

What the **SHOCKING BELIEFS**  
of the Great Christians  
Can Teach Us Today

# ReGRACE

**FRANK VIOLA**  
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# 1

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## Why This Book?

The devil is a better theologian than any of us and is a devil still.

~ A. W. Tozer

In November 2014, Rick Warren asked me to write a series of blog posts on the shocking beliefs of the great Christians who shaped the church (especially the evangelical wing).\*

Warren's hope was that the series would "soften" the uncivil climate in the Christian community over doctrinal differences.

If, for example, a Christian discovered that his or her theological "hero" had some peculiar, inaccurate, or even shocking belief(s), this would give him or her pause before

\*While I claim the term *evangelical* myself, because it best fits my theological views, I don't stay within my corner of evangelicalism when it comes to reading the writings of others. I also believe that modern evangelicalism has a number of blind spots, something I've addressed on my blog—[frankviola.org](http://frankviola.org).

unloading both barrels on a fellow believer over an alleged doctrinal trespass.

After watching the nonstop carnage on social media over theological disagreements during the last decade, I fully resonated with Warren’s goal. And so I began writing the “shocking beliefs” series on my blog.

Within a year, the series went viral, receiving hundreds of thousands of pageviews from all over the world.

In 2017, I had a conversation with the Baker publishing team about revising and expanding the series into a book. They agreed, and that’s how this project began.

## The Purpose of This Book

The book I wrote before the one you’re reading right now is called *Insurgence: Reclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom*—which is a fresh presentation of the earth-shaking gospel of the kingdom of God.\*

One of the lessons those of us who have joined the *Insurgence* have learned is to always walk in the love of Christ, even toward people with whom we disagree.

And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. (2 Timothy 2:24)

*ReGrace* has but one objective: to foster grace, civility, and tolerance among Christians when they disagree with one another over theological matters.

The subtitle “shocking” is subjective. Some Christians will find a number of the beliefs articulated in this book to

\*Frank Viola, *Insurgence: Reclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017). Many have called *Insurgence* my “signature work.”

be first-class shockers. Others will find them surprising. A small number may shrug their shoulders and muse to themselves, “So what?”

Yet the point made in each chapter is undeniable. No influential Christian of the past could claim flawless perception. Each of them had blind spots. Some of their views were peculiar at best. Others were aberrant or ran contrary to Scripture, at least to the minds of many evangelical Christians.

*But despite their less-than-perfect beliefs, God still used them.*

This fact alone should cause us to relax whenever we run into a teacher, preacher, author, or fellow Christian on a blog or social media feed who holds views with which we disagree.

Especially when we come to grips with the immovable fact that none of us is immune to being wrong.

*That includes you and me.*

## Getting Clear

Before we move on, I want to be crystal clear about five things:

- 1) There’s no reason to get offended with any of the chapters in this book. Unless of course, you’re easily offended. (If that’s the case, I have no guaranteed antidote for you, but I did address you directly in a previous book with a cure.)†
- 2) Most Christians have heroes. I know I do. But some people are overly protective of theirs. I was keenly aware

†Frank Viola, *God’s Favorite Place on Earth* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2013).



of this when I wrote the blog post on the “Shocking Beliefs of John Calvin.” After I published it, I sent this email to Rick Warren:

**Subject:** Shocking Beliefs of John Calvin (this one may get me hung!)

Hi Rick. The post is below. If I disappear, it's your fault!

You can reach me at Salman Rushdie's place. ;-)

Rick's response made me laugh out loud. He promised to officiate my funeral if my body was ever found!

Keep in mind that I'm not a “Calvin-hater.” I never touched his theological system. I simply pointed out some beliefs he held that are shocking to many evangelical Christians, just as I did with the rest of the people I treat in this volume.

Nevertheless, in response to that original blog post, I was on the receiving end of hate mail. Even from Quakers! The smoldering anger laden in those emails would make Keyser Söze blush. (If you don't know who Mr. Söze is, you can insert Howard Stern into that sentence.)

What do I mean? Here are two of the tamer ones (*cough*):

Viola's journey to the dark side is now complete. Writing this blog post is the equivalent of witchcraft. I wonder if he's stopped torturing small animals too. Doubt it. Take me off his blog list immediately.

Your “shocking beliefs” series reminds me of Charles Manson. You're a [expletive] and probably a closet serial killer too!

- 3) Some of the so-called shocking beliefs that I cover in this book are beliefs that I myself agree with. Others I find abhorrent. Consequently, just because a shocking belief is listed doesn't reveal how I personally feel about it. It simply means that many evangelical Christians will find the belief to be shocking (at worst) or peculiar (at best).

Therefore, to those of you who are inclined to finish this book and proudly throw your chest out saying, "Good grief, I wasn't shocked by any of those beliefs!" remember three things: You missed the point of the book; each person I feature had people who believed they were heretics during their day; and every one of them still have people raking them over the coals because of their viewpoints.

- 4) While I disagree with a number of beliefs that each person I feature held, I have respect for each of them. In fact, I cannot tie the laces of their shoes. Each individual was remarkable in his own right. I realize this means that people who don't like Calvin, Lewis, Wesley, Augustine, and so forth will be turned off by that statement. *And some may misuse this book as a frontal attack on each person it covers, completely missing the boat on those chapters and the intent of this volume.* If you ever find someone doing that, feel free to quote this paragraph to them to jar their memory.
- 5) To keep this book relatively short, I didn't cover *every* shocking belief these figures from church history held. I simply covered the beliefs I felt were sufficient to make my point. The source materials will give you further information about each individual and their views. So I'm

sure you can uncover more of their shocking beliefs, if you desire to investigate. But again, how many peculiar views they held isn't the point. The point is that some of their beliefs were imperfect, and hence, we should show more tolerance toward each other whenever we disagree.

## On “Great” Christians

For the both of you who are apoplectic right now because I used the word “great” to describe fallen humans, let me point out that I’m merely following Jesus here (emphasis mine):

The *greatest* among you will be your servant. (Matthew 23:11)

Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone *greater* than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is *greater* than he. (Matthew 11:11)

Whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called *great* in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:19)

So settle down, okay?

Note that I’m only covering eight “great Christians” in this book. In my study of church history, these are the people I believe shaped the evangelical Christian world the most. I don’t have a “shocking belief” entry for Billy Graham since I don’t think he fits into that category. However, I did feature seven surprising (perhaps even shocking) quotes by him.

You will find that no women are featured. That’s because in my research, the women who significantly shaped church history (such as Fanny Crosby and Amy Carmichael) didn’t

appear to hold to any shocking beliefs.\* I suppose that's a compliment to them.

Finally, I've deliberately omitted the shocking actions of the great Christians, focusing instead on their beliefs (actions and beliefs aren't the same).

It bears repeating: the purpose of this book is not to lower these individuals in your eyes. It's actually the opposite. It's to show you that despite their strange (and sometimes flawed) thinking on some issues, God still used them. Mightily, even.

The lesson, of course, is that God uses His people in spite of their strange or erroneous perspectives. And since that's the case, let's have more grace whenever we disagree with one another.

It's time for us to regrant.†

\*Carmichael dressed like the Indian women she ministered to and allegedly kidnapped children who were being sold as sex slaves (in an effort to rescue them). She also didn't accept donations. But none of these beliefs would be shocking or surprising to a twenty-first-century Christian audience.

†By *regrant*, I simply mean *rethinking* and *rediscovering* God's *grace* in relation to those with whom we disagree. In other words, to begin to be *gracious* toward all our fellow sisters and brothers in Christ, especially when we don't see eye to eye.

## 2

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### 'Tis Humor

All along, let us remember we are not asked to understand, but simply to obey.

~ Amy Carmichael

When I began my “shocking beliefs” blog series that eventually became this book, I anticipated that some readers would misuse a post to attack the Christians I was covering.

Others wanted to roast me over a slow spit after they realized their spiritual hero didn't possess immaculate perception.

For these reasons, I added this caution just before the comment section that followed each blog post. This one appeared under the C. S. Lewis post:

**WARNING:** Now that you have been made aware of some of the surprising beliefs of C. S. Lewis, you may be tempted to overreact. So before you write your comment, heed this warning: If anyone wields accusations like “C. S. Lewis is

the mouthpiece of Satan” or “Lewis is a cross between the Antichrist, the Zodiac killer, and the Unabomber” and other such sentiments, our beloved Blog Manager won’t approve the comment.

So those of you who found this post on the web somewhere and are starting to march toward the comments box with pitchforks, blowtorches, and blunt objects in order to delegitimize, castigate, or marginalize Lewis beyond repair, your remark will vanish into the electricity after the Blog Manager hits the Delete key.

In addition, this isn’t the place for a theological smack-down, a doctrinal beatdown, a “look how much I know about C. S. Lewis” ego session, or a Calvinism vs. Arminianism feeding frenzy. We simply ask that you post your favorite C. S. Lewis quote in the comments. Thank you very much.

# 3

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## We Know in Part

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.

~ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

As I argued in *Revise Us Again*,<sup>1</sup> every follower of Jesus is a rough draft. Over time, the great Editor—the Holy Spirit—shapes our lives and views. But until we see the Lord, and we “know even as we are known,” we are all in process.\*

This is also true for the great Christians who have gone before us.

Therefore, one of the mistakes we should guard against is the temptation to dismiss a person’s entire contribution because they may hold (or have held) to ideas we find difficult to stomach.

\*This is a reference to Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (KJV).

Speaking personally, if I demanded that a person's theological views be identical to mine, then if I met myself thirty years ago, I would have had to disfellowship myself!

The truth is, my views on some topics have changed over the years.

*And so have yours.*

We are all in process. None of us gets everything right all the time. This stands true for every Christian who has ever breathed oxygen.

So my purpose in highlighting some of the shocking beliefs of the people upon whose shoulders we stand is *not* to burn them in effigy. Nor is it to dismiss their positive contributions to church history.

Rather, it's to demonstrate that even though they may have held views that would raise the eyebrows (or the ire) of many Christians today, that doesn't overturn nor negate the valuable ideas they contributed to the body of Christ.

Unfortunately, many evangelicals are quick to discount—and even damn—their fellow brothers and sisters over alleged doctrinal trespasses, even if those same brothers and sisters hold to the historical orthodox creeds (Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, etc.). But such discounting serves no one on the kingdom side of the aisle, and it can be avoided.

When diversity within orthodoxy is encountered, grace should be extended. Just as we would want grace extended to us, seeing that none of us sees perfectly (Matthew 7:12). Therefore, we should never judge the whole bag by one or two grains of wheat.\*

\*Later in the book, I will address what constitutes orthodox Christian belief and how we should treat those who teach doctrines that contradict it. In other words, I'll discuss "heresy" and those who promote false doctrines.



The words of Paul of Tarsus contain thunder and lightning on this score:

Now our knowledge is partial and incomplete. (1 Corinthians 13:9 NLT)

Or in the words of the NKJV, we “know in part.”

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# 4

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## Honoring Those with Whom You Disagree

I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.

~ Martin Luther King Jr.

We've all seen it. The belligerent throwdowns where Christians take the gloves off with fellow believers over doctrinal, theological, and political differences.

Many of them can't walk away from a fight or lose. Instead, they either pour coals on an already roaring fire or they bring in the gasoline trucks.

For this reason, it's time for us to recover the lost art of agreeing to disagree.

The devil gloats when God's children are at one another's throats over their petty disagreements. But forfeiting a relationship over a disagreement effectively dismantles the words of Jesus:

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:35)

That they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me. (John 17:23)

John Wesley was the first to put the phrase “agree to disagree” in print in the eighteenth century. George Whitefield was his sparring partner, and Wesley attributes the phrase to him. Here’s the quote:

If you agree with me, well: if not, we can, as Mr. Whitefield used to say, agree to disagree.<sup>1</sup>

In light of the doctrinal disagreements between Wesley (an Arminian) and Whitefield (a Calvinist), someone once asked Whitefield if he thought he’d see John Wesley in heaven. Here is Whitefield’s reply:

I fear not, for he will be so near the eternal throne and we at such a distance, we shall hardly get sight of him.<sup>2</sup>

This statement reveals the spiritual stature of George Whitefield.

To recognize the place of another servant of God in the kingdom despite doctrinal disagreements is an evidence of a person who walks with God.

To speak well of another servant of God, honoring them in public even, is a mark of spiritual greatness and Christ-like humility. This is especially true when we have significant disagreements with their theology (or their politics).\*

\*I, of course, am not speaking about what the Scriptures call “false teaching” or “heresy.” I treat those kinds of erroneous beliefs in another part of the book. But God even uses heresies and false teachings for good, despite the harm they

To have the insight to see when God’s hand is on a person and using them, despite the doctrinal differences we may have with them, is a sign of someone who knows the Lord well.

Whitefield’s remark about Wesley is rare to see in our day where bickering, casting aspersions, and dismissing (in particular) are the order of the day when it comes to theological disagreements among Christian leaders.

Let’s take our cue from Wesley and Whitefield when encountering a disagreement with a fellow believer. Learn the art of agreeing to disagree. When it comes to countless doctrinal, theological, and political disagreements, most of those hills aren’t worth dying on.

(Indeed, there are times when we should dig in our heels on a point of orthodoxy, but not to the point of violence—either physical or verbal. We’ll explore this matter later in the book.)

May Whitefield’s tribe increase!

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bring. Samuel Bolton’s *The Arraignment of Error* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1999; first published 1646 in London), is entirely dedicated to this thesis.

# 5

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## It's Not a Bloodsport

I choose to look at people through God, using God as my glasses, colored with His love for them.

~ Frank Laubach

A careful read of church history will chill your blood. From the late fourth century until the seventeenth century, Christians slaughtered their fellow brethren over doctrinal differences.<sup>1</sup>

Sure, there were doctrinal wars undertaken in print where one writer would quarrel at pen's point with another author. However, the pamphlet wars eventually evolved into something far worse.

Christian leaders began unsheathing their swords and the bloodletting began. Tragically, the blood has been flowing ever since, even today in the West where there is freedom of religion (I'm speaking metaphorically).

During the past four decades, I've been given a front-row seat to watch a number of church splits. In every case, it began with someone getting their feelings hurt and going on the warpath.

I remember one case in particular. A man came into our fellowship with a pet doctrine that he wanted everyone else to embrace. (We'll call him Tom.) Tom was so persistent he could wear down a granite mountain. He ran our blood hot.

Despite his efforts, we didn't accept Tom's teaching. He got his feelings hurt and the Ginsu knife made its appearance.

Someone decided to throw a match into the situation by correcting Tom. The result: we could all smell flesh burning. Others tried to correct Tom too, but they were left sucking air. Tom became so angry, he had smoke blowing out of both ears. (I'm aging by the moment as I think about it.)

Tom exploded into criticism and began vilifying the members of the church, accusing them of despicable and heinous things—none of which were true. He was on full meltdown, spewing venom wherever he could. Beyond his blistering denunciations, his sentiment was, "I wash my hands of those people!"

The words of judo champion Dumitru D. Coman come to mind: "When a toxic person can no longer control you, they will try to control how others see you."

Regrettably, I've watched this same drama play out in different settings. Different actors, but the same scenes packed with the same slurs.

The lesson is a chilling one. If you're going to meet in close quarters with other Christians, put your asbestos suit on. Someone is going to unleash toxins. And it will be over either a personality conflict or a doctrinal difference. (Often, these two are joined at the hip.)

More ironic, they will use the name of God and “protecting others” as a justification to malign their sisters and brothers in Christ. (Historically, those who incinerated heretics by fire or tortured them have always used “God’s name” and the “protection of the sheep” as their defense.)

The blood that flowed at the hands of Christians over theological disagreements in the sixteenth century was up to the horse’s bit. The tragic endings of John Huss, William Tyndale, Felix Manz, Balthasar Hubmaier, and countless Anabaptists will curdle your blood.

But we’ve come a long way today. We’ve come two millimeters!

Christians who have thin hide may not use the sword to impale those with whom they disagree. They’ll use the keyboard and the internet instead. But the effect is the same—*carnage*.

Throughout this book, I’m going to declare holy war on this entire attitude. Treating our fellow brethren with the love of Jesus Christ is written in the very bloodstream of God. And you can find it all over the New Testament.

To put it another way, theology doesn’t have to be a bloodsport. It can be a civil and intellectually honest conversation. And it should be.

Unfortunately, much of the problem today is that Christians use different *conversational styles* when they discuss theology.\* So the disagreement ends up being rooted in semantics rather than in substance. This isn’t always the case, of course. But it happens more than you’d expect.

Yet it should not be so among God’s people.

\*In *Revise Us Again*, I identify the three different spiritual conversational styles and give tips on how to recognize and overcome each of them.

To order the book, go to

**ReGrace.info**



## Rediscover grace through the flawed, surprising, and even shocking viewpoints of the giants who shaped our faith

The church is tired of seeing Christians act ungraciously toward one another when they disagree. Social media has added to the carnage. Christians routinely lash out on Twitter or block each other on Facebook because of doctrinal disagreements. The world watches the bloodletting, and the Christian witness is tarnished.

But what if every Christian discovered that their favorite teacher in church history had blind spots and held to some false—and even shocking—views? Bestselling author Frank Viola argues that this simple awareness will soften Christians when they interact with each other in the face of theological disagreements.

In *ReGrace*, he uncovers some of the shocking beliefs held by faith giants like C. S. Lewis, Luther, Calvin, Moody, Spurgeon, Wesley, Graham, and Augustine—not to downgrade or dismiss them, but to show that even “the greats” in church history didn’t get everything right.

Knowing that the heroes of our faith sometimes got it wrong will empower us to treat our fellow Christians with grace rather than disdain whenever we disagree over theology.

**Frank Viola** has helped thousands of people around the world to deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ and enter into a more vibrant and authentic experience of church. He has written many books on these themes, including his signature work, *Insurgence: Reclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom*. His blog, [frankviola.org](http://frankviola.org), has been ranked in the top ten of all Christian blogs on the web today.

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