

CWRmagazine

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



Remembering 9-11 — 15 Years Later —

What Others Are Saying...



CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

Whose Image Is on the Coin?

Thanks for the cover story in the Summer 2016 issue, *Whose Image Is on the Coin? Unholy Alliance of Religion and Politics*, by Greg Albrecht. I get really tired of these analysts telling us how to vote...and all the mud-slinging by the candidates and their supporters. It's crazy what goes on every four years in the United States! Thanks for giving us this balanced perspective. God is not a Republican or Democrat—He came to save the whole world and not just Christians.

Colorado

Because He First Loved Us

This article by Lauren Larkin was so helpful to me. I needed to be reminded that even in our worst moments, God loves us anyway. Deeply understanding how much God loves us helps us see others differently as we let the love of Christ flow through us. Thanks for this great reminder from 1 John 4: "If God so loved us, we ought to love one another...we love because he first loved us."

North Carolina

Father Forgive Us

In "Father Forgive Us" Brian Zahnd indicates that President Barak Obama says mass violence does not happen in other advanced countries and then Mr. Zahnd indicates that "he is right." This is untrue. Mass violence does happen in other countries and the rate of mass violence in the United States is not that much different than it is in numerous other countries. We also know that our freedom of the press reports all mass murders while some countries may be able to cover up horrendous crimes and thus would not be in the statistics.

Mr. Zahnd needs to give some thought

to what Hitler, Chairman Mao, Stalin and the Khmer Rouge did before saying that mass violence doesn't exist in other advanced countries. Hitler and the Germans massacred millions of Russian civilians while invading Russia in WW II, Stalin used millions of Russian citizens as slaves in order to build his empire, and the Khmer Rouge murdered millions. Germany was an advanced country that came close to winning WW II had it not been for America's "capacity for violence."

I love Greg Albrecht and all you people at CWR/PTM. To me you are a true gift from God. I have always enjoyed the CWR Audio and communication I have with you, including the CWR magazine. I just think Mr. Zahnd is way off base in his statements and conclusions.

Texas

• Though we do not state our intent overtly, our general policy is to avoid political commentary, particularly when we or an author we may print seems to take a political position rather than one which is more Christ-centered. Many issues can divide Christ-followers needlessly—in Romans 14 Paul addressed theological differences with practical consequences (vegetarians and non-vegetarians as well as those who regarded a "day" as more sacred than another while others regarded every day alike). Paul urges acceptance and tolerance rather than out-of-hand condemnation, for such judgments divide. We would all be well advised to carefully consider the conclusions in Romans 14 about how we should avoid causing anyone to stumble, for Christ-followers have a wide freedom in taking different positions on peripheral issues, as long as they do not condemn those who do not conform.

We do not believe Brian Zahnd meant to condemn any group of individuals, for indeed, his primary launching point was racism and hatred—even so his remarks might be seen as a proposal that would hold our nation to a higher standard than others,

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and therein is another problem. We may talk about how Christ-followers should look or behave, but there is no country on earth that is a completely Christ-following nation. To suggest that Americans are most culpable of violence is to suggest that we ignore (as you mention) the horrific slaughter of millions of people in Europe and Asia at the hands of violence-obsessed despots.

CWR Audio

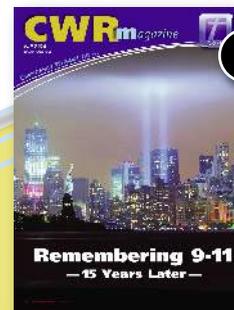
Greg Albrecht has responded with personal answers to so many of our emails over many years—all during that time we have been attempting to find a church here in the UK. We have been to so many churches it seems like we have tried every denomination. After so many negative experiences we are emotionally and spiritually exhausted. Now we are coming back to your weekly sermons—CWR Audio at www.ptm.org. Thanks to all the staff at CWR/PTM for the wonderful Christ-centered work you are doing—the books, articles, magazines, sermons and other resources.

United Kingdom

A More Christlike God

I loved the book *A More Christlike God* by Brad Jersak. It has answered so many questions. It's like a fresh drink of water after a long run. I have read it three times and I'm now reading it for the fourth time! Your ministry makes life worth living...the Jesus Way.

Missouri



Cover Story

From which side of the Cross will we commemorate 9-11? Shall we vigorously join those who will remember 9-11 with new resolutions about vengeance? What about Jesus' direction to "turn the other cheek"? Jesus articulated a way of life that for the past two thousand years has astounded and confused those who seek to follow him.

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Remembering 9-11



— 15 Years Later —

The images are etched in our minds—a commercial airplane, in slow motion, on a collision course with, and then finally crashing into the World Trade Center in New York. Then in what may have seemed at first to be a replay, a second plane. Glued to our televisions, we saw smoke and explosions and people jumping, out of desperation, from inconceivable heights.

Many of us remember exactly where we were when we first heard and saw the unspeakable and unbelievable events of 9-

11-01. As Christ-followers, on 9-11-16, how shall we remember and observe the 15th anniversary of the horrific, abominable events of 9-11-01?

- Shall our military rattle its sabers on 9-11 by flooding the skies with the most advanced weapons of war, to assure those we believe to be our enemies as well as ourselves of our awesome superiority?

- Shall our churches and temples and synagogues remember 9-11 with the singing of patriotic songs, flag waving and video presentations encouraging us to ultimately trust in the power of our “emperor” to wage war?

- Shall we vigorously join those who will remember 9-11 with new resolutions about vengeance and retaliation?

You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for an eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not

...Jesus articulated a way of life that for the past two thousand years has astounded and confused those who seek to follow him.

resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from



by Greg Albrecht

PHOTO BY SONGQUAN DENG/123RF STOCK PHOTOS



Nighttime New York City skyline with “The Tribute in Light” two vertical columns of light in remembrance of the September 11 attacks.

the one who wants to borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.—Matthew 5:38-48.



In this and other passages in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) Jesus articulated a way of life that for the past two thousand years has astounded and confused those

who seek to follow him. The non-violent teaching of the *Jesus Way* makes little if any sense to a world dominated (as it was in Jesus’ day) by a lethal, oppressive combination of warfare and violence by governments and by the tyranny of fear-based religion. The non-violent teaching of Jesus, modeled in and through his own life and death, is part of the revolutionary manifesto of the kingdom of heaven—a truly different kind of a kingdom.

Many twist the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount so that they interpret his teachings as intending an even more strict observance of the law than had been the case in the old covenant. But the force of what Jesus is saying is that since it is impossible to become perfect by observing the law or any law, he is proclaiming and introducing a better way, the *Jesus Way*.

From which side of the Cross will we commemorate and observe 9-11? ... Sadly, much of institutionalized Christendom today is on the violent side of the Cross—the wrong side for a Christ-follower.

The truly perfect, impossible-for-any-human-to-ever-dream-of *Jesus Way* illustrates the impossibility of pleasing and appeasing God via efforts and deeds, and that “now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known...This righteousness is given through

As Christ-followers we are left to struggle with the massive gulf between the unworkable, impractical and nonsensical grace of God, his peace and true rest in Christ, and our own survival.

faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3:21-22).

In these immortal teachings of non-violence taught in Matthew 5:38-48, Jesus is pointing to the new way, the *Jesus Way*, to which the entire world is invited through his Cross. The *Jesus Way* offers the

and venom resulting in the torture and crucifixion of Jesus? Or, shall we observe 9-11 from a Christ-centered perspective, from his non-violent side of the Cross, by turning the other cheek and returning good for evil? Will the followers of Jesus join with him and ask “Father, forgive them”?

Sadly, much of institutionalized Christendom today is on the violent side of the Cross—the wrong side for a Christ-follower. Early Christians were devoted to non-violence:

“Everybody knows what Jesus taught except, it seems, Christians. Is it possible,” said Gandhi, “to read through the Sermon on the Mount and not come away believing in non-violent resistance?” —Mahatma Gandhi

What man can serve as the executioner of his brother when God refused to execute those guilty of the death of his Son? After that acquittal, there is no crime on earth, no form of aggression, that can justify a person deliberately taking the life of another.

Pacifism was such a characteristic of the early church that a pagan prince, the Roman Celsus, warned that if everybody became Christian, it would spell disaster for Rome—for the empire would be without military defense! According to church historian Will Bausch, there is no clear evidence of Christians serving for the first century and a half of our faith. If they had been in the army, they left after baptism. A partial reason was that a Christian soldier might be

forced to engage in emperor worship, but the spilling of blood was predominant. Tertullian notes that a Christian would rather be killed than kill.

*Cyprian, Arnobius, Hippolytus and other church fathers insisted that a soldier must refuse to kill (Brennan Manning, *The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus* pages 93-94).*

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “Everybody knows what Jesus taught except, it seems, Christians. Is it possible,” said Gandhi, “to read through the Sermon on the Mount and not come away believing in non-violent resistance?”

Most of the major denominations of Christendom teach that there are “just wars” when it is preferable to kill

others rather than be killed. On its face, this seems to be the precise wisdom encouraged by the tongue-in-cheek maxim, “Do unto others before they do unto you.”

Here are the words of Walter Wink, in his book titled *Engaging the Powers*:

Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of our modern world.... Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It is what works. It is inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts.... The threat of violence, it is believed, is alone able to deter aggressors.... We learned to trust the Bomb to grant us peace.... It, and not Christianity, is the real religion of America (page 13).

The God whom Jesus reveals refrains from all forms of reprisal



life of Jesus, our risen Lord, in those who believe and trust in him. The non-violent *Jesus Way* does not return violence for violence, but rather, the *Jesus Way* is the mind and heart of Jesus loving its enemies and turning the other cheek.

Remembering 9-11...From Which Side of the Cross?

From which side of the Cross will we commemorate and observe 9-11? Shall we observe 9-11 from the violent side of the Cross that poured out hatred

and demands no victims. God does not endorse holy wars or just wars or religions of violence (page 149).

The fact that many major Christian denominations allow

extended and offered forgiveness instead of retribution and retaliation.

Indeed, the mere idea of turning the other cheek appears to most humans to be

our world is indeed a matter of the *survival of the fittest*. Survival on the macro scale means that nations with the biggest armies and most sophisticated weapons will be

Twain imagines a white-robed messenger coming down and, by repeating and rephrasing their requests, illustrating the idiocy of what the soldiers were actually asking God to do.

for warfare, and beyond that some even seem to encourage and glorify warfare, is no surprise, because violence is and always has been one of the primary products of Christ-less religion.

But, as he did with so many of our human values, Jesus flipped that value didn't he? Jesus voluntarily allowed himself to be killed rather than to kill.

Jesus didn't seek to intimidate those who would express hatred and violence toward him by arming the disciples with the best weapons available at that time. In Matthew 26:51, Jesus told one of his disciples, companions and followers, who drew his sword to prevent the arrest of Jesus: "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword."

Jesus didn't believe in peace produced by intimidation via a display of force that would cause his enemies to fear doing harm to him. There is no question that Jesus taught and modeled peace through non-violence.

Gulf Between the Kingdoms of Our World and God's Kingdom

In what is certainly one of the greatest mysteries of God's love and grace, Jesus, revealing the love and grace of the Father,

one of the most ridiculous and illogical teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ. **The knee-jerk response to God's grace and love is that it is impractical and perhaps even impossible.** The immediate response to Jesus' teaching that we pray for our enemies and stop the endless cycle of returning evil for evil is that God's grace does not work.

Pragmatism, one of the guiding philosophies of our Western world, insists that any belief or practice be held to the ultimate test of truth—the test of practical consequences.

Pragmatism is the standard

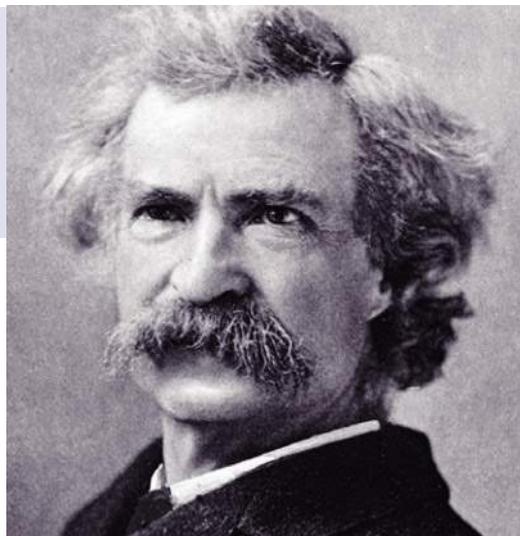
The fact that many major Christian denominations allow for warfare, and beyond that some even seem to encourage and glorify warfare, is no surprise, because violence is and always has been one of the primary products of Christ-less religion.

that rejects any belief whose results do not "work" as we would like them to. Because it doesn't make sense God's grace is either rejected outright or tolerated as a hopelessly idealistic dream.

What is logical and what is practical? It makes perfect sense to realize and reason that

able to "keep the peace" in such a way that they survive.

Pragmatism, as a branch of human wisdom, concludes that peace, as a matter of survival in our world, is only realized and enjoyed when no one, individually or nationally, thinks they can defeat you.



Mark Twain (1835-1910) author of the "The War Prayer." It was so controversial it was withheld from publication until after his death.

Our pragmatic human kingdom debates the grace and love of God's kingdom, depicting non-violence as akin to suicide. The human kingdom cries out, "We can't be doormats in the jungle—if we are to survive, we must understand that there is a law in the jungle in which we live."

Holy wars are woven into the fabric of history—big business religion is often a collaborator with government and the military in massive bloodshed.



Mercenaries engage in the exceptionally-fierce hand to hand combat known as "bad war" during the "Wars of Religion" in Europe. — Engraving by Hans Holbein the Younger, c. early 16th century.

Survival of the fittest means ensuring that any potential prey is impressed and perhaps intimidated by easily perceiving just how fit a potential adversary is. *Survival of the fittest* sounds reasonable. *Survival of the fittest* makes sense.

However, the logical train of thought of *survival of the fittest* is followed by two inevitable, polar-opposite conclusions. The person or nation who accumulates and possesses the biggest, fastest and most powerful weapons will either:

1) be moral and ethical and not use them to brutally subdue others, or

2) give little or no thought to morals and ethics, for the only way to survive is to be the "biggest and baddest."

Of course, history provides many examples of bloodthirsty tyrants who were more powerful than any of their potential adversaries and while they enjoyed peace, all those they subjugated lived in constant fear.

History in fact proves that

...there is a direct correlation to Christ-less, legalistic religion and warfare, and that relationship can be traced down through history

the vast majority of empires were not benevolent, but tyrannical and brutal.

When we consider peace, we are left with one of two options, both of which involve trust:

1) We trust in our own abilities, and the abilities of our country, to provide security, safety and survival so that we might prolong and maximize our lives on this earth. It sounds nice to be concerned about others, but unless we survive we will never be able to be concerned for others. Trust therefore is about human ability to provide security, or...

2) We trust in God to give us life eternal, life of the age to come which transcends the here-and-now suffering and pain that are inevitable as we live out our lives.

Which of the two has actually proven more logical and practical—to trust in human abilities or to trust in God?

The Nexus of Human Power and Divine Grace

The great mystery of non-violence as a way of life is that it is humanly impossible, but in Christ, those things that are humanly impossible are made possible.

- As Christ-followers we are left to ponder the statements of Jesus about those who would be willing to lose their lives and in so doing find, discover and be given life.

- As Christ-followers we are left to struggle with the massive gulf between the unworkable, impractical and nonsensical grace of God, his peace and true rest in Christ, and our own survival.

- As Christ-followers we are left once again at the foot of the Cross, looking upwards in wonderment and in mystery about Jesus, God in the flesh, who allowed himself to be tortured, brutalized, impaled on a cross and crucified—at

the time that didn't seem practical, did it?

"The War Prayer" is, in my opinion, one of the greatest of all the writings of Mark Twain—it was actually withheld from publication until after his death. This essay illustrates the folly of trying to get God to see it our way—the absurdity of thinking that God will support violence of any kind.

Mark Twain of course was the master of satire, sarcasm and irony and "The War Prayer" is no exception. Depicting soldiers gathering for prayer in a church before going out to battle, Twain imagines a white-robed messenger coming down and, by repeating and rephrasing their requests, illustrating the idiocy of what the soldiers were actually asking God to do. Here is "The War Prayer":

O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane



"Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream" was written... just a few years after 59 million lost their lives during World War 2. It quickly became an anti-war song, but beyond that, it is one of the most beautiful love songs ever.

imploing Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it—for our sakes, who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet!

We ask of one who is the Spirit of love and who is the ever-

An Impractical, Strange Dream

Up until 1989, the Berlin Wall divided the city of Berlin and in the aftermath of World War 2 it stood as a stark symbol of the cold war acrimony between Communism and the democracies of the West—in particular that of West Berlin and, as it was then called, West Germany.

As Tom Brokaw stood on top of the Berlin Wall, describing the historic event as the wall was in the process of being torn down, his camera crew recorded school children on the East German side of the Berlin wall, whose families had long been subjected to brutal Communist oppression, as they sang "Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream."

"Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream" was written by Ed McCurdy in 1950, just a few years after 59 million lost their lives during World War 2.

I believe that a real Christian, one in whom Jesus lives, finds warfare and violence repugnant to the name of Jesus, to the reality of Jesus and the dynamic way of life that one leads when one follows Jesus.

of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander through wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst; sport of the sun-flames of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail,

faithful refuge of all those who are sore beset, and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Grant our prayer, O Lord, and thine shall be the praise and honor and glory now and ever, A-men.

Cited from Upton Sinclair, *The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Social Protest Literature of All Time.*



I believe that the grace and love of God, which produce his peace, will eventually put an end to the business of war, to the industry of war...

It quickly became an anti-war song, but beyond that, it is one of the most beautiful love songs ever written.

“Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream” is a dream of the end of hatred and violence—it speaks of a time when mercy trumps judgment, when forgiveness conquers retaliation, when reconciliation overcomes retribution, when God’s love conquers all.

“Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream” has attracted many famous recording artists over the last 60 plus years to “cover” it (when an original song is “covered” it is recorded again by a later artist). Covers of “Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream” include Johnny Cash, Garth Brooks and Joan Baez.

I’ve listened to many of these “covers” but “Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream” by Johnny Cash, recorded in 2002, when he 70 years old, only one year away from his death, is by far and away the most memorable version of all.

His voice, no doubt affected by his age and failing health, was hoarse and raspy—the message of his cover of “Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream” is the tired, haunting and compelling reflection of a man who has been around the block in this sad old world many times, a man who has seen his share of heartache, pain, violence and recrimination.

*Last night I had the strangest dream
I ever dreamed before*

*I dreamed the world had all agreed
To put an end to war
I dreamed I saw a mighty room
The room was filled with men
And the paper they were signing said
They’d never fight again
And when the papers were all signed
And a million copies made
They all joined hands and bowed
their heads
And grateful prayers were prayed
And the people in the streets below
Were dancing round and round
And guns and swords and uniforms
Were scattered on the ground
Last night I had the strangest dream
I ever dreamed before
I dreamed the world had all agreed
To put an end to war.*

- I believe that there is a direct correlation to Christ-less, legalistic religion and warfare, and that relationship can be traced down through history. Holy wars are woven into the fabric of history—big business religion is often a collaborator with government and the military in massive bloodshed.

- I believe that the grace and love of God, which produce his peace, will eventually put an end to the business of war, to the industry of war and to the glorification of war.

- I believe that a real Christian, one in whom Jesus lives, finds warfare and violence repugnant to the name of Jesus, to the reality of Jesus and the dynamic way of life that one leads when one follows Jesus.

Finally, let us consider the words of another vision of the

end of war, when God’s love stands supreme...these words are part the revelation of Jesus Christ given to the Apostle John, recorded in the 21st chapter of the book of Revelation:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

A Prayer for Peace

Our loving heavenly Father, as we remember 9-11 we remember Jesus, who came to stop endless recrimination and revenge of an “eye for an eye.”

As we remember 9-11 we realize that apart from your love and grace any and all human attempts to put an end to war and to bring about a lasting peace are, as recorded in the pages of history, illogical, impractical and fail the very test of pragmatism that so fervently denies and forcibly opposes your grace and peace.

As we remember 9-11 we pray for your peace, your peace that transcends all human knowledge, understanding, technology and implements of warfare. We pray for your peace that enables us to rest in Christ, now and forever more.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. A-men. □



When Towers Fall

by Brad
Jersak



Where Were You?

9-11-2001. Where were you? Remember when you first heard the news of the World Trade Center attacks? Remember your first response—the first things you felt or said? It was a startling episode that traumatized a nation and arrested the attention of the world. The event would become a landmark comparable to Kennedy's assassination or the first lunar landing.

Thanks to the swift and sacrificial service of first responders, immediate estimates that feared 50,000 casualties were dramatically reduced to 2,996 (in all the attacks). Still, such a brazen assault within U.S. borders demanded and inspired a

multitude of analyses and reactions—the tumbling of dominoes still continues. People needed to know who to blame, who to arrest, who to attack. Eventually Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda took responsibility and suffered the

When tragedy strikes and towers fall, we try to console ourselves by finding a devil, a god, a sinner or a king on whom to pin the anguish and chaos.

consequences, but a wide array of other suspects and targets soon followed.

Sadly, what began in many nations as an outpouring of good will toward America was squandered quickly when hawks advising President Bush used the opportunity to invade Iraq (the absence of WMD's

notwithstanding). Meanwhile, Christian fundamentalists gleefully gave God the glory for hurling hijacked planes like javelins to punish America for its social sins.

The conspiracy theorists imagined that the White House

knew and even planned the attacks.

So it goes. When tragedy strikes and towers fall, we try to console ourselves by finding a devil, a god, a sinner or a king on whom to pin the anguish and chaos. Three previous examples come to mind:



9-11 itself was fallout of a prior backstory... of greed, violence and vengeance... Since then, we've witnessed the failed Arab Spring... dictators fell... chaos and civil war; terrorism surged... the rise of ISIS and waves of religious persecution. The common thread has been death and more death...

When Towers Fall

In Luke 13:1-5, Jesus speaks of another fallen tower:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these

that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

We don't know exactly why the tower of Siloam fell—whether it was an earthquake, a construction accident or somehow connected to the violence of Pilate against the Galileans. We do believe the ruins of this tower were discovered inside the City of David, near the old wall and

type of pop-karma that's still in vogue today.

To paraphrase him, "It doesn't work that way. The victims weren't any worse than the survivors and the survivors weren't any more righteous. Sometimes towers just fall and tyrants kill. But look, unless you change course and adopt the *Jesus Way* of peace, every building in this city will fall and everyone will perish at the hands of the Romans."

And so it happened just one generation later.

Second Response

In the case of 9-11, we've mentioned the heroism of the first responders and the initial sympathy of many, if not most nations. But the second



We don't know exactly why the tower of Siloam fell...We know from Jesus' words that popular speculation followed the same "who's to blame?" questions as on 9-11.

near the spring of Siloam, just south of Herod's fortress.¹

Scholars also propose that both tragedies were recent and local enough to impose a need for a public response.

But Jesus reinterprets these events. He denies this type of pop-karma that's still in vogue today.

We know from Jesus' words that popular speculation followed the same "who's to blame?" questions as on 9-11. "Common sense" said that those who died must have been culprits—punished by God and thus blameworthy of some sin. But Jesus reinterprets these events. He denies this

response—at home and abroad—is now history. And in retrospect, it's lamented far more than celebrated.

At home, the American culture of the Wild West prevailed: cowboys in white hats circled the wagons, arming themselves to the teeth to protect their "youngins." Homeland security vowed to protect the borders, but did so at the immense cost of civil liberties.

Overseas, the military industrial complex began its grand and expensive expansion of foreign military bases across the Middle East. Behind the best intentions were real questions about Halliburton and oil, arms deals with

The Tower of Siloam by James Tissot, ca. 1886-1896

Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or do you suppose

warlords, indefinite incarceration without charges, and the use of torture and humiliation of prisoners.

What had we become? How did we so lose ourselves? We reaped exactly what we had sown, down to the last seed—down to the last bullet.

Perhaps Yoda, the Jedi Master was right: “Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.” Could anyone deny it? And where would it lead?

ISIS Versus *Isa*

Fifteen years after 9-11, we see the fallout of the fallen towers. And let the reader understand: 9-11 itself was fallout of a prior backstory of fear and hatred, not just a spontaneous act of aggression. It was but a waypoint on a much longer arc of greed, violence and vengeance.

Since then, we’ve witnessed the failed Arab Spring; dictators fell only to be displaced by chaos and civil war; terrorism surged. And now, the rise of ISIS and waves of religious persecution. The common thread has been death and

In the face of falling towers, whose way will we choose? The way of ISIS: another generation of vengeance and violence—or the way of *Isa*: enemy love and, if necessary, a martyr’s crown.

more death—the multiplication of martyrs.

But not all martyrs are created equal. In the battle of ISIS versus *Isa* (Arabic: Jesus), we see two very different images. ISIS promises the glory of martyrdom to those who strap bombs to their chests and murder crowds—even in



ISIS beheads 21 Christians

...not all martyrs are created equal. In the battle of ISIS versus *Isa* (Arabic: Jesus), we see two very different images. ISIS promises the glory of martyrdom to those who strap bombs to their chests and murder crowds—even in mosques!

mosques! But terrorist suicide-bombings are never glorious and never holy. Indeed, they are not martyrdom at all.

Contrast this to the twenty-

Contrast this to the twenty-one Christian martyrs kneeling on the beach in Libya, serenely praying the Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me”) as each one is beheaded for their faith.

one Christian martyrs kneeling on the beach in Libya, serenely praying the Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me”) as each one is beheaded for their faith.

Most people don’t know why they were dressed in orange jumpsuits. It signified a form of payback—a vindication of the honor for their brothers (incarcerated in orange) who

experienced shame and humiliation in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.

Eye-for-an-eye justice—the same motivation we’ve so often used to justify our vengeful crusades (ancient and modern).

Those Coptic Christians beheaded on the beach are the

true martyrs. They were our brothers in Christ whose irrepressible faith won them a martyr’s crown. They inspire courage across the persecuted

church. Indeed, one of their fellow prisoners was offered freedom since he wasn’t even a Christ-follower. Given the option, he converted to Christ on the spot and died with them.

This too has always been the case. We hear the testimonies: “I want what they have—what no one can take away.”

Perhaps it’s time we take stock ourselves.

In the face of falling towers, whose way will we choose? The way of ISIS: another generation of vengeance and violence—or the way of *Isa*: enemy love and, if necessary, a martyr’s crown.

I can only pray for myself and my own, but pray I must: *Lord, count us worthy to give our lives for you, rather than take the lives of others. By grace alone. Amen.* □

1 George W. Buchanan, *Jesus: The King and his Kingdom* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), pp. 227–230, 238.

5

Stages of Religious Violence

BY GREG ALBRECHT

1 Stage One—Acceptance: Acceptance of the belief that keeping rules, regulations and rituals determines our standing before God is the first stage that actually lays the groundwork for religious violence. Within Christendom, Christ-less religion is the belief that our performance of prescribed rules and rituals is

IT ALL BEGINS WITH THE RELIGIOUS DELUSION TO WHICH HUMANS SO EASILY FALL FOR—THE GLORIFICATION OF HUMAN PERFORMANCE.

the only way to please or appease God, and that our standing with God is dependent upon the quality of our performance. The idea that what we do enhances or improves our standing with God, so that he will love us more because of our performance (more than he would have had we not put forth the effort) is the un-grace of religion. This “philosophy” by definition involves no grace, no relationship, and therefore no Jesus. This “philosophy” is religion—rules and performance. Performance-based religion itself is the foundation that can lead to violence and bloodshed.

2 Stage Two—Immersion: After buying into the belief that performance of rituals and rules determines a loving relationship with God, many become even more deeply involved in religion. They immerse themselves in a religious organization/charismatic teacher whereby their religious progress can be

monitored and directed. Within this religious cocoon and holy huddle, they can be guided by professional religionists and co-religionists who preach and preside over a philosophy of salvation-by-self. Those who practice Stage Two religion are deluded into thinking that God is happy with them because they are doing what the religious organization prescribes. This stage often blurs the distinction between God and human religious authorities.

3 Stage Three—Indoctrination: Those who descend to Stage Three become true believers. Without

reservation those who are enslaved to religion embrace rules of measurement whereby they condemn not only themselves, but everyone else—within their own religious institution and without. Followers of religion who function at Stage Three are fully indoctrinated, becoming religious addicts. Those unfortunates who are imprisoned in this stage begin to accept their religious organization and its religious authorities as “the word of God” and “his only true, anointed prophets/leaders” on earth.

4 Stage Four—Extremism: Religious slaves who experience Stage Four find themselves in some of the deepest cesspools and most foul swamps religion has to offer. Extremism begins to characterize those who are hopelessly in bondage to their particular religious chain gang. In some cases, individuals at this stage blow up abortion clinics while others blow up civilian targets of the “Great Satan.” Those in Stage Four have so totally bought into religion that they have sold

their soul to the devil. Once individuals believe they are acting on behalf of God, physical violence often follows. This violence in the name of God can be turned inward, as in self-inflicted wounds, self-flagellation, self-

**EACH STAGE PROGRESSIVELY
DIMINISHES CRITICAL
FREEDOM AND THOUGHT, AND
BECOMES MORE
LEGALISTICALLY DEMANDING
THAN THE ONE BEFORE.**

starvation, and the like. It can be aimed at fellow religious organizational members as punishment for infractions in the form of beatings, isolation, exposure, and even torture. When the violence is directed toward one's own peers, then it is thought to be "for their own good." Of course, the violence also targets perceived enemies of God on the outside using vandalism, muggings, torture and the severing of body parts. Rules must be obeyed to please God. Punishing rule-breakers pleases God. Stage Four stops short of murder, which leads us to Stage Five.

Stage Five— Fanaticism:

The most toxic and dangerous religious slaves are somewhat like robots, so brainwashed that they will take human life in the name of God. Enemies on religious hit lists may be inside or outside of the organization. Lynchings, honor killings, assassinations, public beheadings and suicide bombings are all too familiar examples of religiously motivated killings. Religious



whom must die. ISIS and Al Qaeda, by all reports, are Stage Five religious organizations. The Judean leaders of the first century A.D. were perhaps a Stage Three organization with some Stage Four elements, with an unfortunate pattern of using some of its followers (the Zealots) who "progressed" into Stage Five when deemed necessary. They were no ISIS or Al Qaeda. But they were no sewing circle either.

The common denominator, the common ingredient present in all five stages is the rejection of God's grace. Each stage progressively

THOSE UNFORTUNATES WHO ARE IMPRISONED IN THIS STAGE BEGIN TO ACCEPT THEIR RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATION AND ITS RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES AS "THE WORD OF GOD" AND "HIS ONLY TRUE, ANOINTED PROPHETS/LEADERS" ON EARTH.

fanatics who experience Stage Five become judges and executioners, and if "martyred" they become a hero to their fellow-extremists. In Stage Five, all pain is projected outward, and the enemy is identified, hated, attacked and annihilated. All inner ugliness is projected onto "sinners"—all hate (especially self loathing) is projected onto "heretics," all of

diminishes critical freedom and thought, and becomes more legalistically demanding than the one before. It all begins with the religious delusion to which humans so easily fall for—the glorification of human performance. All this hatred, bigotry, violence and mayhem begins with religion. □

(Greg Albrecht, *Rejecting Religion—Embracing Grace*, 2010, pg. 133-135)

5

Coming Soon... **THE REMNANT**

By award-winning author, Monte Wolverton

In a totalitarian, post-apocalyptic future where religion is forbidden, a band of concentration-camp escapees treks through a lawless wilderness on a quest for authentic Christianity, only to come face-to-face with an unthinkable dilemma.

Religion That's Lost Its Way

by Lazar Puhalo



While some would like to deny the degree to which suffering, genocides and savage slaughters are so often religion-based, this reality is ultimately undeniable. Religion which has lost its way degrades into a system of primitive tribalism and political ideologies.

It is tragic that, with all the partisan, sectarian and religious-based horror in our world, so many concern themselves with questions of much less significance and with a form of unrealistic, narrow-minded and often brutal moralisms, the meaning of which vanish in the face of the greater tragedies of mankind. Yet, our tribalism leads us to focus on the less

significant, the desire to force others to believe and act as our branch of our religion thinks proper, while offering no deeper consideration

to the actual, profound tragedies that religious fundamentalism daily creates around the world.

Compassion and mercy are the underpinning of all that Christ Jesus taught and did, and still, so many Fundamentalist Christians preach hate and call it love. The demand that civil, secular democratic governments should follow religious doctrines in making legislation, or that law courts be

subverted to religious doctrine rather than to human rights and freedoms, all create local forms of violence toward those whom our religion would make outcasts.

Consider the violence we see inflicted by Fundamentalism on a greater scale. Whether it is Hindu nationalists in India slaughtering their Muslim neighbors for eating beef, Buddhist fundamentalists in Burma persecuting and massacring their Muslim neighbors, Islamic fundamentalists leading the war in Syria/Iraq, or Christian Fundamentalists seeking to extinguish the rights and freedoms of their fellow citizens through violence or

Religion which has lost its way degrades into a system of primitive tribalism and political ideologies... our tribalism leads us to focus on the less significant, the desire to force others to believe and act as our branch of our religion thinks proper...

legislation—it all follows the same spirit.

The spirit of “me-ism” or “we-ism,” of arrogance and self-righteousness, of religio-political ideologies, many of which consider truth and reality to be nefarious conspiracies, are all part of and elemental to the general intolerance and religious violence that manifests itself in smaller ways on local scales, or on a greater scale in the unmentionable horrors of ISIS.

• **Can we not hope** that religions of every form might be delivered out of the dark abyss of Fundamentalism and find some common ground in

the education and acceptance of even those elements of humanity which differ from us?

• **Can we not strive** to gain greater understanding rather than resorting to fear and hatred of those with whom we do not agree and do not understand?

• **Can we not make place** in our hearts to gain greater understanding and knowledge rather than accepting demagogic rants and hiding behind shields of ignorance, prejudice and malice?

• **Can we not at least attempt** to find a place for Christ and his teaching and example in Christianity, and lift it out of the realm of

absolutisms, ideologies and hate misdiagnosed as “love”?

• **Can we not deliver** Christianity from the bondage of Fundamentalism, “CreationISM,” denominational and jurisdictional tribalism, and make a focused effort to **manifest the transforming power of co-suffering love and mercy?**

Let us hope that we might seek such a path. □

Lazar Puhalo is the Abbot of All-Saints Orthodox Monastery (Dewdney, BC) and author of Gehenna: The Nature of Hell According to the Orthodox Church.



CWR_m

ZACK HUNT

COSTLY GRACE

What's So "Christian" About Christianity?

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates is famous for saying, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Those words have become something of a Philosophy 101 cliché since Socrates first uttered them centuries ago, but they're as true today as they were in ancient Greece—and should be just as convicting. Particularly for those of us who call ourselves Christians.

I worry that far too many of us attach the name "Christian" to ourselves without ever really stopping to consider what that name implies or the demands that name should make upon our lives.

For example, we wouldn't call ourselves vegetarians if steak was a regular part of our diet, because vegetarian describes a particular way of life. You can't just believe that vegetables are a good thing. To be a vegetarian, you have to actually live like a vegetarian. And if you eat meat while claiming to be a vegetarian, people will call you out for your gastronomic hypocrisy.

In theory, the name Christian should work the same way. Yet we seem to feel free to call ourselves Christians so long as we simply believe in Jesus and agree to a certain list of beliefs.

But is that really all that Christianity is about? Shouldn't Christianity be more than just a list of beliefs? Shouldn't it also be a particular way of life? And shouldn't that particular way of life resemble the life of the person who gives Christianity its name?

If so, then don't we have an obligation to our integrity and our faith to pause, examine our lives, examine the Church and ask, "What's so Christian about Christianity today?"

How well do we who call ourselves Christians actually resemble the Christ we claim to be following and embodying for the world? Because if we're honest and compare our lives with the life of Jesus, then I'm afraid the answer is not so much—or at least not nearly enough.

Jesus made love the foundation of his ministry. We make doctrinal purity the foundation of our faith and treat love as a nice afterthought.

Jesus called his followers to love their enemies. We call for bombs to be dropped on their heads.

Jesus grew in wisdom. We already know the absolute truth about absolutely everything.

Jesus fellowshipped with sinners. We damn them to hell.

Jesus looked at the big picture of Scripture in order to liberate people from legalism. We take a microscope to Scripture in order to shackle people to rules and dogma.

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." We try to sanctify America through the ballot box.

Jesus blessed the poor, declaring that the kingdom of God belonged to them. We blame the poor for their poverty and treat them as charity cases instead of brothers and sisters.

Jesus made women a central part of his ministry. We bend over backwards to keep them out of ministry.

Jesus said the Kingdom of God is made up of little children. We too often do too little to protect them from systematic abuse at the hands of religious leaders.

Jesus never stopped forgiving. We hold grudges in the name of righteousness.

Jesus died to bring the "wrong" people into the Kingdom. We fight to keep them out.

Don't get me wrong. I'm just as guilty of most of these things as the person sitting next to me in the pew. But it's because of that, my own complicity, that I worry that being a Christian today has come to mean little more than believing in a list of doctrines.

If that is true (if our identity as Christians is primarily found in our heads and not in our lives) then perhaps that is part of the reason why so many of us in the Church today feel persecuted for our Christian faith.

Perhaps, like a vegetarian eating steak, the world recognizes our hypocrisy, the chasm that exists between our lives and the life of Jesus, and we're being called out for living a life that looks almost nothing like what we preach. □

by
Michael
Hardin

the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"? Surely it does, but I wish to focus on this "beginning."

Many have sought to ameliorate this text by claiming that "fear" means "awe" or "reverence." That is fine as far as it goes, but the fact is that when fear is to be part of our response to God, we have not yet known "perfect love."

One searches in vain in the authentic teaching of Jesus that we should fear God. I

have sought to show that the concept of a two-sided or two-faced god (or what I call the Janus-faced god) is the essential view of pagan religion mixing what Rudolf Otto in his book (*The Idea of*

...the concept of a two-sided or two-faced god (or what I call the Janus-faced god) is the essential view of pagan religion...

the Holy) called *fascinans* and *tremendum*.² We are both attracted and repelled by this kind of divinity.

The two-faced god is the god of all archaic religion. It is to be found in the view of God in the Jewish tradition, particularly Deuteronomy, and has been taken up into the Christian tradition due to a failure to distinguish the two distinct streams within apostolic Christianity, viz, that of Christianity oriented to the sacrificial system in Jerusalem and that of writers like Paul or

"FEAR NOT"

The gospel begins with these words from the angels, "Fear not Mary."¹ The risen Christ, the first words to his disciples, "Don't be afraid, there is nothing to fear here." The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews said that Jesus came "to take away the fear of death" and then the writer of first John says that "perfect love casts out fear."

One searches in vain in the authentic teaching of Jesus that we should fear God.

The same word that is used for casting out of fear is also used for casting out demons. God's perfect love casts out all of our fears. The fear of punishment, the fear of hell, the fear that God is somehow out to get us, the fear that somehow we're not going to be good enough, the fear that we

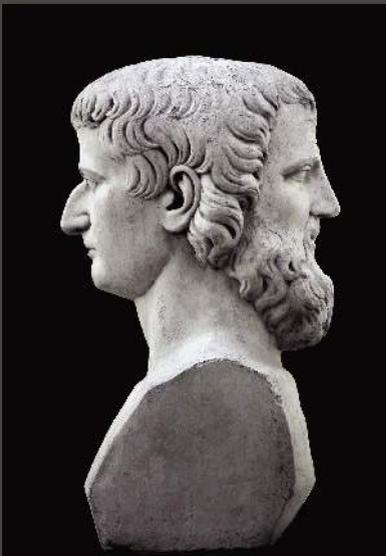
are not going to make it. The fact is that we live in a universe where, from God's perspective, fear has been cast out of heaven like lightning.

We no longer have to fear death or dying because we believe in a God of life, a God of hope, a God who brings resurrection, who will bring wholeness and a new creation that will be so extraordinary that words cannot describe it. And that is our hope!

The words above were part of a sermonette I gave and I was

honored to have these be the final words of the documentary *Hellbound*? These words were not meant as some form of Pollyannaish tripe, or some utopian dream, but in fact as gospel.

Is it not the case that Scripture says that "the fear of



The two-faced god is the god of all archaic religion...and has been taken up into the Christian tradition due to a failure to distinguish the two distinct streams within apostolic Christianity...



the evangelist of the Fourth Gospel.

So it is that Christianity, canonizing both streams has brought back into the mix the

...it is only when we can wrap our minds around “perfect love” that we will lose not just fear of God but also fear of the other, whether friend or enemy.

concept of the *tremendum* or the fear of God and has worked this out in its doctrines of double-predestination, penal atonement and views of punishment in the afterlife. In short, there is a historical explanation as to the where, how and why the gospel was “corrupted.”

Authentic Christianity heeding the exposure and deconstruction of this Janus-faced god in certain New Testament writers (and certain Jewish scriptural traditions) has always been a part of historic Christianity. Today it is becoming the singular point around which we are discovering that the God of the gospel is not two-faced but is singularly Love.

While there is a virtual tsunami of literature in the last century that deconstructs this archaic religious view imported back into Christianity, it has barely filtered down into the

mainstream church or the person in the pew. This is primarily due to the way the Bible has been understood as a divine communiqué or

telegram and the displacement of a Jesus centered view of the divine. While much work remains to be done, enough has been done in biblical and theological studies to challenge the hegemony of the Bible as a

As we come to know the Abba of Jesus, we will also know the power of Love, a Love that permeates all our relationships and brings real healing...

“perfect” text, and especially that of a harmonizing or “flat” rendering of Scripture.

The church of the 21st century will take full advantage of the shift that is occurring as we wean ourselves from any notion that God is to be feared, for it is only when we can wrap our minds around “perfect love” that we will lose not just fear of God but also fear of the other, whether friend or enemy.

As we come to know the

Abba of Jesus, we will also know the power of Love, a Love that permeates all our relationships and brings real healing, reconciliation and alone is the true Power of the Gospel.

The implication is that we must rethink all of our doctrines of revelation, Scripture, the Trinity, Jesus, the Gospel and ethics and spirituality.

By so doing we may find ourselves converted not to religion but to the authentic Life found in God, poured out by the Father in the sending of

the Son and the Spirit. Thus, we will be the community that lives in love and so bears witness in our life together to the gospel. □

1. Luke 1:30, KJV
2. Michael Hardin, *The Jesus Driven Life* (Lancaster: JDL Press, 2013), second edition.

Michael Hardin and his wife, Lorri, are directors of PreachingPeace.org. He is the author of The Jesus-Driven Life and co-edited Stricken by God? with Brad Jersak.



CWRm

CINDY BRANDT

Raising Children With Fearless Faith

I was a morbidly fearful child. I was also a highly literate child, consuming Chinese folk stories before my school years. Some were harmless tales teaching moral character, but many recounted ancient myths of hell. In Chinese folk religion, hell consisted of 18 levels containing specific tortures for corresponding sins. The visual images of hell I saw in picture books as a young girl impact me to this day. I was terrified.

Later, my parents sent me to a Christian school started by western missionaries. I learned of the Jesus who could save me from hell. It was a no-brainer for me. I believed swiftly because I was deathly afraid of hell.

I have told this testimony many times while growing up in the Christian world. As an ice-breaker to my testimony, I'd say, "I accepted Jesus because I didn't want to go to hell!" People would smile and nod with approval at my child-like faith. How did nobody tell me it was not funny?

I would learn there was more to the Christian life than escaping hell, but when you begin a relationship with God based on fear, it takes years to unlearn the punitive God and receive the heart of the gospel of grace.

Most systems of Christianity contain a doctrine of divine judgment, although the particulars vary widely. Good parenting tells us we shouldn't shy away from difficult truths. The problem is—children don't have the emotional maturity to process belief in the necessity of judgment by a loving God. So they panic and retreat into fear. To coax them out of their distress we comfort them: "It's okay, Jesus will save you, just believe in Jesus."

And so it begins—the long-term invisible baggage of fear that has them gripping for Jesus. That genesis of relationship with a loving God is a child's nightmare.

If we are really honest, we plant fear into our children's hearts because we have not yet uprooted fear from our hearts. We want our children *saved* because we're still afraid of what happens if they aren't.

Raising our children un-fundamentalist means excavating our own deep fears. Despite our Christian traditions of heaven and hell, the afterlife remains a mystery. Telling children we know for sure what will happen is dishonest and fundamentalist. It is bad religion to scare children into conversion and to dictate their morality from the basis of fear.

As a young convert, I believed I was safe from hell because of Jesus, yet I remained terrified—my parents were not yet Christians. I spent agonizing hours praying for them—that no accident would take their lives before conversion. The weight of the eternal damnation of my loved ones was far too heavy for my young, frail shoulders to carry.

Our children's desire to follow God should not come from a fear for their eternal destiny. Spiritual security for our kids isn't assurance they'll escape a fiery doom—it's rooting them in the love of God and a safe spiritual environment.

Hard conversations about suffering, judgment and injustice will come when the child is old enough to tackle these issues. But their choices can be from a place of trust in a good God, rather than fear. Hopefully, they'll be compelled by the love they witness in their parents, their community and the acts of God in the world.

I will not repeat these mistakes with my children. I will not be afraid for their salvation. I will channel my childhood fears into a force of love for them, in the best ways I know how. And they will know I have only ever been able to love them as I do because the God who loves them also loves me.

I wish I knew then what I know now. I wish I had known and believed God loves everyone, that we don't know for sure what happens after death, but that choosing love trumps fear.

And I hope you know: God loves you without condition. God will never leave your side. God is like the mother hen gathering her chicks. God is like the forgiving father welcoming his prodigal son. God cares beyond what you can imagine. *God loves you!* □

by Ron Benson

We took an alternate route with our bikes because we wanted to push ourselves. The road was a mile out of our way, with no pavement, but it made for a good proving ground for our physical ability.

Not that I had much physical ability. I was out of shape. But I wanted to get healthier, so Jon and I took to riding our bikes around our rural community. On this particular day, we chose a new route.

The ride was hard enough. I kept concentrating on the



Can Religion Help With Stress?

it out of the sandpit and away from the dogs. I survived. I never went past that house again. But the feeling of stress has never left me.

Stress = Being Human

Stress is as common as life itself. It's not possible to remove all stress from our lives, since life involves experiences and situations that can produce

stress. In fact, stress is important to the way we function.

Some stress can be a little fun (read *roller coaster*).

Dr. Michael Peterson, Professor and Department Chair in Behavioral Health & Nutrition at the University of Delaware, defines stress simply: "Stress is often our negative

The ride was hard enough. I kept concentrating on the rewards: svelte body, new vigor, and maybe a hot fudge sundae if I put in the miles... And then there were dogs. Rottweilers. Big. Three of them.

rewards: svelte body, new vigor, and maybe a hot fudge sundae if I put in the miles. So I pedaled away, pushing myself to accomplish my goals. There was stress, but it was a happy stress.

And then there were dogs. Rottweilers. Big. Three of them. They came charging at Jon and me from an isolated farmhouse. The dogs were in better shape than I, and they were gaining on me. Jon was in better shape than I, too, and he put some distance between himself and the dogs. For me,

that distance was shrinking.

The canines were yapping at my rear tire, and I was pounding the pedals as hard as I thought I could. Stress compounded.

And then I hit the sand.

The road turned into a soft, shifty surface and my tires sunk. The dogs nipped at my heels. My heart was exploding. I pumped that bike with everything I had, pushing my legs beyond any level of exertion I'd ever known, trying to extricate my bike from the sandy bog and get away from the angry hounds. Stress reached critical proportions.

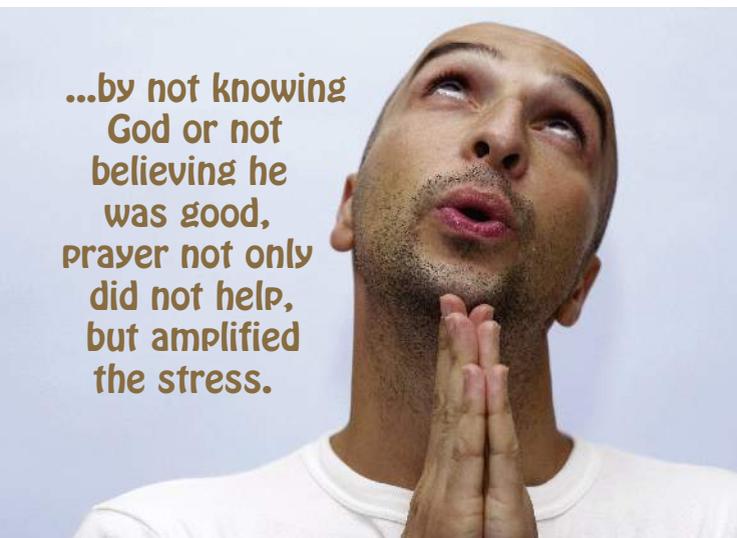
Somehow, some way, I made

emotional reaction to life events. Stress management is really life management." Stress comes with being human.¹

Stress that gets unmanageable and harmful, however,



...by not knowing God or not believing he was good, prayer not only did not help, but amplified the stress.



You see where this is going. Rather than relieving stress, the push to perform more and more tasks for Jesus in order to make him happy with us can lead us right into the stress we're trying to avoid.

our management of stress?

My personal experience as a pastor for over thirty years suggests that, while some

religious practices may indeed offer relief, people can be fooled into thinking that the harder they "practice" religion the better off they will be. We may be convinced that doing the right things, joining the right ministries, spending more time in Bible study, prayer, church attendance, meetings, and working hard to make more and more sacrifices for

seize the opportunity to gain from this scenario. They can offer stress relief through any number of legalistic activities, and when those activities create more stress instead, they can guilt us into thinking it's our fault. What do they offer to help? More legalistic activities.

The research is not conclusive about whether religious practice helps or compounds stress. Many clinical observers find that religious practice has a beneficial effect on stress. Other studies, however, show the opposite. What's going on? How could one study show that religion helps stress management and another study shows the opposite?

Polar Opposite Results

Behavioral scientists at Baylor University set out to understand how both of these results could be true. The research dealt specifically with prayer, since that spiritual practice seems especially useful when it comes to stressful living. The goal of the study was to find out why some people found prayer to relieve stress and others found prayer to magnify stress.³

The answer hinged on how the individual perceived God and their relationship with him. The study used the word *attachment*.

If a subject in the study perceived that they had an attachment with God that was real and they were confident of

becomes a problem. When we feel like our lives are out of control, or when we experience minimal return for large expenditures of effort, we can get "stressed-out"—reaching the limits of our abilities to cope.

Stress takes a toll. 77% of people say that stress causes physical symptoms in their lives, and 73% experience psychological symptoms. It is

My personal experience as a pastor...suggests that, while some religious practices may indeed offer relief, people can be fooled into thinking that the harder they "practice" religion the better off they will be.

estimated that the annual costs to employers in stress related health care and missed work approaches 300 billion dollars.²

Lots of information is available that offers remedies for stress. Things like exercise, meditation, hobbies, even riding a bike can help take the steam out of a stressed life. A common perception is that religious experiences such as attending church, observing rituals, practicing spiritual disciplines, and other activities may be healthy stress relievers.

Religion and Stress

What role does religion play in

the cause of religious perfection will alleviate the stress in life. Sure.

You see where this is going. Rather than relieving stress, the push to perform more and more tasks for Jesus in order to make him happy with us can lead us right into the stress we're trying to avoid. Add to that the pressure of doctrinal fear—end-times threats, hell-fire warnings, "you-don't-have-enough-faith" teaching—and you've got a whole pack of angry dogs nipping at your toes, creating more stress than you can imagine.

It's easy to see how abusive and manipulative leaders can

Add to that the pressure of doctrinal fear—end-times threats, hell-fire warnings, “you-don’t-have-enough-faith” teaching—and you’ve got a whole pack of angry dogs nipping at your toes, creating more stress than you can imagine.



that reality, prayer seemed to help with the stress. If, on the other hand, the subjects viewed themselves as detached from God in any way, either by not knowing him or not believing he was good, prayer not only did not help, but amplified the stress.

Let’s say I was riding my bike around my rural neighborhood and I spotted my wonderful dog, Shadow the Cockapoo, jogging toward my rear wheels. Shadow was a warm friendly

The answer is found in learning more and more about the unconditional love of a grace-motivated God and becoming intimately involved with him.

pooch, and never met a soul she did not love. Shadow’s presence during my ride would not have created stress at all; in fact, it would have made my ride more enjoyable. I may even have made a habit of inviting my beloved pet to come along with me on my rides.

What if, however, the dog chasing me is mean, drooling, ferocious, hungry and quite possibly rabid? Be sure I will not be inviting that animal to join me in my routine.

If using animals as an analogy is disturbing, let’s change it up. Let’s talk about the “man behind the door.”

You’ve had a stressful day.

It’s easy to see how abusive and manipulative leaders can seize the opportunity to gain from this scenario... they can guilt us into thinking it’s our fault.

Someone knocks on the door. If you know who the person on the other side of the door is, and delight in your relationship with that person, and if you are looking forward to being with him and enjoy having him around, you’ll be happy to see him and you’ll share a meal and your stress

level will go down because you opened the door.

But if you don’t know who’s knocking, and if you believe that opening that door is either unhelpful or even a little dangerous, the whole idea of there being a person on the other side of that door will not help your stress one little bit. It will magnify it.

Dr. Peterson makes it clear that there are elements of religious experience that can benefit our stressed-out lives. Having caring, understanding people around us, for instance, can provide a respite to the

chaos of our jobs or the stress of dysfunctional families. But he warns that legalistic religion often offers a carrot to the horse of our stress, setting in front of us a prize that we can never seem to obtain. Religion urges us to do more and more things, and offers us little in return.

According to Peterson, the church says: “To attain God’s blessing, you need to master these ‘behaviors,’ but the ‘carrot’ of God’s blessing always seems to be just a little too far ahead of what you’re

...knowing that God is loving and kind, that he cares for us and understands us, and believing that he desires a deep relationship with us will mean that our active participation in our faith can provide substantial help in relieving stress.

able to achieve. When you realize it’s rigged against you, guilt and shame and stress are the result. This can lead someone to question the very existence of God, since the reality never measures up

The whole thing flies against the words of Jesus when he offers rest for our souls. And if the religion we profess means that our stress will be compounded, the idea of that religion bearing the “good news” of the gospel of Jesus is a myth.



The whole thing flies against the words of Jesus when he offers rest for our souls. And if the religion we profess means that our stress will be compounded, the idea of that religion bearing the “good news”

the Baylor study showed is that **our perception of God is critical.** If we simply don't believe in God, or believe that he isn't important to our lives, religious practice is going to do nothing to help with stress. And seeing God as a spiteful, judgmental authority figure will clearly amplify stress.

But knowing that God is loving and kind, that he cares for us and understands us, and believing that he desires a deep relationship with us will mean that our active participation in our faith can provide substantial help in relieving stress.

The answer is found in learning more and more about the unconditional love of a grace-motivated God and becoming intimately involved with him.

If you're tired of the big dogs biting your heels, and if you can't seem to find your way out of the sand pit of stress, get to a place where you can relax in the presence of The God of All Compassion. In the end, grace is the answer to toxic stress. □

1. Quotes taken from personal interview with Dr. Michael Peterson, January 18, 2016.
 2. Source: Statistic Brain Research Institute, American Institute of Stress, NY. Research Date: October 19th, 2015.
 3. Christopher G. Ellison, Matt Bradshaw, Kevin J. Flannelly, Kathleen C. Galek, *Sociology of Religion* 2014, 75:2 208-233.

against the promise.”

But doesn't church provide structure, in the form of rules and regulations, which can reduce stress in our lives?

“Of course,” Dr. Peterson answers. “Religion provides roles and rituals that can give a perception of stability and structure to our lives and reduce stress....

“But so does prison...and you really don't want to live there.” Religion can put bars on our freedom in Christ.

Stress or Rest?

Maybe not always, and perhaps not for everyone, but religion causes stress. And if you're already stressed-out, legalistic religion is not going to help. It's going to make things worse.

of the gospel of Jesus is a myth.

A couple of practical questions spring from this truth.

First, how do you know when your church or religion is making more stress in your life? According to Dr. Peterson, the answer is pretty simple. Ask yourself these questions:

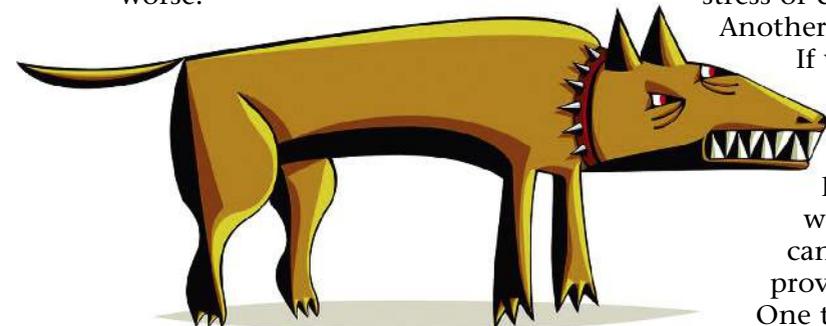
- What is my emotional response to church?
- Do I need church to feel good about God?
- Does church make me uneasy, or frustrated?
- Is there anxiety when I think about church and religious activity?

Your honest answers will reveal whether church attendance is helping with stress or causing it.

Another question:

If we're getting stressed beyond what is healthy, what help can our faith provide?

One thing that



Ron Benson is still afraid of large dogs and legalistic sand traps. He does what he can to steer clear of both whilst pastoring at Grace Christian Fellowship in Bay City, Michigan. You can find more of Ron's writing at ronbenson.net and connect with him on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/ron.benson.16>

The Therapeutic Massage of Prayer

In 2008, stress from a compacted series of tragedies (including many deaths), coupled with my combined sense of personal inadequacy and pastoral responsibility, induced a medical burnout that left me with long-term damage to my nervous system. Symptoms include a reduced tolerance to sustained stress and sensitivity to certain types of stimulation.

Religion plays into this: first, although it's not only a religious problem, when I feel pressured (whether internally or externally) to

When I accept things as they are, and offer my resources to it without trying to manipulate responses or outcomes, I seem to be fine.

“fix” or “manage” something (including God!) as over against “helping” or “serving,” then my relationship to any crisis—such as a congregation (for example) may become like that of a codependent spouse of an alcoholic. I begin to unravel. When I accept things as they are, and offer my resources to it without trying to manipulate responses or outcomes, I seem to be fine.

On the stimulus front, I increasingly found “revivalism” or “renewal” meetings more and more stressful, partly because of overstimulation, but also because of the pressure of the unknown outcome and my responsibility for it:

How many will come forward? Will God ‘show up’? Will people feel like it was a successful meeting? What do I need to “come up with” or generate in order to make this happen?

I led many a meeting like that. In those contexts, if there is pressure for me to be “the man of God” with “God’s power for the hour,” the stress goes through the roof.

In the depths of my burnout, I didn’t even have the trust or energy to compose my own prayers. What was I supposed to say? What was I trying to do? Manage God? Get God to respond? To do my will?

Now I know it’s not everyone’s cup of tea, but this is where I found some prepared prayers very therapeutic—so long as they weren’t shallow and especially if they were simple and beautiful.

This helped me to see occasions where liturgical prayer doesn’t function as ritualistic prisons or legalistic performances. Rather, this was often the only way for me to exit a

panic attack. I needed the Jesus prayer or lorazepam or both.

Other times, I could just let go and enter the ancient prayers that gratefully welcome grace. To my hyper-stressed being, it felt like a passive surrender to God’s healing mercies.

I experienced it as I do a massage. There is a wonderful ritual to massage: right foot, right calf, right hamstring, right hip, then left. Right hand, right arm, right shoulder. Left. Right upper back, lower back. Turn over. And so on. That’s my kind of ritual.

That’s been the liturgical side of therapeutic prayer for me. The Jesus Prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, the Beatitudes, the Creed. Turn over. Psalm 23, Psalm 51, Psalm 103, Psalm 145. I do none of this legalistically. Some days I can only handle or only need my spiritual back rubbed while the legs are fine...it’s as needed, and

I need a lot of grace. Over time, I have regained the strength to balance spontaneous personal prayers with joyous liturgical prayers of grace and mercy.

So too with the services. When I felt the need to drum up some specific response in congregants (whether a big offering, or a crowded altar call or an emotional ministry time) it created a lot of stress about

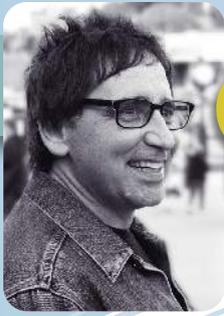


...I could just let go and enter the ancient prayers that gratefully welcome grace. To my hyper-stressed being, it felt like a passive surrender to God’s healing mercies. I experienced it as I do a massage.

who would respond, how they would respond and what God would do.

Instead, I now enjoy seeing the Lord’s table as the pinnacle of the service (as in the ancient church), where we simply extend God’s grace invitation to all. So if I’m in such a service, the invitation is freely given, the grace is freely received—come as you are, come as you will. In that model, at least for me, all the stress is gone. This is especially so where there is no required ritualistic self-loathing or feigned begging. Instead, I am able to approach the table with a grateful heart and open hands to God’s love.

—A former Pastor



George MacDonald's Spiritual Journey (and mine too)

I have never concealed the fact that I regarded George MacDonald as my master; indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote him.—C.S. Lewis

George MacDonald (1824–1905) was a Scottish novelist, poet, preacher and theologian whose writings influenced C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton. MacDonald clearly understood that salvation is not a conferred status, but a **lifelong journey** into the revelation of Christ.

But to be a public theologian and on an ever-evolving spiritual journey rankles the self-appointed gatekeepers of religious certitude. Thus he was regularly (and wrongly) accused of heresy for not toeing the Scottish Calvinism line of his day.

He once received a troubled letter asking why he had lost the “old faith” and embraced supposedly “unorthodox” views. MacDonald’s candid reply is timely and beautiful.

Have you really been reading my books, and at this time ask me what have I lost of the old faith? Much have I rejected of the new, but I have never rejected anything I could keep. At a very early age I had begun to cast them from me; but all the time my faith in Jesus as the Son of the Father of men and the Savior of us all, has been growing. If it were not for the fear of its sounding unkind, I would say that if you had been a disciple of his instead of mine, you would not have mistaken me so much.

Do not suppose that I believe in Jesus because it is said so-and-so in a book. I believe in him because he is himself. The vision of him in that book, and, I trust, his own living power in me, have enabled me to understand him, to look him in the face, as it were, and accept him as my Master and Savior, in following whom I shall come to the rest of the Father’s peace. **The Bible is to me the most precious thing in the world, because it tells me his story.**

But the common theory of the inspiration of the words, instead of the breathing of God’s truth into the hearts and souls of those who wrote it, are in danger of worshiping the letter instead of living in the Spirit, of being idolators of the Bible instead of disciples of Jesus. **It is JESUS who is the Revelation of God. Jesus alone is The Word of God.**

With all sorts of doubt I am familiar, and the result of them is, has been, and will be, a widening of my heart and soul and mind to greater glories of the truth—the truth that is in Jesus—and not in Calvin or Luther or St. Paul or St. John, save as they got it from Him, from whom every simple heart may have it, and can alone get it. You cannot have such proof of the existence of God or the truth

...doubt is the hammer that breaks the windows clouded with human fancies, and lets in the pure light.

of the Gospel story as you can have of a chemical experiment. But the man who will order his way by the word of the Master shall partake of his peace, and shall have in himself a growing conviction that in him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

From your letter it seems that to be assured of my faith would be a help to you. I cannot say I never doubt, nor until I hold the very heart of good as my very own in Him, can I wish not to doubt. **For doubt is the hammer that breaks the windows clouded with human fancies, and lets in the pure light.** But I do say that all my hope, all my joy, all my strength are in the Lord Christ and his Father; that all my theories of life and growth are rooted in him; that his truth is gradually clearing up the mysteries of this world. To Him I belong heart and soul and body, and he may do with me as he will—nay, nay—I pray him to do with me as he wills: for that is my only well-being and freedom. (*George MacDonald: Scotland’s Beloved Storyteller*, M.R. Phillips, 310-311) □

HOUSE of CARDS

by Kevin Miller



Does it Confirm Our Worst Fears About Democracy?

With his hit political drama *House of Cards* now going into its fifth season on Netflix, creator Beau Willimon has found success by doing something writers are warned against—building a story around an unlikeable protagonist. And when it comes to the series' central character, South Carolina politician Frank Underwood,

there's a lot to despise. Not only is Frank unrepentantly self-interested, he's also manipulative, crude, deceptive, treacherous, ruthless and, let's face it, a serial killer.

All of this raises an interesting question: Why would anyone, much less millions of people, use their precious bandwidth to binge-watch a show about such a despicable individual?

When most writers are faced with a potentially disagreeable protagonist, they try to soften the blow by giving the character a “save the cat” moment early in the story, an opportunity to do something virtuous that allows us to see beyond the character's contemptible exterior to the heart of gold within. Willimon will have none of this. As if to stack the deck further (pardon

the pun) against himself, in the opening scene of the first episode, he gives Frank not a “save the cat” moment but rather a “strangle a suffering dog with his bare hands in the middle of the street” moment. Ironically, rather than place Frank beyond

me. Someone who will act, who will do what no one else has the courage to do. Someone who will do the unpleasant thing—the necessary thing.”

The Way It Is—The Way We Wish It Was

More powerful than the content of Frank’s words, however, is the fact he offers them directly to us, the viewers. By breaking the fourth wall, a habit Frank indulges frequently throughout the series, he takes us into his confidence. Frank is about to let us in on a little secret: **There’s the way we wish the world was,**

and then there’s the way it really is.

Frank is going to show us how it is, no matter how disturbing that revelation might be. By coming clean in

just around the corner: the world he inhabits.

Indeed, apart from Frank—and Claire, his wife and partner in crime—one of the most unsettling aspects of *House of Cards* is its bold declaration of what many of us already suspect: *that America is a democracy in name only, that a small group of affluent organizations and individuals shape policy behind the scenes and that the average citizen has little to no influence on the powers that be.* Frank Underwood may be evil, but he didn’t get that way on his own. He is the sociopathic product of a psychopathic system. It might take a village to raise a child, but to get a Frank Underwood, well, that requires a caucus.

Unfortunately, the seedy political underworld revealed in *House of Cards* bears a closer resemblance to reality than we would like to believe. Far from the domain of conspiracy theorists worried about the Illuminati, or Christian fundamentalists concerned about the Antichrist taking over the world, a recent study out of Princeton University, for example, found that, “economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence.”¹ Other qualified observers, such as longtime Congressional staffer Mike Lofgren, author of *The Deep State: The Fall of the Constitution and the Rise of the Shadow Government*, have made similar claims, arguing that America is controlled by “a disconnected, self-serving bureaucracy that is...simply evolving to do what



redemption, the scene endears him to us instead.

Willimon achieves this in part through the words Frank uses to justify his actions.

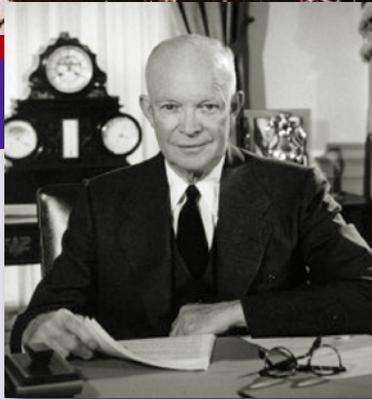
...one of the most unsettling aspects of House of Cards is its bold declaration of what many of us already suspect... that the average citizen has little to no influence on the powers that be.

Frank isn’t a cruel man, or so he claims; he derives no pleasure from the sometimes horrific duties he is tasked to perform. He’s merely a pragmatist, a public servant bent on eliminating “useless suffering,” as he calls it. You might even say he is sacrificing himself—and his conscience—for the public good. As he notes mid-strangle, “Moments like this require someone like

the midst of such a dark moment, Frank indicates that even though we are about to see him cheat, deceive and betray virtually everyone around him, there are two people to whom he will always be faithful: the viewer and himself. He’s also confident that as disagreeable as we may find him, his sins will soon fade in comparison to something far darker that lurks



...with the rise of the military-industrial complex following World War 2, the subsequent Cold War and then the War on Terror, particularly the climate of fear created by the 9-11 attacks...



President Dwight Eisenhower famously warned the U.S. about the "military-industrial complex" in his farewell address.



...certain individuals and organizations in America have seized the opportunity to dismantle this foundation and centralize power in the White House in order to better serve their interests.

it's doing now. That is, to maintain and enhance its own power."²

Art Imitating Life

This is particularly ironic in America, seeing as the genius of the American system was to create a series of checks and balances through the separation

of fear created by the 9-11 attacks, certain individuals and organizations in America have seized the opportunity to dismantle this foundation and centralize power in the White House in order to better serve their interests. From Frank Underwood's perspective, this makes perfect sense. After all, who really wants democracy, those who have power already or those who seek it? What person who has power would want to give it away?

Unfortunately, the seedy political underworld revealed in *House of Cards* bears a closer resemblance to reality than we would like to believe.

of powers—legislative, executive and judicial—in order to prevent too much control from falling into too few hands. However, with the rise of the military-industrial complex following World War 2, the subsequent Cold War and then the War on Terror, particularly the climate

Certainly not Frank. The bad news is, although Frank Underwood is a fictional character, his real life counterparts (minus the serial killer aspect, perhaps) number in the thousands. We don't need *House of Cards* to tell us that. The political landscape in

America has shifted to the point where merely getting through the presidential primaries can run you \$50 million.³ That excludes the 99.9 percent of Americans who either do not possess or are unable to raise that kind of cash. And for those who are able to raise it, as Honoré de Balzac is alleged to have said, "Behind every great fortune, there is a crime."

As a result of this system, getting elected to the highest office in the land requires a completely different set of principles than it does to govern with competence and integrity. One must become a shameless self-promoter, currying favor not so much with the electorate but with the handful of individuals and organizations that have the capacity to fund your campaign. And then, if you succeed, once again, your true

allegiance is not to the people who voted for you—mere pawns in a game where the actual rules are never revealed, much less understood—but to whoever paid your entrance fee. They just made a significant investment in you, and now they expect a healthy return. Altogether, it seems like a system designed to attract the most nakedly ambitious and the least principled among us, hence the arrival of Frank Underwood.

Unlike his real life counterparts, however, at least Frank is willing to reveal the actual rules of the game, and in contrast to the other denizens of this purposely opaque world, merely confessing to his crimes looks like a shining virtue.

In light of this, *House of Cards* could easily lead viewers to a place of cynicism or even despair. What hope do we have if our voices are all but inconsequential? Why participate in the political system at all, much less run for office?

From Cynicism to Hope

Perhaps not surprisingly, the antidote to such skepticism is right there in the title—*House of Cards*. Anyone who has tried to build a literal house of cards knows that the defining feature of such a structure is instability. A bump of the table, a gust of wind, and it all comes crashing down. This seems to be the subtextual message that Brad Willimon is trying to communicate throughout his series. The days may be dark and the deeds evil, but it can't last forever. In the words of Christ, "If Satan

drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?" (Matthew 12:26). By portraying Frank Underwood's rise as a *House of Cards*, rather than reinforcing only the cynicism of those who see through the

Corrupt political or religious mega-structures built on foundations of gluttonous self-seeking will fall. It's just a matter of time...



...we have every reason to hope a more equitable "game" will be waiting for us on the other side. In fact, this seems to be exactly what the author of the book of Revelation seeks to assure us of...

corruption, there comes an inevitability of hope. The worldly system cannot and will not have the last word. Corrupt political or religious mega-structures built on foundations of gluttonous self-seeking will fall. It's just a matter of time.

One need not look far into the real world to see similar

rumblings. Such a collapse may cause considerable pain in the short-term, but if reshuffling the deck makes it harder for cheaters and swindlers like Frank to find a spot at the table, we have every reason to hope a more equitable "game" will be waiting for us on the

other side. In fact, *this seems to be exactly what the author of the book of Revelation seeks to assure us of by the time we see the whore riding the Beast.*

It's not the doomsday of the world *per se*, but of the worldly system in which we find the faithful trodden underfoot. Their day will come, because the light will outlast the darkness no matter how dark it appears right now. And the wrath of the Lamb is not that Christ will interrupt the Frank Underwoods of the world through violent coercion, but rather, that those who dig pits will fall into them (Proverbs 26:27).

Poor Frank. If only he had actually read the Bible rather than merely quoted from it. □

1. Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page (2014). "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens." *Perspectives on Politics* (Vol 12): 564-581, <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=9354310>

2. Elias Isquith (2016). "Controlled by shadow government: Mike Lofgren reveals how top U.S. officials are at the mercy of the 'deep state.'" http://www.salon.com/2016/01/05/controlled_by_shadow_government_mike_lofgren_reveals_how_top_u_s_officials_are_at_the_mercy_of_the_deep_state/.

3. Tory Newmyer, "This is what it costs to run for president" (March 28, 2015). *Fortune*, <http://fortune.com/2015/03/28/campaign-financing>.

Kevin Miller is an author, editor, film critic, screenwriter and director of dramas and documentaries. Kevin produced the movie Hellbound? which was inspired by his editing of Her Gates Will Never Be Shut by Brad Jersak.



CWR_m

BRAD JERSAK

Times of... Refreshing and Restoration

Two months can fly by. Or it can seem like two millennia. I wonder what Peter would say if I time-travelled back to the days just after Pentecost—to the excitement when the Resurrection was just eight weeks prior. To the exhilaration of Pentecost Spirit-wind still blowing you away with strange signs and mass conversions. To the elation of crowds rushing to the Temple to see who had raised the first lame man since Jesus' departure. Maybe they wondered if it was Jesus himself, returning as he promised, just a couple weeks since his ascension.

I wouldn't break the rules of time-travel by sabotaging the apostles' fun and fervor with too much information. I'd only hint at the persistent defiance of the Temple establishment and the forthcoming persecution. I'd say nothing of the fall of this Temple or the manner of Peter's gruesome martyrdom. I'm not there to rain on his parade.

But I must know. Peter, *hypothetically*, this beautiful gospel you're preaching, could it stand the test of time? Would you preach it fifty years from now? Would you still say (in the epistle bearing your name), "The Lord is not slow" in a hundred years? How about a thousand? Would you still preach this:

"Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order **that times of refreshing may come** from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the **period of restoration of all things** about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time" (Acts 3:14-21).

The Peter of Acts 3-4, having beheld the risen Christ and now filled with the Holy Spirit, is so bold before the very Sanhedrin that condemned Christ. But would he buckle at my question? Or would he echo his King, "Oh you of little faith! Be not afraid! He's not just coming at the end of the age. He's WITH you and IN you, now and always, right through to the end of the age!"

In this thought experiment, another time-traveller arrives—a much older but completely vibrant and glorified Peter. Yes, he's even sporting a halo! He too has come from the future, who knows how far? Would he grant me a few spoilers? Would he tell me how I'm seeing it all wrong—that *time* and *telos* (end) are not what they seem? Would he speak of human history as 70x7 millennia? Would he open my earthly mind to a great commission of 100 billion galaxies in God's universal plan? As they say in cyberspace: #mindblown!

If Peter were to show the mercy of self-control and biblical revelation, I believe we can be sure he would say at least this (because this was his beautiful gospel transposed to our era):

"The gospel truly is beautiful, for the Prince of life is alive! His Light breaches the darkness of every event horizon. His love spans far beyond the tired old Hubble's heavens and his mercy has plumbed the metaphysical depths of the deepest hell."

Peter, ever the evangelist (good news proclaimer) would press the point:

"So what? So turn to the Son, return to the Father and be bathed by the Spirit. You don't need to wait another moment for 'times of refreshing.' No striving, no clamoring or clambering. This grace overflows from God's presence right to where you are, wherever you are!"

Ah, so these "times of **refreshing**" are a NOW-word for all who welcome the grace of Jesus Christ! No mere pie-in-the-sky, after we die! Yet Peter does love his "end-times" prophetic promises...never more beautiful than in Acts 3. He would continue:

*"But the **refreshing** is just the firstfruits!"* Of what? *"Listen carefully: the **refreshing** foreshadows the **restoration** of all things."* When will this be? *"When He comes in glory."* But when!?! *"Never mind. Listen: It WILL surely come."*

What will come? *"The Apokatastasis: The Restoration. Of. All. Things."*

All things. Oh my. That would be beautiful. "Yes. It is." □

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Dead Works Christ-less religion is filled with "Dead Works" which are the very antithesis of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Following Jesus involves leaving "Dead Works" behind. Week of Oct. 23

How Much is Enough? Join us as we consider the wisdom behind G.K. Chesterton's observation, "There are two ways to get enough: one is to continue to accumulate more and more; the other is to desire less." Week of Oct. 30

A Promise—Not a Recipe God's promises are more concerned with the final product than day-to-day ingredients and details. Week of Nov. 6

Descending to Serve Jesus came down, from where he was, to the cesspool of swill and slop planet earth had become to serve you and me, not the other way around. Week of Nov. 13

Pioneer and Perfecter Join us and zoom in on the rich Christ-centered teaching of Hebrews 12:2—"Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith..." Week of Nov. 20

Thank You For Accepting Me We give thanks for the substance expressed by the words of Paul Tillich: "You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you. Simply accept the fact you are accepted!" Week of Nov. 27