

3. A LEGACY OF FEAR AND PERSECUTION

“But there are not a few who would be indignant at having their belief in God questioned, who yet seem greatly to fear imagining Him better than He is.”

George MacDonald

In his anti-Christian tract, “Why I Am Not a Christian,” Bertrand Russell cites the history of persecution within the Christian church as one of his main reasons for rejecting the Christian faith. He writes:

the more intense has been the religion of any period and the more profound has been the dogmatic belief, the greater has been the cruelty and the worse has been the state of affairs. In the so-called ages of faith, when men really did believe the Christian religion in all its completeness, there was the Inquisition, with its tortures; there were millions of unfortunate women burned as witches; and there was every kind of cruelty practiced upon all sorts of people in the name of religion.¹

When I first read these words as an undergraduate, I dismissed them with the thought that anyone can claim the name of Christ and any self-righteous despot can commit atrocities in the name of Christ. What I then failed to reckon with, however, was the disturbing fact that some of the greatest theologians in the Western tradition, men still widely revered as heroes of the faith, not only advocated persecution in specific cases, but provided a theological “justification” for it as well. I am now inclined, therefore, to take Russell’s criticism much more seriously than I once did; for as I now see the matter, the legacy of persecution within the Christian Church is a symptom not merely of moral failure within the church, but of theological error as well.

¹Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), pp. 20-21.

I would therefore ask: Does not Jesus himself sanction the very kind of argument that Russell employs? When Jesus warned that not all who use his name—not even all who perform mighty works in his name—are true disciples (see Matthew 7:22-23), he explained exactly how to identify the *true* disciples: “A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. . . . Thus you will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7: 18 & 20—RSV). Part of the suggestion here seems to be that a sound doctrine, soundly interpreted, will not bear evil fruit in the lives of those who sincerely embrace it; it will, to the contrary, bear good fruit. And in the gospel accounts, at any rate, Jesus is quite explicit concerning what he means by “good fruit.” His true disciples, he tells us, are the peacemakers, those who bring reconciliation: the ones who turn the other cheek and walk the second mile and love their enemies and bear the burdens of others (see Matthew 5:9 & 38-48). Similarly for Paul: The “fruit of the Spirit,” he says, includes (among other things) “love, joy, peace, patience, [and] kindness” (Galatians 5:22), whereas “the works of the flesh” include “enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissension, [and] factions . . .” (Galatians 5:20). So if a sound doctrine, soundly interpreted, does not produce evil fruit in the lives of those who sincerely embrace it, then we are entitled, I believe, to regard acts of persecution within the Christian Church as a symptom of unsound doctrine or theological error.

That there are complexities (and difficulties) in evaluating such matters I doubt not at all. But the fact is that specific theological ideas seem to lie behind the disgraceful history of persecution, murder, and even protracted torture within the Christian church. Nor need it be any mystery what these ideas are, since a number of Christian theologians, beginning with St. Augustine, have explained them with great clarity—have explained exactly why, in their opinion, the use of the sword to terrorize pagans and heretics is theologically justified. Not every idea to which some persecutor appeals is, of course, automatically suspect. But when a religious doctrine appears consistently (and over a long period of time) to have destructive effects in the lives of those who accept it, then we have a *prima facie* reason, surely, to question its soundness. For as Jesus

said, “A sound tree cannot [consistently and over a long period of time] bear evil fruit.”

Theology and the Politics of Terror

I first heard the name of Miguel Servetus (1511-1553), whom the Calvinists in Geneva burned over green wood so that it took three hours for him to be pronounced dead, in an undergraduate history class. Here was a man whom the Christian authorities of a Christian city executed even though he had committed no crime in their city; he was executed solely for his anti-Trinitarian views and because he disagreed with Calvin on some fine points of theology. Nor is there any doubt that Calvin himself engineered the arrest, conviction, and execution of this “heretic.”² Nor was Servetus the only “heretic” whom Calvin wanted put to death. Previously he had sought, unsuccessfully, the death of Jerome Bolsec, because of a disagreement over a matter as abstract as the doctrine of predestination;³ and later he had Sebastian Castellio charged with heresy, principally because the latter had criticized the burning of Servetus.

Calvin’s precise role in the Servetus affair is not my present concern, however. For two points, at least, are undeniable: First, as a letter to his friend, Guillaume Farel, illustrates, Calvin had desired the death of Servetus for many years. After the sharp tongued and exasperating Spaniard sent Calvin a copy of the *Institutes* in

²Calvin may have preferred, it is true, a less brutal form of execution. For in a letter to Guillaume Farel, he wrote: “I hope the judgment will be capital in any event, but I desire cruelty of punishment withheld” [Quoted in Williston Walker, *John Calvin* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 333].

³For an exhaustive (even monumental) treatment of the Bolsec controversy on predestination and of the lengths to which Calvin went in his efforts to get Bolsec condemned to death, see Philip Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy on Predestination, from 1551 to 1555: The Statements of Jerome Bolsec, and the Responses of John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and Other Reformed Theologians* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellon Press, 1993).

which he had marked its supposed errors, Calvin penned these portentous words:

Servetus lately wrote to me and coupled with his letter a long volume of his delirious fancies, with the Thrasonic boast that I should see something astonishing and unheard of. He would like to come here if it is agreeable to me. But I do not wish to pledge my word for his safety. For, if he comes, I will never let him depart alive, if I have any authority.⁴

These words, written several years before the actual arrest of Servetus, already reveal Calvin's willingness to have his adversary put to death. And second, as Leonard Verduin points out, Calvin passionately defended the execution afterwards with "every possible and impossible argument."⁵ He sincerely believed, in other words, that Servetus deserved to die.

But why did Calvin believe this? Why did he regard heresy as a crime for which death is an appropriate punishment? It is no answer, in the present context, merely to point out that Calvin was himself the product of an intolerant age. For though that may be true enough, it does not explain the theological roots of the intolerance; to the contrary, it merely underscores Russell's point about some of the pernicious effects that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has had. Are we not talking, after all, about a *Christian* age, one in which, as Russell himself puts it, people "really did believe the Christian religion in all its complete ness"? Why is it that the so-called Christian ages have produced so much intolerance, so much murder and mayhem?

So far as I know, St. Augustine was the first Christian theologian to advocate the use of terror against those whom he regarded as heretical. In *De Correctione Donatistarum*, Augustine asks: "Where [in Scripture] is what they [the Donatists] are accustomed

⁴Quoted in T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 118.

⁵Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 51.

to cry: ‘To believe or not to believe is a matter that is free?’⁶ Against the contention of the Donatists that religious assent must be free, Augustine cites several examples, including the conversion of St. Paul, in which he claims that Christ himself employed physical affliction as a means of coercion. He then goes on to argue:

But we have shown that Paul was compelled by Christ; therefore the Church, in trying to compel the Donatists, is following the example of her Lord Wherefore, if the power [of the sword] which the Church has received by divine appointment in its due season, through the religious character and faith of Kings, be the instrument by which those who are found in the highways and hedges—that is, in heresies and schisms—are compelled to come in, then let them not find fault because they are compelled⁷

Here Augustine makes the remarkable claim that in coercing the Donatists through physical affliction the Church was merely following “the example of her Lord.” But that does not yet explain *why* he considered the use of such coercive measures justified. Why should anyone, even the Lord himself, be justified in coercing people into the Church against their will? Augustine’s answer emerges clearly in his response to those Donatists who had resisted unto death, in some cases by setting themselves afire. He asks: “What then is the function of brotherly love? Does it, because it fears the short-lived fires of the furnace for a few, therefore abandon all to the eternal fires of hell?”⁸ In another place he again asks: “Why, therefore, should not the Church use force in compelling her

⁶Augustine, *De Correctione Donatistarum* 22, as translated in Ayer, *op. cit.*, p. 451. All other quotations from this document are taken from the translation in Philip Schaff (ed.), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Co., 1887), pp. 633-651.

⁷*Ibid.*, 23 & 24. Those who believe that Augustine’s exegesis of the Bible was more accurate than that of many of his predecessors would do well to examine carefully the fantastic exegetical arguments he offers in support of these claims.

⁸*Ibid.*, 14.

lost sons to return, if the lost sons compelled others to their destruction [i.e., to eternal death]?”⁹ In other words, the use of the sword in coercing heretics back into the State Church is justified, Augustine believed, because the alternative would be to consign many more—those under the influence of the heretics, as well as the heretics themselves—to eternal damnation. As Augustine saw it, therefore, we must distinguish between two classes of people. For the righteous “who thirsteth for God,” “there is no need of the terror of hell, to say nothing of temporal punishments or imperial laws . . .”; but for those who have fallen into heresy, “many must first be recalled to their Lord by the stripes of temporal scourging, like evil slaves, and in some degree like good-for-nothing fugitives.”¹⁰

It is worth noting at this point that the Donatists, whose persecution Augustine advocated, agreed with him on almost all theological matters except the nature of a true church. They believed, first of all, in the separation of church and state and, secondly, in the separation of a true church from the surrounding culture. Because they regarded the State Church as fallen and impure, in part because it had appropriated the power of the sword to further its own ends, they refused to submit to its authority. I have no doubt, moreover, that they were a narrow and self-righteous lot, as purists and schismatics often are. But Augustine’s defense of the use of terror against them remains one of the most appalling aspects of his thinking, and it is important to see that this defense was not an isolated quirk in his thinking. Indeed, within the context of his own assumptions, his argument is perfectly reasonable. If you suppose, as Augustine did, that heresy leads to eternal damnation and that, like a deadly germ, the heretic tends to infect others with heresy, then you have every reason to terrorize and even to murder heretics. Such brutality may be a tragic necessity on this view, but it remains a necessity nonetheless.

⁹*Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 21.

Though Augustine may have been the first Christian theologian to argue against freedom of conscience in religious matters, he was by no means the last. His arguments were repeated throughout the Middle Ages and then were picked up by the Protestant Reformers. Like Augustine, Calvin too regarded heresy as a sin worse than murder: “The mockers who would suffer all false doctrines . . . are not only traitors to God but enemies of the human race. They would bring poor souls to perdition and ruin, and are worse than murderers.”¹¹ Similarly, Calvin’s close friend and associate, Theodore Beza, once wrote: “The contention that heretics should not be punished is as monstrous as the contention that patricides and matricides should not be put to death; for heretics are a thousandfold worse criminals than these.”¹² And the Reformers were, of course, quite prepared to act upon their convictions; in 1526, for example, the Christian authorities in Zurich “ordered Anabaptists drowned, in hideous parody of their belief . . .”¹³ Here is how Urbanus Rhegius, an associate of Martin Luther, justified the persecution of Anabaptists (whom he also called “Donatists,” using that term as a form of abuse):

When heresy breaks forth . . . then the magistrate must punish not with less but with greater vigor than is employed against other evil-doers, robbers, murderers, thieves, and the like. . . . The Donatists murder men’s souls, make them go to eternal death; and then they complain when men punish them with temporal death. . . . All who know history will know what has been done in this

¹¹Quoted in Georgia Harkness, *John Calvin: The Man and his Ethics* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931), p. 111. If, according to Calvin, those heretics who cause others to land in hell are worse than murderers, one wonders why he did not also regard, as worse than a murder, a “God” who would predestine some to hell.

¹²Quoted in Stefan Zweig, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

¹³Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959), p. 127.

matter by such men as Constantine, Marianus, Theodosius, Charlemagne, and others.¹⁴

Indeed! All who know history do know what such men as these have done in the name of Christ! Certainly none of them championed freedom of conscience, which they regarded as a threat to their own political power. So, whether they truly believed it or not, they all welcomed the theological assumption that, given the horrors of eternal damnation, heresy is a sin worse than murder. As the above quotations illustrate, moreover, religious persecution in the Western Church typically has had its roots in an obsessive fear of eternal damnation. It is no doubt possible to believe in eternal damnation without believing that God would be so unjust as to damn someone eternally for an honest mistake in abstract theology. But fear is often irrational, and, as a matter of historical fact, the Christian church has consistently employed the fear of eternal damnation as a weapon against “theological error.” It has consistently cultivated in its constituency the fear that those who die in unbelief, or with certain mistaken beliefs, are precisely those whom God will damn eternally in hell. Such fear, which springs ultimately from a lack of confidence (or faith) in the character of God, has had disastrous consequences in the life of the church. Having no confidence in the love of God, those in the grips of such fear have too often wielded the sword in a sincere effort to protect their loved ones from the tragic consequences, as they see it, of error in religious matters.

Moral Progress and the Christian Faith

The more I have reflected upon the history of persecution within the Christian church, the more it has seemed to me that Bertrand Russell’s indictment of religion, at least as a cultural phenomenon, has considerable merit. Like the harlot described in Revelation 17, the Christian church has at times become “drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (17:6—RSV). For

¹⁴Quoted by Leonard Verduin, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

what else were many of the “heretics” so-called, except saints and martyrs?

But having said that, I think it also important to point out that Russell himself falls into confusion when he writes: “the more intense has been the religion of any period and the more profound has been the dogmatic belief, the greater has been the cruelty and the worse has been the state of affairs.” There are two difficulties here: First, Russell ignores completely those intense forms of religious fervor that inspire love and charity rather than fear and suspicion; and second, he attributes all of the evils of religion, as he sees them, to dogmatic belief in general rather than to *specific* dogmatic beliefs. He fails to distinguish carefully enough, in other words, between different dogmatic beliefs. A dogmatic belief in the love of God, or in the sacredness of human life, or in freedom of conscience in religious matters not only does not lead to religious persecution; it probably provides the most effective opposition to it. So it is not dogmatic belief in general, but specific dogmatic beliefs, that we should indict at this point; in particular, we should indict that *conjunction* of dogmatic beliefs implying that heresy is a crime worse than murder. Had it not been for an obsessive fear of heresy grounded in the traditional understanding of hell, most of the atrocities committed in the name of the Christian religion would never have occurred.

Russell goes on to expand his indictment of Christianity as follows:

You find as you look around the world that every single bit of progress in humane feeling, every improvement in the criminal law, every step toward the diminution of war, every step toward better treatment of the colored races, or every mitigation of slavery, every moral progress that there has been in the world, has been consistently opposed by the organized churches of the world. I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world.¹⁵

¹⁵Russell, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

By way of a reply, I would here ask: Has not the Christian faith also *inspired* much of the moral progress of which Russell speaks? Has it not provided the very standard by which many of us would measure moral progress in the world? Consider three beliefs at the very heart of the Christian religion: the belief that (a) God *is* love; that (b) through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God is reconciling the world to himself; and (c) that in response to God's love for us, we must learn to love our neighbors—our enemies as well as our friends—even as we love ourselves. However foolish one might otherwise think them to be, such beliefs not only inspire moral progress of the kind that Russell speaks; they provide a much more rigorous standard for measuring such progress than most people would likely accept. I have no doubt that Russell's critical remarks about "the Christian religion, as organized in its churches," are true enough; religious establishments are no different from any other establishment, more concerned with their own power and self-preservation than with anything else. But is not the Christian faith, as displayed in the life of someone such as Mother Teresa, just the sort of thing that inspires moral progress? And did not individual reformers, under the inspiration of their Christian faith, vigorously oppose, for example, plantation slavery in the United States? It seems to me, at any rate, that the Christian faith has inspired much of the moral progress that, paradoxically, "the Christian religion, as organized in its churches," has opposed so vigorously.

Take the one issue of armed warfare. Virtually all of the early Christian converts, and in particular the early church fathers, were pacifists; they were prepared to bear the same cross that Jesus bore and, like Jesus, saw themselves as suffering servants. They no doubt acknowledged an obligation to the truth (as they saw it), to speak the truth in love for example, but they would never have acknowledged an obligation (or even a right) to wield the sword in an effort to make Christian converts, or to stifle dissent, or to settle theological disputes. Within a few centuries, however, the young and vibrant faith of the early Christians had congealed into an organized religion with its own orthodoxy and political intrigues; within a few centuries, Christians were killing other Christians, not

to mention pagans, in defense of an orthodoxy they evidently had little confidence in. But here, I would suggest, a reasonable interpretation is this: Between the time at which Christians were almost universally pacifists and the time at which those who called themselves “Christians” began persecuting pagans and heretics, the organized Christian church had simply lost its prophetic vision; having twisted the Christian gospel into a message of fear, one that the early suffering servants would not even have recognized, it then felt compelled to defend its message of fear with the weapons of fear. So in that sense, perhaps the Christian church did become an obstacle not only to moral progress in the world, but to genuine Christian faith as well.

I am now inclined, then, to draw a relatively sharp distinction between the Christian faith, on the one hand, and the organized Christian church, on the other, and I am quite prepared to see the latter as, more often than not, an enemy of the former. Not that the organized Christian church is any worse than other human institutions; on the whole, it is just no better. Nor should we expect it to be any better. We humans tend to make a mess of all our institutions, and our religious institutions are no different from any others in this regard. That those who call themselves “Christians” have made a mess of the Christian religion is no more surprising, I would suggest, than that the scribes and the Pharisees (during New Testament times) made a mess of the Jewish religion, or that Islamic Fundamentalists (in our own day) have made a mess of the Islamic religion. Accordingly, though I still believe in religious inspiration, in divine revelation, and in the prophetic word, and though I still regard the Christian faith as one of the principal sources—if not *the* principal source—of moral and spiritual enlightenment in the world, I also believe this: Over time our religious organizations inevitably twist and distort the very prophetic word they were instituted to preserve. They inevitably twist a message of love and hope into a message of fear.

The Destructive Power of Fear

Having conceded that Russell's indictment of the Christian church has some merit, I would also, in an effort to strike a balance, caution against an overly moralistic attitude towards history. Here I mean to caution myself as much as anyone else. We who have enjoyed religious liberty all of our lives no doubt find it easy—too easy, I should think—to regard those Christian authorities who misused their power in the past as unmitigated villains. But we also need to bear in mind, at this point, the complexity of historical events. Whether it be the Spanish Inquisitioners who murdered heretics on a regular basis, the Calvinists who murdered Servetus and countless Anabaptists, or the Puritans in Salem, Massachusetts, who murdered young women charged with witchcraft, the real villains in such episodes are not those who, in their own historical circumstances, may have acted as well as they could; the real villains are the fear that inspired such acts of terror in the first place and the religious ideas, such as the doctrine of eternal damnation, that kindled the fear. When Western Christendom not only backed away from, but actually condemned, the idea of universal reconciliation, it also, so I shall argue in subsequent chapters, backed away from the only *consistent* theology of love; and it has struggled ever since with the only possible alternative: a theology that cultivates, even as it expresses, our fear.

Fear need not, of course, always express itself in the form of physical brutality against others. So far as I know, Jonathan Edwards never advocated the persecution of either heretics or unbelievers, but he nonetheless remains one of the great apostles of fear. In "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," perhaps the most famous sermon ever delivered in America, Edwards evoked such fear in the congregation he addressed that some, unable to endure it, actually passed out in church. Here is but a sample of what he said:

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.¹⁶

Clearly, Edwards needed no sword to sow the seeds of terror. Why he believed that God would look upon a human being, created in the divine image, as “worthy of nothing else” but everlasting torment, or why he supposed that human beings, however sinful, are “more abominable” in the eyes of God than a disobedient child is in the eyes of a loving parent, he does not say. But reflect, for a moment, upon the likely effect of his sermon on the mind of a child. Imagine growing up in a church (or Christian school), as I and many of my friends did, in which ministers, Sunday school teachers, and camp counselors (good people all, but in the grips of their own message of fear) try repeatedly—with less eloquence than Edwards displayed, but with no less fervor—to frighten children into the faith. My point here is not that my early teachers were all failures; far from it. Most of them were far better than the message they sometimes preached, and most of them even had a good deal to say, however inconsistently, about the love of God. When I compare my own childhood, moreover, with that of many others, including those who have suffered physical and sexual abuse of various kinds, I am keenly aware of just how good it was and just how important the Christian community was in making it good. Nonetheless, the *theology* I encountered, both in church and in high school, was essentially a message of fear, and God’s love always turned out, within the context of that theology, to be conditional in one way or another.

As I came to understand it, the fundamental religious problem was to find an answer to the question of how I, a polluted sinner, might escape the vindictiveness and the wrath of God. How, in particular, might I escape everlasting torment in hell? Even

¹⁶Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” reprinted in Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards: Basic Writings* (New York: The New American Library, Inc.), p. 159.

salvation I came to understand as essentially an escape from the wrath, even the hatred, of God, and I still have in my possession a “gospel” tract that begins with these ominous words in bold faced, capital letters: “**GOD HATES YOU.**” The technique here, familiar to anyone who understands the art of brain washing, was especially evident at the church camps I attended: First evoke a terrible fear; then offer a means of escape. According to a host of teachers whom I encountered in my youth, Jesus Christ, who died for us and was subsequently raised from the dead, provided the means whereby we might escape the wrath of God; by enduring our punishment for us, by allowing God to vent his wrath on someone other than us, Christ successfully appeased the vindictive God. But then, according to that teaching, vindictive ness and wrath remain ultimate facts about God. If we accept Christ as our savior—if, that is, we respond to the preacher’s altar call, or submit to the authority of some church—God’s vindictive attitude towards us will change; but if we do not accept Christ, if perchance we should die in our sin, God’s vindictive attitude will *never* change. First evoke a terrible fear; then offer a means of escape.

I’ll probably never forget my first job as a teenager, when I worked for a contract paint company scraping walls, sand blasting, and cleaning gutters; I’ll never forget that job, because I was terribly afraid of the boss. Nor was I alone in this. Many of the other workers, particularly those who liked to loaf, were likewise afraid of the boss, whose wrath, easily kindled, was something to behold. But we also had, fortunately, a good foreman who always stood by us, a kind of mediator between the boss and the working crew. Again and again, the foreman would deflect the boss’ anger away from us, or pacify his wrath, or reconcile him to something we were doing. Still, though I was certainly relieved to have someone pacify the boss on my behalf and on behalf of the other workers, I never felt comfortable around that man and was always glad to see him leave; during that particular summer anyway, I never felt reconciled to that particular boss. And we have here, I believe, a parable of the twisted gospel, the message of fear, that I encountered in the churches of my youth. God in his wrath and his anger is essentially someone to fear, not because he means to perfect us, but because he

may reject us and torment us forever and ever and ever. Because Jesus Christ provides a means of escape, we experience a sense of relief, perhaps, but not a heartfelt love for the one we have learned to fear.

Observe how easily a subtle shift of emphasis can twist the New Testament message of hope into a message of fear. As George MacDonald was so fond of pointing out, not one word in the New Testament implies that vindictiveness and wrath are ultimate facts about God, or that Christ's sacrifice was required in order to appease a vindictive God. A more accurate understanding would be that Christ's death and resurrection was God's sacrifice to us, the means whereby God changes *our* attitudes and reconciles *us* to himself (see, for example, II Corinthians 5:19); it is not a means whereby God's attitude towards us is changed. God's attitude remains the same yesterday, today, and forever. For God is love; that is the rock-bottom fact about God. But the history of organized religion, at least in the Western tradition, is a record of our human resistance to the proclamation that God is love, that his love extends to everyone, and that it is in no way conditioned upon human obedience or human faithfulness.

As a more recent illustration of such resistance, consider Kenneth Kantzer's claim that "the biblical answer [to the question of human destiny] does not satisfy our wishful sentiments. It is a hard and crushing word, devastating to human hope and pride."¹⁷ It is "a hard and crushing word," Kantzer evidently believes, because it implies that, even if we should escape eternal perdition ourselves, some of our loved ones may not. And one could hardly imagine anything more "devastating to human hope" than that. Is it any wonder that so many well-meaning people have turned to persecution and violence? Is it any wonder that they have resorted to desperate means in an effort to protect their loved ones from a fate worse than death? Perhaps few Christians today would advocate, or even tolerate, the persecution of those whom they see as heretics; we may be thankful for that. But even today, the fears that have

¹⁷Kenneth S. Kantzer, "Troublesome Questions," *Christianity Today*, March 20, 1987.

led to such persecution in the past continue to do their evil work of making people miserable and of estranging one person from another—as the wife whose husband dies “in unbelief,” or the mother whose teenage son leaves the faith, or the teenager whose closest friend commits suicide might testify. A church in the grips of fear has little to offer those most desperate for a word of consolation, little except more pain, more misery, more fear. Kantzer claims that this really is the Christian gospel —“a hard and crushing word, devastating to human hope”—but I shall argue in subsequent chapters that he is simply wrong about that. I shall try to set forth a radically different picture, according to which the gospel, if true, really would be, as the word itself implies, good news—indeed, the best possible news for those of us in our present human condition. The gospel presents, for our consideration, a vision of God and the world that makes one want to shout with joy, a vision that can free us from all of the fear and the guilt and the worry within which we so often imprison ourselves. That vision may not always satisfy our *wishful sentiments*—Kantzer is right about that—but it does satisfy our *deepest yearnings*; it may at times devastate human *pride*, but it could never, ever devastate human *hope*. It is a vision altogether worthy of being true, and that is also, I believe, an indispensable condition of its being true.

In her novel, *Jane Eyre*, the nineteenth century writer, Charlotte Brontë, captures with a haunting accuracy the coldness and emptiness that sometimes passes for Christian ministry. I could almost feel the hard wooden pews against my back when I first read this description of a sermon:

Throughout there was a strange bitterness; an absence of consolatory gentleness; stern allusions to Calvinistic doctrines—election, predestination, reprobation—were frequent; and each reference to these points sounded like a sentence pronounced for doom. When he had done, instead of feeling better, calmer, more enlightened by his discourse, I experienced an inexpressible sadness; for it seemed to me—I know not whether equally so to others—that the eloquence to which I had been listening had sprung from a depth where lay turbid dregs of disappointment—where moved troubling impulses or insatiate

yearnings and disquieting aspirations. I was sure St. John Rivers—pure-lived, conscientious, zealous as he was—had not yet found that peace of God which passeth all understanding; he had no more found it, I thought, than had I . . .¹⁸

Perhaps few of us in this life *have* found the “peace of God which passeth all understanding”; many who glibly claim to have found it sooner or later prove by their actions that they have not yet found it. But according to the Christian faith, as I have come to understand it, all of us *will* eventually find such peace, either in this life or in some other, but only after we have finally learned the lessons of love. As we learn our lessons, in some cases after much travail and hardship, we will find that in the end “perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love” (I John 4:18). And just as “perfect love casts out fear,” so also, I am persuaded, is the New Testament message of love, when rightly understood, the best corrective for a theology that expresses our fear. In the following chapters, therefore, I shall try to create a context—biblical, theological, and philosophical—in which the grounds for hope and the groundlessness of our fears might be more evident to us.

¹⁸Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (New York: The New American Library, inc.), p. 354.