

Another Gospel?: A Lifelong Christian Seeks Truth in Response to Progressive Christianity (Alisa Childers, 2020)

What on earth would cause a strong and devout Christian to doubt her faith? I was invited by a progressive Christian pastor to participate in a discussion group. The class lasted 4 years. I lasted 4 months. Every precious belief I held about God, Jesus, and the Bible was placed on an intellectual chopping block and hacked to pieces. Over the next few years I learned about my essentials of my faith by reconstructing my faith.

Deconstruction is the process of systematically dissecting and often rejecting the beliefs you grew up with. It was the progressive pastor's deconstruction, and he was attempting to take us with him. The Christianity I had known was deep and real and true.

He said: *For hundreds of years after the death of Jesus, groups adopted radically conflicting writings about the details of his life and the meaning of his ministry and murdered those who disagreed. There were no universally accepted manuscripts that set out what it meant to be a Christian, so most sects had their own gospels. Christianity was in chaos in its early days, with some sects declaring the others heretics. Creeds became an important form of communication to keep those 1st-century believers on the same page. These were the convictions they lived and died for. Creeds were an easy way to summarize and memorize their essential beliefs.*

The earliest creed in the history of Christianity is probably the one found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5. The easiest way to detect it is when the writer himself tells what he's doing. The 1st Christians had what we now call the Old Testament, and their core beliefs were supported by and affirmed in those writings. They also had the "the apostles' teaching." The creed mentions 12 of these eyewitnesses, and in the very next verse, Paul refers to hundreds more: *Then Jesus appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.*

Paul wrote this when most of those witnesses were still living. We have no record of any of the 500 witnesses challenging that testimony. In essence, Jesus was saying, "Remember Moses? Yeah, that was me in that bush." They knew he was claiming to be God. The "gnostic Gospels," (the 1st version of the Progressive Gospel) described a very different Jesus from the one known in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The core canon was established as Scripture among Christians by the end of the 1st century. These "other" Gospels weren't written until the 2nd and 3rd centuries. The Bible itself demonstrates that the earliest Christians knew the difference between books that were considered Scripture and books that were not. Almost as soon as the New Testament Gospels and the letters of Paul were written, early Christians put them on the same level as the Old Testament Scriptures. I was absolutely astonished when I learned that within the New Testament itself we find Paul quoting Luke's Gospel and calling it *Scripture* (1 Tim 5:18). Likewise, Peter refers to *all [of Paul's] letters* as Scripture (2 Pt 3:15-16). That's as early as it gets, folks. The New Testament documents were written by actual eyewitnesses (or careful historians who interviewed the

eyewitnesses) who walked with Jesus, talked with Jesus, and were commissioned by Jesus to write Christian scripture.

I call it "historic" because that's exactly what it is. Between the pre-New Testament creeds and the New Testament documents themselves, we have the original beliefs that defined Christianity and made it unique in the world. Every reformation was an attempt to get back to the earliest, most biblical, and most authentic version of Christianity. In my view, it should be up to Jesus and the apostles to define what Christianity is.

The pastor was blaming the teachings of historic Christianity for real or perceived wrongs. Without most of us even realizing it, much of the current evangelical culture has become a cult of personality. These rationalizations send wounded sheep into the arms of progressive Christianity, but ultimately they will be left to bleed out. The human race has a problem—a sin problem. There is only 1 cure, and sadly, many Christians throw away the cure because of a bad church experience.

One of the main reasons Christian youth abandoned their faith after high school was because, at some point in their lives, they'd expressed doubts about what they'd been taught to believe. Instead of providing a safe place to process those uncertainties, well-meaning church leaders told them they shouldn't even ask such questions in the 1st place. This led them to conclude that Christianity was a house of cards—the church couldn't deal with their doubts, and neither could God. Biblical faith is not a blind leap; it involves knowledge—that God has spoken and is trustworthy. False definitions of faith are often based on a misunderstanding of the difference between unbelief and doubt. Unbelief is a decision of the will, but doubt tends to bubble up within the context of faith. Paul says that to disbelieve God is to actually *suppress the truth*. Unbelief is a conscious choice to live as if God doesn't exist—and to understand doubt, it's essential to understand faith. If more churches would welcome the honest questions of doubters and engage with the intellectual side of their faith, they would become safe places for those who experience doubt. In progressive Christianity, doubt has become a badge of honor to bask in, rather than an obstacle to face and overcome.

Another fundamental aspect of critical theory prioritizes "lived experience" and identity rather than rationality in discovering and determining what is true. It functions as a worldview, a way of seeing the world that answers questions like Who are we? Why are we here? What is wrong with the world? How can this problem be fixed? What is the meaning of life? According to historic Christianity we are human beings made in the image of a holy, loving, and just God. Sin against a holy God is what's wrong with the world. The sin problem is fixed by Jesus taking the punishment for our sins upon himself. The meaning of life is to glorify God.

When someone accepts the idea of critical theory, it excuses them from upholding biblical morality and even considers the historic Christian sexual ethic to be oppressive. It focuses on actions over belief. That becomes just another works-based gospel. We can throw the raw magnitude of our doubts, questions, and piercing grief into His capable lap, or we can gather it all up into clenched hands and declare Him incompetent or nonexistent.

Modernism is the idea that truth could be found through common sense, logic, human reason, and science. **Postmodernism** rejects the idea that absolute truth can be known. What someone does became more important than what they believe. Belief statements are unavoidable. These “non-statements” end up being just as dogmatic as any faith statement progressives might be unintentionally criticizing.

Today there is general unity among orthodox Christians surrounding 3 topics: the Bible, the Cross, and the gospel. Progressives talk about 2 different faiths, 2 different kinds of love, 2 different lords. Although class discussions revolved around many different topics of faith, the Bible was almost always at the center of conversation. It became clear that for people to deconstruct their faith they had to 1st figure out what to do with the Bible.

I wanted to read the church fathers for myself. I was delighted to discover something so ancient yet so familiar—a deep love of Scripture and an almost indignant defense of the gospel. The genesis of Christianity is that the Bible—every word—is the Word of God. From the beginning, Christians have agreed that the Bible is cohesive, coherent, inspired by God, and authoritative for our lives. Irenaeus himself wrote some important works refuting heretical views that were infiltrating the church toward the end of the 2nd century. He was discipled by a believer named Polycarp, who’d been personally discipled by the apostles.

Augustine wrote: This Mediator, having spoken what He judged sufficient 1st by the prophets, then by His own lips, and afterwards by the apostles, has besides produced the Scripture which is called canonical, which has paramount authority, and to which we yield assent in all matters of which we ought not to be ignorant, and yet cannot know of ourselves. For it seems to me that most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books.

The progressive view of the Bible is to see it as primarily a human book. To believe what you please, and not to believe what you please, is to believe yourselves, and not the gospel. Skeptics attack the Bible. Christians have been answering these claims for the whole of our history. Original sin explains what’s wrong with the world, and it’s an integral part of the gospel. The gospel means “good news” because it is the cure for the disease of sin. God is holy, which means he can’t have any unity with sin. The rule of faith is basically a convenient summary of what ‘orthodox’ Christians in the 2nd century (and later) regarded as the earliest apostolic teaching.” Early Christians were united on beliefs that were considered to be the nonnegotiables. In other words, they were united about the gospel.

There is 1 God, the creator of heaven and earth. This same God spoke through the prophets of the Old Testament regarding the coming Messiah. Jesus is the Son of God, born from the seed of David, through the virgin Mary. Jesus is the creator of all things, who came into the world, God in the flesh. Jesus came to bring salvation and redemption for those who believe in him. Jesus physically suffered and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, raised bodily from the dead, and exalted to the right hand of God the Father. Jesus will return again to judge the world. The

gospel follows the narrative arc of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration.

By denying original sin and God’s plan to redeem humans and reconcile them to himself, the progressive gospel gives us an impotent deity who can only stand in “solidarity” with humans in our suffering and evil but can’t cure it. This is not the gospel of Jesus. Irenaeus wrote in AD 180, **Error, indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced more true than the truth itself.**

Like wheat and tares, true ideas and false ideas have grown together throughout church history. I realized that my differences with the progressives were much more substantial than I had realized at first—and that Christians have been fighting these battles for 2000 years. The word translated as tare in Mt 13:24-43 is not just a generic word for weeds. It describes a specific weed, darnel, which looks very similar to wheat as it matures, but its grains are dark and poisonous. The tares are pulled up first, then the wheat.

The circumcision party of the 1st century was trying to add something to what Jesus accomplished. But Jesus + anything = a **false gospel**. Gnostics, therefore, believed that Jesus came not to save us from sin but to impart special knowledge that would lead us to participate in the divine pleroma. To find this knowledge was to find salvation. Like the progressive Christianity found in our culture, it mimicked Christianity in many ways. The Gnostics and today’s progressive both claim sources of knowledge outside the Bible that can and should judge Scripture.

Ask of whatever has gone out of date, “Was it ever refuted or did it simply become unfashionable?” There was a time in history when the cultural influencers pretty much agreed that slavery was just fine. Progressive Christianity looks a bit like warmed-over Marcionism, which believes that the God we find in the Old Testament is different from the *just, holy, and compassionate God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ* we find in 2 Cor 1:3. **Heresy** is Jesus minus something. I didn’t know the difference between me and a Muslim who felt exactly the same way about his Quran as I did about my Bible but Christianity stands or falls based on the resurrection of Jesus being a real historical event. The Quran teaches that Jesus didn’t die on the cross.

Textual criticism is a discipline, the method scholars use to reconstruct the wording of any ancient writing for which we no longer have the original documents. The most reliable scholars are those who admit their bias, are honest about it, and try their best to be impartial. Before the printing press was invented, the only way to make copies of books and writings was to do it by hand. Handwritten copies are called manuscripts. We have over 5000 manuscripts of the New Testament in Greek—more copies and earlier copies than any work of ancient classical literature. Most copying variants don’t affect the meaning of the text. This is another fact that both Christian and secular scholars agree on.

Our New Testament has been copied with an astounding degree of accuracy. No other work of ancient classical literature comes close and not 1 of them changes any core Christian doctrine. This is also something most scholars

agree on. I was satisfied that the New Testament that sat on my desk accurately reflected what was written almost 2000 years ago.

I learned that what theologians refer to as progressive revelation is “progressive” in the sense that God continued to reveal more information to human beings as time went on. But it doesn’t mean that the revelation progressed from error to truth. The progressive revelation we find in Scripture never contradicts itself and it culminates in Jesus Christ. While it’s true that the disciples of Jesus represent the 1st Christians, they were also the ones closest to Jesus. They knew him. They walked with him. They learned personally from God in the flesh. For us to assume that we know more about God than they do is arrogant and shortsighted.

Christian scholars all generally agree that the scriptures were written by the end of the 1st century. Mainstream scholars who disbelieve that Jesus was the Messiah nevertheless date the Gospels within the time limits of reliable memory. The 4 Gospel writers displayed knowledge of local geography, even of places that were quite obscure. Their use of personal names was spot-on with current scholarly research about the popularity and usage of names in that time and place. The New Testament displays a correct understanding of botanical terms, financial norms, and local languages and customs. We tend to paint ourselves in the best possible light. So 1 of the traits of authentic eyewitness testimony that historians look for in ancient writings is called the “criterion of embarrassment.” The Gospel writers broke convention and even invited ridicule by relying on the word of women as evidence for 1 of the greatest miracles in history. The Gospel writers also included many demanding sayings of Jesus and difficult details of his life. I might not include the fact that Jesus’ own family called Him crazy. I would certainly not have the central figure of my new religion be crucified—when my own Holy Book says that anyone who is crucified is cursed. If the gospel was fabricated by a bunch of 1st-century Jewish men, their tendency would be to simplify, unify, clarify, and beautify Jesus’ sayings.

The earliest manuscripts and many other ancient witnesses do not have John 7:53-8:11. The only other significantly long section that most scholars believe is not authentic is Mark 16:9-20. “Were there 2 donkeys involved in Jesus’ Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem as Matthew reports, or was there 1, as Mark, Luke, and John record?” At Jesus’ resurrection, was there 1 angel as Matthew and Mark mention, or 2 as Luke and John describe?”

When eyewitnesses have a chance to talk with each other, compare notes, and share observations, they will inevitably harmonize their stories. This is a surefire sign that key details essential to solving the case are probably being left out or smoothed over. Homicide detective J. Warner Wallace expects authentic testimonies to differ from 1 another because each eyewitness has a unique perspective, worldview, and life experience. This is why when, as a committed atheist, Wallace read the Gospel accounts, he wasn’t bothered by the differences. In fact, if he was troubled by anything, it was that what he found in the pages of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were the characteristics of authentic eyewitness testimony he had been trained as a detective to recognize. This was 1 of the pieces of evidence that would eventually lead him to faith in

Christ. Each wrote from a different perspective and with a different audience in mind. A colt is a young male that is still dependent on its mother, which is why Matthew records the 2 donkeys being found together. Luke would not have needed to include the fact that the 2nd donkey (the mother) was present because it would have had no significance to their audience. Neither Mark nor Luke nor John state that there was only 1 donkey. A little bit of knowledge will make you an atheist, but a lot of knowledge will make you a Christian.

Jesus taught that *rather than coming to abolish the Law and the Prophets, he came to fulfill them* (Matthew 5:17). Sealing the fate of the Pharisees, Jesus was also affirming the entire Old Testament as Scripture. Jesus fought using the authority of the Scriptures. The devil quoted the Scripture correctly but twisted its meaning. It was a battle over interpretation. Jesus has the resources of heaven available, yet he fights by using the authority of the Scriptures. The Scriptures have spoken. That’s the end of the conversation. Jesus said, *How is it that David, speaking by the Spirit, called him [the Messiah] Lord?* This is where we get our very definition of divine inspiration—from Jesus himself. Whenever Jesus said, *It is written*, he wasn’t appealing just to authority but also to inspiration. It is clear that Jesus understood *It is written* to be equivalent to *God says. For God commanded* (Matthew 15:4). *Have you not read what was said to you by God?* He told them that they *void the word of God by [their] tradition*. In years past, it was assumed that if you called yourself a Christian, you believed in biblical authority.

Every time we turn from the truth of God, we introduce hell into the world. Every time we call evil “good” and good “evil,” we create little pockets of hell on earth. Although universalism appeals to our modern sensibilities, it is not what the Bible teaches. Satan was the 1 who effectively unleashed hell on earth. The nature of hell is debated, but 3 things are made clear. 1st, hell is eternal. 2nd, in hell souls are conscious. 3rd, hell is torment. It’s God giving them their way. When he depicts what will happen to the goats, he says *they will depart from him into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels* (Mt 25: 41). It was created as a type of quarantine for evil—namely, the devil and demons. In a shocking pronouncement of *woe* in Matthew 11, Jesus condemns 2 whole cities to a harsher judgment in the afterlife than Sodom. The Bible regularly speaks of sin and judgment with varying levels of severity and punishment. Hell is not only necessary, it is ultimately loving and just. If someone desires sin and corruption now, what would make me think he would desire to be separated from sin and corruption for eternity? If someone wants to bring their self-serving sin into heaven, what would it say about God if he allowed it in?

We understand Jesus’ death through the lens of the sacrificial system. If it wasn’t something God instituted, why did Jesus even need to die? This tenet is mentioned in the early creed, which Paul recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5. Eventually this doctrine came to be known as substitutionary atonement. It means that Jesus died in our place—as our substitute. The 1 doctrine most commonly rejected by progressive Christians. This belief has united Christians throughout the ages and across cultures and continents.

These sacrifices would require a bull (for the high priest or congregation) or a flock animal (for regular citizens).

According to progressive Christians, Jesus didn't need to die, but he submitted himself to the will of the people. According to their wisdom, the historic view makes God nothing more than an abusive father. **The Lord is not being a killjoy by forbidding sin; he is being a loving Savior.** The wrath of God is the controlled and righteous judgment of anything that opposes the Lord's perfect nature and love. The wrath of God means that 1 day all evil and sin will be quarantined and that those who have put their trust in Jesus will be entirely separated from wickedness and safe from the clutches of suffering and corruption forever. God's wrath exists because he is love. I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. Every sin causes damage, and someone pays for the damage every single time. Without the wrath of God toward sin, heaven would be full of hell.

Those who denounce God's wrath or accuse the biblical God of being a moral monster are often the same people who complain that he allows suffering and evil in the world. Yet Scripture tells us of a God who not only gives us an answer for the problem of evil but literally becomes the answer. Hebrews 9:22 tells us plainly, *Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.* The Christianity they construct is not the real thing. It's an imitation created in their own image. *It was the will of the Lord to crush Him* (Is 53:5) Written about 700 years before Christ, Isaiah is 1 of the places where the "penal" part of substitutionary atonement is discussed. Let's go back to the night before Jesus died to see how He viewed the Cross. *This is my body, which is given for you. This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.* (Luke 22:19-20). He was instituting the new covenant. Jesus saw himself as the ultimate sacrificial lamb. He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself? In reality Progressives are simply constructing a codependent and impotent god who is powerless to stop evil. That god is not really good. That god is not the God of the Bible. That god cannot save you.

What building blocks of our faith are the essentials? Paul wrote that these beliefs were of *1st importance*. Old Testament believers were saved in the same way we are now: by grace through faith (Genesis 15:6) human depravity (I am a sinner); God's unity (There is 1 God); the necessity of grace (I am saved by grace); Christ's deity (Christ is God); Christ's humanity (Christ is man); Christ's atoning death (Christ died for my sins); Christ's bodily resurrection (Christ rose from the dead); and the necessity of faith (I must believe).

Believing in the Bible isn't what saves you, but the gospel can only be fully known if the Bible actually is the inerrant and inspired Word of God. Faith is trust in a person—Jesus. That trust is based on truth and evidence. You have to know some things about Him in order to follow Him and trust Him. The insane beauty of the whole experience is that God led me to the class with the progressive pastor. He knew the end from the beginning. In his unfathomable love and grace, He walked me right into that class and held my hand the whole time. I know that if I could look back on every meeting and every dark moment of doubt—every time I flailed my arms to stay above the stormy water—I would see something I didn't see in real time. **It was exciting to discover that a**

detailed scholarly examination of the Christian worldview only lends support to its veracity.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again. It is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: *ye were bought at a price* and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.

Because progressive Christianity offers me nothing of value, it gives no hope for the afterlife and no joy in this 1. It offers 100 denials with nothing concrete to affirm. I believed Scripture was only a story ancient people told themselves about God, I would lose the living words of God.

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