

Chapter 9: Book Review of *A Gentler God: Breaking Free of the Almighty in the Company of the Human Jesus*,¹ Doug Frank

I first learned of Doug Frank when he was invited to Regent College by friend and professor, Loren Wilkinson, to lecture in the 1980s. The history prof then, Don Lewis — a former fellow student — was quite upset by what Frank had to say, and challenged him to a debate. To put it mildly: Doug Frank can hold his own! . . .

His book, published by then, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century*,² was for me an outstanding read: combining erudition and passion with great historiographical and sociological acumen: on top of which, it was a rousing prophetic tract — and a great service for the Church.

At least, a service for those *trying* to have eyes and ears to see/hear.

As my friend Ron Dart says, though, the “Evangelical Sanhedrin” was sadly unkind to him. . . Ron and I had planned visiting him a few years ago, but that unfortunately fell through.

The book reviewed in this chapter is once again outstanding — for those with those right kinds of eyes and ears.

¹ Frank, *A Gentler God*. Book review is also here: <https://waynenorthey.com/book-review/a-gentler-god/>, accessed August 21, 2024.

² The subtitle was changed in an updated 2020 version (Eugene: Wipf and Stock) to: *The Evangelical Quest for Power in the Early Twentieth Century*.) That quest continues unabated in the 21st century, and is centred since 2015 on allegiance to Trump.

In an article in *The Atlantic*, American Evangelical Peter Wehner, writes:

Too often, I fear, when Americans look at the Church, they see not the face of Jesus, but the style of Donald Trump, (The Evangelical Church”).

In a more recent Atlantic article by the same author, one reads:

Everything, including their faith, has been subordinated to their devotion to Trump. Many, including [Al] Mohler (see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Mohler, accessed August 23, 2024) and [Franklin] Graham (see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franklin_Graham, accessed August 23, 2024), have cast aside what was once a core belief—the centrality of moral integrity in politicians, and especially in presidents—because that is what obeisance to the former president requires of them. (“Did God Save Donald Trump?” (<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2024/08/trump-assassination-attempt-christianity/679523/>, accessed August 23, 2024; emphasis added.)

He cites author Kristin Kobes du Mez:

. . . in fact their faith is profoundly shaped by cultural and political values, by their racial identity and their Christian nationalism. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristin_Kobes_Du_Mez; <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/27/special-series/kristin-kobes-du-mez-what-we-believe-about-history.html>, accessed August 23, 2024)

He articulates a dominant conservative Evangelical perversion of the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are the politically powerful, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are the culture warriors, for they will be called children of God.

He ends with:

The Jesus of the Gospels . . . needs to be reclaimed. (Wehner, “Evangelical Church.”)

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

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* (FSL),³ distributed in the billions by Evangelical Christians since 1952. Its opening line goes:

God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.

Yet as Hans Beutler in my coming-of-age novel *Chrysalis Crucible*⁴ rejoins with reference to the Four Spiritual Laws’ opening line:

“But if you don’t buy in, God hates you and has a terrible plan for your afterlife!”⁵

I also was raised (Canadian) Evangelical Christian and was drawn to this book by Frank after having read his 1986 publication, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the*

³ See: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/what-are-the-4-spiritual-laws.html>, accessed August 23, 2024.

In 1967 at the end of Grade 13 in London, Ontario where I lived, I travelled to Montréal Canada to “witness” at Expo 67’s (see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expo_67, accessed August 23, 2024.) “Sermons From Science” Pavilion. (See photos: http://expo67.ncf.ca/expo_sermons_p4.html, accessed August 23, 2024.)

I had taken training in the previous winter months on how to get people to “accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour.” It consisted in memorizing the FSL booklet, so that the “target” could read along while we recited it.

Then, at the Pavilion, there was a slick assembly-line approach to getting people “saved.” It was all timed to the minute, like automobile assembly lines. If successful in making a convert — the decision to accept Christ — “rejoicing” of angels in heaven notwithstanding (Luke 15:10), it was all business on the ground: personal information was quickly taken in triplicate, and out the door exited the new “convert”: never to be heard from/thought of again!

And on to another round of targets exiting from the next “Sermon.” Evangelize ‘em, save ‘em, and repeat, etc. “We catch ‘em, others clean ‘em,” could have been our motto.

It could not have been more impersonal, more alien: in short, a “Christian” travesty.

Five years later, and after 6 months of “training” south of Chicago at the headquarters of “Literature Crusades” in Prospect Heights, Illinois, I set off to West Berlin to do the evangelistic *schtick* all over again — this time for two years. That disastrous experience created for me an something PTSD-like, and I returned home, tail between my legs, deeply hurting.

My novel, *Chrysalis Crucible* (see about it: <https://waynenorthey.com/chrysalis-crucible/>, accessed August 23, 2024,) first published in 2007, revised, then again released in 2015, gives the ethos of my personal journey — *albeit via fiction* — of working at coming to terms with that great harm done — to all concerned — including our “converts”!

Bluntly: those entire approaches are when evangelism is *not* the Gospel — for anyone!

⁴ Northey, *Chrysalis Crucible*, 2015, 401. See too the previous footnote.

⁵ Because of my vocation (working with crime and *punishment* issues), I have spent nearly 50 years contemplating and at times writing on the issue of “hell.” (See: <https://waynenorthey.com/?s=hell>, accessed August 23, 2024.)

I am convinced that the long history of the West’s dominant teaching — that hell is a God-designed place of “*eternal conscious torment*” — *is the single greatest anti-evangelistic tool in Church History!* Clicking on/going to the link just above will explain some of why. See also in this book, Chapter 2: “Hell and Its Other Side.”

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

Twentieth Century.⁶

Kristin Kobes du Mez⁷ paints an overwhelming picture of American white Evangelicalism’s/Christian nationalism’s⁸ current fascistic grasp for not only political power, but for lawmaking power, reflected in the current Supreme Court, to impose a tragic view of their “Christian god” on everyone!

In *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*,⁹ her analysis begins with Billy Graham¹⁰ in the 1950s, and continues to the present.

Her story presents indeed a corrupted faith, one that is *an ultimate inversion of an early Christian hymn in Philippians 2: 3 – 11*:

3Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty pride, but in humility consider others more important than yourselves. **4**Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

5Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus:

6Who, existing in the form of God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be grasped,

7but emptied himself,
taking the form of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁶ Frank, *Less Than Conquerors*. (When as mentioned above, it was re-issued, the subtitle was changed to: *The Evangelical Quest for Power in the Early Twentieth Century. That nails the problem! — an overweening “Quest for Power.”* It’s also the very same problem in post-War 20th-century America; and again, in the 21st century.)

My wife, Esther, and I do work for an End Abuse program with Mennonite Central Committee, Abbotsford Canada. (See: <https://waynenorthey.com/2024/04/07/19022/>, accessed August 23, 2024.) Part of our work jointly is with men in a “Home Improvement” course who (have) abuse(d) their partners. Throughout the 15 weeks, we keep circling back to the destructive use of “power over” in intimate partner relationships. In short: *It is wrong!* — invariably destructive of good relationships.

Even in God (*when so imagined!*), it is wrong, and why the “Almighty” must go. This is significant part of the burden of Doug Frank in the book under review.

The same problem is writ large in politics. I cite in my Preface Lord Acton’s (see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dalberg-Acton,_1st_Baron_Acton, accessed August 23, 2024.) classic commentary on this: he, a noted 19th-century Catholic historian.

I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men with a favourable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption it is the other way against holders of power, increasing as the power increases. Historic responsibility has to make up for the want of legal responsibility.

Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority: still more when you superadd the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority. (Dalberg, “Transcript of Letter.”)

See as well Chapter 12, that discusses (mainly) Vernard Eller and Jacques Ellul in a book review of *Christian Anarchy*.

⁷ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristin_Kobes_Du_Mez, accessed August 23, 2024.

⁸ See: <https://waynenorthey.com/?s=white+evangelicalism> (accessed August 23, 2024).

⁹ Clicking here (<https://waynenorthey.com/2023/02/15/book-review-of-jesus-and-john-wayne-how-white-evangelicals-corrupted-a-faith-and-fractured-a-nation/>, accessed August 23, 2024) will take you to my full-of-related-material page on this, including my book review of said book.

¹⁰ There is much on my website (sadly) about Billy Graham, and his son, Franklin. See: <https://waynenorthey.com/?s=graham>, accessed August 23, 2024.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — "Not Enough!"

8And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death —
even death on a cross.

9Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name above all names,
10that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Doug Frank 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 expressions of Christian faith, Frank in his earlier book contends that Evangelicalism is *most like Pharisaism*¹¹ *in spirit and tone*.

This fact causes a “twisting in my guts,” he says, in response to the highway sign, which means “In the end, it’ll be God’s way — or the highway!”¹²

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.¹³

Frank is certain of many who experience a similar reaction to a “god” who is enforcer of a religious tradition that is “authoritarian and punitive.”¹⁴ In other words, *the tradition displays a baptized power-over dynamic!*

Frank asks if this “god” in any way looks like Jesus:

Does he look like the divine Spirit whom Jesus called his “Father”?¹⁵

The author tellingly adds:

If not — and now you know my conclusion before I begin — where in the world has he come from?¹⁶

Frank expresses a strong pastoral concern to help liberate fellow Evangelicals

¹¹ He writes in his earlier book:

We are the Pharisees of our time, if anyone is. . . (Frank, *Less Than Conquerors*, 229)

He yearns nonetheless for,

. . . a church that awakens to the Stranger, Jesus Christ, the Jesus Christ of the biblical witness; not the denatured, ideologically and morally useful Jesus Christ of Evangelicalism. . .

The Epilogue’s penultimate paragraph reads:

Whether in auspicious or declining times, as we have seen, we display a tenacious commitment to self-deceit. It is true that we are those who like to think we heed Jeremiah’s words, ‘Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord.’ Our history, however, gives evidence of Jeremiah’s wisdom in adding these words: ‘The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?’ (Jeremiah 17:7, 9). In our very protests of trust in the Lord, we find occasion for our deepest self-deceits (Frank, *Less Than Conquerors*, 278).

¹² Frank, *Gentler God*, 18.

¹³ Frank, *Gentler God*, 19.

¹⁴ Frank, *Gentler God*, 19.

¹⁵ Frank, *Gentler God*, 19.

¹⁶ Frank, *Gentler God*, 19.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

. . . and anyone wounded, angered or alienated by their experience with a threatening God. . .”¹⁷

There is genuine good news in Jesus not yet heard, Frank believes, in fact, . . . drowned out by the bad news associated [too often!] with the conventional Evangelical God.¹⁸

He wants to

. . . clear some of the static in the religious air around us.¹⁹

He cites two former Evangelicals, deeply scarred by Evangelicalism, by its “false God.”²⁰ 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.²¹

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.²²

Yet for all of them, if Jesus is rejected, 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].²³

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.*²⁴

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*²⁵ books and film series by Tim LaHaye²⁶ and Jerry Jenkins²⁷. . .²⁸

However, horror “works,” is the pragmatic response — to “scare the hell out of

¹⁷ Frank, *Gentler God*, 20.

¹⁸ Frank, *Gentler God*, 20.

¹⁹ Frank, *Gentler God*, 20.

²⁰ Frank, *Gentler God*, 22.

²¹ Frank, *Gentler God*, 20.

²² Frank, *Gentler God*, 35.

²³ Frank, *Gentler God*, 39.

²⁴ Frank, *Gentler God*, 41, emphasis added.

²⁵ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*. And see also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left_Behind, accessed August 23, 2024.

²⁶ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tim_LaHaye, accessed August 23, 2024.

²⁷ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerry_B._Jenkins, accessed August 23, 2024.

²⁸ Frank, *Gentler God*, 49.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

people.”²⁹

In this respect, says Frank,

Hell remains the silent linchpin of Evangelical belief.³⁰

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.³¹

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 20th-century Evangelical thinkers, Carl F. H. Henry.³² 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.³³

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 there must be blood sacrifice, and why “holy love” demands sacrifice. He discusses John R. W. Stott³⁴ in this regard, one of the most respected Evangelicals of his generation.³⁵ 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.*”³⁶ Frank writes:

This is the only statement of God’s very essence, as distinct from God’s attributes, that we find in the Bible.³⁷

There are no corresponding statements such as “God is holiness,” “God is (punitive)

²⁹ Dwight Wilson in *Armageddon Now!*, wrote similarly that Evangelicalism found “prophecy” too useful in evangelism to ever dispense with it, despite its perfect failure record in predicting the future, shown — in his study of Evangelicals’ repeated attempts at linking biblical prophecy and historical events — for over 100 years.

It seems too often that a crass manipulative utilitarianism is the besetting sin of many Evangelical Christian leaders/evangelists.

³⁰ Frank, *Gentler God*, 53. There is much on my website concerning hell. *First*, several of us contributed to Kevin Miller’s edited book, *Hellrazed?* (See: <https://waynenorthey.com/2017/11/16/hellrazed-by-kevin-miller/>, accessed August 23, 2024. This book arose five years after Kevin’s powerful documentary: *Hellbound?* ([https://www.kevinmillerxi.com/store/p14/Hellbound%3F%28Standard DVD%29.html](https://www.kevinmillerxi.com/store/p14/Hellbound%3F%28Standard%20DVD%29.html)) , accessed August 23, 2024.

Second, please see my website with so much on hell, here: <https://waynenorthey.com/?s=hell>, accessed August 23, 2024.

³¹ Frank, *Gentler God*, 56.

³² See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_F._H._Henry, accessed August 23, 2024. One might ask, can one effectively psychoanalyse the dead? I think he just might have pulled it off. . .

³³ Frank, *Gentler God*, 96.

³⁴ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Stott, accessed August 20, 2024.

³⁵ Another is J. I. Packer (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._I._Packer, accessed August 20, 2024), discussed below.

³⁶ I John 4:8. My friend Brad Jersak also states that Calvinists do not like this verse (J. I. Packer also apparently disliked it, too.) — any more than Martin Luther liked the Epistle of James — “*eine recht stroherne Epistel*” (Luther) — “a right strawy epistle.”

³⁷ Frank, *Gentler God*, 120.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

justice,” “God is wrath,” etc. 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 [seemingly] cannot.³⁸

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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

This then is the great discovery and promise of Restorative Justice. Penalty is never an end, rather by-product of justice that restores as it owns up to wrong(s) done, repents, makes amends, and commits to harm no more.⁴¹

Why does this contrary “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.⁴²

In Chapter 4, “**Caught in the Cross-Hairs: Squirming beneath the gaze of an all-seeing potentate,**” Frank adduces the panopticon prison,⁴³ developed by philosopher Jeremy Bentham⁴⁴ (founder of modern utilitarianism) 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

³⁸ Frank, *Gentler God*, 122.

³⁹I participated in an excellent project in 2007, edited by [Brad Jersak](#) and Michael Hardin: *Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*. (Jersak and Hardin, Stricken?) Of it:

In the search for constructive rethinking of the cross, this book is a mother lode of resources. The stature of the contributors, the focused clarity of the conversation, and the urgency of the topic make *Stricken by God?* a work that will be accessible and transforming for a wide audience. — S. Mark Heim (<https://divinity.yale.edu/faculty-and-research/yds-faculty/stephen-mark-heim>, accessed August 20, 2024.)

⁴⁰ Frank, *Gentler God*, 123. This in a nutshell has been the burden of my theological work in “*justice that transforms*” for 50 years; certainly, the grand theme of this book series. Though Christopher Marshall (see **References**) does not go far enough in addressing the practical implications of his theology (“razing hell” — Kevin Miller; therefore, “razing punishment” — “penal abolition”), as indicated in this book’s Preface, it is also his grand theme. *God’s justice is God’s love! God’s love is his justice!*

⁴¹ See also theologically on this, my book reviews: Northey, *Beyond Retribution*; Northey, *Compassionate Justice*; Northey, *God’s Just Vengeance*; and Northey, *The Fall of the Prison*.

⁴² Frank, *Gentler God*, 126.

⁴³ See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panopticon>, accessed August 20, 2024.

⁴⁴ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy_Bentham, accessed August 20, 2024.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

silent regime of fear in their hearts.⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶

Frank continues a little later along the same lines, imagining what one might say if speaking the truth buried deep within many of us.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

He sees the Evangelical god as too often an “impinging parent,” writing:

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.⁴⁹

Frank later picks up on a term widely used by Father Thomas Merton⁵⁰: “*false self*.”⁵¹ He writes:

The Evangelical “false self” gives us the best protection it can in an environment that is not truly nurturing.⁵²

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

⁴⁵ Frank, *Gentler God*, 148. And of course, *the all-time best evangelistic tool ever is fear of hell!* (And arguably, the inverse is the case for a great swath of former Evangelicals!)

See as well my coming-of-age novel that also treats in part of hell: *Chrysalis Crucible*. (See: <https://waynenorthey.com/chrysalis-crucible/>, accessed August 20, 2024.)

⁴⁶ Frank, *Gentler God*, 159.

⁴⁷ Frank, *Gentler God*, 160 – 161.

⁴⁸ Frank, *Gentler God*, 171.

⁴⁹ Frank, *Gentler God*, 176.

⁵⁰ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Merton, accessed August 20, 2024.

⁵¹ There is an outstanding reflection on this understanding by Ilia Delio (See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ilia_Delio, accessed August 20, 2024.) here: “Discovering the true self in God with Merton’s guidance.” (<https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/discovering-true-self-god-mertons-guidance>, accessed August 20, 2024.)

⁵² Frank, *Gentler God*, 185.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — "Not Enough!"

noted German theologian Jürgen Moltmann⁵³:

*If Christ is weak and humble on earth, then God is weak and humble in heaven.*⁵⁴

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.⁵⁵

We will learn more in Chapter 8.

Frank in the above quote adduces, without naming, *apophatic* theology.⁵⁶ Of it:

Apophatic theology, also known as negative theology, is a form of theological thinking and religious practice which attempts to approach God, the Divine, by negation, to speak only in terms of what may not be said about the perfect goodness that is God. It forms a pair together with cataphatic theology,⁵⁷ which approaches God or the Divine by affirmations or positive statements about what God *is*.

The apophatic tradition is often, though not always, allied with the approach of mysticism, which aims at the vision of God, the perception of the divine reality beyond the realm of ordinary perception.⁵⁸

I add: In my spiritual journey, the former way has increased meaningfully for me, especially with the insight, (so contrary to my Plymouth Brethren⁵⁹ upbringing,) that, as Brian Zahnd⁶⁰ puts it:

The Bible is the written word of God that bears witness to the living Word of God. God did not become a book, but God did become a human being. The Incarnation is not the creation of the canon of Scripture but the virgin birth of Jesus Christ.⁶¹

This insight became enormously liberating for me, and helps keep me on a contemplative path.

Larry Dixon⁶² was also raised in that tradition. In that connection, a fellow team member in West Berlin, Tom Howe (since deceased), likewise so raised, while on the mission with us in

⁵³ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%BCrgen_Moltmann, accessed August 20, 2024.

⁵⁴ Frank, *Gentler God*, 185.

⁵⁵ Frank, *Gentler God*, 186.

⁵⁶ There is a superb chapter by T. S. Wilson — fellow member of a Contemplative Order — on both the *apophatic* and the *cataphatic* traditions in Dart, *Legatum I*.

⁵⁷ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cataphatic_theology, accessed August 23, 2024.

⁵⁸ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apophatic_theology, accessed August 23, 2024, *Wikipedia*.

⁵⁹ A religious movement that was "*quintessential fundamentalism*" at inception (and remains fundamentalist), according to historian Ernest Sandeen (see: <https://www.britannica.com/contributor/Ernest-R-Sandeen/2580>, accessed August 23, 2024.) in: *The Roots of Fundamentalism*. See further Wikipedia: Christian fundamentalism (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_fundamentalism, accessed August 23, 2024).

As with Frank, I have spent a lifetime trying to disabuse myself of ideas of dogmatic exclusion in religious understandings, and more generally. (The reader of course may reflect ironically that, based on this piece and other writings, I've not been all that successful! . . .

To which I can only reply:

Sigh. . . Lord, have mercy on this "unprofitable servant" (KJV, Luke 17:10).

⁶⁰ See: <https://brianzahnd.com/about/>, accessed August 20, 2024.

⁶¹ Zahnd, "Jesus Is What God," 61.

⁶² See in this publication, "Hell and Its Other Side," that interacts with Dixon's book: *The Other Side of the Good News*.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

Berlin (unbeknownst then to us all), struggled immensely with his own homosexuality, and became sexually involved with others. In a moment of crisis for Tom (upon visiting us at Christmas, 1973, after having left the team that fall to attend Wiedenest Bible School⁶³ in southern Germany), and staying with me, Tom’s story came pouring out one evening.

He had just returned to my apartment from his *rendez-vous* with some of his partners, who had robbed him and roughed him up. He felt devastated.

From my sheltered upbringing, this was shockingly challenging! Ironically, however, Tom — a “weirdo” I had always thought — and I became subsequently (unlikely) friends.

A few years later, I read, and sent to Tom: *The Returns of Love: A Christian View of Homosexuality*,⁶⁴ by Alex Davidson (a pseudonym). That started me down a path of understanding with Tom.

Davidson told his story: one of chosen celibacy in light of Evangelical teaching against homosexuality. He admitted that his orientation was still fully homosexual, and that he lived with unfulfilled longing for intimate human love.

Tom visited our family twice while we lived in Langley BC — albeit each time to take part in cruises departing Vancouver with fellow homosexuals. He lived in Ohio, and was a high school teacher — I suspect an excellent one. Each time, we discussed at length his fully immersive lifestyle in his (for me, alien) world.

On one occasion, Larry Dixon and his wife — at the same time I visited them, and was given chapter 5 in unpublished manuscript form of Larry’s *The Other Side of the Good News*⁶⁵ — challenged Tom late into the night about his evident “sinfulness.” Tom felt traumatized by the experience. (He displayed deep feelings freely.)

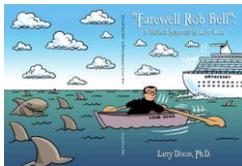
⁶³ See: <https://www.wiedenest.de/>, accessed August 20, 2024.

⁶⁴ Davidson, *The Returns of Love*.

⁶⁵ See my discussion of the book in this *Volume*: “Hell — and its Other Side.” See it also on my website here: https://waynenorthey.com/book-review/the-other-side-of-the-good-news-confronting-the-contemporary-challenges-to-jesus-teachings-on-hell/?preview_id=29322&preview_nonce=4c088dc6d0&thumbnail_id=29323&preview=true, accessed August 20, 2024.

See also my longer piece incorporating that book review: “War and Hell — and Exception Clause Footnote Theology”: <https://waynenorthey.com/2014/04/29/war-and-hell/>, accessed August 20, 2024. It may also be found in Northey, *Justice That Transforms: Volume Three*.

Then there was my response to his so sad book — a kind of Evangelical *fatwa*: “*Farewell, Rob Bell*”: *A Biblical Response to Love Wins*:



https://www.amazon.ca/dp/B00564HX0A/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1, accessed August 3, 2024.)

My review is here: <https://waynenorthey.com/book-review/farewell-rob-bell/>, accessed August 3, 2024. Whoever Dixon’s “god” is — “*Scriptolatry*,” I fear — it cannot deliver peace, freedom and joy. . .

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — "Not Enough!"

Later, they had actually visited Tom, and in staying there overnight, discovered Tom's — *for them beyond the pale* — overtly homosexual lifestyle.

In his recounting, in that experience there was renewed trauma, as he was sorely upbraided by his visitors about his "sinful ways." Both experiences were discussed when Tom visited, and in our correspondence.

I also received a letter from Larry, reproaching me that I had not told them Tom was a practising homosexual.⁶⁶

Tom eventually became HIV positive, and died of AIDS.

It felt a great personal loss. I was deeply moved when his parents sent me all Tom's memorabilia from his time in West Berlin. They indicated gratitude and that this was their tribute to Tom's and my friendship. I had known that an older brother had previously completely cut ties with his parents, and they did not know even where he lived. And now, they had lost a second son. . . There is great pathos here. Tragically, Tom died feeling alienation from church and family. . .

What Evangelicalism at its worst (of many "worsts") does to its own children. . .

I reflect at times on Tom's brother, the parents, and Tom. I wonder in particular how Tom would handle as a senior now, the horrific rise of White Christian Nationalism in America,⁶⁷ so intent on relegating the "Other" to hell in the afterlife; to hellish existence in this life — fully engineered by their "god" and the Bible. I wonder, and often grieve. . .

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.⁶⁸

After a couple of pages of describing Jesus, he asks:

"Does this odd fellow look like someone we'd want to call 'God'?"⁶⁹ — with his answer implicit in the question.

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.⁷⁰

There follows a footnote with an outstanding quote by John Caputo,⁷¹ about the weak forces used by God in Jesus:

The power of the kingdom is the powerless power to melt hearts that have hardened, to keep hope alive when life is hopeless, to revive the spirits of the dispirited and the despairing. . . Death is turned into life, not by a power that overpowers things,

⁶⁶ I of course only knew of this after Tom's departure from the team, and Tom and I both decided that this was not the business of any other (for him) former team member. In that this story has been out for years, I wonder what former team members might think about it, should they come across this. . .

⁶⁷ There is much on my website about this, here: <https://waynenorthey.com/?s=White+Christian+Nationalism>, accessed August 20, 2024.

⁶⁸ Frank, *Gentler God*, 189.

⁶⁹ Frank, *Gentler God*, 190.

⁷⁰ Frank, *Gentler God*, 203.

⁷¹ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_D._Caputo, accessed August 23, 2024.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

like the God of omnipotence-theology, but by the power of powerlessness.⁷²

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.⁷³

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.”⁷⁴

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 and singing without drawing attention to oneself! A next step would be some kind of internal 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.⁷⁵

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.”⁷⁶

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[!]⁷⁷

Indeed.

Frank writes,

If God is the Almighty Fixer, how do we explain the screaming tragedy of human

⁷² Frank, *Gentler God*, 203. See also: Caputo, *Weakness of God*.

For readers who wish to explore the philosophical side of what brilliant Irish-Catholic philosopher, Richard Kearney (see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Kearney, accessed August 20, 2024) calls repeatedly “*kenosis*” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenosis>, accessed August 20, 2024) *all the way down*,” a good place to start would be his book, *Anatheism*. He interacts with Caputo — and so many more! — in that amazing book.

I also preached a sermon in May, 2024, interacting with Kearney’s book; video and text of which are here (just don’t let Dr. Kearney see it! . . .): <https://waynenorthey.com/blog/verbal-traces-of-holding-forth/>, accessed August 20, 2024.

You could also hear Kearney interviewed by friend and retired CBC *Ideas* radio broadcaster, David Cayley here: (<https://waynenorthey.com/?s=david+cayley>, accessed August 20, 2024), here: <https://www.davidcayley.com/podcasts/2019/6/28/after-atheism-new-perspectives-on-god-and-religion>, accessed August 20, 2024.

⁷³ Frank, *Gentler God*, 204.

⁷⁴ Frank, *Gentler God*, 205.

⁷⁵ Frank, *Gentler God*, 205.

⁷⁶ Frank, *Gentler God*, 205.

⁷⁷ Dickinson, Bianchi and Dickinson, *Life and Letters*, 317.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — "Not Enough!"

history?⁷⁸

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: How Religion Poisons Everything*" — however much the book is replete with silly exaggeration (*Everything?!*) ignorance, and cheap shots.⁷⁹

Frank on p. 208 eschews five dubious answers to why God does not act, in favour of a God who is ever present but in whispered love "into the hearts both of the butchers and the butchered."⁸⁰ He writes:

This is the meaning of 'God is love.'⁸¹

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.⁸²

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 in the book at that point).

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.

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.⁸³

⁷⁸ Frank, *Gentler God*, 207. This is a question of theodicy. (See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodicy>, accessed August 20, 2024.)

Theologian and friend Bradley Jersak does a masterful job, along similar lines, of adducing philosophers George Grant and Simone Weil on why any attempts at theodicy — justifying God in lived experience — are futile. Jersak explains:

There is an anti-theodicy in which God's love consents to the secondary causes of human freedom and natural law without violating either. God does not do control, coercion, or force. Rather, God's omnipotence is two-fold:

- God is all-powerful as the Creator of all that is within the fixed limits of the universe. Within those limits, God sovereignly chose to grant the realm of necessity free play without interference.
- God is all-powerful in the sense that God voluntarily refrains ('chains himself') from violating the order of necessity.

Conversely, God's two-fold powerlessness is manifest in time: • God manifests his powerlessness in Creation.

• God manifests his powerlessness in the Crucifixion. Acknowledging the powerful/powerless binary as divine attributes allows Weil and Grant to include other theological doublets and/or 'categories of weakness' in their work. (Dart, *Scholar-Gipsy: Volume 1*, 35 – 36.)

⁷⁹ See on this about neoatheists Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins (playfully assigned by the author jointly the moniker, "*Ditchkins*") my book review of: *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*, by Terry Eagleton. (<https://waynenorthey.com/book-review/reason-faith-and-revolution/>, accessed August 20, 2024.) I add: Naysayer caveat!"

⁸⁰ Frank, *Gentler God*, 209.

⁸¹ Frank, *Gentler God*, 209.

⁸² Frank, *Gentler God*, 210.

⁸³ Frank, *Gentler God*, 211.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

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.⁸⁴

Frank believes that there are two bedrock emotions: *fear and trust* [that one is loved]. Philosopher John Macmurray⁸⁵ argues similarly, declaring fear and love to be 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)?⁸⁶

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.⁸⁷

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.⁸⁸

Chapter 8, “**Despised and Rejected: Meeting myself at the cross,**” tells the story, well into the chapter, of Frank’s (*apophatic*) “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.⁸⁹

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.⁹⁰

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.⁹¹

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

⁸⁴ Frank, *Gentler God*, 224.

⁸⁵ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Macmurray, accessed August 20, 2024.

⁸⁶ Frank, *Gentler God*, 242.

⁸⁷ Frank, *Gentler God*, 243.

⁸⁸ Frank, *Gentler God*, 244.

⁸⁹ Frank, *Gentler God*, 275.

⁹⁰ Frank, *Gentler God*, 279. In Canadian singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn’s (see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruce_Cockburn, accessed August 20, 2024) 2023 album, *O Sun O Moon* (<https://cockburnproject.net/songs&music/wtswitr.html>, accessed August 20, 2024), there is a plaintively beautiful song, “*When the Spirit Walks in the Room*” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCqv5esuNvg&feature=youtu.be>, accessed August 20, 2024 — which captures something of this. . . Most of the album is awash with Christian challenge and joy.

⁹¹ Frank, *Gentler God*, 281.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — "Not Enough!"

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.⁹²

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.⁹³

But Frank cannot deny Jesus' allusions to the reality of hell, or that "he considered hell a useful spiritual truth."⁹⁴ In the story of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25), most preachers believing in a hell of eternal conscious punishment, also 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.⁹⁵

The above, as mentioned, is exactly the view of a former missionary colleague, Larry Dixon, who wrote a book entitled, *The Other Side of the Good News: Contemporary Challenges to Jesus' Teaching on Hell*; and an even more distressing follow-up: *"Farewell, Rob Bell": A Biblical Response to Love Wins*. My interaction with the former is in this Volume. The latter book reads alarmingly as already said, as a kind of Evangelical *fatwa*⁹⁶ against Rob Bell.⁹⁷ The

⁹² Frank, *Gentler God*, 285.

⁹³ Frank, *Gentler God*, 285.

⁹⁴ Frank, *Gentler God*, 286.

⁹⁵ Frank, *Gentler God*, 288.

⁹⁶ As generally understood in the West: *though a misperception*.

In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini's (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruhollah_Khomeini, accessed August 20, 2024) most publicized *fatwa* was the proclamation condemning Salman Rushdie (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salman_Rushdie, accessed August 20, 2024) to death for his novel *The Satanic Verses* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Satanic_Verses, accessed August 20, 2024). . . after the proclamation was presented as a *fatwa* in Western press, this characterization was widely accepted by both its critics and its supporters, and the Rushdie Affair is credited with bringing the institution of *fatwa* to world attention. *Together with later militant fatwas, it has contributed to the popular misconception of the fatwa as a religious death warrant.* (Wikipedia — <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fatwa>, accessed August 20, 2024; emphasis added.)

⁹⁷ We read of Rob Bell:

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — "Not Enough!"

former is further discussed below.

Theologian Walter Wink⁹⁸ says, in a similar context:

Against such an image of God the revolt of atheism is an act of pure religion.⁹⁹

The author spends several pages analyzing the Sheep and the Goats story in Matthew 25: 31 - 46, *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.¹⁰⁰

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'."¹⁰¹

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.¹⁰²

And "*punishment*" is the word for this gift. But in Jesus' mind, whatever else "punishment" means, it does *not* mean "condemnation."¹⁰³ It describes a necessary process in a journey of salvation.

Bell's 2011 book, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, caused a major controversy within the Evangelical community. . . In the book, Bell states that it's been clearly communicated to many that this belief (*in hell as eternal, conscious torment*) is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness and joy that our world desperately needs to hear. (*Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rob_Bell, accessed August 20, 2024; emphasis added.)

See too: *Dare We Hope That All Men be Saved?: With a Short Discourse on Hell*, by Hans Urs von Balthasar (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Urs_von_Balthasar, accessed August 20, 2024).

⁹⁸ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Wink, accessed August 20, 2024.

⁹⁹ Wink, *Engaging*, 149.

¹⁰⁰ Frank, *Gentler God*, 292.

¹⁰¹ Frank, *Gentler God*, 293; *pace* chapter 5 of Dixon's book, which I initially read in manuscript form, before Larry sadly wrote me off, declaring my mentor, Clark Pinnock (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clark_Pinnock, accessed August 20, 2024), and me, to be in essence "heretics."

¹⁰² Frank, *Gentler God*, 295. See on this a similar Orthodox understanding in: Fr. Jeremy, "Orthodox Road: Rediscovering the Beauty of Ancient Christianity" (<https://www.orthodoxroad.com/>, accessed August 20, 2024)." We read a citation in the article:

[St Gregory of Nyssa (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gregory_of_Nyssa, accessed August 20, 2024)] teaches that Paradise and Hell do not exist from God's point of view, but from man's point of view. It is a subject of man's choice and condition. — Metropolitan (Vlachos) Hierotheos of Nafpaktos ([https://orthodoxwiki.org/Hierotheos_\(Vlachos\)_of_Nafpaktos](https://orthodoxwiki.org/Hierotheos_(Vlachos)_of_Nafpaktos)); <https://www.orthodoxroad.com/heaven-hell/>, accessed August 20, 2024, accessed September 11, 2023. The rest of the article explicates this assertion.

¹⁰³ Saint Paul's classic cry-out on this in Romans 8:1 is:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

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

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).¹⁰⁴

This perspective, as indicated, utterly contradicts the interpretation of the doctrine of hell by Larry Dixon¹⁰⁵ — and so many others in the Christian West! — in *The Other Side of the Good News: Contemporary Challenges to Jesus’ Teaching on Hell* — which theologian J. I. Packer¹⁰⁶ fully endorsed and declared Dixon’s treatment to be the best Evangelical expression of said doctrine.¹⁰⁷ To which I say thunderously, “*Yikes!*”

To visit the author’s website¹⁰⁸ is to be struck by the degree to which a person can think one is fighting a never-ending battle (his metaphor is a boxing match) while, Quixote-like, he has all along been fighting his own internal demons/windmills. Or it is perhaps like the Japanese soldiers of post-World War II, where the war has ended, and everyone else has gone home, yet for years they continue “fighting” an imaginary enemy. And, as it turns out, it was *the wrong fight* all along. . .

Such is the tragedy of religious fundamentalism of the sort that my former colleague continues in.

Until his death in 2020, J. I. Packer was widely considered *the leading* international Evangelical academic theologian. He writes in the Foreword to Dixon’s book:

It is suggested that the Bible is unclear, or incoherent, or inconsistent, or untrustworthy, when it speaks of the outcome of judgment after death, or alternatively that virtually the whole church has for two thousand years misunderstood the texts. *I do not think so.* . .¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Frank, *Gentler God*, 296.

¹⁰⁵ My coming-of-age novel on this, which interacts in part with hell as evangelistic motivation, is: *Chrysalis Crucible*. The seeds of the “coming of age,” though the novel is a fictional work, were nonetheless sewn for me during my watershed missionary experience (1972 - 1974). It set me on an almost entirely new faith trajectory. Not so, sadly, for Dixon. One can nonetheless hope and pray for his ultimate conversion (which I do intermittently).

¹⁰⁶ See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J. I. Packer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._I._Packer), accessed August 20, 2024.

¹⁰⁷ Please see on this my: “WAR AND HELL – and Exception-Clause Footnote Theology (<https://waynenorthey.com/2014/04/29/war-and-hell/>, accessed August 20, 2024),” that includes a full review of his book. An updated interaction with the book, as said, is in this *Volume*.

¹⁰⁸ See: <https://larrydixon.wordpress.com/>, accessed August 20, 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Dixon, *Other Side*, 7; emphasis added. *How can this not be pure casuistry?!* Packer all but idolized the Reformation and Calvinist/Reformed theology: one that of course excised as heresy much of 1500 years of previous church theology. . .

So much the worse for 1500 of Packer’s 2000-plus-years of the “whole church” having consistent church theology that must be adhered to!

I know this from experience with Dr. Packer, for, while pursuing my Masters degree at Regent College (<https://www.regent-college.edu/>, accessed August 20, 2024), I was initially subjected to a reading list drawn up by him, of Christian theology that, with one exception was either about/from the Reformation or by a Reformed theologian. My heart sank, as I began reading the prescribed Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion (cont’d)* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institutes_of_the_Christian_Religion, accessed August 20, 2024).

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

Au contraire, Dr. Packer, *au contraire*. And herein lies the penetrating calamity of contemporary majority academic/non-academic Evangelical belief. *Their “god” is indeed worse than Hitler* — clearly stated by Dixon, who quotes Clark Pinnock:

[E]verlasting torment is intolerable from a moral point of view because it makes God into a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for victims whom He does not even allow to die.¹¹⁰

I add in the review of his book, that Dixon’s dilemma is clearly stated:

Obviously, no follower of Christ wants to be guilty of presenting God as one more heinous than Hitler. However, if the Bible is clear on this issue, the Christian must *not* throw in the towel.¹¹¹

And the author proceeds to present God in his “holy hatred of sinners” precisely in those terms: *as one more heinous than Hitler*.¹¹²

I continue by examining Dixon’s telling “if.”

There is a growing minority body of “Evangelical” thinkers, amongst whom I am one, who profoundly question Dixon and Packer on this grand theological perversion.¹¹³

To begin with: I have been challenged to understand that *the Bible is not the Word of God. Jesus alone is!* — to which the Scriptures and Tradition give witness.

A fuller development of that is in this slim book, *Clarion Call of Love: Essays in Gratitude*

But as it turned out, Packer went on sabbatical that year, and I was mercifully given a choice of his reading list, or another by a fill-in prof — one far more representative of two millennia of theological writings.

I happily completed the 5,000 pages of readings and my Masters without use of Packer’s list.

When I told Dr. Packer that upon his return from the sabbatical, he smiled and said it is best to know one tradition well before branching off to other theological streams.

I myself continue gratefully smiling today at having escaped near collision with said theological writings — however consequently unaware as I might be of that tradition, in some respects, a fatal tragedy called the Reformation, where, as my friend Ron Dart (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ron_Dart, accessed August 20, 2024) puts it, the DNA of schism was disastrously sewn into the church body politic to this day.

On that Reformation part tragedy story, the reader may wish to read Ron Dart’s book review (<https://waynenorthey.com/book-review/book-review-of-fatal-discord-erasmus-luther-and-the-fight-for-the-western-mind/>, accessed August 20, 2024) of: *Fatal Discord: Erasmus, Luther, and the Fight for the Western Mind*, by Michael Massing — then read the book.

Journalist Stephen Beale writes in: “Just How Many Protestant Denominations Are There?” (<https://www.ncregister.com/blog/just-how-many-protestant-denominations-are-there>, accessed August 20, 2024):

So, it seems we are safe in saying there are at least nearly 200 major Protestant denominations or denominational categories in the United States. (This is the number I reported in my cover story on the Reformation’s 500th anniversary for the *Register* (<https://www.ncregister.com/blog/just-how-many-protestant-denominations-are-there>, accessed August 20, 2024). The real number is likely higher, but the ARDA (<https://www.thearda.com/>, accessed August 20, 2024) list covers at least the major ones.

When viewed historically and globally, we are safe in saying there are hundreds, likely thousands, of Protestant denominations. That’s still a scandal for Christians whom Christ desired would be one, as a reflection of the Triune unity of God (see John 17).

¹¹⁰ Dixon, *Other Side*, 149.

¹¹¹ Dixon, *Other Side*, 149 – 150; emphasis added.

¹¹² Northey, “War and Hell,” 149 – 150.

¹¹³ Please as said, see my article, including description of the book, *Hellrazed?*, (by Kevin Miller) — to which I am a contributor, in my post: *Hellrazed?* (<https://waynenorthey.com/2017/11/16/hellrazed-by-kevin-miller/>, accessed August 20, 2024.)

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

to Archbishop Lazar Puhalo,¹¹⁴ to which I also contributed.

In noted theologian Brad Jersak’s Preface, we read:

That did it. At this point, [Orthodox] Archbishop Lazar [Puhalo]’s face grew stern. His long index finger grew towards my face, correcting me with these firm words:

NO! Jesus is the Word of God. And any scripture that claims to be a revelation of that God must bow to the living God when he came in the flesh. ‘No man has seen God at any time, but God the only Son, who was in the bosom of the Father — He has made him known.’”

I was both duly chastened and filled with joy. The hair on my head stood up and my entire body tingled with goose flesh. I have never forgotten, and will never forget, that lesson. It was not merely a word about reading I Samuel 15 or every Old Testament call to genocide. What [the Archbishop] made crystal clear is the truth that every conception of God has always been imperfect prior to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ as the final and only perfect revelation of God, fulfilling, completing and correcting all previous revelations.

Brian Zahnd in Chapter 4 puts it thus:

The Bible is the written word of God that bears witness to the living Word of God. God did not become a book, but God did become a human being. The Incarnation is not the creation of the canon of Scripture but the virgin birth of Jesus Christ.

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 . . . And sadly, Dixon’s is not.*

Dixon’s book, by Frank’s standard and my observation, is one long *Pharisaical* tract, properly speaking, a Christian *heresy* (false path).¹¹⁵

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.¹¹⁶

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.¹¹⁷

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?¹¹⁸

It is arrestingly suggestive.

¹¹⁴ Jersak, *Clarion Call*.

¹¹⁵ We read this in Catholic theologian’s James Alison’s (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Alison, accessed August 20, 2024) beautiful book *Raising Abel*:

The perception that God is love has a specific content which is absolutely incompatible with any perception of God as involved in violence, separation, anger, or exclusion. (Alison, *Raising Abel* 48.)

¹¹⁶ This has been a joyous personal career path since 1974, on which, as said, I have extensively written and published. Please visit my website: <https://waynenorthey.com/>, accessed August 20, 2024.

¹¹⁷ Frank, *Gentler God*, 309.

¹¹⁸ Frank, *Gentler God*, 309.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

And to be noted: in all Jesus’ warnings of “hell,” it is only religious leaders who are so cautioned!

Frank also looks at Jesus, 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.¹¹⁹

Frank adduces Etty Hillesum¹²⁰ 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 Jewish family on what Frank calls a journey to hell.

Brad Jersak later, in the above, writes:

[Archbishop Lazar] put it to me straightforwardly: “Are you telling me you [once] believed God cannot freely forgive sin but must first appease his wrath through the violent sacrifice of his firstborn son on the cross?”

I responded that although his characterization might seem crass at first, it seemed to say exactly what I had been taught, believed and preached.

Though more nuanced of [penal substitution atonement] spins have emerged since the publication of *Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (and in part because of it¹²¹), what he described was and remains the unvarnished and dominant Evangelical “gospel.” But for me, the sandy shores of my Calvinist premises were already being washed away. Now came the *coup de grâce* (lit., ‘blow of mercy’ — or ‘stroke of grace’).

Archbishop Lazar replied, ‘I see your problem. You worship Molech — not Yahweh. Not Yahweh.’ Molech was the Canaanite god who demanded his wrath be appeased by the fiery sacrifice of their firstborn children (Isaiah 57:5, Jeremiah 19:4 - 5, etc.). “Something,” Yahweh says, “that he had never spoken, commanded or even entered his mind.” Archbishop Lazar’s rather harsh assessment did not offend me. Rather, his words washed through me like the cold flood, awakening me. Something like scales fell off my spiritual eyes. My witness was no namby-pamby liberal — this was a hierarch stewarding the Patristic faith that gave us the deity of Christ, the dogma of Trinity and the Nicene Creed.

“You mean in Orthodoxy, you aren’t *required* to believe in penal substitution?” I asked, hopeful.

“No, I mean in Orthodoxy, you are not permitted to believe in it,” he replied

¹¹⁹ Frank, *Gentler God*, 310.

¹²⁰ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Etty_Hillesum, accessed August 20, 2024.

¹²¹ Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (“the dude of theology,” see: <https://www.facebook.com/MichaelHardinMusings/>, accessed August 20, 2024) were the editors. I was one of 20 contributors. It was first published by Fresh Wind Press (Abbotsford), but in the same year (2007), Eerdmans contacted Brad and published it as well. It certainly created a great ripple effect.

One reviewer in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* (<https://journals.sagepub.com/home/INT>, accessed August 20, 2024) puts it thus:

This fine collection of twenty essays proposes a new paradigm for understanding the doctrine of the atonement in the twenty-first century. (Crysdale, *Stricken by God?*)

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

firmly, adding, “And there are 350 million of us¹²² who have never believed it. We regard it as heresy.”

That moment confirmed decisively the content (if not the source) of my inner voice and renewed biblical studies. It marked the beginning of a series of falling dominoes that comprised my 10-year-long catechism at [the Archbishop’s] feet.

Once penal substitution fell, doctrines related to retribution began to topple in turn. If God truly is love in his essential nature (though Calvinists deny this), *the necessity of eternal conscious torment, direct acts of divine genocide, and literalist interpretations of wrath fall too.*¹²³

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.¹²⁴

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.¹²⁵

He wonders in context of Scripture whether Evangelicals are not “the current embodiment of Babylon?”¹²⁶ 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 forth 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.¹²⁷

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

¹²² This is no small overstatement! We read in *Wikipedia* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Orthodoxy_by_country, accessed August 20, 2024):

Based on the numbers of adherents, the Eastern Orthodox Church (also known as Eastern Orthodoxy) is the second largest Christian communion in the world, after the Roman Catholic Church, with the most common estimates of baptised members being approximately 220 million.^{[1][2][3]}

¹²³ Jersak, “The First and Last Words of a Pastoral Prophet,” *Clarion Call*, 3 – 4; emphasis added.

¹²⁴ Frank, *Gentler God*, 314 - 315.

¹²⁵ Frank, *Gentler God*, 317. True, though, C. S. Lewis does claim — rightly, I think — in *The Problem of Pain*, that pain can be “God’s megaphone.” See: Lewis, *Problem of Pain*.

¹²⁶ Frank, *Gentler God*, 318. He’s definitely on to something!

¹²⁷ Frank, *Gentler God*, 333.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

truly loves us. And although our face is stained with tears, everything inside us will shout for joy.¹²⁸

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.”¹²⁹ 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.”¹³⁰

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.¹³¹

At another point there is:

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*.¹³²

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 [largely white] Christian male-supremacists¹³³ — have made it easy for thinking young Christians to distrust Paul and project onto him the anger they feel at the male religious establishment.¹³⁴

I would add that Paul is also rejected for being the “inventor” of a Gentile Christianity that was, so-claimed, deeply antisemitic.

Another take on Paul, by a practising Jewish (feminist) Pauline scholar, and professor at Iliff School of Theology,¹³⁵ Pamela Eisenbaum,¹³⁶ who actually reads Paul positively, is: *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle*.¹³⁷

Another outstanding book on Paul in this vein is by Neil Elliott: *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle*.¹³⁸

¹²⁸ Frank, *Gentler God*, 343.

¹²⁹ Frank, *Gentler God*, 344.

¹³⁰ Frank, *Gentler God*, 351.

¹³¹ Frank, *Gentler God*, 355.

¹³² Frank, *Gentler God*, 356; emphasis in the original.

¹³³ See my website on this: White Christian Supremacists (<https://waynenorthey.com/?s=white+christian+supremacists>, accessed August 20, 2024).

¹³⁴ Frank, *Gentler God*, 360.

¹³⁵ See: <https://www.iliff.edu/> (accessed August 23, 2024).

¹³⁶ See: <https://www.iliff.edu/faculty/pam-eisenbaum> (accessed August 23, 2024).

¹³⁷ Eisenbaum, *Not a Christian*.

¹³⁸ Elliott, *Liberating Paul*.

Justice That Transforms: Restorative Justice — “Not Enough!”

Still another exceptional study along the same lines, is Elizabeth Johnson’s: *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril*.¹³⁹

OK: one more to consult! By classics scholar, Sarah Ruden¹⁴⁰: *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*.¹⁴¹

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.¹⁴²

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.¹⁴³

A Gentler God is not an easy, though it is a brilliant, 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 and Christians of any shade, so desperately in need of it, so often unaware — or simply/sadly Christianly “*outta here!*”

While Evangelicals are primarily addressed, *all who struggle to be authentic in their spirituality cannot but be nurtured and challenged by this amazing missive*.¹⁴⁴

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As to the impact of Jesus’ and Paul’s Gospel: two outstanding historical accounts are: *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, by Sir Larry Siedentop (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Larry_Siedentop, accessed August 20, 2024); and Tom Holland’s ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Holland_\(author\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Holland_(author)), accessed August 20, 2024) *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*. Two representative quotes are:

The roots of liberalism — belief in individual freedom, in the fundamental moral equality of individuals, in a legal system based on equality, and in a representative form of government befitting a society of free people — all these were pioneered by Christian thinkers of the Middle Ages who drew on the moral revolution carried out by the early Church. These philosophers and canon lawyers, not the Renaissance humanists, laid the foundation for liberal democracy in the West. (emphasis added). — Siedentop, *Inventing*, back cover.

The relationship of Christianity to the world that gave birth to it is, then, paradoxical. The faith is at once the most enduring legacy of classical antiquity, and the index of its utter transformation. . . It has long survived the collapse of the empire from which it first emerged, to become, in the words of one Jewish scholar, ‘the most powerful of hegemonic cultural systems in the history of the world’ (Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, 9.) — Holland, *Dominion*, 10 - 11.

¹³⁹ Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*.

¹⁴⁰ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarah_Ruden, accessed August 20, 2024.

¹⁴¹ Ruden, *Paul Among*.

¹⁴² Frank, *Gentler God*, 368.

¹⁴³ Frank, *Gentler God*, 369.

¹⁴⁴ For further reading: please consider these two books, by two Evangelical theologians (and other books by them):

- Brad Jersak, *A More Christlike God: A More Beautiful Gospel*;
- Brian Zahnd, *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: The Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News*.

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