



Book Review of *A Gentler God: Breaking free of the Almighty in the company of the human Jesus*, Menangle: Albatross Books, 2010; 390 pp.

In the Introduction, author Doug Frank describes a billboard, erected doubtless by an “evangelical” Christian, that reads “*TRUST JESUS!*”. Frank imagines another a mile further down the road, that reads, “*OR ELSE!*”. These capture something quintessential about evangelical belief and tone, the author, an evangelical Christian himself, claims. This is reminiscent of *The Four Spiritual Laws*, distributed by the millions by evangelical Christians. Its opening line goes, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” But as Hans in my novel *Chrysalis Crucible* (2015) rejoins: “But if you don’t buy in, God hates you and has a terrible plan for your afterlife.” (p. 401)

The reviewer also was raised evangelical Christian, and concurs. I was drawn to this book by Frank after having read his 1986 publication, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century*. (The subtitle has changed in an updated 2009 version. It reads: *The Evangelical Quest for Power in the Early Twentieth Century*.)

The author adduces an impeccable evangelical pedigree that enables him to declare he is an evangelical, a son of evangelicals, as Paul claimed similarly about being a Pharisee. That already foreshadows the “bone to pick” with evangelicalism as Frank says. For of all self-conscious expressions of faith, Frank in his earlier book contends that Evangelicalism is most like Pharisaism in spirit and tone. This fact causes a “twisting in my guts” in response to the highway sign, which means “In the end, it’ll be God’s way – or the highway!” (p. 18) Frank writes:

This book is an attempt to understand the source of the twisting in my guts, and to offer hope to those who share this condition with me (p. 19).

Frank is certain of many who share a similar reaction to a “God” who is enforcer of a religious tradition that is “authoritarian and punitive (p. 19).” Frank asks if this God looks like Jesus, Does he look like the divine Spirit whom Jesus called his “Father” (p. 19)?

The author tellingly adds:

If not – and now you know my conclusion before I begin – where in the world has he come from (p. 19)?

Frank expresses a strong pastoral concern to help liberate fellow evangelicals “- and anyone wounded, angered or alienated by their experience with a threatening God... (p. 20)” There is genuine good news in Jesus not yet heard, Frank believes, in fact “drowned out by the bad news associated with the conventional evangelical God (p. 20).” Frank wants to “clear some of the static in the religious air around us (p. 20).”

He cites two former evangelicals, deeply scarred by evangelicalism, by a “false God (p. 22)”, the author’s contention. He hopes this book will help those so hurt. He uses the word pain, pain akin to that felt by Jesus “tormented – and ultimately hounded to his death – by the false God of institutional religion (p. 22).”

Frank explains that the book is in two parts, one with the bad, the other with the good, news.

In Part One, “Breaking Free of the Almighty”, Chapter 1, “**Born Again... and Again: Getting right with a punitive deity**”, we read of several evangelists, best known of whom was Billy Graham in post-war America who were “masterful showmen who shared an identical formula for success: give teenagers a jolly good time, and then scare the hell out of them (p. 35).” Yet for all of them, the loving God portrayed

will go to the trouble of resurrecting a dead body – just to make sure that person will suffer eternal pain [in hell] (p. 39).

The incentives for following this evangelical “God” were two: love and fear. Of the two, Almost without exception, evangelical preachers have specialized in evoking fear. It is impossible to imagine their sermons without this component (p. 41).

Billy Graham’s first two collections of published sermons closed with a sermon on hell. Graham traced his own conversion to just such a sermon.

But, “The mother of all evangelical horror stories, of course, is the multi-volume *Left Behind* book and film series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins... (p. 49).” But horror “works” is the pragmatic response, to scare the hell out of people.

In this respect, “Hell remains the silent linchpin of evangelical belief (p. 53).” As the author expresses from childhood experience:

In my gut, God’s wrath was far more believable, emotionally charged, and palpable than God’s love (p. 56).

Chapter 2, “**The God that Shame Built: Yearning for a respectable father**” goes some length into the background and psychology of one of the greatest evangelical thinkers, Carl F. H. Henry. Of Henry’s God and that of others of similar ilk, Frank writes:

The God celebrated by Henry, and so many other evangelical thinkers, looks suspiciously like a cleaned-up, beefed-up version of a relationally-distant father.

In today’s evangelicalism, Frank sees two Gods worshipped, neither aligned with the human Jesus: the sovereign and the old fundamentalist.

Chapter 3, “**Nothing but the blood: Paying the price for forgiveness**”, analyzes why blood sacrifice, and why “holy love” demands sacrifice. He discusses John R. W. Stott in this respect, one of the most respected evangelical preachers of his generation. Stott distinguishes “holy love” from human love, and thus makes the death penalty plausible. But Frank calls attention to what Stott seems to miss: that “God is love” (I John 4:8). “This is the only statement of God’s very essence, as distinct from God’s attributes, that we find in the Bible (p. 120).” There are no corresponding statements such as God is holiness, God is justice. Especially when Jesus is brought into the equation. Frank writes:

It is hard to find in Jesus anything like the “holy love” Stott finds in God. Jesus forgives sins freely. God cannot (p. 122).

Frank (correctly, I think) asserts:

Stott’s rendition of the penal substitutionary atonement, like the standard evangelical version, distorts the Bible’s portrait of Jesus and evades the tender

vulnerability of love. Perhaps, instead of using words like “holiness” and “justice” to strip love of its meaning, we need to move in the opposite direction: to re-imagine the meaning of a “holiness” and a “justice” that are so infused with the spirit of an infinitely forgiving love that they require no penalty at all. (p. 123).

This is the great discovery of Restorative Justice. Penalty is never an end, rather a by-product of justice that restores as it owns up to wrong done, repents, makes amends, and commits to harm no more.

So why does this bad news story so resonate amongst evangelicals? Frank suggests:

These two features of evangelicalism – a superficial understanding both of Jesus and of our inner world – go hand in hand (p. 126).

In Chapter 4, “**Caught in the Cross-Hairs: *Squirming beneath the gaze of an all-seeing potentate***”, Frank adduces the panopticon prison developed by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham as analogue of how evangelicals understand God. In this context, Frank writes:

The “carrot” of a warm loving God may be what evangelicals sing about, but the “stick” of a demanding God who has high expectations for their lives still enforces the silent regime of fear in their hearts (p. 148).

In Chapter 5, “**You Must Not Be Yourself: *Guarding the evangelical family secret***”, we learn of the family secret, namely that all the exalted claims about God just don’t quite add up. Frank expresses it bluntly this way, on behalf of many a wounded evangelical soul:

“All this talk about a loving heavenly Father is bullshit. He doesn’t love me, and I don’t love him. I’m tired of trying to love a distant, unfeeling bastard. I want a break from the lies this family tells. I want a break from this family.”
(p. 159)

Frank continues a little later along the same lines, imagining what one might say if speaking the truth buried deep (pp. 160 & 161). Beginning on p. 163, he cites (not verbatim) numerous conversations he has had over the decades about the “family secret” that paint not a rosy picture of robust faith, one instead racked with guilt and second thoughts about the supposed faith “once delivered”. Frank believes that people caught in such faith doldrums have persisted in the “faith” not out of love for a God they nonetheless just do not understand, but out of fear of God’s wrath and of a tyrannical God. Frank calls such a God, based on the understanding of various family therapists, an “impinging parent”. He goes on to describe how “impinging parents – out of their own inner pain – steal the very souls of their children (p. 171).” He sees the evangelical God as too often an “impinging parent”. He writes:

It is not much of a reach to hear in the “commands” of the impinging parent the “commands” often communicated or implied by the stony-hearted – and, I trust, false – God of authoritarian religious traditions like evangelicalism. They are toxic, twisted, manipulative *counterfeits* of the Ten Commandments and other biblical texts, whispered deep into the human spirit by a voice one’s conscious ears are trained not to hear (p. 176).

Frank later picks up on a term widely used by Thomas Merton, “false self”. He writes:

The evangelical “false self” gives us the best protection it can in an environment that is not truly nurturing (p. 181).

Part Two, “In the Company of the Human Jesus” now takes us to Chapter 6, “**The Human Jesus: Meeting a God who comes in weakness**”. The chapter begins with a quote from Jürgen Moltmann: *If Christ is weak and humble on earth, then God is weak and humble in heaven* (p. 185).

In a footnote, the author directs us to the source of his certainty in trusting Jesus: not incontrovertible evidence of some sort, rather an *experience*, “in the aftermath of a singular event in my life, a very brief, unanticipated moment in which a naked, dying God became strangely present to me (p. 186).” We will learn more in Chapter 8.

In a fourth footnote, Frank gives the argument away:

The relationship Jesus had with “sinners,” if we take it seriously, may say all we need to know about God: that God *likes* us, and once we really “get” that, we will like God in return (p. 189).

After a couple of pages of describing Jesus, he asks: “Does this odd fellow look like someone we’d want to call ‘God’ (p. 190)?”

Later, he also writes:

In coming as God to be with us, he comes as a God very like us, raising questions about what it means to be God, and what it means to be human. [There follows a footnote with an outstanding quote by John Caputo about the weak forces used by God in Jesus.] (p. 203)

Thus, a little later, we read, “Jesus’ ‘glory’ will be revealed when his littleness and his weakness are finally seen – specifically, when he suffers and dies (p. 204).” Further:

Again and again in Mark’s Gospel, I hear Jesus saying: “Let me tell you what God is like. God is *not* the Almighty. Does ‘Almighty’ sound humble? Does ‘Almighty’ sound like ‘servant’? Or ‘child’? God is not ‘the greatest.’ God is not ‘number one.’ God is not ‘glorious.’ You’ve got God dead wrong (p. 205).

This of course flies in the face of a vast amount of worship songs this author has participated in over the years! I find myself now more often remaining silent, though difficult to do while standing without drawing attention to oneself! A next step would be some kind of recited mantra that dismisses such songs for the “heresy” (false worship choices) they are.

Frank gives direction here:

Take those images and place them into a mental box marked ‘questionable.’ Then play for a few minutes with these ideas: God is ‘little.’ God is a ‘child.’ God is a ‘servant.’ God is a ‘human son.’ Imagine a naked body on a cross, and think, ‘God is defenseless.’ Notice how different that feels. Notice how it makes you feel (p. 205).

His footnote at the end of this quote is long, but well worth the read. It begins with understanding that “God’s hands are tied (p. 205)”.

Frank alludes to the dismal track record of God in rescuing from great disaster, illness, harm. It is reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's quip re. God: "They say that God is everywhere, and yet we always think of Him as somewhat of a recluse." ! Indeed. Frank writes, "If God is the Almighty Fixer, how do we explain the screaming tragedy of human history (p. 207)?" And of course, so much of those tragedies are humans acting in the name of said Almighty! Small wonder, in context, an atheist's book title is "God is not Great".

Frank eschews five dubious answers to why God does not act (the problem of theodicy) on p. 208, in favour of a God who is ever present but in whispered love "into the hearts both of the butchers and the butchered (p. 209)." He writes: "This is the meaning of 'God is love.' (p. 209) "

Frank concludes the section:

There is a kind of power in God's whispers. But it is the power of powerlessness. It changes things, but invisibly, unpredictably, unaccountably, and, from our point of view, unreliably. It is not the kind of power we imagine, or wish, God to have (p. 210).

Again, the footnote following is helpful, asking how a weak God "created" out of nothing. The response? God called forth life "in the beginning", as he does in every human through his whispers, as he does still in ongoing creation, as he does in resurrection (this last not mentioned here).

And if Jesus debunks "God Almighty", Frank asserts it is out of compassion: "because a God like that [who is not Almighty] is the only God who promises genuine healing (p. 211)." For Jesus knew that an oversized God – the Almighty – cannot touch the deepest wounds. He cannot heal what really ails us. He cannot save us from ourselves (p. 212).

Chapter 7, "**Born Again from Above: *Becoming a real human being***", discusses the internal warfare of so many. Frank avers, "... Jesus is the rarest of creatures: a human being who is not at war with himself (p. 224)."

Frank believes that there are two bedrock emotions: fear and trust [that one is loved]. Philosopher John Macmurray argues similarly, declaring fear and love opposite extremes of the human emotional continuum.

Frank looks at Jesus' fear in the Garden of Gethsemane, seeing it as so real, so human. He conjectures:

Is it possible that, once one has become a real human being, trust will always have the last word (p. 242)?

And again:

This freedom begins for us, as it begins for Jesus, the moment we meet a Father who calls us "beloved" in a way that we absolutely trust (p. 243).

The chapter ends with:

This peace among our inward parts, a peace that is accepting of all that is in us and all that is in others, inaugurates an entirely new spiritual reality. It is a

place of freedom and a place of rest. Jesus called it the “kingdom of God.” It is what being “born again” is really all about (p. 244).

Chapter 8, “**Despised and Rejected: Meeting myself at the cross**”, tells the story, well into the chapter, of Frank’s “visitation”, from which

It was the moment Jesus came alive for me. My father came alive for me as well. And something in me came alive that is still alive today (p. 275).

Many other stories are told in this chapter of encounters with God/Christ/Spirit. Frank writes: The Spirit of God is wildly profligate in the manner in which it intersects and begins its transforming process in the lives of human beings (p. 279).

Towards the end of the chapter, we read:

As I rest in this hospitality, it becomes quite natural to trust that the figure on the cross, who reveals myself to me, also reveals true God to me. This moment of truth – that God and I become one in the dying Jesus – will never be forgotten (p. 281).

In Chapter 9, “**To Hell with Jesus, Getting salted in a saving fire**”, we read:

To many minds, hell is Christianity’s most reprehensible teaching. Non-believers notice readily what Christians often ignore: there is something unhinged about a God who tells people to love their enemies while he promises to torment his own enemies without mercy – and for eternity (p. 285).

Frank comments on such unbelievers:

I honour these skeptics, and all who know in their hearts that the conventional view of hell as eternal punishment for our sins makes God a monster and mocks the meaning of the word “love.” Those who reject such a hell have taken the word “love” far more seriously than have most Christians. Those who reject such a God bear witness to the human yearning for a better God than the one many Christians worship. I take the existence of this yearning as a sign that a truer, better God can be found (p. 285).

But Frank cannot deny Jesus’ allusions to the reality of hell, or that “he considered hell a useful spiritual truth (p. 286).” In the story of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25), most preachers believing in a hell of eternal conscious punishment find the warning about hell useful. Frank comments,

Implicitly, perhaps without noticing, they use a story about compassion to warn that compassion has an outer limit: those who show no compassion will receive no compassion (p. 288).

The author spends several pages analyzing this story, concluding that indeed compassion has no limit. He writes:

If we trust our story, and the one who tells it, this journey will feel like a punishment, like a passage through “eternal fire.” But it will also be the path to re-connection – with themselves, with the suffering ones they formerly ignored, with the suffering God (p. 292).

Frank then interprets the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19 – 31 in the direction of “the saving purposes of ‘eternal fire.’ (p. 293)” He writes:

Perhaps no human being finally arrives in Abraham’s bosom unscorched by the fires of hell – suffering in this life or in the next. To be scorched is to have our nakedness revealed to our own eyes. Unless that nakedness is revealed, we do not know ourselves as human or truly whole. Fire is a healing gift for the goats (p. 295).

And “punishment” is the word for this gift. Further,

But in Jesus’ mind, whatever else “punishment” means, it does *not* mean “condemnation.” It describes a necessary process in a journey of salvation.

Hell, then, is a metaphor for the *kindness of God*, who cannot bring us to ourselves except through suffering...

Jesus seems to want to make a simple point: suffering is the portal through which everyone must pass to become a real human being. No one evades the fire. It comes in life, or it comes in death. As Jesus taught his disciples, “everyone will be salted with fire” (Mark 9:49). (p. 296)

This perspective utterly contradicts the interpretation of the doctrine of hell by Larry Dixon (a former missionary colleague of mine) in *The Other Side of the Good News: Contemporary Challenges to Jesus’ Teaching on Hell* (2003) – which J. I. Packer fully endorses and declares Dixon’s treatment to be the best evangelical expression of said doctrine. Besides begging the question in the subtitle, Dixon misses the Gospel entirely by actually positing another side to the “Good News”. There is “Good News”, period. Or there is not. Dixon’s book, by Frank’s standard and my observation, is sadly one long *Pharisaical* tract, properly speaking a Christian *heresy* (false choice).

Further, Frank’s perspective squares solidly with Restorative Justice in its incorporation of “restorative punishment” into its workings – not as an end, rather as a pointer and conduit to healing and change.

Frank does further work teasing out subtleties regarding hell. He retells the story of Jonah as one who goes to hell and back. He likewise retells the story of Peter as one who went to hell and back. He suggests

Hell, it seems, is only – albeit painfully – a way-station on the journey to salvation (p. 309).

His footnote at this point is intriguing, in his wondering about “a special form of hell” for America’s evangelical leaders (and others of their ilk) “where bitter tears become the necessary doorway to salvation (p. 309)?” It is arrestingly suggestive.

Frank also looks at Jesus too who went to hell and back. He writes:

It will perhaps be a cold day in hell before evangelical preachers use the story of Jonah to explain that “eternal” flames are *not* without end and that Jesus is *present* in hell. But large sectors of the Christian church have kept alive the strange idea that Jesus went to hell to put an end to its tortures (p. 310).

Frank tells the story of Ety Hillesum as exemplary of taking the salt of human suffering into her life at a Nazi death camp. She could have exempted herself, but willingly chose to join her family on what Frank calls a journey to hell.

Chapter 10, “**Breaking the Almighty’s spell: *Learning compassion in the school of sorrow*”**, observes that

Evangelical Christianity breeds a special category of goat: the kind whose lack of compassion seems to grow out of, and is often supported by, a supercharged loyalty to the Almighty (pp. 314 & 315).

Frank quotes several leading evangelicals in response to various disasters who try to explain them in terms of God’s needing to get our attention. He writes:

But that way of speaking, I will suggest in this chapter, reflects an unconscious resistance to mourning (p. 317).

He wonders in context of Scripture whether evangelicals are not “the current embodiment of Babylon (p. 318)?” If so, he suggests that evangelicals have become the biblical equivalent of “goats”, and as such will endure God’s wrath (cleansing fire).

Through recounting some of his own story in relation to his father, Frank continues to call on a process of mourning in our lives. He writes:

I believe the mission of the cross is to set this mourning in motion. It unmask the Almighty to reveal a smaller, more vulnerable, more “foolish-looking” God. This human God – like our real human parents – looks very much like ourselves, like the selves we really are. This God is no better able to manage the events of history, to guarantee our success or protect us from injury, than we are. This God is no more the Almighty than we are (p. 333).

The final paragraph of the chapter reads:

We can and will experience true transformation if, in the cross, we meet the broken God and our suffering broken selves. There, as our hearts flood with compassion, the Almighty who lives inside us will die a natural death and be raised again as one who truly loves us. And although our face is stained with tears, everything inside us will shout for joy (p. 343).

The author evidently speaks from experience!

Chapter 11, the final chapter, is entitled “**The Freedom to Be a Mess: *Stumbling into genuine wholeness*”**. Frank points out that we are “many people (p. 344).” One of them is the “Housekeeper” who constantly strives to fix things, and to keep everything tidy. He is “not a fan of the real Jesus (p. 351).”

At one point we read:

The freedom to be a mess is the freedom to bring my whole variegated, complicated inner world *into* my relationships with both myself and others. Giving others what is really me – the whole of me – is what it means to love. If I cannot love out of the truth of what I am, I cannot love at all (p. 355).

At another point we read:

Of the many audiences I hope this book reaches, these walking wounded are the ones I most prize. I hope they will find some encouragement, as I do, in the freedom Jesus offers us to embrace the often messy reality of *who we really are*. (p. 356; emphasis in the original)

Frank then tells the story of a kind of Ultimate Housekeeper: Saul/Paul. In a footnote on p. 360, Frank acknowledges

The persistent misuse of Paul by the preachers of good housekeeping has made him a favorite whipping boy of young people who criticize evangelicalism for its joyless legalism, social conservatism, and spiritual poverty. Paul's comments about the role of women in the church, particularly since they are interpreted as timeless edicts rather than understood sensitively in their cultural context – and because they have been shamelessly exploited by Christian male-supremacists – have made it easy for thinking young Christians to distrust Paul and project onto him the anger they feel at the male religious establishment (p. 360).

I would add that Paul is also rejected for being the “inventor” of a Gentile Christianity that was deeply anti-Semitic. Another take on Paul, by a practising Jewish feminist, Pauline scholar, and professor in an evangelical institution, who actually reads Paul positively, is: *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (2010).

The freedom Frank calls us to in this chapter “to be a mess”, is contrary to any Enlightenment grasp for freedom. In footnote 18 on p. 361, Frank explores the difference.

He writes at one point:

Although I have not used the word often, what I have been exploring throughout *Part Two* of this book is the meaning of the Christian doctrine of resurrection (p. 368).

And he writes a little later:

For me, therefore, the salvation event is itself the meaning of Easter. For Jesus to be risen, he must come alive here and now, in the heart of this human being or that (p. 369).

A Gentler God is not an easy, though it is an outstanding, read. It delivers on its intent, in this reviewer's opinion. More, it strikes as utterly *authentic*. No religious nostrums indeed, no sham, no phony piety, guileless.

It deserves to be read and reread as “Good News” for all evangelicals so desperately in need of it, though often unaware. While evangelicals are primarily addressed, all who struggle to be authentic in their spirituality cannot but be nurtured and challenged by this amazing missive.