

Why Book Reviews?

Blame it on Dr. Carson.

When Don Carson was at one of our meetings last January he mentioned several ways to make a 'fraternal' even more beneficial for the pastors in attendance. Since one of the problems pastors face is just keeping up with all the reading, he suggested that the group would be well served if some of the men would be responsible for reading and reporting back to the rest.

Enter Tim Challies. Tim is a member of Grace Fellowship Church and is editor of a website called 'Discerning Reader' (www.discerningreader.com). Discerning Reader is an online catalogue of thousands of book reviews, fully indexed and searchable. It's a great resource!

Putting two and two together, I approached Tim and asked him to start us down the path of serving each other through book reviews. Tim has willingly accepted the challenge of heading up this ministry. Beginning with this month, it is our goal to supply you with two reviews at each meeting of the Toronto Pastors Fellowship. One will be a review of a book of particular interest to pastors, and the other will be a review of a popular Christian book that the people in our churches are more likely to read.

Eventually, we would like for this to become a ministry involving more of you, our attendees. If you are interested at all in reading books and writing reviews for the purpose of helping your brothers in the ministry, please e-mail me (freeman.julian@gmail.com) and let me know. I'll be happy to fill you in on how you can be a help to this project.

But for now, please enjoy these reviews and the first meeting of the season for our fellowship. And don't forget to give feedback: it's the only way we'll know how to improve!

Sincerely,

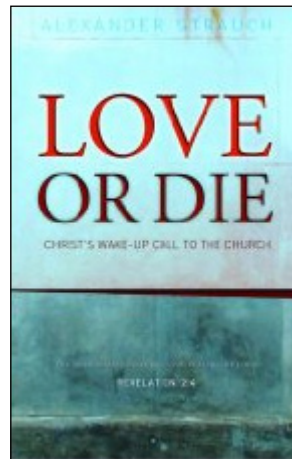
Julian Freeman

Love or Die: Christ's Wake-Up Call to the Church

By Alexander Strauch
Reviewed by Tim Challies

Alexander Strauch has served as a teacher and pastor elder at Littleton Bible Chapel in Littleton, Colorado, for more than thirty years. He and his wife, Marilyn, have four children and six grandchildren. His previous works include *Biblical Eldership*, *The New Testament Deacon*, *The Hospitality Commands* and *Agape Leadership*.

It is a strange gig, being a book reviewer. There are times when I spend weeks or months in anticipation of a new book only to find it a great disappointment. And then there are times when a book just shows up--a book I didn't even know existed--and it takes my breath away. Such was the case with *Love or Die* by Alexander Strauch. While the book is large in dimensions (8.8 x 5.9, so slightly larger than an average paperback) it is short in length, coming in at just 112 pages (which includes a study guide, indexes and a couple of appendices). But despite its length, it packs quite a punch. I can think of few books I've read recently that have had so immediate an impact on me and have given me so much to think about. I trust, that with God's help, the implications of this book will be with me always. *Love or Die* is subtitled *Christ's Wake-Up Call to the Church* and is an exposition of sorts of Revelation 2:2-6. In these verses, Christ praises the church at Ephesus for their works, their toil, their endurance and their discernment. But he also



rebukes this church, saying "I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first." He calls them to repent, lest He is forced to "remove your lampstand from its place." This church, it seems, had once been marked by love; but somehow, in the intervening years, the love had been lost. The sound doctrine remained but the love had waned. Christ gave them this simple admonition: love or die.

Strauch divides his exposition into two parts. In the first, he reminds the Christian that it is possible to have sound doctrine, to be faithful to the gospel, to remain morally upright and to have the appearance of godliness, even while lacking in love. To lack in love is to ignore some of Christ's clearest, most urgent admonitions. And yet many Christians are marked more by an appearance of sound doctrine than by a true love for God and love for one another. When Christ saw this in the church at Ephesus, He reminded the church to "Remember therefore from where you have fallen." In Christ's assessment, the only assess-

ment that truly matters, this church had fallen, and this despite Christ's commendations of them. "Remember, there is always one who walks among the churches, unseen but seeing all. How do you imagine Christ might evaluate your local church body?" Love is to be the distinguishing mark of the Christian.

No ancient or modern philosopher—Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Russell—ever taught such far-reaching ideas about love. No political figure, from Julius Caesar to Winston Churchill, has made such demands upon his followers to love. And no religious teacher, whether Buddha, Confucius, or Mohammed, ever commanded his followers to love one another as he loved them and gave his life for them. No other system of theology or philosophy says so much about the divine motivation of love (and holiness), or expresses love to the degree of Christ's death on the cross, or makes the demands of love like the teaching of Jesus Christ and his apostles.

Christ offers a three-fold remedy to the lack of love in this church at Ephesus. He commands them to remember the love that had once marked their church; he tells them to recall "past joys, deeds, attitudes, and experiences in the life of the church in order to repeat them and act upon them." He commands them to repent, by restoring the love they once possessed. And He commands them to do the works they did at first. They are to "reengage in the deeds of love they had once done but had abandoned."

Remember, there is always one who walks among the churches, unseen but seeing all. How do you imagine Christ might evaluate your local church body?

In the second part of this book, Strauch teaches how we can cultivate love. "Although God ultimately is the one who keeps us in his love and motivates us to love, there is also a human side of the equation. Scriptures directs all believers to pursue love, keep ourselves in the love of God, abide in Christ's love, walk in love as Christ loved, and consider how to stir up one another to love and good deeds. Thus it is vital to our church communities and to the spiritual health of individual believers that we know how to cultivate love and protect love." He dedicates a chapter to each of these topics: study love, pray for love, teach love, model love, guard love, practice love.

Following the Bible's model, Strauch grounds love in the local church.

Love requires both a subject and an object, thus love is a corporate learning experience. We grow in love by engagement with other people, not in

isolation from them.

Christians cannot develop love by sitting at home alone on the couch watching TV preachers or by attending a weekly, one-hour church service. It is only through participation in "the household of God," the local church (1 Tim, 3:15), with all of its weaknesses and faults, that love is taught, modeled, learned, tested, practiced, and matured. By dealing with difficult people, facing painful conflicts, forgiving hurts and injustices, reconciling estranged relationships, and helping needy members, our love is tested and matures.

One simply cannot grow in love without the stresses and strains of life

together in the household of God, the local church. The local church truly is "a spiritual workshop for the development of agape love" and "one of the very best laboratories in which individual believers may discover their real spiritual emptiness and begin to grow in agape love." If you are not a participating member of a local church, then you are not in God's school of love.

We know how the church at Ephesus responded to Christ's rebuke. Some time around the beginning of the second century, Ignatius, one of the Apostolic Fathers, wrote a letter to this church at Ephesus. He had been arrested for his faith and was being taken to Rome to be executed. As he and his guards passed near Ephesus, a delegation of Christian brothers was sent to encourage him as he faced a martyr's death. After this visit, Ignatius sent them a letter thanking them for their care. And in this letter he specifically praises

their love, commending them as a church "characterized by faith in and love of Christ Jesus our Savior." He rejoices that they "love nothing in human life, only God" and he comments on their church's overseer saying he is "a man of inexpressible love." He says that in the love shown to him by the delegation he could see the love of the entire church at Ephesus. These Christians heard and heeded the loving rebuke of Jesus Christ.

I know beyond any shadow of doubt that many of our churches--and perhaps your church, and perhaps mine--would hear this same rebuke from the lips of the one who walks among us unseen, but seeing all. This passage from Scripture is a gift from God that we might "hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Though *Love or Die* is but a short book, it is an excellent one and I commend it to you. It would not be out of place in any church library or personal collection.

Strauch, Alexander, *Love or Die: Christ's Wake-Up Call to the Church*. Littleton: Lewis & Roth, 2008.

Do Hard Things

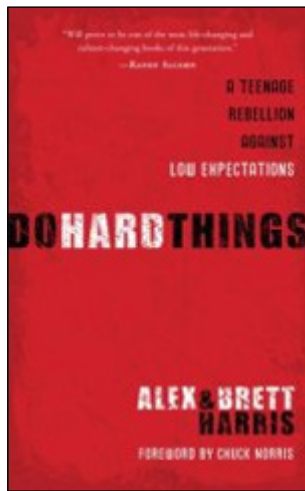
A Teenage Rebellion Against Low Expectations

By Alex & Brett Harris
Reviewed by Tim Challies

I've often reflected on an experience I had when I was studying in college. With a busy semester ahead of me, I decided to take "Death and Dying," an elective that had the reputation of being an exceptionally easy course (a "bird course" we called it back then). On the first day we arrived in the lecture hall, the professor handed out a reading list and what he assured us were the lecture notes for the entire course. With these in hand, we were told, there was little use in showing up for the rest of the year unless we were really and truly interested in the subject matter. It was not a difficult course, he said, and we could probably do fine if we just turned in the assignments and showed up to write the exam. Needless to say, most of us took this as an opportunity to have an evening to ourselves each week rather than actually sitting through long and boring lectures on a subject that was of little interest. Also needless to say, most of us earned very poor grades. I've contrasted this in my mind to courses where the professor challenged us on the first day that his would be

an exceedingly difficult course and one that would require the best we had. With such a challenge, many students rose to the challenge. Knowing that expectations were high and knowing that we faced a long and difficult fight, we reacted by putting out more effort and ultimately by doing better.

High expectations, it seems, often results in greater performance.



Tragically, we live at a time where we expect very little of teenagers. The teen years, we seem to think, are a time where we can and must expect little. If our teenagers manage to avoid dangerous drugs, manage to avoid pregnancy and manage to avoid completely derailing their lives, we consider these years a success. We maintain low expectations and are not surprised when teenagers deliver very little.

Do Hard Things is a book for teens—and a distinctly different kind of book for teens. "Check online or walk through your local bookstore. You'll find plenty of books written by fortysomethings who, like, totally understand what it's like being a teenager. You'll find

Alex and Brett Harris founded TheRebelution.com in August 2005 and today, at age nineteen, are among the most widely read teen writers on the web. The twins are frequent contributors to the webzine *Boundless*, serve as the main speakers for the Rebelution Tour conferences, and have been featured nationally on MSNBC, CNN, NPR and in *The New York Times*, as well as in publications like *World* magazine, *Breakaway* and *Ignite Your Faith*. Sons of homeschool pioneers Gregg and Sono Harris and younger brothers of best-selling author Joshua Harris (*I Kissed Dating Goodbye*), Alex and Brett live with their family outside Portland, Oregon.

a lot of cheap, throwaway books for teens, because young people today aren't supposed to care about books, or to see any reason to keep them around. And you'll find a wide selection of books where you never have to read anything twice—because the message is dumbed down. Like, just for you." But this book is a challenging book, and one written *by* teens and *for* teens. It is written by Brett and Alex Harris, whose greatest claim to fame (other than being the younger brothers of Joshua Harris) is being the minds behind The Rebelution—one of the internet's most popular sites for teens and now a series of conferences. This book continues the message they've been communicating in every other forum.

That message is simple but far too often overlooked in society today: rebel against low expectations. They cast a vision of a better way of doing the teen years in which so many teens have been "conditioned to believe what is false, to stop when things feel hard, and to miss out on God's incredible purpose for [the] teen years." They look at five kinds of hard—five different kinds of hard things that can challenge the expectations of those around them: things that are outside of your comfort zone, things that are beyond what is expected or required, things that are too big to accomplish alone, things that don't earn an immediate pay off and things that challenge the cultural norm. They describe each of

these through stories and examples drawn primarily from their lives and from the lives of other "rebelutionaries" who have shared their stories with the authors.

Though this book is targeted squarely at teens, I can't deny that the message rubbed off even on this reader whose teen years are far behind. There is something inspiring in watching teens shake off the low expectations that plague their lives and there is something in it that makes me want to examine where I may also

have fallen prey to low expectations. Writing as the proud older brother of these authors, Joshua Harris says "Every former teen needs this book, too. I know I do. There's no age-limit on the Rebelution. It's never to late

Every former teen needs this book, too. I know I do. There's no age-limit on the Rebelution. It's never to late to do hard things.

-Joshua Harris

to do hard things."

For too long our expectations of teens, and their expectations of themselves, have been far too low. In *Do Hard Things* Alex and Brett Harris rebel against low expectations and encourage their peers to meet the challenge of doing tough things for God's sake and for God's glory. I wish I could have read this book when I was a teen. I'm glad that my children will have the opportunity. I pray it will stir them and stir a whole generation of young people, to use their teen years to do the hard things God calls them to do. And I pray that the teen years are only the beginning, only the foundation, of lives lived to the glory of God.

Harris, Brett & Alex, *Do Hard Things: A Teenage Rebellion Against Low Expectations*. Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2008.