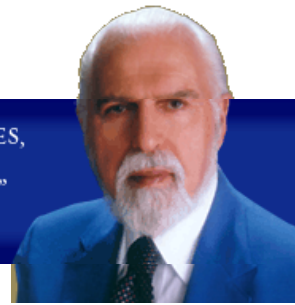
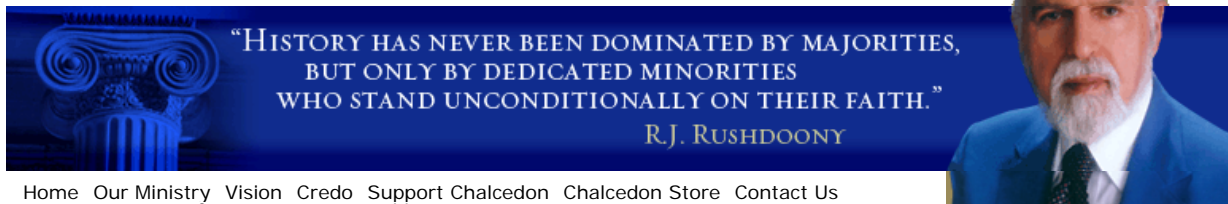
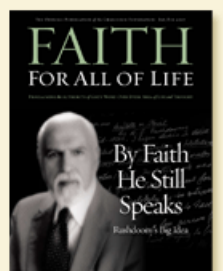


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## A Review of *Hand of God*

*Hand of God*, a film by Joe Cultrera (aired at 9 p.m. ET, Jan. 16, 2007, on PBS' Frontline)

Reviewed by [Lee Duigon](#) » [Bio](#)  
February 26, 2007

*All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. Matt. 23:3*

"It's not the religion and it's not all the priests and it's not all the people who go to church. It's the guys at the top." —Paul Cultrera, Jr.

Is the Roman Catholic Church an evil empire, a safe haven for pedophiles?

This disturbing *Frontline* film says "yes." It's the story of filmmaker Joe Cultrera's brother, Paul Cultrera, Jr.—his abuse at the hands of a pedophile priest, the shambles it made of his life, his partial recovery, and his ongoing quest for closure and restitution from the Roman Catholic Church.

*Hand of God* is not an easy viewing experience. Unless you're like the priest who tells Cultrera, "It's all in your head, sir. You're a sad little man," you'll believe the story and be strongly moved by it—to anger, to pity, to outrage, and to deep disgust.

That the film is also a work of cinematic art adds to its power. Its tone is one of menace, decay, and corruption.

### The Story

We believe Paul Cultrera's story. Since the Catholic sex scandal broke a few years ago, thousands of such stories have come to light. The church has paid out millions of dollars in damages, with millions more yet to be awarded.

"I'm talking about a lifetime of damage," Paul said to a priest who tried to buy him off for \$60,000. "Why do you think I should accept that?"

Briefly—watch the film, if you want all the details—Paul served as an altar boy at his local Catholic church and one of the priests, Father Joseph Birmingham, sexually molested him, over and over again. It left Paul alienated from his church and from his faith; unable to focus on anything in his life; unable to form stable, loving relationships (he's slowly getting better at that); and for a long time unable to love or respect himself. He did indeed incur a lifetime of damage.

Before Birmingham came to the Cultreras' parish, he molested boys elsewhere. Whenever he was caught, the church merely transferred him. Church officials protected him, never seriously tried to stop him, and in general displayed not the slightest regard for the laws of God.

Paul Cultrera confronted one of the priests who protected Birmingham. "Not only did he molest me," Paul told the priest, "but he clearly molested hundreds of people. The Church basically moved him around from parish to parish. You were involved in it. You told me you wanted to help me ... It would have been a lot more helpful for me if the first time you just said, 'Look, I blew it. I didn't stop him when I was in St. James and I didn't stop him when I was in charge of him. We were friends.'"

What was the priest's answer to this man's lifetime of anguish? "If we knew back then what

we know now about the effects of sexual abuse on teenagers and young boys, then of course we'd have acted differently; but we didn't know back then."

Was God's law different in the 1960s? Were children less apt to be damaged by the attentions of a pedophile? Was plain common sense in short supply?

Clearly this priest, and others like him, cared nothing for the harm done to a child under the auspices of the church. If he could perceive Paul's pain, he did a very good job of hiding it. Where was the church's compassion? Where was its fear of God?

But God has provided the compassion—through Paul's family, through his brother's filmmaking art, even through the viewing public. The actions of a pedophile priest shattered not only his victim, but the boy's family, too. Paul's mother has been grief stricken: when she appears in the film, her hands are constantly busy with displacement activities; she can't control them. Paul's father struggles to control his rage—which has no target because Birmingham is dead. Paul's brother and sister have been wounded, too.

But God's love and grace is healing this family. Now that Paul's secret is out, the Cultrera family is knitting together again, around him. Somehow the relationship of the sons with their father seems stronger than it was and growing stronger still. And their mother is proud of them in a way that, perhaps, she never was before. The two brothers, and the sister too, are closer than they have been since they were little children. The Cultreras may have been forsaken by their church, but they have not been forsaken by their God. We pray Paul lives long enough and heals well enough to see this and give thanks.

Meanwhile, we are left with a question.

How could this have happened?

#### **A Mixed Message**

One answer that springs immediately to mind is that our culture is drowning in sexual anarchy. Sex is a hard sell in this day and age, and it's on all the time. You can't even go Christmas shopping without seeing a lesbian make-out calendar displayed for sale in a bookstore at the local mall.

The same politicians who denounce pedophile priests march shoulder to shoulder with pedophile activists in "gay pride" parades. The same newspapers who expose the scandals in the church publish editorials demonizing the Boy Scouts for not accepting "gay" Scout leaders. In fact, it's never been a better time to be a pedophile.

Our culture sends a mixed message. Where is the media outrage when public school teachers have sex with children? Where is the outrage when gay activists take over teachers' unions and fill the classrooms with celebrations of "sexual diversity"? If you were a pedophile, wouldn't you think a lot of influential people in America were on your side?

#### **An Unbiblical Church**

Just as importantly, too many families have ceded their authority to the church—any church, not just the Roman Catholic Church. (For a list of news reports of child molestation scandals in assorted Protestant churches, see <http://reformation.com/CSA/variousabuse.html>.)

"The women in our family gave more credence to what the priest would say than they did to their husbands or their brothers or their uncles," Paul recalled.

"When Birmingham was molesting me," he said, "I probably had more awe for the priest than I did for Dad at the time ... Birmingham stole the position of my father."

His father, Paul Sr.: "Okay, they're [the church] taking care of my son and my kids, why should I worry?" Trusting his church, Paul Sr. was happy and proud that a priest was showing such an interest in his teenage son.

"I think Birmingham stepped in there at a time in my life when I was probably looking for some strong father figure, and he fit the bill," Paul Jr. said. "Father [Birmingham], literally he was the father figure. 'Cause he was 'Father.' He replaced our fathers."

This is not Biblical. The family is a separate sphere of government—not under the church, but like the church, under God. Paul Sr. was wrong, tragically wrong, to delegate to the church his responsibility as a father. And the church is wrong when it seizes that responsibility.

### **The Magician**

Paul Sr.'s children grew up seeing the priest as a kind of magician.

"The priest had the power," Paul Jr. said, "to turn that host, that piece of bread, and the wine, into the body and blood of Christ. And that was something none of us could do. I mean, that was the ultimate magic trick ... It all reinforced the sense that these people have a power that we don't have—a direct line to God."

And, "He's got the hotline to God, you know. He's the guy who does the magic."

Again this is not Biblical. There is no magic. "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ" (1 Tim. 2:5).

If Paul had known his Scripture, if his father had taught it to him, he would have known that Father Birmingham had no magic, no hotline to God. He would have been less in awe of him, less apt to be such easy prey.

This doesn't let off churches who don't believe in transubstantiation. In any church, there is the danger that clergy or elders will set themselves up as something holier than other men. Christ Himself speaks of this throughout Matthew 23.

### **Institutional Corruption**

A final factor here is institutional: church officers, to protect the church from scandal and litigation, protected pedophile priests.

Why? Because the bigger, the richer, and the more powerful any institution grows, the more it becomes an end in itself. Church leaders must always resist the temptation to build up kingdoms unto themselves.

God's laws require that adults who molest children be punished, so do men's laws, for that matter. Birmingham's superiors, knowing what he was, chose not to punish him, but to protect him by shifting him from parish to parish, by pretending that he'd learned his lesson this time, etc. They were, of course, protecting themselves and their church.

The Christian's primary loyalty must be to God and his primary obedience to God's laws. God and the church are not the same thing. These priests sinned by putting their church before their obedience to God.

"They're [church leaders] just a bunch of corrupt businessmen, and they're sitting on top of the evil empire," Paul said. Their empire became evil because they made an idol of it. Their loyalty was not to God's commandments, but to their church. And the consequence of their sin was that many boys were molested, and many lives were ruined.

Theirs is an unbiblical view of the church, and such a view is not found only among Roman Catholics. Throughout his life, R. J. Rushdoony was unpopular with "churchmen" because he taught Christians to put God first—and also taught that the family was a sphere of authority coequal with the church. This kind of teaching was badly needed in the Cultreras' parish, and was not to be found.

### **Conclusion**

So why do these things happen?

In the end, it's a sin issue. Sinners sin. And churches, over time, have grown increasingly antinomian. Rather than teach sinners the law of God and teach them Christ's saying, "If ye love me, keep my commandments," they have chosen to concentrate on mushy, ephemeral issues like "feelings" and "relevance" and "getting to know Jesus" without having to know His laws. Is it any wonder that so many churches fail to fortify sinners against their inborn lust to sin?

When a church usurps the authority of a father, and the father lets them do it because he thinks they're "holy"; when a church ignores the laws of God, and treats its own rules and bylaws

and traditions as if they were on a par with Holy Scripture; when a church falls in love with its own power and affluence, becomes wise in its own eyes, and becomes in its own heart a substitute for God, and no longer accountable to Him; when these things happen in a church, sin finds a cozy refuge there, and scandal a productive breeding ground.

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*Lee Duigon is a Christian free-lance writer and contributing editor for the Chalcedon Report. He has been a newspaper editor and reporter and a published novelist.*

[Top of article](#)

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