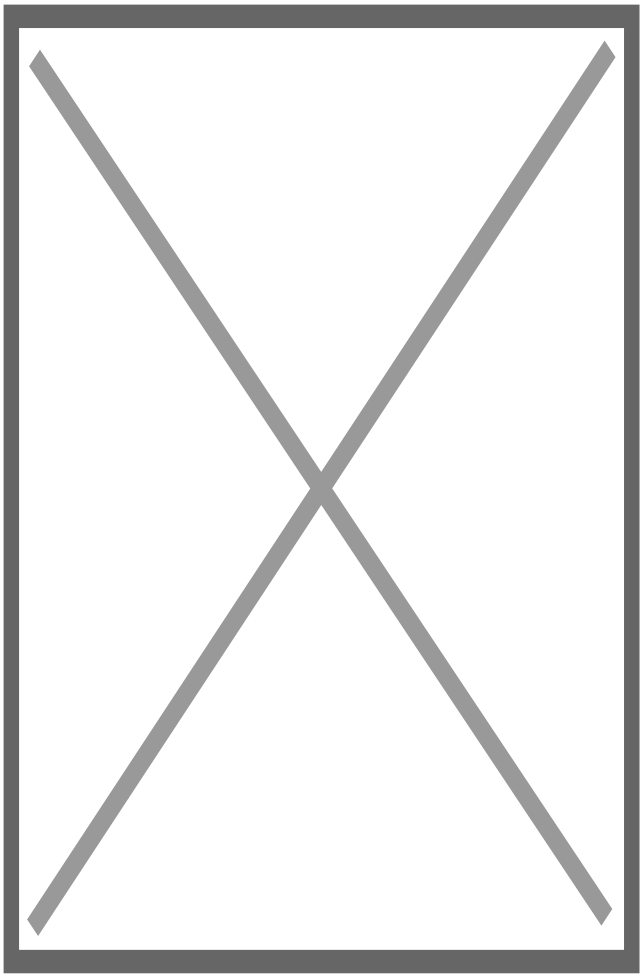
A review of A Gentler God

reviewed by Mark Noll in the January 25, 2011 issue

In Review



A Gentler God

By Doug Frank
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In 1986 Doug Frank published one of the most intriguing books in an outpouring of historical writing on American evangelical Protestants. Its title, *Less Than Conquerors,* inverted a well-known Pauline phrase popular in revival traditions on both sides of the Atlantic.

Frank's thesis was that as evangelicals entered the 20th century and began to lose the cultural dominance they had once enjoyed in American society, they made a series of disastrous moves. They turned to end-times prophecy and a spirituality of inner "victorious living," abdicating responsible social action; they objectivized

sinfulness in external matters like the liquor traffic, trivializing the meaning of evil; and they let simplistic hellfire evangelism dominate church life. All of this badly distorted the gospel. The book's lengthy account of how evangelicals abandoned the true meaning of Christ's cross in exchange for increasingly desperate and self-deluding theologies of power made it an unusual historical exercise.

Frank's new book extends the themes of his earlier volume into a full-scale critique of the post-World War II evangelical Christianity in which he was raised. As he describes it, the neoevangelical discourse publicized by evangelists such as Billy Graham and reprised in myriad local churches features a God who in perfect holiness threatens sinners with eternal punishment unless they repent, accept Christ and go on to lives of squeaky-clean moral probity. This God is both wrathful and loving, avenging and forgiving, demanding and accepting. While Frank obviously retains some affection for those who proclaimed such a message, he now regards it as "self-contradictory"—and even psychologically murderous.

On a more cerebral level, evangelicalism's new breed of young intellectuals proclaimed God's sovereignty, perfection, self-sufficiency and omnipotence. Frank summarizes these traits as an evangelical evocation of "the Almighty." It is against this picture that he presents his case for a "gentler" and "smaller" deity.

However, *A Gentler God* is not so much history as it is psychology, theology and an account of personal experience. Narrating extensive stories of his own spiritual pilgrimage away from what he calls the wrathful God of his youth and recounting experiences of others who have been wounded by their experiences in evangelical families, churches and colleges, Frank develops a full-scale psychological interpretation of evangelical pathologies and a full-scale theology to remedy those pathologies.

For his psychological analysis, Frank draws heavily on Richard C. Schwartz's account of how authoritarian families cause children to internalize childhood experiences of shame, and on John Bowlby's description of "disordered mourning," in which those who suffer loss or pain bottle up normal reactions to these situations, at great cost to their emotional maturation. To such psychological authorities, Frank adds an array of authors whose works support his view of childhood shaming or trauma as the wellspring of personal disorder and social evil.

The result is a picture of human beings who are made up of many parts that need to be acknowledged and embraced, and of evangelicals as people who typically deny or bury some of these inner parts and so support the creation of immature, stunted and artificial emotional lives. Frank contends that these evangelicals need a Jesus who "does not deny the existence of, or try to squelch, the varied moods and voices of his interior world. He does not set one part of himself up as a judge or censor over the other parts. . . . He welcomes every part." But because evangelicals have not let this Jesus into their hearts, according to Frank, they regularly perpetuate the fear, self-contempt and controlling uptightness in which so many of them were raised.

Evangelicals are right to think of Jesus as the Savior, Frank says, but wrong to pass so quickly from the cross to the empty tomb. Salvation, in Frank's view, comes only as the suffering, humiliation, abandonment and despair of the cross open the one true revelation of God, but evangelicals cling to an almighty Deity who continually threatens eternal damnation, effectively destroying the healing and self-restoring power of the cross. From a smaller and gentler God—who is neither omnipotent nor omniscient, who does not superintend the details of human existence, and who does not condemn any of his creatures to a lost eternity—comes the capacity to bring the parts of a disordered inner life back into joyful harmony. Whether this crucified Savior was raised from the dead in historical space and time is far less important than the existential healing that encountering the crucified Savior can bring to the emotional present.

As someone who has lived through at least some of what Frank describes as typical evangelical experience and yet who remains much closer to traditional evangelical theology, I have a mixed reaction to this book. On the one side, his account of the family dynamics, psychological scars and emotional reticence often present among

white evangelicals has the ring of truth. So also does Frank's account of the disconnect between evangelical preaching about Christ, who rescues sinners, and evangelical life, which carefully limits acknowledgment of sin and its evil effects to stories of conversion. Frank's charge that evangelicals talk and sing much about Christ on the cross while rarely letting the realities of the crucifixion influence their preached theology and private behavior is a serious challenge worthy of the most careful attention.

On the other side, however, are a number of problems. Neither the psychological model that undergirds Frank's polemic nor his theological construction relying on this model is as convincing as he assumes. A picture of human sinfulness as the failure to reconcile inner parts that have been suppressed or neglected is a paltry substitute for standard Christian accounts of original sin and its deeply ingrained effects. Frank's picture of the inner world sounds remarkably like the faulty psychology that clearer minds from Jonathan Edwards onward have shown to possess only metaphorical value.

Frank's relentless attack on all forms of substitutionary atonement is also quixotic. In contrast to lengthy sections on the rhetorical excesses of fire-breathing popular evangelists, he devotes only a handful of pages to John Stott's *The Cross of Christ*, one of the most widely read and carefully constructed popular expositions of traditional atonement theology. In particular, Frank dismisses without serious consideration Stott's account of "holy love," through which Stott shows how the exchange of intratrinitarian love motivates the high demand of holiness and the wide offer of mercy incarnate in Jesus Christ. If many evangelicals take their inner bearings from the hellfire preachers who were once popular, many also have an inner life ordered by the much more thoroughly biblical accounts offered by careful expositors like Stott.

A Gentler God is beset by relentless anthropomorphizing that moves rapidly from Frank's accounts of individual psychological traumas to full-blown theological conclusions. After he draws on psychological literature to suggest that children of authoritarian parents "find it difficult to forge healthy, fulfilling attachments to other people," he makes a great leap: "I want to describe here how impinging parents—out of their own inner pain—steal the very souls of their children. I believe evangelicals who live with an impinging 'heavenly Father' are as susceptible to this soul theft as are children who live with impinging earthly fathers or mothers."

When applied more broadly, this method leads to some bizarre speculations. Frank argues that the way that Carl Henry and others of his generation stressed the mastery of divine sovereignty originated almost entirely in "deep wounds of shame, generated in them by their association with fundamentalism"—"raw wounds" that were "later re-sensitized by shameful encounters originally laid in one's childhood family."

Just as speculative are statements like this assessment of recent American history: "It is possible that George W. Bush went to war against Iraq leader Saddam Hussein because he and his vice president didn't know how to become friends with the voice inside them that accused them of being weaklings."

Frank's use of theological authorities is highly selective. While the Martin Luther who preached the theology of the cross looms large, the Luther who held that this very theology required an Augustinian view of original sin, as the self curved in upon the self, is absent. More important, Frank recites stories from the Gospels that feature Jesus' manifest love for sinners and disdain for "the godly," but there is scant consideration of his sayings about unquenched fire, about the new law to be written on hearts, and about the sacrificial lamb who carries away the sin of the world.

Most seriously, there is in this book no Trinity, and hence nothing to indicate how a believer's inner being may reflect, if only dimly, the loving dynamics of a perfectly holy, perfectly loving and perfectly active God. Rather, everything for Frank is exclusively univocal: he presumes that if one has sharply undergone some aspect of human experience, one has seen without ambiguity how God relates to humanity. *A Gentler God* will receive much serious criticism from evangelicals, but the criticism he should really fear is from a Feuerbach contending

that this "gentler God" is just a projection of felt human needs.

It is both praise and criticism to call Doug Frank's excoriation of postwar American evangelicals a thoroughly evangelical performance. The book is a compelling personal testimony; it is filled with stories of broken lives made whole; it offers a deeply moving account of Jesus' love for sinners; it is supported by a wealth of well-chosen anecdotes; it makes full use of popular psychology and selected biblical passages; its theology is unreflective, with a Jesus-only modalism warring against a God-the-Father modalism; and it universalizes the singularities of individual personal experiences. The result is a book that is compelling in the way that postwar evangelicalism is compelling—at its best and at its worst.