

When Everything's on Fire
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October 22, 2023

Mark 9:49 (CEB)

“Everyone will be salted with fire.”

Zechariah 13:9 (NRSVue)

And I will put this third into the fire, refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The Lord is our God.’”

Psalm 12:6 (MSG)

God's words are pure words, Pure silver words refined seven times in the fires of his word-kiln, Pure on earth as well as in heaven.

“Once upon a time everybody believed in God. Our ancestors believed in God or gods as effortlessly as they believed in the firm ground beneath their feet or the open expansive sky above their head; it was just the world in which they lived. Faith in God was presumed as the great poet Epimenides said, ‘in him we live and move and have our being.’”

But things changed.

This past week, we finished our book study of Brian Zahnd's *When Everything's on Fire*. Zahnd's book focuses on the reality happening today where many Christians are struggling to maintain their faith in a world that is becoming more and more secular and where *belief in the divine* seems to be declining, rapidly.

So...in this new age, when everything seems to be on fire, is it possible to hold on to Christian faith?

Zahnd begins by showing us how he sees how we got here.

Friedrich Nietzsche. I'm sure you've all heard of him, whether you know of his writings or not. Nietzsche was a pastor's kid, son of a Lutheran pastor, who became an atheist and one of history's biggest critics of Christianity. In 1882 he wrote *The Gay Science*, a book of poems of his thoughts and opinions on life. One of the poems is called, *The Parable of the Madman*. In this poem a “madman,” carrying a lantern, runs into a village in the early morning yelling, “Where is God. I'm looking for God.” When everyone begins to laugh and mock him, he says, “Where is God? ... I will tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? ...God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.” After his rant, the madman smashes the lantern on the ground before his astonished listeners and says, “I have come too early, my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way.” He then walks into a church and sings a requiem for God. The end.

Fast forward eighty years to the 1960's and the cover of Time Magazine, “Is God Dead?”

Some say that Nietzsche was a prophet ahead of his time. In his time, all of society believed in God and claimed that God was the center, but was that true? Or was it merely “society putting on airs – faking it.” Society...humanity...was advancing, learning, questioning - and writers and theologians like Nietzsche were

presenting valid perspectives that critiqued the moral and practical justification of Christianity, its leaders and followers.

Think about it, whether it's 1882 or 2023, we've had God and Jesus Christ's teachings for how long? And the preeminent Christian leaders before us and their followers preach the good news but do anything but actually live it.

Thou shalt not kill; but - yay the death penalty, give everyone a gun and war is the answer. Love your neighbor as yourself; yet our "neighbors" are homeless, starving, oppressed and incarcerated in mass numbers.

Atheist or not, Nietzsche wasn't entirely wrong.

Is it any surprise then when Zahnd shares a story from a few years ago where "the pastor of an evangelical-fundamentalist church announced on the Sunday after Easter that he had become an atheist? The pastor told his stunned congregation that he had been an atheist for over a year and that all attempts to revive his faith had failed. So, on the Sunday after Easter, he publicly left Christianity and moved on with his life - a life with no more Easters, period." (pp. 27)

Zahnd's book deals with a phenomenon that is occurring primarily in the United States right now. "American Christianity," as it appears to so many in the 21st century, has become a finite, rigid, unkind, inflexible, nationalistic, and unrecognizable religion that claims Jesus as its center.

The pastor turned atheist said, "this isn't my God, and this certainly isn't my Jesus." He went through a process known as *Christian deconstruction*, a process by which a Christian critically reevaluates the tenets and doctrines of traditional Christianity and emerges with a different perspective on their faith. Now don't fear! Deconstructing one's faith is not a bad thing or a scary thing...or even a new thing. It's not a formal process by any means. Deconstructing is, *and should be*, a natural and regular thing for Christians – for people of any faith, as well as people of no faith.

Zahnd reminds us that "the imposition of cultural assumptions, political agendas, distorted doctrines and corrupting influences of empire have obscured the beautiful image of Christ" (pp. 31).

Examining your Christian faith - what you believe, what you practice and *why* you believe it – is good. Asking questions of your Christian faith is good. Having doubts is ok. How we approach and engage scripture is important. Looking at the world around, looking at Christianity and its leaders, its proponents, and its adherents ...and then critically comparing and analyzing them – is what every Christian ought to do. All of this matters because, as Christians, if we believe in Jesus Christ and if we want to live the life that Jesus exemplified, we need to regularly do this work.

Like Nietzsche's contemporary, Fyodor Dostoevsky was a writer and Christian, we want to confidently say, "I believe in Christ and confess him not like some child; my hosanna has passed through an enormous furnace of doubt."

In doing this work though, it can happen that some become jaded and angry. The danger is that we throw the baby out with the bath water. Completely abandoning *everything* that is of God and faith. Deconstructing work can produce pastors who become atheists, LGBTQ Christians who give-up, and young tweens and twenty-somethings who see Nietzsche's type of Christianity and they refuse to engage with such a hypocritical institution and so become a "none."

Our theological houses begin to be constructed from the day we're born – it's inherited with religious thoughts, ideas, rules and expectations put upon us from our parents, families, Sunday school teachers and religious leaders. When we reach a point when we decide to ask difficult or controversial questions – do some of our own construction - it can be disastrous for our spirits because too often we're taught to think that engaging doubtful dialogue or expressing uncertainty about God or Christianity is a sign of weakness in one's faith, rather than thoughtful work. We're not allowed the space, nor the grace to do faith work that can be difficult and challenging. "You can't think like that." "Thinking such things is blasphemous-aren't you afraid of going to hell." "You should be ashamed of yourself." "If you truly believed, you'd (fill in the blank)."

IF given freedom and encouragement to talk with God, to analyze our scriptures and to compare and contrast all of it with the world we live in, we can hopefully recognize that some theological houses need to be condemned completely because they're not worth saving...some need to be deconstructed and undergo some renovations...and some are good as they currently stand are worth risking everything to save.

So, how's *your* house? When was the last time to you did any work on it? An inspection? Perhaps remodeling a room or even a simple fresh coat of paint? Modernize it? Maybe adding on a new room? Did you ever take it completely down to the foundation and erect entirely new walls, floors and ceilings? Or even think about it?

When we were discussing the book, we talked about when was the last time you thought about eschatology (the end times), soteriology (salvation) or atonement. When you think or talk about **what** salvation is or **how** a person is "saved," what do you believe? Do you believe now what you believed as a child? Why or why not? What has or hasn't changed? Can you express **why** you think what you think?

When we attempt to answer these questions, our desire is to reach a conclusion, answer for which we can be certain – a bedrock, absolute answer. The problem that we run into, that humanity has run into for as long as it's been trying to answer these questions, is the "assumption that everything that CAN be known and experienced in the phenomenon of being is what you can ascertain through the five physical senses. That everything you know HAS to be verified... through those senses --- anything apart from that has to be held suspect." This is where science and faith clash. Where empiricism and the demand for scientific proof can block faith, instead of journeying alongside it.

Zahnd talks about the joy of revelation and how we ignore it and discount it, yet it – the revelation of Jesus Christ – is the only possible foundation for the Christian faith. We have met God through the revelation in Jesus Christ. Yet, revelation is inexplicable. Saul was blinded by a light, fell to the ground and heard a voice from above. Saul spoke to Jesus and his heart was changed; he was converted. Saul, now Paul's faith, was from a revelation that was unverifiable against empirical standards. The same thing happened with Peter when Jesus asked him, "who do people say that I am." And Peter said you are the Christ, the one. His faith, nor Paul's, could be reasoned or logically explained into existence, because it was revealed to their *heart*.

When we ponder and consider all of the big questions of existence that formulate our faith, what is the guiding force? What is the end-all, be-all answer to your faith? Jesus – he is our savior and our teacher – *HE is the Word*. It's not about a religion. It's not about the Bible. It's not about the church. These things are a part of the theological constructions of our faith, but ultimately our faith is always Jesus. We can get rid of Christianity; we can ditch this book and we can continue to cling to Jesus. As Christians, we have experiences of God, heart moments in our lives that are inexplicable, that are overwhelming, that we witness to others as "I just can't explain it, but..." That is the revelation of Jesus – the image of the invisible God – that is the foundation of our Christian faith.

[my story of experiencing the divine while driving]

I can't explain it, but I can confess it. It may not make it any truer for you, but it's not any less real for me. It was God – it was Jesus. I'm sure all of you can speak of similar experiences. We can read, study and know enormous reems of information ABOUT God, about Jesus, about Christianity, but facts and data aren't faith. "It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by reason."

When our theological houses are threatened - in danger of burning down or even just getting singed, our reactions may vary from fighting the fire, to saving what we can, or to running away and letting the fire take it all. But remember that "...the Lord, your God is a consuming fire..." (Deut. 4:24 and Heb. 12:29) like Moses encountered in the desert's burning bush.

The revelation is ongoing. Listen—and ask yourself, "Is everything on fire with that which threatens to consume the sacred OR is the deeper truth that everything is on fire with the glory of God? Certainly, our world seems aflame with destructive forces but the wise poet knows that's not the whole story. She has seen beyond the veil and hears and bears witness that earth is crammed with heaven and every common bush is afire with God....but in our hurry to be or do something, we rush past it all and miss the love of God smiling through all things."

God is not dead. Seek God. "Learn to sit in some kind of wilderness until something catches fire." God is still speaking. Join the conversation.¹

AMEN

¹ All quotes are from *When Everything's on Fire* by Brian Zahnd or https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_MkMa7lhRGs