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## AFTER BABEL FAITH BEYOND FACTIONS

BY BRAD JERSAK



# AFTER BABEL: FAITH BEYOND FACTIONS

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*A massive diversity and hostile polarization exist in our world. The world has become more insular, closing ranks around myriad forms of identity. Many take sides irrationally and when some fact or new data contradicts the worldview that defines and confines them, that information is rejected and recast to fit their indoctrination so that “their side” is always right.*

—Greg Albrecht

*Now the works of the flesh are obvious. They are such things as ... hostilities, strife, jealousy, bursts of rage, selfish ambition, factiousness, divisions, moods of envy, ... I told you before, and I tell you again: people who do such things will not inherit God's kingdom.*

—Galatians 5:19-21 (NTE)

**F**actions. Ever since humanity first splintered at the tower of Babel, humanity has known the reality and dilemma of *factions*. Amid the apostle Paul's dire warnings against the “works of the flesh” that endanger God's people, “factions and divisions” are all too familiar to this day. Whether we're talking politics, religion or ideology, *factions* so permeate our society that “culture wars” have been normalized — a given.

And frankly, they're killing us.

What are *factions*? Factions are defined as

aggressively partisan and schismatic behavior across the socio-political spectrum. Factions frame the world in us-them, in-out binaries. Factions demand that we use labels and follow scripts that set us against “the other.” Factions erect razor-wire fences of hostility against ready-made enemies.

Factions say, “Either you're with us or against us.” Factions take sides, build camps and exclude “the other” as a dangerous contagion to be removed.

Indeed, harnessed to *factionalism* are no less than eight of the infractions in Paul's list of *the works of the flesh* in Galatians 5:20-21. Hostilities, strife, jealousy, bursts of rage, selfish ambition,

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factiousness, divisions and envy. Yes, that's factionalism.

For Paul, the factious are fleshly and will not inherit God's kingdom. That's a big ouch! And he's not talking to outsiders. He's addressing Christ-followers. He's using intense rhetoric to emphasize

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the destructive power of divisions and tribalism even within the Body of Christ. He sets those eight deadly sins alongside and in league with the “big sins” like worshiping idols, attending orgies and practicing sorcery. And yet somehow, they’ve become acceptable to and even define so much of what is popularly accepted as religion.

proudly! Thus, sectarian religious clubs institutionalized, branded and advertised their superiority over “the other”!

In their pastoral letters, Paul, John and James all condemn factionalism. To them, factions are not only *fleshly* – they are also an embedded feature of *the world system* that is opposed to Christ.

Yet far from fleeing that system, remarkably, God’s people have embraced the worldly factions with religious conviction. We’ve identified ourselves with and on the us-them, left-right spectrum as rigorously as any Christian doctrine.

Political parties (e.g. Republican vs. Democrat) become factions the moment they use the label to identify “the other” as an enemy. Social movements (e.g. Progressive vs. Conservative) become factions when they seek to exclude and silence “the other.” And it seems we completely capitulate to the world system when we readily classify ourselves and everyone else as “right” or “left.” That’s the world. That’s the flesh. That’s factionalism. And for Paul, worldly factions and life in the Spirit are different kingdoms.

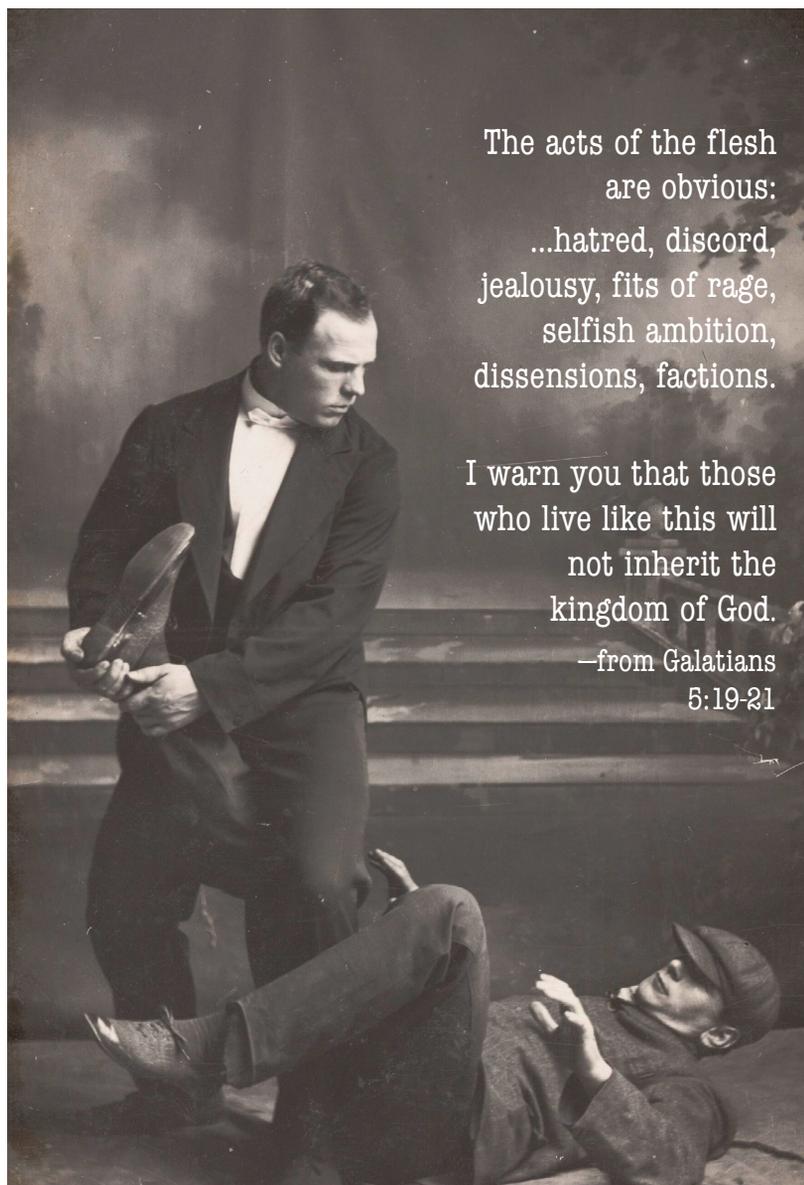
By now, I hope you’re asking, “What’s the good news?!” Fear not, I’m almost there. But the news gets far worse before it improves.

***When we confuse some spectrum script, partisan policy or left-right ideology with the gospel, we’ve lost the good news.***

For example, I’ve discovered I can quote the words of Christ directly without any commentary and be labeled “right” or “left.” When I cite the biblical prophets verbatim, I’m dismissed as being “political,”

complete with a party label.

In other words, the spectrum is now retroactively labeling the Bible and even Jesus as an opposing faction AND/OR proclaiming their socio-political platform as the gospel, sometimes in Jesus’ name. And that’s how factions fashion idols that displace the Lion and the Lamb with the donkey and the elephant.



The acts of the flesh  
are obvious:

...hatred, discord,  
jealousy, fits of rage,  
selfish ambition,  
dissensions, factions.

I warn you that those  
who live like this will  
not inherit the  
kingdom of God.

—from Galatians  
5:19-21

Even though Christ expressed a desire and issued a commandment – that we would love one another and be one as he and his Father are one – what happened? Splits and schisms led to quarreling movements and the proliferation of tens of thousands of denominations. We’ve contrived no end of doctrinal *isms* as battlegrounds. Factions. On purpose! Even

My son, Justice, has seen through this lie and done his name proud by pushing back. In his words:

*“We need to break free from this new form of violent groupthink. I see society weaponizing shame as an instrument of control, placing peer pressure on each other to conform blindly to whatever the current popular belief, stance or opinion is.”*

*“We have simply swapped one toxic system for another and it has pushed society into a deeper state of anxiety and close-mindedness. I spit in the face of this toxic system. I’m leaving the matrix forever and taking back my freedom.”*

So, is there good news? Well, Christ’s words, *believe the good news follows repent*. And what would *repent* look like for 21<sup>st</sup>-

century citizens who find themselves breathing the fake news of factionalism every day?

## REPENT OF THE FLESH

Identify the fleshly attitudes and impulses that hook you into fear or hatred of the other. Paul helps us here: where my heart clings to bitterness, resentment and judgment of “the other,” I can surrender those commitments (for that is what they are) to Christ and welcome the Spirit of forgiveness, reconciliation and kindness. I can welcome “the other” by seeking common ground and seeing their best qualities.

## REPENT OF THE WORLD

Transcend the ever-shifting left-right assumptions and political propaganda wherever it demonizes “the other” and demands you do the same. Break down walls of mistrust and open up tables of fellowship with those the party system despises and dehumanizes. Okay, I’ll say it: how many hours do we give to divisive propaganda, talk radio or cable channels? If Galatians 5 is correct, then flooding our souls with us-them “news” outrage for entertainment is no less toxic than feeding our minds with images of violence or sexuality.

Jesus might put it more dramatically: it’s better

to pluck out your eye than enter *Gehenna* with eyes glued to the TV screen.

## BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS

Finally, focus on *whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things* (Philippians 4:8). And we know that factions are not in that list.

*“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable if anything is excellent or praiseworthy. think about such things” —Philippians 4:8*

Will we be Spirit-people or flesh-people? Could we follow the Jesus Way and raise our eyes and our standards to positive engagement in our communities? And right where animosity normally flares, Christ calls us to be the light of the world (Matthew 5:14), ministers of reconciliation who befriend “the other.”

Sometimes, God initiates our repentance and belief in good news through “the other,” the supposed enemy, as you see in the parable of the Good Samaritan who loved the stranger as a neighbor and brother.

Earlier this year, my wife and I experienced a series of trials. I didn’t publicize them on social media, but I received a direct message through one of my Muslim friends on Facebook — a brief, kind connection. He said, “My brother, I don’t know what’s happening in your life, but as I think of you, it feels to me that something is ‘off.’ But I want you to know that I’m praying for you and your family.”

And with that small act of compassion, I could once again repent of factionalism and believe the good news of reconciliation! Is there an estranged “other” in your life or community, waiting for an encouraging word? Let’s transcend the spectrum and reach out in love. □

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