

The folly of frightening folks into faith

BY CHRIS HIGHLAND

Fear should never be the main motivation for believing anything.

One of the primary fearful messages we heard as young Evangelicals was: “Jesus is coming soon, so you’d better be ready.” Since we were deep into Christian music, that message was consistently drummed home. We sang along to songs like “I wish we’d all been ready,” “One more day,” “Jesus is coming soon,” “Evacuation Day” and “Keep your eyes on the clouds.” One harmony group wailed: “If this is the last day, we’ve been waiting for it, longing for it.” Judgment Day was imminent—maybe tomorrow!—so we prayed and read our Bibles and sang all these songs with tears and repentance. I suppose this was to spook us to faithfulness, to be good disciples of Christ. And it worked, sometimes.

Does it work to scare people into salvation? That seems quite cruel. The way I see it now, much of this frightful preaching is really about shame—shaming to salvation. Sin=shame=need for salvation. We deserved punishment for our mental transgressions and normal youthful mistakes. And who better to shame than shame-sensitive teenagers? We’d better get saved and sanctified (purified, holy) and pray like there was no tomorrow, because, there might not be a tomorrow.

And, of course, naturally there was the very unnatural threat of eternal punishment: Hell. The worst part for us was the horror of being separated from our Best Friend Jesus, forever! We were told that death isn’t enough of a terror, not punishment enough. Eternal dying, everlasting torture, is the most loving consequence of not loving God. Our Father in Heaven wasn’t messing around.

Have faith, be faithful, be obedient ... or else. Our earthly dad might send us to our room without supper if we misbehaved, but our Heavenly Dad would burn us alive for eternity. Who could resist such a kind and compassionate invitation to faith?

As any thoughtful person would feel, I find this all greatly troubling. Threatening a terrible torture after death should never be a means to coerce someone, especially a child or youth, to believe. If your beliefs are worthy of serious, life-changing consideration, is it necessary to resort to fearful threats?

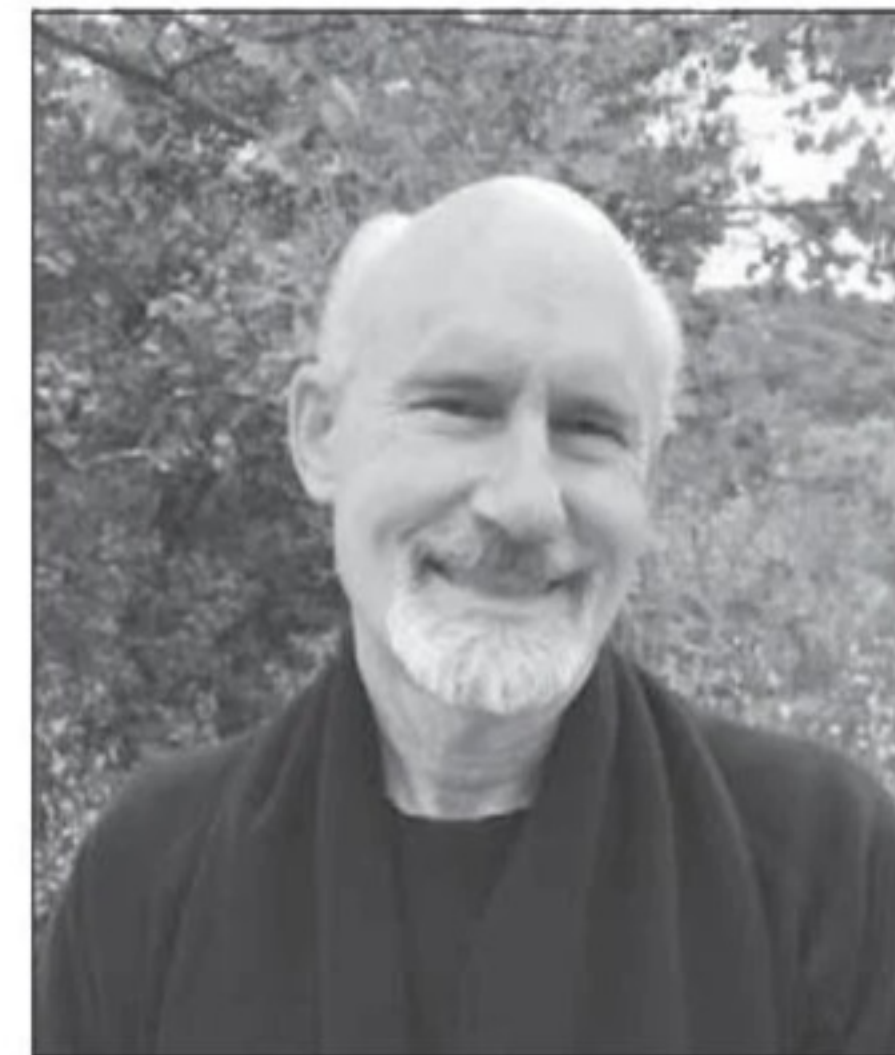
We may hear someone say: What if there IS a God? What if there IS a heaven? My response: These are very large “ifs.” Turning the questions around, I might ask: IF there is a God, who says it’s YOUR God? Maybe there’s a Creator—or Creative Force—but just not

the one you worship. And, IF there is an afterlife, why should we believe it looks just like you say it looks?

In my view, if there is such a place—something like the heavenly realm described in the Book of Revelation—wouldn’t the gates and doors be open and welcoming to everyone (why are there gates and doors anyway?). This would show the highest form of acceptance, wouldn’t it? Any loving, thoughtful parent would welcome their child home. On the other hand, perhaps we could dare to reflect on the possibility there is no heaven, no afterlife at all. That can be a frightening thought, but it needn’t be. Just as we didn’t exist before we were born, and aren’t bothered by that, not existing after death needn’t cause fear either. It makes sense that our body—made of flesh and bone, with brain and mind—simply returns to the basic material elements we are

made of—ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The universal process continues, though “I” don’t live on. Personally, I find this much less disturbing than living for eternity in a golden city in the clouds sitting through an endless worship service.

It’s not my intention to take away anyone’s comforting beliefs about God or the afterlife. I understand the emotional impact of what I felt as a youthful believer. Yet, I think we need to face up to the problem of “looking up” for rescue. These “spiritual scare tactics” cause people to look up into the sky—look for heaven—instead of down to earth where we live here and now. Think of it this way: If the emphasis is always on the Christ of the future, it draws attention away from the Jesus of the past. The practical, ethical teachings of Jesus, such as love your neighbor aren’t so important when those “worldly things” distract from what



comes next. It’s like we’re in an earthly “waiting room” and would rather get on with the best thing about life, which comes after death—“eternal life” with God above.

No one knows if the end of the world is coming today or tomorrow. So, faith or no faith, why not live the most fulfilling, courageous, and fearless lives we can, right here, right now?

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