

Good Corn, Good Grief, and Good Riddance: Christian Living by Embracing Good and Rejecting Rubbish

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Introduction

Raised in a churchgoing Christian family, I attended Sunday school and catechism classes designed to nurture me with correct theology that, if I would understand it fully, would provide me with salvation from my sin. That sin, inherited from my first ancestors, Adam and Eve, made me mortal, but by believing in Jesus Christ as my savior, confessing my sins, and accepting God's forgiveness, I could receive everlasting life—life beyond the grave where I will continue to live with my Lord forever. This was much better than the alternative fate where if I fail to believe in Jesus and accept him as my savior, I would remain under a curse, and when my earthly life is over, would be tormented in the fires of hell for eternity.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the war of the soul—the soul's struggle to hold on to what is good and right, and to reject what is bad and wrong. I will begin personally from my perspective as a Reformed American Christian by illustrating how religious dogma is impressed upon children of Christians before they are aware of its implications and are still too intellectually immature to question it or separate the wheat from the tares within it. Secondly, through stories of people who have experienced blessedness and damnation, I will explore why many of us have difficulty living freely due

to our own beliefs, different insights and theological questions, and how that grief can change us to mature spiritually and theologically to become better aware of the meaning of our human existence. Finally, I will address the painful question of why the established church is losing members and failing to reach nonbelievers due to its inflexibility and politicized existence and how we should move beyond that to build a healthy church.

Good Corn—Tradition

Many years ago, I visited a church in New England to report on our mission work in Japan. The pastor of the church met me at the airport and subsequently drove me around his neighborhood showing me many beautiful, colonial style houses. He mentioned to me that he truly loved living in New England, and would have a difficult time returning to his birthplace in rural Iowa where he was surrounded by nothing but fields of corn. But after saying this, he paused and looked me straight in the eyes and said with a serious tone, “But it was good corn. It was *good* corn.” What I sensed he was trying to convey by those simple words was that though returning to a place and way of life he once knew as a child was now unimaginable for him, he could also claim the good that originated there, and owes his present existence to the things he learned and experienced amidst those cornfields. I now live in Japan, and can very much understand what he must have been feeling. I was raised in rural Wisconsin surrounded by hayfields and dairy cattle. I would have a difficult time moving back to that environment, but I can truly say that the cows around me were “good cows.” Even though I am no longer surrounded by those cows, deep inside me are the roots of what made me who I am. Only when we are in touch with our roots are we able to know ourselves and interpret the times in which we presently live.

I was baptized in the Christian Reformed Church outside the small village

of Vesper, Wisconsin, a town of less than 500 people. The Christian Reformed Church is a denomination formed after its secession from the Dutch Reformed Church in 1957 with its roots in the Netherlands.¹⁾ We were indoctrinated by a theology that was in line with that of Louis Berkhof, a Dutch theologian who immigrated to North America, and was well known as a very systematically disciplined scholar who maintained an extremely rigid Calvinistic theology, even to the point of espousing a doctrine of double predestination.^{2) 3)} Though sermons coming from the pulpit of my first church proclaimed this theology of fire and brimstone, in daily life, members of the church seemed rather oblivious to sermon messages, but were affected by a stoicism that made life something to endure rather than enjoy. According to I. John Hesselink, former president of Western Theological Seminary and Professor of Systematic Theology, it was commonly agreed upon among Lutheran Christians in 20th century northern Europe that Lutherans enjoyed their religion while Calvinists endured theirs,⁴⁾ and he attributes much of this stereotypical view of Reformed churches to the stoic inflexibility of theologians like Louis Berkhof. Hesselink believes that much of the 20th century Reformed theological thinking moved away from “the message and spirit of the Bible” to

1) Christian Reformed Church. *crcna.org* <<https://www.crcna.org/welcome/history>> Retrieved August 10, 2022.

2) Louis Berkhof. *Systematic Theology*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1949. <<https://ccel.org/ccel/berkhof/systematictheology/systematictheology.iii.ii.ii.html>> Retrieved August 8, 2022.

3) Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry. *carm.org* <<https://carm.org/dictionary/double-predestination/>> Retrieved August 15, 2022. Double Predestination “is the view that God sovereignly and freely chose to predestine some to Heaven (the elect) and some to Hell (the reprobate). This predestination is not based on anything in the person, nor is it based on what the foreseen actions and/or beliefs of that person would have been.”

4) I. John Hesselink. *On Being Reformed* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformed Church Press, 1988), 50.

one where “Scripture and faith are replaced by reason and logic.”⁵⁾ Whereas Scripture and faith are naturally evolving, developing and growing, reason and logic function by drawing conclusions, and once one is drawn, debate ceases. Yet, there is always “good corn” even where things are not ideal as Hesselink proves by acknowledging, “It is noteworthy that even a traditional Calvinist such as Louis Berkhof can define the Trinity” as “not three persons in the ordinary sense of the word; they are not three individuals, but rather three modes or forms of being in which the Divine Being exists.”^{6) 7)} So even Berkhof’s concrete image of God allowed for some fluidity within God’s self.

My first lessons in theology came especially from my mother. As most children in various cultures are taught, we were educated to treat others well, obey parents and teachers, and do good deeds. As far as I can recall, that was the code for living a good life and being a good person. I was also taught about the afterlife. Some day we will die, and when we die we have two possible destinations. One was heaven and the other was hell. Heaven was a beautiful place where there was no sickness, no pain and no evil, and we would spend all of eternity singing praises to God. Hell, on the other hand, was a lake of fire where those who were bad would end up and would be tormented in excruciating pain for ever and ever.⁸⁾ I remember once asking my mother, “How do

5) Ibid., 30–31.

6) I. John Hesselink. *Calvin’s First Catechism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 231, n. 9.

7) Louis Berkhof. *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1954), 42.

8) John H. Walton and Craig S. Keener. *NRSV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2019), 2285–2286 (especially notes on Revelation 20:14 and 21:8). A New Testament image of hell is a place of eternal fire prepared for the “devil and his angels,” (Matthew 25:41) and a “lake of fire” for “Death and Hades” and for “anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life.” (Revelation 20:14–15) Also, “the

we know if we can go to Heaven?" Her answer was not exactly what I wanted to hear. She replied, "Well, if we are good enough, we will get to Heaven some day." I continued, "How do we know if we are good enough?" She said, "You try to be as good as you can, and hopefully, you will have been good enough so that when you die you'll go to heaven. But we really can't know."

This bothered me tremendously since I knew I could not be good. I was habitually teasing my sister; I was taking cookies from the cookie jar without permission; I was telling lies when I needed to cover something up to avoid punishment; I was hating boys at school who teased me. Because of all my sins, I had to work really hard on being good, and at some level I was terrified that I could not produce enough good to offset the bad and would be preparing for an eternally prolonged retirement in hell. I remember once as a child reading in my Bible and coming to the passage that says, "whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the *world* to come."⁹ Fearing I might be guilty of this unpardonable sin, I went out into my backyard and was walking to and fro, trying to remember whether or not I might have committed this sin and would have no way to avoid the impending trip to the lake of fire. Just thinking of this was psychological and spiritual torture.

Naturally, just as no one wants to spend eternity in continuous torture, no one wants one's loved ones to spend eternity that way either. When I was about 10 years old, my mother was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease, a cancer of the lymph system which is fatal if not brought into remission. That was

cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur." (Revelation 21:8) These are frightening images of the future for anyone with the conviction of being a habitual sinner, let alone a prepubescent child. (Quotations from the NRSV.)

9) Matthew 12:32. KJV.

a big enough shock for a prepubescent boy in itself, but what magnified this devastating diagnosis even more was that my mother's anger at God for her perceived ultimate demise caused her to lash out at God verbally in front of me. I remember her saying, "God hates me. If he loved me he wouldn't do this to me." I also heard her curse which was a first for me. I feared that through all of this, she would not only die of cancer, but was setting herself up for an eternity of perpetual unbearable pain.

Unfortunately, because of the fear of being judged and not knowing what to do or even how to question anything, I kept all of these things in my own heart, never saying a word to anybody about them. Mine was the negative version of Mary's experience when she was trying to understand the wonderful and mysterious meaning of the shepherds worshiping her baby boy, or coming to terms with how her disobedient son must first be obedient to his heavenly father. All she could do was to ponder the wonderment of these events inside herself until a clearer revelation of what was taking place would become known.¹⁰⁾

I knew there was "good corn" in some of what was taught to me by my parents and by the conservative church that spiritually nurtured me. Yet, I needed not only to take with me the good corn, but also had to learn how to disregard the negative things that are passed down with it. Even until the final harvest, there will be unrelenting weeds that grow among the corn, and if we attempt to destroy those weeds, we may damage the good corn that grows along with them. Our calling, as Christians, is to preserve the golden corn, watering and blessing it to become abundantly more nutritious than ever while not allowing the weeds to choke us into cynical hopelessness and take away

10) Luke 2:19 and 2:51.

our vision for building up God's kingdom.¹¹⁾

Good Grief—Transition

I am blessed to have two sons with whom I am able to communicate quite candidly about virtually any subject. I do not find this to be true with my family of origin. With my sons, even when I do not understand why their generation thinks and behaves the way it does, we can discuss it and gain insights from each other. With many of my relatives, it is a forgone conclusion that I am expected to believe and think the way they do. If I do not, I must be on the wrong track, and that would lead them to feeling that they need to convince me of my misunderstandings to put me on the right one. I felt this strongly while growing up, and learned that when I saw things differently from my relatives, it was easier to keep my thoughts to myself than to deal with causing conflict which, no matter how I would try to explain my position, would be seen as a threat to family values and lead to potential discord.

Communication with my mother was never easy—a problem that was magnified by her bout with cancer that brought her face to face with theodicy. Since she had tried to be good and expected to be rewarded for it, when cancer hit her at the age of 34, she felt God had reneged on his contract, and became combatant toward God. She felt that treatment for her disease, which included radiation therapy, was not worth it. After all, she had told me that God hated her, and if God already hated her, God could make her endure more pain through the treatments that were known to cause nausea, hair loss, and life threatening infections. However, in the midst of her spiritual turmoil, her deceased father appeared to her in a dream telling her it was not time for her to die. He told her that she had three children to care for and had to remain

11) Matthew 13:24–30.

on the earth. That dream was instrumental in reversing her thinking, and she subsequently agreed to begin radiation therapy.

What is interesting here is the fact that she was raised in a strict, catechism-memorizing family where the Calvinistic code of understanding one's place in this world as a Christian was branded into her brain tissue in order to bring her salvation. Yet when the crisis hit, it wasn't the catechism that gave her direction. It was her deceased father who she loved and respected who gave her the life to move on. Her youngest son was 28 years old when she died, so her father gave her the life-giving advice that she needed to raise me and my siblings into adulthood.

Certainly, one may argue that my mother did not actually meet my grandfather in her dream, but that her mind manufactured an image of him and an audio track that was produced to give her the direction that she needed. I will side with the indisputable amount of evidence that there are people who have indeed communicated with deceased persons, often in near-death experiences better known as NDEs. The University of Virginia School of Medicine defines an NDE as follows:

Near-Death Experiences are intensely vivid and often life-transforming experiences, many of which occur under extreme physiological conditions such as trauma, ceasing of brain activity, deep general anesthesia or cardiac arrest in which no awareness or sensory experiences of any kind should be possible according to the prevailing views in neuroscience.¹²⁾

12) Near-Death Experiences (NDEs). *University of Virginia School of Medicine, Division of Perceptual Studies* <<https://med.virginia.edu/perceptual-studies/our-research/near-death-experiences-ndes/>> Retrieved August 11, 2022.

We tend to be addicted to the scientific method¹³⁾ when it comes to death and dying and what happens to the brain when death is imminent. Eben Alexander, a neurosurgeon who survived a severe case of bacterial meningitis, and was in a seven day coma during which his brain was not functioning,¹⁴⁾ is a well known NDE experiencer who, before his NDE, actually considered it “pure fantasy” when patients told him of meeting deceased relatives, meeting God, or “traveling to mysterious, wonderful landscapes.”¹⁵⁾ His thinking changed completely after his own NDE, and he now says:

The scientific method demands that a phenomenon be visible to more than one person. It also demands that the phenomenon be repeatable.¹⁶⁾ ...Aristotle used logic to think about the world, but he did not use the scientific method. He didn't get out there and test.¹⁷⁾

We have to acknowledge that when we are analyzing NDEs, As Alexander writes, “scientific and religious dogma is not always correct and it is important to develop a strong level of trust in our own internal guidance system rather than blindly following the so-called experts.”¹⁸⁾ Though near-death experi-

13) The “scientific method” is “a method of procedure that has characterized natural science since the 17th century, consisting in systematic observation, measurement, and experiment, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses.” 辞書 バージョン 2.3.0. (268) Copyright © 2005–2020, Apple Inc.

14) Eben Alexander. *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife* (Little Brown Book Group, Kindle Edition, 2012), 8–9.

15) Ibid., 8.

16) Eben Alexander with Ptolemy Tompkins. *The Map of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon Explores the Mysteries of the Afterlife and the Truth about what Lies Beyond* (Little, Brown Book Group., Kindle Edition, 2014), Chapter 3.

17) Ibid.

18) Ibid., Appendix.

encers are providing us with anecdotal rather than scientifically verifiable evidence, the enormous amount of consistencies as to what occurs during an NDE episode among the thousands of stories shared by experiencers cannot be denied. And for those who believe the Bible, the question is how do you prove any of it as being historical by the scientific method? The Bible is a compilation of stories passed down over many generations and redacted by numerous scribes over time. We Christians believe Bible stories, not because the historicity of those events can be substantiated scientifically, but because we believe the Holy Spirit is at work in preserving them for us. I suggest that we apply the same criteria to substantiation of NDEs which have been a part of human experience for as long as the Bible has.

The Gospel of Luke tells us a story of a poor man, Lazarus, who was covered with sores, and a rich man “who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.”¹⁹⁾ Although this passage is believed to be an allegorical rather than historical reference, the story contains elements that are much like those revealed by present-day NDE experiencers. First of all, when the indifferent apathetic rich man dies, he goes to Hades, the realm of the dead, where he is tormented amidst flames. The rich man saw Lazarus far away from him sitting safely next to Abraham, and begged Abraham to allow Lazarus to be sent to him to dip the tip of his finger in water to cool his tongue to somewhat relieve his pain.²⁰⁾ Abraham responded by saying that this was impossible because during his time on earth, the rich man received good things and Lazarus bad, insinuating that the rich man did not attempt to help Lazarus who lay at the rich man’s gate, “covered with sores, who longed

19) Luke 16:19–20. NRSV.

20) Luke 16:23–24.

to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table."²¹⁾ While on earth, the rich man kept himself far from Lazarus perhaps because even the thought of such a man existing might cause him uncomfortable guilt or shame for not doing anything to help him. Secondly, just as the rich man and Lazarus were separated socially while on earth, now in the afterlife, between them, "a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us."²²⁾ This is only part of the story of Lazarus from Luke, but due to its similarities to what is recalled by many NDE experiencers, it is highly possible that Jesus told this story with knowledge of NDE episodes that people of his time had experienced.

The rich man is not given a chance to return to the earth and live a different life, but one can imagine he was very lonely being cut off from the good place of blessedness on the opposite side of the "great chasm." He had his lavish lifestyle, but was disconnected from other human beings. When he arrived in Hades, he was alone. Actor William Shatner, who is best remembered for his role as captain of the star ship Enterprise in the 1960s television series, *Star Trek*,²³⁾ and is a bold adventurer who took a recreational trip to space at the age of 90,²⁴⁾ revealed that his entire life has been a struggle with avoiding loneliness. He mentions a time when he was in grade school and sent valentine cards to himself on Valentine's Day because he did not know if anyone would send him one, and it turned out that no one did. This was a devastating experience for him, and he believes that the way to avoid loneliness is to "do

21) Luke 16:20–21. NRSV.

22) Luke 16:26. NRSV.

23) William Shatner Biography. *IMDb* <<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000638/bio>> Retrieved August 25, 2022.

24) Ibid.

something for somebody else.”²⁵⁾ Being connected with other human beings saves us from the loneliness that waits to envelop us. Perhaps Shatner is hinting that ultimate selfishness leads to ultimate loneliness. Knowing how to appropriately grieve this loneliness may lead us down the road to healing and to becoming connected with God, with others and with the cosmos.

Among the endless numbers of NDE experiencers, I have selected three whose stories we may find helpful in understanding our destinies as children of God experiencing life on earth. All three stories are intertwined with the themes of loneliness, connectedness, and love.

The first experiencer is Tamara Laroux whose NDE occurred after attempting suicide by gunshot at the age of 15. Tamara was raised in a Christian family and believed in God and God’s love and forgiveness due to her grandmother’s witness,²⁶⁾ but her parents divorced when she was four years old,²⁷⁾ and she lived her life feeling unloved and rejected. She writes about the day of her attempted suicide:

That day, I was faced with all those feelings of isolation and loneliness, of not belonging or fitting in with any of the hundreds of kids walking the halls around me, of rejection and abandonment by people who said they loved me.²⁸⁾

Tamara also had a strong need to be connected to her biological father

25) William Shatner reveals battle with loneliness | 60 Minutes Australia. *You Tube* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1Eek9Ts-LY>> Retrieved August 16, 2022.

26) Tamara Laroux. *A Second Chance at Heaven* (Nashville: Emanate Books, 2018), 10–11.

27) *Ibid.*, 16.

28) *Ibid.*, 5–6.

with whom she said she had a “distant” relationship.²⁹⁾ As to the reason why she attempted suicide in spite of living in a relatively good home, she writes:

Bound by chains of loneliness and despair, surrounded by silent tears and an internal cry that never stopped, my life had absolutely nothing I wanted. I felt so much guilt and shame because I knew I had a great family and a decent life, but it wasn’t enough. I desired more, much more! I needed to feel love on the inside of me, to look in the mirror and know that what I saw was good and not just one big screw-up.³⁰⁾

Tamara was actually asking God to forgive her as she brought a gun first to her head, and finally to her chest where she ultimately shot herself.³¹⁾ Her action sent her into what she experienced as being in hell where she was continuously tormented along with many other souls. Concerning the loneliness she and the other souls were experiencing, she writes, “Although we seemed right next to one another, we could not communicate or touch.”³²⁾ They were able to see one another, and yet were isolated, unable to interact. Tamara writes about the knowledge she had of every single soul she encountered and their knowledge of her:

There were no secrets. As I looked at any particular person, I knew everything—not one sin or action was hidden. I knew his or her family lineage, background, everything this person had ever done wrong, every

29) Tamara Laroux. *Delivered: A Death-Defying Journey into Heaven and Hell* (Xulon Press, 2010), 34.

30) Ibid., 11–12.

31) Tamara Laroux. *A Second Chance at Heaven*, 13.

32) Ibid., 33.

sin committed, and all the sorrow the person had experienced. The others also knew everything about me—every boy I’d kissed, every test I’d cheated on, every lie I’d told, every sin I had ever committed. Every selfish act or secret shameful thought was out there for all to see and know. Complete transparency of minds, emotions, and wills revealed each of our lives from beginning to the end. Our souls were now laid bare, and we no longer had physical bodies to clothe and disguise our spirits.³³⁾

About this bizarre place she writes, “We were totally alone and totally vulnerable. There was nowhere to hide. *No escape*.”³⁴⁾ Being alone—apart from God’s presence, and having no escape from a place void of any hope was what Tamara says is “the essence of hell.”³⁵⁾

A second experiencer is Howard Storm, a former atheist whose “career as an artist and teacher of art had been left behind for the Christian ministry” after his NDE.³⁶⁾ In Howard’s case, he suffered an attack of unbearable pain due to a rupture of his duodenum when his NDE occurred while waiting for a surgery that was necessary for him to survive.³⁷⁾ His experience of a hellish environment was not like Tamara’s, but rather developed slowly as he left his body in a hospital room, and entered a foggy gray atmosphere where polite voices were calling him by name to come out into the hall quickly so that they could fix him up.³⁸⁾ After agreeing to follow these people in the hall, the road

33) Ibid., 34.

34) Ibid.

35) Ibid., 35.

36) Howard Storm. *My Descent into Death: A Second Chance at Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), Taken from Forward.

37) Ibid., 4.

38) Ibid., 12–13.

gradually became darker until he arrived at a very dark place of loneliness where those once polite people who had nicely beckoned him to join them had gradually morphed into vicious bullies who were cursing him, biting him and tearing flesh from his body, and leaving him alone on a dark, cold floor to die.³⁹⁾ Howard was not able to recognize people he saw though he had tried.⁴⁰⁾ He did not initially see himself as being connected with them, but only saw them as people who tormented him. While Tamara could see the souls around her and feel what they were feeling, she had no connection with them. Howard could only see indistinguishable people around him, but later on, he realized they were people just like him or like all of us. He puts it this way:

The people who attacked me were the same kind of people that I was. They were not monsters, they weren't demons. They were people who had missed "it." The point of being born and being alive in this world. They had missed it, and had lived lives of selfishness and cruelty, and now were in a world where there was nothing else. And they were doomed to inflict that upon each other and upon themselves probably for ever and ever and ever and ever... without end. And now I was a part of it.⁴¹⁾

As awful as it was, Howard believed he deserved to be in that place.⁴²⁾

The third experiencer is Ronald Reagan.⁴³⁾ He differs from the other

39) Ibid., 13-18.

40) Ibid., 13.

41) 臨死・そして与えられた2度目の人生—Howard Storm “My Descent into Death.” *YouTube* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xgmZQe9DIE>> Retrieved August 18, 2022.

42) Ibid.

43) Though sharing the name, Ronald Reagan is unrelated to the 40th president of the United States of America.

two in that he was born into a dysfunctional family where his father was an extremely violent alcoholic, who was constantly enraged and frequently beat his wife and children.⁴⁴⁾ Ronald's family was very poor, but when he was nine years old, a widow who lived nearby gave him a little lamb. In an interview, he said, "I took that lamb home with me. It was my friend. The only friend I felt like I had."⁴⁵⁾ This lamb usually met him when he returned home by the school bus, but one afternoon, the lamb was not there. Ronald began walking back to his house when his father was fixing a flat tire on an automobile, drunk and angry, and cursing. Wanting to keep his distance from his father, Ronald "tried to walk a wide berth around the car,"⁴⁶⁾ but when he got to the other side of the car, he was stunned by the sight of his lamb, lying dead with a tire iron in its body and blood all over its white fleece. In a drunken rage, his father had plunged the tool into the lamb and killed it. For Ronald, that was the final straw. By the age of twelve, he was a runaway and was in and out of juvenile jails and reform schools, full of anger and hate, and constantly committing crimes.⁴⁷⁾

One day, Ronald went to a store with his five year old son, and while pushing on the door at the same time as another man did from the opposite side, he became enraged and punched the man, causing him to fall into a stack of bottles on the floor. The bottles broke, and the man took a piece of glass and began swinging it at Ronald.⁴⁸⁾ Holding up his arm to defend himself, Ronald's

44) I Went to Hell & Saw My Friends There! | Ron Reagan | It's Supernatural! Classics. *YouTube* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RyaJA9wui8>> Retrieved August 18, 2022.

45) RONALD REGAN SAW PEOPLE HE KNEW IN HELL AND THIS IS WHAT THEY TOLD HIM. *YouTube* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WztrzHda5Vg&t=362s>> Retrieved August 18, 2022.

46) I Went to Hell & Saw My Friends There! *YouTube*, Retrieved August 18, 2022.

47) Ibid.

48) Ron Reagan Died & Saw His Friends in Hell! *YouTube* <<https://www.youtube.com/>

arm was cut through to the bone and a major artery was severed causing uncontrollable bleeding.⁴⁹⁾ The store manager told Ronald he had to get to a hospital soon or he would “die within minutes.”⁵⁰⁾ He then put Ronald into a car and drove him to the nearest hospital two miles away. The hospital at which he initially arrived was ill equipped to treat him, so an ambulance was used to transport him to another one. While in the ambulance, he saw what he describes as an explosion where it seemed like the ambulance was on fire. He then came out of his body, and was moving through a smoke filled tunnel “at a tremendous rate of speed,” and upon getting to the end of the tunnel, he heard voices from a multitude of people.⁵¹⁾ At some point he saw from above what appeared to be a live volcanic opening into which he was descending. While descending into these flames where he actually smelled burning flesh, he saw multitudes of people suffering in the flames that were burning them causing them agony. Ronald expresses his bewilderment noticing “they’re burning, they’re screaming, they’re crying out but they’re not burning up.”⁵²⁾ Then he started recognizing faces of the people in the flames—people he knew who had all died violent deaths. They were calling out to him, “Go back! Don’t come to this place! There’s no way out! There’s no escape!”⁵³⁾ As traumatic as it was to see this suffering, Ronald says that “the physical pain didn’t seem to be as bad as the emotional pain of hopelessness, helplessness and aloneness” that was in that fiery pit.⁵⁴⁾

watch?v=LgEXW-lmStU> Retrieved August 18, 2022.

49) Ibid.

50) Ibid.

51) RONALD REGAN SAW PEOPLE HE KNEW IN HELL AND THIS IS WHAT THEY TOLD HIM. *You Tube*, Retrieved August 19, 2022.

52) Ron Reagan Died & Saw His Friends in Hell! *You Tube*, Retrieved August 19, 2022.

53) Ibid.

54) Ibid.

When Ronald opened his eyes in the hospital room, he told his wife that he had been in an awful place. She saw him thrashing and moaning looking very troubled as he was experiencing this, but told him he had been in a hospital all along, to which he responded, “No, I’ve been in another place. I don’t know exactly what it was, but it was terrible.”⁵⁵⁾

Though it is impossible to share the entire scope of the experiencers’ stories, I have focused on the hell that was experienced and how we all need to avoid heading down that road. Tamara was delivered because “the hand of God” reached down and picked her up out of hell and transported her to a heavenly place before returning her to her body.⁵⁶⁾ Howard was delivered when Jesus came to him, reached out and touched him, healed him, and picked him up and held him close after his devastating abuse during his experience.⁵⁷⁾ And Ronald was delivered after physically recovering on earth when his wife became a Christian and invited him to go to church. By hearing a minister refer to “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,”⁵⁸⁾ he connected those words to his experience with his beloved lamb, his only friend at the time, who died at the hands of his violent father, and he was delivered from all the addictions that had made his life miserable.⁵⁹⁾

We have seen here three examples of “good grief.” Grief is usually thought of as negative since it is related to loss, especially the loss of loved ones. But in these cases, the grief experienced went like an arrow to the very core of the experiencers’ souls to awaken them to the reality of the meaning

55) RONALD REGAN SAW PEOPLE HE KNEW IN HELL AND THIS IS WHAT THEY TOLD HIM. *YouTube*, Retrieved August 19, 2022.

56) Tamara Laroux. *A Second Chance at Heaven*, 40–48.

57) Howard Storm. *My Descent into Death*, 25–26.

58) John 1:29. NRSV.

59) I Went to Hell & Saw My Friends There! *YouTube*, Retrieved August 19, 2022.

of their human existence. Tamara could not immediately share her story with her family thinking they may not believe her,⁶⁰⁾ Howard told his wife everything not being sure whether she believed him,⁶¹⁾ and Ronald could not make his wife understand what he had gone through.⁶²⁾ Even after their experiences, a loneliness persisted in that the experiencers could not exactly relay what had happened to them. They lacked connectedness because no one they talked to was actually present at the places of their experiences, but I dare to say that love prevailed. The love channeled through the experiencers to the hearers of these stories enhances the power of the stories—power that says you are loved, you are not alone, and you can be connected to God and God’s people. The experiencers were able to take the risk of being rejected because of the immense love of God they experienced and knew they had to proclaim. When our fears of being rejected cause us to avoid connecting with others, true love cannot be realized. The first letter of John makes this clear: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts our fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”⁶³⁾

Our personal faith experiences are unique and multifarious, but acknowledging them is of immense importance in enabling us to accept ourselves as God accepts us. We must take our faith experiences seriously, and not cater to the expectations pressuring us to conform to a particular dogma. A question to ponder is whether we are truly able to share our beliefs with others. Often it is easier to get caught up into appearing to be like those around us. If a controversial issue is discussed, we may feel like we have to be on one side or the

60) Tamara Laroux. *A Second Chance at Heaven*, 69.

61) Howard Storm. *My Descent into Death*, 90.

62) RONALD REGAN SAW PEOPLE HE KNEW IN HELL AND THIS IS WHAT THEY TOLD HIM. *YouTube*, Retrieved August 19, 2022.

63) I John 4:18. NRSV.

other, and are judged by what the religious body to which we belong dictates. When people have NDEs, they are so strongly convicted of the need for people to hear the truth to avoid eternal destruction of their souls that they must tell somebody as responsible humans, regardless of whether or not their groups will accept or reject them. We need that urgency as well. Do we have the conviction to tell our stories to anyone regardless of the anticipated response? Do we care about others enough that we do not want their souls to be eternally damned? When dogma gets in the way of our storytelling, reformation becomes impossible. We have to make our churches loyal to a body of Christ that grieves properly when old traditions are lost, but also rejoices when new life-giving beliefs are embraced. When we do this, we become the church of the 21st century that reforms itself to reflect God's will for Christ's church in the world rather than promoting our will for the church and expecting God to cheer us on. As we grieve the decline of membership in nearly every Christian denomination,⁶⁴⁾ what are we being called to do to rid the church of obstacles to becoming a renewed institution that affirms and loves all people as Creator God does?

Good Riddance—Transformation

Having struggled with understanding God and God's involvement in her life, my mother looked to conservative Christian leaders to try to resolve some of her doubts as a believer. One of them was Dr. James Dobson, known among conservative Christians at the time as "America's Foremost Family Counselor," and who was president and founder of *Focus on the Family*,⁶⁵⁾

64) Joe Carter. *FactChecker: Are All Christian Denominations in Decline?* *thegospelcoalition.org* <<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-are-all-christian-denominations-in-decline/>> Retrieved August 23, 2022.

65) Focus on the Family. *focusonthefamily.com* <<https://www.focusonthefamily.com/>>

an organization “dedicated to the preservation of the home.”⁶⁶⁾ In 1994, my mother sent me a copy of his book, *When God Doesn’t Make Sense*,⁶⁷⁾ which I now realize was probably her way of indirectly telling me that even when you believe in God, things are not going to always be well.

Dobson’s emphasis on keeping the family healthy in a time where divorce rates and reported cases of child abuse were increasing was seen as a call to stand up against the deterioration of society and Christian values. However, the inconsistency between the Dobson of the 1990s and that of the 2010s is remarkable. In reference to Bill Clinton’s 1998 affair with White House intern, Monica Lewinsky, “Dobson was appalled by his fellow citizens’ willingness to excuse the president’s behavior as ‘just a private affair—something between himself and Hillary.’ Reminding readers that military officials were being held accountable for sexual misconduct, Dobson found it ‘profoundly disturbing’ that the rules seemed to be rewritten for Clinton.”⁶⁸⁾ “Character DOES matter,” he exclaimed. “You can’t run a family, let alone a country, without it.”⁶⁹⁾

One would conclude that Dobson would be equally appalled by the behavior of Donald Trump. Trump was caught on tape lewdly “bragging about his attempts to seduce a married woman, of kissing women without their consent, of assaulting women—because ‘when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything... grab ’em by the pussy.’”⁷⁰⁾ He paid off a porn star to conceal

about/foundational-values/> Retrieved August 22, 2022.

66) James Dobson. *When God Doesn’t Make Sense* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1993), From introductory remarks on book’s cover.

67) Ibid.

68) Kristin Kobes Du Mez. *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 143.

69) Ibid.

70) Ibid., 263.

their affair,⁷¹⁾ and with “his allies used clandestine hotel-room meetings, pay-offs, and complex legal agreements to keep affairs—sometimes multiple affairs he carried out simultaneously—out of the press.”⁷²⁾ This man needs to be evaluated morally to determine whether or not he is an appropriate candidate to serve as president.

In keeping with his disreputable lifestyle, at Dordt College (presently Dordt University), a conservative Christian Reformed University, Trump declared, “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose any voters.”⁷³⁾⁷⁴⁾⁷⁵⁾ One may ask, how is it possible for professing Christians to accept a man who says this as one of their leaders? But as Calvin University Professor of History Kristin Kobes Du Mez puts it:

Once you define yourself as the good guys and whoever you’re opposed to as the bad guys, that’s when things get really dangerous, because then, almost by definition, whatever you do is righteous and whatever you do

71) Megan Twohey and Jim Rutenberg. *Porn Star Was Reportedly Paid to Stay Quiet About Trump*. The New York Times (January 12, 2018) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/12/us/trump-stephanie-clifford-stormy-daniels.html?auth=login-googleltp&login=googleltp>> Retrieved September 5, 2022.

72) Ronan Farrow. *Donald Trump, a Playboy Model, and a System for Concealing Infidelity*. The New Yorker (February 16, 2018) <<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/donald-trump-a-playboy-model-and-a-system-for-concealing-infidelity-national-enquirer-karen-mcdougal>> Retrieved August 22, 2022.

73) Kristin Kobes Du Mez. *Jesus and John Wayne*, 1–2.

74) Mike Bell. Trump rally brings thousands to Dordt. The Gazette (January 23, 2016) <<https://www.thegazette.com/campaigns-elections/trump-rally-brings-thousands-to-dordt/>> Retrieved September 8, 2022.

75) Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra. *Reformed College Hosts Trump’s Disturbing Boast of Follower Loyalty*. The Gospel Coalition (January 24, 2016) <<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/reformed-college-hosts-trumps-disturbing-boast-of-follower-loyalty/>> Retrieved September 8, 2022.

can be justified. The ends will justify the means because God is on your side... It's not love your neighbor as yourself... it is seeing anyone on the outside as potential enemies, potential threats... [and] you can't fight a battle if you don't have enemies.⁷⁶⁾

With this “us-versus-them mentality,” even if Trump is profoundly corrupt, he can be accepted as a “Christian leader” since he pushes the agenda of his followers who act as warriors along side “a militant warrior Christ... wielding a sword into battle to slay his enemies.”⁷⁷⁾

It is regrettable that a respected Christian university provided its campus as a venue for an unapologetically immoral presidential candidate to hold a rally. On December 18, 2019, Trump was impeached for “abuse of power and obstruction of Congress,”⁷⁸⁾ and a Christianity Today editorial called for Trump’s removal from office.⁷⁹⁾ James Dobson’s response to a desired removal of Trump, however, was as follows:

I have read a new editorial published by Christianity Today that promotes impeachment of President Donald Trump. The editors didn’t tell us who should take his place in the aftermath. Maybe the magazine

76) Matthew Kucinski. *Jesus, John Wayne, and the Church: Historian’s Work Explores Masculinity and Evangelicalism*. Spark (December 1, 2020) <<https://calvin.edu/publication/spark/2020/12/01/jesus-john-wayne-and-the-church>> Retrieved September 8, 2022.

77) Ibid.

78) Nicholas Fandos and Michael D. Shear. *Trump Impeached for Abuse of Power and Obstruction of Congress*. New York Times (December 18, 2019) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/18/us/politics/trump-impeached.html>> Retrieved September 9, 2022.

79) Mark Galli. *Trump Should Be Removed from Office*. Christianity Today (December 19, 2019) <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/december-web-only/trump-should-be-removed-from-office.html>> Retrieved September 9, 2022.

would prefer a president who is passionately pro-abortion, anti-family, hostile to the military, dispassionate toward Israel, supports a socialist form of government, promotes confiscatory taxation, opposes school choice, favors men in women's sports and boys in girl's locker rooms, promotes the entire LGBTQ agenda, opposes parental rights, and distrusts evangelicals and anyone who is not politically correct. By the way, after Christianity Today has helped vacate the Oval Office, I hope they will tell us if their candidate to replace Mr. Trump will fight for religious liberty and the Bill of Rights? Give your readers a little more clarity on why President Trump should be turned out of office after being duly elected by 63 million voters? Is it really because he made a phone call that displeased you? There must be more to your argument than that. While Christianity Today is making its case for impeachment, I hope the editors will now tell us who they support for president among the Democrat field. That should tell us the rest of the story.⁸⁰⁾

Is Dobson, psychologist and former professor of pediatrics at the University of Southern California School of Medicine,⁸¹⁾ so ignorant of the obvious reasons for suggesting removal of a habitually lying, cheating, immoral individual acting as president of a 220 year-old democracy whose only answer when asked for his favorite Bible verse was "an eye for an eye,"⁸²⁾ that he can cynically

80) Leada Gore. *Dr. James Dobson responds to 'Christianity Today's' call for Trump removal*. *AL.com* (December 23, 2019) <<https://www.al.com/news/2019/12/dr-james-dobson-responds-to-christianity-todays-call-for-trump-removal.html>> Retrieved August 22, 2022.

81) Kristin Kobes Du Mez. *Jesus and John Wayne*, 79–80.

82) Brain McBride. *Donald Trump: My Favorite Bible Verse is 'Eye for an Eye.'* ABC News (April 15, 2016) <<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/donald-trump-favorite-bible-verse-eye-eye/story?id=38416270>> Retrieved August 26, 2022.

respond to the editor of a respected Christian periodical feeling no shame as a nationally renown Christian counselor? Where does Dobson, who claims to be pro-life and pro-family, really stand morally?⁸³⁾ He said, “Character DOES matter. You can’t run a family, let alone a country, without it.”⁸⁴⁾ He seems to have changed his mind and is now a warrior fighting with Trump who is believed by “nearly half of America’s church-attending white Protestants” to be “anointed by God to be president.”⁸⁵⁾

In a CBS interview, Mark Galli of Christianity Today said of Trump:

... it’s his public morality that makes him unfit because all of us, anybody in leadership... none of us are perfect. We’re not looking for saints. We do have private sins, ongoing patterns of behavior that reveal themselves ... in our private life that we’re all trying to work on. But a president has certain responsibilities as a public figure to display a certain level of public character and public morality.”⁸⁶⁾

As one who preaches a message to drive people away from conservative churches, Dobson is doing an excellent job as we see increasingly more youth leaving fundamentalist congregations and moving toward traditional Catholic and Orthodox, or mainline protestant denominations that embrace the mys-

83) Focus on the Family. *focusonthefamily.com* <<https://www.focusonthefamily.com/about/foundational-values/>> Retrieved August 22, 2022.

84) Kristin Kobes Du Mez. *Jesus and John Wayne*. 143.

85) Julia Duin. *The Christian Prophets Who Say Trump Is Coming Again* (February 18, 2021) POLITICO <<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/02/18/how-christian-prophets-give-credence-to-trumps-election-fantasies-469598>> Retrieved September 8, 2022.

86) Transcript: Mark Galli on “Face the Nation,” (December 22, 2019) *CBS News* <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-mark-galli-on-face-the-nation-december-22-2019/>> Retrieved September 5, 2022.

tery of sacraments and miracles rather than rational arguments to explain them.⁸⁷⁾ People today are searching for the God who created them and accepts and loves all people with diverse personal faith experiences regardless of their gender or sexual identity.⁸⁸⁾ They reject, as we all should, a god created by fundamentalists who changes with the political landscape. Christians serve a God whose name is “אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה” (I AM WHO I AM),⁸⁹⁾ not one called “I am who you say I am,” the god served by idolatrous worshipers who break the first commandment by putting themselves and their ideologies before יְהוָה (*Yahweh*).⁹⁰⁾

The vision for the church should be one of learning to weed out the destructive elements of our traditions to build up a church that is always reforming to God’s will, by acknowledging that the church does not reform itself, but that “God is the agent of reformation. The church is rather the object of God’s reforming work.”⁹¹⁾ We need to say “good riddance” to ideologies that embrace hateful legalistic rules that lack love, for Jesus says loving God and one another is what all the law and prophets depend on,⁹²⁾ and the apostle Paul clearly says that love is the most important virtue to have.⁹³⁾ We need to say

87) ‘Weird Christianity’ and why young people are embracing orthodoxy online and in church. *abc.net.au* (June 14, 2020) <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-14/weird-christianity-why-young-people-embracing-ancient-faith/12349466>> Retrieved August 23, 2022.

88) Christina Colón. *QUEER, CHRISTIAN, AND BELOVED*. Sojourners (July 2, 2020) <<https://sojo.net/articles/queer-christian-and-beloved>> Retrieved August 23, 2022.

89) Exodus 3:14. NRSV. Other possible translations for God’s name, אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, are “I AM WHAT I AM” or “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE.”

90) Exodus 20:3.

91) Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda: Our Misused Motto. *Presbyterian Mission* <<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/ecclesia-reformata/>> Retrieved September 3, 2022.

92) Matthew 22:37–40.

93) I Corinthians 13.

“good riddance” to thinking of our bodies as physically fashioned mainly for the purpose of procreation. We need to say “good riddance” to the arrogance of certainty within our personal theologies. As Peter Enns reminds us, when we are too certain of our own knowledge, it gets in the way and we stop trusting and walking with God.⁹⁴⁾ Finally, we need to say “good riddance” to the embracing of false “messiahs” who claim to have the true gospel and demand absolute loyalty. When we can say “good riddance” to the destructive elements that are tearing the church apart, we will be able to build a church that recognizes Jesus as the Messiah who saves us not by holding us to legalism, but by mysteriously dwelling among us by the Holy Spirit in the ambiguity that permeates our daily lives.

Conclusion

What I have attempted to do with this paper is to first explain how our church traditions, no matter how corrupt they may be due to our sin, contain “good corn” with which we have been blessed. That “good corn” has provided us with a foundation on which to stand, and has given us a guide to help us walk our Christian lives. However, there are weeds of unhealthy dogmatism among the corn that can choke out the golden truth and make existence miserable.

Secondly, I have shared the NDEs of three persons to help us grieve the world views that have been passed down that hurt us in many ways. Tamara Laroux said she just wanted to be “happy,”⁹⁵⁾ but attempted suicide which after being saved from death, brought her to a much deeper understanding of

94) Peter Enns. *The Sin of Certainty* (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 103–104.

95) Out of this World. *YouTube* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-q1Uf2f4wI8&t=12s>> Retrieved August 24, 2022.

herself as a beloved child of God. Howard Storm just wanted to be “successful” and “of value to the world,”⁹⁶⁾ but when a devastating medical emergency caused him enough pain to desire death, he was given an experience by God that helped him shed his atheism and see himself as a soiled sinner saved by God’s grace. Ronald Reagan, due to his abusive father, began a hate-filled violent life at the age of nine, and lived on the streets or with whoever would take him in. He simply wanted to be strong and “to hurt—to kill anything that represented authority in any form.”⁹⁷⁾ A tragic fight in which he was cut up so severely that he nearly bled to death gave him the opportunity to see the hell he was headed for if he continued in his ways. Before their NDEs, Tamara was a lukewarm believer, and Howard and Ronald were atheists, but in the end, their grief was turned to joy when they discarded their original pursuits. All three became Christian ministers pursuing ministries of sharing what God had revealed to them. Stories of “good grief” led these three witnesses to healing and a life dedicated to bringing the gospel to the world.

Finally, I discussed how we need to be able to say “good riddance” to traditions that have been passed on to us but that today are depriving the church of its potential to be the κοινωνία⁹⁸⁾ (koinonia) or fellowship for all of God’s creatures according to God’s will. Preserving the church is dependent on embracing the “good corn,” growing in love through our “good grief,” and being courageous enough to say “good riddance” to the elements that once

96) Howard Storm Interview - STUNNING AND LIFE CHANGING NDE 2001. YouTube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vm647n1360A>> Retrieved August 24, 2022.

97) I Went to Hell & Saw My Friends There! *YouTube*, Retrieved August 19, 2022.

98) Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 438–439. Besides the meaning of fellowship, κοινωνία refers to close relationships, and can sometimes mean generosity or altruism, and participation or sharing.

had their time, but now need to be discarded in order to bless the κόσμος⁹⁹⁾ (cosmos) that God so loves.¹⁰⁰⁾

99) Ibid., 445–447. The Greek word, κόσμος, may refer to the earth and/or everything in it or the universe and/or everything in it; “the sum total of all beings above the level of the animals;” “the habitation of mankind,” or “earth, world in contrast to heaven.” Often when κόσμος refers to humankind, it implies those hostile to God. Considering these definitions, we may conclude that Jesus came not only to save us humans from our sin, but also to save our habitation and the entire universe from destruction due to our sin.

100) John 3:16.