

# INSIDE OUT

A STUDY GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

# THE CHRIST?ANS



# THE CHRISTIANS SYNOPSIS

PASTOR PAUL: "And you stayed and you paid and together we prayed that someday we would finally free ourselves of debt. And that someday is today. And today is the day that debt is paid."

—*The Christians*

As the play begins, Pastor Paul, spiritual leader of a hugely successful megachurch, takes the pulpit to announce to his flock that the church has finally paid off its long-standing debt. The pastor then goes on to reveal that after much soul-searching, he has decided that his ministry will take a new turn; no longer will he preach the literal existence of Hell. Associate Pastor Joshua, surprised and shocked, objects to this theological turn and initiates a heated debate with Pastor Paul. In the ensuing argument, the two men battle each other with conflicting passages of scripture, and finally, as they fail to resolve their doctrinal differences, Joshua decides to leave the church and take with him the many congregants who can't accept this unexpected change in the dogma. Then the fallout begins.



**DENVER CENTER** FOR THE  
**PERFORMING ARTS**  
Theatre Company

## INSIDE OUT

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### THE CHRISTIANS

By **Lucas Hnath**

Directed by **Kent Thompson**

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# THE PLAYWRIGHT — LUCAS HNATH

In addition to *The Christians*, Lucas Hnath's plays include *Hilary and Clinton*, *Red Speedo*, *A Public Reading of an Unproduced Screenplay about the Death of Walt Disney*, *Isaac's Eye* and *Death Tax*. His work has been produced at Actors Theatre of Louisville/Humana Festival of New Plays, Ensemble Studio Theatre, Gate Theatre, Mark Taper Forum, New York Theatre Workshop, Playwrights Horizons, Royal Court Theatre, Soho Rep, Transverse Theatre and Victory Gardens. He has been a resident playwright at New Dramatists since 2011. He is a member of the Ensemble Studio Theatre and is a New York Theatre Workshop Usual Suspect. He has received the Kesselring Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the

Whiting Award, and two Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award Citations and Outer Critics' Circle Award for Best New Play and an Obie. His works are published by Dramatists' Play Service and Overlook Press.

Born and raised in Orlando, Florida, he went to Christian elementary schools, belonged to a youth ministry, tagged along with his mother to seminary classes — but these days, Hnath doesn't discuss his religious beliefs.

<http://newdramatists.org/lucas-hnath>

[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/06/theatre/lucas-hnath-the-Christians-tackles-a-schism-among-the-flock.html? \(Ref\)](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/06/theatre/lucas-hnath-the-Christians-tackles-a-schism-among-the-flock.html? (Ref))

## MEGACHURCHES

*The Christians* is set in a 'megachurch' — a popular term for a Protestant Christian church having 2,000 or more people in average weekly attendance.

In 2010, the Hartford Institute's database listed more than 1,300 such Protestant churches in the United States; according to that data, approximately 50 churches on the list had average attendance exceeding 10,000, with the highest recorded at 47,000 in average attendance. On one weekend in November 2015, around one in ten Protestant churchgoers in the US, or about 5 million people, attended service in a megachurch. While 3,000 individual Catholic parishes have 2,000 or more attendees for an average Sunday Mass, these Catholic churches are not considered part of the megachurch movement, because by definition megachurches are a Protestant phenomenon.

Globally, these large congregations constitute a significant development in Protestant Christianity. In

the United States, the number of megachurches has more than quadrupled in the past few decades. It has since spread worldwide. In 2007, five of the ten largest Protestant churches were in South Korea. The largest megachurch in the United States is Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas with more than 40,000 members every weekend, and the current largest megachurch in the world is South Korea's Yoido Full Gospel Church, an Assemblies of God church, with more than 830,000 members as of 2007.

Some megachurch complexes are the size of airport terminals, and may include fitness centers, bookstores, information desks, cafés, swimming pools, K - 12 schools and free automotive repair for single mothers. Annual budgets for such organizations may reach as high as \$53 million. Huge video screens behind the pulpit can project live feed of the service, inspirational images, or in one case, the mass baptism of 700 teenagers.

## SCHISMS IN CHURCHES

Within the very diverse Protestant church community, fierce theological debate regularly flares in blog posts, TV broadcasts and Twitter feeds. Among current disputed topics are homosexuality, abortion, same-sex marriages, gun ownership and stem cell research, but also questions of health, global warming, evolution and planetary science, may come up for theological attack.

Christian churches range in dogma and tenets from the very progressive, such as the Unitarian Universalist church, to the extremely conservative and traditional, such as the Seventh Day Adventists, certain Baptist sects and Jehovah's Witnesses. All contemporary Christian churches are Bible-based in their teachings, but otherwise diverge widely in their accepted practices and beliefs. Many contemporary pastors and priests who have preached tolerance and acceptance, modification of creed, or who are openly gay, have

been sanctioned or dismissed by church governance or by their own congregations, while many other churches and denominations in light of dwindling church attendance, are far more inclusive and tolerant.

Tim Sanford, artistic director of Playwrights Horizons theatre in New York City, commenting on the impact of *The Christians*, writes: "We're in a world wracked by violence, stirred by intractable conflicts between warring belief systems. Ideologies cannot act. Only humans can act. But if we're honest with ourselves, almost all of us make choices based on our belief systems. The more impossible that reconciliation becomes, the more necessary it seems."<sup>1</sup>

1. Tim Sanford

<http://www.playwrightshorizon.org/shows/trailers/tim-sanford-christians/>  
<http://www.nconline.org/blogs/just-catholic/coming-american-schism>

# CONCEPTS OF HELL

“If you are going through Hell, keep going.”

—Winston Churchill

The Christian church's teaching of a literal Hell, as a physical place of eternal punishment for sinners, has been preached from the Protestant pulpit for centuries. The core Bible quotes about hell are few and varied in the Scriptures, elaborated on with great zeal by preachers from many different traditions.

Most cultures, from ancient times on, held beliefs of an underworld or afterlife, but few taught that the underworld was a place of eternal punishment. In Greek mythology, the spirits of the dead were ferried across the River Styx by the ferryman Charon, to the realm of the underworld, ruled by the god Hades, but it was a gray, colorless spot, not a place of fiery torment. The Greeks also spoke of Tartarus, a dominion even lower than Hades, where the worst of the worst gods, monsters, Titans and evildoers, like Sisyphus and Tantalus, were imprisoned.

Norse mythology held that Helheim, ruled by the giantess Hel, was the realm of the dead, a place where the common souls were sent after death, while heroes lived for eternity, feasting and drinking in Valhalla. Tibetan and other Buddhists taught that the soul of a deceased person could suffer tortures if they'd led a wicked life, but that they would shortly be reincarnated into a new existence, whether human, animal, or insect, through many lifetimes until the individual could evolve enough to get off the wheel of incarnation.

There is no mention of Hell in the Old Testament as a permanent punishment for the wicked. Some Old Testament texts mention the Hebrew word 'Sheol', from the Greco-Roman belief of Hades, as the place of the dead. Scholars translate 'Sheol' or 'Hades' simply as “the grave.”

In the New Testament, the book of Revelation describes Hell as a “lake of fire” and an eternal place of punishment where the damned were sent after Judgment Day, at the end of the world. According to the Apocalypse of Peter, Hell is a place where sinners are thrown in unquenchable fire.<sup>3</sup>

Early Christians were taught that sinners were sent for eternity to Gehenna, inspired by a deep, narrow glen to the south of Jerusalem, where Canaanites once offered their children in sacrifice to Molech, according to the Old Testament books Chronicles and Jeremiah. This valley afterwards became the common receptacle for all the refuse of the city. Here were tossed the dead bodies of animals and of criminals, and all kinds of garbage, and consumed by fire kept always burning. In time 'Gehenna' became the image of a place of everlasting destruction. Various revised versions of the Bible now replace the word 'Gehenna' with the word 'Hell'.

In the Middle Ages (A.D. 5<sup>th</sup> century), St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, upheld the idea of an eternal Hell “of material fire and torment to the bodies of the damned,” to which atheists and the truly wicked were condemned, but argued that those who committed lesser sins such as overeating and laughing too much would be saved by passing through a “purgatorial fire” before Judgment Day.<sup>4</sup>

In the Renaissance, perhaps the most vivid descriptions of Hell were given by Dante Alighieri in his *Inferno*, the first part of the poet's great work of 1320, the *Divine Comedy*. In the story, Dante is accompanied by the Roman poet Virgil through the nine circles of Hell, a literary invention of Dante's, based in part on the traditional Seven Deadly Sins. Dante's Circles of Hell featured murderers sinking into rivers of boiling blood and fire, or suicides turned into trees and fed upon by vultures. Dante's literary visions of Hell terrified generations with his lurid descriptions of eternal punishment.

New England theologian Jonathan Edwards during the Great Awakening of the 1700's was famous for his terrifying tract, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. This was a typical sermon of the Great Awakening, emphasizing the belief that Hell is a real place. Edwards hoped that the imagery and language of his sermon would awaken audiences to the horrific reality that he believed awaited them should they continue life without devotion to Christ. *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* had enormous impact at the time, and is still read and discussed today.

In the 1800's, Hell seemed to become less an idea that believers took literally, and became more a symbol or literary device used by writers such as Lord Byron, William Blake and Baudelaire. In the current era, Fundamentalists still preach eternal damnation, but there is a trend among contemporary Christians not to believe in a literal Hell. Recent polls show that 71% of adults nationwide believe in Hell, but they don't want to hear about it. Most pastors avoid preaching the concept of Hell, an unpopular topic with their congregants.

1. Bible truths, p. 13.

2. Ibid, p. 14.

3. Facts and details

<http://bibletruths.com>

<http://factsanddetails.com/world/cat55/sub353item/402.htm/>

<http://historylists.org/art/9-circles-of-Hell-dante-s-inferno.html>

# CHRISTIAN CHURCH MUSIC

Throughout the history of Christianity in the U.S. there have arisen many independent streams of vocal church music, including the Shape Note hymns of the Southern Baptists, and the plaintive spirituals of Appalachia and the African American slave tradition, alongside the great many composed hymns from times past that fill church hymnals—“Blessed be the Ties that Bind,” “Watchman Tell Us of the Night,” and hundreds more.

Today, gospel (the style of choral music sung in *The Christians*) is a widely popular genre of church music: vocal, stirring, inspirational, celebratory and rhythmic, often accompanied by hand-clapping, tambourines, piano, organ and band instruments. Gospel music evolved out of many converging streams, but is rooted in the spirituals of the African plantation slaves in the old South. These spirituals arose from both African folk traditions and work songs, and the songs the slaves were taught in the Southern churches. Slaves created “Negro spirituals” by bringing the rhythms and melodies of their African homeland to tales of Old Testament heroes. While they couldn’t sing openly about their own dreams of freedom, they could rejoice in the story of Exodus, when the children of Israel were freed from bondage. When slaves sang “Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land, tell old Pharaoh to let my people go,” they did so with a vigor that suggests deep personal connection. Heavenly salvation and earthly freedom became intertwined.

In the years directly following the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865, many free Blacks discarded spirituals as reminders of a time they wanted to forget. They were called “sorrow songs,” these folk tunes that spoke of a weary people held captive and beat down. But there was no getting over the old songs, which resonated so deeply with listeners. Post-slavery singing groups like the Fisk Jubilee Singers included European art songs in their repertoire, but it was always “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Ezekiel Saw the Wheel” that brought audiences to their feet.

So many old spirituals, such as “Oh Mary Don’t You Weep,” “Didn’t It Rain,” “Jacob’s Ladder,” and “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord” endure today, because they provide the same lift as they did 150 years ago.

African American songs and music continued to develop through blues, pop, “race records” and folk singers, and the music of the Black church in America. Spirituals were brought into the White mainstream in the 1940s and 50s through the early popular folk music revival, with groups like the Weavers who recorded and performed many spiritual songs like “I’ve Got a Home in that Rock,” and the growing awareness of the great writers and singers of Black gospel like Mahalia Jackson, Clara Ward, Aretha Franklin, the Five Blind Boys, The Staple Singers, the Swan Silvertones, and individual artists like Ethel Waters, who sang the deeply moving “His Eye is on the Sparrow” in the film *The Member of the Wedding*. Mid-century R&B artist Ray Charles initially offended some of the Black church community by using gospel music licks in his decidedly secular and sexy songs, but the sheer power of Charles’ music won the argument.

Today, gospel music in the church and in the marketplace is an ever-evolving and always-popular genre that has grown to embrace ever more of the elements of popular music, changing the tone of modern church services away from the solemn and serious mood of earlier times in the Protestant tradition. Songs like “Oh Happy Day,” “People Get Ready,” “Spirit in the Sky,” “You Gotta Serve Somebody” and Melanie’s “Lay Down” are just a few examples of religion-based songs heard on pop radio over the past decades. Kirk Franklin, CeCe Winans, Sandi Patti, Amy Grant and many other contemporary gospel singers may receive Grammy nominations and awards, and have fan followings outside the confines of the church. New gospel songs are written and recorded every day, and the music continues to lift and enliven modern church services.

1. Grout, p. 13.

2. [New world encyclopedia.org/entry/ Gregorian chant](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Gregorian_chant)

Grout, Donald Jay. *A History of Western Music*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1973.

[http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Gregorian chant](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Gregorian_chant)

<http://www.christiansworshipmusic.net/history>

## HYMNS SUNG IN THE PLAY

“**Hold to God’s Unchanging Hand**” — a hymn sung in gospel style with a steady, comforting beat.

“**Catch on Fire**”, **faster and rousing** — like revival music.

“**I Feel like Going On**” — a rhythm and blues song sung by the artist Al Green. Deliberate and loud.

“**Farther Along**” — attributed to W. B. Stevens. It is sung brightly at a moderate tempo.

# STUDY QUESTIONS

## Pre-Performance Questions

1. How would you define “faith?” In what ways can questioning build a sense of faith? In what ways can questioning erode a sense of faith?
2. What is your definition of revelation?

## Post-Performance Questions

1. How did the scenic, costume and lighting designs contribute to how the story was told on stage?
2. What is your response to the statement: “I have a powerful urge to communicate with you but I find the distance between us insurmountable?”
3. What causes the rift between Pastor Paul and Associate Pastor Joshua? What is the result and which side would you be on if you were part of the congregation?
4. How would you describe the relationship between Pastor Paul and his wife Elizabeth?
5. What is the result of a small church becoming a major corporation?
6. What does the Congregant add to the discussion about Pastor Paul’s revelation?
7. Do you consider the play’s ending to be resolved or unresolved?

# PERSPECTIVES

**Make your experience unforgettable when you join us for one of these insightful, educational events:**

## Creative Team Perspectives

**Jan 27 | 6:00pm | The Conservatory Theatre**

Get an exclusive insider's perspective before the show when you join us for a free, professionally-moderated discussion with the creative team.

## Cast Perspectives

**Feb 7 | 6:30pm**

Join a fun and engaging discussion with the actors after the performance.

## Perspectives: Higher Education Advisory Council

**Feb 12 | 1:30pm**

Participate in a topical discussion led by members of our academic community after the matinee.

## Perspectives: Theatre & Theology

**Feb 14 | 6:30pm**

Join Pastor Dan Bollman of the Rocky Mountain Evangelical Lutheran Synod after the performance to examine each show through a theological lens.

# WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Denver Public Library recommends these library resources to enhance your theatre experience.

## Read!

*A Little History of Religion* by Richard Holloway (2016).

Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, gives a telling of the entire history of religion, from prehistory to our own fraught times. This is a respectful, but unblinking look at the significance of religious faith and the quest for meaning. Holloway's study takes him beyond the major world religions, and his intellectual curiosity leads him to consider everything from Quakers, Scientology, secular humanism and fundamentalist violence.

## Watch!

*Bill Moyers and the Wisdom of Faith with Huston Smith.* (2011, Athena Productions)

Watch class-act journalist Bill Moyers converse with Huston Smith, a notable professor of Comparative Religions, as they tackle spirituality, universal truths and seeking these parallel truths throughout world religions.

## Listen!

*Billboard #1 Gospel Hits* (eOne Music 2015).

A two disc compilation that collects the greatest gospel hits of the past decade. Stay in the spirit by listening to music filled with spirit.

## Download!

*The Bible Made Impossible* by Christian Smith (2011).

You've witnessed the schism that erupted between Pastor Paul and Associate Pastor Joshua over interpretations of the various scripture they use to support their arguments. Smith very carefully portrays how easily scripture can be interpreted in different ways, even by members of the same congregation, imagine how divisive these vagaries can be for members of different sects. Sociologist Christian Smith assigns the blame to the way American Evangelicals subscribe to the tenants of biblicism. So why is biblicism impossible? You'll have to read to find out!



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