

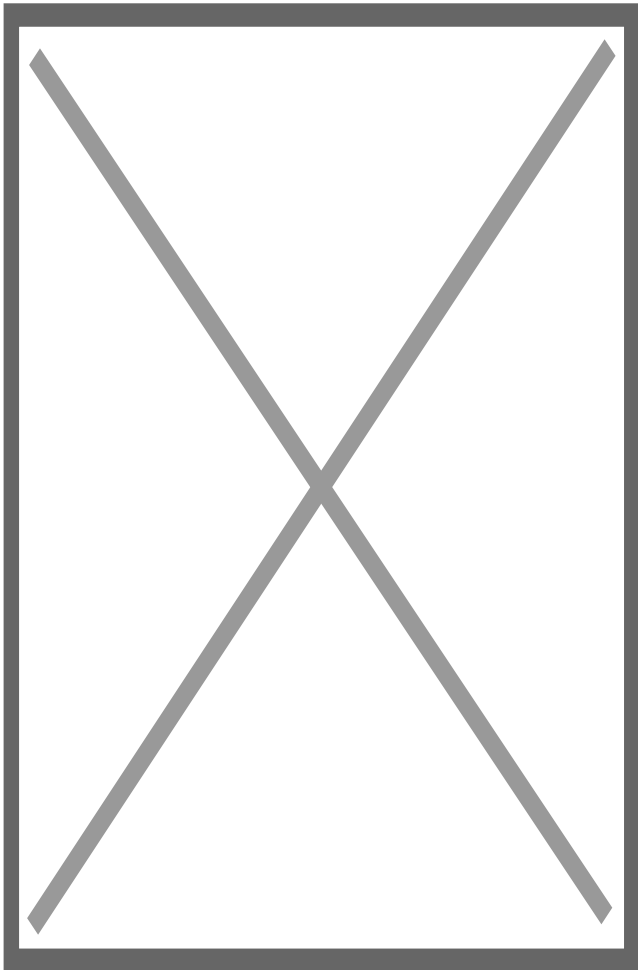
The relief people need

David Zahl focuses on sharing a gospel that's unapologetically about the grace of God.

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [December 2025](#) issue

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In Review



The Big Relief

The Urgency of Grace for a Worn-Out World

By David Zahl

Brazos

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

I hadn't heard of David Zahl before I read a review, in the March 2023 issue of the *Century*, of his 2022 book *Low Anthropology: The Unlikely Key to a Gracious View of Others (and Yourself)*. My first reaction was irritation; that was the book I had long wanted to write myself, and this cretin had the audacity to beat me to it. My second reaction was to buy the book and devour it three times, first on my own and then with groups of church members. *Low Anthropology* was my gateway to Mockingbird Ministries, where Zahl is director and editor in chief. Now I'm hooked on multiple podcasts, a print magazine, and weekly newsletters. I suppose it's only a matter of time before I get on an airplane to attend one of the Mockingbird conferences.

What's so compelling about Zahl and the ministries he helms? The pastors and writers in his network are, by and large, mainline Protestants perpetuating a gospel that is unapologetically about the grace of God. They're smart but not overly academic, relevant but not in the wearisome try-hard way of eager evangelicals. They spend precious little time criticizing fellow mainline Christians. Neither do they spend much energy bemoaning mainline decline. Rather, they focus their attention on sharing a generous, theologically centrist vision of Christianity that feels infused with the weight of truth and goodness and beauty.

Still, I am not an uncritical fan. When I heard that Zahl's new book, subtitled *The Urgency of Grace for a Worn-Out World*, would be titled *The Big Relief*, I thought it was irredeemably hokey. Grace as relief might be worthy of a paragraph. Maybe even a chapter. But could that association really carry an entire book?

"We are all chasing relief," Zahl argues in the book's introduction. After acknowledging a vast array of external pressures that could strain a person's psyche, he presses further:

It could be something less circumstantial and more existential, like the pressure to justify our lives and demonstrate that we're worthy of the air we breathe. Perhaps it's an internal voice of accusation and not-good-enoughness or the external judgments of others, their biases and prejudices and criticisms. Maybe we long for relief from grief or guilt or the pain of rejection. Some of us . . . struggle with the pressure to belong, the pressure to keep up, the pressure to say the right thing—the pressure, even, to be our own god, in control of everything.

Zahl's description of the pressure seemed totally accurate, but I remained unconvinced that the solution was a verb I associate with the alleviation of heartburn.

Still, *relief* is a relatable word, and *The Big Relief* is a masterclass in how to talk about theology and faith in ways that are accessible to laypeople. Pop culture references and personal storytelling abound, but that doesn't mean the book is dumbed down. Zahl is well and widely read, and he acts as an interpreter of complex theological and philosophical concepts to serve ultimately pastoral ends. To be sure, *The Big Relief* will read as conservative in some contexts. Zahl's choice to refer to God with the pronouns he/him, for instance, will grate on many readers. Still, for mainline churches that yearn to be rooted in a gracious orthodoxy, this is a marvelous guide.

This brief book systematically addresses major dimensions of grace and the relief they offer. For instance, forgiveness relieves regret, surrender relieves control, and imputation relieves status anxiety. Imputation wasn't a concept I'd encountered before my entrance into the Mockingbird universe, but having lived in places in which high achievement and affluence create cultures dangerously obsessed with status, I found it to be just the concept I needed. As Zahl explains it, imputation

announces that God reconciles sinners to himself by declaring them to be righteous on account of Christ. That is to say, God does not judge you or me on the basis of our own action or identities . . . but on the basis of Christ's, which, through his death and resurrection, have been imputed to us by faith.

This repeats a theme of Zahl's previous book, that claiming our identity as sinners in need of grace is far more freeing than believing ourselves to be fundamentally good people. What used to be a *Saturday Night Live* joke now passes as wisdom on Instagram: We're all good enough, smart enough, and if people don't like us it's probably their fault because they're toxic and should be eliminated from our lives. (It's odd, when you think about it, that for all our contemporary discomfort with calling people sinners, we don't think twice about likening human beings to poison.) In the chapter on favor, Zahl gently reminds readers that Jesus grants kindness, mercy, and redemption even to those who we reject as toxic.

Zahl's chapter on atonement is among the strongest. Sometimes it seems like the mainline church, in our eagerness to resist penal substitutionary atonement, has disassembled the cross like so many Lego bricks. More often, we simply ignore the cross—and not because it's such a glorious scandal. Zahl lets multiple atonement theologies coexist in tension, recognizing that each has a unique spiritual and psychological weight. He even honors the role of substitutionary atonement, acknowledging that while it can be misused, it is often the most privileged Christians who reject it. Meanwhile, those who have actually experienced the wrong end of the criminal justice system tend to embrace a narrative of radical exculpation. Zahl emphasizes the importance of a solid grasp of the Trinity when imagining atonement. "If Jesus stands in our place," he writes, "it is God himself doing so." Ultimately, Zahl finds in the atonement an expression of divine love that is profoundly moving—a love that bleeds for the sake of the other.

I liked the book, but I still hadn't decided if I could tolerate the title motif. Then came the day when I exited my local Greek diner, pulled up directions to my next meeting, and realized that the five-minute drive I'd anticipated was in fact going to take 15. I scurried to my Prius, peeled out of the parking lot, and pondered how to explain being ten minutes tardy. I hate being late. I was just about to pass the church where I serve as copastor when I glimpsed the police car in our parking lot. Oh dear, I thought as the officer pulled out behind me. *I am going to be a lot later than ten minutes.* While the officer ran my license and registration, I texted our church administrator to ask her to make a call to let them know I'd be delayed. *Look out the window to see why.*

The officer returned with a warning slip. I was stunned. "I deserved a ticket!" I exclaimed without thinking. After all, I'd been going 39 in a 25 mph zone. The police officer was not expecting me to fight him on the warning. He laughed and walked away. And the joke's on me, because the sweet relief I felt was gargantuan as I drove away. Slowly.

Zahl isn't ashamed to take on the sort of mundanity that resonates with people's everyday lives. Meanwhile, sometimes the theological rhetoric we toss around in the mainline church lands in the clouds, not in the neighborhoods where people are negotiating personal failure, loneliness, and the ruthless tyrant known as travel sports.

To be sure, we also live in neighborhoods where people are negotiating discrimination, climate crisis, and the horrors of Christian nationalism. Zahl and his Mockingbird companions tend to let others address matters of social justice while they attend to the wounds of individuals. This work is important, too. We need such healers, making a refrain of grace upon grace, because the desperation of the general population is not so quiet anymore. It's becoming earsplitting.