

I stared at the application for a long time. Frozen. I had tried for so long to hold it all together. I was grasping for any straw of certainty to maintain the facade. But as I looked at the membership application for the Reformed Baptist¹ church I was attending in southern California, “I felt my faith in Christ break as if my femur were snapping in two.”² The entire religion that I held as the center of my life, and that held all things together, had come to an abrupt and traumatic end. I didn’t know it at the time, but one of the main reasons this crisis occurred was because of the very faith I had so heavily relied upon. I would soon discover that some Christian doctrines are inherently traumatic and inevitably result in high amounts of cognitive dissonance, resulting in a loss of faith. In my life this collapse centered around the concepts of God as loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful, combined with the belief that all things are predestined by that same God, and that the abuse I had endured and had inflicted on others was ordained by that same God. These ideas cannot coexist and will very likely lead to fracture. But on the other side of this fracture, in letting go of the faith that harmed me, there was healing for my abused body.

Shortly after finishing college I commissioned as an Officer in the United States Marine Corps and moved away from home and the comfort of the faith community that surrounded me. I encountered many people from all walks of life, and quickly realized that I couldn’t reconcile that these people I had come to know and love were destined to burn in hell for eternity because they didn’t believe the right set of ideas. But this realization stayed inside of me, never to be revealed to anyone, not even my partner. This was because of the fear of admitting to such questions, knowing that it meant doubt in a core part of my life. As the years went by and I continued to live with this cognitive dissonance, I found myself drawn to absolutist claims about God and my religion. I was

¹ Throughout this paper I will use “Reformed” to describe the tradition that I was a part of. Although it’s been around since the Reformation, it has morphed into a modified version of itself that is sometimes referred to as neo-Reformed. This is associated with names like John Piper and RC Sproul.

² Paul Maxwell and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Trauma of Doctrine: New Calvinism, Religious Abuse, and the Experience of God* (Fortress Academic, 2021), xvii.

drawn to the Reformed tradition of the Christian religion in its dogmatic claim to certainty because it gave me what I craved.

A fundamental idea in the Reformed tradition is that everything that happens in the universe is purposefully and willfully done by God. Nothing happens outside of God's desire and intent, and everything that does or does not happen is for a higher purpose and plan. John Piper is one of the foundational modern teachers and preachers in this tradition and he claims "the worst sin that was ever committed was ordained by God...He controls everything, and He does it for His glory and our good."³ Piper also claims that the reason God ordains child abuse, for example, is to deepen the child's "faith and holiness."⁴ This teaching was comforting for me at the time because it satiated an anxiety I had around ambiguity, and feeling like there was a lack of control in my life. It gave me what seemed to be a clear reason for my suffering. But this comfort did not last when faced with the contradiction in the Reformed tradition between God's love and our love with one another.

A basic premise in the broader Christian religion is that God loves us. That is usually explained in terms like "God wants what is best for you" or "God loves you very much." It's the basic idea in the most famous verse from the Christian New Testament, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."⁵ But the Reformed tradition interprets God's love differently. John Piper had this to say about God's love: "God's love is his doing whatever needs to be done, at whatever cost, so that we will see and be satisfied with the glory of God in Jesus Christ. Let me say it again: the love of God is his doing whatever needs to be done, at whatever cost to himself or to us, so that we will see and be satisfied by the love of God in Christ forever and ever." In this tradition God's love is not

³ *Has God Predetermined Every Detail in the Universe, Including Sin?*, directed by Desiring God, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSSLpVChng>.

⁴ Justin Taylor, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, ed. John Piper (Crossway, 2009), 92.

⁵ New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

about us at all, but about godself. This way of seeing God's love, combined with the concept of God ordaining everything that happens, presents a problem when it faces the human experience of love.

Love is a core part of being human. We experience this in our relationships with each other in a variety of ways. My favorite definition and explanation of love is that of bell hooks in her book *All About Love*. She describes love as having six key ingredients: care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust.⁶ And these six ingredients must be reciprocal, radiating from both individuals in a relationship towards the other. We know this to be true in our lived experience. Contrast this with the Reformed definition of God's love. In that description it is not about reciprocity in any of these ingredients of love. It is only about God and what God wants. This conflict creates an especially difficult conundrum for the abused person.

It started when I was around 11 years old, that I can recall. A person older than me, himself just a teenager, started sexually abusing me. This person told me it was "normal" and that there was nothing wrong with it. But at the same time I knew I was supposed to keep it hidden and not tell anyone. This went on for a handful of years, until I was no longer regularly in proximity to this person. I eventually told my partner, who at the time was my girlfriend, and she thought it best I bring this to my parents. So late one night we sat them down and I told them what happened. I don't remember many things about that night, but the one thing seared in my mind was my mother telling me that I "should have known better." Although the person who had abused me later took full responsibility and made amends with me, I deeply internalized that I "should have known better."

As the years went by in my life and I had all these internal conflicting ideas floating around in my mind and body, a multitude of traumas started to take a toll. My inner monologue would look something like this: "God loves me and wants what is best for me. But wait...he just wants what is best for himself. He controls all things and these terrible things that have happened to me. But

⁶ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2018), 14.

wait...those things are my fault...I should have known better. But even if I knew better, God did it to me for a greater purpose and that was loving.” And this chaos swirled around inside of me until that fateful day in December of 2018 when it all collapsed.

Paul Maxwell writes about this phenomena of trauma and loss of faith in his book, *The Trauma of Doctrine: New Calvinism, Religious Abuse, and the Experience of God*. He refers to it as “trauma-induced apostasy.”⁷ It is a necessary and inevitable result of the Reformed tradition on traumatized persons. This is because the idea of God that the tradition asks of its adherents requires them to “inverse commonsense moral criteria in order to accept it.”⁸ Instead of understanding God in a relatable way, such that we could infer the love of a partner or children or friends onto the love we have for God and that God has for us, we are asked to completely inverse that idea of love and hold it in tension with our lived experience. Maxwell summarizes this well:

“In the case of Reformed theology, one must perform three acts of belief in order to maintain faith in God. The first is to recognize that God conceived and ordained the trauma—for example, that he sovereignly decreed one’s own boyhood sexual abuse. The second is to believe that God is good for decreeing it. The third is to believe that God is good for decreeing it because the boy, in particular, was bad. All three of these acts of belief are necessary components for maintaining a Reformed view of God’s relationship to trauma.”

This is exactly what brought me to that breaking point. It was a feeling of helplessness, isolation, and worthlessness. I had expended all my energy to reconcile my life to my faith and it had nowhere to go but collapse. Richard Gartner writes in his book on boyhood sexual abuse, “It’s hard to imagine feeling more abandoned, isolated, and worthless than a boy who believes in God, but also believes that God betrayed him.” I couldn’t remain in a relationship with a deity who tells me they love me, but also orchestrates my pain. That is the relationship of an abuser. It is the relationship of the narcissist to the victim. The abuser who can say “I love you and want what’s best for you” while they

⁷ Maxwell and Vanhoozer, *The Trauma of Doctrine*, xviii.

⁸ Maxwell and Vanhoozer, *The Trauma of Doctrine*, 77.

betray you at the same time. I did the brave and courageous thing that any victim of abuse should do...I walked away. After walking away there was still more work to be done to heal from the experience.

The first stop on my journey to healing from this trauma was coming to terms with my former conception of God. In the few short months after this fracture I had a bit of a militant atheist phase, as is natural. But I couldn't stay there for very long. It felt too certain and too similar to the Reformed tradition of Christianity I had left behind. I soon accepted that I was agnostic, and I remain that way today. I simply don't know. Having accepted that ambiguity, I set out to learn of other ways to conceive of God. I was inspired by a quote by Rabbi Irving Greenberg, "no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children."⁹ His point being that if we must conceive of God behind all of this, it must answer for the most brutal of human experiences. That search led me to Open Theism and Relational Theology. Put simply, these ways of thinking about God conceive of a universe where God *can't* do certain things. God is love and love is not coercive, therefore God is not coercive. Rabbi Harold Kushner writes about this in his book *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*, "I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason." This doesn't answer with any certainty the problem of evil, but it alleviates that core problem in deterministic views of God. God could not have stopped what happened to me. A person did that...nothing more. A person that was himself abused in a long generational cycle of abuse. Finding an alternative way to think about God helped heal my intellectual pain, but it didn't address what had happened in my body.

The second stop on my healing journey was bringing my body in line with my mind. I entered a phase of somatic realignment in my life. This happened in therapy sessions where I

⁹ Irving Greenberg, *Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity After the Holocaust*, 1977.

engaged with my trauma through art, narrative, and somatic exercises. I went on more walks. I created collages of various print images to tell the story of my journey and where I was at the moment. I took up coloring and drawing to depict what I felt in my body. I also found it helpful to do journaling and letter writing, to get my thoughts onto paper. I engaged in bodily spiritual exercises as well. I became fascinated and drawn to what I had learned about more liturgical and ancient practices of my childhood faith. Through a series of events I ended up at an Episcopal Church on Easter Sunday 2021. Before that time I knew very little about the Episcopal Church, other than being vaguely aware that the priests dressed in some strange robes and they were more progressive in their approach to Christianity. I distinctly remember the tears that flowed down my face at that first service, as I not only realized I was among more like minded people politically and socially (much of those views had changed for me as well), but I found a healing calm in the communal aspect of the service. Prayer is done as a group in a kind of call and response, guided by a priest or a lector. The service is full of bodily engagement through sitting, standing, kneeling, and the passing of the peace (a kind of greeting time). The main event is the Eucharist, unlike in other traditions where the main event is the sermon. The Eucharist is something that fills me with awe. Not because of any supernatural claim, of which I will always remain sceptical, but because it is a communal activity wherein all I need to do is be present and receive. Happy, sad, mad, angry, tired, energized, confused, distracted, engaged, whatever my thoughts or feelings, I need only to come and receive. It is an intimate event. Another human is offering me wine and bread, looking me in the eyes, feeding me. This is important because in that previous traumatic faith, I had to constantly manufacture the right mood and way of being. I had to always be joyful and thankful. That is a betrayal of the self, and dishonest. I never left that Episcopal parish and remain a regular attendee and participant to this day. It has taken many years, but I can honestly say my body has reached a point where my religious trauma is manageable. I sometimes forget it was ever there at all.

Reformed doctrines of God permeate many traditions of Christianity today. It can be found in countless non-denominational evangelical churches throughout the world. Churches filled with people who likely don't know who John Piper is, or how exactly predestination or God's sovereignty works, but are taught these concepts, and experience the same internal struggle that I did. This is actively harming millions of people. There is a way out of this pain and a pathway to healing. Paul Maxwell ends his book with a note to survivors like myself,

“If your religious community, or even God himself, makes you feel unsafe, you can leave. Act in your own self-interest. Be brave. Walk out, and do not come back if that is what is best. You do not owe those people anything. You do not owe God your sworn allegiance to a social pyramid. We are born with nothing and die with nothing. We get no points for style...Seek belonging in a safe community that loves you, wants you, helps you, and challenges you in ways that don't negligently trigger the disruption of your healing. This community may be a church and it may not be.”¹⁰

I give you permission to do whatever you need to heal. Nothing bad will happen to you, in this life or the next. On the contrary, being true to yourself in this way is the path to life, and healing from religious trauma.

¹⁰ Maxwell and Vanhoozer, *The Trauma of Doctrine*, 310–11.