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Making Change

Monte Wolverton

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What Our Readers Are Saying...

Volume 10, Number 5
October 2019
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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

What is the Gospel?

After reading Greg's "What is the Gospel? (part 1)," I just wanted to say that I have personally never read a clearer or easier to understand explanation of the true gospel of Jesus Christ. I cannot but wonder, as we Christ-followers grow in understanding of the true gospel, whether it will result in isolation from the mainstream world of Christianity.

All the best as always, your brother in the Lord Christ Jesus.

Florida

I just want to say thank you for making *CWR magazine* available online. I find the way you see Jesus as the Word of God very helpful and hopeful in a broken world.

Alberta, Canada

A More Christlike God

Dr. Jersak, this spring I read your book, *A More Christlike God*. Before I read it, I was already starting to see the strength and beauty of cruciform theology.

But I think it's safe to say that your book helped me entirely embrace it. My view of God has changed as a result to one where I don't even need to be tempted to be fearful of God, because that's not the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Thank you so much for your help!

Washington

"God's Love in Granite"

Thank you so much for the article "God's Love in Granite" by Brian Zahnd. This article was truly inspiring and helpful to me. I wish everyone could read it!

This quote perfectly answers the debate about creation and the origin of the universe—a big bang/explosion of God's LOVE!

"Why did God create? Why did God say, 'let there be'?' The mystics have always given the same answer—because God is love, love seeking expression. From the eternal dance that is Father, Son and Holy Spirit burst forth an explosion of love. Some call it the Big Bang. Some call it Genesis. If you like, we can call it the genesis of love as light and all that is.

As we learn to look at creation as goodness flowing from God's own love, we begin to see the sacredness of all things. All of creation is a gift—a gift flowing from the self-giving love of God."

Texas

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A big thank you from all of us at CWR/PTM!

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Making Change

Monte Wolverton

Young man, it's time you learned about money and business, declared my frugal grandmother one day, after I had misplaced a quarter. Sure, I was only six years old, but it was never too early to start learning the basics of commerce. So for Christmas that year she bought me a shiny red toy cash register, made of solid metal. Like most toys in the mid '50s, it had no batteries or electronics. I poked a mechanical key marked with an amount of money, and a little white tab with a corresponding amount popped up in a window atop the machine, while a bell rang and a cash drawer full of play money popped out. *Whee!*

But to my grandmother's dismay, at the age of six I was far less concerned about finance than how my new toy functioned. My big takeaway was that only one key could effectively be pressed at a time. Press another key and the first one popped back up. Press the first key again and the second one popped up. I wanted to press them all them at once, but it didn't work properly that way.

Whenever I hear about organizations that are trying to "make change," I think of my cash register. Institutional leaders bravely decide to improve things. They correct one issue. Encouraged, they

correct a second issue, only to have the first one pop back up. When they re-correct the first one, the second one pops back—and so on.

So should they push all the buttons at once? Can the directors rewrite the constitution and bylaws? Can they revise their mission statements? Sure they can—but they often don't, because it's dicey. *The Harvard Business Review* suggests that 60-70% of all organizational change initiatives fail. And by fail, we mean customers/members/donors stumbling over themselves to get out the door. So leaders often opt for a gradual approach to change.

But enough talk about institutions in general. Let's get specific. Churches are institutions (in this context we mean denominations and congregations, as distinct from the collective body of all believers).

In churches, marginal issues and teachings have a way of popping up anytime, growing like barnacles on the hull of a ship, slowing it down and causing it to veer off course. Meaningful change in a church, therefore, should involve periodically and proactively scraping the barnacles off and steering the organization back toward Christ-centeredness.

Even so, despite best intentions, sticky issues have a way of becoming embedded in



institutional memories. Which buttons might be popping back up on your institutional cash register? Beware—because they may not be obvious. They may disguise themselves with the best of intentions. Here are just a few. I'm sure you can think of others.

* * * * *

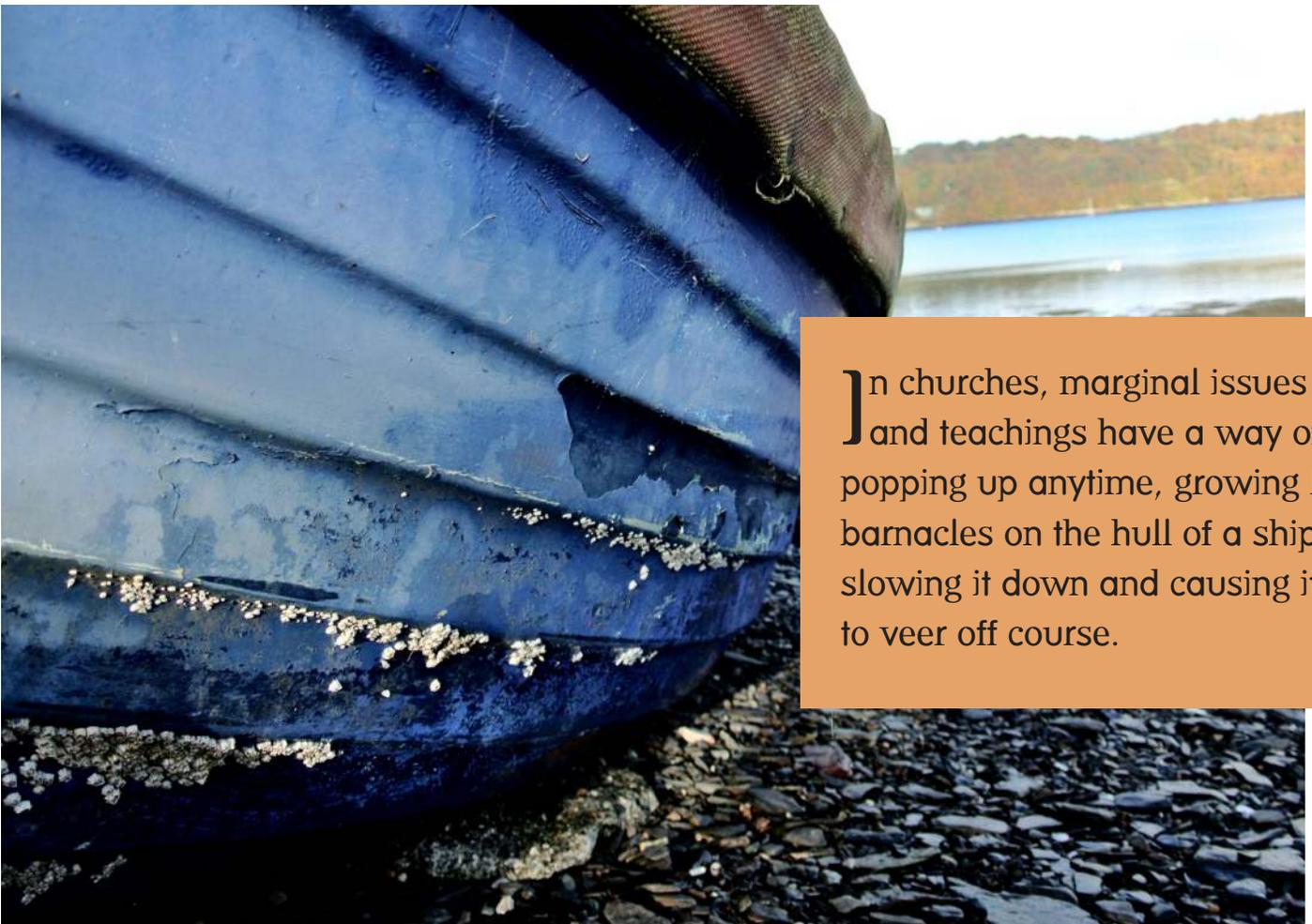
Kelsey slammed her coffee cup down on her dining room table. Her church of 16 years had just changed its worship services from 10:30 Sunday morning to 2 in the afternoon. But that was her family time! She was livid, and she wasn't the only one. At least half a dozen of her friends were disgruntled—not as much over the change itself as the way it came down. Pastor Kevin had made an arbitrary decision for reasons

known only to him and his yes-man board. He had not even taken a poll of the congregation. Kelsey honestly wanted to do the right thing, but now she was wondering. Well, she thought, he certainly isn't the only Christian show in town....

Authoritarianism—strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom. It can pop up at any time—but more often when institutional leadership is stressed or challenged. Administration and members alike revert to the comfort of pat answers and top-down command. It may seem innocent at first, but unchecked, it can morph into religious dogmatism, extra-biblical religious requirements, rules, regulations, routines and regimentation.

* * * * *

Lester had always admired his Uncle Ed—always generous, never judgmental, ready with a sympathetic ear and words of encouragement. Ed's only fault, as far as Lester could tell, was his church—one of those mainline groups. Lester had invited Ed to his church, but Ed always politely declined. Lester's Pastor Todd readily admitted that there had been doctrinal misunderstandings in the past, but now he claimed God was taking this church in a new direction. God had huge plans for this church. A massive move was in the offing that would set the world on its ear. If members wanted to be a part of it, they should remain "steadfast." Lester was convinced—this group was indeed special. He would set Uncle Ed straight the next time he saw him.



In churches, marginal issues and teachings have a way of popping up anytime, growing like barnacles on the hull of a ship, slowing it down and causing it to veer off course.

Exceptionalism—being different from, or somehow better than, the norm. It’s an easy tactic for leaders to fall back on. It provides a sense of identity and serves to keep a group together. Just keep telling them they have features that make them better than all the others. Sure, God may love the world, but he loves us more. Unfortunately, exceptionalism is only a step away from exclusivism.

* * * * *

Mitch and Sally were feeling restless. They liked their little congregation, and they loved the people, but they were looking for something more. For one thing, there wasn’t much of a youth program, and it was nearly impossible to drag their two teens, Ashley and Brent, to services. Last week Mitch and Sally visited a big congregation just two miles away. It had a dynamic pastor, great music and a special service for the kids with a live band! Should they move—or maybe even take a



Meaningful change in a church should involve periodically and proactively scraping the barnacles off and steering the organization back toward Christ-centeredness.

break from services entirely? Mitch and the kids were ready, but Sally had cold feet. “God has planted me here,” she thought, “so shouldn’t I remain where God has planted me?”

Determinism is the idea that all events are determined by causes outside the human will—more to the point, things that happen to you are predestined by God. At its worst, this idea robs believers of their God-given free will. The assumption in the story above is that God has compelled Sally to do something against her will, which is not consistent with New Testament teaching. God invites, never coerces. The reality is that Sally made a decision. The truth is that Christ has made us free to make informed choices in good conscience about what is best for us, our families and friends—and however we believe our God-given gifts and talents can be put to best use.

If all this sounds like *too much freedom*, maybe we need to ask

ourselves why we think it sounds that way. Maybe a button on that spiritual cash register is popping up, and we need to re-examine our relationship with an institution.

* * * * *

Today my 65-year-old cash register sits on a shelf. It still basically functions, although some of the buttons are gone and the others don’t work quite the way they used to. Beyond that, my grandkids don’t even know what it is. It doesn’t look *anything* like the ones we have today.

But isn’t that just like Christian institutions? They need frequent maintenance, changes, upgrades, improvements—sometimes even reinvention. □

Monte Wolverton is Associate Editor of CWR magazine and author of Chasing 120 and The Remnant 1 & 2. Available at ptm.org/books.

THE TRUTH ABOUT CONDEMNATION



BRAD JERSAK

Condemnation. Such a chilling term! We associate condemnation with feelings of inescapable shame. As a legal term, even worse! The ultimate condemnation is when a judge sentences someone to death. But that's not truly the ultimate threat, is it? **The greater fear is that God himself will condemn us.**

The faith of my fathers threatened unbelievers with an everlasting state of condemnation: eternal conscious torment in a burning lake of fire and sulfur. Citing Romans 12:1, we believed only the faithful remnant (us) who were “in Christ Jesus” would escape the great exclusion.

I don't believe that anymore. This horrifies those *hellions* (a cheeky term for dogmatists who preach hellfire) who think I'm setting up unsuspecting victims for everlasting destruction by refusing to dangle it over their heads. I would counter that their ugly threats drive people away from God, not to him, and that a **conversion under compulsion is not conversion at all—it's just spiritual blackmail.**

If we're to know the truth about condemnation, we'd best get our information from the source: Christ himself. But even that's not so easy. If we compare the earliest and latest Gospels (Mark and

John), the Evangelists seem to have heard and understood Jesus slightly differently. In Mark 16:16, Jesus says, “*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be [future] condemned.*”

But in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus describes condemnation as a state intrinsic to unbelief—a predicament we were *already* in and from which he's come to rescue us:

*“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands **condemned already** because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son”* (John 3:17-18).

Although different, notice how both texts avoid making God the active condemner. The cause and condition of our condemnation is unbelief. But the agent of our condemnation is *not God or his Son*. But still, Jesus raises the topic because he is committed to averting condemnation—past, present or future. We don't escape condemnation through denial or avoidance, so with Jesus, let's face it head-on:

In Mark 16, Jesus warns of a coming judgment for those who've not welcomed the grace of God

revealed in Christ. Some translate the Greek term *katakrima* as “damned,” though that’s excessive. More precisely, at least through legal eyes (let’s start there), it relates to a guilty verdict, sentencing and the execution of that verdict.

CONDEMNED TO WHAT?

Yes, unbelief is “condemned” ... but to what? The *hellions* will say, “condemned to hell.” But that is by no means the only sense of judgment (*katakrima* or *krisis*) we see in Scripture. Indeed, Israel’s first “judges” (as in the book of Judges) were all *deliverers!*

We also see ample evidence in both the Old and New Testaments that our merciful Judge’s “sentence” can be a cleansing judgment that purifies the gold of our true selves and consumes only “that which is not of love’s kind” (to use George MacDonald’s phrase). The final judgment is pictured as “launderers soap and refiners fire” in Malachi 3 and purifying fire of 1 Corinthians 3.

In other words, **the judgments of God are not necessarily retributive—indeed, in view of God’s nature, they are necessarily *not* retributive.** The fiery judgment of God is directed solely at every fetter that binds us to self-destructive attachments and others-destructive ways. Imagine, for example, a judge who sentences an addict to an enforced course of rehabilitation in an addiction center (a common occurrence in my country).

Having said that, we discover in Hebrews 12 that the judgments of God are not those of a courtroom judge (punitive or otherwise). Rather, they are always and only to be regarded as *the restorative correction of a loving Father*, applied for our good to make us whole. Is *Abba’s* remedial justice only for believers and only for this life? Some would say so. I would not. And why not?

Because in his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has transformed death and hades from a destiny of non-being into a passageway to life ... that passage includes a *katakrima* of purification in the furnace of divine love. “Condemnation” is no longer ultimate. Mercy triumphs over judgment and now, only the love of God for his creatures is ultimate and eternal. Could one forever reject such love? It’s possible in principle (the principle of human freedom) but I believe it’s infinitely unlikely, given the ravishing beauty and

effectual power of Christ’s love for everyone.

BEYOND LEGALESE

Let’s return to the question of legal (or “juridical”) metaphors that evoke courtrooms and judges, criminals and lawyers, convictions and sentencing ... in short, condemnation to retributive justice. We are not denying the reality of divine judgment or that Christ presides as the all-merciful Judge. We’re not ignoring the Day of the Lord in which Christ renders his judgments. But here are two all-important qualifying “riders”:

First, judicial imagery is *metaphorical*. It has a



“... the judgments of God are not necessarily retributive—indeed, in view of God’s nature, they are necessarily *not* retributive.”

rhetorical function, especially as Christ confronted complacency and defiance. **Biblical metaphors and rhetoric are never empty, but they are limited and mustn’t be totalized.** Judicial metaphors are only one of many salvation themes. Others include ransom from slavery, redemption from debt, healing from disease, to name just a few. In every one of them, Christ is *always* the hero, sent by his *Abba* to rescue us, heal us, free us, etcetera—*never* to condemn, just as Jesus told us in John 3.

Continued on page 13

Trying Hard . . . Not To Be Ugly

Brian Zahnd

We live in an ugly time. That's how I see it anyway. Racism is on the rise, xenophobia is in vogue, and mercy walks the plank. Children are imprisoned, journalists are dismembered, and rage is all the rage. It's an ugly time.

So, I'm trying hard not to be ugly. But it's not easy. To be ugly about all the ugliness is easy. Of course, when I insert my own ugliness into the fray I don't call

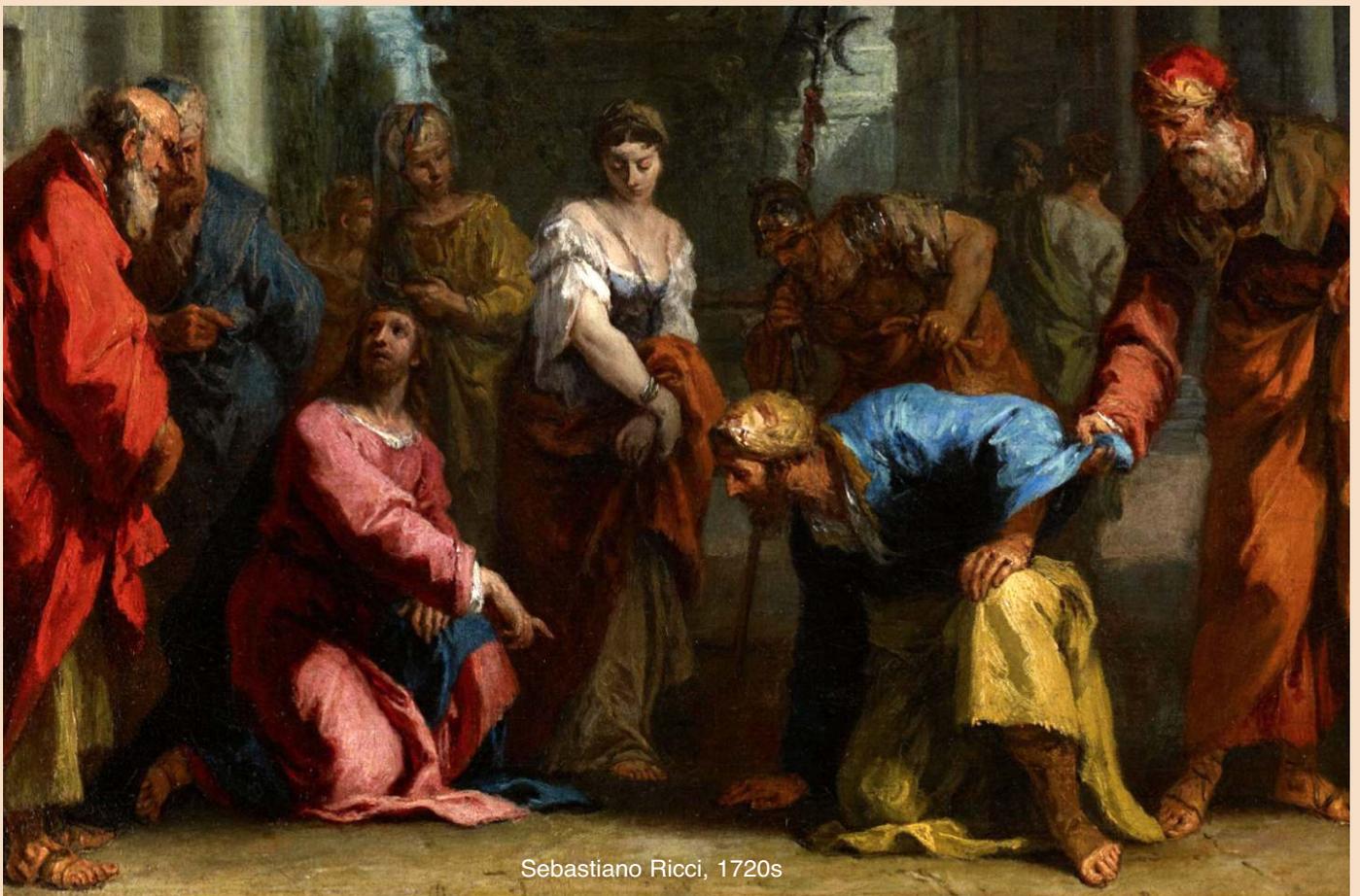
it being ugly, I call it being right. I tell myself that my rage is like the whip-wielding, table-flipping Christ in the temple.

But in my more contemplative moments, I have to admit that most of the time my rage is more like Peter cutting off an ear than Jesus cleansing the temple. Just because Jesus did something doesn't mean that I should try to do it. After all, Jesus walked on water too.

So I want to resist the ugliness,

not by being ugly about it, not by raging against it, not by hurling insults at those caught up in mimetic ugliness, but by being something other.

What I'm saying is that I want to try to be beautiful. I'm not sure I'm called to imitate Christ in his rage, but I know I'm called to imitate Christ on the cross. It's the cruciform that is the definitive form of Christian beauty. Crucifixion is ugly unless we imitate Christ and pray,



Sebastiano Ricci, 1720s

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

This is the beauty that saves the world.

THE BOUNTY OF THE CROSS

At the Cross, the sin of the world coalesced into a monstrous singularity of *deicide*—the murder of God. But God in Christ absorbed the singularity of sin and forgave the world. This is why we depict the crucifixion in terms of artistic beauty. **Good Friday was simultaneously the ugliest moment and the most beautiful moment in history.**

The scapegoating, the mockery, the cruelty, the barbarism, the violence was all ugly. But the ugliness was overcome by the beauty of Jesus forgiving it all. In the collision of human ugliness and divine beauty, beauty wins. Beauty will save the world.

Maybe you can be trusted to wield rage righteously, but I’m pretty sure I can’t. My rage will most likely do little more than add to the ugliness. In trying hard not to be ugly, I need to choose a posture of compassion. I don’t mean a quietism or passivity that avoids prophetic confrontation, rather I mean a prophetic confrontation that comes from a place of genuine love for all—love not just for the victims, but for the victimizers as well.

When we decide that some sinners are unworthy of being loved, we have sided with the crowd against Christ. The phenomenon of the satan can operate just as diabolically among those who are on the right side of the issue.

When the crowd of cruel Pharisees was ready to stone the woman caught in adultery, Jesus didn’t incite a righteous crowd to stone the cruel crowd—that’s how the satan wins. What Jesus did was to break the spell of the mob with a call to individual self-reflection.

“Jesus said to them, ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ ... When they heard it they went away one by one, beginning with the elders” (John 8:7, 9).

THROWING ROCKS IS UGLY

This is a beautiful story because Jesus took the ugliness of the mob out of it. They came as a blood-thirsty mob, but they dispersed as individuals contemplating their own sin.

“... throwing stones at stone-throwers isn’t the Jesus Way, because it isn’t the way of love..”

Rage, no matter how justified, could not have done this. The crowd ready to stone the woman knew they were right—they had Bible verses to prove it. And I’m sure Jesus could have assembled a second crowd that knew they were right to stone the first crowd. (*We are never more self-righteous than when we are attacking the self-righteous.*)

But throwing stones at stone-throwers isn’t the Jesus way, because it’s not the way of love. Jesus wasn’t just trying to save the woman caught in adultery from being stoned, Jesus was also

trying to save the individuals caught up in the satanic *mimesis* [mutual mimicry] of the crowd. Righteous rage would have ended with the ugliness of someone being stoned. But Jesus saved everyone involved through acts of contemplation and forgiveness. This is beautiful. And this is the beauty I want to imitate.

LEAVING RAGE BEHIND

Instead of imitating the enraged—who may very well be right in what they are raging about—I want to imitate Jesus who in a beautiful way defused a mob and forgave a sinner.

I’m going to make a concentrated effort to avoid the perpetuation of rage. I’m going to give more time to

contemplative prayer and long walks in quiet places. I’m going to read more Thomas Merton.

I really want to give up on rage. I want to try to become a sage. That probably sounds pretentious, but it really is what I humbly aspire to. As I approach sixty, I might as well at least try to become a sage. What else am I going to do? As the French poet Charles Péguy said, *“There is only one tragedy in the end: Not to have been a saint.”*

I’m trying hard not to be ugly. I want to live a more beautiful life. I know I can’t trust myself with rage.

On the edge of sixty, I want to try to become a sage. If you think of it, pray for me. □

Brian Zahnd is the pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri and the author of Postcards from Babylon.

What are we *really* singing?

Laura Urista



We praise Thee O God our Redeemer, Creator, in grateful devotion our tribute we bring. We lay it before Thee, we kneel and adore Thee, we bless Thy holy name, glad praises we sing. (Netherlands folk song text by Julia Cady Cory).

Those are the opening words to my very first “favorite hymn.” I can remember singing those words at age four, surrounded by my family and hundreds of worshippers at a large church gathering. I still get goosebumps thinking of the shared joy of singing hymns of praise and worship with my parents, brothers and sisters as well as my spiritual “brothers and sisters in the Lord.” This great old hymn remains one of my favorites to this day, and I’ve often chosen to sing it when I lead worship for my local congregation.

THE MUSIC OF CREATION

Music is an important part of worship and it has been since creation. From the beginning, “when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy” (Job 38:7), to the end, when “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them” will sing to the Lamb on the throne (Revelation 5:13), creation is musical.

Many animals communicate by singing—wolves howl, whales communicate with each other through intricate songs and of course the birds “rise up singing.” Through worship in song, humans can participate in the music of creation. Our worship through music reflects the order, beauty and diversity of God’s creation.

LISTEN TO THE LYRICS

Worship music can take many forms and styles, from great classic hymns played on a magnificent church organ, to the lively stylings of electric guitars and drums, to the simple song of a small child singing, “Jesus loves me, this I know.” I recently sang this melody to my three-year-old granddaughter and, to my great surprise, she joined in without prompting. In that moment I felt my heart soar—it seemed like it might actually explode with the warmth and joy I experienced singing with my little angel.

We all enjoy a variety of different forms of worship music, but unfortunately, certain songs or music styles can also bring up painful, toxic memories or uneasy feelings. *We need to be aware of what we are really singing and why.* I was

recently asked about why some hymns and worship songs reference old covenant judgment and violence. My answer, in short: many hymns we sing today are taken from old covenant passages in which the author's viewpoint about God and his mercy was limited by the author's particular culture, teachings and understanding.

Take, for example, *By the Rivers of Babylon*, a popular song based on Psalm 137. This psalm is a lament of a people taken into captivity. They saw their beloved Jerusalem destroyed and may have seen their children and loved ones tortured and killed before their very eyes.

If we consider that some of the Psalms are the written prayers, laments and documented history of a people who suffered greatly, then songs of this nature make sense. It is important to keep in mind that musical lyrics, like poems or any form of literature, must be viewed with the author's primary audience in mind first of all, before the meaning is extended to future generations.

THINK ABOUT THE MESSAGE

Some hymns and praise songs include a limited understanding of God's grace extended to all mankind. In a popular song we often sing at the church I attend, the lyrics say: "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the **righteous** run into it and they are saved." Okay—but, just what happens to the unrighteous? Are they **not** saved—are they

destroyed? Just what will happen to those who don't know about God yet? When we start to think deeply about what we are *really singing*, it can indeed be troubling.

As worshippers, we need to be conscious and aware of the words we are singing, even when we may feel emotionally swept up singing a hymn/praise song. The apostle Paul said, "*I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also*" (1 Corinthians 14:14-15, RSV). If the words you sing trouble you or cause an uneasy feeling you can't get rid of, discuss it with your worship leader, choir director or pastor.

As worship leaders, choir directors and pastors, we need to be careful to review the words of hymns and songs we plan to sing with or for the congregation. Do the songs contain obvious theological problems? Perhaps the problematic word(s) can be

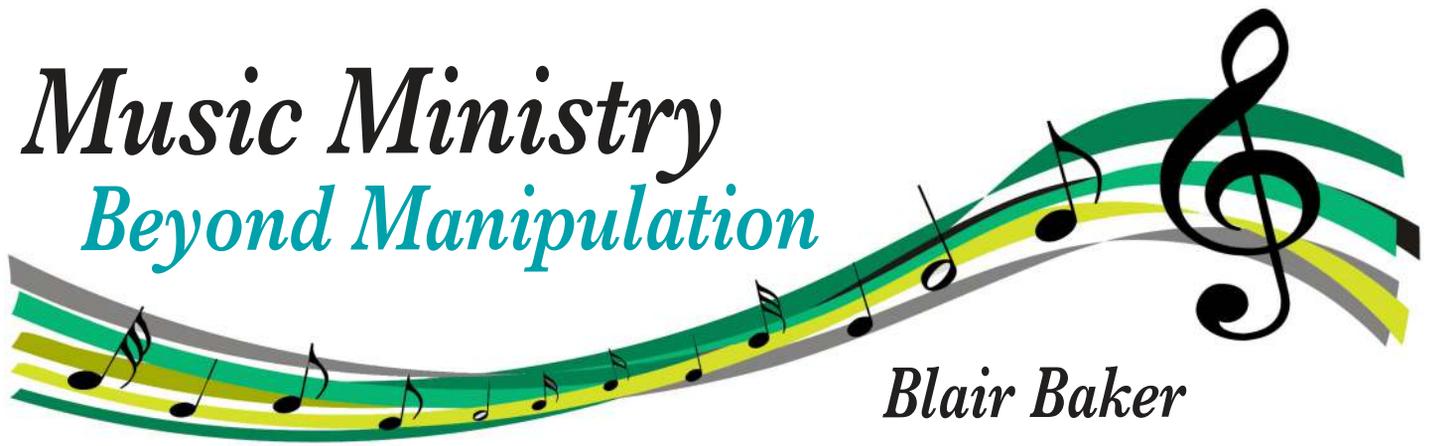
slightly changed or verses left out. Or perhaps we need to abandon certain songs if they are "causing little ones to stumble." We need to decide if *what we are really singing* represents the "whole counsel of God." What do our hymns imply about the sovereignty and grace of God? What are they saying about the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ and life on the *Jesus Way*?

Praise music and hymns can help us experience deep and meaningful communion with God and with others, whether in a church, within a small group—or with a three-year-old! They can uplift us and help us remember the gospel of God's love for all mankind, as long as we remain mindful of *what we are really singing*. □

Laura Urista is the Managing Editor of CWR magazine and The Plain Truth.



Music Ministry Beyond Manipulation



Blair Baker

Music has such great power! It can inspire, focus, guide, comfort, depress and uplift us. Music can help us express the full range of human experiences and emotions. Melody has an enormous effect on people—while it can stir wonder and joy in some, it can depress and turn the stomach of another. Some people have been so damaged by their experience of church that any association with a certain style of music can remind them of painful memories.

I know people who refuse to go to certain church services because the music is repetitive and doesn't proclaim the good news of the gospel. Then there are those from more lively church backgrounds who find more subdued musical environments to be dry, or feel the way the congregation sings the old, classic hymns to be lackluster. They feel there is no way for the Spirit to move or flow in those situations. What drives our approach and reactions to worship music?

MANIPULATIVE MUSIC

Music speaks to our hearts and is a wonderful expression of

worship and praise, but it can also be a tool to manipulate if we are not focused on leading our thoughts towards God rather than ourselves. Certain churches use particular guitar chord patterns and repetitive rhythms in order to induce a state of openness. They believe this altered state of consciousness invites the Holy Spirit in to grant worshippers gifts of the Spirit—speaking in tongues, seeing

The use of music is so powerful, and like any gift of God, we must be careful how we use it.

visions and many falling over in trance-like states.

I took guitar lessons from a man who used to play in a well-known church. He told me about the expanded chord patterns they used in order to manipulate worshippers' emotions. I have attended some of these churches and found it easy to get carried away with the music. Using repetitive lyrics and music to induce a trance-like state can be highly manipulative. The use of music is so powerful, and like any

gift of God, we must be careful how we use it.

But music can also be a wonderful tool to help us remember Bible verses, encourage us and help us better understand the gospel. When I first started my commitment to Jesus as a teenager, I was inspired and helped by the music of artists like Keith Green and Amy Grant. Now I truly appreciate Taize style worship. I listen to

Taize music at home and it helps me focus my mind on prayer and focuses my heart on God. I find some popular Christian music too syrupy for my taste and they strike a bad chord with my past experiences in some churches.

SONGS OF COMFORT

I also love the old classics *Amazing Grace*, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, and the like. I took to memorizing hymns years ago in order to have at hand the gospel and ways to pray and sing

at all times. It has been a tremendous blessing that just when I needed a particular song, it was there.

I remember one such experience from a few years back, when Russell, a dear friend in his eighties, lay in hospital dying (in fact, he died the following day). I went to visit him, but he was in a shared ward with no walls—an appalling situation. So I just lay my head next to him and sang the hymns quietly while he struggled to breathe. As I sang, tears flowed from his eyes. He couldn't speak. I sang *Amazing Grace*, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* and *Abide with Me*. All I could do was utter these hushed hymns of comfort in song to my friend, who could no longer speak and was nearing the end. I sang quietly because there were others in the room who were fit and well, looking on from other beds.

OF GRACE AND MERCY

Here is the most amazing thing! When I sang *Abide with Me*, I noticed Russell start to mouth the words with me. At his funeral, *Just as I Am* was sung. Afterwards, the woman who helped arrange the funeral spoke with me, and I asked her about the song choice. She told me that Russell had wanted to have *Abide with Me* sung at the funeral, but that she and others felt it was too somber.

Can you imagine what my heart did at that moment? It turns out *Abide with Me* was actually Russell's favorite song and that's why he wanted it sung at his funeral, but I never knew that. That's why it was so amazing. I am still moved to this day knowing how our good Lord comforted my dear friend and brother with his favorite hymn the day before he passed. That's our kind and loving Lord whose "mercies are new morning by morning."

At the end of the day, I think we need to extend grace to each other even as we sing different types of worship songs and be tolerant of others' choices. Perhaps when we think of the music we are sharing as worship leaders (I've led worship in an Anglican church and for children's church too), we can encourage people to deeply think about the words they are singing. We can suggest that they find some hymns they enjoy and start to memorize them too, so they can sing those words whenever or wherever they feel the need. May worshipful words and music be a blessing through us all to others. □

Blair Baker is an author, artist and children's book illustrator based in Marlborough, UK.

THE TRUTH ABOUT CONDEMNATION

BRAD JERSAK (continued from page 7)

Second, we reject any theory of *atonement* that says God *cannot* freely forgive, that God is *beholden* to wrath and that our release depends on the *appeasement* of God's anger through the violent punishment of his Son. That is a paganized perversion of biblical judicial terms. In other words, my theological revulsion is not to legal terms such as *katakrima* per se, but rather, to deriving from them blasphemous conceptions of God that require a brutal child sacrifice (his own) to assuage his holy fury before he can "forgive." That's not forgiveness at all! That ugly narrative is more accurately aligned with the false god Molech (see Jeremiah 32:35).

I reject the dominant modern gospel of retribution preached from so many pulpits across our continent—the same bad news message I once preached. When I saw through Christ's life and teachings that God is not a condemning judge, but rather, a consistently loving Father, I was able to move toward a more beautiful, ancient and yes, more biblical gospel. □

Brad Jersak is the author of A More Christlike God and A More Christlike Way, published by CWR press.

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"God our Father, we find it difficult to come to you, because our knowledge of you is imperfect. In our ignorance of you, we have imagined you to be our enemy; we have wrongly thought that you take pleasure in punishing our sins; and we have foolishly conceived you to be a tyrant over human life. But since Jesus came among us, he has shown that you are loving, that you are on our side against all that stunts life, and that our resentments against you are groundless."

—Augustine of Hippo

God is Good

Richard Rohr

In most ancient religions on every inhabited continent, God was seen to be “controllable” through some form of sacrifice, even fellow humans. Around the time of Abraham, the sacrificial instinct was transferred from humans to animals (Genesis 22:13); ancient Hebrew and other religions sacrificed birds, goats, sheep, and bullocks to please a seemingly fearsome God. This was still going on in Jesus’ time. When Jesus said, “It is finished,” before he died on the cross, some believe he was saying that the very notion of sacrificial religion was finished and

It is almost impossible for humans to believe that we can be good or worthy without some kind of “payment” to earn that dignity. The free flow of unearned love, what we call grace, is almost a punishment for most people. They fiercely resist it. This view of scarcity, as opposed to a God and a worldview of infinite abundance, must be radically transformed for the Gospel to even make sense. In my opinion, only a small minority of believers actually live inside the world of grace.

The amazing wonder of biblical revelation is that God is much different than we thought and much better

we can seek and ask for. Contemplation is a vast opening to inner experience. Walter Brueggemann, in his monumental *Theology of the Old Testament*, says that the Jewish people came up with a “credo of five adjectives” to describe the God they met on their historical journey. YHWH was experienced as merciful, gracious, faithful, forgiving, and steadfast in love. You must realize what a breakthrough that was in human history and how it allowed one such as Jesus to emerge from such a worldview.

The only people who know this to be true for themselves, and not because someone else told them, are those who sincerely seek, pray, and, often, suffer. Outside of inner experience, these descriptors of God are just words. Outside of your own inner experience of this kind of God, most religion remains ritualistic, moralistic, doctrinaire, and largely unhappy; that is true on both the Right and the Left. It is the contentious religion that we see all around. □

Adapted from Richard Rohr, Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality (Franciscan Media: 2008), 10-11.

“The amazing wonder is that God is much different than we thought and much better than we feared.”

shown to be fruitless.

But the sacrificial instinct remains ingrained until you can fully accept that you are accepted wholeheartedly. So, today’s “civilized” cultures have evolved it into various forms of self-sacrifice and moral heroics, still found in most people and groups who do not emphasize inner experience.

than we feared. Paraphrasing an evolutionary biologist’s statement about the strangeness of the universe: “God is not only stranger than we think but stranger than we can think.” That changed way of thinking is what we call the contemplative mind. It is indeed a gift, but a gift that



CWRm

GREG ALBRECHT

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

“But What About Works?”

Q There are dozens of scriptures in the Bible about works, so many that a book could be written about them. Works don't save a person but they are something that are expected of a Christian. You have written a half-dozen books or more on grace. Would you please help us get our heads around all these many scriptures about works?

R Here are a few thoughts for your consideration: First, I agree—many biblical passages exhort us to “works.”

The term “works” begs for a definition. In context, “works” sometimes refers to behaviors that people undertake, willingly and by choice. Further, the Bible may also use the term “works” to describe virtuous and beneficial deeds, rather than the opposite.

The entire old covenant is about “works.” This is not to exclude the threads you find between the lines through the Old Testament about Jesus, about grace, etc. But the emphasis in the Old Testament is on national and individual relationship with God—about what God's people must and must not do. It's a performance heavy covenant, full of stipulations concerning behavior.

There's no doubt that the New Testament directs us to behave in many positive, appropriate ways, and disavows other behaviors. We have the responsibility to make good choices and adopt beneficial behaviors.

But a question remains about the efficacy of these works. What do good works accomplish in the eternal dimension? Do our works earn anything—do we deserve payment for our good works?

You say, “Works don't save a person but they are expected.”

Let's focus on the word “expected” for a moment. Yes, God “expects” works in the way

that James says, “show me your faith by your works.” That is, those who've been given the grace of God and put their faith in Jesus will illustrate the reality of their faith by their lives. But “works” follows faith—“works” are produced by God in us. We are his “workmanship” or “handiwork” (see Ephesians 2:10).

So again, salvation is not BY works, but FOR works. God saves and rescues and re-births us, so that Christ in us, the hope of glory, works in our lives, producing in and through us the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Only God can create a tree. And the only reason a tree brings forth fruit is that God created the tree and vibrant systems within the tree that enable fruit-bearing. No stick of wood can plant itself in the ground, and by rigorous effort, expect fruit to be borne on its branches. Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches...Without me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

God does not force anyone to allow him to indwell them and enliven them—but if we embrace his grace, then as his children, we will produce the good fruit of the Holy Spirit. How? By yielding to God so that his works may be produced in us.

Some suggest that laws and behavior create morality. I insist that true morality is a product of God—the fruit of Christ's Spirit alive in us.

Morality does not induce God's favor or motivate God to take action. True morality is because of God. God does not serve laws. God's laws came from God and are given by God.

God's law boils down to love. Such love is the product of God, rather than humanly-produced morality, as if we could prove that we are good enough for God to love us back. Rather, we willingly love God and our neighbor as God's grace empowers us to do so. □

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October 2019

Heart and Soul
—Week of October 6

God’s Grace Isn’t Fair
—Week of October 13

The Grace in Which We Stand
—Week of October 20

Everything Happens for a Reason?
—Week of October 27

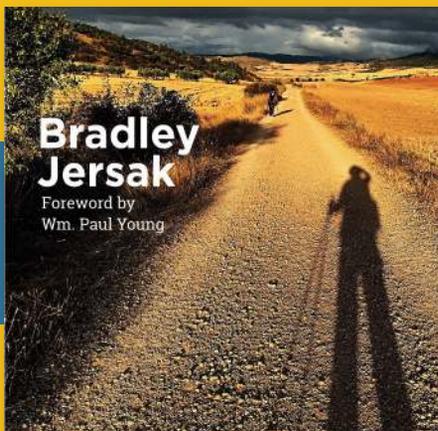
November 2019

“Water, Water Everywhere…”
—Week of November 3

Romans—Whose Righteousness?
—Week of November 10

Where We Are—Where We Are Going
—Week of November 17

We Are Thankful
—Week of November 24



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