

EXCERPT



What Are Christians For? *Life Together at the End of the World*

February 22, 2022 | \$22, 192 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4736-5

Though fidelity to the common good ought to define our politics, the modern revolutions of the West have poisoned common life in America. Uninterested in the cultural wars that have often characterized American Christianity, Jake Meador casts a vision for an antiracist, anticapitalist, and profoundly pro-life Christian political approach rooted in the givenness and goodness of the created world.

God Made the World to Be Good

Suppose it is true that we are not, in fact, cosmic orphans but rather the recipients of a great inheritance. And suppose that we can discern what that inheritance is and how we ought to pass it on to others. Even granting all of that, one obvious problem remains: we human beings constantly fail to honor the debts we owe to one another. The greatest problem for the idea that nature is the product of “a plan of love and truth” is not necessarily the sophisticated arguments of nineteenth-century philosophers or twentieth-century theologians. It is, rather, the plain fact that the debts we owe to one another are constantly defaulted on—that we constantly fail one another. In a world of such constant failures, it makes a certain sense to say, “I will take control of my life and take care of myself.” If no one else will do it, you are all that you have left, or so the common wisdom goes.

It is true that families can fail to practice love. It is true that neighborhoods can be treacherous and friends can fail. And all these failures make it harder to discern, let alone embrace, the natural order that God imprinted on the world when he made it. Yet these failures are not the end of our indebtedness or the destruction of the natural order. Why is that? Answering the question will require a bit of theology, but being able to answer this objection is vital, and so the effort to think through the question carefully will be well rewarded.

Christianity has traditionally taught that God is *simple*. When we use that word conversationally, we mean something like “the opposite of complex.” But that is not what simplicity means when Christians are talking about God. When Christians say that God is simple, they mean he does not have multiple parts. He is one. Christianity teaches that when we talk about God, we cannot distinguish between God’s being—the blunt fact of his existence—and God’s characteristics—his love, his mercy, his justice, and all the rest.

This can seem an abstract debate at first. Why do Christians care about this? What difference does it make whether God has separate parts to his identity? But the answer is quite practical. Classical Christian theism has said that there is nothing that can act on God from the outside, for there is nothing that exists independent of God that can sustain its existence without God. So we cannot think of God’s love and God’s holiness as being competing characteristics within his being, as if God confronts something happening in the world and has to decide how to respond by balancing his love for people with his regard for his own holiness. That is not how Christianity has understood God traditionally. If that were how we thought of God, we would implicitly be saying that something outside of God is influencing him, either nudging him to favor his love or to favor his holiness. Once we have done that, we have functionally reduced God to a kind of superpowered human, something closer to the Greek gods than to the Christian God. This we should not do—for if you know your Greek mythology, you know that the humanized gods of the Greek myths are often vindictive, petty, and cruel. But God is none of those things.

Rather, because his being and his attributes are the same, we can say that God is complete in himself. The needs and lacks that drive the Greek gods toward vicious behavior simply do not apply to God as he is described in Christianity. Alone among all the beings in existence, God needs nothing outside of himself to sustain his existence or to give him



Tara Burns, print and online publicity
800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or tburns@ivpress.com

Krista Clayton, author interviews
800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kcayton@ivpress.com



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Jake Meador is the editor in chief of *Mere Orthodoxy*, an online magazine covering the Christian faith in the public sphere, and a contributing editor with *Plough*. His first book was *In Search of the Common Good: Christian Fidelity in a Fractured World*. Jake's work has been published in *First Things*, *National Review*, *Books & Culture*, *Commonweal*, *Christianity Today*, *Front Porch Republic*, and the *University Bookman*.

pleasure. He has no need within himself. This can, wrongly understood, cause God to seem aloof and distant. Yet this is precisely the opposite of what our conclusion ought to be from this teaching.

God is complete in himself. He does not need anything else to be satisfied. And yet you and I still exist. This world still exists. The flowers are dressed in splendor, the birds sing with joy, the ocean roars in praise of God. If God is complete in himself and lacks nothing, and if God still moved to create, then he did not create out of some need or fear or insecurity. God did not act because he desires power or wishes to control people or cause them pain. He already is fully powerful, fully realized, fully satisfied within his own inner life. He did not create because he had to. He created because he loves. Creation is gratuitous. It is unnecessary. It is a gift. God in his action is utterly free from all the things that drive human creatures to act sinfully toward their neighbors. And in that there is great comfort because we know when he acts toward us, he acts *for us*, for he has no need of anything from us.

Our existence itself is a gift of God. Indeed, the entire cosmos is a gift of God. It is the product of divine intentionality, a means through which God can give of himself to us. Thus even if the more immediate ways in which the world can reveal its order to you—such as family or church or neighborhood—have failed you, that order can still be seen because you have been given the gift of existence by God. The late English theologian John Webster explains it well: "Because God is not one being and agent alongside others, and because he is in himself entirely realized and possesses perfect bliss, he has nothing to gain from creating. Precisely in the absence of divine self-interest, the creature gains everything." Elsewhere in that same essay, Webster quotes the nineteenth-century German Lutheran Isaak Dörner who said, "Love is also a lover of life." And in that, there is some comfort—and even joy.

It is precisely because God exists outside of us that we can receive his law as good. It is because God, acting in love, made the world that we can be confident that the world is good, that the way in which God made the world to work is good. In one of his sermons, Webster writes that "God's law is not an arbitrary set of statutes managed by some divine magistrate; still less is it a mechanism for relating to God through a system of rewards for good conduct and punishments for misbehavior. God's law is best thought of as God's personal presence. It is God's gift of himself, in which he comes to his people in fellowship and sets before them his will for human life. God's law is the claim that God makes upon us as our Maker and Redeemer."

—Taken from chapter one, "An Immense Inheritance"

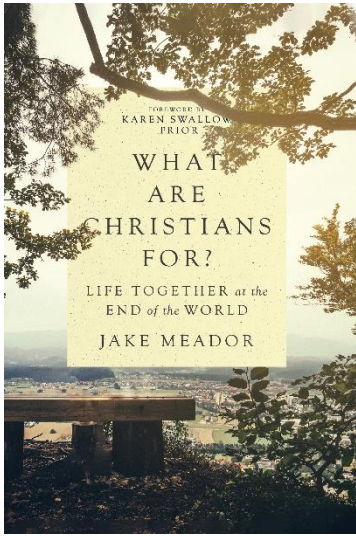


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ENDORSEMENTS



What Are Christians For? *Life Together at the End of the World*

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"A Text of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty . . ."

"Jake Meador continues to give us an accessible but deeply informed account of what he calls 'Christian social doctrine.' He begins by contrasting late modernity's view of nature—as a place of chaotic power conflicts—with that of the magisterial Protestant Reformation—as a work of God's love. On the basis of this 'thick' conception of the natural order, he then insightfully shows how it provides an alternative, life-giving way to understand race, sex, technology, the family, the environment, politics, and institutions. Our polarized and fragmenting contemporary church needs this book!"

—**Timothy Keller**, pastor emeritus, Redeemer Presbyterian Church of New York City

"Like a good physician, Meador offers penetrating yet accessible diagnoses and remedies for our contemporary milieu. Identifying the breakdown of our perception of the natural order in relation to ourselves, creation, and our neighbor, Meador draws from the broad Christian tradition (and heavy doses of Herman Bavinck) to offer concrete responses. This book thus challenges us, because Christian discipleship involves radical self-giving and obedience. But it is also an invitation, for as Meador reminds us, we are never more natural than when we love."

—**N. Gray Sutanto**, assistant professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, Washington DC

"A voice in the wilderness of current culture wars, Meador has written a provocative and unsettling Christian critique of modernity. Deftly incorporating an arresting selection of voices, many far too lightly dismissed by Christians as their ideological antagonists, Meador presents an inspiring, bracing, and rigorously orthodox vision of Christian life, thought, and community as a hopeful response to its challenges and possibilities."

—**Alastair Roberts**, adjunct senior fellow, Theopolis Institute

"Meador's book is a call for a more rooted world in which Christians pursue justice, mercy, and holiness in a sphere that will not be tamed or controlled. Touching on race, gender, economics, ecology, and more, it is a vision that is both comprehensive and full, yet modest and grounded. In these pages, there is much to provoke and to challenge, as Meador offers a vision of the Christian's participation in the world, which is as small as the household and as sweeping as the cosmos."

—**Myles Wertz**, associate professor of theology at Abilene Christian University

"A book that pairs a trenchant critique of whiteness guided by Willie Jennings with a robust Reformed orthodoxy guided by Herman Bavinck is precisely the book that I've been looking for. Meador's work is a text of truth, goodness, and beauty revealing to us the world in which we live and the way we ought to move about in it."

—**Malcolm Foley**, director of Black church studies at Truett Seminary



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