

How Jesus Saves the World from Us

12 Antidotes to Toxic Christianity

Morgan Guyton

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*This book is dedicated to my father, John Guyton,
the smartest man I've ever known,
who taught me how to be a Christian thinker.*

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Introduction

Have Christians become what Jesus came to stop us from being?

It's a question that haunts me as an American evangelical Christian who lives in a time when our culture wars have alienated so many good people from ever giving Jesus a chance. Why do the loudest Christian voices today sound so much like the religious authorities who crucified Jesus? Did Jesus really win after he was raised from the dead? Or was his movement co-opted over the centuries by the spiritual heirs of the very people who had him killed?

Some people blame Constantine, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, for turning an outsider movement into an imperial conquest. Other people point the finger at Augustine, the brilliant fourth-century theologian whose misgivings about his sex life may have helped to shape the unhealthy relationship we Christians have with our bodies.¹ Others say it was the medieval nominalists, who taught that words mean only whatever God says they mean, which means that God could hate and call it love.

Of course, there has always been a beautiful Christianity sharing the same church with the loudmouths who get all the headlines. There were the Egyptian desert mystics, who, whenever they got robbed, would chase after the thieves to tell them they forgot something. There was Francis of Assisi, who never met a

leper whom he didn't kiss. There was Julian of Norwich, the first Christian woman to write a book in English, who claimed that her visions revealed a God who was purely benevolent and mostly motherly, without an ounce of hate, despite the bubonic plague that was devastating her people.

Still, it seems as if the loud, mean Christians are the ones who always win. But perhaps this makes sense in a strange way. If Jesus' cross is the heart of Christianity, then maybe Jesus has never stopped being crucified by his own people, and the ones who really get Jesus are crucified along with him. John 1:11 says, "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." How do we know this is talking only about Jesus' original life on earth? What if Jesus keeps coming back to "his own" and we keep on rejecting him?

When Jesus was on the cross, he said something that applies to Christians who crucify him today as much as it did to the religious leaders who first crucified him. He said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Jesus knew that the religious leaders who crucified him thought they were doing so out of genuine allegiance to God. They thought he was ruining everything about their religious system—and indeed he was. They didn't realize that he was actually God incarnate, come down to fix what they had screwed up.

The religious authorities had good reason to think that they were supposed to put Jesus to death. In the ancient Bible stories they had read, God commended those who killed out of zeal for his holiness. When the Israelites built a golden calf to worship instead of God, their leader, Moses, told the sons of Levi, "Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor" (Exod. 32:27b). When the sons of Levi obeyed Moses and slaughtered three thousand random people, Moses told them, "Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the LORD" (Exod. 32:29). Thus, the Levites, one of the most important Israelite religious orders, was established by an act of terrorism almost as massive as 9/11.

Likewise, when the Israelite men started sleeping with Moabite

women and worshipping their gods, Moses' great-nephew Phinehas saw an Israelite take a Moabite woman into a tent. He followed them, took a spear, and thrust it through both of them while they were making love. As a reward for this double murder, Phinehas and his descendants were given "a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites" (Num. 25:13).

If holy priesthoods are rewarded to those who kill for God's honor, then crucifying a man who claimed to be God is the ultimate expression of righteous zeal. Likewise, it was perfectly righteous for a religious zealot named Saul of Tarsus to persecute the followers of this Jesus. In Acts 7, Saul oversees the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Then he goes on a tear, dragging Christians from their homes and throwing them in prison (Acts 8:1–3). Saul was every bit as passionate about standing up for God as many Christians are today. But one day, on his way to persecute Christians in Damascus, Saul was blinded by a light and fell to the ground. A voice came out of the bright light saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul said, "Who are you, Lord?" And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4–5).

As a result of this dramatic encounter, Saul stopped persecuting Christians and became the *apostle* Paul, the greatest Christian missionary of all time. Christians often see Paul's Damascus Road encounter as a biblical paradigm for how salvation happens. But Jesus didn't save Saul from anything so much as he saved the world *from Saul*. I wonder if this recognition would be helpful to how Christians understand salvation today. *How would Christians live differently if we believed that Jesus needs to save the world from us?*

I really do mean *us*. All of us. Not just the Christians I define myself against, but Christians who posture exactly the same way I do. I really believe that being authentically Christian amounts to believing that the world needs to be saved *from me*, instead of thinking I have to save the world *from them* (whoever "them" is). British writer G. K. Chesterton gave a famous two-word response when a newspaper asked its readers to share what they thought was wrong with the world. "I am," he wrote back.²

This is a book for Christians who are troubled by what we've become and want Jesus to save the world from us. It's also a book for anyone else who wants to eavesdrop and see whether Jesus might have something better to say than what you've heard from Christians before.

I've identified twelve toxic Christian attitudes from which Jesus needs to save us and twelve antidotes that Jesus uses to save us. He's saving the world from our disingenuous posturing, our exhibitionist martyrdom, our isolationism, our disembodiment, our moral cowardice, our ideological certitude, our divisiveness, our anxious overprogramming, our moralistic meritocracy, our prejudice, our pursuit of celebrity, and our quest for uniformity. He's saving us by filling our hearts with genuine worship, wounding us with his mercy, emptying our spiritual clutter, breathing vitality into our bodies, awakening our sense of honor, captivating us with his poetry, letting us taste true glory, showing us the beauty of his temple, sticking up for people who screw up, liberating us from social conventions, modeling his way of servanthood, and calling us deeper into his kingdom.

My social location as a middle-class, straight, white male limits my radar screen. Though I've tried to write this for everyone, at times I will inevitably be addressing my own demographic—from whom the world might need the most saving. This book documents a journey I've traveled many years in search of a more beautiful gospel than the one I grew up thinking we had to believe. My prayer is that you can be inspired by the hope that I've been shown by incredible mentors and angels along the way.

Jesus once healed a man with a legion of demons by casting the demons into a herd of pigs who stampeded into a lake and drowned (Mark 5:1–20). Recently I realized that this is what Jesus is doing to our church today. The more that mean, loud Christians behave like stampeding pigs, the more our demons are exorcised as everyone's eyes are opened.

The discomfort that you feel at what you've seen around you is the Holy Spirit awakening the church. We have so many problems in our day: police brutality against black people, a generation of severely indebted college graduates, the greatest wealth

inequity our society has known in generations, unjust trade and immigration laws, a climate that has been heavily damaged by our waste. I feel pretty helpless in the face of these serious problems, but I do have one piece of good news: *Jesus is saving the world from us, one Christian at a time.*

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