



EXCERPT



When Everything's on Fire *Faith Forged From the Ashes*

November 9, 2021 | \$22, 196 pages, hardcover | 978-1-5140-0333-6

Is it possible to hold on to faith in an age of unbelief? Written with personal and pastoral experience, Brian Zahnd extends an invitation to move beyond the crisis of faith toward the journey of reconstruction. As the world rapidly changes in ways that feel incompatible with Christianity, this book provides much-needed hope that a stronger, more confident faith is possible.

When Faith Is in the Crucible

In fall 2019, my wife and I made our third pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago. Walking the Camino has become one of the great passions of my life. The pilgrim life suits me—at least for a few weeks every few years. We take our first step on the Camino in the French village of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port in the Pyrenees Mountains, and then forty days and five hundred miles later we arrive at the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela, Spain.

But the old adage “it’s the journey, not the destination that matters most” is particularly true of modern pilgrimage. If the destination is the point, I can get to Santiago from anywhere in the world in a matter of hours, but that’s not the point. The point is the long walk itself and the simplified life of being a pilgrim—it’s a respite “far from the madding crowd” of modernity. For forty days and forty nights our lives are reduced to the blessed singularity of walking from town to town, from church to church, from one lodging to the next, each day moving a bit closer to Santiago. We don’t dart here and there, back and forth in a frenzy; we don’t speed through the world in mechanized transport; we just journey steadily westward, never moving any faster than footspeed. The slowness is the point. Because when we slow down enough over a protracted period, we settle into a more contemplative state. The true destination of my pilgrim journey isn’t Santiago but the stillness of soul conducive to contemplation.

To walk the Camino de Santiago is a deeply spiritual experience. Every pilgrim, no matter how secular in their philosophy, senses this and it’s a frequent topic of conversation. “The Camino will provide” is a common expression among pilgrims. It means that no matter what you need, it will somehow turn up as you walk the Way. I’ve found that this is true on many levels. The spirituality of the Camino is a precious anomaly in our disenchanting age. The Camino is also religious—by which I mean you will pass countless churches, chapels, and crucifixes. Virtually every pilgrim will attend at least one Mass to receive a pilgrim blessing. You will almost certainly find lodging several nights in a monastery. It’s impossible not to sense the religious devotion of the millions of medieval pilgrims who walked the road to Santiago in their premodern world.

It’s considered incontrovertible that Europe is thoroughly secular while America clings to Christianity. But that has not been my experience. When I’m in Europe I sense deep, though often buried and forgotten, Christian roots; while in America I encounter a thin veneer of civil religion disguising a deeply secular core. Contrary to what some may think, the soil of Americanized Christianity is not well-suited to nourishing or sustaining Christian faith. This is what I was thinking about as I walked the Camino in fall 2019.

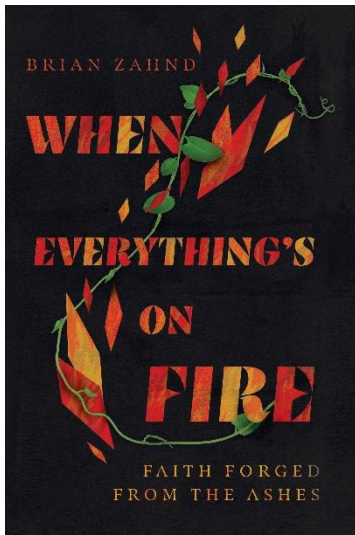


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"In our postmodern age ablaze with skepticism and secularism, Brian Zahnd's pastoral instincts and prophetic insights encourage us not to fear the loss of all that is being burned up in the church, but to be reassured that the enduring fire of God's love is branding the entire world with the kingdom of God. This is the burning bush of a book I didn't know I needed."

—Eric E. Peterson, pastor of Colbert Presbyterian Church and author of *Letters to a Young Congregation*.

I was keenly aware of the faith-challenging fiery ordeal that Western Christians are currently passing through, and I began to formulate some ideas of what I would like to say to those whose faith is in the crucible. Two weeks and two hundred miles into the Camino I sat for several hours on a terrace in Castrojeriz—a lovely hilltop village that has welcomed pilgrims for over seven hundred years—and outlined the eleven chapters of this book, giving it the title *When Everything's on Fire*. I began the writing process in January. At the beginning of 2020 it seemed like everything was on fire, and then—*everything was on fire!* A global pandemic. An economic crisis. A day of reckoning for America's systemic racial injustice. Nationwide protests. More police shootings of unarmed black men. More unrest. More scandals in the church. More politicization of the Christian faith. More political vitriol and violence. More enflamed division. More people losing faith. Indeed, everything's on fire!

But all is not lost—far from it. Even when everything seems to be on fire, faith is still possible. Faith does not have to perish in the ashes of a theological deconstruction. The particular challenges of our secular age do not have to be a dead end for faith. There is a way forward. The apostle Peter speaks of a faith that is more precious than gold because it has been refined by fire (1 Pet 1:7). It is possible to forge a valid and vibrant faith from the ashes of fiery testing. That's what I want to discuss. I wish that you and I could walk together for few days on the Camino de Santiago and have many long conversations about the possibility of Christian faith in an epoch of unbelief. And who knows, maybe it will happen someday. But for now this book will have to suffice. As you read, try to think of me as a fellow pilgrim on the journey of life that for a little while seeks to be your walking companion and conversation partner.

Allons! Whoever you are come travel with me!
Traveling with me you find what never tires.
The earth never tires,
The earth is rude, silent, incomprehensible at first,
Nature is rude and incomprehensible at first,
Be not discouraged, keep on, there are divine things well envelop'd,
I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell.

—Taken from the prelude



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BIO



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"My own faith has passed through the flames of modernity and is alive and well. I've faced the most potent challenges to Christian faith head-on and lived to tell the tale as a believing Christian. A healthy, flourishing faith is possible in the twenty-first century, but we need to acknowledge that we are passing through a time of rising skepticism, cynicism, and secularism." —Brian Zahnd

A Pastor with a Prophetic Voice

"What we need is a wise, unflustered, generous, and disruptive friend. Brian Zahnd is this kind of friend. Engaging wounds inflicted by the church, questions haunting the mind, and those aches deep in the soul, Brian writes as one who has truly encountered Jesus, even while wrestling in the dark. Brian writes with the curiosity and daring of one who has learned to trust the long lyric of love."

—Winn Collier, director of the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination at Western Theological Seminary and author of *Love Big, Be Well: Letters to a Small-Town Church*

Brian Zahnd is the founder and lead pastor of Word of Life Church, a large nondenominational congregation located in St. Joseph, Missouri. He is known for his theologically informed preaching and his focus on embracing the deep and long history of the church. He is a frequent conference speaker and travels the world widely speaking in churches and conducting conferences for pastors. Brian's vision is for the church to be an authentic expression of the kingdom of Jesus in the twenty-first century. Through his Faith and Culture conferences Brian provides a forum for pastors to engage with leading theologians and important Christian thinkers.

Brian is a passionate reader of theology, philosophy, and literature. He is also an avid hiker, mountain climber, and authority on all things Bob Dylan. Brian and his wife, Peri, have three adult sons and three grandchildren. He is also the author of several books, including *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*, *Water to Wine*, *A Farewell to Mars*, *Beauty Will Save the World*, and *Unconditional? The Call of Jesus to Radical Forgiveness*.



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