

CWR^m magazine

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

October 2020

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AFTER BABEL

FAITH BEYOND FACTIONS

BY BRAD JERSAK



What Our Readers Are Saying...

Many thanks!

Until recently I've always had trouble making certain "religious" teachings make sense. They did not seem to align and perfectly support each other.

The Bible group I am in now is showing me a different way to understand Scripture, and things make much more sense, follow smoothly with no more gaping holes that lose me.

Your message follows what I am relearning about God. What "God's wrath" meant just never made sense to me until now. I am so hungry for more of this teaching that lightens my heart and draws me closer into oneness with the Trinity. Thank you.

Michigan

I thank God for you at CWR/PTM ministries and all your information and resources which are so influential in helping to teach and support me and my family in this confusing world we live in.

New York

Thank you CWR/PTM for continuing to keep me spiritually well-fed. I am continually praying for you and this great work.

Georgia

A More Christlike Way

Recently, with everything going on in the world I was quite sad and frankly losing faith in humanity.

At the same time, I picked up *A More Christlike Way* and gained back some lost hope. It is so refreshing to hear messages of God's love, especially when some of our fellow Christians are not acting out of love. Thank you!

Email

August CWRm

Thanks for all the inspiring and encouraging articles in the August issue of *CWRm*.



I learned a lot from all the articles, as usual. Especially in these crazy times, your magazines, books, letters and other resources help to keep me balanced and centered firmly on Christ the solid Rock.

North Carolina

Dear Readers,



Your generous donations enable us to share this Christ-centered gospel and to inspire others to living faith in Jesus Christ.

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

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AFTER BABEL: FAITH BEYOND FACTIONS

BY BRAD JERSAK

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

—Greg Albrecht

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

—Galatians 5:19-21 (NTE)

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

And frankly, they're killing us.

What are *factions*? Factions are defined as

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

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

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

“Factions” frame the world in us-them, in-out binaries. Factions demand that we use labels and follow scripts that set us against “the other.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

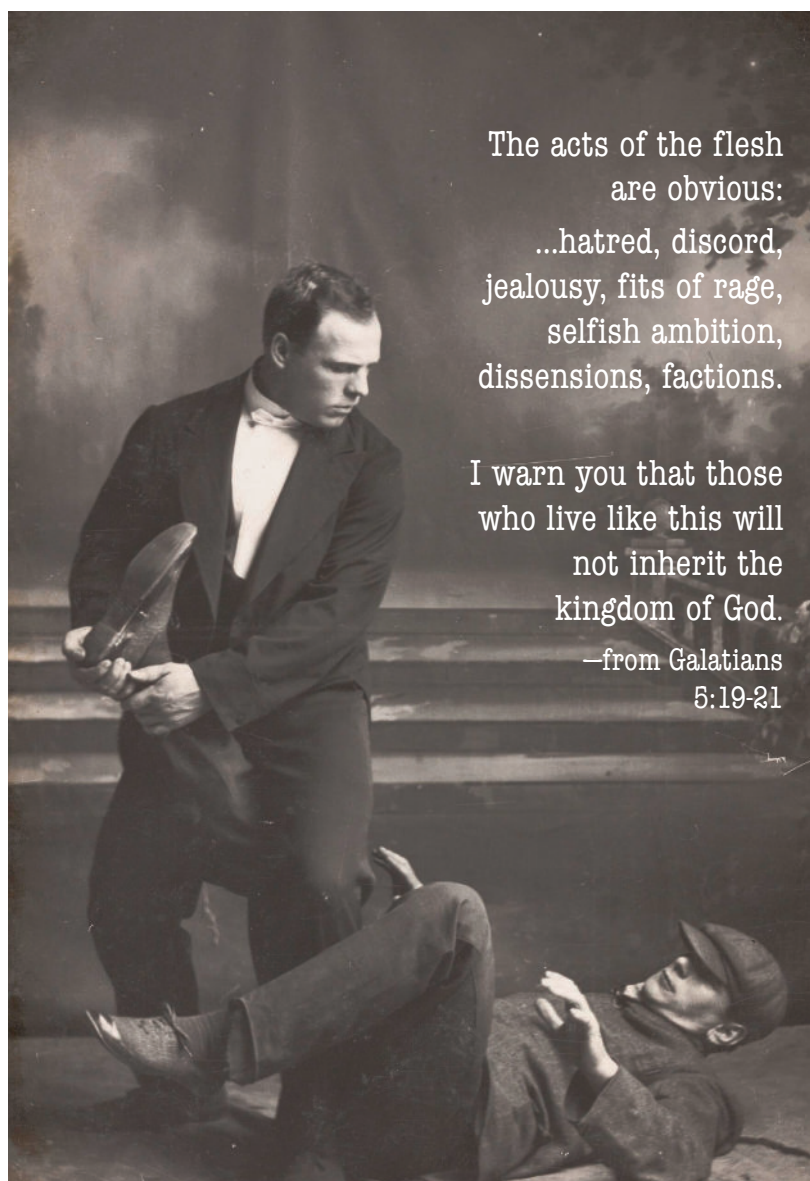
By now, I hope you’re asking, “What’s the good news?!” Fear not, I’m almost there. But the news gets far worse before it improves.

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

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

complete with a party label.

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



The acts of the flesh
are obvious:
...hatred, discord,
jealousy, fits of rage,
selfish ambition,
dissensions, factions.

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

—from Galatians
5:19-21

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

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

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

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

So, is there good news? Well, Christ's words, *believe the good news follows repent*. And what would *repent* look like for 21st-century citizens who find themselves breathing the fake news of factionalism every day?

REPENT OF THE FLESH

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

REPENT OF THE WORLD

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

Jesus might put it more dramatically: it's better

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

BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brad Jersak has just co-authored his first novel with Wm. Paul Young, titled The Pastor: A Crisis.

Jesus Invites Outsiders!

◆◆ Greg Albrecht ◆◆

After this he went out and saw a man named Levi at his work, collecting taxes. Jesus said, “Come along with me.” And he did — walked away from everything and went with him. Levi gave a large dinner at his home for Jesus. Everybody was there, tax men and other disreputable characters as guests at the dinner.

The Pharisees and their religious scholars came to his disciples greatly offended. “What is he doing eating and drinking with crooks and ‘sinners?’”

Jesus heard about it and spoke up. “Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I’m here inviting outsiders, not insiders — an invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out.”

—Luke 5:27-32 (MSG)

In his Gospel, Luke shines a spotlight on marginalized outsiders. As an outsider himself, the only Gentile author whose words are preserved in the New Testament, Luke tells stories of Jesus reaching out to the ostracized — children, women, day laborers, the impoverished, the diseased and the oppressed. Luke tells us of outsiders coming out of the shadows to be with Jesus, to talk with him and to have him physically and spiritually touch and heal them. They loved to “hang out” with Jesus and he with them.

“Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I’m here inviting outsiders —an invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out.”

—Luke 5:31-32 (MSG)

The story of Levi is the story of a political and religious outcast who was regarded as the lowest of the low in polite society. It is the story of a fat cat who had robbed people of money in order to

become rich ... someone who had sunk so low that all categories of society (apart from his own partners in crime, his fellow tax collectors) despised him.

Jews who were tax collectors were so despised that they were not allowed into the synagogues to worship. They were seen as hopelessly and irredeemably corrupt sleazeballs and scum bags.

Until Jesus invited Levi (another name for Matthew, who authored the Gospel of Matthew) to follow him, the majority of his disciples were blue-collar workingmen and redneck fishermen, without a great deal of education. Religious authorities would have regarded Jesus’ disciples as completely inadequate, lacking qualifications to be religious professionals — but when Jesus invited Levi to be his disciple, they were greatly offended and scandalized.

The other disciples were viewed as people who knew nothing about religion — ignorant and lacking formal training. But Levi? In the estimation of the religious community, when Jesus called Levi, Jesus sunk to an even lower level. They believed Levi to be a deplorable.

In his introduction to the Gospel of Luke (in *The Message Bible*), Eugene Peterson writes,

Most of us, most of the time, feel left out — misfits. We don’t belong. Others seem so confident, so sure of themselves, “insiders” who know the ropes, old hands in a club from which we are excluded. One of the ways we have of responding to this is to form our own club or join one that will have us. Here is at least one place where we are “in” and the others “out.”

... The terrible price we pay for keeping all those other people out so that we can savor the sweetness of being insiders is a reduction of reality, a shrinkage of life. Nowhere is this price more terrible than when it is

paid in the cause of religion.... But with God there are no outsiders.

When he saw Levi (aka Matthew) engaged in his disreputable profession and invited him to become one of his followers Jesus had already established a pattern of reaching out to the poor, the disenfranchised, the alienated and the abandoned. To the religious establishment, Jesus seemed like a poor itinerant peasant from some backwater place called Nazareth. Jesus had no religious credentials — and of course, the religious establishment could only give credibility to someone they had taught and indoctrinated.

Instead of arguing finer points of theology, doctrine and dogma, Jesus was spending time — lots of time — touching, comforting and healing the sick, diseased and terminally ill. Jesus didn't look like what religion expected of a rabbi and teacher. Instead of sweet-talking and lobbying the rich and well-off, Jesus was giving time and attention to the neglected and despised cast-offs.

TAXES & THE DEPLORABLES WHO COLLECTED THEM

During Jesus' life, the Jews in Palestine were subjected to oppressive taxes — there was a water tax, a city tax, a tax on food such as meat and salt, a road tax and a house/property tax. Customs and frontier taxes on shipping were so exorbitant that sometimes the final price of an item, when it arrived at its destination for sale, was over 100 times its original cost.

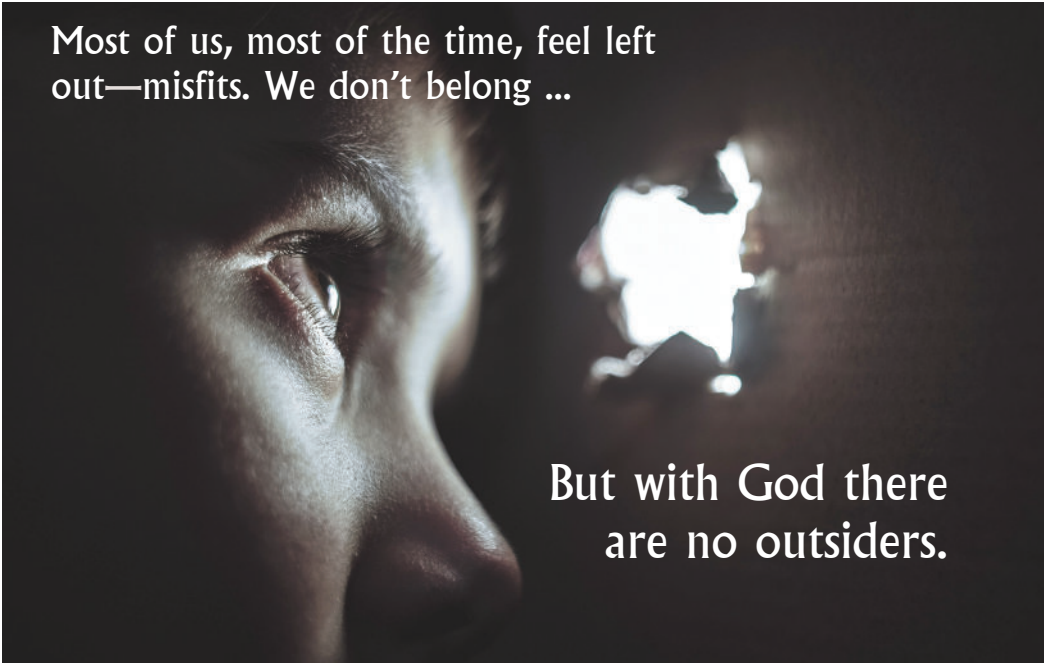
There were at least *two types of tax collectors* who were subjected

to the hatred of those who were subjected to this brutal burden of taxation:

The first type was the simple tax collector who collected taxes for Rome directly. Rome did not care if tax collectors extorted more money than Rome demanded — in fact, this extra “commission” or to use more exacting terms — “skimming” or “gouging” — was the way tax collectors made their money — in many cases their fortunes.

Tax farmers were investment speculators who purchased the rights to collect taxes in a specific geographical region for Rome. This method allowed Rome to get its money for taxes upfront, in one large, single payment.

Rome received one payment for all the taxes in a given region from the *tax farmer* who with that one up-front payment to Rome purchased the right to extract taxes from all the residents in that area. Tax farmers



Most of us, most of the time, feel left out—misfits. We don't belong ...

But with God there are no outsiders.

Because tax collectors themselves were Jewish, they were viewed as traitors because they worked directly for the Roman oppressors — they were seen as greedy citizens who ripped off their own countrymen.

A *second type of tax collector* were “employers” of the *simple tax collectors* who worked for them. Some men who were already wealthy increased their wealth by purchasing the rights to collect taxes for Rome. Those engaged in this lucrative profession were called *tax farmers*.

purchased the right to become somewhat like a tax collection agency, collaborating with the Romans. The reward for the *tax farmer* was his unchecked power to extract more taxes than the Romans demanded, as payment for his work.

All society, religious and irreligious, educated and illiterate, rich and poor, joined ranks to condemn *tax collectors and farmers* as the lowest of the low because they worked for a foreign government collecting taxes from their own people,

participating in a cruel and corrupt system. Tax collectors were viewed as traitors to their own country, and in terms of religion, they were seen as corrupt and unclean.

LOOK WHO CAME TO DINNER!

Matthew — aka Levi — threw a huge banquet for Jesus. As a tax collector we can assume Levi had the funds to ensure this was a lavish and extravagant affair. The Pharisees believed Jesus was enjoying a banquet that Levi could afford because Levi had ripped off the little people.

The Pharisees could only see Jesus' attendance as reprehensible because it seemed to condone bad people doing bad things.

The self-righteous Pharisees, who could not abide the fact that Jesus wasted so much of his time with the dregs of society, were now absolutely scandalized as Jesus attended this dinner party paid for with what they assumed were ill-gotten gains.

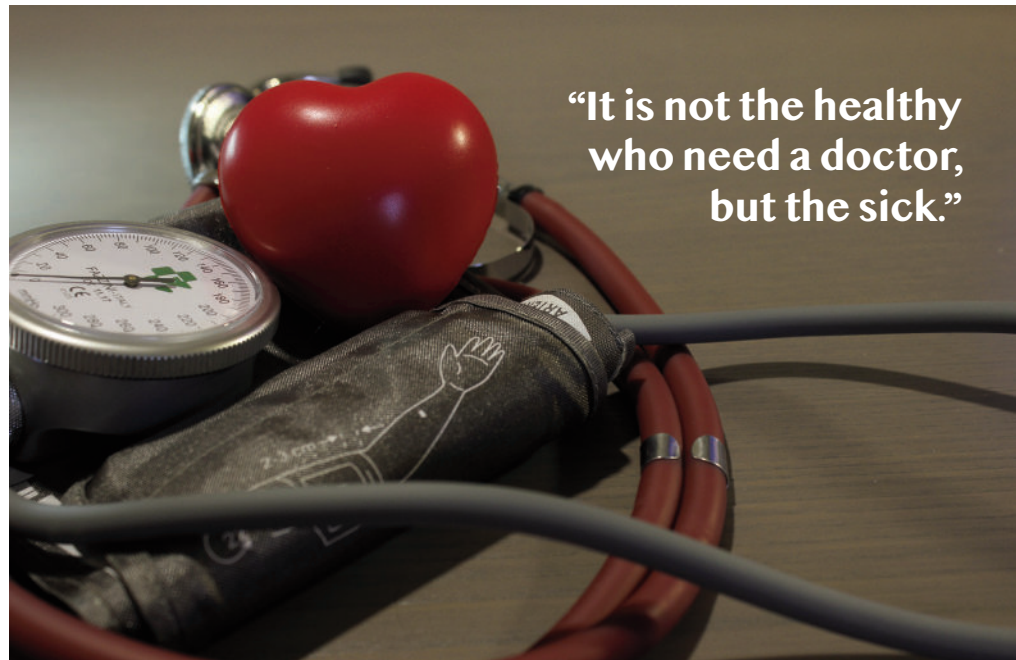
The Pharisees and their religious scholars came to his disciples greatly offended. "What is he doing eating and drinking with crooks and 'sinners'?" Jesus heard about it and spoke up, "Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I'm here inviting outsiders, not insiders—an invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out." —Luke 5:30-32 (MSG).

Jesus speaks of sinners as in need of a doctor. Sinners are sick, and they know they are sick. He speaks of those who are healthy in an ironic sense — those who think they are healthy but indeed are just as sick as those

who realize their illness and accept their need for healing.

The Pharisees — the religious professionals of Jesus' day — did not mind Jesus telling sinners that they needed to repent. What offended them was that Jesus seemed to accept people before they had jumped through all the necessary religious hoops.

But that's the way God's grace works.



"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."

The Pharisees believed people were sick because they did not obey religious laws. But the problem with this law-based religion is that pointing people to the law as a cure for sickness only compounds their sickness. The law does not heal.

If a person is commanded to stop doing wrong things and start doing right things, as defined by law, the problems are not solved. The law does not produce healing and redemption. The law cannot create what it commands.

God's grace accepts us before we do anything to deserve his

love. No amount of spiritual works we can produce can purchase God's love.

Christ-less religion, on the other hand, is just the opposite. Christ-less religion says that "outsiders" cannot come inside — no one can be accepted by God, says Christ-less religion — unless and until they have earned that right. In order to become an insider, according to Christ-less

religion, people must join its club and please and appease the god it claims to represent. God begs to differ.

When Christ-less religion says that God must be pleased and appeased, it really means its own rules and regulations, which religion, in all its humility, says are exactly the same as God's rules and regulations.

These people to whom Jesus ministered knew they were sick and in need of a doctor — they knew that they were in a bad way — they knew they were sinners. They knew that their life had not been one big long

Sunday school of milk and cookies and nice religious stories. They knew heartache and pain.

“COME INSIDE—YOU’RE NOT AN OUTSIDER IN MY KINGDOM”

And Jesus said to this motley crew of his disciples, including the disreputable and deplorable Levi, the former tax collector — “I love you. I accept you. I have a place for you. You can be one of my followers. You can come rest in my grace. And as you well know, my grace is not being given to you because you have earned and deserved it.”

Jesus’ invitation and assurance to all outsiders, including you and me is this: “I have accepted you and embraced you, and now I am going to change you — now I am going to transform you from the kind of life you have lived — which has caused you so much misery, heartache and pain — and now I am going to live my life in you, and you will be

transformed from what you were to the child of God I will make of you.”

God’s love does not magically cause all of our pains to dissolve in a puff of smoke — for he calls us to pick up our cross and follow him. But one of the mysteries of God’s love is that in Christ God shares our journey, he shares our heartache and our pain with us, and in that way loves us with the greatest love of all.

Levi, the tax collector, knew he was a despised and hated person — he probably had only a few friends, likely other tax collectors who made their wealth at the expense of the poor and needy.

Levi was surely filled with guilt, shame and self-loathing — he knew he was not a good person. Jesus said to Levi — “I want you to follow me.”

Jesus didn’t say that because he agreed with ripping people off — that’s self-evident from all the others in Jesus’ life to whom he ministered — the little people —

the least, the last and the lost.

Jesus said that to Levi to tell him — “I can tell you where love is — I can show you — love is Me, Levi — and you will find it in and with me. Come and follow me.”

Levi stopped ripping people off — but he didn’t stop being a sleazy crook so that he could prove to God that he was worthy of God’s love — transformed and changed, inside and out. He received God’s love and then God started to rebuild and refashion Levi’s life. When he received the gifts of God and followed Jesus Levi — just like you and me — became the workmanship — the handiwork of God.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
—Ephesians 2:8-10 □

Greg Albrecht is president of PTM/CWR.

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Attack of the “Love Buts”

◆◆ Keith Giles ◆◆

Try this experiment.

Step 1: Post “God is Love” on Facebook or Twitter.

Step 2: Wait 10 minutes.

Step 3: Read dozens of posts from Christians who are eager to remind you that God is love, BUT God is also a God of wrath.

Almost every single week, I get responses from Christians — always Christians — who cannot allow a post like “God is love and all who live in love live in God, and God in them” rest on its own without adding the asterisk about God’s wrath.

Just last week I posted: “For those who say we focus on Love too much, please remember: God IS Love.”

The first comment was from a friend of mine, Leyna Nguyen, who is not a Christian. Her response was: “There are people who say this?!”

And around five comments below hers, the wave of wrath started to crash. 115 comments later, the post led us to statements like this one:

I’m thinking of when it comes to the love of God:

“For God so LOVED the world...” (John 3:16).

“The LOVE of God is higher, wider, longer and deeper than anyone can imagine” (Ephesians 3:14-21).

“Nothing will ever separate us from the LOVE of God” (Romans 8:31-39).

“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through LOVE” (Galatians 5:6).

“LOVE is patient. LOVE is kind. LOVE keeps no record of wrongs.”

(1 Corinthians 13).

“God is LOVE.” (1 John 4:7-21).

Do you know what you will *never* read following any of these pontifications on the amazing, unending, extravagant love of God?

You will never once read anything about the wrath of God to “balance” out this teaching.

You also never once read any statements about how you and I are unworthy of God’s love, or how we can’t earn or deserve God’s love.

Never. Not even once.

Instead, what we read is page after page, verse after verse of the fantastic, endless, transformative LOVE of God that is poured out

on us night and day like a never-ending waterfall.

So, like it or not, we are loved.

What I don’t understand is why some Christians are so eager to shut down this love train. Why do they seem so afraid of a God whose character is love? Why are they threatened by a God who IS love?

Worse: *Why are some Christians MORE afraid of a God of love than they are of a God of wrath?*

That’s what I legitimately do not comprehend.

Perhaps this is “Big Brother” syndrome? Like when the Prodigal Son returns home and the Father forgives him so completely and quickly

Why are some Christians MORE afraid of a God of love than they are of a God of wrath?

“God loves and never stops but he also hates. Hate is not the opposite of love and God has shown He does both continuously.”

[sigh]

My friend Glenn Warner calls these people “Love Buts,” because when you remind them that God is love, they must respond with, “Yes, God is love, BUT...”

Why is this? Why are some Christians so insistent upon contradicting all the numerous verses in the New Testament that practically gush with the extravagant love of God?

I mean, this is just a small sample of the verses

and throws the party for him, it's the older brother who can't handle it. He hates the idea of this extravagant love being shared with his brother the "sinner" who deserves to sleep outside with the servants.

Maybe that's the reason why some Christians today want to pencil into the margins of their Bibles a long list of wrathful God examples to balance out the overly-loving verses about a God who reconciles, forgives, embraces, restores, and loves his children no matter what they do.

What's strange to me is that their New Testament scriptures don't reflect their bias towards wrath, so they literally have to reach all the way back to the Old Testament — before Jesus came to

us with the gospel (and grace and truth) — to find the pictures of a God they like better. Then they cut and paste that angry God's face over the face of Jesus so they can sleep better at night; rest assured that they are loved and those other "sinners" are going to get what's coming to them in the end.

But I can't buy that. I have to take the New Testament and the "Good News" of Jesus for what it is — Good News!

We are LOVED by a God who IS Love! We were created by this God of Love—in God's image—so this means we are LOVED! Created by Love, in the image of LOVE, to BE Loved.

- This is who we are.
- Love is who God is.
- Love is what God does.

- Loved is who we will always be.

There is no "*Love But...*" verse in the New Testament. There is only love. Endless, boundless, unending, unrelenting, exceptional, amazing, fantastic, glorious love that we can only experience to believe and receive.

Hopefully one day those who call themselves followers of Jesus will relax and get comfortable with the idea of a God who really is love, inside and out. No *ifs*, *ands* or *buts* allowed.

Until then, I'll just keep posting about the God who loves us more than life itself.

Won't you join me? □

Keith Giles and his wife Wendy are local program directors for Peace Catalyst International in El Paso, TX.

**Created by Love,
in the image of LOVE,
to BE Loved.**



War of the Lamb

◆◆ Brian Zahnd ◆◆

Those who want to hold onto a primitive vision of a violent and retributive God often cite the white horse rider passage from Revelation. They will say something like this: “Jesus came the first time as a lamb, but he’s coming back the second time as a lion.” (Despite the fact that no lion is ever seen in Revelation — the lion is the Lamb!) By this they mean the nonviolent Jesus of the Gospels is going to mutate into what they fantasize is the hyper-violent Jesus of Revelation.

Sadly, the proponents of this flawed interpretation seem to prefer their imagined violent Jesus of the future over the nonviolent Jesus of the Gospels. At a basic level they essentially see the Bible like this: After a long trajectory away from the divine violence of the Old Testament culminating in Jesus renouncing violence and calling his followers to love their enemies, the Bible in its final pages abandons a vision of peace and nonviolence as ultimately unworkable and closes with the most vicious portrayal of divine violence in all of Scripture.

JESUS “GIVES UP” ON LOVE?

In this reading of Revelation, the way of peace and love which Jesus preached during his life and endorsed in his death is rejected for the worn-out way of war and violence. When we literalize the militant images of Revelation we arrive at this conclusion: In the end, even Jesus gives up on love and resorts to violence. Tragically, those who refuse to embrace the way of peace taught by Jesus use the symbolic war of Revelation 19 to silence the Sermon on the Mount.

This kind of hermeneutic has disastrous implications; it mutes Jesus’ message of peace and forgiveness. When we literalize the ironic and

symbolic images employed by John of Patmos, we illegitimately use Revelation to give license for our own hellish violence. We reason, if Jesus is going to kill two hundred million people upon his return, what does it matter if we kill one hundred thousand people at Hiroshima?

But is John the Revelator really trying to tell us that in the end, the Lamb is going to transform into the ultimate killing machine? Of course that’s not what John is saying!

First, remember that ALL of Revelation is communicated in theatrical symbol — all of it!



First, remember that **ALL** of Revelation is communicated in theatrical symbol—**ALL OF IT!**

- Locusts that look like horses with human faces, women’s hair, and lion’s teeth.
- An army of two million soldiers riding lion-headed horses that breath fire and belch sulfur.
- A red dragon with seven heads in the heavens that sweeps away a third of the stars with its tail.
- A seven-headed beast from the sea with the body of a leopard, feet of a bear, and mouth of a lion.

- An angel in the sky with a giant sickle who reaps all the grapes of the earth and puts them in a winepress that generates a river of blood for two hundred miles.

These are all symbols! None of them are literal! Just as Jesus riding a flying white horse wearing a blood-drenched robe with a sword protruding from his mouth is a *symbol*. The question is, what is John communicating to us with his creative symbols?

JOHN'S GOSPEL MESSAGE

To begin with, the rider on the white horse is called Faithful and True, and his name is The Word of God. John is not depicting a literal event in the future, but giving us a symbolic reality about the present – John is depicting the glorious triumph of the Word of God (Jesus Christ).

The one called The Word of God is not riding the red horse of war, but the white horse of triumph. Jesus doesn't overcome evil by war, but by his word. This

is how Jesus wages his righteous war. Jesus doesn't wage war like the murderous beast of Rome; Jesus wages war as the slaughtered Lamb of God.

As Eugene Peterson says in his excellent book on

Revelation, "The perennial ruse is to glorify war so that we accept it as a proper means of achieving goals. But it is evil. It is opposed by Christ. Christ does not sit on the

red horse, ever."

After riding the peace donkey on Palm Sunday to contrast his peaceable kingdom with the violent empires of a pagan world, Jesus does not later contradict himself by riding a warhorse in an exaggerated imitation of Genghis Khan.

Perhaps John of Patmos is asking too much of modern readers, but he assumes we will keep in

mind that Jesus is ever and always the slaughtered Lamb. As Richard Bauckham reminds us in his *Theology of Revelation*, "When the slaughtered Lamb is seen 'in the midst of' the divine throne in heaven, the meaning is that Christ's sacrificial death *belongs to the way God rules the world*."

Christ always rules from the cross, never from an Apache attack helicopter!

A SELF-SACRIFICIAL KING

John stresses that Jesus reigns through self-sacrifice by depicting the white horse rider as wearing a robe drenched in blood *before the battle begins*. Jesus' robe is soaked in his own blood. Jesus doesn't shed the blood of enemies; Jesus sheds his own blood. This is the gospel! The rider on the white horse is the slaughtered Lamb, not the slaughtering Beast.

To further make his point, John tells us that the sword the rider uses to smite the nations is not in his hand, but in his mouth. This is not Caesar's sword, but the word of God. The Revelator so desires that we not miss this point, that he comes right out and tells us, "and his name is called The Word of God." It's

"The perennial ruse is to glorify war so that we accept it as a proper means of achieving goals. But it is evil. It is opposed by Christ. Christ does not sit on the red horse, ever." —Eugene Peterson

like when a political cartoon labels the symbol to make sure we properly identify it. The sword is not a sword; the sword is the word of God.

If we combine all of John's creative symbols the message is clear: ***Jesus wages war by self-sacrifice and by what he says***. Jesus combats evil by co-suffering love and the word of God. This is the righteous war of the Lamb.

Christians are called to believe that co-suffering love and the divine word are all Christ needs to overcome evil. A fallen world addicted to war does not believe this, but the followers of Jesus do...or should! If Jesus conquers evil by killing his enemies,

he's just another passing Caesar.

But the whole point of John's Revelation is that Jesus is *nothing* like Caesar! The war of the Lamb looks nothing like the war of the Beast. Jesus is not like Caesar; Jesus does not wage war like Caesar. To miss this point is to misunderstand everything the Apocalypse is trying to reveal! The war of the Lamb is the same war the Apostle Paul describes to the Corinthian church:

We are human, but we don't wage war as humans do. We use God's mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments. We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God. We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ. —2 Corinthians 10:3-5

This is the kind of war that is symbolically depicted in Revelation with a rider on a white horse called The Word of God who wears a robe drenched in his own blood and wages a righteous war with a sword coming from his mouth.

This is not a literal war, this is a symbolic war. This is not a future war; Christ is waging this war right now. ***I know Christ is waging this war right now because I am among those who have been slain by the sword of his mouth and raised again to newness of life!***

Jesus slays me. He slays me with his divine word. And in slaying me, he sets me free. This is salvation. John the Revelator is showing us how Jesus saves the world, not how Jesus kills the world.

The book of Revelation is not where the good news of the gospel goes to die. The book of Revelation is where the good news of the gospel finds its most creative expression. Through inspired dreamlike images John the Revelator dares to imagine a world where the nightmare of endless war finally succumbs to the peaceable reign of Christ. And I, for one, believe in the vision John saw.

The kingdom of the world has now become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he will reign forever and ever.

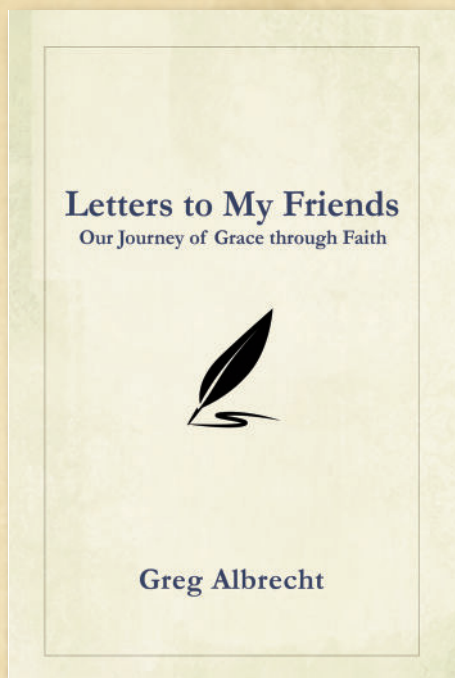
—Revelation 11:15

Worthy is the Lamb! ☐

Brian Zahnd is author of Farewell to Mars and Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God.

CWRpress

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**Stay tuned for this
1st edition collector's item!**

**GREG ALBRECHT***Loving Sinners, Hating Sins?*

God loves sinners, but he hates their sins” is a shallow platitude and cliché that devalues God’s love and seemingly gives us permission to diminish how we extend his love to others. How do we know what God hates, exactly? Where do we find a teaching that commands us to despise and detest?

“God loves sinners but he hates their sins” subverts everything Jesus ever taught.

“God loves sinners but he hates their sins” may sound great on the surface but it severely limits the dimensions of God’s love. Jesus did not tell us God loves us if our behavior measures up to an acceptable standard. Jesus told us that God is love, period, no qualifications. Jesus told us to love sinners, period. Jesus said “love your neighbor” but he did not qualify our love of neighbor by saying we must hate their sin.

God is love. He is good, not evil.

When we say God “hates” we are introducing the next step — invites humans to identify, prioritize and target who and what God hates, specifically.

Sin is sin — evil is evil — failing to live perfectly is failure. We all fail. God is love and he does not give us a list that prioritizes some sins as worse than others. Don’t get sucked into that trap. John 3:16 tells us that God loves *the world* and the next verse says that Jesus did not “come into this world to condemn the world.”

Imagine that! Jesus didn’t come into this world to condemn the world yet many of those who claim to represent him make condemnation of those who do not agree with them one of their highest priorities!

Many religious people don’t comprehend how, nor do many even believe, that God actually does love everyone because they do not accept and believe the predominant definition of God — God is love. *God is love — which is an entirely different dynamic than saying he has love.*

Many people who are ritual-observing, ceremony-compliant, dues-paying members of

religious institutions believe God is angry with virtually everyone. They believe their own religious holy huddle barely escapes God’s wrath because of their compliance to religious dogma and authority. But, while they believe they only just escape the wrath of God, they believe the unsaved, lost, unbelievers, pagans and heretics who are steeped in their sins are up the creek without a paddle.

Many religious people are far from convinced that God loves them with his “in-spite-of love” as opposed to a “because-of-your-performance love.” They are absolutely persuaded that God is filled with wrath. Try telling someone who believes in an angry, wrathful God that God loves everyone. You will quickly discover that *people get angry with anyone who tries to take away their angry God.*

Many believe in an angry God because they need an angry God. Ironically, they need a God of hate to help them feel better! Christ-less religion is quick to accommodate such a desire.

When Christ-less religion feels its mandate and mission is to condemn sin, those enslaved to that religiously-fueled outlook fall prey to pride and self-righteousness. Because many “devout” and religious folks presume they are avoiding really bad sins, they feel that God loves them more. The un-Christlike saying, “God loves sinners but hates sin” leads to condemnation, so that religious authorities feel justified in prioritizing and enumerating, in God’s name, the sins they say God hates the most.

Jesus never disdained or looked down his nose on anyone, but if there was ever any behavior that he resisted, it was when religious authorities of his day regarded others who differed with them as utterly contemptible.

“God loves sinners but hates their sins” almost invariably leads a person to focus on the perceived sins of others rather than looking in the mirror at their own shortcomings.

God doesn’t love us for any imagined virtues that we produce or righteous deeds we perform. We cannot earn God’s love, nor can we lose it. □

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– Week of November 8

Descending to Serve
– Week of November 15

Thank You for Accepting Me
– Week of November 22

Pioneer and Perfector
– Week of November 29

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