocaust can be redeemed and forgiven. ❑

4. Ibid., p. 49.
5. Ibid., p. 284.