

BRITE DIVINITY SCHOOL  
TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY  
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LOVED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD:  
COUNTERING LEGALISM  
AND MAKING THE CHURCH A PLACE OF HEALING

M. T. S. FINAL EXERCISE

CHTH 71973

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## INTRODUCTION

We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
Leaning together  
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!  
We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass  
Or rats' feet over broken glass  
In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,  
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed  
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom  
Remember us—if at all—not as lost  
Violent souls, but only  
As the hollow men  
The stuffed men.<sup>1</sup>

The opening stanza of T. S. Eliot's 1925 work "The Hollow Men," like the entirety of the poem, is haunting. He gives his readers a world devoid of meaning and preoccupied with death. Eliot's closing words—"This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper"<sup>2</sup>—have become some of the most famous in English-language poetry.

Eliot, an American and a Briton, wrote these words during a period of tenuous peace in the West, and one could argue that he had the Great War in mind. But poet-

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<sup>1</sup>T. S. Eliot, "The hollow men," in *The complete poems and plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), 56.

<sup>2</sup>Eliot, 59.

ry is a living medium: Its true meaning lies not with the author but with the audience. The author's context and original intent are less important than the interpretations readers develop based on their own experiences.

I see Eliot's world as one in which Meursault, the antagonist in French existentialist Albert Camus' 1942 masterpiece, *L'étranger*, would feel at home. (So too would Anthony Swofford, Jake Gyllenhaal's character in the 2005 film *Jarhead*, if the reader would like a more modern-day example.) Meursault is a reactionary creature who lives in a perpetual state of ennui,<sup>3</sup> of listless dissatisfaction, of hollowness, as it were. The main theme of *L'étranger* is Meursault's attitude that life is ultimately meaningless. At the end of the novel, Meursault resigns himself to his murder conviction and imminent decapitation, clinging to a vain hope that the spectators greet him "avec des cris de haine."<sup>4</sup> In *Jarhead*, Swofford sees the full absurdity of war after training for weeks, serving for months and never firing one meaningful round. Their worlds, like the one of Eliot's hollow men, end without significance. There was no grand scheme after all.

The characters described above are alive and well and living in the 21st century. The United States has just experienced two decades of the greatest economic growth in its history. But suicide rates, advertisements for mood-enhancement products and the ever-expanding self-help sections of our local Barnes & Nobles tell us that hope is still elusive for many. What's the answer to all this hopelessness, this ennui? Popular

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<sup>3</sup> Le Robert's fourth definition of "ennui" is "[m]élancolie vague, lassitude morale qui fait qu'on ne prend d'intérêt, de plaisir à rien." It is in that sense that I use the word. *Le Robert pour tous* (1994), s.v. "ennui."

<sup>4</sup> Albert Camus, *L'étranger* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1957), 179.

billboards and bumper stickers tell us that these people just need Jesus. After all, John 10 says Jesus came so we “may have life, and have it abundantly.”<sup>5</sup> Surely a firm grasp of the gospel could give some hope to those who see nothing but pain and meaninglessness.

Jesus can’t be the answer, however, if he’s the problem. Too often, Christians portray God as vengeful, and they add rules and criteria to God’s love. The message of a legalistic God does nothing to help the hollow ones and the Meursaults among us. It replaces meaninglessness with condemnation, trading despair for despair. It promotes a false God (and, consequently, a false Christ) who serves as an oppressor instead of the true God who grants freedom in love.

Theologian Andrew Sung Park has dedicated his career to exploring the impact of oppression on victims, and I believe he is immensely helpful in our discussion. In the 1990s, Park introduced the Korean concept of “han” to Western theology. (I will discuss this topic more in depth later, but allow me to introduce it here, in brief.) Han, Park says, “is the pain of a victim internalized in depth.” It “is a chronic sense of helplessness and resignation” in the face of an individual or group’s inescapable situation. “Sin causes *han* and *han* produces sin. Sin is of oppressors; *han* is of the oppressed.”<sup>6</sup> In our case, the sin is the communication of a false, legalistic God.

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<sup>5</sup>Jn 10:10. All Bible quotations come from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Sung Park, “Sin and han: the pain of a victim,” *The Living Pulpit* (October–December 1999): 22–23.

In 2007, I had a lengthy conversation with a gay<sup>7</sup> man while we were on a train traveling from Chicago to central Illinois. He told me that one of the reasons he avoided Christianity during adulthood was because he was sure, based on what he had gleaned from various sources, his homosexuality precluded him from any sort of relationship with God. He said that although he is sure God does not love him because he is homosexual, he sees no other way he can find love and companionship with another human being.

For this man, the Christian message was oppressive, and it created pain within him: By the time we met, he had resigned himself to being unloved by God for the rest of his life and to eternal damnation. This was his unavoidable fate. Unlike traditional pain, though, his feelings were not caused by a specific oppressor. At some point, he was introduced—anonously, perhaps, or over a long period—to the idea that he was repulsive to and unloved by God. Imagine his pain! From this man's perspective, he had two choices: He could spend his life in lonely misery and try to earn the favor of a God who likely did not love him, or he could salvage some joy out of his terrestrial life and simply hope that he would not be condemned for eternity.

The man is a victim of legalism, an oppressive concept that communicates a God whose love is based on the performance of an individual or group. It is the view that one can sin one's way out of God's love and forgiveness, that one can, through one's actions, become unloved or unlovable by God. The only way to bring about healing

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<sup>7</sup>Homosexuality is a controversial topic within Christianity. I ask that the reader focus more on the man's concept of God than on the sticking point of homosexuality. I pray we can agree that God loves everyone, no matter an individual's sexual identity, belief system, etc.

from the damage done by legalistic doctrines is through communicating God's love for humanity.

What follows is a look at how legalistic doctrines impact their audiences. By adding caveats to God's forgiveness and love, many churches and individual Christians make God and God's message oppressive. The progression is as follows: An individual is exposed a doctrine that suggests the individual can earn forgiveness or God's favor through works or abstinence from sin. Because the individual is fallible and human, the individual inevitably fails at moral perfection. This creates shame and forces the individual to develop an internal, oppressive lifestyle paradigm. Any breaches of the internal code result in further shame. In time, the individual's shame produces a sense of hopelessness, leading to the development of han—feelings of pain and deep-seated despair.<sup>8</sup> The above case study, which we will revisit later in this essay, provides just one example of the dangers of this sort of distorted Christianity.

Before we delve into the pain of legalism, we will first examine the complex relationship between God and humanity, as told through the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. From there, we will turn to the nature of legalistic oppression and study its causes and symptoms, viewing them in light of the han framework that was developed by Park, introduced above, to whom I am indebted in this study.

I will conclude the essay by addressing negative and positive resolutions to legalistic han. We will look at ways in which Christians and Christian communities can

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Sung Park, *The wounded heart of God: the Asian concept of han and the Christian doctrine of sin* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 15–20.

help oppressed individuals recover from the damage legalistic concepts of God have wrought and ways Christians can avoid teachings that could do further harm. It is a difficult task to regain the trust of those who have been hurt by legalistic doctrines, but it is not an impossible one. We must always remember that ours is a God of second chances and trust that God will be faithful in repairing broken souls.

#### A biographical note

During my training and experience as a journalist, my professors, mentors and editors taught me to stay detached from the story. I was to report the news, not be it.

This training served me well. It gave me courage so I could walk past police barricades and interview officers and firefighters outside a burning building. It helped me interview a freshman at Texas Christian University who had accidentally hit and injured a fellow student with her SUV. And it kept me from crying while I was interviewing a family whose property was destroyed in a wildfire.

Therefore, it would be easy for me to sit back and stay emotionally detached from the issue I am exploring in this essay. I could ignore my experiences and my emotions and present an academic study that I carried out while observing the laity from a lofty theological tower.

But this is not a news story. Just as our loving God stepped off the throne and sent Jesus to interact with us on our vulgar, human level, so too must theology meet humanity where it is, in the toils of everyday life. Theologians must become attached

to their fellow humans—there is no other way to suffer or rejoice with them!—and they must be open about their own contexts and experiences.

We theologians cannot avoid being the story because we are, by being human, part of the story of God’s ongoing relationship with creation. We cannot, and should not, attempt to write theology from a “journalistic”—detached, third-party—perspective. To do so would be to elevate ourselves above our audiences. Instead, we must write in solidarity with our audiences,<sup>9</sup> identifying with their experiences and their lives and never allowing them to think that we, as Paul would say, “have already reached the goal.”<sup>10</sup> We theologians are humans and, thus, must write from that stance.

Too often, Christians deify themselves by saying that they are speaking the infallible truth of God. I make no such claim. All I can claim to know for sure is my own context: I am a white male who lives in the United States in the 21st century. I grew up in suburban Cincinnati the only child in a middle-class, white-collar family. I attended high school in a suburb of Houston and went to a private university in Fort Worth, Texas. My parents, still madly in love after more than 25 years, encouraged my talents, indulged my eccentricities and, most important, taught me that I was loved both by them and by God, no matter my actions.

But at some point, I lost sight of God’s unfailing love and focused more on my

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<sup>9</sup> I adapt this idea from the works of various liberation theologians, especially Justo L. González, *Santa Biblia: the Bible through Hispanic eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Phil 3:12.

own inadequacy, shoving my parents' teachings to the back of my mind. The subtle injection of legalistic doctrine—from church, from televangelists, from any number of unknown sources—spread throughout my system like a virus. At its height, during high school, I remember skipping meals as self-punishment for my sins.

My oppressor was nothing as tangible as a slave owner or bigoted superior. Mine was an abstract thought: the idea that my thoughts and actions could somehow cause God to deny me any of God's love. I thought God was out to get me. And despite my privileged life, I suffered as a result of the legalistic doctrine that infected me.

The last few years have been a period of recovery for me. The more I study the Bible and Christianity, the more I am convinced that God extends love to all creation, sans caveat. There is always room for restoration and atonement. Such is my experience, and such is the reason I embarked on this study. It is my sincere prayer that this essay bring hope to its readers and that it encourage them to make a positive difference within their own faith communities.

## GOD'S LOVE, GOD'S HATE

### Loved in the image of God

The first chapter of Genesis is an object of consternation among many modern Christians. Theologians have dissected its opening phrase—“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”<sup>11</sup>—almost assuredly more than any other verse in the Bible. The current battle over origins education in U.S. public schools has pitted literalists against mainstream scientists and postmodern theologians. Genesis 1 is, to many, history and science.<sup>12</sup>

Such a view is a disservice to God and to the authors of Genesis. The book's Hebrew is poetic and beautiful. It describes God's creative act, yes, but above all, it introduces God to us. From the outset, we see God's power: The one who is eternal creates by speaking everything, from light to plants to animals, into existence. The first chapter comes to a climax in v. 26. The text says, “וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ” or, “[t]hen God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image.’”<sup>13</sup> God then blesses hu-

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<sup>11</sup> Gen 1:1, NASB. The NASB translation better represents the Hebrew language in his verse. *New American Standard Bible*, (La Habra, Calif.: The Lockman Foundation, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Answers in Genesis is an apologetics organization that promotes young-Earth creationism. They operate the Creation Museum in northern Kentucky. The reader can find more information about the literalistic views of Genesis and the rest of the Bible on their site at <http://www.answersingenesis.org>.

<sup>13</sup> Gen 1:26, BHS and NRSV. *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1977).

manity, puts it above the rest of creation and, after surveying “everything that he had made,” God calls it “very good.”<sup>14</sup>

Genesis 1 portrays rather clearly a God who is powerful and eternal, but what’s less clear, but still present, is that it characterizes God as one who loves. Genesis 1 tells us that God’s creative act was volitional. That is, God chose to create, by God’s own free will. It stands to reason, then, that God loves creation simply because an entity that has the power to act volitionally and create something other than itself would not then create something for the end goal of not loving it. God’s creation was the first act of love. The most exciting part is in vv. 26–27: God elevates humans above the rest of creation by creating us in God’s own image. We are God’s favorite creation!<sup>15</sup>

But what does it mean that we are created in the image of God? Is the likeness physical, emotional, psychological or, perhaps, divine? There is no theological agreement on the issue. Nonetheless, allow me to offer some theologians’ views on the subject.

Walter Brueggemann says in his 1982 commentary on Genesis that humanity was created “after the manner of a king who establishes statues of himself to assert his sovereign rule where the king himself cannot be present.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, humanity attests to “the Godness of God by exercising *freedom with* and *authority over* all the other

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<sup>14</sup> Gen 1:28–31.

<sup>15</sup> I realize that this statement might have Christological implications. I contend that Jesus’ divine nature is coeternal and cocreator with the rest of the Trinity and therefore not created. Jesus’ incarnate body was created, however, and was cohuman with us.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 32.

creatures entrusted to its care.”<sup>17</sup> Being created in the image of God does not allow us humans to sit back and revel in our own greatness. Instead, it’s a call to responsibility. God chose us to be caretakers of creation and to have dominion over it, as it says in v. 28, by using a power that “invites, evokes and permits,” just as God does for us.<sup>18</sup>

Frank Michaeli, who was a professor of the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Paris, differs from Brueggemann in approach but comes to a similar conclusion. In the first volume of his two-part commentary on Genesis, Michaeli, who died in 1977, puts forth a literal interpretation of *imago Dei*, saying that humanity is an image of God because we have physical and spiritual similarities. “L’homme est une image de Dieu parce qu’il lui ressemble dans toute sa personne, corps et esprit, comme un fils ressemble à son père.”<sup>19</sup> Humanity is also an image of God’s spiritual nature, “de son esprit, de sa gloire.”<sup>20</sup>

Michaeli places humans in a high position, but he does not deify us. The author of Genesis, Michaeli says, uses *imago Dei* as a method “pour préciser l’exacte position de l’homme dans le monde.”<sup>21</sup> If we are the image of God, we are different from the animals over which we have dominion. And if we are the image of God, we are not God ourselves; we only resemble God. Michaeli’s words are worth quoting:

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Frank Michaeli, *Le livre de la Genèse (chapitres 1 à 11)* (Neuchâtel, Switzerland: Delachaux & Niestlé S. A., 1957), 27.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 28.

“Aucune prétention à la divinisation de l’homme ne peut se fonder sur cette image, car entre une personne et son image, il restera toujours une séparation profonde. L’homme n’est ni Dieu, ni animal ; il est placé là par le créateur, pour remplir une mission précise, dans une position privilégiée, mais dépendante de son souverain.”<sup>22</sup>

Brueggemann’s interpretation of *imago Dei* and, more broad, the status of humanity in the eyes of God, is much less literal than that of Michaeli. Nonetheless, we can see a common theme. For both theologians, *imago Dei* involves God’s plucking humanity out of the rest of creation. They say humanity has a “responsibility”<sup>23</sup> or a “precise mission,”<sup>24</sup> in short, a call from God, one that no other created being has received. God does not see humans as codivine, nor does God see us as simply beasts. Instead, God elevates us for a special purpose, and in doing so, demonstrates that we are loved.

Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian who was active during the middle of the 20th century, has a different point of departure than both Brueggemann and Michaeli, but he ends up affirming the human creature, as well. Barth argues in the third volume of *Church Dogmatics* that Jesus Christ is the perfect *imago Dei*.<sup>25</sup> Humanity, Barth says,

“has indeed a part in the divine likeness of the man Jesus, the man for the fellow-man. As man generally is modelled on the man Jesus and His being for others, and as the man Jesus is modelled on God, it has to be said of man generally that he is created in the image of God.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Brueggemann, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Michaeli, 28, author’s translation.

<sup>25</sup> Karl Barth, *Church dogmatics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol III, 2, *The doctrine of creation* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 323–324.

<sup>26</sup> Barth, 324.

Not only that, but the fact that humanity exists as male and female points toward God's Triune existence.<sup>27</sup> "God is in relationship, and so too is the man created by him. This is his divine likeness."<sup>28</sup>

How does this affirm God's love for humanity? Basically this: From the beginning, God ordained humanity to be God's covenant-partner, and God created humanity to be determined toward this end. But because humans are fallible, God, who made humanity and the covenant, also sustains the covenant relationship. "God created [humanity] in this correspondence, as a reflection of Himself. Man is in the image of God."<sup>29</sup> One of the themes of the third volume of *Dogmatics* is that the Triune God is for humanity, as made evident through the incarnation. This, Barth says throughout his theology and *Dogmatics* is God's divine "Yes!" to humanity.

Barth's theology of *imago Dei* differs greatly from more traditional approaches, but it still ends up with the same conclusion: By creating us in God's image, God affirms humanity. God sets us apart from the rest of creation from the beginning. It's not too much of a leap, then, to say that God truly loves us.

The reader might wonder at this point the definition of the word "us," used above. Two issues might come to mind: First, does "us" simply refer to Jews and Christians? Second, does "us" refer to our whole selves, bodies included, or just our

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<sup>27</sup>The reader can find a concise explanation of Barth's discussion in §45 in Geoffrey Bromiley, *An introduction to the theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979).

<sup>28</sup>Barth, 324.

<sup>29</sup>Barth, 323.

spiritual beings. Genesis 1 answers both of these clearly. The chapter makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles or between sinners and saints. In Genesis 1, all humanity is created in God's likeness and, thus, all humanity is loved. Furthermore, the passage makes no distinction between the spiritual and physical attributes of humanity. Instead, in v. 31, God views all of creation—its physical and spiritual attributes both present—and pronounces it all “very good.”

#### Sin enters the world

We pick up the story in the third chapter of Genesis. Despite their privileged status among creation, our forebears in Eden are not content. They want to be like God, so at the urging of a crafty serpent, they eat of the fruit of good and evil, sinning in their disobedience. With their first bite comes awareness of unrighteous things and the loss of their innocence. There is now a separation between God and humanity, one that we humans cannot bridge alone. But what happens to God's love when sin enters the world? It remains. Rather than destroy the original transgressors, thereby annihilating the whole human species, God yet again pours out love by clothing them and allowing their legacy to live on.<sup>30</sup>

#### God hates the wicked

Humanity's knowledge of good and evil eventually leads to humanity's choosing evil over good. From the fall onward, God's relationship with humanity is a cycle

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<sup>30</sup> Gen 3:21; 3:24–4:1.

of failure, sacrifice and atonement. God minces no words regarding God's feelings toward those who reap iniquity. For example, in Pss 5:5 and 11:5, David declares that God hates the wicked. Deuteronomy 18 says that God abhors sorcerers, augurs and soothsayers.<sup>31</sup> The language used is strong: Those who sin anger God greatly.

Do accounts of God's hatred for certain individuals discount messages of God's love that we see in the creation account and throughout the rest of the Bible? If God hates the wicked, does that mean that God does not love anyone who sins? Does God not love humanity?

By no means. We must not think of God's hate and God's love as being mutually exclusive. Such a view oversimplifies the complexity of God's relationship with humanity. Ezekiel helps us shed light on the issue. At the end of the book, God discusses with the prophet the upcoming destruction of those who, in 18:24, had turned "away from their righteousness," those whom, as Ps 5:5 suggests, God hates. But the God we see in this chapter is conflicted about God's actions: "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone," God says in Ez 18:32. God's commitment to justice and God's own sovereignty mean that God must hate iniquity and those who practice it, but God's solidarity with humanity, best illustrated in God's continual forgiveness of Israel, means that God also loves us.<sup>32</sup> Ezekiel suggests that God does not like hating us because of God's love for us. It pains God to choose between sovereignty and solidarity.

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<sup>31</sup> Deut 18:10–12.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Brueggemann discusses God's loyalty to both Israel and God's own sovereignty in his *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 268–272.

As Christians, we can look toward the cross event as the clearest evidence that God’s love for humanity trumps any anger or hate that God has over our transgressions and our sinful selves. The nature of God’s love through the person of Christ is attested by Jesus himself in the Gospels and in commentary from the New Testament’s epistle-writers. Combined, they point us toward a God who chose to show mercy to God’s creation by sacrificing God’s own begotten one.

In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus utters what are perhaps the most well-known words of Bible: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”<sup>33</sup> The verse is cliché in our society—we see it at sporting events and painted on overpasses—but it is nonetheless powerful. God sent Jesus out of love for the world, sinners and saints included. The message of this section of John is that God’s love for the world is not contingent upon belief in Jesus but is poured out to all humanity.

The authors of the New Testament’s epistles pick up on this theme. The author of 1 John minces no words when he boldly declares, “God is love.”<sup>34</sup> The statement comes in the midst of a 15-verse discourse on God’s relationship with humanity. The author goes on to say:

“God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Jn 3:16

<sup>34</sup> 1Jn 4:8; 4:16.

<sup>35</sup> 1Jn 4:9–10.

For the writer of 1 John, the person and actions of Jesus are the quintessential expression of God's love for humanity, love that God showed to us despite our not loving God.

In his letter to the Roman church, Paul also writes on God's universal love for humanity. Paul says in v. 5:6 that "while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." Paul adds, "But God proves his love for us in that while still we were sinners, Christ died for us."<sup>36</sup> Paul shares the sentiments of the writer of 1 John and of Jesus himself: The cross event came about because God loves us, and God's love is not contingent upon our acceptance of the Christian message.

Does God still hate iniquity? Yes. God's divine justice and sovereignty require God to hate anything that is imperfect. But this does not mean that God's hate replaces God's love; they are not mutually exclusive emotions. If God had no love for us, we would have never made it out of Eden. Instead, God clothed us, grew us, blessed us, sustained us, entered into covenant with us and died for us. These are not the actions of a God who has no love for humanity.

In light of this discussion, I feel confident in saying that God loves humanity.<sup>37</sup> All humans. Every single individual—past, present and future. Mother Teresa. The Pope. Barack Obama. George W. Bush. Pastors. Transsexuals. Porn stars. Child predators. Adolf Hitler. Widows. Orphans. Rapists. Jews. Gentiles.

Everyone.

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<sup>36</sup> Rom 5:8.

<sup>37</sup> Please do not misread this as a soteriological claim. God saves whom God saves, but God extends love to all humans.

## GOD WHO OPPRESSES

Scripture tells us that God's love for humanity and desire for reconciliation with all of us are not trumped by God's hatred of our wickedness. This is the crux of the Christian message, and proper doctrine requires that God's hate for wickedness and God's love for humanity be held in tension. If God truly did not care about humanity, God would not have created us, and God certainly would not have sacrificed Christ to atone for our sins. The message of God's love and desire for reconciliation appears throughout Scripture, but I fear that message is often distorted. Instead, many Christians teach, however subtly, that God does not truly love humanity.

The root of the problem lies in doctrines and methods of evangelizing that overemphasize God's wrath and understate or omit God's desire to grant mercy to humanity. These doctrines and methods tend to focus heavily on individual sins of thought and action. In America, such doctrines and methods trace their roots back to (or past) the revivalist movements in the 17th and 18th centuries. A prime example is revivalist preacher Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," a sermon he delivered in Enfield, Conn., on 8 July, 1741. In it, Edwards says:

"The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds

you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you was suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell."<sup>38</sup>

Edwards' sermon contains strong language and imagery, as did of much of the Christian rhetoric of the day. And in terms of dramatic reactions and conversion experiences, it was successful.<sup>39</sup> But the God preached in "Sinners" is not one who pours out love on God's creation. Quite the opposite, in fact: Throughout the 7,000-plus-word sermon, the word "love" appears but four times, and only twice with God as the subject. Far from being a God who exudes love, the God that Edwards describes will very soon send down "fiery floods of ... fierceness and wrath" on those who do not repent.<sup>40</sup>

A few hundred years later, much of U.S. Christianity still hasn't shed its revivalist roots. Much of Christian evangelism is still very much focused on forcing audiences to realize the filth of their sinful actions and thoughts through underscoring God's wrath. Consider the following excerpt from a tract distributed by a church that has campuses in Texas and Washington State:

"IF YOU DIED TONIGHT and you were JUDGED according to

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<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

<sup>39</sup> For an in-depth discussion of Jonathan Edwards and the religious climate during the Great Awakening, see Martin Marty, *Pilgrims in their own land* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1984).

<sup>40</sup> Edwards.

these standards (LYING, STEALING, ADULTERY, BLASPHEMY, and MURDER), how do you think you would do? Would you be INNOCENT or GUILTY? Do you think you would go to HEAVEN or HELL? Now remember, before you answer, God is such a GOOD judge, that unlike many judges on the bench today, He will not leave out even one minute detail of sin in His judgment. Now, think deeply before you answer.<sup>41</sup>

The language is a bit more updated, but the message in this tract is the same as in Edwards' sermon. Our thoughts and actions have damned us, so we must repent of them immediately in order to gain salvation from eternal death. Once saved, we must "never look back."<sup>42</sup>

What's wrong with moral living? Nothing. Certainly we can agree that it's wrong to lie, steal and murder, and the church should encourage Christians to aspire to lead righteous lives. The issue here is that the sort of legalistic evangelizing that we see in Edwards' speech and the church's tract places an incredible amount of emphasis on the moral depravity of human beings and utterly ignores God's desire for reconciliation. It immediately sets up a moral framework for the audience: A Christian does not, for example, lust or steal, so if one lusts or steals, one must not be a Christian. A step further: A Christian does not do immoral things, so if one does something immoral, one must question one's status with God.

Such thinking is both powerful and dangerous. Legalism's impact goes beyond simple and healthy conviction over inappropriate action or thought. It creates immense guilt and shame that cause victims to question their beliefs about God. God

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<sup>41</sup> Deliverance Bible Church, "Religion Destroys." Formatting in original.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

moves from being one who hates our wickedness but still chooses to show us mercy out of love to one who is malevolent and who shows us mercy begrudgingly. Legalism tells us that we are merely thorns in God's side. Following this logic, it's easy to see how people who are exposed to legalism could perceive that God does not love humanity.

The most malicious part of legalism is that it hides itself behind a false image of God. The God promoted by legalism is one who, as discussed before, has no love for humanity and expects human moral perfection—or at least perfection in certain areas, such as sexuality. Legalism's God is one whose love is performance-based. To many victims of legalism, this God is their oppressor.

The legalistic God offers not freedom but enslavement. I contend that the emotional impact of belief in such a false God is just as oppressive as that of any system of forced servitude. Legalistic shame creates deep-seated hopelessness. Where after sin and ensuing conviction the individual with a proper understanding of God might say: "I have failed. God, forgive me," legalism leads the individual to lament, "I am a failure. How can God love me?"

This is the goal of legalism: to devastate its victims, to convince them that God does not love them because they are too morally depraved. Legalism distorts its victims' perception of God in an effort to enslave them and use their shame to perpetuate itself. For Christians, this results in alienation or even stricter adherence. For non-Christians who desire a relationship with the Christian God, legalistic doctrines

serve as a road block that often results in anger or the feeling that the individual's sins prevent any sort of reconciliation from taking place. For all parties involved, it can result in great suffering. How does this work? The next section will shed light on that question.

### Andrew Sung Park and the doctrine of han

Theologian Andrew Sung Park's roots lie in the volatile Korean Peninsula of the mid-20th century. His "father was drafted into the Japanese Army toward the end of World War II"<sup>43</sup> during the Japanese occupation of Korea. After the war, his family's land was usurped by a nascent, communist North Korean government. The family crossed "the Imjin River, where they were shot at by the border patrols," barely escaping to South Korea, where they became refugees in South Korea, eventually coming to the United States in January 1973, in search of a better life.<sup>44</sup> The family's difficulties continued, however. Later that year, Park's parents were killed in an automobile accident, ushering in what Park describes as "the darkest time of [his] life."<sup>45</sup>

In his book *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*, Park uses his biography as a springboard into his thesis. Han, he says, is used in Korean and many other Asian languages "to describe the depths of human

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<sup>43</sup> Park, *Wounded*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

suffering.”<sup>46</sup> “Han is the abysmal experience of pain,” Park says.<sup>47</sup> In a 1999 article in *The Living Pulpit*, he equates han to a black hole: “As it reaches the maximum limit, the victim’s suffering implodes and collapses into a compressed core of pain. That collapsed pain is *han*.”<sup>48</sup>

What sets han apart from traditional views of suffering is that it requires a two-party relationship. Han “entrenches itself in the soul of the victims of sin and crime.”<sup>49</sup> In Park’s chapter from the book *The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the Sinned-Against*, he further describes han as “the suffering of the innocent who are caught in the wicked situation of helplessness.”<sup>50</sup> It is a

“physical, mental, and spiritual repercussion to a terrible injustice done to a person, eliciting a deep ache, a wrenching of all the organs, an intense internalized or externalized rage, a vengeful obsession, and the sense of helplessness and hopelessness.”<sup>51</sup>

Park outlines three levels of han: individual, collective, and structural. Individual han “is a reaction to the oppression of the individual” and is frequently connected to the other two levels.<sup>52</sup> Collective han is “a cultural inferiority complex” or “national

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<sup>46</sup> Park, *Wounded*, 15.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Park, “Sin and han,” 22; see also Park, *Wounded heart*, 17.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Andrew Sung Park, “The Bible and han,” in *The other side of sin: woundedness from the perspective of the sinned-against*, ed. Andrew Sung Park and Susan L. Nelson (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2001), 47.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>52</sup> Park, “Sin and han,” 22.

shame,” such as in situations of foreign occupation.<sup>53</sup> Finally, structural han comes as a result of “monopolistic capitalism, pervasive racism, tenacious sexism, and oppressive classism.”<sup>54</sup> This section focuses on individual manifestations of han.

In *Wounded Heart*, Park provides a further breakdown of individual han. Active, conscious han—that is, han that is directed against a specific oppressor—can result in “*fury and vengefulness*,” and it “seeks gratification by retaliation for injuries suffered.”<sup>55</sup> Passive, conscious han—in which the individual is aware of oppression but not aware of the source—can lead to self-withdrawl, self-hatred or resignation.<sup>56</sup>

Another type of han, unconscious, involves feelings that are “blocked to memory.”<sup>57</sup> Active, unconscious han can result in resentment, indifference or subservience toward “the offending individuals, institutions, or social systems.”<sup>58</sup> Passive, unconscious han occurs when “the victim blames and punishes herself or himself” for the wrongs of another.<sup>59</sup>

The final step in understanding Park’s doctrine of han is examining its resolution, which can be either negative or positive. Negative resolution of han results in sin and, thus, further han. Positive resolution cuts “off the chain of the vicious cycle of sin

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<sup>53</sup> Park, “Sin and han,” 22; see also Park, *Wounded heart*, 20.

<sup>54</sup> Park, “Sin and han,” 22.

<sup>55</sup> Park, *Wounded heart*, 31.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 34–35.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

and *han*.<sup>60</sup> Abused children, for example, can resolve their *han* negatively by becoming abusive parents themselves or positively by working to end child abuse in their communities.

Han is not a small, rigid doctrine. In *Wounded Heart*, Park discusses the existence of *han* among groups and individuals around the world. He looks at the *han* of European Jews after World War II and of exploited workers in Korea.<sup>61</sup> It's evident from his writings that he never intended *han* doctrine to apply only to the Korean context. If sin is universal, so too is *han*: The former begets the latter.

#### Legalistic oppression

As discussed earlier, legalism's most malicious attribute is its promotion of a God whose love is performance-based. Such a God does not desire a relationship of ongoing sanctification. Instead, legalism's God demands moral perfection in exchange for love and promises divine retribution should failure ensue. This creates a cycle of guilt and shame, eventually leading to *han*. When *han* sets in, legalism directs its victims' frustration to God, the victims themselves or both. Let's apply a modified version of Park's structure of individual *han* to legalism and its false God so we can see the mechanics of this concept more clearly.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Park, "Sin and *han*," 23.

<sup>61</sup> Park, *Wounded heart*, 21–24.

<sup>62</sup> This structure is adapted from Park, *Wounded heart*, 31–34. The modifications I mention here involve the identity of the victim's oppressor. From a third-party perspective, the oppressors in all of these situations are legalism and its false God. To the victims, however, the oppressors are God, themselves, or all of the above. These descriptions are written from the perspective of the victims.

**Active, conscious:** Park describes this form as “the will to revenge” and says that it is “visible, recognizable and restless.”<sup>63</sup> Christian and God-believing<sup>64</sup> victims of legalism who suffer from active, conscious han desire to exact violent revenge against their perceived oppressor: God. There are two ways this could play out: The victim could effectively kill God by swearing off all belief and by actively seeking to convince others that God does not exist, or, because God is not physically accessible, the ire of the active, conscious sufferer could be redirected to things that represent God, including churches and individual Christians. The sufferer might try to hurt God by harming those whom the sufferer sees as receiving the divine love that the sufferer cannot obtain. Extreme cases of active, conscious han might result in church shootings or other violent acts against people or institutions that represent God.

Active, conscious sufferers either have left Christianity or, if already outside the faith, have stopped desiring entrance into the faith. These people have spent some time trying to work within legalism’s moral framework, but after continued failure, they have grown angry. They see God as a malevolent figure who creates unrealistic rules just so God can watch humans fail.

**Passive, conscious:** “When the offender is either too vulnerable or too formidable

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<sup>63</sup>Park, *Wounded heart*, 33.

<sup>64</sup>“Christian” refers to those who say they are Christians, no matter their specific theological beliefs. “God-believing” refers to people who are outside the Christian faith but who still believe in the God of Christianity and Judaism. Likely, these are people who were raised with some connection with Christianity or Judaism and who do not have any other religious affiliation. I am not making a soteriological or exclusivist claim here. I can think of no other way to distinguish between the two groups, so I plead the reader’s indulgence.

to blame, a victim's han turns into *resignation*.<sup>65</sup> Here where I must expand Park's original structure for our purposes. Victims of legalism who suffer from passive, conscious han will not blame God for their suffering. Instead, they will blame their own inadequacy and moral depravity. The concept of God that a victim of legalism possesses is God to that person. To the victim, the true nature of God is that God is one who gives and denies love based on an individual's moral acts and performance. To speak of a God with different characteristics would be to blaspheme. Furthermore, to blame God for one's own feelings of hopelessness would be to question God's purposes and, thus, invite divine retribution.

Whereas active, conscious sufferers will attempt revenge against God, passive, conscious sufferers will not. Passive, conscious sufferers believe that their pain is fully deserved. Therefore, passive, conscious sufferers will take out their frustration on themselves in order to cleanse themselves of further unrighteousness. These sufferers are mired in self-loathing because they see themselves as their own oppressors. They believe that if they can just stop sinning, their suffering will stop.

Victims of legalism who suffer with this sort of han might resort to self-punishment—skipping meals, self-mutilation, even suicide—or avoidance of those with whom victims do not feel worthy to interact. Self-punishment and avoidance are not methods of running away; they are tactics the sufferer uses to try to atone for immoral thoughts and actions.

I believe that this form of han is what a majority of legalism's victims who re-

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<sup>65</sup>Park, *Wounded heart*, 33.

main in the Christian faith endure. These victims are trapped between two choices: take revenge on God (by denying, questioning or blaspheming) in order to alleviate their own suffering, with the risk that such actions could lead to more pain, or continue trying to atone for their sins by working even harder at moral righteousness and by inflicting punishments on themselves.

**Active, unconscious:** The difference between this aspect of han and its conscious counterpart is subtle but present. Active, conscious sufferers display anger and fury toward their oppressors (or perceived oppressors, in our case). Active, unconscious sufferers instead “become bitter toward those responsible for their victimization.”<sup>66</sup> Instead of acting out in aggression, these sufferers express their resentment in “forms such as indifference, subservience, [or] humor.”<sup>67</sup> In this form of han, the oppressor is again the victim’s false perception of God.

Although this form of han can manifest itself among God-believers, I believe it is mostly prevalent among those within the Christian faith. Christian sufferers are likely to choose subservience despite their bitterness. They resent that God does not love them and makes unrealistic moral demands, but they also see no other means to attain salvation. Rather than leave the faith or profess unbelief, they grudgingly obey.

**Passive, unconscious:** As with active, unconscious han, this form is similar to but subtly distinct from its conscious counterpart. It occurs “[w]hen a transgressor is

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<sup>66</sup> Park, *Wounded heart*, 62.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

either too potent to revolt against or unidentifiable.”<sup>68</sup> Passive, unconscious sufferers are best defined as helpless, Park says. They believe that there’s nothing they can say or do to alleviate their suffering.

If passive, conscious han is prevalent among Christians, the unconscious variety chiefly impacts God-believers, those who believe in the God of Judaism and Christianity but are outside the Christian faith. Those who suffer from this form of han feel that God does not love them because they are too morally depraved and that no one who is seemingly in God’s good graces will take them seriously. In this form of han, the oppressor is twofold: Sufferers might feel that they have failed themselves through their moral depravity (as in the passive, conscious form) and they might feel that God has left them out to dry. No matter the perceived source, victims feel utterly helpless. With no way out, they sink further into isolation and self-loathing.

People who suffer with unconscious han, passive or active, are marked by a desire to un-know or un-believe in God. In my experience, people who tend toward this form of han see God as a jailkeeper. Belief in God is not freedom but incarceration inside a box of guilt and rules.

The reader should not think at this point that an individual’s feelings of han can or should be classified neatly into these categories. Han is a dynamic emotion that changes based on context. Over time, one might move from helplessness to violent anger or anywhere in between. The feelings of those who suffer from han are complex, deep-seated and powerful, and they should not be dismissed.

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 35.

## RESOLVING HAN

### Negative resolution: perpetuating pain

According to Park, han can be resolved in negative and positive ways. We discussed some of the possible negative responses to han in the previous section. Active, conscious han, for example, can result in violent retribution; passive, unconscious han can lead to self-loathing and suicide. We will look at methods of positive resolution in the next section.

Because legalism is a teaching, one of the ways it can be resolved negatively is by the victims' spreading it to other people. Legalism uses its hosts to spread its message to other victims. Sometimes, transmission is altruistic—hosts believe they are helping other people by giving them what they think is God's moral code—and sometimes it is manipulative—hosts who believe they have followed the code well might enjoy the power they wield when they condemn their audience.

Consider the following reader submission from a recent “Cheers and Jeers” section in Fort Worth (Texas) Star-Telegram:

**“Jeers:** To the lowlife who last month stole my son's car and stripped it. Was it really worth losing your soul? God knows who you are. Jeers to the city auto pound for charging to recover a stolen vehicle.”<sup>69</sup>

The woman who submitted this “jeer” to the newspaper is making a strong theological statement: By stealing her son's car, the thief has earned automatic damnation. The

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<sup>69</sup>“Cheers & Jeers,” Fort Worth (Texas) Star-Telegram, 28 March, 2009. The name of the woman who made this submission, published in the original, has been omitted for privacy's sake.

woman, we might assume, does not believe she is damned. She has kept the moral code; she has not stolen.

How does this communicate the concept of a God who does not love? The woman's broad theological statement—theft leads to damnation—does not take into account the complexity of God's relationship with humanity. Thievery is sin, something that God in God's righteousness detests, but God loves the thief despite the thief's transgression. There is no room for reconciliation in the woman's statement, no place for divine mercy or forgiveness. The God-concept she communicates is not one that involves love.

One could argue that I am reading too much into this paragraph. That's entirely possible, but I disagree. It might not come from a scholarly source, but this paragraph of theology was likely seen by hundreds of thousands of people. It represents, in my opinion, the pervasiveness of legalism in our society. Statements such as this one perpetuate legalism's false, performance-based God. This woman's statement victimizes anyone, Christian or not, who has ever stolen anything by suggesting that their sins trump God's love and ability to forgive. It propagates legalism and kick-starts the cycle of han.

Let's look at another example: I once attended a church camp at which the pastor told his audience of 13- to 18-year-olds that he was unafraid to say that all homosexuals were going to hell. A vast majority of the 600-plus students who attended the

camp had never met the pastor and would never see him again. Nonetheless, his message remained in many of their minds.

For this situation, we must ask the same question as before: How does this communicate a God who does not love? The camp pastor communicated a concept of God's nature to his audience, a concept that included, among other things, the idea that God does not offer forgiveness to anyone who is homosexual,<sup>70</sup> regardless of their beliefs. He elevated homosexuality to the top position on the moral code. He presented homosexuality, which he believed to be a sin, as a deal-breaker with God, as a lifestyle that is so displeasing to God that there's no way God can look past it and offer forgiveness. The homosexual—or the student dealing sexual-identity questions—in the audience was out of luck. Irrevocably damned.

In such a situation, who was the oppressor? Depending on the student, the oppressor was either the false God who required moral perfection, at least in the area of sexuality, before offering salvation or the victim's selves for not being “good enough” to be loved by God.

From a third-party perspective, we see that the oppressor in this situation was the legalistic God-concept that the pastor presented. He, himself a victim of legalism, injected it into the students' minds, and for some of them, it festered, long after the pastor was gone. And although I have no concrete proof, I can surmise that it either perpetuated or created feelings of hate in some of those students.

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<sup>70</sup> As I mentioned before, the issue here is not whether homosexuality is a sin. This pastor believed it was, so I'm working within his theology. The important issue here is that he presented a specific action or lifestyle as having the ability to nullify God's love and offer of forgiveness and atonement.

### Positive resolution: bringing healing

The prevalence of legalism and the han it creates is overwhelming. It would be an understatement to say that God has very little credibility in U.S. society. Many victims of legalism and han—especially those who sit outside the Christian faith—are not likely to jump at the chance to hear anyone talk about God. They are entirely justified in their anger. They have been manipulated and oppressed.

This is why we Christians must break the cycle of han by resolving it in a positive, proactive way. We must stop portraying God as one whose love is contingent on our actions and instead present God as one who loves unceasingly. We must preach a cross event that occurred because of God's love for us. The church—the community of Christians—must become a place of healing that, yes, involves repentance of transgressions but also encourages freedom under grace.

How is this done? First, we must root out legalistic doctrines in our own faith communities. There must be no hint of doctrine that suggests to the audience that God's love is contingent on our thoughts and actions. We must teach that God's love for humanity is greater than God's hate of our wickedness and that God desires that we live in freedom. This does not mean that we should resort to antinomianism, for Christianity still has a moral-ethical component. Rather, it means that we should not try to manipulate people into conversion to Christianity or adherence to a moral code by teaching God that does not love immoral people.

In practice, this means a slight reordering of the gospel message. Recognizing

that many people in our nation believe that God hates them, we must always begin with God's love for humanity and God's affirmation of the human creature. We should mention human sinfulness, but we must not obsess over individual thoughts and actions. Instead, it is more proper to discuss the general, sinful state of humanity. We must not force or coerce someone into repentance but instead allow God to move in the person's life. If the person is truly repentant, so be it. It's not our job to save or sanctify anyone.

Such a reframing of the gospel also requires a change in the messages that come from church pulpits. Every sermon and Bible lesson should include at least some mention of God's love for humanity, and it is incumbent on Christians to ensure that no one goes home with the belief that God does not love them. Morality should be taught as something that comes from gratitude for God's love and from our interacting with our fellow humans in gladness, not as a restrictive code.<sup>71</sup> We should teach that God does indeed hate wickedness, but we should emphasize that God's hate of our transgressions does not replace God's love for us.

Second, the church must stop focusing so heavily on the plight of sinners and expand our view of sin to include those who have been sinned against.<sup>72</sup> Theologian Ruth C. Duck says in her chapter in *The Other Side of Sin* that "[a]ll people have

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<sup>71</sup> I adapt this from my own reading of Romans and the Gospels and from the theology of Karl Barth.

<sup>72</sup> Park discusses this extensively throughout his theology, as does one of my former professors, Kang Nam-Soon. Ruth C. Duck presents this suggestion in her chapter, "Hospitality to victims: a challenge for Christian worship," in *The Other Side of Sin*, which was cited earlier in this essay.

the potential both for being violated and violating others.”<sup>73</sup> We must realize that “[w]orshiping congregations include both victims and violators; in fact, the same person may be victimized in one context and violated in another.”<sup>74</sup> This refocusing not only helps victims of legalism, but it helps us realize that all sorts of oppression abound in our world, as well.

One practical application of this might be a service that highlights the lament of victims instead of the sins of violators. Duck suggests psalms of lament, such as Psalm 22, might be helpful here. Allow people to put their laments into words, whether spoken, signed, written or sung. One who has been oppressed by legalism might feel reassured by hearing respected church leaders and members confess their own fears of inadequacy. At the end of the service, make it a point to reaffirm God’s abundant love, and remind them that our God is one who suffers alongside us.<sup>75</sup>

Third, we must leave our buildings and communities and go out into the world. We must treat those whom we meet with dignity, and we must authentically love them. Christians in the United States must realize that legalism has caused many Christians and God-believers to hate or fear the community of believers because of the oppression it represents. The popular (and entirely justified) perception of Christians—judgmental, hateful, uncaring—precedes us. We must not see those outside the church as tally marks or signatures in the Book of Life. Instead, we should see

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<sup>73</sup> Duck, *Other side*, 167.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Portions adapted from Duck, *Other side*, 168–170; Ps. 145:8.

them as humans with wants, needs, fears and loves. They should be our friends, not our projects.

That said, we should also not ignore people within the Christian community. Many of the people who are in the pews every Sunday suffer in silence. They attend church out of fear that missing a Sunday might bring God's wrath upon them. These people, designated earlier as sufferers of active, unconscious sin, need healing, as well.

The most important thing for Christians to keep in mind throughout the healing process is that, as Duck and Park have both said, we are all capable of being victims and violators. Those who teach legalism are participating in sin and are acting as oppressors, but only because they are under the same legalistic yoke. The problem is the doctrine, not the person. Instead of condemning those who teach legalism, we must engage them in love. We must guide them and challenge them to reevaluate their perceptions of Scripture, humanity and God. Legalistic oppression is cause for anger, but it should be always resolved in love.

## CONCLUSION

I wish I could say that I know how my friend from the train is doing today. I don't. He and I parted company in a run-down Amtrak depot and have never spoken since. I don't remember his name, and I'd bet the money in my wallet he doesn't remember mine. Nonetheless, I have prayed for him, and it's to him I dedicate this essay. Maybe happenstance will bring a copy to his desk. I can only hope.

The impact of legalistic doctrines on the community of believers and on humanity as a whole is destructive and painful. Careless, merciless theology and teaching have slandered the name of God and distorted the freeing message of Christ, causing people to fear and hate the gospel. This must end, and Christians must work to end it.

In Matthew 5, Jesus tells his disciples that they should be salt and light, transforming the world around them with their love and teaching.<sup>76</sup> So too must we. We must acknowledge that for many, Christianity and God are painful subjects, and we must not condemn these people in their suffering. Instead of condemning, we should speak the truth in love—the truth of love, of God's abounding love for God's creature. For we are all mortal, all fallen, all inadequate, all at times secretly and silently hoping that God is real, that the gospel is true and that we will be delivered from the pain of this world.

We all know the hollow ones, the Meursaults, the people who sit next to us on

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<sup>76</sup>Matt 5:13–16.

the train or work in the next cubicle who think life is meaningless. We must engage them in love, just as God engages us. As Barth would say, we must be for them, and be with them in gladness.<sup>77</sup>

It is my sincere hope that my little bit of theology has opened eyes and comforted hearts. May we always preach healing in the name of Christ, in whom we find rest for our souls. For his yoke is easy, and his burden is light.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Barth, 259.

<sup>78</sup>Matt 11:28–30.

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## TRANSLATIONS

**Page 2**

“avec des cris de haine”

“[m]élancolie vague, lassitude morale qui fait qu'on ne prend d'intérêt, de plaisir à rien.”

**Page 11**

“L'homme est une image de Dieu parce qu'il lui ressemble dans toute sa personne, corps et esprit, comme un fils ressemble à son père.”

“de son esprit, de sa gloire.”

“pour préciser l'exacte position de l'homme dans le monde.”

“Aucune prétention à la divinisation de l'homme ne peut se fonder sur cette image, car entre une personne et son image, il restera toujours une séparation profonde. L'homme n'est ni Dieu, ni animal ; il est placé là par le créateur, pour remplir une mission précise, dans une position privilégiée, mais dépendante de son souverain.”

**Page 2**

“with cries of hate”

“vague melancholy, moral fatigue that makes one take no interest or pleasure in anything.”

**Page 11**

“Man is an image of God because he resembles him in all his person, body and mind, like a son resembles his father.”

“of his mind, of his glory.”

“to define the exact position of man in the world.”

“No pretense of the divinity of man can be found in this image, because between a person and his image, there always remains a profound separation. Man is neither God nor animal; he is placed there by the creator to undertake a precise mission, in a privileged position, but dependent on his sovereign.”