

# The Quarterly Journal



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## The New Look of the Prosperity Gospel Joel Osteen Offers You Your Best Life Now

by Gary E. Gilley

Rhonda Byrne's New Age book and video, *The Secret*,<sup>1</sup> teaches that we can "create [our] own happiness through the law of attraction." Whether it is cash, health, prosperity, or happiness, all can be ours if we will just learn to use "the secret." Byrne tells us, "Disease cannot live in a body that is in a healthy emotional state." But he warned: "If you have a disease and you are focusing on it and talking to people about it, you are going to create more disease cells."<sup>2</sup>

Such rhetoric should sound familiar to anyone even faintly aware of the Word-Faith movement, often called "the prosperity gospel." This teaching has been infiltrating evangelicalism for decades and its adherents are now the world's fastest-growing segment of Christianity. For example, some have estimated that up to 90 percent of Africans claiming to be Christians believe in the prosperity gospel.

Well-known personalities within the movement include Kenneth Copeland, Robert Tilton, David (Paul) Yonggi Cho, Benny Hinn, Marilyn Hickey,

Frederick Price, John Avanzini, Charles Capps, Jerry Savelle, Morris Cerullo, Joyce Meyer, and Paul and Jan Crouch. The late Kenneth Hagin was an influence on Copeland and many of the others.



Word-Faith adherents believe that faith works like a power or force. Through faith we can obtain anything we want: health, wealth, success, and more. However, this force is released only through the *spoken word*. As we speak words of faith, power is discharged to accomplish our desires.

In *Christianity in Crisis*, Hank Hanegraaff summarizes the theology (continues on page 16)

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# Editorials

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## A BIBLICAL DEFENSE OF DISCERNMENT MINISTRIES

We live in an age in which it is difficult to stand for the faith. Not only do those on the front lines of discernment face opposition, they also may be hit by “friendly fire.” One of our privileges in light of this understanding of God’s revelation is to examine all ideas, teachings, and thoughts in the light of Scripture, which can be trusted to reveal God’s will in all matters “that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3).

The Apostle Paul modeled this approach for us when he wrote that we are “casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). Those ideas that survive this examination can be embraced. But those ideas that lack biblical foundation must be disposed of as “every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God.”

One of the qualifications for an elder is that he understand well the Scriptures so that he can hold fast the faithful word, as well as exhort and convict by sound doctrine those who contradict it (Titus 1:9). A pastor or elder is not equipped to lead the church of Christ because he makes an excellent CEO, has an MBA, knows how to win and influence people, or has a sunny personality — although none of these things rule him out. But the Holy Spirit did not list these among the

requirements for church leaders (Titus 1:5-8; 1 Timothy 3:1-7). Instead, the Spirit focused on the need for elders to know biblical truth and be able to communicate and defend it.

Unfortunately, what God considers essential many consider optional or even detrimental to ministry. Few churches today attract large crowds because of careful, systematic teaching of the Word. People will flock to churches with great programs for all ages, a well-organized sports schedule, or to hear professional-level music, but sound doctrine holds little attraction. Yet it is sound doctrine that God mandates. Lives are not changed by programs and entertainment; they are transformed by the renewing of our minds that can only come through exposure to the truth of God’s Word (Romans 12:2).

If the teaching of sound doctrine is unappetizing to many, to expose false doctrine is repulsive. Discernment is considered unnecessary, unwanted, and mean-spirited. To spend any time critiquing false teachings is to invite charges of negativism, division, and worse. Yet we must decide whether we want to please the Lord or men and, because the Lord commands us to “refute those who contradict” sound doctrine, we have no choice. This is not to say that we spend the bulk of our teaching time on issues that don’t measure up to Scripture; for to do so would throw us out of balance very quickly. The vast majority of teaching from the pulpit and other forums within the church should be “exhortation in sound

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# News Updates

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## JESUS SEMINAR REVIVED

The presumed demise of The Jesus Seminar may have been short-lived. The controversial group has battled extinction following the death of its founder, Robert Funk, who died in September 2005. But now, through the efforts of its outgoing board chairman, Lane C. McGaughy, new life is being breathed into the organization.

In March 1985, Funk led a volunteer group of more than 70 “biblical” scholars who began meeting with the intent to establish which words spoken by Christ recorded in the Gospels were truly authentic. The consensus of the seminar was that only about 18 percent of the words attributed to Jesus by the Gospel writers were genuine. The group maintained that “the story of the historical Jesus ended with his death on the cross and the decay of his body.” The bodily resurrection and ascension of Jesus are myths according to seminar members.

The Jesus Seminar started as a part of the Westar Institute in Santa Rosa, Calif. While it was claimed that “Westar was never on the verge of closing shop,” McGaughy last year had “engineered a major money-saving relocation to Willamette University in Salem, Oregon,” according to a report in *The Christian Century*. Over \$1.5 million of a \$3.5 million funding campaign to help provide a successor to Funk has been met.

The organization continues to fulfill the approximate 25 requests it receives annually from various churches for its one-day conferences.

—MKG

## BENNY HINN KEPT FROM CRUSADE

Thousands of Benny Hinn’s miracle-seeking enthusiasts in East London were left disappointed last October when the controversial faith healer was denied entry into Britain. According to a *Times Online* report, “Board Agency officials turned him back when he landed with his private jet because he had failed to obtain a ‘letter of sponsorship’ from a church.” The article also said that after being refused admission, Hinn “flew on to Paris and tried to enter Britain at [London’s] Luton airport but was again turned back.”

The snafu came about as a result of a tough new points-based system, which went into effect November 2008, for obtaining visas by all visitors to the United Kingdom. Hinn had brought his miracle crusades to

England several times before without incident, but the recent change included more stringent rules for ministers.

Bishop John Francis substituted for Hinn during the three-day series of meetings. A live video link was set-up for Hinn to clarify and apologize for the “unfortunate situation” to his faithful attending the services.

Yet not all Hinn’s flock were sympathetic. Jill Masefield, who attended the “Fire Conference and Miracle Service,” said, “It has cost me a fortune in hotel bills and I feel we have been led up the garden path. It is extremely unfair.”

According to one report, “Plans are already in place to get the necessary visas for Pastor Benny Hinn to be able to come and preach the Gospel in the United Kingdom.”

—MKG

## JOYCE MEYER EXPANDS VIEWING AUDIENCE

In September, Joyce Meyer Ministries pursued its most robust venture into television programming when it signed on to be a part of the Lifetime Television network. Meyer’s program, “Enjoying Everyday Life,” made its debut on Sept. 28, and airs Monday through Friday. The exposure on the Lifetime network is said to increase the St. Louis-based minister’s potential viewing audience by 98 million homes. Meyer’s ministry says it is now capable of reaching nearly 3 billion people worldwide.

More good news came Meyer’s way when her ministry received praise from Senator Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa) who said of the ministry, “It’s good to see increased financial accountability, transparency, board governance, and ethical fund-raising taken seriously.” Meyer’s was one of six prominent charismatic ministries being investigated by Grassley and the Senate Finance Committee.

Yet not all of Meyer’s exposure of late has been positive. Last May, Chris Coleman, 32, Meyer’s personal bodyguard, was arrested and charged with three counts of first-degree murder in the strangulations of his wife, Sheri, and young sons, Garrett and Gavin, in their Columbia, Ill., home. Coleman began working for Meyer in November 2000, and was reportedly being paid an annual salary of \$100,000. A judge ordered Joyce Meyer Ministries to release more than 400 pages of its documents pertaining to Coleman’s employment, which the ministry tried to keep confidential. Coleman is also alleged to have been having an affair with a high school friend of Sheri’s while on ministry trips with Meyer.

—MKG

# Interrupting Bart Ehrman



## Responding to a Contemporary Apostle of Doubt

by J. Greg Sheryl



The Apostle Paul reminds us, “For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain” (Titus 1:10-11, NASB).

In the Garden of Eden, the serpent initiated his plan to cause the downfall of man with his cunning words to Eve. First he questioned, then contradicted the Word of God. Satan, who was revealed to be that serpent of old (Revelation 12:9), has used this tactic ever since.

In a similar manner, Bart D. Ehrman would have you believe that the Bible isn't trustworthy; but is instead a human book and not God's Word. He expounds his skeptical religious views through his books, some of which are aimed at a popular audience, such as *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*;<sup>1</sup> *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question — Why We Suffer*;<sup>2</sup> and his most recent salvo, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)*.<sup>3</sup>

Ehrman's books are dangerous for at least three reasons: First, because he writes in an engaging and accessible manner; second, because he writes some of his books for a popular audience; and third, because he

writes from a skeptical viewpoint. Because he is a New Testament scholar, it is easy to assume that when one is reading his work one is getting reliable, unbiased information, when such is not always the case.

Ehrman is a bona fide New Testament scholar who has produced some scholarly works. However, his scholarship is biased and often employs a one-sided presentation. Ehrman is an agnostic, and despite his claim to have been a Christian at one time, he is certainly no friend of the Bible or of Christianity.

PFO director G. Richard Fisher in a previous issue of *The Quarterly Journal* dealt with Ehrman and his above-cited book, *Misquoting Jesus*.<sup>4</sup>

Most fully in the Introduction to *Misquoting Jesus*,<sup>5</sup> but in shorter form elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> Ehrman gives what might be called an “anti-testimony,” a description of how he came to abandon his belief in the Bible as the Word of God. In the paperback edition of *Misquoting Jesus*, and at least two of his other books, he also writes about how he devolved from supposedly being a “born-again Christian” to the agnostic he is today.<sup>7</sup>

### THE TRAGIC TALE OF BART EHRMAN

Ehrman grew up in a nominally Christian home. He was baptized in a Congregational church, but attended

an Episcopal church, beginning in about the fifth grade. Ehrman claims that at age 15, he was born again, due to the influence of a Youth For Christ leader. Later, he studied at Moody Bible Institute, where it appears he began having questions about biblical inerrancy.

After earning a 3-year diploma at Moody, he finished his undergraduate studies at Wheaton College — “Billy Graham's alma mater,” as he says.<sup>8</sup> There he enjoyed his studies in Greek, but his questions about biblical inerrancy grew. Eventually, Ehrman decided to pursue a master's degree and a doctorate at Princeton Theological Seminary, because the famed textual scholar Bruce M. Metzger taught there.

At one time, Princeton was a theologically orthodox Presbyterian seminary, featuring such stalwarts of orthodoxy as B.B. Warfield and J. Gresham Machen. However, those days had long since passed. In fact, Machen, along with a group of professors, had left the seminary following a 1929 controversy over theological liberalism there. Ehrman was definitely aware of Princeton being a theologically liberal institution. He writes:

“I guess I did know *one* thing about Princeton Seminary: it was not an evangelical institution. ... I learned from friends that Prince-

ton was a 'liberal' seminary where they did not hold to the literal truth and verbal inspiration of the Bible. My biggest challenge would not be purely academic ... It would be holding on to my faith in the Bible as the inspired and inerrant Word of God. And so I came to Princeton Theological Seminary young and poor but passionate, and armed to take on all those liberals with their watered-down view of the Bible."<sup>9</sup>

However, Ehrman was not equal to the challenge. While at Princeton, his questions about biblical inerrancy came to a head. The final straw came in a professor's response to a term paper he had written. The paper dealt with a passage in the second chapter of Mark's Gospel where there appears to be a discrepancy between whom Jesus identifies as the high priest during a certain Old Testament event, and whom the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel says it was (cf. Mark 2:25-26 with 1 Samuel 21:1-6). Ehrman aimed to demonstrate that there was no contradiction. He believed his professor would appreciate his reasoning. Ehrman describes what happened:

"But at the end of my paper he made a simple one-line comment that for some reason went straight through me. He wrote: 'Maybe Mark just made a mistake.' I started thinking about it, considering all the work I had put into the paper, realizing that I had had to do some pretty fancy exegetical footwork to get around the problem, and that my solution was in fact a bit of a stretch. I finally concluded, 'Hmm ... maybe Mark *did* make a mistake.' Once I made that admission, the floodgates opened. For if there could be one little, picayune mistake in Mark 2, maybe there could be mistakes in other places as well."<sup>10</sup>

Although this is not the first time anyone had ever stumbled across this Bible difficulty — a fact that Ehrman seems to have known at the time he

wrote his paper<sup>11</sup> — for some unexplained reason, Ehrman at this point abandoned his view of biblical inerrancy for the professor's explanation of biblical errancy. It seems that this became Ehrman's first step away from biblical Christianity toward his present agnosticism. After obtaining his doctorate from Princeton Theological Seminary, he became interim pastor of Princeton Baptist Church for a year.

Although Ehrman became a liberal Christian at Princeton, he didn't become an agnostic until some years later. He claims that he became an agnostic, not because of his lowered view of Scripture, but because of his inability to understand how "an all-powerful and loving God [could allow] so much excruciating pain and unspeakable suffering [in the world]. ... Ultimately, [this question] was the reason I lost my faith."<sup>12</sup> Later, Ehrman elaborates by saying:

"Eventually, though, I felt compelled to leave Christianity altogether. ... I could no longer explain how there can be a good and all-powerful God actively involved with this world, given the state of things. For many people who inhabit this planet, life is a cesspool of misery and suffering. I came to a point where I simply could not believe that there is a good and kindly disposed Ruler who is in charge of it. The problem of suffering became for me the problem of faith. After many years of grappling with the problem, trying to explain it, thinking through the explanations that others have offered ... about nine or ten years ago I finally admitted defeat, came to realize that I could no longer believe in the God of my tradition, and acknowledged that I was an agnostic."<sup>13</sup>

Ehrman then describes his current spiritual state:

"I don't 'know' if there is a God; but I think that if there is one, he certainly isn't the one proclaimed by the Judeo-Christian tradition, the one who is actively and

powerfully involved in this world. And so I stopped going to church. Only on rare occasions do I go to church now, usually when my wife, Sarah, very much wants me to go."<sup>14</sup>

In this same book, Ehrman proclaims, "I had solid Christian credentials and knew about the Christian faith from the inside out."<sup>15</sup> Obviously, only the Lord knows Ehrman's heart; however, it is very possible that Ehrman never was a true Christian.

## EHRMAN AND SUFFERING

Ehrman's recent book on human suffering is called *God's Problem*. It is easy to sympathize with Ehrman's struggle with the problem of human — not to mention, *Christian* — suffering. Within his book, Ehrman cites the suffering of himself and others, including his father. However, in the supplementary material to his 2005 book, *Misquoting Jesus*, he says of his own life:

"About seven or eight years ago, I became an agnostic. When I tell people this, they often tell me they think that's sad — so perhaps I should add that I don't find it sad. ... And as I have said on numerous occasions, I have a fantastic life — a brilliant and beautiful wife, a great pair of kids, a terrific teaching position with bright students, lots of time (though never enough!) for leisure and writing, and on and on. And so I consider myself a rather 'happy agnostic.'"<sup>16</sup>

Given this characterization of his own life, it is unclear just how much personal suffering Ehrman has experienced. Perhaps his experiences of suffering are largely — though not entirely — vicarious.

Despite Ehrman's apparent genuine concern for the problem of suffering, in one passage in his book, *God's Problem*, he admits:

"If I can drink bottled water delivered to my door every week, nice French wine, micro-brewed beer, and Diet Cokes on demand, surely someone living

somewhere else should be able to drink water without parasites in it. I admit, I don't much like thinking about this myself. When I turn on the NCAA basketball tournament tonight and pour out a Pale Ale or two, I probably am not going to be reflecting on the fact that during the time it takes me to watch the game, three thousand people around the world will die because they have only unsanitary water to drink. But maybe I should think about it. And maybe I should try to do something about it."<sup>17</sup>

One can certainly appreciate and perhaps even identify with Ehrman's honesty here about his apathy toward the plight of those less fortunate. However, it seems incongruous for Ehrman to claim the problem of suffering as his reason for agnosticism while admitting and tolerating such apathy toward it.

Although the full title of his book is *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question — Why We Suffer*, the book should probably be titled, *Ehrman's Problem: How My Book Fails To Answer the Question of Why We Suffer*. For, at the end of the nearly 300-page book, Ehrman concludes:

"What we have in the here and now is all that there is. We need to live life to its fullest and help others as well to enjoy the fruits of the land. In the end, we may not have ultimate solutions to life's problems. We may not know the why's and wherefore's. But just because we don't have an answer to suffering does not mean that we cannot have a response to it. Our response should be to work to alleviate suffering wherever possible and to live life as well as we can."<sup>18</sup>

### EHRMAN'S VIEW OF THE BIBLE

Ehrman's latest popular book is *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)*. This book's title has some things in common with

some of his earlier popular books (e.g., *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*; *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question — Why We Suffer*) in several respects: First, both the main title and the subtitle of the book are provocative and sensationalistic; second, all of these titles denigrate the authority of Scripture and cast doubts on its veracity; and third, the subtitles of *Misquoting Jesus* and *Jesus, Interrupted* both implicitly promise to give the reader the real scoop of which the ordinary public is unaware.

Ehrman's latest book may be his most ambitious popular-level assault on the Christian faith, because he not only reiterates the central theses of his two previous books, but also adds to them. In this book, he not only attacks the reliability of New Testament manuscripts and blames the fact of human suffering for his agnosticism, but he additionally asserts that the Bible contains numerous contradictions, some of which he considers irresolvable. He also exposes what he considers to be the human, rather than divine, origins of Christianity, the canon of Scripture, and the development of Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the divine-human natures of Jesus, and so forth. If this is Ehrman's *magnum opus* assault on Christianity, then the reader is left to wonder what to make of Ehrman's weak disclaimer, found in the book's final chapter, in which he says:

"Some readers will find it surprising that I do not see the material in the preceding chapters as an attack on Christianity or an agnostic's attempt to show that faith, even Christian faith, is meaningless and absurd. That is not what I think, and it is not what I have been trying to accomplish."<sup>19</sup>

The book's subtitle says that the Bible contains "hidden contradictions" and that for some reason we don't know about them. Ehrman writes that the clergy are involved in a large-scale cover-up of information they know about the Bible, but have

deliberately decided not to share with the laity. Ehrman intends to redress this injustice with his book. He writes:

"... not only are most Americans (increasingly) ignorant of the *contents* of the Bible, but they are also almost completely in the dark about what scholars [especially liberal scholars] have been saying about the Bible for the past two centuries. This book is meant to help redress that problem. It could be seen as my attempt to let the cat out of the bag."<sup>20</sup>

At the end of the same chapter — appropriately titled "A Historical Assault on Faith" — Ehrman returns to this justification for writing the book, stating:

"This book is not, then, about my loss of faith. It is, however, about how certain kinds of faith — particularly the faith in the Bible as the historically inerrant and inspired Word of God — cannot be sustained in light of what we as historians know about the Bible. The views I set out in this book are standard fare among scholars. ... But most people in the street, and in the pew, have heard none of this before. That is a real shame, and it is time that something is done to correct the problem."<sup>21</sup>

### EHRMAN'S ACCUSATIONS

Ehrman has already begun his assault on the Bible's credibility by page 5, where he charges:

"The Bible is filled with discrepancies, many of them irreconcilable contradictions. Moses did not write the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) and Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did not write the Gospels. There are other books that did not make it into the Bible that at one time or another were considered canonical — other Gospels, for example, allegedly written by Jesus' followers Peter, Thomas, and Mary. The Exodus probably did not happen as described in the Old Testament. The conquest

of the Promised Land is probably based on legend. The Gospels are at odds on numerous points and contain nonhistorical material. It is hard to know whether Moses ever existed and what, exactly, the historical Jesus taught. The historical narratives of the Old Testament are filled with legendary fabrications and the book of Acts in the New Testament contains historically unreliable information about the life and teachings of Paul. Many of the books of the New Testament are pseudonymous — written not by the apostles but by later writers *claiming* to be apostles. The list goes on."<sup>22</sup>

### LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP

Ehrman certainly believes his claims and seeks to defend his positions. He doesn't say, "I have questions about these things." He *asserts* them, as if they are indisputable facts.

In contemporary language, we would call Ehrman a skeptic. In biblical parlance, Ehrman might be described as a "scoffer," (or "scornful") or a "mockers," a category of person that the Bible speaks about, especially in the book of Proverbs, but also elsewhere. For instance, it says:

"A scoffer seeks wisdom and does not find it" (Proverbs 14:6a).

"Blessed is the man [who does not sit] ... in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night" (Psalm 1:1-2).

One can choose to believe Ehrman and his fellow liberals, or else one can choose to believe the historic Christian view of the Bible as the inspired, inerrant Word of God. Before one makes such a decision, however, they should listen to what Ehrman says in the final chapter of his book about where he is, spiritually, today:

"My personal view is that a historical-critical approach to the Bible does not necessarily lead to agnosticism or atheism. ... It is

true that historical criticism did more or less shatter my evangelical views of the Bible. But it did not lead me to become an agnostic."<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, a few pages later, Ehrman writes:

"And so I did not leave the Christian faith because of the inherent problems of faith per se, or because I came to realize that the Bible was a human book, or that Christianity was a human religion. All that is true — but it was not what dismantled my acceptance of the Christian myth. I left the faith for what I took to be (and still take to be) an unrelated reason: the problem of suffering in the world. There came a time in my life when I found that the myths no longer made sense to me, no longer resonated with me, no longer informed the way I looked at the world. I came to a place where I could no longer see how — even if viewed mythically — the central Christian beliefs were in any sense 'true' for me, given the oppressive and powerful reality of human suffering in the world."<sup>24</sup>

Ehrman above mentions "a historical-critical approach to the Bible." Indeed, he cites this as the source of his lowered view of the Bible. One theological dictionary defines "historical criticism" this way:

"An approach to biblical interpretation that seeks to understand the Bible in light of its historical and cultural backgrounds, that is, as a book arising out of a human context. Historical criticism uses a variety of methods to determine what actually happened in history 'before,' 'behind' or 'under' the text rather than seeking a 'divine' meaning in the text itself. *Although helpful to an extent, the primary criticism leveled against historical criticism is that it tends to downplay Scripture as a divine book and instead overemphasizes its humanness.*"<sup>25</sup>

Ehrman insists that he didn't abandon Christianity because his views about the Bible changed — and even though his view of the Bible became that of a book which was no longer the Word of God. It is akin to expecting a house to survive after removing its foundation. Compare this with what Jesus stated would happen to the builder who built his house on a foundation of sand, rather than on the rock (see Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-49). In this same section of his book, Ehrman does make one statement with which we agree: "Faith is not a matter of smarts."<sup>26</sup> Depending upon one's theology, faith is either completely a gift from God or else a divinely influenced human response to God. Jesus said, "No one can come to Me unless the Father Who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44). And Ehrman, by his own admission, lacks faith.

### THE CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER POSED BY EHRMAN

At one point in *Jesus, Interrupted*, Ehrman writes:

"The conservative evangelical response to my book [*Misquoting Jesus*] surprised me a bit. Some of these critics criticized *Misquoting Jesus* for 'misleading' people — as if facts such as those I have just cited [in that book] could lead someone down a slippery slope toward perdition. ... I certainly never intended to lead anyone away from the Christian faith."<sup>27</sup>

However, commenting on Ehrman's earlier book, *Misquoting Jesus*, contemporary Christian apologist Lee Strobel, writes:

"The issues [Ehrman] raises in his book are now challenging the faith of others. Here's the text of an email that I received: 'Please help me. I have just read Bart Ehrman's book *Misquoting Jesus*. I was raised in the church and I'm now 26 years old. This book has devastated my faith. I don't want to be kept in the dark; I want to know what really is going on in the Bible and what I should believe, even if it goes against

what I've believed since I was a little boy. *Is Ehrman correct?* That's the question that prompted me to jump on a jet for Dallas to seek out another renowned textual critic [Daniel B. Wallace of Dallas Theological Seminary] whose scholarly credentials rival Ehrman's. At stake was nothing less than whether the New Testament can be trusted to provide a reliable picture of the real Jesus."<sup>28</sup>

This is illustrative of the effect that Ehrman's popular-level books are capable of producing. This sort of reaction to reading Ehrman's book is not at all unlikely. Ehrman's protests that "I certainly never intended to lead anyone away from the Christian faith" ring hollow in the light of results such as the one cited above. It is like a man with a loaded gun who randomly shoots into a crowd of people, and afterwards excuses his actions by saying, "I certainly never intended to kill anyone."

It is also important to understand that our connection to God as Christians is our faith. The Scripture teaches, "The just shall live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). We need to protect our faith from destructive critics of Scripture like Ehrman. In line with this, the Scripture teaches:

"But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

And the Apostle Paul told the Corinthians:

"But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus Whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted — you may well put up with it" (2 Corinthians 11:3-4).

The NIV translates this latter phrase, "you put up with it easily enough." The apostle here is not commending the Corinthians; instead he is reproving them.

Again, the Scripture says:

"Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, Who is the head of all principality and power" (Colossians 2:8-10).

Note that word, "Beware." We might say, "Watch out for this sort of person!" Yes, don't let people like Ehrman steal your faith, which links you to Christ. Guard your faith with your very life! What is really frightening in this regard is this statement toward the end of Ehrman's book, *Jesus, Interrupted*, where he says:

"Some of my closest friends teach in divinity schools and seminaries, training Christian pastors. And they agree up and down the line with most of what I've said in these chapters. A number of them use my textbook on the New Testament for their introductory courses, a book that spells out many of the views discussed here."<sup>29</sup>

### EHRMAN'S CHARGE

R.A. Torrey, a late 19th-early 20th century minister and evangelist, told of an experience similar to Ehrman's at Princeton:

"It is constantly taught not only by unbelievers, but even in many Christian pulpits and in some of our theological seminaries, that Jesus and Paul were mistaken as to the time of our Lord's return. In an interesting little pamphlet published by the Boston American Unitarian Association, in which five ministers tell how they came to be Unitarians after having preached in orthodox churches, one writer says, 'But in

a lecture one day on Thessalonians, our professor remarked that Paul evidently was mistaken as to the time of the coming of Christ. I was thunderstruck and stared rigidly at the speaker, while my pencil dropped from my fingers. It is true, then, after all the denunciation of the preachers, Higher Criticism<sup>30</sup> wasn't the false, shallow thing that it was made out to be. I can hear yet, after many years, the echo of that slamming book in the vacant library, and that cedar pencil clattering to the floor.' Evidently, this young man was easily shaken. If a professor in a theological seminary said anything, that settled it for him. The professor must certainly be correct, and all other professors who taught differently, and all others who studied the Bible for themselves, must be wrong. The fact that the professor made such a remark as this was proof positive that Higher Criticism was not 'the false, shallow thing that it was made out to be.' I do not wonder that such a young man should wind up as a Unitarian preacher. Yet, even theological professors are sometimes mistaken, and this professor was mistaken. The mistake was altogether the professor's and not at all Paul's."<sup>31</sup>

Torrey concludes his discussion of the return of Christ with these sober words:

"Perhaps the young theological student, who was so thunderstruck by his professor's saying that Paul was mistaken as to the time of the coming of Christ, and who therefore launched forth into Unitarianism, may be a lesson to the critics to be cautious lest their teaching prove equally disastrous to some other weak-minded young man."<sup>32</sup>

### TOTAL BIBLICAL INERRANCY

Because of the number of topics and specifics that Ehrman covers in *Jesus, Interrupted*, and due to space limitations, it is impossible to deal with all

of the attacks upon the Bible and historic Christianity that he makes. Here we can only briefly examine the matter of total biblical inerrancy, the conservative Christian doctrine that states that in its originally written documents called “the original autographs,” the Bible is free of errors of any kind in all that it says, including the related area of Bible difficulties and apparent discrepancies.

Many have given definitions of biblical inspiration and inerrancy. Biblical scholar Charles Ryrie, perhaps best known for the *Ryrie Study Bible*, defines it this way:

“My own definition of biblical inspiration is that it is God’s superintendence of the human authors so that, using their own individual personalities, they composed and recorded without error His revelation to man in the words of the original autographs [i.e., the original, firsthand documents]. Several features of the definition are worth emphasizing: (1) God superintended but did not dictate the material. (2) He used human authors and their own individual styles. (3) Nevertheless, the product was, in its original manuscripts, without error.”<sup>33</sup>

Ryrie, of course, agrees that *portions* of the Bible were dictated, as the Bible itself evidences. He subsequently writes:

“Of course it is true that some parts of the Bible were dictated (like the Ten Commandments and the rest of the law), but the definition proposed above incorporates the idea that God allowed the writers varying degrees of self-expression as they wrote.”<sup>34</sup>

At the start, we should frankly admit that belief in total biblical inerrancy is not a matter of salvation. That is, one can certainly be a Christian and not hold to a belief in biblical inerrancy. It is also true that many Christians do not believe in biblical inerrancy; or at least, they would believe that the Bible can contain

some errors of some sort (for instance, in matters of history or science). However, although not essential to a person’s salvation, if biblical inerrancy is the *truth*, it is certainly an *important* doctrine; and, furthermore, it is a doctrine that ultimately affects both the life and the worldview of the person who either holds to or rejects this doctrine.

Concerning a belief in total biblical inerrancy, Reformed theologian R.C. Sproul writes:

“But we affirm it in the final analysis not because it was the view of the Reformers, not because we slavishly revere [A.A.] Hodge and [B.B.] Warfield, not even because we are afraid of dominoes or a difficult apologetic. We defend it and express our deep concern about it because we believe it is the truth. It is a truth we do not want to negotiate. We earnestly desire dialogue with our evangelical brothers and collaborators who differ from us. We want to heal the wounds that controversy so frequently brings. We know our own views are by no means inerrant. But we believe inerrancy is true and is of vital importance to our common cause of the gospel.”<sup>35</sup>

### EHRMAN OBJECTS, WALLACE RESPONDS

Ehrman often says in his books that we don’t have the originals of any of the books of the New Testament: “The copies we have were made much later, in most instances many centuries later.”<sup>36</sup>

Ehrman’s point is:

“If one wants to insist that God inspired the very words of scripture, what would be the point if we don’t *have* the very words of scripture? ... This became a problem for my view of inspiration, for I came to realize that it would have been no more difficult for God to preserve the words of scripture than it would have been for him to inspire them in

the first place. ... And if he didn’t perform that miracle, there seemed to be no reason to think that he performed the earlier miracle of inspiring those words.”<sup>37</sup>

However, in the interview by Lee Strobel with Dr. Daniel Wallace of Dallas Theological Seminary (who Strobel identifies as a New Testament textual critic whose scholarly credentials rival or possibly exceed Ehrman’s), Wallace responds to that sort of objection by saying, “Judging by how the medieval church worshiped all sorts of relics, it’s a good thing God didn’t do that!”<sup>38</sup>

Wallace both knows Ehrman and has debated him. He is currently working on a book-length response to *Jesus, Interrupted*, due out later this year.<sup>39</sup> In this same interview with Strobel, commenting on Ehrman’s earlier book, *Misquoting Jesus*, Wallace states:

“[Ehrman] tries to create strong doubts as to what the original text said, using more innuendo than substance. Readers end up having far more doubts about what the Bible says than any textual critic today would ever have. I think Ehrman has simply overstated his case. ... Essentially, scholars do not have to come up with conjecture about what the wording of the original text might be. We have the wording of the original in the manuscripts *somewhere*. Pragmatically, we could say that the wording of the original can be found in the text of our published Greek New Testaments or in their footnotes.”<sup>40</sup>

Wallace also affirms:

“The ancient church fathers quoted so often from the New Testament that it would be possible to reconstruct almost the entire New Testament from their writings alone. All told, there are more than one *million* quotations of the New Testament in their writings. They date as early as the first century and continue

through the thirteenth century, so they're extremely valuable for determining the wording of the New Testament text."<sup>41</sup>

"Only about one percent of [New Testament textual] variants are both meaningful, which means they affect the meaning of the text to some degree, and viable, which means they have a decent chance of going back to the original text. ... But most of these are not very significant at all."<sup>42</sup>

"... the basic thesis that has been argued since 1707 [is]: *No cardinal or essential doctrine is altered by any textual variant that has plausibility of going back to the original.* The evidence for that has not changed to this day."<sup>43</sup>

"My original point is this: no cardinal doctrines are affected by any viable variants."<sup>44</sup>

We do not have the original autographs for any of the Old Testament books, either. However, the late Old Testament scholar Gleason Archer wrote:

"In fact, it has long been recognized by the foremost specialists in textual criticism that if any decently attested [manuscript] variant were taken up from the [textual] apparatus at the bottom of the page and were substituted for the accepted reading of the standard text, there would in no case be a single, significant alteration in doctrine or message."<sup>45</sup>

To conclude, it is true that there are present in our Bibles errors made by copyists, and texts that have variants that are in question; however, the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts that form the basis for our modern-day Bible translations — though not perfect — are *essentially* the Word of God.

### THE LOGICAL BASIS FOR BIBLICAL INERRANCY

The foundation for the belief that the Bible was without error in the original autographs is:

- The belief that God inspired the writing of the Bible.

- That God, Himself *being* Truth (e.g., Isaiah 65:16; John 14:6; 15:26; Romans 3:4), only speaks the truth (Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18).

- That God is omniscient.

- That God does not contradict Himself.

God, Who is both omniscient and is Truth itself, and Who inspired the biblical writings cannot err or contradict Himself. The inerrancy of Scripture is a logical conclusion, once we accept the above premises.

The Bible itself firmly teaches that it is inerrant. For instance, "The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple" (Psalm 19:7). Also:

"Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar" (Proverbs 30:5-6).

The Lord Jesus powerfully asserted, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

To which the Apostle Paul added:

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).<sup>46</sup>

This latter Scripture also teaches the *sufficiency* of Scripture.

Most importantly, however, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Christian's highest authority, unquestionably taught the Bible's inerrancy. His very birth was in accordance with the Old Testament Scriptures (see Matthew 1:22-23; 2:5-6, 14-15). When He was tempted in the wilderness by the devil (Matthew 4:1-11; cf. Luke 4:1-13), our Lord responded three times by quoting the Scriptures (i.e., the written Word of God) to the devil. His ministry itself fulfilled the Scriptures (e.g., see Matthew 8:16-17; 13:34-35; 21:1-5, 42).

In His controversies with the religious leaders of His day, our Lord time and again appealed to the Scriptures as authoritative and binding (e.g., Matthew 9:13; 12:7, 38-42; 15:1-9; 19:3-9; 21:15-16; 22:23-45). Within one of the citations noted here, He referred to a portion of the Mosaic Law as "what was spoken to you by God" (Matthew 22:31). Within this same section of Scripture, the Lord quoted part of Psalm 110, saying, "How then does David in the Spirit call Him 'Lord'" (Matthew 22:43).

In the Sermon on the Mount, He declared, "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matthew 5:18). In what is perhaps one of His strongest affirmations of the Scripture's authority and trustworthiness, Jesus said, "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35).

His death fulfilled the Scriptures (Isaiah 53; Psalm 22, which Jesus quoted on the Cross; Matthew 26:31; 52-54; 27:9-10, 35) and His resurrection fulfilled the Scriptures (John 2:18-22).

The Christian, therefore, has good grounds for believing the Scriptures to be inerrant and trustworthy, because we follow Christ's lead in this.

### A WELL-KNOWN THEOLOGIAN ON INERRANCY

Regarding biblical inerrancy, theologian R.C. Sproul has written:

"The classical approach to the defense of Scripture is one that concerns itself with both deduction and induction, external and internal evidence. The approach proceeds on the basis of a progression from the premise of basic or general trustworthiness of Scripture to the conclusion of inerrancy or infallibility."<sup>47</sup>

Sproul offers his readers the following reasoning:

"Premise A: The Bible is a basically reliable and trustworthy document. Premise B: On the

basis of this reliable document we have sufficient evidence to believe confidently that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Premise C: Jesus Christ being the Son of God is an infallible authority. Premise D: Jesus Christ teaches that the Bible is more than generally trustworthy: it is the very Word of God. Premise E: That the word, in that it comes from God, is utterly trustworthy because God is utterly trustworthy. Conclusion: On the basis of the infallible authority of Jesus Christ, the Church believes the Bible to be utterly trustworthy, i.e., infallible."<sup>48</sup>

Sproul then emphasizes:

"It is important to note at this point that this method does not involve circular reasoning. Circular reasoning occurs when the conclusion is already present in the first premise. The argument itself is not an infallible argument as each premise involves matters of inductive or deductive reasoning by fallible rational creatures. There is neither a formal a priori assumption nor a subjective leap of faith in the method. Rather, the method is involved with careful historical, empirical investigation as well as with logical inferences."<sup>49</sup>

Concerning Premise A above, Sproul says, in part:

"It is not within the scope of this essay to give a detailed defense of the general reliability of the biblical documents. Such a defense, at this point in history, should not be necessary in light of the overwhelming abundance of evidence and testimony confirming the historical reliability of the Scripture. Only the most radical higher critics would deny the premise of basic or general reliability."<sup>50</sup>

Concerning Premise D above, Sproul says, in part:

"Jesus' view of Scripture is not a hotly disputed issue. ... A multitude of [both liberal and conser-

vative] writers have demonstrated clearly that Jesus held a very high view of Scripture. In addition to [C.H.] Dodd and [Emil] Brunner, we could mention the work of John Murray, E.J. Young, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, James Orr, Roger Nicole, J.I. Packer, Clark Pinnock, and a host of other scholars who have demonstrated the high view of Scripture held by Jesus. ... That Jesus' view of Scripture was high is beyond dispute."<sup>51</sup>

Concerning Premise E above, Sproul, in part, writes:

"What is at issue is not the question whether or not human beings *can* err. What is at issue is the question whether or not God inspires error or the Holy Spirit guides into error. When orthodoxy confesses the infallibility of Scripture it is not confessing anything about the intrinsic infallibility of men. Rather the confession rests its confidence on the integrity of God."<sup>52</sup>

### BIBLE DIFFICULTIES

However, arguably, any serious student of the Scriptures who analyzes and compares one text of Scripture with another will eventually come upon one or more Bible difficulties: Passages that seem to conflict with or are difficult to reconcile with one another. I certainly have.<sup>53</sup>

Torrey states the case well:

"Every careful student and every thoughtful reader of the Bible finds that the words of the apostle Peter concerning the Scriptures, 'in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest ... unto their own destruction' (2 Pet. 3:16), are abundantly true. Has any one of us not found things in the Bible that have puzzled us, that in our early Christian experience have led us to question whether the Bible was, after all, the Word of God? We find some things in the Bible that seem impossible to reconcile with other things in the

Bible. We find some things that seem incompatible with the thought that the whole Bible is of divine origin and absolutely inerrant. It is not wise to attempt to conceal the fact that these difficulties exist. It is the duty of wisdom, as well as of honesty, to frankly face them and consider them. There are several things we can say concerning *these difficulties that every thoughtful student will eventually encounter*."<sup>54</sup>

Although Torrey (1856-1928) lived and died well before Bart Ehrman was born, he seems to respond to some of the charges that Ehrman levels against the Bible in the following excerpts, which are quoted at length from his book, *Difficulties in the Bible*:

"[One of these is] that a difficulty in a doctrine, or a grave objection to a doctrine, does not, in any way, prove the doctrine to be untrue. Many thoughtless people imagine that it does. If they come across some difficulty in the way of believing in the divine origin and absolute inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible, they at once conclude that the doctrine is discredited. That is very illogical."<sup>55</sup>

"He is a very shallow thinker indeed who gives up a well-tested truth because there are some apparent facts that he cannot reconcile with that truth. And he is a very shallow Bible scholar who gives up his belief in the divine origin and inerrancy of the Bible because there are some supposed facts that he cannot reconcile with that doctrine. There are many shallow thinkers of that kind in the theological world today."<sup>56</sup>

"Oftentimes a man will bring you some difficulty and say, 'How do you explain that, if the Bible is the Word of God?' and perhaps you may not be able to answer him satisfactorily. Then he thinks he has you, but not at all. Turn to him, and ask him, 'How do you account for the

fulfilled prophecies of the Bible if it is of human origin? How do you account for the marvelous unity of the Book? How do you account for its inexhaustible depth? How do you account for its unique power in lifting men up to God?' and so on. For every insignificant objection he can bring to your view of the Bible, you can bring many more deeply significant objections to his view of the Bible. And any really candid and honest man, who desires to know and obey the truth, will have no difficulty in deciding between the two views."<sup>57</sup>

To one objector of the Bible's divine origin, Torrey replied, in part:

"You cannot deny that the Bible has a power to save men from sin, to bring men peace and hope and joy, to lift men up to God, that all other books taken together do not possess. How do you account for it if the Bible is not the Word of God in a sense that no other book is the Word of God? The objector did not answer. The difficulties that confront one who denies that the Bible is of divine origin and authority are far more numerous and much more weighty than those that confront the one who believes it to be of divine origin and authority."<sup>58</sup>

"[Another thing] to be said about the difficulties in the Bible is this: the fact that you cannot solve a difficulty does not prove it cannot be solved, and the fact that you cannot answer an objection does not prove at all that it cannot be answered. It is remarkable how we often overlook this very evident fact. There are many who, when they meet a difficulty in the Bible and give it a little thought and can see no possible solution, at once jump to the conclusion that a solution is impossible by anyone, and so they throw up their hands and forget their faith in the inerrancy of the Bible and its divine origin.

It seems that everyone should have enough modesty, which is fitting for beings so limited in knowledge as we all undeniably are, to say, 'Though I see no possible solution to this difficulty, someone a little wiser than I might easily find one.' If we would only bear in mind that we do not know everything, and that there are a great many things that we cannot now solve that we could very easily solve if we only knew a little more, it would save us from all this folly. ... What would we think of a beginner in algebra, who, having tried in vain for half an hour to solve a difficult problem, declared that there was no possible solution to the problem because he could not find one?"<sup>59</sup>

"Even in some prominent institutions of learning, where men are supposed to be taught to appreciate and understand the Bible, and where they are sent to be trained to preach its truth to others, much more time is spent on minute and insignificant points that seem to point toward an entirely human origin of the Bible than is spent upon studying and understanding and admiring the unparalleled glories that make this Book stand apart from all other books. What would we think of a man who, in studying some great masterpiece of art, concentrated his whole attention upon what looked like a flyspeck in the corner? A large proportion of the much-vaunted 'critical study of the Bible' is a laborious and scholarly investigation of supposed flyspecks."<sup>60</sup>

## TWO MEN WITH VERY DIFFERENT DESTINIES

Who do you think wrote the following paragraph about himself?

"The particular intellectual problem I was wrestling with, for the first time since my conversion as a teenager, was the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures. Seeming contradictions and

problems with interpretation defied intellectual solutions, or so I thought. Could the Bible be trusted completely?"<sup>61</sup>

It was Billy Graham. If Billy Graham wrestled with Bible difficulties and struggled with trusting the Bible as God's Word, perhaps we shouldn't be too discouraged if we sometimes struggle with this as well.

The background to this story is that Billy Graham had a close friend named Charles Templeton. They also used to preach together at evangelistic rallies. After a while, Templeton decided to attend Princeton Theological Seminary to obtain some advanced education. His experience there paralleled that of Ehrman in some ways. He, too, after attending, became skeptical of Christianity; and sometime after graduating from Princeton, he, like Ehrman, jettisoned the Christian faith.

However, after his doubts about Christianity at Princeton began, he would talk to Billy Graham. Graham wrote:

"[During Templeton's] first year as a graduate student ... [I] discovered that he was undergoing serious theological difficulties, particularly concerning the authority of the Scriptures. My respect and affection for Chuck were so great that whatever troubled him troubled me also. I had similar questions arising from my own broadened reading habits [of neo-orthodox theologians such as Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr]."<sup>62</sup>

Graham was already an evangelist at the time. But he wrote:

"Could I trust the Bible? With the Los Angeles Campaign galloping toward me, I had to have an answer. If I *could not* trust the Bible, I could not go on. ... I was only thirty years of age. ... But that night I believed with all my heart that the God who had saved my soul would never let go of me. I got up and took a walk. The moon was out. ... Dropping to my knees there in

the woods, ... I could only stutter into prayer. The exact wording of my prayer is beyond recall, but it must have echoed my thoughts: 'O God! There are many things in this book I do not understand. There are many problems with it for which I have no solution. There are many seeming contradictions. There are some areas in it that do not seem to correlate with modern science. I can't answer some of the philosophical and psychological questions Chuck and others are raising.' I was trying to be on the level with God, but something remained unspoken. At last the Holy Spirit freed me to say it. 'Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word — by *faith!* I'm going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts, and I will believe this to be Your inspired Word.' When I got up from my knees at Forest Home that August night, my eyes stung with tears. I sensed the presence and power of God as I had not sensed it in months. Not all my questions were answered, but a major bridge had been crossed. In my heart and mind, I knew a spiritual battle in my soul had been fought and won."<sup>63</sup>

Of Charles Templeton, one source writes:

"For much of his life he remained friends with Graham, but Templeton never returned to the faith of his youth. Just two years before his death in 2001, he published a critique of Christianity titled *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*."<sup>64</sup>

### FURTHER THOUGHTS ON BIBLE DIFFICULTIES

Sproul gives some further help on Bible difficulties. He says:

"[E.J.] Young demonstrates that within the context of a biblical view of truth there is room for crudity and roughness of literary style, including improper gram-

matical structure, variations of parallel accounts of events, discourses, etc., but not room for contradiction or deception. Phenomenological, anthropomorphical, hyperbolic, etc. forms of language do not negate or falsify truth."<sup>65</sup>

Within the same book, Sproul cites a short 1973 statement about the Bible issued by a group of biblical scholars and theologians called "The Ligonier Statement." The end of it reads:

"With the great fathers of Christian history we declare our confidence in the total trustworthiness of the Scriptures, urging that any view which imputes to them a lesser degree of inerrancy than total, is in conflict with the Bible's self-testimony in general and with the teaching of Jesus Christ in particular. Out of obedience to the Lord of the Church we submit ourselves unreservedly to his authoritative view of Holy Writ."<sup>66</sup>

In a book titled, *Does the Bible Contradict Itself?*, William Arndt, a 20th-century professor of New Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutics at Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis, Mo., wrote:

"It is a plea for fairness in the treatment of alleged discrepancies. Fairness demands that, when we meet two seemingly contradictory statements in an author, we do not exaggerate the differences, but make an honest endeavor to harmonize them. The apriori assumption must always be that the author has not contradicted himself. This rule is observed in dealing with secular authors. At what pains, for instance, have not editors been to bring about agreement between seemingly conflicting statements in the writings of Plato! The principle by which they were guided was that no contradiction must be assumed unless all attempts at harmonizing fail. That is in accordance with the dictates of fairness. Let but the same amount of good will be mani-

fest in the treatment of the difficult passages in the Bible, and the charge that it contains irreconcilable discrepancies will no longer be heard. Or is anybody willing to defend the thesis that the Word of God is entitled to less consideration than the works of human authors?<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, we must be careful here lest we fall into shallow, superficial ways of reasoning. We all know from experience that people often say of two statements of a person that they are contradictory, while on a little scrutiny it appears that they are in perfect harmony. It is of utmost importance here that a person be not guided by first impressions, but be willing to make a thorough study of the case in question."<sup>68</sup>

This book should be required reading for Ehrman, who always treats the Bible as a collection of contradictions; and as sets of mutually irreconcilable, disparate documents and accounts. Observing the procedures of decency and fairness mentioned by Arndt above would save him from such arrogance and folly.

Additionally, there are actually books that attempt to harmonize the events in the earthly life of the Lord Jesus. One such book, written by A.T. Robertson, is actually called *A Harmony of the Gospels*, and shows harmonies exist. Ehrman, however, does not mention this specific in his books.<sup>69</sup>

There also exist many books whose *entire purpose* is to offer solutions for specific Bible difficulties. They can be a good resource when one runs across apparent contradictions, discrepancies, etc., in reading the Bible. Two that PFO recommends are the *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*<sup>70</sup> by Gleason L. Archer, Jr., published by Zondervan Publishing; and *The Big Book of Bible Difficulties: Clear and Concise Answers From Genesis To Revelation*<sup>71</sup> by Norman L. Geisler and Thomas Howe, published by Baker Books. Other numerous excellent works exist as well, which Ehrman also does not mention.

Additional fine resources for resolving Bible difficulties are the notes in conservative study Bibles, such as the *NIV Study Bible*; trusted Bible commentaries can also help; and books on Christian apologetics written by reputable theologians, biblical scholars, and Christian apologists which deal with this and other related issues; books by such men as Robert P. Lightner, Charles C. Ryrie, R.C. Sproul, Ron Rhodes, Norman Geisler, John Ankerberg, Darrell Bock, and Daniel Wallace.<sup>72</sup> There are a number of other good scholars and books.

Despite all of this, there remain some difficulties and apparent contradictions that may seem to defy resolution. Interestingly, a man who, like Ehrman, earned his doctorate at Princeton, yet somehow retained a high view of Scripture, speaks to this matter in a book that he wrote on Bible difficulties. The particular difficulty he addresses here concerns whether or not the Lord's Supper was a Passover meal. (Ehrman mentions a difficulty that parallels this one in *Jesus, Interrupted*.<sup>73</sup>) Dr. Robert H. Stein writes:

"Numerous attempts have been made to explain this apparent discrepancy. Many reveal both the seriousness and reverence with which scholars treat the Word of God."<sup>74</sup>

Stein then lays out three possible solutions to the difficulty, with several versions of one solution. He then says:

"All these explanations represent serious and devout attempts to harmonize the conflict between the Synoptic Gospels and John. It is clear that they cannot all be correct. Some appear to have a rather low probability of being correct. In this particular instance, it is doubtful that any of the explanations has a particularly high degree of certainty. The fact that there are so many different explanations suggests that no one explanation is extremely convincing. It would appear that the evangelical can take one of two positions with regard

to this apparent conflict in the dating of the Lord's Supper. First, choose one of the explanations listed above and accept it as a correct explanation. Second, confess the presence of a difficulty which, at the present time, does not have a good explanation. The latter position may be quite frustrating, but at times such a position may be required due to a lack of sufficient information. The evangelical's confidence in the Bible, however, should enable him to accept the fact that there are instances where a satisfactory explanation is not available. The truthfulness of the Bible remains even if its teachings cannot be understood or explained perfectly."<sup>75</sup>

### A RESPONSE TO BART EHRMAN

In his hymn, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," 18th-century Christian hymnist William Cowper wrote, "Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan His work in vain; God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain."

J.B. Phillips may best have been known as a New Testament translator and as the author of a book titled, *Your God Is Too Small*. However, he wrote a lesser-known book, based on his experiences as a New Testament translator, entitled, *Ring of Truth: A Translator's Testimony*.<sup>76</sup> Although Phillips held to "limited infallibility" and did not believe in biblical inerrancy, the Foreword to that book gives a sound response to someone like Ehrman. It is worth quoting in full:

"I do not write for scholars; they can look after themselves. For twenty-five years I have written for the ordinary man who is no theologian. Alas, today, he frequently gets the impression that the New Testament is no longer historically reliable. What triggered off my anger (righteous, I trust) against some of our 'experts' is this. A clergyman, old, retired, useless if you like, took his own life because his reading

of the 'new theology' and even some programmes on television, finally drove him, in his loneliness and ill-health, to conclude that his own life's work had been founded upon a lie. He felt that these highly-qualified writers and speakers must know so much more than he that they must be right. Jesus Christ did not really rise from the dead and the New Testament, on which he had based his life and ministry, was no more than a bundle of myths. That made me angry, and I remembered the terrible words of Jesus which, in effect, say that a man would be better off dead than cause one of 'his little ones to stumble'. For many years it has been my solid purpose to communicate the truth of the Christian Gospel. I am *not* concerned to distort or dilute the Christian faith so that modern undergraduates, for example, can accept it without a murmur. I am concerned with the truth revealed in and through Jesus Christ. Let the modern world conform to him, and never let us dare to try to make him fit into our clever-clever modern world. I am no anti-intellectual, any more than St. Paul, who wrote so penetratingly that 'the world by wisdom knew not God'. But I say quite bluntly that some of the intellectuals (by no means all, thank God!), who write so cleverly and devastatingly about the Christian faith appear to have no personal knowledge of the living God. For they lack awe, they lack humility, and they lack the responsibility which every Christian owes to his weaker brother. They make sure they are never made 'fools for Christ's sake', however many people's faith they may undermine. Few people have had such a close and constant contact with the New Testament as I have. Even fewer have taken the trouble to understand the business of 'communication'. I say this in no spirit of conceit; it is a matter of simple fact. I therefore felt that it was high

time that someone, who has spent the best years of his life in studying both the New Testament and good modern communicative English, spoke out. I do not care a rap what the 'avant-garde' scholars say; I do very much care what God says and does. I have therefore felt compelled to write this book. It is my testimony to the historicity and reliability of the New Testament."<sup>77</sup>

At the close of this same book, Phillips, who was also an Anglican clergyman, concludes with these words:

"Most of the clergy are not nearly so naïve as people may think and most of them have a pretty intimate knowledge of what human nature is like. ... This ability to discriminate [the true from the false] does not desert us when we move into the field of what man has written. We acquire a 'nose' for the fake and the imitation even though it may deceive the inexpert. It is my serious conclusion that we have here in the New Testament, words that bear the hall-mark of reality and the ring of truth."<sup>78</sup>

Amen!

### Endnotes:

1. Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005.
2. Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question — Why We Suffer*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.
3. Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009.
4. See G. Richard Fisher, "The Misguided and Misleading Teachings of Bart Ehrman," *The Quarterly Journal*, October–December 2006, pp. 5-13.
5. See *Misquoting Jesus*, op. cit., pp. 1-15.
6. See, for example, *God's Problem*, op. cit., pp. 1-3; see also, *Jesus, Interrupted*, op. cit., pp. ix-xi.
7. *Misquoting Jesus*, op. cit., pp. 247-249; *God's Problem*, op. cit., pp. 1-7 ff.; *Jesus, Interrupted*, op. cit., pp. 277-278.
8. *God's Problem*, op. cit., pg. 2; also,

- Misquoting Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 6.
9. *Jesus, Interrupted*, op. cit., pp. x-xi, italic in original.
10. *Misquoting Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 9, ellipsis and italic in original.
11. *Ibid.*, where Ehrman mentions that this is "one of the well-known problems of the passage" in which this incident occurs; and, "In other words, this is one of those passages that have been pointed to in order to show that the Bible is not inerrant but contains mistakes."
12. *God's Problem*, op. cit., pg. 1.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 4.
14. *Ibid.*, pg. 4.
15. *Ibid.*, pg. 2.
16. *Misquoting Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 247. On pg. 258, he says, "I'm happier than I've ever been. I have a fantastic life!"
17. *God's Problem*, op. cit., pg. 200.
18. *Ibid.*, pg. 278.
19. *Jesus, Interrupted*, op. cit., pg. 271.
20. *Ibid.*, pg. 2, italic in original.
21. *Ibid.*, pg. 18.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6, italic in original.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 272, 273.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 277-278.
25. Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki & Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999, pg. 59, "historical criticism," emphasis added.
26. *Jesus, Interrupted*, op. cit., pg. 278.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 184-185.
28. Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus: A Journalist Investigates Current Attacks on the Identity of Christ*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007, pg. 69. On pg. 284, note 15, Strobel states that he himself added the italicized emphasis to the e-mailer's question.
29. *Jesus, Interrupted*, op. cit., pg. 275. The textbook Ehrman refers to is his fourth edition of *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, see *ibid.*, pg. 285, note 2 for Chapter 2.
30. "Higher Criticism" refers to "A method of biblical interpretation that seeks to determine the authorship and date of books, the literary documents underlying them, and their historical dependability." Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001, rev. ed., pg. 88, "Higher criticism." Original edition copyright 1986 by Millard J. Erickson. Published by Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Mich.
31. R.A. Torrey, *Difficulties in the Bible*. New Kensington, Pa.: Whitaker House, 1996, pp. 172-173. This book is a somewhat revised reprint of Torrey's book, *Difficulties and Alleged Errors and Contradictions in the Bible*, published in 1907 by Fleming H. Revell Company.
32. *Ibid.*, 1907 edition, pg. 182.
33. Charles C. Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible*

- Doctrine*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972, pg. 38.
34. *Ibid.*, pg. 39.
35. R.C. Sproul, *Scripture Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2005, pp. 36-37.
36. *Jesus, Interrupted*, op. cit., pg. 183.
37. *Misquoting Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 11, italic in original.
38. *The Case for the Real Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 72. G. Richard Fisher makes this same point in his article on Ehrman. See "The Misguided and Misleading Teachings of Bart Ehrman," op. cit., pg. 6.
39. Information from a face-to-face interview with Dr. Wallace in his office on Sept. 1, 2009.
40. *The Case for the Real Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 72, italic in original.
41. *Ibid.*, pg. 83, italic in original.
42. *Ibid.*, pg. 87.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89, italics in original.
44. *Ibid.*, pg. 90.
45. Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982, pg. 30. This book was republished by Zondervan in 2001 as the *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*.
46. I am aware that both the RSV and NRSV translations of the Bible provide the alternate rendering of the first part of verse 16, "Every scripture inspired by God is also." However, rendering it that way would seem to open a huge, perhaps unresolvable, question: "How can we know what Scripture in the Bible is inspired by God?" For this reason, I believe that the traditional rendering above is correct. I was gratified to find that New Testament textual scholar Dr. Daniel Wallace came to this conclusion on scholarly grounds. He did his master's thesis, on which he spent more than 1200 hours, at Dallas Theological Seminary, on 2 Timothy 3:16, and wrote, "My conclusion was that 'inspired' in 2 Timothy 3:16 was indeed a predicate adjective. And I supplied over 400 similar examples in the appendix to back it up!" Daniel B. Wallace, "My Take on Inerrancy," Document available at <http://bible.org/article/my-take-inerrancy>.
47. *Scripture Alone*, op. cit., pg. 72.
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.
49. *Ibid.*, pg. 73.
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.
51. *Ibid.*, pp. 80, 81.
52. *Ibid.*, pg. 85, italic in original.
53. For a good, relevant article on this topic, see G. Richard Fisher, "'But the Bible is Full of Contradictions!' — Pushing Through the Fog of Apparent Bible Discrepancies," *The Quarterly Journal*, July-September 2004, pp. 1, 15-21.
54. Torrey, *Difficulties in the Bible*, op. cit., pp. 9-10, ellipsis in original, emphasis added.

55. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.  
 56. *Ibid.*, pg. 13.  
 57. *Ibid.*, pg. 14. Ehrman would probably respond to the first two questions Torrey raises in the above paragraph by denying the possibility of fulfilled prophecy and denying that the Bible displays unity.  
 58. *Ibid.*, pg. 15.  
 59. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.  
 60. *Ibid.*, pg. 18.  
 61. Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997, pg. 136.  
 62. *Ibid.*, pg. 135.  
 63. *Ibid.*, pp. 138-139, italics in original.  
 64. Collin Hansen, "Billy Graham's Bible dilemma," *Christian History & Biography*, Summer 2004, Issue 83, pg. 47.  
 65. *Scripture Alone*, op. cit., pg. 88.  
 66. *Ibid.*, pg. 175.  
 67. See also R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press,

1977, pp. 46-48, where Sproul makes the same point that Arndt makes here. This book has recently been released in a revised, updated edition.  
 68. William Arndt, *Does the Bible Contradict Itself?: A Discussion of Alleged Contradictions in the Bible*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955, pg. IX.  
 69. Rather than using the phrase "harmony of the gospels," which states what he is absolutely unwilling to admit — i.e., that the historical events in the Gospels are actually capable of being harmonized — Ehrman refers instead to "a Bible synopsis." See *Jesus, Interrupted*, op. cit., pg. 285, endnote 1 for Chapter 2.  
 70. Formerly entitled, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, and also published by Zondervan.  
 71. Formerly entitled, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties*, published by Victor Books.

72. See, for example, Robert P. Lightner, *A Biblical Case for Total Inerrancy: How Jesus Viewed the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1998; Charles C. Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972; R.C. Sproul, *Scripture Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2005.  
 73. *Jesus, Interrupted*, op. cit., pp. 23-29.  
 74. Robert H. Stein, *Difficult Passages in the New Testament: Interpreting Puzzling Texts in the Gospels and Epistles*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1990, pg. 63.  
 75. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.  
 76. J.B. Phillips, *Ring of Truth: A Translator's Testimony*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, Ltd., 1967, published in the United States by Harold Shaw Publishers, Wheaton, Ill.  
 77. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20, italics in original.  
 78. *Ibid.*, pp. 123, 124.

## JOEL OSTEEN

(continued from page 1)

ogy of Kenneth Hagin — considered by many to be the father of this movement — as found in his booklet *How to Write Your Own Ticket with God*. Hanegraaff relates that in the opening chapter of Hagin's booklet, which is entitled "Jesus Appears to Me," the late Faith teacher claims he was "in the Spirit" — just like the Apostle John on the Isle of Patmos. Jesus supposedly appeared to him and told him to get a pencil and a piece of paper. This Jesus then instructed Hagin to "Write down: 1, 2, 3, 4." Jesus next allegedly told Hagin that, "if anybody, anywhere, will take these four steps or put these four principles into operation, he will always receive whatever he wants from Me or from God the Father." And the divine methodology is said to include whatever you want financially. The formula is simply: "Say it, Do it, Receive it, and Tell it."

Hanegraaff then repeatedly cites Hagin from his booklet, outlining these four actions:

"Step number one is 'Say it.' 'Positive or negative, it is up to the individual. According to what the individual says, that shall he receive.'"

"Step number two is 'Do it.' 'Your action defeats you or puts you over. According to your action, you receive or you are kept from receiving.'"

"Step number three is 'Receive it.' We are to plug into the 'powerhose of heaven.' 'Faith is the plug, praise God! Just plug in.'"

"Step number four is 'Tell it so others may believe.' This final step might be considered the Faith movement's outreach program."<sup>3</sup>

Kenneth Copeland states the faith formula this way:

"All it takes is: 1) seeing or visualizing whatever you need, whether physical or financial; 2) staking your claim on Scripture; and 3) speaking it into existence."<sup>4</sup>

David (Paul) Yonggi Cho, pastor of the world's largest church in South Korea, has borrowed from the occult and developed what he calls the "law of incubation." Here is how it works: "'First make a clear-cut goal, then draw a mental picture, vivid and graphic,' to 'visualize success.' Then 'incubate' it into reality, and finally 'speak' it into existence through 'the creative power of the spoken word.'"<sup>5</sup>

If a positive confession of faith releases good things, a negative confession can do the opposite. Charles Capps says, "Faith filled words will put you over. Fear filled words will defeat you. Words are the most powerful thing in the universe."<sup>6</sup> Capps further claims that God personally told him, "As there is creative power in my Spoken Word, so is there evil power present in the words of the enemy to affect and oppress everyone that speaks them."<sup>7</sup> And Joyce Meyer, echoing Capps, reminds us, "Words are containers for power! They can carry creative or destructive power."<sup>8</sup>

Hagin wrote that those who confess sickness get sickness, those who confess health get health, and so on. The spoken word releases power — power for good or power for evil is the commonly held view of the movement. It is easy to see why the title "positive confession" is often applied to this group.

Also easy to see is why the teachings of the Word-Faith movement are very attractive to some. If we can produce whatever our hearts desire by simply demanding what we want by faith, and if we can manipulate the universe and perhaps even God, then we have our own personal genie just waiting to fulfill our wishes. The similarities between Word-Faith teachings and *The Secret* are unmistakable.

## JOEL OSTEEN AND THE NEW LOOK

Many Christians can discern the obvious error of New Age teachings behind *The Secret* and similar books such as Eckhart Tolle's *The New Earth*, as well as the over-the-top proclamations of many within the prosperity gospel movement. However, when similar teachings are repackaged, reworded, and presented in a winsome fashion, a larger number will fall prey. Enter Joel Osteen and his brand of the prosperity gospel-lite. As we will see, Osteen teaches essentially the same theology as his Word-Faith mentors, but with an updated twist.

Osteen "pastors" the largest church in America: Lakewood Church in Houston, which in 2008 boasted average weekend attendance of 43,500, almost double that of the church with the next-highest attendance.<sup>9</sup> Osteen took the helm of Lakewood Church in 1999 upon the death of his father, John.

John Osteen was a prosperity gospel preacher who founded Lakewood in 1959 and had built it into a 6,000-member church before his son replaced him.<sup>10</sup> Joel, who until his father's death had led Lakewood's television ministry and had preached only once before, was thrust into the pulpit. Attendance skyrocketed. Today, Lakewood services are broadcast in more than 100 countries, Joel has written two multimillion-seller books, and he, along with his wife, mother, and numerous musicians from Lakewood, travel throughout the world offering an event they call "A Night of Hope." While most churches struggle to find and keep members, people are willing to buy \$15 tickets to attend "A Night of Hope" and the auditoriums are usually packed.

Osteen has no theological training and it is obvious from his books, sermons, and interviews on television that he has little knowledge of the Scripture. Nevertheless, he has caught an unprecedented wave of popularity and could clearly claim the title as the most admired pastor in America. His popularity, of course, is due largely to his message. Eschewing anything con-

troversial or negative (such as hell or judgment or even sin), Osteen proclaims a message of pure positivism.

The title of his first book, *Your Best Life Now*, summarizes what Osteen has to offer his many audiences. If we will follow certain principles or steps — seven to be exact — our existence will be happy, healthy, and blessed with everything that would make this life wonderful. This is a message that appeals to the flesh of unbelievers and worldly-minded Christians and would account for the superstar status that Osteen has attained.

What the reader will find in this book is a mixture of common sense, practical advice, and a multitude of success stories interlaced with a heavy dose of deceitful teaching.

Let's begin with the Gospel. It is not so much that Osteen presents a false gospel (which he seems to do in *Your Best Life Now*), but rather no gospel at all. In a 300-page book which will be read by millions of unbelievers, the closest Osteen ever comes to the Gospel is, "'Work out your own salvation.' Salvation is more than a onetime prayer. It is constantly working with God, dealing with the issues He brings up and keeping a good attitude, fighting through until you win the victory."<sup>11</sup>

What Osteen believes concerning the Gospel is uncertain, but what is undeniable is that the emphasis of his ministry is maintaining a positive outlook on life rather than a right relationship with God. Except for this one sentence, the entire book is taken up with "seven steps to living at your full potential." This theme resonates with the thinking of those whose lives and minds are in conformity with this world system rather than being "transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

It really should not surprise us that men such as Osteen have caught the public's eye. They tell us what we want to hear (2 Timothy 4:3), which is: we need to make the best of this life, enjoy every minute we can, because this is the best it is ever going to be. This philosophy is that of the world, not God, Who consistently

calls us to live for higher values than this world and self (1 John 2:15-17). Paul wrote to the church at Colossae, "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth" (Colossians 3:2). Paul did not mean by this that we are to ignore life on this planet and go hide somewhere until the Lord returns. It means that we live for a higher purpose than personal pleasure and success, "for you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3).

Osteen makes no attempt to draw his readers to this higher purpose, to a life lived for God. Instead God is to be manipulated for our own pleasure. Osteen would appreciate Eliphaz's advice to Job (later condemned by God): "Now acquaint yourself with Him, and be at peace; thereby good will come to you" (Job 22:21).

Let's take a look at some specifics.

### THE OFFER

Osteen's attraction is found in what he is offering, which is nothing less than a life of good health, abundance, wealth, prosperity, and success:

"But if you develop an image of victory, success, health, abundance, joy, peace, and happiness, nothing on earth will be able to hold those things from you."<sup>12</sup>

Because these are the things most people treasure and, because Jesus said, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21), it is predictable that the seductive promise of a map leading to these treasures would find many adherents. And it certainly does. Here's what is being offered:

**Health:** If we follow the teachings of Osteen, we can expect good health. His mother, for example, was diagnosed with terminal cancer twenty years ago, but because she confessed good health, she is cancer-free today.<sup>13</sup> As a matter of fact, one of the highlights of the "A Night of Hope" events is the testimony by Osteen's mother concerning her physical healing — implying, of course, that those in the audience can also be healed if they do what Joel suggests.

**Abundance:** Osteen, without qualification, declares that all of us are destined for greatness of every kind. He tells us: "You were born to win; you were born for greatness; you were created to be a champion in life."<sup>14</sup> And adds to that abundance: "He wants you to live in abundance. He wants to give you the desires of your heart. He wants you to be complete and content. ... God is turning things around in your favor."<sup>15</sup> As a matter of fact, apparently irrespective of our relationship with God, "Before we were ever formed, He programmed us to live abundant lives, to be happy, healthy, and whole. But when our thinking becomes contaminated, it is no longer in line with God's Word."<sup>16</sup>

Two things should be noted here: First, the Scriptures teach no such thing. While eternal life with the Lord is the destiny of the redeemed, judgment and then the lake of fire is the destiny of the lost (2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 20:14-15). Meanwhile, in this life the rain falls on the just and the unjust, and Christians may suffer as many trials as unbelievers, perhaps more (Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4; 2 Corinthians 4:8-12; 11:23-29; Hebrews 11:35-40). It is true that Psalm 37:4 promises, "Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart," but one who delights himself in the Lord desires God, not mere material blessings, good parking spots, success in business, and a nice wardrobe. Osteen's program trivializes the abundant life Jesus came to give His followers (John 10:10).

Second, when the prosperity teachers use the phrase "God's Word," the reader must carefully discern what is meant. Often, as in this case, "God's Word" is not a reference to the Bible but to words spoken, supposedly by God, extrabiblically through Word-Faith adherents. Osteen then is not accusing people of being out of step with the Scriptures, but of being out of step with the teachings of men such as himself. This is nothing less than a claim that God has revealed His Word apart from Scripture.

**Wealth:** "God wants to increase you financially, by giving you promotions, fresh ideas, and creativity,"<sup>17</sup> or so Osteen promises. In biblical times promotions were not common practice, fresh ideas and creativity did not carry the value they do today, and wealth was not necessarily seen as a sign of God's pleasure. Someone might counter that David and Solomon were wealthy, but this was not the case for Jeremiah and Habakkuk, both godly men who lost everything. Job flourished for a time, lost it all, and then gained it back. Job's turning point came when he repented of his arrogance, and even then, God was under no obligation to restore his wealth. The scriptural principle is that the Lord is sovereignly at work in our lives. He can choose to bless us with riches, or He can choose to bless us by taking our riches away.

Osteen arrived at his idea that "God wants to increase us financially" based on his limited experience and his selective recall of that experience. He tells us, for example, that when his father was "willing to go beyond the barriers of the past [by applying the principles found in this book], he broke that curse of poverty in our family. Now, my siblings and I, and our children, grandchildren, even our great-grandchildren, are all going to experience more of the goodness of God because of what one man did."<sup>18</sup>

Of course, millions of examples throughout the world and throughout history could be given of godly people living in poverty, and the children of the wealthy wasting their inheritance and privileges, but Osteen ignores such examples. Instead he is convinced, "God wants to give you your own house."<sup>19</sup> The U.S. government and the banking system seemed to agree with Osteen until the recent economic crash. Now they're taking away many of those houses. But this does not deter Osteen; he is persuaded that we will prosper.

**Prosperity:** Prosperity is more than health and wealth; it includes all the good things life can give. Apparently God is working extra hard to make life easy for us. Osteen promises, "It's going to happen, ... Suddenly, your

situation will change for the better. ... He will bring your dreams to pass."<sup>20</sup> Such statements leave no room for the cancer patient who does not get better, the factory worker who is laid off and never again finds a comparable job, the athlete who has a career-ending injury, or all those losers at the "American Idol" auditions (we can be thankful for this one at least). Such people would have reason to question Osteen's pronouncement that, "God didn't make you to be average. God created you to excel."<sup>21</sup>

Just two minutes of reflection would unveil the fallacy of this statement. By definition everyone cannot be above average — somebody has to be in the middle of the pack, and someone has to bring up the rear. This kind of idea sounds like the familiar grade inflation going on in many of our schools and universities today. If 90 percent of students all make an "A" average (which is not uncommon anymore) that does not mean that they are smarter than past students, it just means that the evaluation system has been changed so that more students (and potential employers) think they are successful.

In addition, did not Paul tell us that of the ones God calls there are "not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, ... But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty" (1 Corinthians 1:26-27). Our Lord seems to have standards and values that are out of alignment with Osteen's.

Still Osteen insists, "you will often receive preferential treatment simply because your Father is the King of kings, and His glory and honor spill over onto you."<sup>22</sup> Osteen prays, "Father, I thank you that I have Your favor."<sup>23</sup> By God's favor Osteen has in mind such earth-shaking issues as finding the perfect parking spot in a crowded lot.<sup>24</sup> Why a perfectly healthy middle-aged man would pray for the premier parking spot, knowing of course that someone with greater physical needs will be denied such a

spot, is never explained. Osteen admits God sometimes refuses to answer his parking prayer, but this “doesn’t mean that I’m going to quit believing in the favor of God.”<sup>25</sup> Osteen can’t lose. If he finds the best spot in the lot he has God’s favor; if he circles for 15 minutes and fails in this all-important task, it is not going to derail his theology.

**Success:** “God wants you to go further than your parents.”<sup>26</sup> This statement is made without a speck of biblical evidence. On the contrary, it was a rarity in Scripture to find a child who exceeded a godly or successful parent. The same is often true in our own experience: some children do go further than their parents, but others do not. Osteen is making an unsupportable statement.

But Osteen writes, “God wants you to live an overcoming life of victory. He doesn’t want you to barely get by. He’s called *El Shaddai*, ‘the God of more than enough.’ He’s not ‘El Cheapo,’ the God of barely enough!”<sup>27</sup> On the contrary: *El Shaddai* is a title used for our Lord in the Old Testament which is often translated “God Almighty.” It speaks of the all-sufficiency of God, and is a special title of reverence. Osteen has invented his own meaning and in the process turned God into our personal sugar daddy, ready to hand out the goodies to anyone who thinks he has discovered the secret to His heart.

**Good self-image:** “God wants us to have healthy, positive self-images, to see ourselves as priceless treasures. He wants us to feel good about ourselves. ... Moreover, God sees you as a champion. ... He regards you as a strong, courageous, successful, overcoming person.”<sup>28</sup> Scripture never mentions such a thing. Rather than chase after good self-images, Paul warns the believer “not to think of *himself* more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly” (Romans 12:3, emphasis added). Instead of taking seriously the instruction of Scripture, Osteen is happy to chase after the fads found in pop psychology.

He goes on, “When you are tempted to get discouraged, remind

yourself that according to God’s Word, your future is getting brighter; you are on your way to a new level of glory.”<sup>29</sup> Eternally this is a true statement for the child of God, but to promise such will be the case in this life is pure deception. And because Osteen makes no distinction between the redeemed and the unregenerate in his book, he is offering a false and damning hope to most of his audience, those who do not know Christ as their Savior.

## THE BELIEF SYSTEM

Osteen does not base his belief system on Scripture, for the Bible never teaches anything remotely similar to the prosperity gospel. That is not to say that *Your Best Life Now* is totally devoid of biblical references, but the few that are attempted are almost all hopelessly out of context or twisted beyond recognition.<sup>30</sup> Osteen gives notice early and often that his views are not drawn fundamentally from Scripture, but from his experiences and those of others. Still, in the introduction Osteen writes:

“Within these pages, you will find seven simple, yet profound, steps to improve your life, regardless of your current level of success or lack of it. I know these steps work, because they have worked in the lives of my family members, friends, and associates, as well as in my own life.”<sup>31</sup>

Osteen supports his thesis through the use of success stories. Some of his stories are difficult or impossible to document and therefore raise a red flag concerning his integrity.<sup>32</sup> Others are highly selective examples of happy endings.<sup>33</sup> As a result of such stories, Osteen can promise that, if his theories are embraced, “Suddenly, things will change. Suddenly, that business will take off. Suddenly, your husband will desire a relationship with God. Suddenly, that wayward child will come home. Suddenly, God will bring your hopes and dreams to pass.”<sup>34</sup> Or maybe not!

Inexplicably — given his belief system and insistence that God will bring prosperity to our lives if we follow the formula — Osteen must admit

that all things do not end in success. Both his sister and father experienced the failure of divorce,<sup>35</sup> some people are not healed,<sup>36</sup> things don’t always work out the way we desire,<sup>37</sup> his father suffered kidney failure and was on dialysis for months,<sup>38</sup> and died of a heart attack.<sup>39</sup> While Osteen declares God “doesn’t send the problems,” he admits that “sometimes He allows us to go through them.”<sup>40</sup> But the fact is that even in Osteen’s story-theology world, the people of God suffer the same ups and downs, successes and failures, health and sickness, and so forth as the unbeliever. One has only to glance through the Psalms to realize that this is not our “best life now.” We live in a corrupt world and until the Lord returns, our sin-tainted universe will often disappoint and grieve us. Stories of success (and failure) can be lined up from here to eternity, but such stories are not the basis of truth, or of life; the Word of God is.

## THE METHODS

Drawing, however, from many selective stories, and ignoring what God has to say, Osteen presents a methodology that he promises will produce a life of abundance, success, health, and affluence. This system is not unique to Osteen, having come almost verbatim from the prosperity teachers mentioned above, but he has taken this false teaching to a new audience.

Osteen’s seven steps to “your best life now” contain three basic concepts.

**Visualization:** The initial step in Osteen’s program is visualization:

“... the first step to living at your full potential is to *enlarge your vision*. To live your best life now, you must start looking at life through eyes of faith, seeing yourself rising to new levels. See your business taking off. See your marriage restored. See your family prospering. See your dreams coming to pass. You must conceive it and believe it is possible if you ever hope to experience it.”<sup>41</sup>

Osteen teaches that visualization is necessary because it has the power to bring about what one envisions:

“You will produce what you’re continually seeing in your mind. If you foster an image of defeat and failure, then you’re going to live that kind of life. But if you develop an image of victory, success, health, abundance, joy, peace, and happiness, nothing on earth will be able to hold those things from you. ... start anticipating promotion and supernatural increase. You must conceive it in your heart and mind before you can receive it. In other words, you must make room for increase in your own thinking, then God will bring those things to pass.”<sup>42</sup>

Apparently even God is at the mercy of that which we visualize; after all, “Thoughts [not God] determine destiny.”<sup>43</sup> “If you don’t think your body can be healed, it never will be. ... When you think positive, excellent thoughts, you will be propelled toward greatness, inevitably bound for increase, promotion, and God’s supernatural blessings.”<sup>44</sup>

**Faith:** It is not enough to think about and visualize what we want. We must also express faith. “God works by faith. You must believe first, and then you’ll receive.”<sup>45</sup> Osteen also tells us, “we receive what we believe. Unfortunately, this principle works as strongly in the negative as it does in the positive.”<sup>46</sup> “Understand this: God will help you, but you cast the deciding vote. ... [we must] get into agreement with God.”<sup>47</sup> “It’s our faith that activates the power of God.”<sup>48</sup>

It is vital that we visualize what we want and to expect it (“express faith”) because our faith attracts what we visualize. While Osteen never calls this the “law of attraction,” it is similar to the concept as taught by New Age teachers such as Eckhart Tolle, Rhonda Byrne, and others. Osteen writes that, “your life will follow your *expectations*. What you expect is what you will get.”<sup>49</sup> And he further teaches:

“Our thoughts contain tremendous power. Remember, we draw into our lives that which we constantly think about. If

we’re always dwelling on the negative, we will attract negative people, experiences, and attitudes. If we’re always dwelling on our fears, we will draw in more fear. You are setting the direction of your life with your thoughts.”<sup>50</sup>

**Words:** Still, it is not enough to think good thoughts and express faith in them; it is necessary to speak your desires out loud. This is why the prosperity gospel is often called the Word-Faith movement — for power lies in the spoken word. Follow Osteen’s thinking:

“Our words have tremendous power, and whether we want to or not, we will give life to what we’re saying, either good or bad. ... Words are similar to seeds. By speaking them aloud, they are planted in our subconscious minds, and they take on a life of their own.”<sup>51</sup>

And then Osteen instructs:

“Get up each morning and look in the mirror and say, ‘I am valuable. I am loved. God has a great plan for my life. I have favor wherever I go. God’s blessings are chasing me down and overtaking me. Everything I touch prospers and succeeds. I’m excited about my future!’ Start speaking those kinds of words, and before long, you will rise to a new level of well-being, success, and victory. There truly is power in your words.”<sup>52</sup>

But there is more. We must also speak to our problems:

“Whatever your mountain is, you must do more than think about it, more than pray about it; you must speak to that obstacle. ... Start calling yourself healed, happy, whole, blessed, and prosperous. Stop talking to God about how big your mountains are, and start talking to your mountains about how big your God is!”<sup>53</sup>

Osteen can confidently promise us, “Friend, there is a miracle in your mouth.”<sup>54</sup> How so? “The moment you

speak something out, you give birth to it. This is a spiritual principle, and it works whether what you are saying is good or bad, positive or negative.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, “you must start boldly confessing God’s Word, using your words to move forward in life, to bring to life the great things God has in store for you.”<sup>56</sup> And, of course, it is totally up to us to pull this off:

“God has already done everything He’s going to do. The ball is now in your court. If you want success, if you want wisdom, if you want to be prosperous and healthy, you’re going to have to do more than meditate and believe; you must boldly declare words of faith and victory over yourself and your family.”<sup>57</sup>

Osteen is presenting a pure self-help program and baptizing it in the name of God. Those who fail to reach these promised benefits have only themselves to blame because they did not follow Osteen’s formula.

## CONCLUSION

Whenever the supposed things of God and people of God become popular with the inhabitants of this fallen world, we would be wise to be especially discerning. The Jews persecuted and/or killed almost every one of their prophets (Acts 7:52). The apostles were despised by the world and Jesus was murdered by those He came to save. Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness (Matthew 5:11) and warned, “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). Why? Because the message of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing (1 Corinthians 1:18). Therefore when we find a Christian message or ministry, or man or woman being praised by unbelievers, we can be assured that either unregenerate humanity has not yet caught on to what is being said, or that more likely what they are saying is in line with what the unbeliever already believes.

As we have demonstrated, Osteen’s message is exactly what unbelievers and undiscerning Christians want to

believe and they are thrilled to have someone who claims to be a reliable representative of God agree with them. This would account for Osteen's incredible success, but it does not account for, or excuse, the inconceivable gullibility and immaturity of professing Christians.

### Endnotes:

1. For more information on *The Secret*, see J. Greg Sheryl, "Do You Want to Know The Secret?," *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2007, pp. 1, 11-21.
2. Taken from *The Secret*, Extended edition DVD, TS Production LLC, 2006.
3. Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1993, pg. 75, italics in original.
4. *Ibid.*, pg. 80.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.
6. Charles Capps, *God's Creative Power Will Work for You*. Tulsa, Okla.: Harrison House, 1976, pg. 1, quotation rendered in bold in original.
7. *Ibid.*, pg. 7.
8. Joyce Meyer, *The Name, The Word, The Blood*. Tulsa, Okla.: Harrison House, 1995, pg. 37. On pg. 4 of *God's Creative Power Will Work for You*, Capps writes, "Words are containers. They carry faith, or fear, and they produce after their kind" (italics in

original).

9. Kent Shaffer, "Top 100 Largest Churches in America of 2008." A portion of this article is available at: <http://churchrelevance.com/top-100-largest-churches-in-america-of-2008/>. It is worthy to note that according to this source, attendance has dropped by 3,500 people from the previous year; this decrease is a virtual megachurch in its own right.
10. See further, Robert S. Liichow with G. Richard Fisher, "The Leaven of Lake-wood," *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2004, pp. 1, 14-19.
11. Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*. New York: Faith Words, 2004, pg. 212.
12. *Ibid.*, pg. 5.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 126-127.
14. *Ibid.*, pg. 35.
15. *Ibid.*, pg. 78.
16. *Ibid.*, pg. 114.
17. *Ibid.*, pg. 5.
18. *Ibid.*, pg. 25.
19. *Ibid.*, pg. 35.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 196, 197, 198.
21. *Ibid.*, pg. 82.
22. *Ibid.*, pg. 40.
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 41.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.
25. *Ibid.*, pg. 43.
26. *Ibid.*, pg. 8.
27. *Ibid.*, pg. 33, italics in original.
28. *Ibid.*, pg. 57, 58.

29. *Ibid.*, pg. 67.

30. *Ibid.*, see pp. 10, 14, 18, 30-31, 33, 61, 76, 79-83, 87-89, 104, 115, 129-130, 134, 164.
31. *Ibid.*, pg. viii.
32. *Ibid.*, see pp. 12, 23, 73, 122, 161, 167, 201-202, 229, 280-281, 292.
33. *Ibid.*, see pp. 4, 7-8, 27, 111-112, 125, 127, 199-200, 246.
34. *Ibid.*, pg. 199.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 151, 176.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 207-209.
38. *Ibid.*, pg. 247.
39. *Ibid.*, pg. 248.
40. *Ibid.*, pg. 205.
41. *Ibid.*, pg. 4, italics in original.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 6.
43. *Ibid.*, pg. 101.
44. *Ibid.*, pg. 104.
45. *Ibid.*, pg. 33.
46. *Ibid.*, pg. 72.
47. *Ibid.*, pg. 74.
48. *Ibid.*, pg. 306.
49. *Ibid.*, pg. 13, italic in original.
50. *Ibid.*, pg. 109.
51. *Ibid.*, pg. 122.
52. *Ibid.*, pg. 123.
53. *Ibid.*, pg. 124.
54. *Ibid.*, pg. 125.
55. *Ibid.*, pg. 129.
56. *Ibid.*, pg. 130.
57. *Ibid.*, pg. 132.



## EDITORIALS

(continued from page 2)

doctrine." But we must be willing to handle issues that threaten the spiritual health of the body of Christ, and we must not shy away from teaching on such subjects as we work through the Scriptures.

### THE NECESSITY

As we survey the Word of God, it is impossible to miss the prominent place that God places on truth and the deep concern that our Lord has when His people err in doctrine or in living. The Old Testament is full of calls to live on the basis of God's truth and warnings about those who teach anything else. For example, Jeremiah 23:

"'Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!' says the LORD. ... 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; they speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the LORD.'... 'The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully.'... 'Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams,' ... 'Yet I did not send them or command them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all,' says the LORD" (vv. 1, 16, 28, 32).

Earlier, God revealed the problem facing Judah when Jeremiah prophesied, "An astonishing and horrible thing has been committed in the land: The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end?" (5:30-31). Not only were the prophets, priests, and kings leading the sheep astray, but the people loved it. Rather than being appalled by the falsehoods coming from their leaders, the Israelites gravitated toward their teachings. But the Lord cautions, "But what will you do in the end?" That is, after these false teachings have robbed you of true life found in God, after they have brought you into bondage instead of freedom, after they have led to counterfeit living rather than authenticity — what will you do then? Such is the true consequence of counterfeit theology.

In the Gospels, Jesus continued this theme. In Matthew 16:6, Jesus warned His disciples, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees." Later the disciples "understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (v. 12). Anyone who thinks Jesus preached only a positive and upbeat message should read Matthew 23:13-36, where he pronounced eight "woes" on the Pharisees.

Acts 20:27-32 speaks of wolves — often coming from within the church — who will do great harm to the flock.

Paul wrote, “take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (v. 28). But the true safeguard is in verse 32: “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” Exhortation and warning are both vital to good shepherding.

Even a superficial reading of the Epistles reveals much written on false teachings:

- Jude 3-4 and 2 Peter 2 both exhort us to contend earnestly for the faith against those who would distort it.

- Galatians 1:6-9 contains one of the strongest admonitions in all of Scripture and is reserved for those who teach a gospel different from the one Paul taught the Galatians. Paul wishes these false teachers be damned. Perhaps only the final warning found in Scripture rivals this one. In Revelation 22:18-19, John warns anyone who dares add to or subtract from the prophecy of the book of Revelation will have added to him the plagues written in the book.

In addition to these statements, other Epistles devote much attention to false teaching. The Corinthians misunderstood the sign gifts and tolerated numerous sins in the congregation; the Galatians twisted the Gospel; the Colossians were replacing godly wisdom with human philosophy; the Thessalonians had been discouraged with bogus claims about the end times; Timothy had to battle “strange doctrines” and “myths”; Hebrews was written to combat a move back to the Old Covenant.

The goal of exhorting in sound doctrine and refuting false teaching (Titus 1:9) is not to find someone who has slipped up at every turn. Rather it is “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12), and leading God’s saints to maturity (Hebrews 5:11-14). The Apostle John reflected God’s heart when he wrote that he had no greater joy than to hear of his spiritual children walking in the truth (3 John 4).

## OBJECTIONS TO DISCERNMENT

Despite Scripture’s emphasis on the need for biblical discernment and critique, most people continue to be critical of the concept. Those who preach most fervently the need for tolerance often are themselves intolerant of those who seek to follow God’s directives in this matter. The most common objections are:

### 1. *What right do we have to judge others?*

*Answer:* Matthew 7:1 says, “Judge not, that you be not judged.” Christ was not calling a moratorium on examining the lives and teachings of others; He just wanted us to do it the right way. He told us to first judge ourselves. When that has been done properly we are in a position to help others with their sins and false beliefs (Matthew 7:1-5). In verse five Jesus says, “First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see

clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.” Jesus demands that we get involved not as self-righteous hypocrites, but as those who recognize their own sins and weaknesses and have honestly confessed and dealt with them first. Later, in the same context, Jesus tells us to beware of false teachers and examine their fruit (7:15-16) — which would be a reference to both their lives and their teachings. Rather than ignoring “false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves” (v. 15), we are to watch out for them and examine the product of their doctrine and lives (vv. 16-23). We are to do so to avoid being deceived by them and living false lives ourselves.

### 2. *Aren’t you following in the footsteps of the Pharisees?*

*Answer:* Those who recognize the need for discernment sometimes are accused of keeping the letter of the Law but miss its message of spiritual transformation. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day, we are told, loved the Word of God, were serious students of the Old Testament, and sought to wrap their lives around God’s truth. They, however, concentrated on outward appearance and show, but had no true relationship with God. The more one seeks to live out his life according to the teachings of the Word, the more one is likely to be accused of being a Pharisee.

Jesus never spoke against the Pharisees for their literalness and their adherence to the Old Testament Law, but rather because they knew the Word yet did not live it. He certainly condemned them for their hypocrisy (Matthew 23). But hypocrisy has nothing to do with love and devotion to the Scriptures.

Jesus reserved his strongest rebuke for the Pharisees because they added to the Scriptures. In Matthew 15 Jesus asked, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?” After giving them an example, Jesus said, “Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition.” He said they “taught as doctrines the commandments of men” (vv. 3-9). The real Pharisees today are not those who insist on following Scripture, but those who add to the Scriptures.

### 3. *Aren’t you trying to prove yourself superior?*

*Answer:* Such an argument questions the motives of those who publicly discuss others’ teachings. When some tried to attack Paul’s motives, he said no one could know the motives of others. He told the Corinthians to “judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts” (1 Corinthians 4:5).

### 4. *Aren’t you assuming everyone else is wrong?*

*Answer:* Each of us must admit we cannot know all of God’s thoughts. Everything God has communicated is there to be read and analyzed by us. Next, we must understand that God’s view is all that matters. We are to carefully study the Scriptures and then shine its light on our teachings and others’. Therefore, we must scrutinize

God's Word and *cut it straight* ("rightly divide," 2 Timothy 2:15), so that we are able to teach the Lord's truth (2 Timothy 2:2), which is able to equip for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). This is to be done to aid in the spiritual life and growth of others.

5. *By challenging the teachings of others, aren't you judging their motives?*

*Answer:* See the answer to objection number three. Again, we are not able to judge motives (1 Corinthians 4:4-5). We are called to examine their lives (Matthew 7:15-16) and their teachings (Matthew 16:6, 12); we leave their motives to God.

6. *Critiquing the beliefs of others is unacceptable. Even benign assessment is viewed as intolerant and mean-spirited.*

*Answer:* Unbelievers have never accepted God's truth. First Corinthians 1:18 says that the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is the power of God for those being saved. Christians should never capitulate to secular worldviews. When the Corinthian believers hungered for Greek wisdom to be mixed with New Testament theology, Paul refused. He preached Jesus Christ so that their faith would rest in the power of God alone (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). We err when we adjust our teachings and methods to appease the spiritually dead and spiritually compromised. The Scriptures — and nothing or no one else — always should determine our methods and message.

7. *A discernment ministry will turn people into critical cynics.*

*Answer:* We must be careful not to become people who look everywhere for error or something to complain about. Even in our discernment we are to "do all things without complaining and disputing" (Philippians 2:14). And we must take seriously Paul's admonition to Timothy to not get tangled up in useless arguments and speculations (1 Timothy 1:4). But it is impossible to really love something (God's truth) and not want to defend it (Jude 3). And we must not allow the criticism of those who refuse to obey God to pressure us into living unbiblically.

## CONCLUSION

Past generations of Christian leaders have seen the importance of defending the faith. For example, J. Gresham Machen made a great observation at the height of the Modernist-Fundamentalist battles in the early 1900s: "What is to-day a matter of academic speculation begins to-morrow to move armies and pull down empires" (quoted by George M. Marsden in *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, pg. 137).

And Thomas Oden offers us this insightful word of wisdom:

"Although I concede that there are other tasks more important than the exposure of heresy, I warn: If there is no immune system to resist heresy, there will soon be nothing but the teeming infestation of heresy" (quoted by Larry Pettegrew in "Evangelicalism, Paradigms, and the Emerging Church," *The Master's Seminary Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pg. 175).

—GEG

## PERSONAL FREEDOM OUTREACH — STATEMENT OF BELIEF

I. THE BIBLE AS THE DIVINELY INSPIRED, INERRANT WORD OF GOD: IT IS IN ITS ENTIRETY THE SOLE AUTHORITY FOR ALL MATTERS OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF AND PRACTICE.

II. THE ONE TRUE GOD. IN THE ONE TRUE GOD THERE EXIST THREE PERSONS, BEING: THE FATHER, THE SON JESUS CHRIST, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT.

III. JESUS CHRIST: HIS DEITY, HUMANITY, VIRGIN BIRTH, SINLESSNESS, DEATH AND BODILY RESURRECTION; WHO WILL PERSONALLY AND VISIBLY RETURN AGAIN TO EARTH.

IV. THE PERSONALITY AND DEITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

V. THE EXISTENCE AND PERSONALITY OF SATAN, HIS TOTAL OPPOSITION TO GOD, AND HIS POWER OVER THE UNREGENERATE.

VI. THE COMPLETE AND TOTAL DEPRAVITY OF ALL MEN WHICH MAKES THEM HOPELESSLY LOST WITHOUT THE NEW BIRTH OBTAINABLE THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST.

VII. THE FINAL ESTATE OF MAN: FOR THE SAVED, EVERLASTING LIFE IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD AND FOR THE UNSAVED, EVERLASTING PUNISHMENT BECAUSE OF THEIR UNBELIEF.

VIII. THE GOSPEL BY WHICH WE ARE SAVED BEING SUMMED IN THE DEATH, BURIAL AND RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST.

IX. THE CHURCH BEING THE BODY OF CHRIST, UNITED IN THE HOLY SPIRIT, CONSISTING OF THOSE WHO HAVE RECEIVED JESUS CHRIST AS SAVIOR. A LOCAL CHURCH IS AN ORGANIZED ASSEMBLY OF BELIEVERS UNITED FOR THE PURPOSE OF CARRYING OUT THE GREAT COMMISSION OF CHRIST.

X. THE GREAT COMMISSION OF CHRIST BEING TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO ALL MEN, BAPTIZING AND DISCIPLING THOSE WHO HAVE BELIEVED.



# Books in Review

## NO OTHER GOSPEL

by Carol J. Ruvolo

P&R Publishing, 226 pages, \$13.99

One does not have to be in a cult to be confined by the shackles of a false gospel. Neither does one have to be under the influence of an ultra-fundamentalist church to fall prey to legalism. Good churches can be brought down by bad doctrine. And, as Carol Ruvolo points out, what happened in Galatia around A.D. 50 can happen today in the United States or anywhere else.

Ruvolo's *No Other Gospel* is an insightful study of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Knowing the threat of the false gospel of legalism is crucial. Ruvolo writes:

"No matter how well we know the truths of the gospel, most of us are attracted by legalism in some form. That is because legalism appeals to our hungry egos. ... As long as we remain fallen sinners plagued by hungry egos, we remain vulnerable to legalism's allure" (pg. 7).

She cuts to the heart of the issue by telling us:

"The real issue in legalism is not *what* we do or don't do. It is more a matter of *how and why* we do what we do or don't do. Legalism is not just an obsession with merit and conduct. It is a denial of the all-equipping power of grace and a rejection of the God-honoring purpose of grace" (pg. 5, italics in original).

Ruvolo is well-read and capable of illuminating Paul's antidote to legalism and his battle for the Gospel of grace. She is committed to the infallibility, inerrancy, authority, and complete sufficiency of the Word of God. She also holds to a Reformed theology, which slightly — but without enmity — flavors the book throughout and is a bit more developed in Lesson (or Chapter) 7. Yet even for those who do not espouse a Reformed theology, the book is a marvelous and helpful exposition of Galatians. They should not be offended or disappointed.

The book is designed in study format for use over 13 weeks either by an individual or as a group study. However, one can read this book more casually and still benefit from it.

In each of the 13 Lessons, Ruvolo takes her readers through an orderly segment of Paul's letter to the Galatians, interpreting the passages. She closes each lesson with "Exercises," which consist of a "Review" of the chapter, personal "Application" (which includes Scripture memorization, prayer guidelines, and stimulating questions), and "Digging Deeper" (questions for further study).

From the onset, Ruvolo forewarns, "Bible study is a serious task that involves a significant investment of time and energy. Preparing yourself to study effectively will help you reap the greatest benefit from that investment" (pg. x). She suggests several logical and practical recommendations to derive the most from this or any Bible study.

Throughout the book, Ruvolo gives brief Greek word studies and insights into first-century customs. The book also contains great practical illustrations, such as one involving emergency track lighting on commercial aircraft (pp. 93-94). Her endnotes are well worth reading, too, as they provide not only references to her source material, but additional thoughts and insight. The personal applications are equally valuable. For example, Ruvolo records several Scripture passages that describe personal attributes that Paul encourages believers to imitate. She tells readers to make a list of these attributes, select two, and make a detailed plan of action to follow Paul's example.

On page 53, Ruvolo has written a concise, nine-sentence presentation of the Gospel. Believers should commit this to memory and preach it to themselves on a daily basis. Doing so will safeguard against our own subtle drift into legalism — and allow us to be better able to "preach Christ crucified." The Galatians succumbed to the false teaching of legalism "not because they were stupid or ignorant people, but because they were lazy and careless thinkers" (pg. 73). Christians today should learn from the error of our first-century brethren.

Two appendices round out the book. "What Must I Do to Be Saved?" is a brief outline of the Gospel and invitation for salvation. "What Is the Reformed Faith?" summarizes key aspects of Reformed thinking.

*No Other Gospel* is an analysis of legalism and the Gospel of grace alone, and much more. It will enrich and bless the life of any believer who reads it.

—MKG

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