

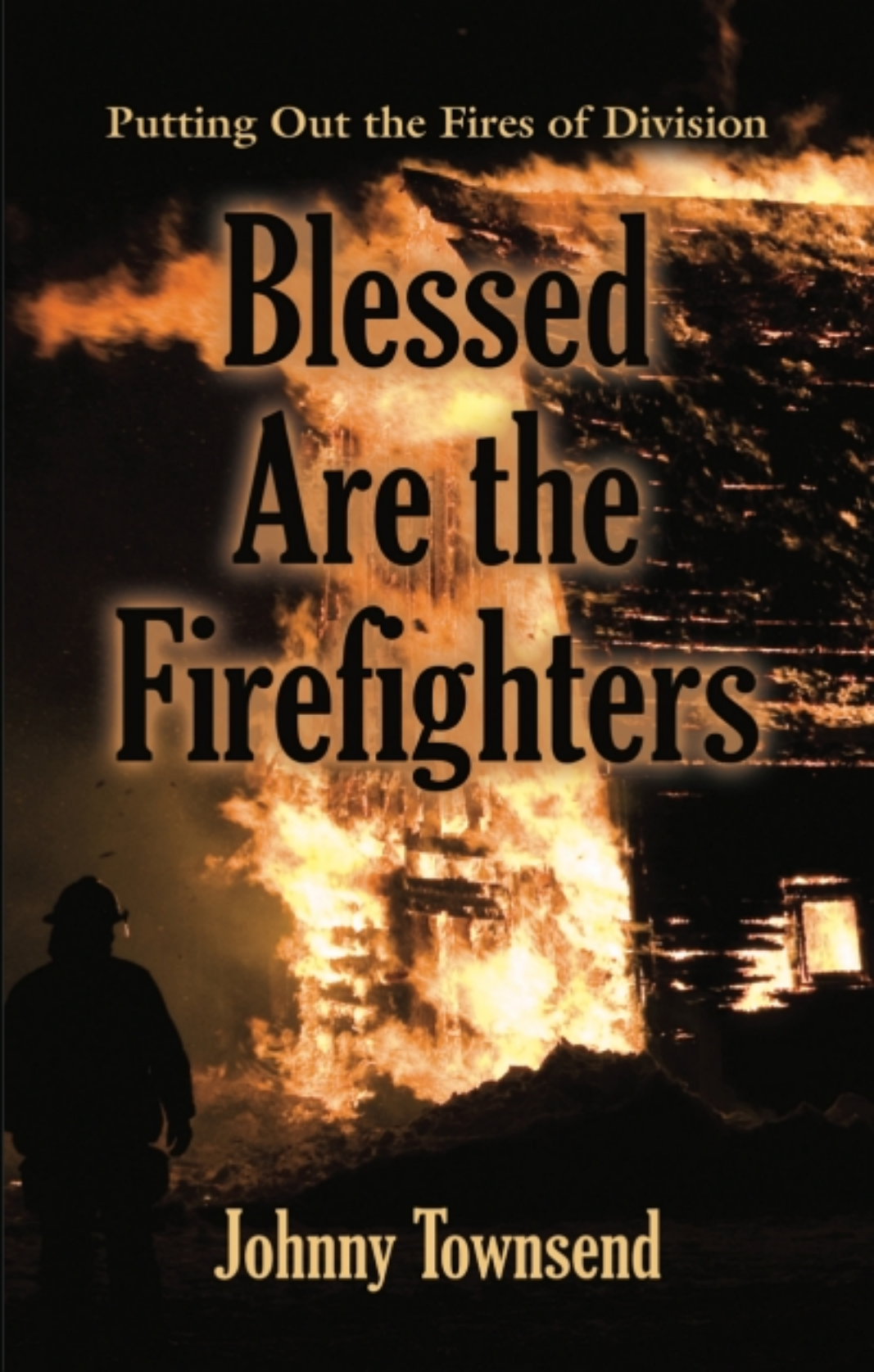
We don't need "affordable" healthcare. We need universal healthcare. We don't need "access" to education. We need tuition-free college and vocational training. The only way any of us can live in a healthy society is if we all do.

**Blessed Are the Firefighters:
Putting Out the Fires of Division**
By Johnny Townsend

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A dramatic photograph of a large fire at night, with a firefighter's silhouette in the foreground. The fire is intense, with bright orange and yellow flames rising from a structure. The firefighter is seen from behind, wearing a helmet and gear, standing in the dark foreground. The overall scene is dark, with the fire providing the primary light source.

Putting Out the Fires of Division

Blessed Are the Firefighters

Johnny Townsend

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Blessed Are the Firefighters: Putting Out the Fires of Division

We don't need "affordable" healthcare. We need *universal* healthcare. We don't need "access" to education. We need tuition-free college and vocational training.

In these essays, Johnny Townsend erases the weasel words and gets right to the point. The only way any of us can live in a safe, healthy society is if we all do. Every worker needs a living wage. But more than that, we need a thriving wage, and Universal Basic Income is a practical starting point.

It's not enough to give coal miners and oilfield workers "good" pay. They also need jobs that promote the health of their communities and the rest of the country. Since we have no choice but to transition away from fossil fuels, we must provide both training and new work opportunities for those who will be displaced as we confront an ever-worsening climate crisis.

Pursuing gender and racial equality, LGBTQ rights, the elimination of for-profit prisons, the separation of church and state, and making peace more profitable than war form the core of any successful strategy for success.

Praise for Johnny Townsend

In *Zombies for Jesus*, “Townsend isn’t writing satire, but deeply emotional and revealing portraits of people who are, with a few exceptions, quite lovable.”

Kel Munger, *Sacramento News and Review*

In *Sex among the Saints*, “Townsend writes with a deadpan wit and a supple, realistic prose that’s full of psychological empathy...he takes his protagonists’ moral struggles seriously and invests them with real emotional resonance.”

Kirkus Reviews

Let the Faggots Burn: The Upstairs Lounge Fire is “a gripping account of all the horrors that transpired that night, as well as a respectful remembrance of the victims.”

Terry Firma, Patheos

“Johnny Townsend’s ‘Partying with St. Roch’ [in the anthology *Latter-Gay Saints*] tells a beautiful, haunting tale.”

Kent Brintnall, *Out in Print: Queer Book Reviews*

Blessed Are the Firefighters

Selling the City of Enoch is “sharply intelligent...pleasingly complex...The stories are full of...doubters, but there’s no vindictiveness in these pages; the characters continuously poke holes in Mormonism’s more extravagant absurdities, but they take very little pleasure in doing so....Many of Townsend’s stories...have a provocative edge to them, but this [book] displays a great deal of insight as well...a playful, biting and surprisingly warm collection.”

Kirkus Reviews

Gayrabian Nights is “an allegorical tour de force...a hard-core emotional punch.”

Gay. Guy. Reading and Friends

The Washing of Brains has “A lovely writing style, and each story [is] full of unique, engaging characters...immensely entertaining.”

Rainbow Awards

In *Dead Mankind Walking*, “Townsend writes in an energetic prose that balances crankiness and humor....A rambunctious volume of short, well-crafted essays...”

Kirkus Reviews

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Introduction: America, We Need to Talk

(published in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on 7 November 2020)

Have you ever received a “Needs Improvement” on your report card? Ever struggled to advance from “Meets Expectations” on a performance review at work to an “Exceeds Expectations”? Ever had a “come to Jesus” moment with a spouse or wayward teen?

Recognizing weaknesses, occasional bad behavior, or undeveloped skills isn’t an attack. It’s a necessary step toward improvement.

Those on the political right seem to feel that any criticism of America means those making the criticism hate our country. Conservatives experience incredible rage and disgust in response. But critics aren’t criticizing to show superiority. We have plenty of room for improvement as well. We’re pointing out problems because those problems exist, they hurt millions of our fellow Americans, and something *can* be done to rectify the problems.

As long as we don’t live in denial.

Like a friend of mine whose father was excommunicated from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints right before her temple wedding. “Don’t tell me why,” she said. “I don’t want to know.”

I heard something similar from a coworker about her husband. “Bob keeps saying ‘we need to talk,’ but I know he’ll tell me he’s having an affair, and I can’t bear to hear it.”

When I was a Mormon missionary, my companion and I held “Companion Inventory” once a week to discuss issues we might have with one another, so our resentment wouldn’t fester.

Couples experiencing problems in their marriage often seek out marriage counseling. Families look for family counseling. Does that mean we hate our spouse and kids? Or just that we want to make our marriage and family stronger?

When a conservative Christian leader or politician is caught having an affair, he is readily forgiven by his followers and supporters if he apologizes. Most of us believe, after all, in repentance.

But if America betrays its people and denies it, or rationalizes it, or tries to weasel out of it, that’s not repentance.

If America betrays its ideals, admits it happened, but then doesn’t apologize, that’s not repentance.

If America betrays its people and ideals and does apologize but then doesn’t make restitution to the extent

possible, that's not repentance, either. It's certainly not redemption.

In the LDS Church, folks who commit semi-serious sins are subject to what used to be called "disfellowship." (Now they call it "formal membership restrictions.") Once they pass probation and prove themselves worthy again (by admitting their sin, vowing not to commit it again, and making appropriate restitution for whatever they've done), they're welcomed back into full fellowship.

Mormons call the Church tribunal a "court of love." Even when a member is excommunicated for serious sin, we're told the act of expulsion is done out of genuine care and consideration. We're helping our loved ones take the difficult steps to make amends and become the better people we know they can be.

So why does it mean I hate America if I point out a flaw or two that needs attention?

What many essential workers, people of color, and folks on the left feel is that we've become the person our spouse *doesn't* want to go to marriage counseling with. Our spouse doesn't even want a divorce. Our spouse simply wants to kill us and bury us in the desert. We're the unwanted toddlers drowned in the bathtub.

We read what our conservative friends and family post on Facebook. We see the news reports of militias planning to attack us and hear the deafening silence of your refusal to condemn such behavior. For years now, realizing we were always the ones reaching out, we wait for you to

initiate contact, with an email or phone call or holiday card that shows you even care we're still alive.

When we see you cheering people and policies that demonize us, when you post memes about putting us in prison, when you see us shot or arrested for peacefully protesting—pointing out one or two of America's legitimate flaws—and say with a shrug that we got what we deserve, we understand something that you don't.

We know what it feels like to have our loved ones wish us dead.

America, we need to talk.

But please don't panic. Let's all take a deep breath. It's going to be OK. We love you, and together, despite your flaws *and* ours, we can find a way to work all of this out.

Taxes Pay for the Nation's Physical, Not Spiritual, Needs

(published in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on 10 Sept 2020)

Whenever I discuss poverty with my Mormon family members or former missionary companions, they tell me, “Helping others should only be done out of the goodness of our hearts. The government has no right to *force* us to be kind.”

But it's not the government's responsibility to ensure our spiritual growth. The government *is* responsible, however, for ensuring the physical well-being of its citizens.

If we allow people a choice whether or not to help their fellow man, and they choose *not* to, what benefit is that either in building their moral character or in alleviating the suffering of others? It's a lose/lose for everyone.

But if the poor *know* that people aren't just going to throw a handout their way, religious conservatives say, they'll learn responsibility and take care of themselves.

I wonder, though, if a hungry five-year-old is really capable of holding down a good job. Is an eighty-two-year-old? Can homeless parents take care of their homeless

children, find a way to wash themselves and their clothes, and travel to job interviews with their kids in tow?

“Well,” I hear conservatives say, “my cousin Bob did it! Maria at the office did it!”

That’s great. Really. My gay ex-Mormon neighbor climbed Mt. Everest. One of the missionaries I served with in Italy qualified for the Olympics. But exceptional people are just that—exceptions—and everyone, even those who are not extraordinary, deserve housing, healthcare, and food.

Are those who are unemployed because of a pandemic really supposed to pay five months of back rent out of their moral pocketbooks?

If 30 million tenants are evicted because they can’t pay such an enormous sum, how does that benefit their landlords? Will the landlords suddenly find 30 million new tenants...willing to pay someone *else’s* back rent?

It’s another lose/lose for all concerned.

Exactly how moral must one be to afford cancer treatment? How righteous to afford dialysis or insulin or mental healthcare with a minimum wage, “essential” job?

Mormons and other religious conservatives are only too eager to force certain moral decisions on others. They’re fine with demanding folks wear clothes in public. They’re OK with forcing legal adults to wait an additional three years before they can drink alcohol and requiring those with traditionally untreatable health issues to

continue suffering rather than benefit from medical marijuana.

So why do religious conservatives resist being asked to do something that not only helps millions of poor, ill, and uneducated Americans but also improves the success of the nation as a whole?

I regularly hear from conservatives, “All you people want is to take, take, take!”

But doesn’t that imply what conservatives want is to “keep, keep, keep”?

Does that latter behavior get conservatives points in heaven? Do Mormons get their “calling and election made sure” by leaving others to suffer simply because they aren’t extraordinary?

Sure, religious conservatives donate to religious institutions, and those in turn give some financial assistance back to the community. But they also get to pick and choose who receives their generosity. That’s their right, of course.

But it doesn’t help everyone. And the government is responsible for *all* its citizens.

When I hear religious conservatives praise morality-promoting austerity programs, I can’t help but wonder if any of *them* ever received assistance from their parents with tuition. Any help getting a car? Housing? Free babysitting?

If these folks don’t feel sinful and weak for accepting help, why would such a moral stain exist if someone *else*

receives help from a friend? Or from the entire community?

If we can all pitch in and fund bomber jets and killer drones without feeling morally compromised, why are we so resistant to spending even a fraction of that to provide food or post-secondary education or healthcare to our own citizens? To our neighbors? Why does *that* destroy our character?

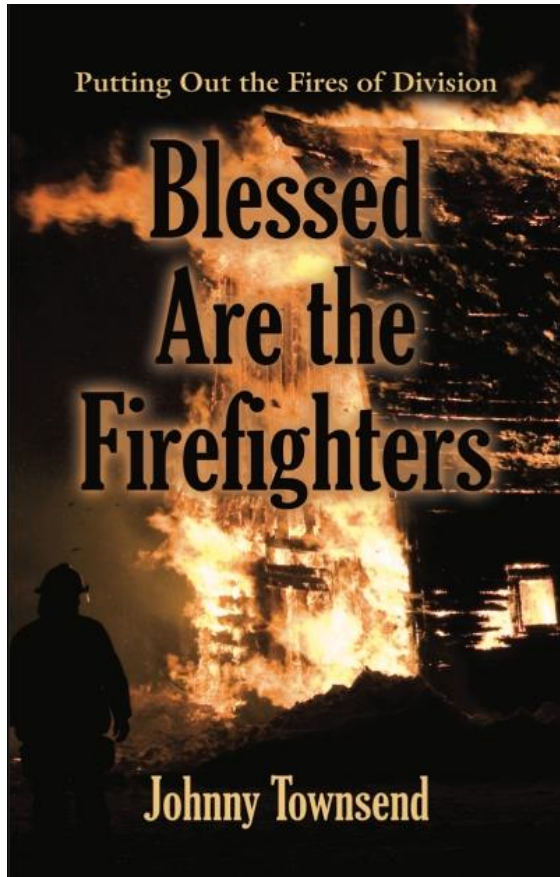
If the military is worthy of our forced benevolence because it ensures our physical well-being, surely these other essentials are worthy as well.

Families have their responsibilities. Religions have theirs. As do individuals.

But the government has responsibilities of its own that shouldn't depend on the conflicting caprices of its citizens.

It is the personal responsibility of each of us to support the government in accomplishing its task of ensuring the physical well-being of everyone it governs.

Not only support, but demand.



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