

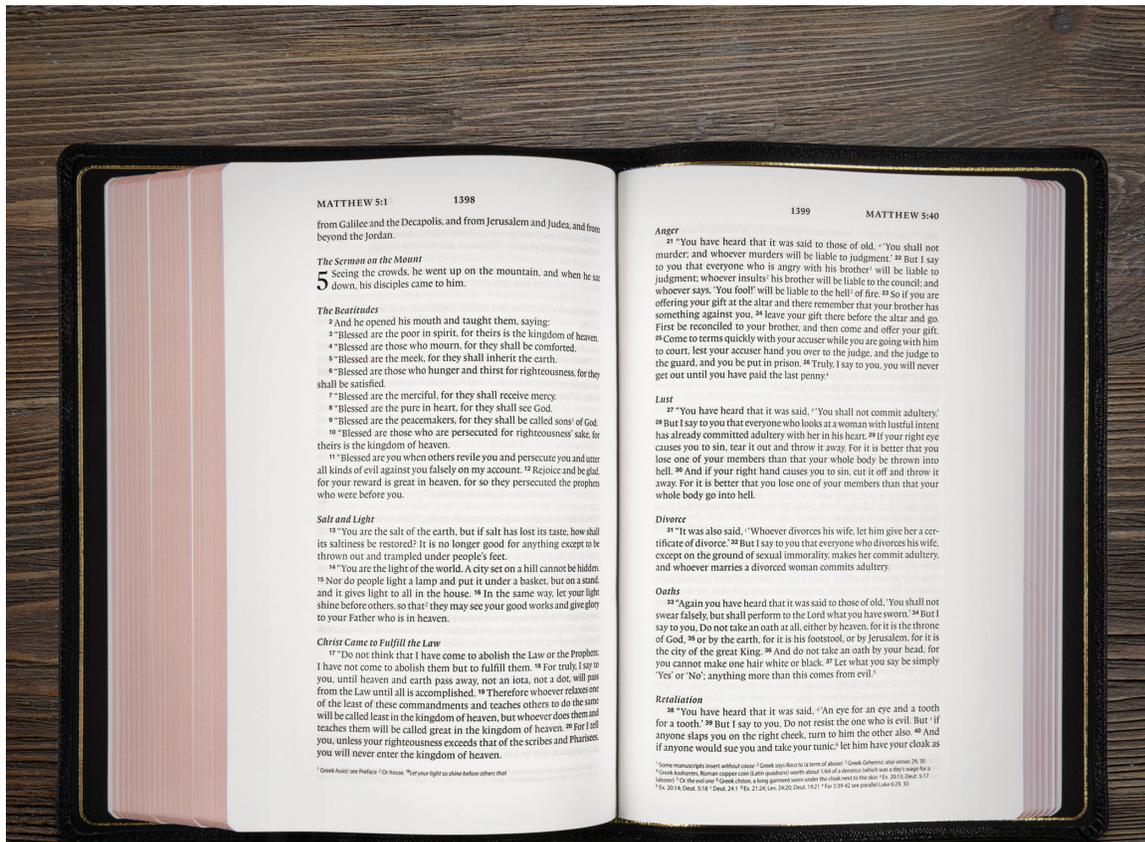
# Theology for Life

Volume 9 | Issue 1 | Spring 2022



## **Inside this Issue...**

- **Five Counterfeit Truths of Progressive Christianity**
- **The Liberal Agenda**
- **Eastern Idolatry**
- **Disassociating Paul from Jesus**

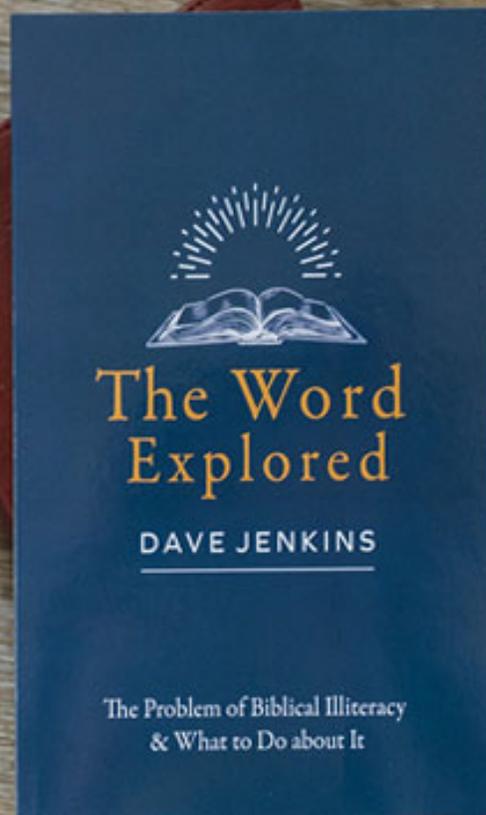


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## Editor's Corner

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Progressive Christianity is a movement that is outside historic Protestant theology. The movement grounds itself in a theology “from below”—namely a theology that focuses on how, according to progressive Christians, the Bible and one’s personal feelings come alongside each other. In direct contrast to this theology from below, the theology “from above” is the belief that God’s Word is reliable, trustworthy, for every area and every phase of life, and binding on all of life.

Progressive Christianity often focuses on social justice, environmentalism, women being pastors, etc. As a whole, Progressive Christianity casts aside inerrancy, believing that the Bible is riddled with error. They also emphasize “collective salvation” over personal biblical conversion. Collective salvation emphasizes the salvation of whole cultures, including socioeconomic structures.

At the end of the day, how Christians view the Bible matters. In recent years, we have seen the rise of unbiblical teachings (even demonic practices), such as the Enneagram and yoga in Christian circles. These ideas made headway first in progressive “Christian” circles because they don’t exercise any biblical discernment, and instead are constantly questioning whether the Bible is true and reliable. When you question and/or cast doubt on the authority of God’s Word, it is no wonder that such a movement that focuses mainly on things outside of biblical orthodoxy and then tries to call itself “Christian” is able to flourish.

In his classic book, *Christianity and*

*Liberalism*, J. Gresham Machen once remarked that Christianity is a revealed religion. By emphasizing a theology from above, Machen pointed out that any religion that denies or dismisses the Bible is *another religion entirely*. Machen's insight is salient since progressive "Christianity" is not biblical Christianity. It does not have an orthodox view of the Bible and salvation as a whole. Therefore, it is right and proper to say that it is not biblical Christianity.

Recently, progressive "Christians" have tried to get a popular hymn titled, "In Christ Alone", by Keith and Kristyn Getty changed so that the words "the wrath of God" would be removed from the hymn. Thankfully, the Gettys refused to do this. Likewise, before the issue with the Gettys' song, the Emergent Church movement in the 1990s and early 2000s demonstrated that progressive Christians don't believe in the wrath of God. But it is the wrath of God the Father that was placed on the Son to pay the penalty of our sins in our place. Without the outpouring of this wrath of God the Father against the Son, there is no forgiveness of sins. And this is precisely why having a theology from above is so vital. And it's also vital because having a right view of the Scriptures will lead to having a right and biblical view of salvation, the person and work of Christ, and much more.

Progressive "Christians" want a "Christianity" that suits their wishes, but not what the Bible describes and defines. Wayne Grudem is right when he says, "One of the foundational commitments of theological liberalism is viewing the Bible as merely a human book." However, the Bible isn't merely a human book. It isn't a book of fairytales and myths. The Bible isn't full of errors and contradictions. The Word of God is reliable, trustworthy, for every phase of life, and binding on the life of God's people.

You'll discover the dangers of progressive "Christianity" and why it is another religion in this issue of *Theology for Life*. Along the way, your faith will be strengthened by a theology from above that will help you to ground it in the Word of God.

In Christ Alone,

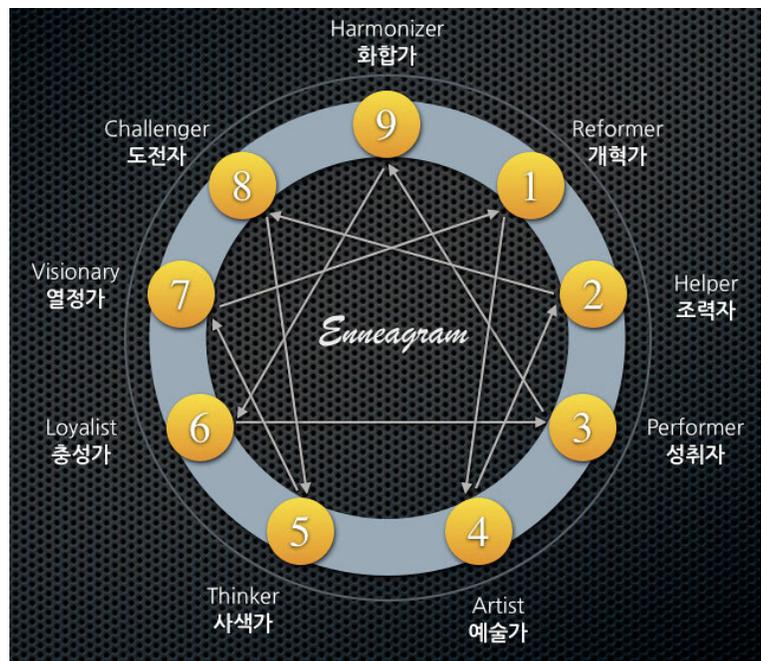
Dave Jenkins  
Executive Editor, Theology for Life Magazine

## What about the Enneagram?

By Marcia Montenegro

**As the Enneagram spreads, there is a need for accurate information since it is not readily available, and the information is conflicting.** People are trusting others that the Enneagram is valid rather than investigating. There are five main issues with that need to be carefully considered:

- What is the Enneagram and where did it come from?
- What are the problems with its promotion?
- How does it seem to work if it's not valid?
- What is the correct response to the charge that the Enneagram commits the genetic fallacy?
- What are the potential long-term effects of the Enneagram trend?



## What is the Enneagram and where is it from?

The word comes from the Greek words “*ennea*” for “nine” and “*gramma*” for “writing” (or “drawing”). The Enneagram is a nine-sided diagram with 9 points.

The Enneagram began with George Gurdjieff (1866-1949), an Armenian-Greek who was a mystic and spiritual philosopher. Raised as Eastern Orthodox, he left the orthodox teachings of his upbringing for a spiritual journey. He and his followers claimed he had encounters with spiritual teachers, none of which was ever verified. However, both Gurdjieff and his Russian pupil, P.D. Ouspensky, had a large influence on the later New Age movement.

Gurdjieff devised a 9-sided figure called an *Enneagon* or *Enneagram*, which he claimed was a picture of cosmic reality and demonstrated the mysterious laws of 3 and 7, which he claims are the basis of all reality. This is the real, original Enneagram, which had no reference to personality traits. Followers of Gurdjieff claimed he got this from a secret Sufi brotherhood, the existence of which has never been verified (despite at least one fake account that was debunked). Other teachings were given using the Enneagram as a diagram for his teachings—primarily that man is “asleep” and must become a “conscious” being.

Ouspensky (1878-1947) wrote books on Gurdjieff’s teachings called the “Fourth Way”. This included Gurdjieff’s views of the Enneagram in his book, *In Search of the Miraculous* (published posthumously). In this book, Ouspensky explains that the enneagram is “...a ‘cosmic blueprint’ — a diagrammatic representation of the fundamental laws that create and sustain everything from the whole of Creation to individual organisms. The Enneagram demonstrates the interaction of the Law of Three and the Law of Seven that gives rise to all phenomena” and “All of Creation, the Physical world, the Subtle world, the Causal world and beyond that the Absolute—everything is contained in 9.”

The history of the Enneagram continues with Oscar Ichazo (b. 1931), a spiritual teacher who ran an occult school in Arica, Chile. Ichazo taught esoteric ideas, including the Enneagram (which he preferred to call the Enneagon), to which he added his own ideas of “ego fixations”. Due to later lawsuits, contradictory information came out on exactly what Ichazo taught.



Ichazo’s student, Claudio Naranjo (b. 1932), a Chilean psychiatrist and spiritual seeker, took the Enneagram teachings to the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, an experimental center of edgy ideas and people doing psychedelics (Esalen played a crucial role in the human potential movement and influenced the New Age). Naranjo came up with the 9 personality types.

Naranjo claimed later in a video that he and Ichazo made up the idea that the Enneagram was ancient when they knew it wasn’t. Naranjo also claimed that he based the 9 types on his observations, but “mostly” via automatic handwriting.

One of Naranjo’s students at Esalen, the Jesuit priest, Bob Ochs, took the Enneagram to the Roman Catholic world and taught it to several priests. Richard Rohr,

a Franciscan priest, later co-wrote *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective*. Rohr, who had much influence on Rob Bell and Brian McLaren, continued to have an influence on the developing Progressive movement in Christianity. It is the popularity of his book that got the Enneagram into the evangelical church. One major avenue was via books by his students Chris Heuertz, (author of *The Sacred Enneagram*), and Ian Cron and Suzanne Stabile, who co-authored *The Road Back to You*.

The Enneagram also migrated from Esalen to the New Age, where it became a big hit, churning out many books as a result. The “psychic”,

**“The Enneagram is promoted with false information, such as claims that it is ancient and that it has Christian origins...”**

Helen Palmer became a self-described expert on it and taught workshops and classes, gradually spreading it in New Age venues. This included New Age psychologists and therapists who wedded their spiritual views with the Enneagram. The thrust of the Enneagram in the New Age was/is

a gnostic seeking of the “True Self” or “divine Self”.

The Enneagram Institute was founded by Don Riso and Russ Hudson, both New Agers. This establishment is not a scholarly or academic institution.

## **What are the Problems with its Promotion as a Personality Test?**

The Enneagram is promoted with false information, such as claims that it is ancient and that it has Christian origins in a 4th-century monk, Evagrius Ponticus, and/or Ramon Llull, a medieval Catholic. There is no evidence for this, and it has been debunked. Nevertheless, these ideas are still promoted in the Christian Enneagram books, by Christian Enneagram teachers, by pastors who support the Enneagram,

and by others.

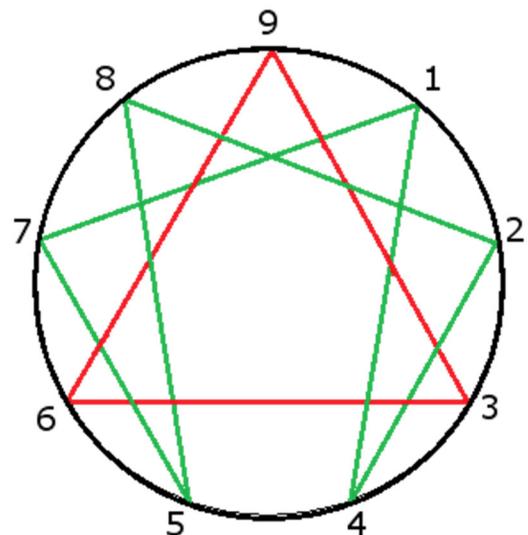
Most assume the Enneagram is a valid personality test, but it has no basis in psychological studies or research. It is entirely subjective and arbitrary. The Enneagram is interpreted in many different ways depending on the views of the person or schools of thought doing the interpretation.

The fact that it is not valid means that people are seeing themselves in certain ways that may be inaccurate. They trust the Enneagram books and teachers which may lead to accepting other false ideas since the Enneagram is steeped in false beliefs and teachings. Many teachers and pastors who promote or teach the Enneagram have recommended Richard Rohr or his books, which is a serious problem due to the fact that he is a heretic.

### How Does it Seem to Work?

The Enneagram can “work” by confirmation bias, by what people already know about themselves and read into it. Or they trust the information and believe it. It’s a subjective technique so there is no way to even measure that “it works”. It depends on what people feel and think about themselves, and on other factors that may be part of the process of self-evaluation.

Another system that is comparable for comparison’s sake is astrology. Both astrology and the Enneagram started out with no reference to personality types. Personality profiling according to zodiac signs and planetary positions developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the field of psychology. Many believe they fit their zodiac signs or birth charts, even more than the num-



ber of people who have done the Enneagram, primarily since astrology has been around longer and has more of a worldwide following.

“Evidence suggests that over 90% of adults know their sun [zodiac] signs. Some surveys also indicate that well over half agree that the signs’ character descriptions are a good fit.” Yet astrology is not valid, even though tens of thousands of people would argue that it helps them and is accurate.

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**“...the Enneagram is arbitrary, subjective, and does not, in any way, hold up to any kind of scientific method.”**

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## **Response to the Claim that Opposing the Enneagram Commits the Genetic Fallacy**

Much of the resistance and refusal to face the facts about the Enneagram has been due to the straw-man argument that opposing the Enneagram is in some way committing a genetic fallacy. There are two parts of a proper rebuttal to this straw-man argument:

First, it is not a genetic fallacy if the origin matters. In this case, the Enneagram was never a personality test to begin with. It did not develop through any scholarly or psychological research. It developed in the hothouse of the occult and New Age ideas and “mostly” via the occult method of automatic writing. One would want a valid personality assessment to have a valid origin in professionally accredited psychological sources. Secondly, the Enneagram is arbitrary, subjective, and does not, in any way, hold up to any kind of scientific method.

### **Long Term Effects?**

The Enneagram is taught in the Church, not as a mere personality indicator, but as a way to know God. To grow spiritually, and even for

sanctification. Since many of the spiritual ideas are from Richard Rohr and his followers/students, the spiritual ideas are at the very least

suspect, and in many cases, are outright unbiblical.

**“Since the Enneagram is false in nature, it means that Christians who recommend it are promoting a false idea and a false method for self-evaluation”**

Christians know God through Scripture, prayer, and worship. Sanctification is by the Holy Spirit as one grows in Christ. The Bible is sufficient in giving Christians the means for a mature faith and walk.

There are the dangers of becoming self-absorbed and of seeing oneself through the filter of the Enneagram

instead of the Bible. The Enneagram, if relied on, becomes a barrier to the Holy Spirit’s work of showing Christians where growth is needed through God’s Word.

Another danger is that Rohr’s ideas are part of some of the Enneagram’s teachings. His teaching on the True Self and the need to develop higher levels of understanding are spiritual poison derived from unbiblical teachings.

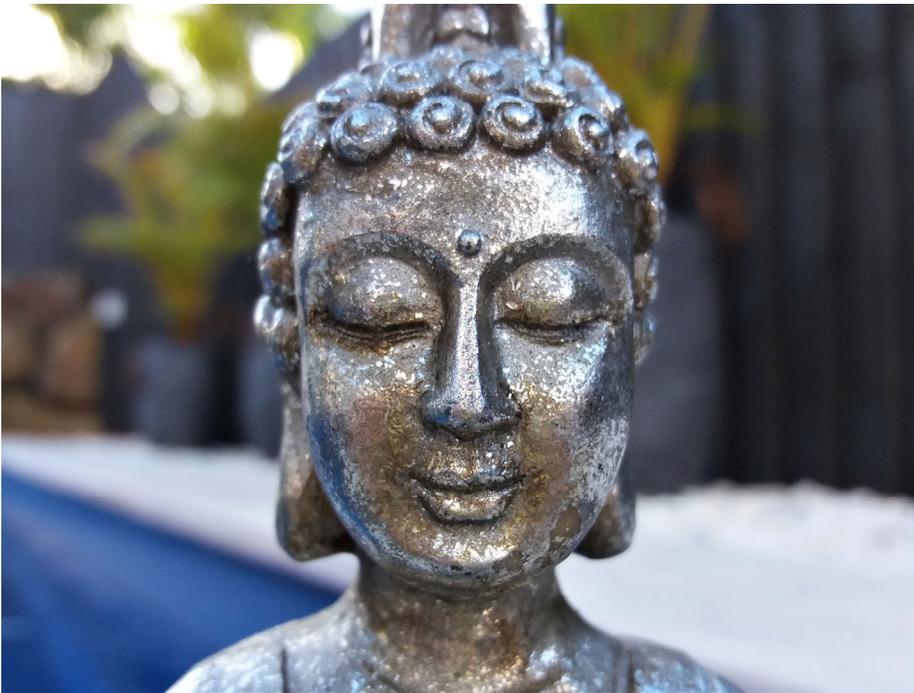
Since the Enneagram is false in nature, it means that Christians who recommend it are promoting a false idea and a false method for self-evaluation. How can Christians proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ while accepting a false tool? The truth is, we can’t.

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## Eastern Idolatry

By Peter Jones



**C.S. Lewis gets many things right.** Years ago, he concluded that there were only two possible answers to the religious search: either Hinduism or Christianity, which are ultimate, contradictory expressions of religion—that is, either One-ist pantheism or Two-ist theism (*Letters of C.S.*

*Lewis*, pp. 479–80).

Pantheism is the “very spiritual” belief that “god” is in everything. From this conviction derives the phrase “all is one and one is all.” This part of “god” in everything joins everything together. Since human beings are inherently spiritual, pantheism is the original default button

of the rebellious creature. God is not above me; god is in me. God (capital *g*) does not make the rules; I make the rules. As aggressive materialism and atheism decline, people are now happy to be “spiritual” by finding “god” within. They reject the most basic notion of theism; namely, that God—the personal Creator—is distinct from the creation as its Maker.

The classic Hindu text, *The Bhagavad Gita: The Song of God*, some 2500 years old, expresses pantheism in stirring poetic form:

*“Whoso reveres Me as abiding in all things, adopting the belief in oneness, though abiding in any possible condition, that disciplined man abides in Me.”*

I imagine that some readers may consider such poetic pantheism as merely an exotic Eastern belief or an interesting religious phenomenon known in far-off cultures. I have news for you: the West is on the cusp of a revival of pantheism, which is a fundamental assault on the truth claims of biblical orthodoxy, and now demands the right to regulate public policy according to its view of the world. We Christians had better understand the nature and form of this great enemy of the gospel.

In general terms, pantheism is at the root of all non-biblical religions, which worship creation rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25). Since we worship what we consider divine, Paul, in essence, is declaring in this text that all religions that worship creation are pantheistic. Indeed, we can see pantheism expressed in various forms in all the ancient Eastern religions, Greco-Roman paganism, ancient Gnosticism, the Hermeticism that captured Europe at the time of the Renaissance, the animism/spirit worship of “primitive religions” worldwide, the theosophical spiritual movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the nature worship and deep ecology of contemporary mystical spirituality.

America has, in the opinion of some, become Hindu, not just in the vocabulary we now use (avatar, karma, yoga, mantra, and so on), but in the widespread acceptance of the underlying Hindu affirmation of

pantheistic "One-ism". Some call this Western conversion to Eastern spirituality the latest Great Awakening. We do not need to be rocket scientists to foresee the unavoidable clash of these two opposing worldviews—pantheism and theism—which I call, for simplicity, One-ism and Two-ism. The world is either pantheistically one or theistically two. As Cornelius Van Til, the Reformed apologist, said some fifty years ago, speaking specifically of the first assumption of pagan Greek thought: *"All things are at bottom one. [But] if theism is right, all things are at bottom two, and not one"* (*A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, pp. 18–19).

**"The futurist pantheists speak of a 'journey toward oneness', carried along by the Global Spirit..."**

In effect, these two worldviews are formally incompatible, irreconcilable. As created beings, we must affirm one, and we cannot affirm both. So, what does that say about the massive contemporary interfaith movement? The interfaith movement must adopt one worldview or the other, and it is patently clear that the basis for

intercommunion is the search for the "god" within.

What is the immediate future of pantheism? It is upbeat. In 1997, pollster Daniel Yankelovich said that we are witnessing nothing less than the reinvention of spirituality. For leaders in this progressive spirituality movement, pantheism is obvious progress. According to Philip Goldberg:

*"This non-dual religion is likely to ascend [in America] because studies show that human beings move upward along a continuum of spiritual expansiveness...society will surely welcome a "non-dogmatic" spirituality, over against the deadly forces of tribalism, ethnocentrism and fundamentalism, outworn dogmas of the past, people who believe "mine is the true religion.""* (*American Veda*,

p. 345).

The futurist pantheists speak of a “journey toward oneness”, carried along by Global Spirit (a modern form of animism) and believe nothing will stop them from building a new humanity based on oneness, which will include the gender blur of the rising generation, which refuses to be confined to biblical moral distinctions.

However, there is an iron fist in this velvet, all-tolerant glove—a religious non-negotiable. All the variations of pagan pantheism, which claim to be “non-dogmatic” (whether Hinduism, Gnosticism,

mysticism, Interfaith, or the spiritual homosexual agenda), hold to an implacable dogma of pantheistic unity. Pantheists claim that theirs is the true religion. Goldberg explains the “good news” of pantheism: the mystery that God and the world are not two. As this “mystery” takes over the minds of the contemporary world, we and our believing children and grandchildren will battle for the right to speak the truth in the public square.

But we take heart, because the idolatry of pantheism in all its subtle complexities is not to be compared with the majestic glory of God, distinct Creator, and triumphant Redeemer, who—by grace—in the person of Jesus, the Son and only Savior, stooped to save us. This is the gospel of theism to be proclaimed courageously in the promised power and demonstration of the Holy Spirit to a world seduced by the false spirituality of pantheism, just like the world of ancient Rome. May the Lord give strength and boldness to His Church for the task ahead, as He did to the Church at the beginning of her history. “The gates of hell” are always intimidating, but they can never win.

**“This is the gospel of theism to be proclaimed courageously in the promised power and demonstration of the Holy Spirit...”**

## Deconstructing Deconstructionism

By Nick Batzig

### Conversations about deconstruction seem to be ubiquitous.

Legions are the number of articles, social media links, sermon series, and videos dedicated to critiquing existing theological traditions, parachurch platforms, or public religious figures. While those engaging in this phenomenon have done so from several vantage points, two common approaches are taken by those leaving churches that teach historic Christian doctrine and ethics. Simply put, those approaches are exaggeration and ambiguity.

Exaggeration is a form of inductive hyperbole. It is an attempt to prove a sweeping generalization without sufficient evidence to back it up. People fall for exaggerated criticism because it



stokes alarm and fear. Nothing works more powerfully on the minds and hearts of people than ungodly fear (2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 1:7). If someone can convince people that the ship is sinking, he can encourage them to jump off the ship. If he can make people think that there is no one left to help navigate the ecclesiastical storms, then he can convince them to follow him to “safety”.

To be sure, churches and their leadership are subject to critique. No one who has read the New Testament can fail to see how “judgment begins at the house of God” (1<sup>st</sup> Peter 4:17). The Lord's all-searching eyes assess the spiritual condition of churches and its leaders. Given current debates, this means that wherever a church, denomination, or parachurch ministry legitimately excuses abuse, racism, or sexual sin, it should be exposed, repented of, and held accountable.

This also means that whenever legitimate criticism of a church's theological tradition is called into question, it should only be done so in order to drive us deeper into the Scriptures to form clear and settled convictions. This is so rarely called for by those criticizing churches, denominations, and parachurch ministries that it leaves one with the impression that deconstruction from *biblical Christianity* rather than *doctrinal clarity and reform* is the end goal.

The exaggeration employed by Deconstructionists also diminishes the fact that each local church must be dealt with according to its own spiritual condition. One of the problematic aspects of social media is that it creates a single-issue conflated court of public opinion about “the Church” or about a particular denomination. Prominent voices calling for deconstruction make exaggerated blanket statements about “the church in America”, “Evangelicalism”, or “Big Eva”.

Whatever hot-button issue becomes the issue of the day, social

**“However, the exaggeration employed by Deconstructionists is meant to expose perceived deficiencies...”**

media fosters a monolithic conversation that lacks measured reaction and theological nuance. To be sure, every local church, denomination, and parachurch ministry is subject to criticism. However, the exaggeration employed by Deconstructionists is meant to expose perceived deficiencies while clouding the good in the most sweeping manner possible. This, it seems to me, is an enormous part of the momentum of the deconstructionist movement. This sort of approach undermines the true Spirit-wrought work that Christ has done among His people in various ecclesiastical fellowships and parachurch ministries.

Christ does not treat all visible churches as monolithic organizations. The Lord treats each of His local churches according to their individual conditions. Jesus' letters to the seven churches (Revelation 2-3) serve as prime examples of how the Lord critiques the spiritual life and health of individual local churches. G.K. Beale explains:

*“The seven churches fall into three groups. The first and last are in danger of losing their very identity as a Christian church. Therefore, they are exhorted to repent in order to prevent their judgment and to inherit the promises that genuine faith deserves. The churches addressed in the three central letters have to varying degrees some who have remained faithful and others who are compromising with pagan culture. Among these Pergamum is in the best condition and Sardis is in the worst. These churches are exhorted to purge the elements of compromise from their midst in order to avert judgment on the compromisers (and probably also themselves) and to inherit the promises due those who overcome compromise. The second and sixth letters are written to churches which have proved themselves faithful and loyal to Christ’s ‘name’ even in the face of persecution from both Jews and pagans. Even though they are ‘poor’ and ‘have little power,’ they are encouraged to continue persevering as the “true Israel,” since more trials will confront them. They are to endure*

*with the hope that they will inherit the promises of eternal salvation (both will receive a 'crown').”*

The Apostles also dealt with each individual local church based on their spiritual condition. The churches in Galatia were in danger of a different sort of false teaching than was the case with the churches in Thessalonica. The members of the churches in Galatia needed Paul to address it based on its specific needs.

The churches in Philippi had different pastoral needs than did the churches in Colossae. Prior to offering critique of any given local church, denomination, or parachurch ministry, we must remember that each one has distinct needs.

The second approach taken by those advancing deconstruction is ambiguity. Having painted sweeping criticisms of a denomination or ministry on a blog or on Twitter threads, impassioned individuals gain enough of a following to catch the eye of a publishing company. The publisher thrives on public interest. Out of zeal to lead the charge in each social matter, the impassioned public voice writes a book critiquing some aspect of perceived injustice.

According to the author(s), “the church” [insert church name] has not done a sufficient job speaking or writing out against said perceived injustice. A cursory reading of the critique reveals that the author(s) has resorted to both exaggeration and ambiguity. Minimal specific examples are given. Hardly any qualifications are made. Next to no clear solutions are offered. The deconstruction movement trades in ambiguity.

Exaggeration and ambiguity were part and parcel of the Emergent Church movement. The difference between the Emergent Church and the Deconstruction movement is that the Emergent Church asked ambiguous questions about such things as the doctrine of hell, penal substitution, the exclusivity of Jesus, etc. The Deconstructionism movement ultimately

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**“We have a dire need to saturate our minds and hearts with God’s Word so that we will be better prepared...”**

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gets to all those questions, but it does so by means of outrage over the intersection of race, gender, class, and sexuality—proposed systems of oppression of certain groups in society and the church.

When we hear calls for deconstruction, we should ask the following pertinent questions:

- Is this individual calling me into a deeper study of God's word on this subject?
- Is this criticism driving me into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ, as the only Savior of sinners?
- Is this a fair critique of a certain church, denomination, or ministry, or is this criticism being unjustly applied to the scope of the object of criticism?
- Where might there be exaggeration and ambiguity in the critiques being levelled at churches, denominations, and ministries?
- What, if any part, of this exaggerated and ambiguous critique is valid? If any part of this criticism is valid, what biblical corrective is offered? Is the proposed biblical corrective truly in accord with the clear teaching of God's word?
- How does the Lord approach the spiritual condition of His churches? Am I seeking to treat the church as the Bride of Christ?
- Am I reacting to historic Christian doctrine because I believe it is biblically deficient, or because I have bought into the conclusion that they must have been formulated in order to maintain abusive or oppressive control of others?

In a day when many are being led away from the truth by the deconstruction movement, it is incumbent on us to ensure that we are not being deceived through exaggerated and ambiguous rhetoric. We have a dire need to saturate our minds and hearts with God's Word so that we will be better prepared to offer valid criticisms and valid biblical

solutions wherever they are needed. We must be ready to be critiqued and offer critique wherever it is needed. However, we must resist the urge to paint with too sweeping or too nebulous criticism.

The end goal of our critique of a church or denomination is to help it be faithful to God, His word, and His people. If we love Christ and His Church, we will seek to do so for His glory and the good of the souls of His people, rather than abandoning the hope of the gospel to which we have been called.

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## Why a Theology from Above and Below Matters

By Dave Jenkins



**In high school I fell in love with studying theology and quickly began delving into exploring Church history.**

And the more I studied Church history the more I began to see

that it was comprised of everyday men and women—regular folks the Lord used in powerful ways. But equally, I saw those who sought to harm the Church with doctrine that doesn't come from God's Word. What these unfortunate heretics wanted to do was, in fact, the exact opposite of standing fast on Scripture; they wanted to "outsmart" the Lord, the very Author who gave us sixty-six books to study in order that we might grow in our walk with Him.

Over the years, one of the topics that I've seen very little discussion on in either an academic level or (in particular) in level of the average

Christian in the pew is the idea of what “a theology from above” and/or “a theology from below” means and why it matters. A theology from above sees special revelation in the sixty-six books of the Bible as coming from God. A theology from below considers the Bible and feelings side-by-side. Such an idea makes Scripture inert and subjective by stripping away its true objective and foundation.

In American evangelicalism today we have reverted from being a body of evangelicals rooted in Sola Scriptura, as espoused by leaders of the Reformation, to a people who think that Scripture and our feelings are on par with one another. Lest you think I’m against feelings—let me clarify, I’m not. But Scripture is to interpret our feelings, not the other way around.

When I’m sad or discouraged, Scripture tells me to hope in God (Psalm 42-43). When I’m anxious, Scripture tells me the Lord knows me and invites me to come near to Him and cast my anxieties upon Him (Philippians 4:4-9). Scripture is to interpret our feelings; our feelings are not to be equal to or on par with Scripture.

The danger in one’s feelings being upheld as having the same authority/value as Scripture is because it declares that one’s feelings are basically of the same importance in one’s spiritual growth and understanding as God’s revelation. If one’s feelings are the determiner of truth, then he/she is going to follow whatever he/she thinks and do whatever he/she feels. The sad reality is that the heart is desperately wicked—rendering our feelings completely untrustworthy. But there’s an even greater reason we should avoid the theology from below—when we follow our feelings we will be deceived. We will not test all things and hold fast to what is good, noble, and true in the Word of God. Instead, we will be

**“The Church has responded to the idea of a theology from below with a theology from above.”**

deceived and think that sound doctrine doesn't matter and that our thoughts/feelings are on the same level as the Scripture.

One of my biggest concerns for Christians of my general age group (that is, people between 30-45 years old) is that we are falling for the trap of "New Age theology". The main theme in New Age theology is the elevated role of our feelings—in this theological philosophy, feelings (rather than Scripture) have the greatest influence over what we think, say, and do. So, for example, we may think that yoga or the Enneagram (or other such non-biblical practices) are no big deal. But the thing is the Bible forbids us from mixing biblical truth with ungodly ideas and philosophies. In the case of yoga, adherents are taught poses of worship to the "sun god" (an idol of Hinduism), which is in direct conflict with the 10 commandments and completely outside of biblical orthodoxy. Why would a professing Christian engage in idol worship that dishonors God? But that is exactly what yoga does—even the greeting used (Namaste) means "the god in me recognizes the god in you". And the same thing is true concerning the Enneagram—its roots are found firmly planted in mysticism and cultic worship practices, saturated with the doctrine of demons. People today think the Enneagram is just a "personality test", but it's so much more than that. On the surface it may seem harmless, but the truth is that it is a matter of worship and theology. It tells us to place our feelings at the center of our worship of God, where biblical truth should be—something that no Christian should do. A theology from below has become so prevalent in our day that we dare not miss it and we dare not believe it.

The Church has responded to the idea of a theology from below with a theology from above. Men like B.B. Warfield, who wrote his classic book on the doctrine of Scripture and many others, have called us to stand fast on the Word of God. Even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century men gathered together—men like James Boice and R.C. Sproul, among others—and wrote the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*. Today more than ever we need men and women unafraid to stand on the Word of

God and call out error.

But we need to be cautious here. The men who stood fast for biblical truth contended for the faith without being contentious. They stood fast against false teaching and false teachers because their hearts were firmly grounded in the Word of God. That is what it means to believe in a theology from above. It means we take the Word extremely seriously, because it's deadly serious, but we also don't use our theology like a club to beat people over the head. Instead, we take what we believe and are convinced that sound doctrine matters, but equally that sound doctrine produces Christians who are transformed with the help of God's grace and the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

A theology from above takes the Bible seriously and it takes people's questions seriously. A theology from above helps people to have a firm faith rooted in the revelation of God's Word, and a good understanding of Church history. The men and women who have been powerfully used by the Lord throughout Church history have also had a good understanding of Scripture and what the Church has taught on various topics under attack. And this is vitally important because many people are under the delusion that Christians are anti-intellectual and that the Church has no good answers to the issues of the day. Instead of believing a theology from above, they have instead fallen prey to a theology from below.

J. Gresham Machen warned about a theology from below in his classic book, *Christianity and Liberalism*, in which he said that theological liberalism is another religion. It's another religion because it denies biblical authority on a multitude of issues. When biblical authority is placed at the same level as our feelings you can no longer have biblical Christianity. Biblical Christianity is grounded in the revelation of God's Word, not our feelings. It remains steadfastly rooted in the character of God, who is faithful and true. Titus 1:2 also tells us we have a God who will never lie. This means that since God is holy (and does not sin by lying), and because He has revealed Himself in His Word,

what He has said must be true because He is holy.

And yet we see the people who believe a theology from below suggest that the Bible is full of errors, myths, and even fairytales. And

**“Feelings are a poor master and a poor substitute for truth—completely unable to reveal who God is and what He is like.”**

yet, we must ask where is their proof? Where has God erred in His Word? And do they understand that when they suggest that the Bible has erred that they are, by extension, attacking the very God who gives them life and breathe in their lungs, the One who could—even at this moment—snuff them out? The answer is no, they cannot admit this. Why? Because admitting this would contradict the idea that

we are in charge of ourselves (as our “feelings” dictate), and God is not (contrary to what Scripture teaches). It is as Calvin once remarked: our hearts are idol factories. Until someone can admit that they are *not* the sovereign of the universe, and the Lord is the true Sovereign of the universe, they are in rebellion against God and at war with the Lord.

Christians throughout Church history have responded to these accusations of “biblical error” with solid biblical teaching and satisfying responses. And they have done so to help show that Christians are not anti-intellectual, that we care about what people say and the questions they have, while attempting to help them understand what the Bible means and what the Church has taught. At the core of a theology from below is an overinflated view of self that makes oneself and feelings the center of “truth”. When that happens, you can say goodbye truth because truth is objective, not subjective to fleeting feelings. Feelings are a poor master and a poor substitute for truth—completely unable to reveal who God is and what He is like. Sadly, this is exactly what theological liberalism has done and what “progressive” Christianity has

been teaching and continues to perversely promote.

And yet the true Church (the Bride of Christ) faithfully continues to stand on the Word because we believe in a theology from above. We believe that God's Word is reliable, trustworthy, without error, and the *possibility* of error. Such understanding helps to inform how we not only preach and teach, but also how we minister to people, and live our daily lives. So, believing the right things about the Bible itself is critical, but so is understanding how those beliefs should lead to affecting our lives for God's glory and the good of others.

## Why Church History Gives Good Answers to Christians on Contemporary Issues

By Dave Jenkins

**Scripture is the final authority for the faith and practice of every Christian for every square inch of life.**

But in contemporary evangelicalism, it's often assumed that we are "Bible only" people, and by that I mean that we should only

"know and understand Scripture". It is, of course, true that we are Bible-first people because we are called to be like Bereans, handling the Word of God rightly. But it isn't correct that we are *only* "Bible people". We are Bible-first people as Protestant, Reformed evangelicals. Still, we are not against history, as if we could come to our convictions apart from having teachers who have come before us. It is not possible. And yet, in Christian circles today, there is a trend towards thinking that we are Bible-only people. We should be a people formed and shaped by the Word,



but that doesn't discount the role of Church history.

For example, one of the most critical debates in the Church's history occurred between Augustine and Pelagius. This debate would even shape much of the Reformation debate between Martin Luther and Erasmus; the outcome of which potently demonstrated the necessity of a firm grasp of scripture, as Martin Luther clearly had. The biblical-theological insights of Augustine helped shape both Luther and Calvin, both of whom have been enormously instrumental in shaping many of

**“Church history tell us not only what the Church has taught about various topics, but also why they matter.”**

the leading Reformed and Puritan theologians. So, as Christians, we are not Bible-only people; we are *Bible-first* people.

By being a Bible-first Christian, I'm advocating that we take the Word, study it, and rightly handle it (2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 2:15). Rightly handling the Word is first done by grounding oneself in solid convictions about the

Bible. But we must begin by asking where we get those convictions? Yes, the Bible teaches much about itself, but we also gain insights from others about what the Bible says—gaining a wealth of understanding from other learned theologians who have gone before us. Ephesians 4:11 tells us that the Lord gave us teachers, so this means that we need teachers to help us rightly handle God's Word.

When others suggest that we are *only* Bible people, I suggest they are wrong. We are Bible-first people because the Bible shapes and molds our thinking and character. But even so, there is nothing wrong with learning from people who rightly handled the Word of God. And it's important also to say that a discerning Christian knows the difference between saying that they are a Bible-only person and a Bible-first person. They know this difference because they understand that being discerning means testing, examining, or analyzing what is being taught,

which is Paul's meaning in 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5:21, when he says we are to test all things and hold fast to what is good. We are not to hold to anything that isn't biblical, but we are to test everything and hold fast to what is *good*.

Many people today even suggest that our faith is our own, and in some sense, they are correct. But ultimately, our faith is not our own; our faith belongs to God, because *we* belong to God. We also identify with the Body of Christ, which means that we also must align ourselves with those who have gone before us in Christ. It is popular today to think of yourself as a Christian on an island. There's a name for this—lone-ranger Christianity. But lone-ranger Christianity misses a big chunk of what biblical Christianity is all about. Jesus brings sinners who were once destined for hell and brings them from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God. Without Jesus there is no hope of having faith, let alone having an anchor for it. And this is why we need to be Bible-first people, without ignoring or discarding Church history.

The Church has good answers to contemporary questions facing the Church. From debates ranging about the proper understanding of the atonement, to the Trinity and more, these are issues the Church has dealt with and answered decidedly. When we ignore the insights of Church history we open ourselves to error and to the shifting sands of theological controversy.

Church history tells us not only what the Church has taught about a variety of topics, but also why they matter. The stories behind the various Church Councils—and what lead to them, for example—help us understand that the framers of these Councils were: men of godly character who were Bible-first, but not Bible-only people. They gathered together to talk openly from Scripture about the issues facing them and to come to biblical and faithful convictions, responding to the issues of the day. The Church needs to adopt this approach today because we face challenges on every side—challenges on gender, sexuality, social justice, and over-reaching civil governments.

My point is simply this: Christians must learn from the Scriptures first, but we must also learn from how the Church has responded to controversy. In fact, theological controversy has been an opportunity for the Church to engage in doctrinal clarity on a variety of subjects. And this is vital because we are living in a time when history is not just being rewritten to suit whoever is in charge, and then taught to the masses, but also a time when history itself is doubted.

In America today we have a cancel culture that is willing to tear down anything that isn't seen as "politically correct" anymore—going so far as to even remove monuments that represent real events of our nation's history. American citizens and members of the body of Christ are both in a fight to preserve the truth. More and more, our history is being eroded away because of this explosion of rewritten or removed history. If we refuse to learn from our history we are doomed to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. And when Church history is neglected, we will be thrown back into the Dark Ages.

Church history gives believers many good reasons to have confidence, not only in how the Lord worked through people in various eras of history, but also in examples of how to stand boldly and steadfastly on the Word of God. Christians have great answers from the Word of God, but we also have excellent answers from the history of the Church as well. We need to learn from Scripture, but we also need to learn from the examples and teaching of those in the Church who have come before us. If we don't learn from those who have come before us, we will be Bible-only people, when we should be Bible-first people. Thoughtful Christians are those who know that we need to not only know Scripture, but also learn from the insights of others in the faith.

Church history matters because it explains the "why" of how people arrived at the convictions they did, and thus why they made the stand they did. We need Church history today, but first and foremost we need the Bible. Church history can help us to grow in our understanding of Scripture, and it can help us to be good and faithful servants of Jesus.

**Dear Christian, we have good answers from both Scripture and the teachings of the saints of old.** You do not need to reinvent the wheel; learn from those who have gone before you and those who are your elders in the faith.

## Five Counterfeit Truths of Progressive Christianity

By Alisa Childers



**I'm convinced that one of the greatest achievements in the history of mankind is the discovery of all things dairy.**

Cream-top milk, full-fat cheese, grass-fed butter, rich gelato, and whipped heavy

cream are some of my favorite indulgences. Can you imagine the bitter existence of having to drink your coffee black—or even worse, lightened with nut milk? Give me half-and-half or give me death.

Unfortunately, my sister has been allergic to the stuff for as long as I can remember. One Christmas, she splurged on some really expensive non-dairy brie “cheese”, and exclaimed, “This is SO good. It tastes just

like the real thing!” Her excitement was palpable, so I gave it a taste. As the gray clotted mass made its way toward my face, I got a whiff of what smelled like moldy mushrooms, leather, and pennies.

Forcing a small bite between my grimaced lips I mustered a polite, “Mmmm. That is...uh...interesting.” I paused before asking, “Is *that* what you think brie tastes like?” We burst out laughing as she realized she had never even tasted it.

My sister thought the imposter cheese tasted right because she wasn’t familiar with the real thing. It wasn’t her fault. She’d never sampled the double-cream goodness melting over a cracker and topped with fig jam. But I could never be tricked because I eat the real thing regularly. And. I. Love. It.

It’s the same with the gospel. There are all kinds of false ideas about God floating around that seem right at first. And if we don’t know the real thing, we might even feel satisfied with their half-truths and misrepresentations. One of these false ideas is the modern trend of progressive Christianity. [Christianpost.com](http://Christianpost.com) gives a warning against the misguided values of "progressive Christianity" saying:

*"The counterfeit gospel is under the guise of Progressive Christianity. Yet, if you hold this doctrine up to the light it will be missing the watermarked face of God. This doctrine is worthless and void of truth and robs the soul of true joy in Christ, do not be deceived. Some of the core ideas spread by this relatively new sect are fragmenting through the body of Christ like shrapnel. We must guard our hearts and minds with the armor of God and strike back with the sword of Truth."*

## **What is Progressive Christianity?**

The movement called “progressive Christianity” seeks to redefine what it means to be a Christian. Although it is marketed as “the real thing”, core essential doctrines are abandoned or radically redefined. Progressive Christianity utilizes Scripture, employs Christian

vocabulary, and claims to follow the teachings of Jesus. Although it looks, smells, and sounds like the real thing, it ends up being more like fake brie than the historic Christian gospel. At the end of the day, the unifying beliefs of their movement add up to counterfeit truths.

## **1st Counterfeit Truth of Progressive Christianity: You are Perfect Just as You Are**

In progressive Christianity, the doctrine of original sin is abandoned and replaced with “original blessing” or “original goodness”. In their comprehensive survey of progressive Christianity, progressive authors David Felten and Jeff Procter-Murphy write, *“Far from being fallen creatures trying to return to a mythical Eden, human beings are emerging as a species from more primal and baser instincts to become more responsible and mature beings.”* Although most progressive Christians will acknowledge that humans are “broken”, they typically avoid identifying that brokenness with sin, but rather, attribute it to *immaturity*.

Historically, Christians have believed that humans have a sinful nature that was passed down from Adam and Eve after they rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden. The Bible teaches that sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2; Ephesians 2:12, 4:18), which puts us in quite a predicament. Put simply, we need a Savior. However, in progressive Christianity, it isn't our sin that separates us from God, but our own self-imposed shame. Of Adam and Eve, progressive author Brian McLaren writes, *“They lose their fearlessness in relation to God.”* So, rather than viewing their sin as what separated humans from a holy God, McLaren refers to their experience in Eden as a “classic coming of age story.”

**“The Bible is chock-full of different metaphors and motifs to help us understand what Jesus accomplished on the cross.”**

According to this counterfeit truth, you don't need to deny yourself

and repent. You just need to realize that you were never separated from God in the first place. You are perfect just as you are.

## **2nd Counterfeit Truth of Progressive Christianity: Jesus Didn't Need to Die on the Cross**

If sin doesn't separate us from God, why then did Jesus die on the cross? According to progressive Christianity, Jesus didn't die as a blood sacrifice offered to God for the sins of the world. He died to show us how to forgive our enemies by allowing Himself to be crucified by an angry mob. One progressive author puts it this way: *"Who originated the Cross? If God did, then we worship a cosmic abuser, who in Divine Wisdom created a means to torture human beings in the most painful and abhorrent manner."*

The Bible is chock-full of different metaphors and motifs to help us understand what Jesus accomplished on the cross. There are themes of Jesus taking our punishment, paying our debt, reconciling us to God whereas we once were enemies. There is language of being adopted into God's family, following Jesus' example of forgiveness, and being cleansed from our sin. Scripture speaks of Jesus defeating the power of sin, death, and hell through His death and resurrection. There is almost no end to the beauty of what Jesus accomplished when He went to the cross!

However, in progressive Christianity, the view historically known as penal substitutionary atonement, which has to do with Jesus being punished in our place—as our substitute—is perceived to be an abusive doctrine that implicates the character of God. The logic goes like this: if God the Father requires the blood of Jesus, His Son, doesn't that make Him something like a divine child abuser? According to this counterfeit truth, Jesus didn't need to die on the cross to save us from sin but submitted to it out of love.

### **3rd Counterfeit Truth of Progressive Christianity: The Resurrection Doesn't Have to Be Historical to Be Meaningful**

Although not all progressive Christians outright deny the resurrection of Jesus, it is common to de-emphasize the historicity of Jesus' miracles and focus on the meaning behind the stories. In an interview with the Houston Chronicle, Progressive Lutheran minister, Nadia Bolz-Weber, commented on Christian beliefs like the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the miracles of Jesus. She said, *"I believe that all of it's true. Whether every single bit of it is a fact or not doesn't interest me."* In an article written to help Christian parents explain Easter to their children, a progressive pastor wrote a blog post claiming, *"Stories don't have to be factual to speak truth. And it's okay to question a literal resurrection."*

Historically, Christians have believed that the resurrection of Jesus was an actual historical event. Even the apostle Paul wrote that if the resurrection didn't happen, Christianity as an entire belief system would be false. He wrote, *"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins"* (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:17). But this is not so important in progressive Christianity. As Felten and Procter-Murphy write, *"Today, the metaphor of resurrection stands for many Christians as a symbol of the call to new life, as an appeal to practice resurrection here and now."*

According to this counterfeit truth, it's not necessary for a Christian to believe in the miracles of Jesus—including His resurrection. Rather, it's enough to simply focus on the meaning and moral lesson behind these narratives.

### **4th Counterfeit Truth of Progressive Christianity: God isn't That Concerned about Who We Sleep With**

One of the hallmarks of progressive Christianity is a rejection of

biblical sexuality, and an affirmation of same-sex marriage and premarital sex. In her book *Shameless*, Nadia Bolz-Weber argues for a new Christian sexual ethic that allows for moderate pornography consumption, one-night stands, same-sex encounters, and virtually any sexual activity that demonstrates a “concern for each other’s flourishing.”

Historically, Christians have believed that God’s design for sex is between one man and one woman within the covenant of marriage. Jesus Himself affirms the purpose of sex and marriage: “*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh*” (Matthew 19:5). Jesus also condemned “sexual immorality” (verse 9), which was understood by His Jewish listeners to be any sexual activity outside of marriage. But by redefining the word “holiness” to mean “the union we experience with one another and with God,” Bolz-Weber is able to declare sex outside of marriage as not just acceptable, but holy.

According to this counterfeit truth, human sexuality is based on what makes someone feel happy and fulfilled, rather than on God’s holiness and purpose for sex.

## **5th Counterfeit Truth of Progressive Christianity: The Bible is an Ancient Travel Journal**

For progressive Christians, the Bible is a wonderful work of literature that reflects what people believed about God in their times and places. It gives us an inspired and faithful account of how ancient Israel interacted with God, and how Jesus’ disciples and apostles understood the “Jesus story”. Progressive Bible scholar Pete Enns puts it like this:

*“The Bible is an ancient book and we shouldn’t be surprised to see it act like one. So seeing God portrayed as a violent, tribal warrior is not how God is but how he was understood to be by the ancient Israelites communing with God in their time and place.”*

Historically, Christians have believed that the Bible is inspired by

God and authoritative for our lives. When the biblical authors wrote things like “God says” or “it is written” or “thus says the Lord”, they were actually speaking for God, not just communicating their best understandings of Him. Because of this, we believe the Bible is God’s Word and should be obeyed. But in progressive Christianity, the authority for our beliefs, behaviors, and practices shifts from the Bible to our own thoughts, feelings, and preferences.

According to this counterfeit truth, the Bible is viewed more like a book of suggestions and possibilities than an authoritative standard for truth.

## Follow the Real Jesus

Learning to spot these ideas will ensure that you are following the real Jesus and believing the real gospel—not a counterfeit version of Christianity that will inevitably end up looking a lot like what you see in the mirror. After all, a god made in your own image is not the God of the Bible, and it’s not a god that can save you. And like the brie cheese, once you’ve tasted the real thing, you won’t be satisfied by anything else.

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## The Liberal Agenda

By R.C. Sproul



**When any discussion develops concerning Christianity and liberalism, it is crucial that one gives a proper definition of liberalism.**

The term *liberal* can mean anything from being free in one's thinking to being a proponent of the latest fad in the realm of theology or any other ideology. The term *liberal* shifts with the sands of time in as much as yesterday's liberal may be considered today's conservative without changing views.

However, when we speak of liberalism in the field of theology, we are not thinking of a frame of mind or a philosophical bent but a distinct historical movement that captured the minds of many churchmen in the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century liberalism followed closely on the heels of enlightenment thought and was married

philosophically to many of the ideas that defined modernism. The root idea that defined liberalism was the influence of the philosophy of naturalism. Naturalism asserts that all reality can be explained in purely natural categories, without any appeal to the supernatural. As a

**“The Bible was the favorite target of this assault...reducing the Bible to just another human book of the ancient world.”**

result, nineteenth-century liberalism saw a wholesale attack on all things supernatural contained within historic orthodox Christianity.

The principal targets of nineteenth-century liberalism included the miracles attributed to Jesus in the New Testament (not to mention all of the miracles

recorded in the Old Testament). Those events that are defined or described in Scripture as being miraculous, indeed, caused by the supernatural agency of God, were rejected as naïve, pre-scientific myths that found their way into the original documents of Scripture. The miraculous acts of Jesus were explained away. For example, the feeding of the five thousand was sometimes described as an act of fraud by which Jesus had hidden a cache of fish and loaves in a cave with a secret opening concealed by His long flowing robe. And like the magician who pulls sausages or scarves endlessly out of his sleeves, so Jesus, standing in front of the concealed entrance of the cave, was assisted in His magical work by the disciples, who, working as a bucket brigade, were feeding the fish and loaves through the secret entrance into Jesus’ cloak, out His sleeves, to the masses. Another tack taken by the liberals was to give a moral explanation to the miracles of Jesus. In the case of the feeding of the five thousand, what Jesus did was to persuade those who brought lunches with them to share their food with those who had brought none. This was an “ethical miracle”, by which Jesus promoted the ethic of sharing with one’s fellow human being.

Next on the target list were the supernatural aspects of the life of Jesus. Of particular concern for nineteenth-century liberals was their assault against the virgin birth. Not only was the virgin birth rejected, but every supernatural aspect of Jesus' life, including the transfiguration, His atonement as a transcendent supernatural event, His resurrection, His ascension, and His return at the end of the age. All of these things were cast aside as so many accretions of early Church mythology. Obviously, since the Bible reports the person and work of Christ in supernatural terms involving angels, miracles, and the fulfillment of predictive prophecy, all of those aspects found in sacred Scripture were also rejected. The Bible was the favorite target of this assault, by which critical scholars rejected all predictive prophecy and anything that smacked of the supernatural, reducing the Bible to just another human book of the ancient world.

This new wave of thinking swept through Europe, with its roots principally in Germany, and then it crossed the ocean to theological seminaries in the United States, where it produced a crisis within many churches. What does one do with billions of dollars' worth of church property and the thousands of people who are ordained to be clergy, who no longer believe the historic content of orthodox Christianity? Some took the position that the only honest response to this skepticism was to resign from the ministry and find employment in another line of work. However, the overwhelming majority of those who espoused this view decided simply to restructure the mission of the Church. The mission of the Church became no longer an enterprise of bringing personal redemption supernaturally between the soul and God; rather, it sought social redemption by alleviating, as far as possible, human suffering. This gave way to the birth of the so-called "social gospel", which saw the good news found in the Church's mission to meet the humanitarian needs of society. The Gospel itself was given a new definition in terms of social action. Along with the denials of particular aspects of historic Christianity, a denial of the importance of Christian doctrine also came

in its wake. Doctrine was something that was derived from the teaching of the Bible, and since the Bible was now suspect, there was no need for any significant maintenance of orthodox Christian doctrine.

In every age, the Church is threatened by heresy, and heresy is bound up in false doctrine. It is the desire of all heretics to minimize the importance of doctrine. When doctrine is minimized, heresy can exercise itself without restraint. In the twentieth century, the Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, wrote his treatise on the person of Christ

titled, *The Mediator*. In that book, Brunner used one word to describe the essence of nineteenth-century liberalism: “unbelief”. He saw in liberalism not a simple change of nuance in the content of the Christian faith, but a wholesale rejection of the very heart and soul of biblical Christianity. The twentieth century saw the continuation of the impact of liberalism, particularly in the mainline denominations in America, with the advent of so-called neo-liberalism following the radical criticism of men like Rudolf Bultmann and his successors.

This liberal agenda has by no means disappeared from the life of the Church. It has gained almost total control of the mainline denominations and has made its influence felt strongly within evangelical circles. Within evangelicalism itself, we have seen a serious erosion of biblical authority, a willingness to negotiate the biblical Gospel itself, and a widespread rejection of doctrine as being unimportant and in no way foundational to the Christian faith.

Liberalism stands in every generation as a flat rejection of the faith. It must not be viewed as a simple subset or denominational

**“This liberal agenda has by no means disappeared from the life of the Church. It has gained almost total control of the mainline denominations...”**

impulse of Christianity; it must be seen for what it is—the antithesis of Christianity based on a complete rejection of the biblical Christ and His Gospel.

## 5 Signs Your Church Might be Heading Toward Progressive Christianity

By Alisa Childers

**Several years ago, my husband and I began attending a local Evangelical, non-denominational church, and we loved it.** We

cherished the sense of community we found among the loving and authentic people we met

there, and the intelligent, “outside the box” pastor who led our flock with thought-provoking and insightful sermons. Sadly, the church started going off the rails theologically, and after about a year and a half, we made the difficult decision to leave. Today that church is a self-titled “Progressive Christian Community”.



Back then I had never heard of “Progressive Christianity” and, even

now, it is difficult to pin down what actually qualifies someone as a Progressive Christian, due to the diversity of beliefs that fall under that designation. However, there are signs—certain phrases and ideas—that seem to be consistent in Progressive circles. Here are 5 danger-signs to watch for in your church...

### **One: There is a Lowered View of the Bible**

One of the main differences between Progressive Christianity and Historic Christianity is its view of the Bible. Historically, Christians have viewed the Bible as the Word of God and authoritative for our lives. Progressive Christianity generally abandons these terms, emphasizing personal belief over biblical mandate.

#### **Comments you might hear:**

- *The Bible is a human book...*
- *I disagree with the Apostle Paul on that issue...*
- *The Bible condones immorality, so we are obligated to reject what it says in certain places...*
- *The Bible “contains” the word of God...*

### **Two: Feelings are Emphasized Over Facts**

In Progressive churches, personal experiences, feelings, and opinions tend to be valued above objective truth. As the Bible ceases to be viewed as God’s definitive Word, what a person *feels to be true* becomes the ultimate authority for faith and practice.

#### **Comments you might hear:**

- *That Bible verse doesn't resonate with me...*
- *I thought homosexuality was a sin until I met and befriended some gay people...*
- *I just can't believe Jesus would send good people to hell...*

## Three: Essential Christian Doctrines are Open For Re-Interpretation

Progressive author, John Pavlovitz, wrote: *“There are no sacred cows [in Progressive Christianity] ...tradition, dogma, and doctrine are all*

**“Many Progressive Christians today find the concept of God willing His Son to die on the cross to be embarrassing or even appalling.”**

*fair game, because all pass through the hands of flawed humanity. Progressive Christians are often open to re-defining and re-interpreting the Bible on hot-button moral issues like homosexuality and abortion, and also cardinal doctrines such as the virgin conception and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. The only sacred cow is “no sacred cows.”*

### Comments you might hear:

- *The resurrection of Jesus doesn't have to be factual to speak truth...*
- *The Church's historic position on sexuality is archaic and needs to be updated within a modern framework...*
- *The idea of a literal hell is offensive to non-Christians and needs to be re-interpreted...*

### Four: Historic Terms are Re-Defined

There are some Progressive Christians who say they affirm doctrines like biblical inspiration, inerrancy, and authority, but they have to do linguistic gymnastics to make those words mean what they want them to mean. I remember asking a pastor, “Do you believe the Bible is divinely inspired?”

He answered confidently, “Yes, of course!” However, I mistakenly assumed that when using the word “inspired”, we both meant the same

thing. He clarified months later what he meant: that the Bible is inspired in the same way and on the same level as many other Christian books, songs, and sermons. This, of course, is not how Christians have historically understood the doctrine of divine inspiration.

Another word that tends to get a Progressive make-over is the word “love”. When plucked out of its biblical context, it becomes a catch-all term for everything non-confrontative, pleasant, and affirming.

### **Comments you might hear:**

- *God wouldn't punish sinners—He is love...*
- *Sure, the Bible is authoritative, but we've misunderstood it for the first 2,000 years of church history...*
- *It's not our job to talk to anyone about sin—it's our job to just love them...*

## **Five: The Heart of the Gospel Message Shifts From Sin and Redemption to Social Justice**

There is no doubt that the Bible commands us to take care of the unfortunate and defend those who are oppressed. This is a very real and profoundly important part of what it means to live out our Christian faith. However, the core message of Christianity—the gospel—is that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and resurrected, thereby reconciling us to God. This is the message that will truly bring freedom to the oppressed.

Many Progressive Christians today find the concept of God willing His Son to die on the cross to be embarrassing or even appalling. Sometimes referred to as “cosmic child abuse”, the idea of blood atonement is de-emphasized or denied altogether, with social justice and good works enthroned in its place.

## Comments you might hear:

- *Sin doesn't separate us from God—we are made in His image and He called us good...*
- *God didn't actually require a sacrifice for our sins—the first Christians picked up on the pagan practice of animal sacrifice and told the Jesus story in similar terms...*
- *We don't really need to preach the gospel—we just need to show love by bringing justice to the oppressed and provision to the needy...*

## Conclusion

Identifying the signs is not always easy—sometimes they are subtle and mixed with a lot of truth. Progressive Christianity can be persuasive and enticing, but carried out to its logical end, it is an assault on the foundational framework of Christianity, leaving it disarmed of its saving power.

We shouldn't be surprised to find some of these ideas infiltrating our churches. Jesus warned us, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (Matthew 7:15). So, if you spot any of these 5 danger-signs in your place of worship, it might be time to pray about finding fellowship in a more biblically-faithful church community.

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## Disassociating Paul from Jesus

By Nick Batzig



**By means of sophisticatedly crafted statements on social media, certain prominent voices in the evangelical wing of Christendom have revealed their penchant for pitting Jesus' ethical teaching against that of the Apostle Paul.** To elevate

what Jesus taught over against what His apostles taught reveals a fundamental deficiency with regard to the doctrine of biblical revelation. Such false dichotomizing is ostensibly driven by a desire to distance oneself from the Apostle's condemnation of homosexuality and his teaching about gender role distinctions in the Church. The desire to set Jesus and Paul at odds—or to subtly downplay the fact that the

apostolic letters are, in fact, the very words of Christ—will inevitably backfire on those who believe they are helping others embrace a more tolerant brand of Christianity in the Church.

***“And through the promise and gift of the Spirit He has made the identity real.”***

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Church faced a form of theological liberalism in which theologians sought to disassociate Jesus and Paul. Although the driving factors in the theological liberalism of the twentieth century were somewhat different from our current ecclesiastical controversies, the method and desired end were strikingly similar.

Attacks on the organic unity of Scripture led professors at Princeton Theological Seminary to proffer some of the greatest arguments for the defense of the unity and progressive development of the canon of Scripture. In his 1912 article titled, *“Jesus and Paul”*, J. Gresham Machen confronted the liberal attempt to make Paul “the second founder of Christianity”—a redactor of Jesus’ teaching. Machen wrote:

*“In recent years there is a tendency to dissociate Paul from Jesus. A recent historian has entitled Paul “the second founder of Christianity.” If that be correct, then Christianity is facing the greatest crisis in its history. For—let us not deceive ourselves—if Paul is independent of Jesus, he can no longer be a teacher of the Church. Christianity is founded upon Christ and only Christ.”*

Machen subsequently turned the content of that article into his much more developed work, *The Origin of Paul’s Religion*, which is one of the greatest refutations of efforts to disassociate the foremost Apostle from the Savior.

Gehardus Vos, the great biblical theologian at Princeton,

explained that the relationship between the biblical revelation about the earthly ministry of Jesus and the Apostolic writing is the relationship between “the fact to be interpreted and the subsequent interpretation of this fact.” He wrote:

*“It is a total misunderstanding both of the consciousness of Jesus and of that of the N.T. writers, to conceive of the thought of ‘going back’ from the Apostles, particularly Paul, to Jesus...To take Christ at all He must be taken as the center of a movement of revelation organized around Him, and winding up the whole process of revelation. When cut loose from what went before and came after, Jesus not only becomes uninterpretable, but owing to the meteoric character of His appearance, remains scarcely sufficient for bearing by Himself alone the tremendous weight of a supernaturalistic worldview. As a matter of fact, He does not represent Himself anywhere as being by his human earthly activity the exhaustive expounder of truth. Much rather He is the great fact to be expounded. And He has nowhere isolated Himself from His interpreters, but on the contrary identified them with Himself, both as to absoluteness of authority and adequacy of knowledge imparted (Luke 15 :16; John 16:12-15). And through the promise and gift of the Spirit He has made the identity real. The Spirit takes of the things of Christ and shows them unto the recipients. Besides this, the course of our Lord’s redemptive career was such as to make the important facts accumulate towards the end, where the departure of Jesus from the disciples rendered explanation by Himself of the significance of these impossible. For this reason the teaching of Jesus, so far from rendering the teaching of the Apostles negligible, absolutely postulates it. As the latter would have been empty, lacking the fact, so the former would have been blind, at least in part, because of lacking the light.*

*The relation between Jesus and the Apostolate is in general that between the fact to be interpreted and the subsequent interpretation*

*of this fact. This is none other than the principle under which all revelation proceeds. The N.T. Canon is constructed on it. The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles stand first, although from a literary point of view this is not the chronological sequence. Theirs is the first place, because there is embodied in them the great actuality of N.T. Redemption. Still it ought not to be overlooked, that within the Gospels and the Acts themselves we meet with a certain preformation of this same law. Jesus' task is not confined to furnishing the fact or the facts; He interweaves and accompanies the creation of the facts with a preliminary illumination of them, for by the side of his work stands his teaching. Only the teaching is more sporadic and less comprehensive than that supplied by the Epistles. It resembles the embryo, which though after an indistinct fashion, yet truly contains the structure, which the full-grown organism will clearly exhibit."*

This, of course, raises for us the question about the content of the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles. We should at once observe that Jesus never personally wrote anything. The content of the four synoptic gospels, and the content of the words of Jesus in the book of Revelation were written down by "*holy men of God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*" They are no less the work of the Spirit of God through the instrumentality of chosen men than are the words of the Apostles in their addresses to the church.

Additionally, it should not be forgotten that the Apostle John ended the fourth gospel by reminding us that "*there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written*" (John 21:25). Certainly, Jesus taught many things that were not recorded for the church throughout the remainder of the New Covenant era. However, Jesus promised His disciples that the Spirit of God would come and would give them even more revelation than that which He had given them throughout the time of His sojourning with them on earth. This promise is fulfilled in the completion of the canon

with the writing of the Book of Acts, the New Testament epistles, and the Book of Revelation.

In his book, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament*, J.H. Bernard explained how the meaning of Jesus' teaching about the coming Spirit in John 16:8-14 is intimately related to the fuller revelation of the canon that He would give the Apostles. He wrote:

*“Though in the teaching of Jesus all the truth might be implied, it was not all opened; therefore the Holy Ghost was to add that which had not been delivered, as well as to recall that which had been already spoken. There is an evident contrast intended, with regard to extent of knowledge, between “these things which I have spoken while yet present with you,” and “all things which he shall teach you.” Nay, there is the plainest assertion which could be made, that things were to be said afterwards which had not been said then; and those not few but many — (“I have yet many things to say unto you”) — not of secondary importance but of the highest moment (“Ye cannot bear them now”). They are things of such a kind as would now weigh down and oppress your minds, seeing that they surpass your present powers of spiritual apprehension. But these many and weighty things shall not be left untold. “When he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all the truth.” He shall guide you, as by successive steps and continuous direction, into the whole of that truth of which the commencements have now been given; and especially into the highest and central part of it. For it is also made plain on what subject this light shall be poured, and into what mysteries this guidance shall lead. “He shall testify of me;” “he shall glorify me;” “he shall take of mine and shew it unto you;” “at that day ye shall know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you.” Not then for some secondary matters (details of Church order or relations of Jews and Gentiles) was this light and witness of the Holy Ghost reserved (though to these questions also the divine guidance extended), but rather for the great and central mystery of godliness, embracing the nature, work, and offices of Jesus Christ, his media-*

*torial relations to the Father and to the Church, the redemption of men by his blood, and the salvation of men by his life. But instead of attempting to enumerate these great ideas, it were better to comprehend them all in his own vast and unexplained expression, "He shall take of mine, and shall show it unto you."*

We have now reviewed the teaching of our Lord in the flesh, in order to draw from it an answer to this question, "Is the revelation of the great salvation given to us in that teaching to be considered as final and complete?" The answer has been, "No! It has not the appearance of being final, and it explicitly declares that it is not complete. When it was ended, it was to be followed by a new testimony from God, in order that many things might be spoken which had not been spoken then." The testimony came; the things were spoken; and in the apostolic writings we have their enduring record. In those writings we find the fulfillment of an expectation which the Gospels raised and recognize the performance of a promise which the Gospels gave. If we do not, the word of salvation, which began to be spoken by the Lord, has never been finished for us.

While all of this ought to come with the convincing force with which it is intended, we still have to seek for a satisfactory answer to the questions about apostolic teaching that *appears* to be new ethical teaching—distinct from what our Lord taught during His earthly ministry. The prime explanation is found in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:10-12 and 14:37-38.

John Murray, Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, wrote the single most helpful chapter on the internal testimony of Scripture, with special references to the Divine inspiration and apostolic authority on account of the language used in such places as 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:10-12 and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 14:37-38.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:10-12 the Apostle employs phraseology that might be construed as *unauthoritative judgment*:

*"Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not*

*to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife. But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her.”*

Does this mean that part of our Bible is not authoritatively binding, and that these passages are just pious advice? Seeking to set out an accurate explanation of what Paul actual meant, Murray wrote:

*“The passage in I Corinthians 7:10-12 is sometimes understood as if Paul were instituting a contrast between the authoritative teaching of Christ and his own unauthoritative judgment on questions bearing upon marriage and separation—“But to the married I give charge, not I but the Lord...But to the rest I say, not the Lord.” A careful reading of the whole passage will, however, show that the contrast is not between the inspired teaching of Christ and the uninspired teaching of the apostle but rather between the teaching of the apostle that could appeal to the express utterances of Christ in the days of his flesh, on the one hand, and the teaching of the apostle that went beyond the cases dealt with by Christ, on the other. There is no distinction as regards the binding character of the teaching in these respective cases. The language and terms the apostle uses in the second case are just as emphatic and mandatory as in the first case. And this passage, so far from diminishing the character of apostolic authority, only enhances our estimate of that authority. If Paul can be as mandatory in his terms when he is dealing with questions on which, by his own admission, he cannot appeal for support to the express teaching of Christ, does not this fact serve to impress upon us how profound was Paul’s consciousness that he was writing by divine authority, when his own teaching was as mandatory in its terms as was his reiteration of the teaching of the Lord himself? Nothing else than the consciousness of enunciating divinely authoritative law would warrant the terseness and decisiveness of the statement by which*

*he prevents all gainsaying, “And so ordain I in all the churches” (1 Cor. 7:17).*

*That Paul regards his written word as invested with divine sanction and authority is placed beyond all question in this same epistle (1 Cor. 14:37,38). In the context he is dealing specifically with the question of the place of women in the public assemblies of worship. He enjoins silence upon women in the church by appeal to the universal custom of the churches of Christ and by appeal to the law of the Old Testament. It is then that he makes appeal to the divine content of his prescriptions. “If any man thinketh himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things I write unto you are the commandment of the Lord. And if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant.” Paul here makes the most direct claim to be writing the divine Word and coordinates this appeal to divine authority with appeal to the already existing Scripture of the Old Testament.”*

While so much more could be said, of this much we should be assured: all attempts to contrast and dissociate the teaching of Jesus and the teaching of Paul will end in a bifurcation of the canon itself. Adversely, this will inevitably lead on to the undermining of both the apostolic teaching on redemption, as well as the apostolic ethic for the life of the members of the New Testament Church. Far from helping those who are uncomfortable with the apostolic teaching on such things as homosexuality and gender relations in the Church, such a bifurcation will ultimately serve to undermine the entire revelation of God in Scripture.

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## Seven Characteristics of Liberal Theology

By Kevin DeYoung

### What is theological liberalism?

Liberalism is both a tradition—coming out of the late-18th century Protestant attempt to reconfigure traditional Christian teaching in the light of modern knowledge and values—and a diverse, but recognizable approach to theology.



Like any “ism”, liberalism is not easy to pigeonhole. But Gary Dorrien’s magisterial three volumes on *The Making of American Liberal Theology* present a coherent picture of a movement that has been marked by identifiable hermeneutical and sociological commitments. Even if one wishes to avoid liberal theology, it would still be wise to know something about a movement that has exerted such considerable influence over the past two hundred years.

Below are seven characteristics of liberalism that have been culled from the first volume of Dorrien's trilogy. The headings are mine; the indented text is from the book.

### **One: True Religion is Not Based on External Authority**

*The idea of liberal theology is nearly three centuries old. In essence, it is the idea that Christian theology can be genuinely Christian without being based upon external authority. Since the eighteenth century, liberal Christian thinkers have argued that religion should be modern and progressive and that the meaning of Christianity should be interpreted from the standpoint of modern knowledge and experience. (pg. xiii)*

What's more, Dorrien recognizes this rejection is something new in the history of the Church.

*Before the modern period, all Christian theologies were constructed within a house of authority. All premodern Christian theologies made claims to authority-based orthodoxy. Even the mystical and mythopoetic theologies produced by premodern Christianity took for granted the view of scripture as an infallible revelation and the view of theology as an explication of propositional revelation.*

*Adopting the scholastic methods of their Catholic adversaries, Protestant theologians formalized these assumptions with scholastic precision during the seventeenth century. Not coincidentally, the age of religious wars that preceded the Enlightenment is also remembered as the age of orthodoxy.*

*Reformed and Lutheran orthodoxy heightened the Reformation principle that scripture is the sole and infallibly sufficient rule of faith, teaching that scripture is also strictly inerrant in all that it asserts.*

*(pg. xv)*

Note that Dorrien does not believe inerrancy was a Princetonian invention.

## **Two: Christianity is a Movement of Social Reconstruction**

*One of the most influential definitions of theological liberalism was offered in 1949 by an able latter-day proponent, Daniel Day Williams: “By ‘liberal theology’ I mean the movement in modern Protestantism which during the nineteenth century tried to bring Christian thought into organic unity with the evolutionary world view, the movements from social reconstruction, and the expectations of ‘a better world’ which dominated the general mind. It is that form of Christian faith in which a prophetic-progressive philosophy of history culminates in the expectation of the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth.” (pg. xix)*

## **Three: Christianity Must Be Credible and Relevant**

*Specifically, liberal theology is defined by its openness to the verdicts of modern intellectual inquiry, especially the nature and social sciences; its commitment to the authority of individual reason and experience; its conception of Christianity as an ethical way of life; its favoring of moral concepts of atonement; and its commitment to make Christianity credible and socially relevant to modern people. (pg. xxiii)*

## **Four: Truth Can Be Known Only Through Changing Symbols and Forms**

*Bushnell admonished that “all our difficulties and controversies” regarding the truths of revelation were caused by a basic failure to face up to what was known about the clothing of truths in signs and analogies. The problem was not peculiar to New England theology, he suggested, it was an “almost universal sin that infests the reasonings of mankind concerning moral and spiritual subjects.” Throughout the world, people treated the symbolic forms of their truths as the truths themselves (pg.151).*

## **Five: Theological Controversy is About Language,**

## **not About Truth**

*Bushnell debated various doctrinal points with his adversaries, claiming always that their disagreements were about language usage, not lack of belief: “All my supposed heresies, in reference to these great subjects, are caused by the arrest of speculation and the disallowance of those constructive judgments, or a priori arguments, by which terms that are only analogies, and mysteries that are most significant when taken only as symbols, are made to affirm something wiser and more exact than what they express” (pp. 151-152).*

### **Six: The Historical Accuracies of Biblical Facts and Events are Not Crucial, So Long as We Meet Jesus in the Pages of Scripture**

*Bushnell cautioned that the faithful reader of scripture is not obliged to assume the truth of the Gospel narrative “by which the manner and facts of the life of Jesus are reported to us.” That was the matter in question: “We only assume the representations themselves, as being just what they are, and discover their necessary truth, in the transcendent, wondrously self-evident, picture of divine excellence and beauty exhibited in them.”*

*Bushnell counseled that the biblical narrative is not very impressive aside from the extraordinary character of its pivotal figure, but the more that we study the figure of Jesus, “a picture shining in its own clear sunlight upon us,” the more clearly we are brought into the source and light of all truth: “Jesus, the Divine Word, coming out from God, to be incarnate with us, and be the vehicle of God and salvation to the race” (pg. 399).*

### **Seven: The True Religion is the Way of Christ, not Any Particular Doctrines about Christ**

*The Word of Christ is not a doctrine or the end of an argument, but a self-authenticating life; it is morally regenerative spiritual power*

*claimed in Christ's spirit...Moving beyond their mentor, the Bushnellians accented the humanity of Christ; Munger and Gladden lifted Jesus' teaching above any claims about his person. In both cases, however, a self-authenticating moral image conceived as the power of true religion was in control. The true religion is the way of Christ (pp. 399-400).*

Dorrien observes that this kind of religion was a departure from historic orthodoxy.

*Traditional Protestant orthodoxies place the substitutionary atonement of Christ at the center of Christianity, conceiving Christ's death as a propitiatory sacrifice that vicariously satisfied the retributive demands of divine justice (pg. 400).*

The new progressive religion of liberalism understood Christianity quite differently.

*By the end of Beecher's life, it was almost prosaic for Munger and Gladden to assert that Christianity is essentially a life, not a doctrine (pg. 405).*

## Conclusion

Liberalism is not a swear word to be thrown around. It is a diverse, but identifiable approach to Christianity, one that differs significantly from historic orthodoxy, not to mention evangelicalism and fundamentalism. Liberals believe they are making Christianity relevant, credible, beneficial, and humane. Evangelicals in the line of J. Gresham Machen believe they are making something other than Christianity. That was the dividing line a century ago, and the division persists.

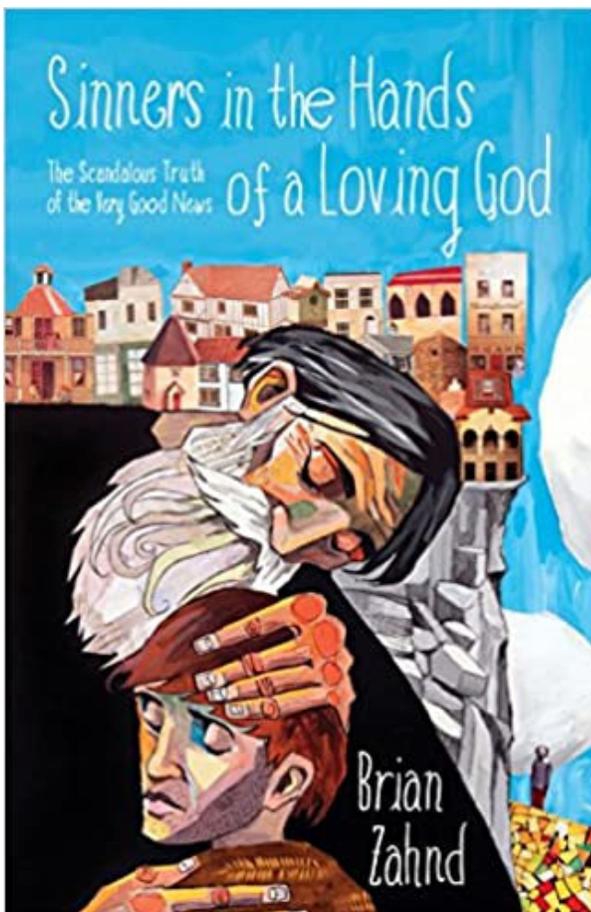
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## A Book Review:

### ***Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: The Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News***

**By David Steele**



**I will never forget a very special evening with a small group of Christ-followers at the McLean home.** My good friend, Don suggested that we read *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* by Jonathan Edwards in one sitting—on our knees. And so, a group of middle-aged adults gathered in Don’s living room alongside several children (whose knees were much more nimble)—and we read Edward’s classic sermon—on our knees. It is a moment I will not soon forget. We were humbled. We were drawn into the very presence of God. And like the 18th-century congregation in Enfield—we were cut to the quick.

*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* is

not only one of the most well-known sermons in American history; it is one of the most powerful sermons ever preached on American soil. In one sermon, the Puritan divine highlights both the awesome wrath of a holy God and the matchless grace and tenderhearted love of Jesus Christ.

The sermon is derived from Deuteronomy 32:35, *“Their foot shall slide in due time.”* The doctrine that Edwards sets forth is simple: *“There is nothing that keeps wicked men at one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God.”* Edwards concludes with a strong application which is meant to awaken sinners and flee from the wrath of God.

Current readers (along with the original Enfield congregation) are faced with a momentous decision as Edwards warns them to the sobering reality of God’s wrath: *“There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell’s wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor anything to take hold of; there is nothing between you and hell but the air; it is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.”*

Readers are challenged to take advantage of “the door of mercy wide open”, which beckons them to receive the grace of God in Christ. The concluding words of the sermon leave sinners with an important decision; the most important decision they will ever make: *“Therefore, let every one that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come. The wrath of Almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over a great part of this congregation. Let every one fly out of Sodom: “Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed.””*

## **Condemning Jonathan Edwards**

The congregation in Enfield was humbled and mercifully drawn to the Savior as, literally, thousands have since Edwards first preached his sermon on July 8, 1741. But not everyone is eager to receive the biblical message that Edwards preaches. *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* has received a fair amount of criticism over the years. It has been, and

continues to be, maligned and caricatured. Often found on a list of required reading for college English courses, the sermon is mocked for its candid language and scary images. Many readers simply cannot stomach the God that Edwards presents or submit to the God that Edwards loves and serves.

Brian Zahnd's new book, *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: The Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News* is the latest thunderbolt against the Edwardsean vision of God. Zahnd argues that Edwards depicts God as a "sadistic juvenile dangling spiders over a fire."<sup>1</sup> He likens Edwards's vision of hell to "the Almighty's eternal Auschwitz."<sup>2</sup> And Edwards's vision of God is compared to a "sadistic monster."<sup>3</sup>

Zahnd's work is a best-selling release in the Christology category on Amazon. It has been highly touted by well-known authors. And it has received rave reviews on Amazon as readers are drawn to a softer version of God and a worldview which is miles away from Reformed theology. But does this popular book stand up to the scrutiny of Scripture? Does Mr. Zahnd's critique of Reformed stalwarts like Jonathan Edwards and John Calvin have any merit? At least four major concerns surface in Mr. Zahnd's book.

## **Concerns with *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God***

The first concern is regarding the portrait of God. Readers will quickly discover that the portrait of God in this book is painted with a different kind of brush, which renders an altogether different portrayal of God. What we find is a God utterly devoid of wrath. To be fair, Mr. Zahnd affirms the existence of God's wrath and divine anger in Scripture but maintains these biblical realities are only *metaphors*, none of which are designed to be taken literally.

"*Liberalizing a divine metaphor,*" according to Zahnd, "*Always leads to error. We easily acknowledge that God is not literally a rock and not literally a hen, but we have tended to literalize the metaphor of divine anger.*"<sup>4</sup> But Zahnd confuses anthropomorphic language that attributes body parts to God, or compares Him to a rock or a hen or an eagle, with

the reality of God's wrath. Instead of affirming the plain teaching of Scripture, Zahnd simply says, "God is not wrath."<sup>5</sup>

Once the author dispenses with any literal notion of God's wrath, he is able to make the following sweeping statement about God's character:

*"The revelation that God's single disposition toward sinners remains one of unconditional love does not mean we are exempt from the consequences of going against the grain of love. When we live against the grain of love we suffer the cards of self-inflicted suffering. This is the 'wrath of God.'"*<sup>6</sup>

So, instead of facing God's all-consuming wrath, unrepentant sinners are merely enduring a season of "self-inflicted suffering." Time does not permit a detailed examination of the myriad of passages that point to God's wrath. But notice, for example, a holy God's response to sin in Psalm 5:5-7:

*"For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man."*

R.C. Sproul helps dismantle the idea that God loves all sinners unconditionally:

*I can think of no more pernicious lie to destroy people's souls than this, which some preachers are spreading around the world: God loves you unconditionally. No, he does not. If we do not meet the conditions that he established for us in creation, then God will send us to hell forever. That is what the Bible says, even though the culture does not. He requires perfect obedience. Unless that condition is met, none of us will ever step inside the courts of heaven. Unless the terms of the covenant of creation are kept perfectly, we will rendezvous in hell, where we justly belong because of our disobedience.<sup>7</sup>*

God's response to sin in Psalm 5:5-7 may sound severe to the typical postmodern ear. But the Scriptural reality of God's wrath

stands. Despite the overwhelming biblical evidence, however, Zahnd categorically rejects the wrath of God. He argues, *“You have nothing to fear from God. God is not mad at you. God is never going to be mad at you.”*<sup>8</sup>

*“The true biblical test of any theology,”* writes Stephen Wellum, *“is whether it accounts for all of the biblical data.”*<sup>9</sup> While a few select passages that concern God’s wrath are selected from the Old Testament in Zahnd’s work (and ultimately explained away as “metaphors”), the New Testament reality of God’s wrath is simply set aside. Passages such as Matthew 3:7; John 3:36; Romans 1:18-19; 2:5; 5:9 and Colossians 3:6 are strangely missing. One wonders how 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 1:5-10 would be explained in a book that discounts the wrath of God:

*“This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering— since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as*

**“All these statements are clear indications that the author rejects penal substitutionary atonement.”**

*well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified*

*in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed because our testimony to you was believed.”*

A.W. Tozer was deeply concerned about views concerning God that failed to match the teaching of Scripture. He writes, *“It is my opinion that the Christian conception of God current in these middle years of the twentieth century is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of*

*the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amounting to a moral calamity.*"<sup>10</sup> The pattern that Tozer identified in those days continues in our day, even among people who bear the name of Christ. That pattern is repeated in *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*.

## **The Prescription for Forgiveness**

Like many other popular pastors and teachers, Zahnd repudiates penal substitutionary atonement. Influenced by Jürgen Moltmann's, *Crucified God*, the author makes these general assertions:

- *"The cross is many things, but it is not a quid pro quo to mollify an angry God."*<sup>11</sup>
- *"Yes, it was a murder that God knew would happen—because of our addiction to sin and violence—but God's foreknowledge of this killing doesn't mean that it was God's will for Jesus to be murdered."*<sup>12</sup>
- *"The cross is not a picture of payment; the cross is a picture of forgiveness. Good Friday is not about divine wrath; Good Friday is about divine love."*<sup>13</sup>
- *"The cross is not the place where God vents his wrath on Jesus. The cross is the place where human fear and anger are absorbed into God's eternal love and recycled into the saving mercy of Christ."*<sup>14</sup>

All these statements are clear indications that the author rejects penal substitutionary atonement. Zahnd echoes the rantings of Steve Chalke who has likened penal substitution to *"cosmic child abuse."* Zahnd writes, *"The cross is not where God finds a whipping boy to vent his rage upon; the cross is where God saves the world through self-sacrificing love. The only thing God will call justice is setting the world right, not punishing an innocent substitute for the petty sake of appeasement."*<sup>15</sup>

Zahnd agrees with the conclusion of Tony Jones' book, *Did God Kill Jesus?* Both writers agree and emphatically declare that God did

not kill Jesus. Zahnd continues, *“Among the many problems with Calvin’s theory of the cross is that it turns God into a petty tyrant and a moral monster. Punishing the innocent in order to forgive the guilty is monstrous logic, atrocious theology, and a gross distortion of the idea of justice.”*<sup>16</sup> Zahnd continues, *“A theory of the cross that says it was God who desired the torture and murder of Jesus on Good Friday turns the Father of Jesus into a cruel and sadistic monster. It’s salvation by divine sadism.”*<sup>17</sup>

What are we to make of these revealing statements which ridicule penal substitutionary atonement? To begin with, *anyone who compares God to a “sadistic monster” should rethink their strategy and repent.* The reality is this: *“Penal substitution,”* writes Roger Nicole, *“Is the vital center of the atonement, the linchpin without which everything else loses its foundation.”*<sup>18</sup>

Emil Brunner cuts through the theological fog and offers this timely advice: *“...He who understands the Cross aright—this is the opinion of the Reformers—understands the Bible, he understands Jesus Christ.”*<sup>19</sup>

Zahnd maintains that God knew about the cross but never “willed” the horrific events of the cross. However, two passages in the Book of Acts show the sovereignty of God in salvation and demonstrate God’s involvement in the cross from start to finish. First in Acts chapter 2:

*“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men”* (Acts 2:22–23, ESV).

And later in Acts chapter 4:

*“...for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take*

place” (Acts 4:27–28, ESV).

Affirming the love and mercy of God at the cross, but discounting His wrath is misguided, dangerous, and unbiblical. R.C. Sproul laments, “A god who is all love, all grace, all mercy, no sovereignty, no justice, no holiness, and no wrath is an idol.”

Finally, *the reckless abandonment of penal substitutionary atonement undercuts the gospel of Jesus Christ.* Penal substitutionary

**“The problems in Zahnd’s book intensify when one considers his view of Scripture.”**

atonement is not an invention of Calvin—it is the plain teaching of Scripture. Christ bore the penalty for our sins. Christ was the substitute for every sinner that would ever believe. We deserved wrath, yet Jesus stands in as our substitute (Hebrews 9:26). We were the enemies of God and separated from Him because of our sin, yet Jesus reconciled us to God (Isaiah 59:2; Colossians 1:20-22; 2<sup>nd</sup> Corin-

thians 5:18-19). We were slaves to sin, yet Jesus was our redeemer (John 8:34, 36; Mark 10:45; Colossians 1:13; Ephesians 1:7). We deserved the wrath of God, yet Jesus was our propitiation (Romans 3:25; 1<sup>st</sup> John 2:2, 4:10) and satisfied the righteous demands of the law by absorbing the white-hot wrath of the Father.

We have an unshakable hope because we are saved from the wrath of God and saved through the Son of God. These realities give rise to a new way of living. These realities spark new motivation. These truths propel us into the future and enable us to live our lives to the glory of God!

## **The Paltry Nature of Scripture**

The problems in Zahnd’s book intensify when one considers his view of Scripture. To be clear, the author claims to have a high view of Scripture. However, his view must be clarified:

*“When I point out that the Bible is the penultimate word of God that points us to the ultimate Word of God who is Jesus, I do so as a person with a high view of Scripture and a lifelong commitment to the Bible. When we speak of the Word of God, Christians should think of Jesus first and the Bible second. It’s Jesus who is the true Word of God, not the Bible.”<sup>20</sup>*

Earlier, in an attempt to strip the Bible from any kind of wrath, Zahnd writes emphatically, *“The Bible is not the perfect revelation of God; Jesus is.”* This convenient hermeneutic allows the author to bypass any form of divine wrath and bears a strange resemblance to the neo-orthodox notion that the Bible is not the Word of God; rather it “contains” the word of God.

*“Jesus is greater than the Bible,”* according to Zahnd. Indeed, he continues, *“Jesus is the Savior of all that is to be saved...including the Bible. Jesus saves the Bible from itself! Jesus shows us how to read the Bible and not be harmed by it.”<sup>21</sup>* This unwarranted pitting of the Bible against Christ is a subtle move that opens a Pandora’s box, which only invites doctrinal error and confusion. It is an unnecessary hermeneutical hurdle that trips the unsuspecting and ultimately undermines the authority, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture. Paul clearly affirms that Scripture is “breathed out” by God (2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 3:16).

We believe, however, that the Bible is God’s absolute truth for all people, at all times; it is our final authority for discerning truth. And we reject any clever hermeneutical hurdles that minimize doctrinal propositions, even realities that make us uncomfortable.

## **The Preoccupation with Mystical Experience**

The final concern in *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* makes sense of the previous unsettling theological problems—namely, a preoccupation with mystical experience. Listen to the author as he explains the pathway that led him away from the biblical vision of God:

*“But it wasn’t primarily reading theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri Nouwen, and Stanley Hauerwas that led me away*

*from an angry-God theology; it was mostly mystical experiences in prayer...”<sup>22</sup>*

Zahnd continues his explanation:

*“...But having learned to sit with Jesus in contemplative prayer, I have discovered by my own experience (emphasis mine) that what John said is true: God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. God is the eternal life of self-giving love. There is no darkness. No anger. No violence. No retribution. Only love.”<sup>23</sup>*

But do we come to understand the purposes, plans, and attributes of God through contemplative prayer? Certainly not! There are only two clear routes to knowing God. First, we come to a knowledge of God through *general revelation* (Psalm 19:1-4). General revelation will not lead people to a saving knowledge of Christ, but it makes them sufficiently accountable to God (Romans 1:19-20).

Second, we come to a knowledge of God through *special revelation*. We know God through the Lord Jesus Christ (John 17:3). We come to know Him by becoming familiar with His attributes. Thomas Watson says, *“God’s glory lies chiefly in his attributes, which are the several beams by which the divine nature shines forth.”<sup>24</sup>*

And we come to know God through the Scriptures. It is the Bible that reveals an accurate portrait of God for us. One must *never* make human experience the starting point in theology. *“To do so,”* Louis Berkhof warns, *“Drags God to man’s level. It stresses God’s immanence at the expense of his transcendence. The final result is God made in the image of man.”<sup>25</sup>* This is exactly what emerges in *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*. Whenever experiences trump Scripture, the inevitable result is theological error.

## **How Shall We Think About God?**

A false representation of God and the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is simply unacceptable. Yet, false views of the living God continue to be proclaimed and variations of the gospel continue to be propagated. A.W. Pink lamented, *“How vastly different is the God of*

*Scripture from the ‘god’ of the average pulpit!”<sup>26</sup>*

I offer three important principles that will help shape the Christian mind and enable readers to approach God with reverence and worship Him in a way that is consistent with Scripture.

### **One: Always Distinguish Between the Creator and the Creature**

Tozer writes, *“To think of the creature and Creator alike in essential being is to rob God of most of His attributes and reduce Him to the status of a creature. It is, for instance, to rob Him of His infinitude: there cannot be two unlimited substances in the universe. It is to take away His sovereignty: there cannot be two absolutely free beings in the universe, for sooner or later two completely free wills must collide.”<sup>27</sup>*

### **Two: Banish Idolatrous Thoughts of God**

Tozer adds, *“Low views of God destroy the gospel for all who hold them.”<sup>28</sup>* We must strive to worship God rightly and maintain steadfast allegiance to His Word, which is our reliable guide for determining His plans, purposes, and attributes. For *“among the sins to which the human heart is prone, hardly any other is more hateful to God than idolatry, for idolatry is at bottom a libel on His character. The idolatrous heart assumes that God is other than He is—in itself a monstrous sin...”<sup>29</sup>*

### **Three: Commit to Thinking Biblically about God**

Steven Lawson offers a fitting challenge that every person needs to hear: *“I believe that the greatest issue facing the church in any century is a proper understanding of who God is. What is needed in the contemporary church today is a steady diet of the attributes and perfections of God. It is our high theology that produces high doxology... Until there is a right knowledge of God, there will never be the right knowledge of self, nor the proper remedy applied to our own inners lives.”<sup>30</sup>*

*Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* will no doubt attract the attention of many people. It will be received by people who are unwilling

to submit to the biblical portrait of God. My desire is not to be argumentative or divisive but to invite Brian Zahnd to reconsider his assertions concerning God. For Zahnd's views lead the unsuspecting down a path that rejects a biblical portrait of God and repudiates penal substitutionary atonement. Such views lead readers on a trajectory that will, in the final analysis, lead to a spiritual wasteland. These views are bolstered by other popular writers. But truth is not a matter of majority rule—Truth is determined by God and His infallible Word.

## Conclusion

God is still angry with sinners. His wrath is being revealed from heaven against ungodly people (Romans 1:18). And the wrath of God will be unleashed on every person who refused to turn from sin and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ: *"If a man does not repent, God will whet his sword; he has bent and readied his bow; he has prepared for him his deadly weapons, making his arrows fiery shafts"* (Psalm 8:12-13).

The words of Jonathan Edwards were true on July 8, 1741, and his words remain true today:

*"The bow of God's wrath is bent and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart and strains the bow; and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood."*<sup>31</sup>

But Edwards was never content to leave his hearers without hope. He was always eager to draw the attention of people to the saving grace and mercy that flows freely from the cross:

*"God has magnified his free grace towards you, and not to others; because he has chosen you, and it pleased him to set his love upon you. O! what cause is here for praise! What obligations you are under to bless the Lord who hath dealt bountifully with you, and magnify his holy name! What cause for you to praise God in humility, to walk humbly before him."*<sup>32</sup>

The lament of A.W. Tozer gives us pause and instructs us in a day

which is fraught with theological error: “*What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.*”<sup>33</sup> May we bow low in humility before this great and awesome God. May we delight in Him and affirm each attribute that the Scriptures reveal. May our minds be ignited with zeal for His name. May our hearts be filled with joy as we contemplate His majesty. May our lips proclaim His goodness and His glory. And may our hands and feet be mobilized to share the saving message of the gospel for the joy of the nations!

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## Recommended Reading on the Progressive Christianity and Liberal Theology

In this issue of *Theology for Life Magazine*, we've been considering the dangers of progressive Christianity and how Christians should view it. We understand that we haven't covered everything on this topic, but it is our prayer that, hopefully, readers of this issue of *Theology for Life* will grow in their understanding of this topic so they can stand fast on the Word of God.

If you've found this issue helpful and would like to study this subject further, please check out the following reading list. These pieces are at the top of their genre in both excellence and readability.

### **The Person of Jesus:**

- *The Unexpected Jesus* by R.C. Sproul
- *The Person of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology* by Donald Macleod
- *Studies in Dogmatics: The Person of Christ* by G.C. Berkouwer
- *The Glory of Christ* by John Owen
- *The Person and Work of Christ* by B.B. Warfield

### **The Work of Jesus:**

- *The Truth of the Cross* by R.C. Sproul
- *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction* by Sinclair Ferguson
- *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace* by Michael Horton
- *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* by John Murray
- *The Work of Christ* by Robert Letham

- *Pierced for Our Transgressions* by Steve Jeffrey, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach
- *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* by John Owen
- *The Cross of Christ* by John Stott

## **Doctrine of Scripture:**

- *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* by J.I. Packer
- *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible* by J.I. Packer
- *Truth and Power: The Place of Scripture in the Christian Life* by J.I. Packer
- *Taking God at His Word* by Kevin DeYoung
- *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* by Michael Kruger
- *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* by G.K. Beale
- *The Doctrine of the Word of God* by John Frame
- *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* by Vern Poythress
- *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* by Vern Poythress
- *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* by B.B. Warfield
- *Understanding Scripture: An Overview of the Bible's Origin, Reliability, and Meaning* by Wayne Grudem, C. John Collins, and Thomas Schreiner
- *From the Mouth of God: Trusting, Reading, and Applying the Bible* by Sinclair Ferguson
- *The Divine Original: Authority, Self-Evidencing Light, and Power of the Scriptures* by John Owen
- *Thy Word is Truth* by E.J. Young
- *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena (vol. 1): Part IV: Revelation* by Herman Bavinck

- *Scripture Alone: Exploring the Bible's Accuracy, Authority and Authenticity* by James White
- *Scripture Alone* by R.C. Sproul
- *God, Revelation, and Authority* by Carl Henry

Obviously, there are many more great books on this subject not listed here, but hopefully you will find this a good place to start.

In Christ,  
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Marcia Montenegro was a professional astrologer who believed and practiced many New Age/Eastern beliefs before receiving Christ as her personal Savior. She began a website <http://christiananswersforthenewage.org/> to help Christians better understand the dangers of New Age/Eastern beliefs and how they are making inroads into the church and Christian community.



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