

“A perfect cocktail of disgusting lies.” –Anonymous



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HERETIC!

An LGBTQ-Affirming, Divine Violence-Denying,
Christian Universalist's Responses to Some of
Evangelical Christianity's Most Pressing Concerns

**PARENTAL
ADVISORY
EXPLICIT CONTENT**

MATTHEW J. DISTEFANO

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Christian Universalist's Responses to Some of
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Dedication

To Lyndsay and Elyse, Michael and Speri,
and everyone else who believes in me

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Foreword

Music will always have a special place in my heart. As a child, I can recall how special it was anytime someone complemented me on my ability to sing along with what I heard on the radio. I understood melody, harmony, and timing; the three essentials to a quality tune. But I understood when and how to be creative as well, when to add something outside the written music. As I grew up, my life only became more infused with the sweet sound of song. To that end, I became involved in competitive choirs all throughout high school, sang in multiple worship teams, and was even a part of the creation of a worship album.

Now, when I was younger, I attended a church with my grandmother and have vivid memories of sitting in a pew, listening to the chorus of voices around me. I often felt some sense of embarrassment because my grandmother was always out of key. And more than that, she always sang louder than I thought was necessary. Compared to those around us, she stuck out like a sore thumb. Yet, she never seemed to mind. No one else did either. But, I was painfully aware and even felt that it reflected badly on me. Such is the narcissistic nature of a young child (as if adults are any better.) It never registered in my mind that she seemed so happy and comfortable in her worship.

You may be wondering what it is about these specific memories of discomfort that have stayed with me, and, to be honest,

for the longest time, I simply did not know. It was only recently that they began to make sense.

You see, my life has, in so many ways, resembled my time in those pews. Like sitting next to my out-of-tune grandmother, it has been wrought with discomfort—my belief systems painfully turned upside down with one thought that began to roll like a boulder down a steep hill. I could not stop the progress and I could not go back to what I previously “knew,” no matter how much I wanted to. I was stuck dealing with the changes and after a while, just went with it, even when it produced feelings of anxiety and panic. That sounds dramatic, but it is accurate; there certainly were days in which I could not sit still, where all my thoughts led to an uncomfortable disquieting in my soul. Probably the most difficult experience during this time was the lack of those with whom I could commiserate. In fact, my doctrinal questioning eventually resulted in me being asked to walk away from my church home completely.

Shortly after meeting Matthew—around the time he released his first book—I, in keeping with my new-found habit of stepping outside my comfort zone, traveled to his release party and met a new group of friends face-to-face that were all questioning the same things as me. Consequently, after I read *All Set Free*, I was forced to consider yet more question-inducing material. As the questions began to pile up, the pressure was definitely on. When the answers alluded me, things only got worse. Nevertheless, what I discovered is that questions are the best part of life, and, in the uncertainty, faith is actually found. I had always considered faith as being certain of something, but upon further reflection—and countless conversations—I have found it's actually the opposite.

So, back to my musical memories...

One thing I learned as I worked with vocal instructors is that the melody is the driving force in any song. Without a strong melody, the harmonies will always sound wrong. However, when put together in the correct way, the collaboration brings about wonderful tunes that appeal on many different levels. The same is true as it applies to wrestling with the questions that arise from our belief systems. While we can apply the basic tenets of Christianity to the idea of a melody—the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed, for example—it is the wrestling with the tough questions that adds the harmony, bringing the whole song together.

Far too often, however, the tough questions are treated as dissonant noise that must be stamped out in the name of “core beliefs.” Yet, as I’ve learned, in all reality it’s our supposed “core beliefs” that are the cause of all the dissonance. Questioning things has shown me this.

In this book, Matthew dares to question a number of subjects that are considered taboo within the Church at-large. Questions such as the existence of hell—or lack thereof—Universalism, homosexuality, and others, are sure to make a few people squirm in their seats. But, these are the very questions that would not leave me alone and produced in me the panic at finding myself in the uncomfortable position of having to change my mind. To that end, it is my personal opinion that the questions explored in these chapters are necessary, if the Church is to truly take its place as the bride of Christ, constantly reforming toward his image and likeness.

—MICHELLE COLLINS

Preface

Am I a heretic? The title of this book seems to suggest so. However, I'll let you in on a little secret: I'm really not. I may be cheeky, and I'm certainly crass, but I'm not a heretic. That is, not according to either the Apostles' or Nicene creeds. And the last I checked, these were the standards for what is and is not considered heretical in Christianity. At least, they were supposed to be.

So, if I'm not really a heretic, why call this book "Heretic!?" Well, it's simple: I've been labelled a "heretic" so many fucking times, I thought "What the hell? Why not wear it as an ironic badge of honor?" It's sort of like how the 2004 Boston Red Sox, in spite of how great a team they were, called themselves "the idiots." Why? Because that's sort of what they looked like: a bunch of "idiots" with long hair and beards, strong personalities, and lots and lots of flair. And in a game like baseball, where there are supposed to be certain rules to abide by—think of how the New York Yankees do business—that kind of stuff just ain't gonna fly. Christian theology, at least here in the United States, is sort of like that. Only instead of being called "idiots," those who don't quite fit the mold are called "heretics," "false prophets," "reprobates," and all sorts of other harmfully judgmental things.

All of this certainly raises the question: If I'm not technically a heretic, why *does* such a label get branded onto me so very often? Well, I honestly don't think most Christians actually know the

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difference between orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and heresy. So, when certain Christians come across my theology, they just brand it heretical because it doesn't line up with theirs. Simply put, my theology doesn't include eternal torment (*Heresy!*), penal substitutionary atonement theory (*Heresy!*), biblical inerrancy (*Heresy!*), the Rapture (*Heresy!*), divine violence (*Heresy!*), exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community (*Heresy!*), and much more (*HERESY!*). However, as we'll hopefully discover throughout this book, none of these issues are actually heretical; not in formal terms anyway. They may be unpopular, but so what? The last I checked, truth doesn't give a shit about how many people believe it or not. Truth is truth, and has nothing to do with popularity.

So, to all the idiotic heretics out there, here's to you! Cheers, and enjoy the book.

Acknowledgments

Where would I be without my wife Lyndsay? I dare not imagine. So, I must first and foremost thank her for being my rock. And to her mini-me, our daughter Elyse, who always finds a way to bring a smile to my face: Thank you, my sweet princess.

My closest friend is Michael Machuga, and I owe him a huge debt of gratitude for the way he has impacted my life. Mike is, without a doubt, the Gimli to my Legolas—sans the bright red beard.

My parents, Dave and Sharon, have always been dedicated mentors and lifelong friends. I am quite thankful for the wise council I've received throughout the years.

I have to give a shout-out to my fellow heretics from the Heretic Happy Hour podcast. Keith Giles, Jamal Jivanjee, and Rafael Polendo, you guys are the fucking best. Let's keep this train a-rollin'.

I'm grateful to those who have read the manuscript and offered their thoughts and critique, and especially to Mark Hilditch for offering his editing services. Thanks also to the focus group who provided valuable feedback: Rob Edwards, Nathan Jennings, Bryan Johnson, Dietrich Lange, Juanita Ponce, and Simone Ramacci.

A hearty "thank you" to everyone who provided the lovely quotes that were used on the back cover of this book. Without

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your uplifting words of wisdom, I couldn't have found quite the same motivation.

And to everyone that I've failed to mention, *thank you*. Truly. I haven't the room to name you all, but you know who you are, and you haven't gone unnoticed. I couldn't do what I do without all the support I receive from each and every one of you.

Namaste.

Introduction

I have been “doing theology” publicly—on Facebook and elsewhere—for roughly four years. If you’ve engaged with me on that platform then you know it has been quite an interesting ride to say the least. If you have not, then what you must know about me is that I rarely, if ever, sugarcoat things. I don’t pull punches and I don’t let harmful ideas go unnoticed. Furthermore, I put a lot—I mean *a lot*—of ideas out there, and try to remain as transparent as possible. This can lead to some fun banter, but it is not without its risks. Sometimes it bites me in the ass and I am forced to publicly admit where I have been in error. The ego is not a fan of such things. Yet, ultimately, this is a good thing as we all must grow, and how can we do so unless we challenge ourselves and our current beliefs? Given this reality, then, sometimes you just have to take it on the chin and learn from your mistakes.

Being an author and theologian who affirms universal reconciliation, and who is, to some extent, currently positioned in the public eye, I have been afforded the opportunity to be asked a litany of thought-provoking questions. Because of this, I’ve gotten a feel as to what is on people’s minds. Indeed, while some questions have been absolutely dreadful—hostile, angry, purely emotional, and on a few occasions, even laden with physical

threats—others have forced me to push myself and grow in ways I never thought imaginable.

It is these we will focus on throughout the book.

If I may be so bold, the thought of universal salvation, at least initially, evokes a visceral response from most Evangelicals that goes something like this: “Well if *that* is the case, then what is the point in following Jesus?!” Because I have been asked this question so many times, I thought it best to tackle it right off the bat in chapter 1. Then, in chapter 2, we’ll address the subject of biblical cherry-picking. It seems this is an issue with scores of Protestants, who tend to believe that if you do not affirm every theological claim in the Bible then you are just flippantly picking whichever cherries you desire. This couldn’t be further from the truth, as rather than being frivolous cherry pickers we will in fact be following Jesus of Nazareth and the Apostle Paul as our models in how to read the Scriptures.

Chapter 3 will build upon chapter 2. We’ll touch on René Girard’s mimetic theory and explain why, throughout history, regardless of culture or religion, qualities like vengeance and a desire for sacrifice are so quickly and consistently *projected* onto the divine. Then, piggybacking off this, chapter 4 will explore why our understanding of the Scriptures is different than what is known as Marcionism—an unfair charge that has often been levied against Girardians such as myself, or pretty much anyone else who says that *God’s nature is exactly like Jesus’*.

Chapter 5 will cover the issue of homosexuality, which can be a most contentious subject. But, we will not shy away as we attempt to put forth an argument for the full inclusion of the GSM (Gender and Sexual Minority) community into the Church at-large.

Chapter 6 will explore Universalist thought in the early Church, as it seems we tend to forget just how acceptable a doctrine it was for many Patristic Fathers.

Chapter 7 will address the charge that I've abandoned the cross, which really means that I've abandoned the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement (which I gladly admit to doing). Yet, as we shall see, I'm hardly the first to think of the cross in a non-penal way.

In chapter 8, we will move on to the topic of free will. Most Christians contend one of two things: that scores of human beings will ultimately be lost to the flames of hell on account of their own "freedom," or that God sends them there. Nevertheless, as we'll hopefully discover, both views have their major pitfalls.

Chapter 9 will then deal with the notion that God's love and wrath are somehow mutually exclusive, juxtaposed against one another, rather than God's wrath, like all other attributes, being that which flows from his infinite outpouring of love.

Finally, our closing chapter will be a discussion about a topic that used to scare the living daylights out of me, namely, the End Times™ and more specifically, the less than two-hundred-year-old doctrine known as the Rapture.

Now, all that being said, please do not think of this book as some end-all-be-all when it comes to theological matters. It is far from *that!* Rather, it is a simple and succinct set of answers to the questions I hear most often. Perhaps we can even call it my confession of faith, where I opt for brevity more often than not. Forgive me (there's a lengthy bibliography if you desire to dig deeper). Nevertheless, if you do not find yourself in agreement with me, then that is perfectly fine (as if you need my approval!) Maybe you can write a letter if you see fit. I am always open to

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dialoguing about these issues, so long as things stay respectful and kind. Theological discourse constantly excites me; a vigorous debate is something to be cherished, rather than feared and shied away from. Just don't call me a heretic or worse—not unless you want to end up on the back cover of a book. 😊

Take from this book what you will. I do my best to keep things short and to the point. Often times I am cheeky, and sometimes I can be rather biting. I hope that is okay with you. Oh, and I cuss from time to time.

So, bear with me...

In spite of these rough edges, however, the heart of this project is love. Love is the reason I do what I do and, in fact, is the reason why any of us exist in the first place. So, my goal is to spread love and to proclaim, in the words of my wife's favorite author, Rob Bell, that love wins! All else is just the particulars, which this book attempts to decipher. Perhaps I am off a bit, but aren't we all? Yet, in spite of such error, as Bernard Ramm teaches: "God forgives our theology...just like he forgives our sin."¹

Thank God for that!

Following Jesus: A Ticket Outta Hell or Something Much More?

“Whenever universalism is espoused, the urgency and energy of the New Testament preaching is dissipated. I tell you, it is a very unusual thing to hear a Barthian say, ‘I beseech you, be reconciled to God.’ And it is an even rarer thing to hear a card-carrying, genuine-article universalist publicly espousing the doctrine of universalism with tears in his eyes, to say, ‘I beg you; lay down your arms; be reconciled to God.’”¹

—JOHN PIPER

“If universalism is true... it is not necessary to preach the gospel at all, since everyone is already on their way to God and heaven, whether or not they have the Son.”²

—ALEXANDER M. JORDAN

I’m not being hyperbolic when I say that questions like “If all are saved, then why follow Jesus?” are my least favorite variety, and for a litany of reasons. Primarily, it is because questions like these seem to assume that if there is no eternal hell awaiting us should we fail to choose Jesus as “personal lord and savior” in this life,

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then Jesus is not worth following. As if Jesus doesn't stand on his own. As if our primary concern as Christians should be the afterlife, rather than ushering in the *at-hand* kingdom of heaven. As if the Way of Jesus comes down to an acknowledgement that he is who he says he is, merely some secret password St. Peter requires prior to letting us in through the Pearly Gates, rather than a way of discipleship directly handed to us from the Master and the first apostles. But, is the former the thrust of the New Testament? Should hell-avoidance be our primary concern? Let's take a look, shall we?

Point 1: The Gospel Brings Peace, Now

“As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.”

—EPHESIANS 6:15

“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

—PHILIPPIANS 4:7

In case you haven't noticed, our world is, and has always been, a violent one. The history books prove this. The present moment proves this. Just look around you. Syria is a mess. Palestine is in shambles—so too is Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, Ethiopia, Honduras, Brazil, Mexico, and on and on. This unfortunate reality also includes my country, the United States of America. Recently, the *always-on-the-brink-of-war* US—by the way, a “Christian” nation, as I'm often told—just

chose for its President a “Christian” man whose solution to defeat terrorism is, in part, to “take out their families,”³ over a “Christian” woman notorious for her pro-war voting record and dubious—dare I say *un-Christlike*—political dealings. It seems that, in one way or another, this perpetual war we find ourselves in will muster up a way to continue on *ad infinitum*.

Then, on top of our precarious sociopolitical situation, our city streets are witnessing increased mimetic aggression, both from and toward police, and *random* acts of violence, while statistically trending downward, are still flooding the scene. Furthermore, Mother Earth is taking a beating: deforestation, increased severe weather patterns, the Pacific garbage patch, the Fukushima incident, the depopulation of the bees, and so on. It is overwhelmingly apparent, then, that violence—including violence toward our planet—is quickly getting out of control and at some point, we will have to face a reaping of what we are currently sowing. The worst-case scenario, of course, is that we may just one day find ourselves booted off our tiny blue dot, either because of nuclear destruction, a piling up of ecological disasters, and/or for any number of other reasons too numerous to list. Think of it as a global Gehenna of sorts.⁴

I do not say these things to sound like an alarmist. Ultimately, I remain an optimist. Yet, I also realize the reality of our plight. It’s not beyond the realm of possibilities for humanity to enter into an all-out nuclear war at some point, not when our planet has something to the tune of 15,500 total nukes (as of August, 2016⁵). And, if any of the nine nations that possess these weapons start going all red button on us, then it’s probably game over—unless you want to live underground for the rest of your life. I don’t.

So, here's the rub: Given what could be considered some pretty gloomy prognostications, do we not need "saving" from a very real "something?" And is that something not violence? Has it not always been about violence? Isn't the Gospel relevant when thinking about the real crisis humanity finds herself in, and, in fact, has seemingly always found herself in?

You bet it is!

This is what the Gospel has been about from the start: A breaking into our time and space by God to show humanity what true humanness, as well as perfect theology, is all about. And all of it—I mean *all* of it—is centered on God's liberating grace and perpetual love. Only now, this beautifully good news has been hijacked and made out to be nothing more than securing for ourselves some blissful afterlife—at the expense of those

The Gospel has never so much been about posthumous rewards, or being saved from the Father—may it never be that—but about liberation from our enslavement to the violent powers and principalities that structure our out-of-shape world.

who burn for all eternity—rather than ushering in the peaceful kingdom of heaven in the *here* and *now*. But, the latter is exactly what we need to get back to because at its core, the Gospel has never so much been about posthumous rewards, or being saved from the Father—may it never be that—but about liberation from our enslavement to the violent powers and principalities that structure our out-of-shape world.

One of these foundational mechanisms is called *scapegoating*.

We see this culture-structuring principle on full display in the Passion narrative, for example, when the High Priest Caiaphas proclaims: “It is better for you to have *one man die for the people* than to have the whole nation destroyed” (John 11:50, emphasis mine). You see, this is just how scapegoating works, how it leads to (false) peace. When a community is in crisis, they sacrifice one *for* the rest. This is emphasized by Luke’s Gospel, when the writer notices how former rivals—Pilate and Herod—unite around the death of Jesus: “That *same day* Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; *before this they had been enemies.*” (Luke 23:12, emphasis mine)

The Passion exposes this wicked truth about humanity, though, and then offers a way out. That Way is the Way of Forgiveness, even in the face of the violent mechanisms that make up human culture. Jesus models this in Luke 23:34 when, naked from the cross, he continually cries out “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”⁶ Here, Jesus speaks to the non-conscious nature of what is driving this event—*they do not know what they are doing*—and then unveils, for all to see, how to end this cycle of violence. It will be through forgiveness, and by not counting their sins against them (2 Cor 5:19; cf. Jer 31:34); and it will be out in the open—*outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood* (Heb 13:12)—rather than in the Temple, behind the veil, where sacrifices were generally made.⁷

This Way that Jesus opens up for us is how “thy kingdom come” manifests itself on earth “as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10). From Jesus, we learn that in spite of our human kingdoms being structured with retributive violence to the extent of seventy-sevenfold—as when Lamech boasts of murdering a child

for merely scratching him (Gen 4:24)—the kingdom of God is established by forgiveness offered to one another seventy-sevenfold (Matt 18:22). The crescendo of this message is the Passion and Resurrection.

Indeed, the Resurrection picks up where the Passion leaves off. Actually, it does more than that. It unveils the slain yet forgiving victim, whose blood speaks a *better* word than the blood of Abel (Heb 12:24). In Genesis 4:10, Abel's blood cries for vengeance. But Jesus, both from the cross and then after it, cries for forgiveness and peace. And when he does this, others (like you and I) have the ability to taste, see, and trust in his Way even unto death, because in the end, all is forgiven and all will be made alive again—on what the writer of Acts calls the “time of the restoration of all things” (Acts 3:21). In the meantime, though, our calling as Christians, or in other words our “election,” is to follow in this path of peace that our Master set before us, pleading with others to be “reconciled to God”—*here and now*.

Point 2: Death Looms— Watching, Waiting

“So that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.”

—HEB 2:14–15

All of us, in one way or another, are destined to die; whether by some horrific event early on in life or simply from a wearing

down of the bodies we are currently riding around in, it's inevitable. Frankly, this scares the living shit out of us. Pulitzer Prize winning anthropologist Ernest Becker even posited that our fear of death is the *primary* driving force behind humanity's gruesome violence (more on that in chapter 7).⁸ And to a great extent, I tend to agree with him.

You see, while human beings are unique in our ability to create symbols—language, works of art, of music, and of poetry—along with this beautiful gift comes the ability to also think symbolically about our future death. So, in addition to carrying with us the type of anxiety all animals possess (i.e., “fight or flight”), we also develop an anxiety of the more neurotic variety. When we do this, we create entire systems—religions, cultures, etc.—to protect our idea of the “immortal self.” The major problem, then, is that these systems tend to crash into other systems, causing hostility and conflict that can last for ages (just ask anyone who has been caught up in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict).

But, there is a *Christocentric* (Christ-centered) solution to this problem, one that is driven home, not only by the writer of Hebrews, but also by the Apostle Paul in Romans 5. Here's a very quick run-down of what Paul has to say about the issue of death in vv. 12–19 of that chapter:

In v.12, Paul tells us that Adam's sin leads to *death* for *all* people. Then in v.14 he writes how death even exercises *dominion* over us (cf. 1 Cor 15:56; Heb 2:14–15). That is to say, death and the fear it causes, holds humanity in bondage, making it completely juxtaposed against the life-giving gift Christ freely gives (Rom 5:17–18, 21). To that end, for Paul, what Adam did, Christ undid—Adam's sin undone by Christ's free gift of grace, universal death in Adam *undone* by universal life in a crucified yet raised Christ.

Paul is so confident of this that in his first letter to the Corinthians, he describes *death* as being “swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:54). One verse later, he even mocks death itself: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Cor 15:55; cf. Hos 13:14)

A bold proclamation, don't ya think!

The early Christians, Paul included, were bold people though. They took all sorts of unjust abuse because of their faith. They were accused of cannibalism (due to their eucharistic practices), accused of atheism⁹ (they would not bow to the Romans gods),

Death and our fear of death is enough of a hell to be saved from.

scapegoated for a tragic fire that tore through first century Rome,¹⁰ and butchered by the thousands. During Nero's reign, their burning bodies were even used to

light up the night sky.¹¹ Yet, they remained true to Christ, their Master. They were always forgiving, even going so far as to open their homes to one another, living wholly *for* the “other.” One could say they lived as if they had already died with Christ (Col 3:3). But, because Christ had been raised, so were they.

O, death, where is thy sting, indeed!

To that end, what I want to emphasize to those who, doctrinally, need an eternal hell in order to follow Jesus is this: *Death* and our *fear of death* is enough of a hell to be saved from. The early Christians recognized this, which is why the theme of death and Christ's victory over it—and not over an eternal torture chamber called hell—is so prevalent in the Christus Victor model of the atonement (which we'll discuss in chapter 7). Nevertheless, it's a model that makes intuitive sense, ringing true in my heart of

hearts, because it means that there is a *real* saving from something—that is, from death and our fear of it—not a speculative saving from a speculative hellacious afterlife.

Point 3: Jesus Asks Us To

This is the most “duh-worthy” answer of the three. No matter what we believe about eschatology, soteriology, or any of the other “-ologies,” doesn’t Jesus—the incarnate Word (Logos¹²) of God—ask us to follow him, *full stop*? To put it another way, isn’t our theology subservient to our Jesus-following, and not the other way around? The Bible—which, incidentally, is not the Word (Logos) of God—is fairly clear about this: (All emphasis mine)

- Matthew 4:19: “And he said to them, ‘*Follow me*, and I will make you fish for people.’”
- Matthew 16:24: “Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and *follow me*.’”
- Matthew 19:28: “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have *followed me* will also sit on the twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’”
- Mark 10:21: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, *follow me*.’”

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- John 8:12: “Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever *follows me* will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’”
- John 21:18–19: “‘Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, ‘*Follow me.*’”

This call to follow Jesus is not some arbitrary command, however, but something much, much more. You see, given humanity’s copycat nature, we are going to follow someone, and generally non-consciously. And the fact of the matter is that this will generally lead to rivalries and violence; for you see, because we all want what the other has, and because we all cannot have it, it becomes simple mathematics.

Think of the opening scene from *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. Two friends, Sméagol and Déagol, are fishing in a river, when Déagol gets dragged down by a lunger. While under the water, he discovers the infamous Ring. Once at the surface, Sméagol arrives and then picks up on Déagol’s deep desire for the ring. Sure enough, the two then get into a knock-down-drag-out fight in which Sméagol slays Déagol. And that, my friends, is basically what we humans do to each other any time something *shiny* comes our way. We just cannot help ourselves. Our desires become so twisted that we often lose our humanity and will stop at nothing to acquire these desires. We’ll even slay our own brother or sister if we have to.

Here, Tolkien absolutely hits the nail on the head!

But, the Hebrew Bible also speaks to this in its founding murder myth. Cain slays Abel because he desires what he believes Abel has, namely God's blessing (Gen 4:3–5). The rivalry that is fueled by the brothers' shared desires brings a lurking of sin to Cain's door (Gen 4:7).¹³ Cain then lets sin enter one verse later, when brother rises up against brother, spilling the first human blood. The Bible speaks truth to power here, soberly yet accurately depicting how all of human culture is founded on blood.

So, thinking again about Jesus...

Jesus refuses to enter into these sorts of rivalries with others. He does not do this simply because he is God—that is, a being with superhuman abilities (i.e., Docetism)—but because he, as the True Human, intimately knows the Father's heart. On numerous occasions, the writer of John's Gospel gives an account of the bond between the Son and the Father:

- John 5:19–20: “The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.”
- John 6:38: “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.”
- John 8:28: “I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me.”
- John 10:29: “What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.”
- John 12:49: “For I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak.”

Now, as we began exploring in section 1, what Jesus Christ reveals about the divine is that divinity possesses no violence. God is a life-giver—*only*. Reality is structured, not by violence, but by love, which is also to say mercy (Matt 5:38; Luke 6:36). In fact, God is love itself (1 John 4:18). He is also light and in him there is no darkness (1 John 1:5). This includes the darkness of imitative rivalry, the very darkness that plagues humanity and drives us to such retributive violence.

What Jesus Christ reveals about the divine is that divinity possesses no violence. God is a life-giver—*only*.

That darkness is purely a human thing!

In Matthew 16:21–23, we witness it quite clearly in the back and forth between Jesus and Peter. Notice how, after Jesus foretells of his own death, Peter attempts to persuade Jesus to do contrary

to what the Father was having him do. It is as if Peter is saying “no” to following Jesus, instead desiring Jesus to follow him. French anthropologist René Girard offers great insight into how a rivalry could have been born during this event:

Instead of imitating Jesus, Peter wants Jesus to imitate him. If two friends imitate each other's desires, they both desire the same object. And if they cannot share this object, they will compete for it, each becoming simultaneously a model and an obstacle to each other. The competing desires intensify as model and obstacle reinforce each other, and an escalation of mimetic rivalry follows; admiration gives way to indignation, jealousy, envy, hatred, and, at last, violence and vengeance. Had Jesus imitated Peter's ambition, the two thereby would have begun competing for the leadership of some politicized “Jesus

movement.” Sensing the danger, Jesus vehemently interrupts Peter: “Get behind me, Satan, you are a skandalon to me.”¹⁴

Jesus understands the temptation of taking on a model other than the Father (Luke 4:1–11). He understands how enticing the satan can be and recognizes it as *skandalon*, or a stumbling block. In *this* case, it is Peter’s desire to have Jesus follow him that is the skandalon personified—“Satan.” If Jesus would have followed Peter, the non-violent Christ-mission would have failed and the two would have entered into a rivalrous situation, one that would have potentially escalated toward overt violence, either among Jesus and Peter and the disciples, or with those in Jerusalem where Jesus would soon be going, or both.

Because we simply cannot turn off our desires, we instead must imitate the desires of a figure that only does the will of the non-rivalrous Father. That figure is Christ Jesus.

This is why following Jesus is so important. Because we simply cannot turn off our desires, we instead must imitate the desires of a figure that only does the will of the non-rivalrous Father. That figure is Christ Jesus. It is he who can lead us, en masse, into the kingdom of heaven. It is he who best exposes humanity’s propensity toward rivalry, and then he who models how to replace that with positive imitation—i.e., non-consciousness replaced by a higher consciousness.

It may not be a simple task, but it is the Christian calling—or again, our “election.” And because this way of life is not an easy one, crosses must be carried daily (Luke 9:23), as it remains a

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daily struggle for most people, including myself. Yet, since Jesus asked this of us, and then showed us exactly how to do it, it is exactly what we, as *Christ*-ians, should do. Not because we have to, or because if we do then we can “go to heaven when we die,” but simply because that is what Jesus asked of us.

Cherry-Picking the Scriptures, New Testament-Style

“[Christian] Liberalism leads away from biblical fidelity and compromises scriptural truth. It only needs the door to be open a crack in order to push its way through. The only guarantee against the liberal influence on the church is to set our minds and eyes upon the word of God, study it diligently, and believe what it says.”¹

—MATT SLICK

“Progressive Christians despise God’s word when it comes to hating sin. They will only talk about God’s love and watch the hate they spew once they find you don’t support their beliefs. But remember God’s warnings regarding false teachers (2 Tim 4:2–4) and differing gospels.”²

—CARLOTTA MORROW

Am I a biblical cherry picker? *Yes, actually, that is pretty much what I am.* Do you want to know why? (And no, it is not because I despise God’s “word.”) It is because that is pretty much what both Jesus and Paul were (ducks and covers). But, seriously, they were. Well, they did not have Bibles per se, but you know what I

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mean—they “cherry-picked” their Scriptures. Yet, it’s not enough to simply leave it at that, because their cherry-picking was in a strikingly consistent manner; where certain theological claims that were embedded into Second Temple Jewish thought—most notably, that God is, among other things, a vengeful and cursing God—are eliminated. That is simply to say, they had a “nonviolent hermeneutic.” Now, so you do not think I’m bat-shit-crazy for saying this, let’s explore some of these instances. (It will help you to have a Bible handy for the rest of this chapter.)

Jesus

INSTANCE 1: LUKE 4:16–30, REFERENCING ISAIAH 61:1–2

Allow me to set the scene. We begin in Luke 3, where Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus then heads out into the wilderness (Luke 4:1). Here, he is tested by the devil. But, like a Kung Fu master, Jesus dismisses the satan, passing the ultimate test. While in the power of the Spirit, Jesus then heads to the synagogue in Nazareth to proclaim the jubilant good news that he is about to bring. When he arrives, he opens the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, turning right to the Jubilee text from chapter 61 (one of everyone’s favorites), and reads:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me
To bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,

To let the oppressed go free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

—Luke 4:18–19

Rolling up the scroll, Jesus makes a full stop, midsentence, and boldly proclaims, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). Then, in the very next verse, *you-know-what* hits the fan. And before you retort by saying “that’s not what the next verse says,” let me clarify something.

In Luke 4:22, the passage in most biblical translations indeed reads “all spoke well of him,” but in all reality, the Greek text simply says πάντες ἐμαρτύρουν αὐτῷ, or “all bore witness to him.”³ So what is going on here? Scholar Michael Hardin, in his masterful work *The Jesus Driven Life*, offers a compelling answer:

Translators have to make what is known as a syntactical decision, they have to decide whether or not the “bearing witness” is negative or positive. Technically speaking they have to decide if the dative pronoun “to him” is a dative of disadvantage or a dative of advantage; was the crowd bearing witness to his advantage or to his disadvantage?⁴

In other words, translators have to make a choice: Was the crowd enthralled with Jesus’ message, bearing positive witness, and proud that Jesus was Joseph’s son? Or, rather, were they upset by it, and bore negative witness to it by dismissing Jesus as the son of a “nobody?” (After all, as John 1:46 teaches, nothing good ever came out of Nazareth). Well, it seems that based on Jesus’ sarcastic response in vv. 23–27 that the latter is more accurate. Otherwise, why would he get defensive for seemingly no reason? It is doubtful he would. Instead, it seems more reasonable to think that Jesus is responding to the jeering crowd in front of him. The reverse makes little sense.

But, a key question remains: *Why* were they so pissed off to begin with? What gets them all riled up in the first place? The answer, to put it plainly, is in how Jesus reads the text from Isaiah. Notice, in Isaiah 61:2, a key feature to the Jubilee passage is “the day of vengeance of our God.” But Jesus does not read this part. In fact, he stops midsentence in order to omit the

For Jesus, unlike his interlocutors, God was *not* going to deliver his people from Roman occupation through the use of vengeance.

theological claim that God was going to bring vengeance down upon the very people he, as well as the prophets Elijah and Elisha before him, were sent by God to bless. For Jesus, unlike his interlocutors, God was *not* going to deliver his people from Roman occupation through

the use of vengeance; instead, he was going to bring good news to *all* the poor, proclaim release to *all* the captives, recovery of sight to *all* the blind; he was going to let *all* the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor without any such eschatological violence.

This is what gets the crowd in a tizzy. And that is why they then “bear witness” to Jesus, not advantageously, but disadvantageously. They are upset over Jesus’ omission of a very key part of the Isaianic text, which leads them to sarcastically dismiss Jesus as merely “the son of Joseph,” or in other words, the son of a “nobody” (cf. John 1:46). Hence Jesus’ retort: “No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown” (Luke 4:24).

To sum all this up: What the people cannot accept here is a teacher who teaches that a Day of Jubilee is a day *without* “the

vengeance of our God” (Isa 61:2). It is such an offensive claim, in fact, that they nearly throw Jesus off a cliff because of it (Luke 4:29–30). Indeed, Jesus must have learned, that very day, just how dangerous it is to mess with folks’ presupposed doctrines.

INSTANCE 2: LUKE 7:18–23, REFERENCING VARIOUS PASSAGES FROM ISAIAH; 1 AND 2 KINGS

Here’s our second scene. John the Baptist is in a bit of a pickle. He really wants to know if Jesus is the messiah, “the one who is to come” (Luke 7:20). But, he is also in prison for speaking out against King Herod and his minions. So, to solve this conundrum, John sends some of his disciples to speak with Jesus in order to clarify just who Jesus really is. However, when John’s disciples reach Jesus and ask John’s questions, Jesus, in typical Jesus fashion, does not simply answer *yes* or *no*, but instead offers a multilayered and highly technical response.

The answer Jesus provides primarily consists of scriptural quotations from Isaiah (and some from First and Second Kings). He informs the disciples to tell John that the blind receive sight (Isa 29:18; 35:5; 61:1–2), the lame walk (Isa 35:6), the lepers are cleansed (2 Kgs 5:1–27), the deaf hear (Isa 29:18; 35:5), the dead are raised (1 Kgs 17:17–34), and the poor have good news brought to them (Isa 29:19). Like the story from Luke 4, though, there is something going on under the surface that we must pay attention to.

You see, John the Baptist most likely shared a similar eschatology with the folks in Nazareth—the ones who were ready to throw Jesus from a cliff for his elimination of “the day of vengeance of our God” from Second Isaiah. We see evidence of this in Luke 3:7–9, where John warns the people of “the

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wrath to come.”⁵ So, it’s quite telling that when Jesus quotes the above Isaianic passages, he *always* eliminates the associated vengeance texts.

See for yourself. Isaiah 29:18 and 29:19 are referenced, but not Isaiah 29:20: “~~For the tyrant shall be no more, and the scoffer shall cease to be; all those alert to do evil shall be cut off~~”; Isaiah 35:5 and 35:6 are included, but not Isaiah 35:4: “~~Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense~~”; and Isaiah 61:1–2 is used, but not the phrase “and the day of vengeance of our God” from v. 2.⁶ Then, Jesus does a mic drop, when he concludes with: “And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (Luke 7:23). The offense he is talking about here is the same offense caused in the synagogue in Nazareth. It is the offense, or scandal, of a non-vengeful Father. But, for those who are not offended, they will find blessing here, because they will see that God indeed blesses everyone. That is the exact message Jesus gives in Matthew 5:45, when he teaches that God “sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous”—which, by the way, is a direct subversion of the very Deuteronomic God Jesus’ contemporaries so often affirmed, the God who were told will “change the rain of your land into powder, and only dust shall come down upon you from the sky until you are destroyed.” (Deut 28:24)

INSTANCE 3: MATTHEW 5, REFERENCING LEVITICUS 24:20; VARIOUS PASSAGES FROM DEUTERONOMY 28

Scene three: The Sermon on the Mount. Here, Jesus makes some very interesting statements that should garner our attention. On a number of occasions, he begins a teaching with “You have heard that it was said, but I say to you.” What this means is

that he is going to be quoting from his Scriptures, and then follow that with a fresh take on how to apply the instructions. So, for instance, contrary to Leviticus 24:20, in Matthew 5:38–39, Jesus says “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But, if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” However, Jesus also qualifies these teachings with the statement: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish, but to fulfill” (Matt 5:17).

So, what is going on here?

First off, we have to figure out if by “fulfill” Jesus meant that he came to affirm *every jot and tittle* in the whole of

the “law and prophets,” or that he came to perfect and complete them. This is to ask, is Jesus simply agreeing with all the teachings of Moses and the other Hebrew writers, or is he the *telos*, or ultimate goal, of them? To address this, we should simply ask ourselves this: how did Jesus interpret the passages he quotes?

Well, given his direct “contradiction”—or, rather, expansion—of multiple teachings (namely those from Lev 24:20; Deut 28:15, 20–24, 59–61; Eccles 5:4), we should conclude the latter; that Jesus is not necessarily affirming the letter of every law, but the spirit behind the whole of it. In other words, when we say that Jesus fulfills the Law, what we’re not saying is that every theological datum in the whole of the Law and prophets must be affirmed, but that the *whole* of Israel’s story points to one thing: Christ. And, more specifically, peace through Christ.

Jesus is not necessarily affirming the letter of every law, but the spirit behind the whole of it.

As René Girard points out: “When Jesus declares that he does not abolish the Law but fulfills it, he articulates a logical consequence of his teaching. The goal of the Law is peace among humankind.”⁷

That is *the key* right there!

The Law’s command to take “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” rather than being viewed as simply an archaic form of justice, should be viewed as a mandate that actually *attempts* to get to the root of the problem—*violence*. That is to say, it takes us from a more violent place to a less violent one. Remember, once Abel’s blood is spilled, vengeance is taken by Lamech—who is only a few generations removed from Abel—seventy times sevenfold (Gen 4:23–24). That is quite a bit more excessive than “an eye for an eye,” is it not? Because of this, a flood of violence ensues, wiping out almost all of humanity. To stop such chaos, Mosaic Law gets to the heart of the matter by saying “stop at an eye for an eye,” but simply cannot quite do the job (in chapter 3, we’ll discuss why). Jesus, however, as the *telos* of the Law, does. And he does so by teaching that we should not resist⁸ our persecutors (Matt 5:38–42), that we should love our enemies (v.44), and pray for them, and that we should be perfect, just as our heavenly Father is perfect (v.48). In Luke’s version of the sermon, the Father’s mercy is the lynchpin of perfection (Luke 6:36), thus showing how mercy and love go hand in hand, and that they are to take precedence *over* retributive justice.

So, does Jesus abolish the Law? No, of course not. Abolishment means that something ends prematurely. He fulfills and exegetes it perfectly. And in doing so, he models a perfect theological framework by showing how God is best defined by his perfect love of enemies (Matt 5:43–48) and mercy for the wicked (Luke

6:36). And he shows that although it may not have *always* been the Moses way—although it is at times—it is in fact the truly human and therefore truly divine Way.

**INSTANCE 4: LUKE 20:41–47,
REFERENCING PSALM 110:1**

This scene begins with “the chief priests and the scribes” questioning Jesus (Luke 20:1). These folks had a tendency for doing such a thing. And not only that, but they also had a tendency to proof-text the Torah during their interrogations, often times in order to then clobber people over the head (John 8:3–5). This led to some atrocious sociological implications (women being stoned to death, for example).

Adding fuel to the fire, in the minds of some, Israel’s future king—the messianic deliverer who would free the Jews from the grip of Roman Law—was soon coming with *violence* and *vengeance*, and from the house of David (2 Sam 7:1–17). In spite of Jerusalem being destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, which forced the Israelites into exile for the next five-hundred or so years, many still believed in this deliverance to come. And that meant there would be hell to pay for Israel’s enemies. The Pharisees, no doubt, would have been familiar with this notion, and so too Jesus. In fact, Jesus—while not affirming all the presupposed ideas about what messiahship meant—does accept this title in Mark 14:62.

So, with these two things in mind—the Pharisaical approach to the Scriptures as well as the Davidic understanding of Messiah—let’s get to the passage at-hand, because what Jesus does with the Pharisees’ inquires is nothing short of brilliant.

After Jesus puts the scribes in their place, Luke tells us how “they no longer dared to ask him another question” (Luke 20:40). Jesus then poses his own rhetorical question: “How can they say that the Messiah is David’s son?” Well, certainly Jesus knew that the Messiah *would* come from the Davidic line, *so where is Jesus going with this? What is he up to, asking such a rhetorical question?* He continues:

“For *David himself says* in the book of the Psalms,
 ‘The Lord said to my Lord,
 Sit at my right hand,
 Until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

—Luke 20:41–43, emphasis mine

Let’s unpack this by focusing on two distinct things.

First, in Psalm 110:1—the passage being quoted by Jesus—the traditional understanding of this passage is that the first “Lord” mentioned is to be understood as God, while the second is either David or one of his descendants (i.e., a future king).⁹

But this is read differently by Jesus.

When Jesus gets a hold of this passage, he names David as the first “Lord”—*for David himself says*—and the future Messiah (Jesus) as the second. Jesus then asks, “How can they say that the Messiah is David’s son?” Why does he ask this? Because, for David to call one of his descendants “lord,” it is only because *that* descendant was special in some way, that he was deserving of such a title—you simply did not call your sons and other descendants “lord.” To that end, when Jesus attaches *himself* to the second “lord,” he is making a dangerously bold move, not only because he tinkers with Scripture in order to do so, but because he is not held in too high of esteem amongst the scribes and Pharisees. If you recall, it is only a few verses prior that they

had sent spies to watch Jesus in order to trap him so as to hand him over to the Roman authorities (Luke 20:20). So, for Jesus to attach himself to the concept of “messiah?” Whoa boy, watch out; shit’s about to get real!

Second, when Jesus quotes from Psalm 110, he again omits any of the associated vengeance texts (Ps 110:2–3, 5–7). In fact, *any time* Psalm 110 is quoted in the New Testament, Psalm 110:2–3, 5–7 are always omitted (Heb 5:6; 6:20; 7:17, 21). This is important because crucial to any Davidic understanding of messiahship is a Rambo-style deliverance—think along the lines of Mark Driscoll’s Jesus:

“a Pride fighter with a tattoo down his leg, a sword in his hand and the commitment to make someone bleed.”¹⁰ It certainly seems like that is what John the Baptist was expecting (Luke 3:7–9). And it is *definitely* what the folks in Nazareth were waiting for (Luke 4:18–30). But, by attaching himself to the concept of Messiah, and then by again omitting all of the associated vengeance passages from his quotations of Scripture, Jesus reorients the assumed understanding of “divine deliverance.” Yes, the Messiah may in fact be from the Davidic line (although perhaps not in the traditional sense), but he will not be a Davidic warrior-type, and he will not be bringing vengeance upon his enemies. Instead, he will love his enemies

By attaching himself to the concept of Messiah, and then by again omitting all of the associated vengeance passages from his quotations of Scripture, Jesus reorients the assumed understanding of “divine deliverance.”

and pray for those who persecute him (Matt 5:44). In fact, Jesus' last prayer prior to his final breath is for the forgiveness of those who declared him an enemy: "Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34)." What a complete reversal of what Messiah was to be viewed as, a Christology that is a complete rejection of militarism and violent deliverance!

Paul

INSTANCE 5: GALATIANS 3:10–13, REFERENCING DEUTERONOMY 21:23

Paul's letter to the Galatians is one of my favorites. Perhaps it is because we can easily tell just how pissed off Paul is. And, if I'm being honest, that is one of the reasons I like him so much. Like me, he defends the Gospel by telling it like it is and has a bit of a snarky streak. I mean, it is not that often you hear good men of God sarcastically wishing for teachers of false gospels to castrate themselves (Gal 5:12). The last I checked, telling church leaders to cut off their genitalia was frowned upon.

Nevertheless, allow me to offer a brief contextual note so that we can address the passage at-hand.

What is specifically going on in this letter is that Paul is upset by a group of teachers from the Jerusalem Church who are espousing a counterfeit, Jewish-Christian message to his churches in Galatia and elsewhere (Gal 1:7; cf. Rom 16:17). Peter, at least indirectly, is included among these.¹¹ What is being falsely taught is that prior to becoming a follower of Christ, one had to comply with Mosaic Law: obey the Sabbath, keep a kosher table (Gal 2:11–12), and, if male, become circumcised (Acts 11:2–3;

15:1–2). Furthermore, it seems this false message included some harsh and unfair rhetoric levied against Gentiles.¹² This leads to division in the Church, and really pisses Paul off because for him, there were to be absolutely no dividing lines (Gal 3:28; Rom 10:12), and anything “of the Law” is not to be held in too high esteem—as it brings a curse (Gal 3:10), on Christ even (Gal 3:13), wrath (Rom 4:15), and death (Rom 7:9–10; 8:2). Hence the reason for Paul’s rhetoric against the false teachers and their law-based “gospel” in Galatians 5:12: “I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!” In essence, I believe Paul is saying: *If you are going to force people to cut off the tips of their penises in order to be “justified” before God and the Law, then why don’t you just go ahead and cut off your own dick instead!*

With this brief contextual note in mind, let’s turn to a passage in Galatians where Paul employs a creative interpretation of a familiar phrase from the book of Deuteronomy. He does this in order to condemn the very Law that the false teachers are using in their condemnation of others—which, incidentally, by its very logic, condemns the false teachers themselves (cf. Rom 2:1).

Notice how, in Galatians 3:10, Paul emphatically states that the law—which, by the way, Pauline scholar J. Louis Martyn argues was given at Sinai in God’s *absence* (Gal 3:19–20)¹³—is a curse to everyone who relies on it (Gal 3:10). Why? Because the

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Scriptures are clear: *everyone* will fall short in one way or another (Rom 3:23) and the minute that happens is the minute you are under its curse (Gal 3:10; cf. Deut 28:15, 20–24, 59–61).

After establishing this sobering truth, Paul then lays down the gauntlet by creatively quoting Deuteronomy 21:23, writing: “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” (Gal 3:13). What Paul *fails* to include in that phrase is the kicker. Notice the difference:

- Deuteronomy 21:23: “For anyone hung on a tree is under *God’s curse*” (emphasis mine).
- Galatians 3:13: “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.”

Did you catch that? For the writer of the book of Deuteronomy—as well as all the penal substitution folks—God’s curse is upon anyone who is hung on a tree. But, for Paul, that is not so. In fact, he says that nobody speaking by the Spirit of God says “Jesus is cursed,” only that he is Lord (1 Cor 12:3). Yet cursed and hung upon a tree is exactly where Jesus ends up anyway—with help from the Law, no less. So, what Paul understands is that it is not God who is the architect of such cursing—as God does not create systems that lead to the killing of his very own son—but rather, the Law is. Or, to put it really simply, humanity and its systems cursed Jesus. Yet, because he was truly innocent, God raised him from the dead (Gal 1:1); which he would have never done had he really been cursed by God.

INSTANCE 6: ROMANS 15:7–13, REFERENCING VARIOUS PASSAGES FROM PSALM 18; DEUTERONOMY 32:43

We again turn to the Apostle Paul, but this time to his letter to the Romans. It is a most difficult letter to interpret and has given scholars and lay Christians alike fits for millennia. Perhaps it is

one of the letters Peter is referring to in 2 Peter 3:16, when he writes, “There are some things in them [Paul’s letters] hard to understand.” So, for our purposes, we are going to have to make an assumption, namely that Pauline scholar Douglas Campbell is essentially correct in how to best approach it. As a non-scholar myself, I realize that, inevitably, trust will have to be placed in another who is above my pay grade. Do we all not have to do this in some regard? I am not making a blind assumption though. Rather, it is the result of years of diligent study. Perhaps I am wrong, but you will have to decide that for yourself.

So, here’s the gist of how Romans is to be approached, according to Campbell and others.¹⁴

In *The Deliverance of God*, Campbell argues that, instead of all of Romans 1–4 being entirely the “voice of Paul,” it is a “dialogue” between Paul and the false teachers we just discussed—those who were either in Rome or on their way to Rome at the time of this letter. Campbell sums up his method for approaching the first four chapters of the letter:

There are certain instances where Paul attributes material to the Teacher directly, using the technique of prosopopoeia. In these texts the Teacher in effect speaks for himself (although suitably crafted by Paul, of course)—first in the opening of his usual conversion speech (1:18–32), and then later in dialogue with Paul (3:1–9). However, for much of the rest of the argument Paul is quoting the Teacher’s teaching, and rather sarcastically, and this is entirely consistent with his main rhetorical goal throughout the section, which is to refute the Teacher in terms of his own gospel.¹⁵

Remember, this so-called “gospel” is the Jewish-centered one, which, in all reality, is entirely counterfeit (Gal 1:6–7). In

addition to keeping various Jewish laws, this *false* gospel comes chock full of anti-Gentile rhetoric, typical of some prominent Jewish sentiments (cf. Wisdom of Solomon 13–14). This rhetoric can be found scattered all throughout Romans 1:18–32. And crucial to this message is the commonly held Jewish belief that “the wrath of God” will be revealed against those Gentiles who practice these abominable things (Rom 1:18).

But, here’s where things get good.

Paul, in order to show how false this “gospel” truly is, then turns it right back around on the false teachers in Rom 2:1: “*Therefore* you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, *the judge*, are doing the very same things.” (Emphasis mine) Basically, what he is arguing is that if the wrath of God is going to be revealed—just as the false gospel says it is (Rom 1:18)—it will be revealed against the false teachers, too. There is a qualification, however, because in all reality, it will not be the “wrath of God” that befalls the teachers, but wrath stored up by themselves for their insistence on preaching and practicing the gospel of wrath (Rom 2:5). In effect, Paul is saying that you reap what you sow, and if you are going to sow a law-based, wrathful gospel, that is what you are going to reap upon *yourself*.

That being said, let’s move on to my main point, which is that Paul then later uses a specific hermeneutical method—similar to that of Jesus in Luke 7:22—as further evidence that the true Gospel is wholly inclusive to Gentiles, and that the false, wrathful, law-based message of the teachers is *dead on arrival*. What he specifically does is quote the Hebrew Scriptures, and then exegetes them so he can point to a time where Gentiles

“might glorify God for his *mercy*” (Rom 15:9, emphasis mine). First up, Romans 15:9b (quoting Psalm 18:49): “Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name.” What is left off, of course, is all of the vengeful passages that precede this declaration: “~~They cried for help, but there was no one to save them; they cried to the Lord, but he did not answer them. I beat them fine, like dust before the wind; I cast them out like the mire of the streets... Blessed be... the God who gave me vengeance and subdued peoples under me~~” (Ps 18:41–42, 46–47). Then, one verse later (quoting Deuteronomy 32:43): “And again he says, ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.’” And again, what is left off is the vengeance that follows: “~~For he will avenge the blood of his children, and take vengeance on his adversaries; he will repay those who hate him, and cleanse the land for his people.~~”

This consistent interpretive pattern is, again, for the purpose of eliminating the dividing lines that certain Jewish-Christians were creating in the first century. Being falsely taught was that one must obey the Law—kosher table, Sabbath, and penis slicing—in order to have the Gospel. And Paul was having none of it, because, for Paul, to take away the truth of the Gospel with laws fabricated in God’s absence (Gal 3:19–20¹⁶) was to preach a false gospel and thus pronounce judgment on all, including one’s self (Rom 2:1). Or, in other words, *to store up self-inflicted wrath* (Rom 2:5).

Yet, for Paul, in spite of all this, due to the fact that all of us, both Jew and Gentile, are so damn disobedient (Rom 11:30–31), God will be merciful to all whom he pleases, that is, *all* (Rom 11:32). *This even includes the false teachers!* That’s just how inclusive Paul’s theology is. Indeed, it’s a theology centered on

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the mercy of God: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.” (Rom 11:32) Hence the jubilant exaltation at the very end of his rhetorical argument (which runs from Romans 9–11): “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen” (Rom 11:33–36).

INSTANCE 7: EPHESIANS 6:13–17, REFERENCING ISAIAH 59:17–18

Ephesians 6:13–17 is a passage from Paul that should be familiar to any Christian. It reads:

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

What many of us may not realize is that this is a direct reference to Isaiah 59:17–18. However, like so many other instances, there is going to be some tinkering done by Paul. Sure, the “breastplate of righteousness” and “helmet of salvation” are included in Paul’s version of the armor of God, but notice what is, not coincidentally, missing:

~~“He put on garments of vengeance for clothing,
and wrapped himself in fury as a mantle;
according to their deeds, so he will repay;
wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies.”~~

—Isaiah 59:17b–18

Indeed, as Paul notes, there is armor to be put on, for there is a war at-hand. However, this is not a war of “blood and flesh,” but a war fought against the “cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph 6:12).” It is not a war to be fought with literal swords, bows and arrows, but a “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” And for this war we bear no garments of vengeance, no boots of war; rather, we gird our bare feet with the “gospel of peace.”

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Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, my goal was to point to some of the direct evidence that both Jesus and the apostle Paul had a method for interpreting the Hebrew Bible. In essence, what we saw was how both draw out the best of their Scriptures in order to point to a heavenly Father who is *non-sacrificial*, *non-vengeful*, and *non-violent*.

To that end what I want to emphasize is this: To take the Bible seriously is to not take everything literally. Sure, some things we should take literally. Jesus told us to literally love our

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enemies (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:35); he told us to literally bless those who curse us (Luke 6:28); he told us to literally turn the other cheek (Matt 5:39); and he told us to literally be merciful *just like* our heavenly Father is (Matt 5:48; Luke 6:36). But, as for some of the other shit that we've said about God over the millennia—even if we've said it in the Bible—well, now that's a different story. Some of *that* stuff has to be modified in light of Jesus, the most unexpected of messiahs.

End Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Hardin, “Finding Our Way Home,” para. 48.

CHAPTER 1

1. Piper, “Universalism and the Reality of Eternal Punishment,” para. 29.
2. Jordan, “Universalism vs the Gospel,” para 3.
3. Ross, “Donald Trump,” para. 1–2.
4. For a deeper look into the potential cataclysmic effects of our current self-destructive ways, both René Girard (*Battling to the End*) and Jean-Pierre Dupuy (*The Mark of the Sacred*) offer in-depth surveys that I highly recommend.
5. See <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhoahaswhat>.
6. This passage is, admittedly, a textual variant, and is not found in the original Greek manuscripts. However, it certainly does follow the spirit of Jesus’ teachings on forgiveness that are found littered all throughout the gospels.
7. This is the point John’s Gospel is trying to make by having Jesus’ death on Thursday rather than Friday, as the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) have it. The writer of the Fourth Gospel places Jesus’ death at the same exact time the Passover lamb was to be slaughtered in the Temple in order to subvert the “traditional” notion of sacrifice. In essence, what is being conveyed is that while the priests were making sacrifices inside the city, the true sacrifice was slain outside the city, on a hill called

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- Golgotha. For a detailed look at the subversive nature of Jesus' sacrificial death, see James Alison's essay "God's Self-Substitution and Sacrificial Inversion" in *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*. Edited by Jersak and Hardin. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.
8. Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press, 1973.
 9. In no way do I mean this as a slight against atheists (I myself was one), but as a historical fact.
 10. Tacitus, *Annals*, Book XV, Ch. 44.
 11. *Ibid.*
 12. The term "Logos" comes from, among other places, John 1:1–5. It is a Greek word that most of our English bibles translate as "Word." But it is much more than just speech. In fact, prior to Socrates, Heraclitus argued that the Logos was that which structures the entire world. Incidentally, he also argued that that structural principle is violence. The counter to this is, of course, the nonviolent Logos of Christ which John talks of. Instead of a Logos of war and strife (Heraclitus, fragments 53 and 80), the true Logos is imbued with love, grace, and peace.
 13. This is the very first time the word "sin" is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.
 14. Girard, "Are the Gospels Mythical?," para. 10.

CHAPTER 2

1. Slick, "The Elements of Liberalism," sec. II, para. 5.
2. Morrow, "Beware of Progressive Christianity," para. 10.
3. The KJV actually gets this correct, and reads "And all bare him witness." However, most translations, such as the NRSV and NIV, tell us that all "spoke well of Jesus."
4. Hardin, *Jesus Driven Life*, 67.
5. *Ibid.*, 70.
6. *Ibid.*, 69–70.
7. Girard, *I See Satan*, 14.

8. What Jesus is not saying is that Christians are to allow themselves and others to be persecuted. Regarding Jesus' command to non-resistance, Michael Hardin points out, "The Greek verb used (*antisthenai*) does not mean be a doormat, it means that when you are abused (persecuted), you 'speak truth to power' by engaging in actions which, while nonviolent, are also resistant. Turning the other cheek does not mean letting someone strike you over and over. It is a way of calling attention to the abuse in a nonviolent fashion such that the abuser will recognize the futility of their actions." (Hardin, *Jesus Driven Life*, 126) See, also, Walter Wink's *Engaging the Powers*, pp 175–77.
9. Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 176.
10. From an interview with *Relevant Magazine* that can be found at <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/features/1344-from-the-mag-7-big-questions>.
11. Martyn, *Galatians*, 246–47.
12. Evidence for this can be found in Romans 1:18–32, as well as Galatians 5:19–21. In both instances, Paul is rhetorically playing the role of the false teacher and quotes traditional anti-Gentile rhetoric that can be found in Wisdom of Solomon 13–14, but in other places as well. (Campbell, *Deliverance*, 360–62)
13. Martyn, *Galatians*, 364–70.
14. Those who come to mind include, but are not limited to, J. Louis Martyn and Chris Tilling.
15. Campbell, *Deliverance*, 587.
16. Martyn, *Galatians*, 364–70.

CHAPTER 3

1. Mann, "Myth of a Non-Violent Jesus," para. 11.
2. Williams, *Being Christian*, 38.
3. Hamerton-Kelly, *Violent Origins*, 141.
4. Girard, *I See Satan*, 137.
5. *Ibid.*, 15.

For more information about Matthew J. Distefano
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Matthew J. Distefano is a husband and father, the author of three books, and, among other things, a “professor of word vomit.” Being “one with the devil,” he deceptively spends the majority of his time affronting “Jesus’ work on the cross.” You can follow him at www.allsetfree.com.



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