

# The Crisis of Faith Today

Will He Find Faith on the Earth?

Paper #2

## A History of the False Alternatives to Authentic Belief in Jesus

by

J. A. “Jack” Crabtree

### Introduction

I tried to make clear in the first of this set of papers that mere belief in Jesus alone does not mark one as a child of God. Rather, what marks one as a child of God is acceptance of Jesus as the one sent by God with a clear, accurate, and thorough grasp of the Truth itself. Hence, the true child of God is not the one who names the name of Jesus. Rather, he is the one who humbly and willingly sits at the feet of Jesus and learns from him. No matter how antiquated and “uncool” Jesus’ ideas might be, no matter how contemptible to modern attitudes they are, the authentic follower of Jesus will embrace his teaching anyway. His foremost desire is to bring his own understanding of reality—every inch of it—into conformity with that of Jesus.

The book of *1 John* contains a very significant paragraph in 1:5–7:

*Now this is the message that we heard from JESUS and disclose to you: God is the Light. Now, in him, there is no darkness. If we say that we hold an understanding of reality in common with God, and yet we are walking in darkness, we are lying. And indeed, we are not following the truth. But if we are walking in the light as JESUS is in the light, we do hold an understanding of reality in common with one another—that is, we with God—and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.*

John suggests that what Jesus taught his disciples is that God is the source of Truth. God is the source of a true and accurate understanding of reality. In a word, he is “the Light.” If we want to have a framework for understanding accurately the truth about anything, we must look to the framework that God has revealed. Furthermore, no one can be an authentic disciple of Jesus who does not share Jesus’ commitment to conforming his life and thought to the Truth revealed by God. And, notably, an individual reveals the extent to which he has an accurate grasp of this Truth by how he lives. The one who lives his life in accord with the Truth that God has revealed is someone who is truly on the same page as Jesus. (He has *koinonia* with Jesus.) Furthermore, he is on the same page as God. (He has *koinonia* with God.) And, finally, this is the one who is “cleansed” from all his sin. In other words, the one who lives his life in accord with the Truth that God has revealed—and only he—will be saved from destruction and will be granted eternal Life. It is clear from this paragraph in *1 John* that, from John’s perspective, it takes a great deal more to be saved than to simply purport to be Jesus’ follower. One must actually live his life in a manner that evidences his desire to conform his mindset, values, and beliefs to the Truth as God himself would define it.

We also noted in the last paper an important corollary to the above: not every belief that a so-called follower of Jesus embraces is actually an aspect of the Truth. Followers of Jesus can quite easily be led to embrace seductively interesting beliefs that are utterly incompatible with the

Truth that comes from God. Sometimes a Jesus-follower embraces darkness rather than the Light. And, if he is doggedly and immovably committed to that darkness, then he is not a *bona fide* Jesus-follower at all.

Throughout the history of mankind, there have been many different, alternative viewpoints advanced with respect to what it means to follow Jesus. While only one viewpoint captures the Truth, many have been proposed. Hence, authentic belief in Jesus has faced constant opposition and challenge from various false alternatives. Individuals in every generation have had to come to authentic belief in Jesus by sorting through and rejecting various competing claims with regard to what it means to follow Jesus. While every believer has had to sort through alternatives to authentic belief, there have been a number of influential alternatives that have challenged biblical faith significantly. In this paper I want to do two things. In the first part of the paper, I want to tell the story of the perilous journey belief in Jesus has had to traverse throughout history. In the brief second part of the paper I want to propose that there exists a new and dangerous peril for belief in Jesus. The third paper in this series will examine this new and perilous alternative to biblical belief more closely.

## Part 1: A Brief History of Faith's Perilous Journey

There have been six major challenges to authentic belief in Jesus throughout the history of our faith. In this section of the paper, I want to briefly outline these six alternatives to authentic belief that created a number of very dramatic crisis points in the history of faith: (1) the challenge of the Judaizers, (2) the challenge of the Christian Religion, (3) the challenge of Christian Gnosticism, (4) the challenge of Liberalism, (5) the challenge of the Social Gospel, and (6) the challenge of Pagan-Pentecostal Spirituality.

### (1) The Challenge of the Judaizers

The first important challenge to authentic belief in Jesus occurs right under the noses of the apostles. I mentioned it briefly in the first paper. A significant portion of early Jewish followers of Jesus believed—quite understandably—that a follower of Jesus should want to obey the Mosaic Law. It seemed to them that even a Gentile follower of Jesus should want to obey the Mosaic Law. In their minds, the Mosaic Law simply defined righteousness; and it was clear to them that a follower of Jesus should want to pursue righteousness.

Paul understood the scruples of these Jews. They had been thoroughly enculturated in a way of life centered in the Law of Moses. It would seem wrong to them, as a matter of course, to fail to keep the Sabbath, not to eat kosher, etc. They had thought and felt that such things were wrong their entire lives. It is not surprising that coming to believe that Jesus is the Messiah would not change such thoughts and feelings.

On the other hand, Jesus changed everything. It was clear from Jesus' teaching and from the meaning and significance of Jesus' death and resurrection that how a Jew thought about divine mercy must change. God's purpose, from before the foundation of the world, was that the basis upon which a sinful human being could receive mercy would be the propitiatory offering (= the death) and intercession of Jesus. Nothing else was necessary for salvation. If Jesus was willing to be my advocate, mercy and Life was mine. If Jesus was not willing to be my advocate, there

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would be no mercy and no salvation. And for whom was Jesus willing to serve as advocate? He promised that he would grant Life (through his advocacy) to anyone who believed in him. It mattered not whether that individual was a Jew or a Gentile. Jesus was not partial. He did not require a person to be a Jew in order to receive his advocacy. Anyone who earnestly wanted to be Jesus' disciple—Jew or Gentile—would be granted Life in the age to come.

This, in any event, is what the apostles taught. However, some of the Jewish Jesus-believers resisted this apostolic understanding of Jesus' teaching. They could agree that the basis for divine mercy was Jesus' death and advocacy, but they could not agree that Jesus would advocate for anyone who did not keep the Mosaic Law. In agreement with the apostles, they believed that no one was an authentic follower of Jesus who did not pursue righteousness. Therefore, Jesus would not advocate for anyone who did not pursue righteousness. But what did it mean to pursue righteousness? From their perspective, no one was in pursuit of righteousness who did not seek to obey each and every commandment in the Law of Moses. Hence, no one could be saved who did not seek to obey the Law of Moses.

The apostles understood Jesus' gospel differently. The Law of Moses defined a distinctively Jewish kind of righteousness. Not all that God required of his people Israel was inherently moral in nature. Some of what he required of them was morally arbitrary. Some requirements had more to do with marking Israel as his people than they did with reflecting the goodness of God. Gentiles were not related to God in the same way that Jews were. Gentiles did not have a distinctive place in history. Hence, they did not have distinctive obligations and requirements placed on them. Accordingly, righteousness looked different for them. Gentiles (by virtue of being human beings) were under obligation to emulate the goodness of God (his love, his justice, his purity, etc.). But they were not under obligation to be Jews. Hence, the distinctively Jewish forms of righteousness were not obligatory for them. So, with respect to a Gentile Jesus-believer, while he must pursue godliness in order to be a *bona fide* disciple of Jesus, he need not live like a Jew. That is, he need not engage in all of the distinctively Jewish practices (that is, he need not keep any commandments that were not inherently moral in nature).

It is not surprising that a Jewish believer might be confused about this apostolic perspective. It is quite understandable that he might fail to understand that the Mosaic Covenant is a distinctive and exclusively Jewish obligation. Granted, his failure is a mistake, but it is a very understandable mistake. For his whole life, such a Jew had equated righteousness with Law-obedience and had never thought to distinguish what is righteous for him as a Jew from what is righteous for mankind universally. Paul, for one, was very tolerant of the Jew who had a hard time making this adjustment in his perspective.<sup>1</sup>

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1. In Romans 14, Paul identifies a Jewish believer who is confused about the role of the Mosaic Covenant in the life of a Jesus-believer as a "weaker brother." He exhorts the Jesus-believer or Gentile who is not confused (the stronger brother) not to hold such a "weaker brother" in contempt. Paul is completely sympathetic with the weaker brother. While he is clear that the weaker brother has a faulty ("weak") understanding, he has nothing but respect for his heart and considers him an authentic follower of Jesus. Paul's perspective and sentiments expressed in Romans 14 are in stark contrast to the perspective and sentiments he expresses in the book of Galatians. Obviously,

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However, some Jewish Jesus-believers were more than confused on this point. They were absolutely hardened against the apostolic perspective. They would not listen to reason. They were unpersuadable, unteachable, and unwilling to accept the apostolic perspective at all. To accept the view that Gentiles are not obligated by the Mosaic Covenant would put Jews and Gentiles on the same footing. It would mean that the Jews are robbed of any superiority. Apparently, the members of this faction (the one Paul was responding to in his letter to the Galatians<sup>2</sup>) were influenced by pride in their superior status as Jews. They were utterly unwilling to forfeit their feeling of superiority. Their pride manifest itself in a firm resistance to the Truth.

This fact alone would be enough to call into question the authenticity of their belief. True belief in Jesus does not, and ultimately cannot, reject any aspect of God's truth. But Paul discerned another, different mark of the inauthenticity of their belief—their self-righteous lack of mercy.

The Judaizer faction manifested a discernible lack of mercy in their attitude toward those who did not keep the Law. They sought to intimidate and shame any Jesus-believer who did not strive to keep the Law. They were censorious, judgmental, and condemning toward those that they believed were not as committed to righteousness as they were. From Paul's perspective, these attitudes and behaviors called into question their very belief in the gospel itself.

The person who truly understands and embraces the truth about God's mercy extended to him (a truth that became abundantly clear in Jesus) will extend mercy to others. The believer in divine mercy knows that he has nothing to boast about. His salvation is solely a function of the profound depths of God's mercy. It is not a function of his own worthiness or merit. He thoroughly understands that his salvation is a function of God's grace alone. He understands that his following Jesus does not somehow make him worthy of salvation.

Because the members of the Judaizer faction did not extend mercy toward others (neither toward Gentile believers nor toward Jewish believers who felt a significant degree of freedom with regard to the distinctively Jewish parts of the Law), Paul questioned whether they had truly understood, embraced, and trusted in the gospel of Jesus at all. He accused them of believing a "different gospel."<sup>3</sup> What would that "different" gospel have been? Specifically, that Jesus will advocate for those *who prove themselves worthy* because, as faithful followers of him, they keep all the requirements of the Mosaic Law. Paul was not suggesting that the Judaizer faction articulated their gospel explicitly in this form. But the self-righteousness that was evident in their attitude toward others suggested to Paul that they, in fact, believed themselves to be "worthy." And what was it that made them worthy? Their Law-obedience. Hence, their real, working understanding

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something significantly different is occurring in the communities of Galatia.

2. For lack of a clear and explicit title for the faction of Jews that is in view here, I will call it the Judaizer faction. By that I mean the faction of Jewish Jesus-believers who firmly and stubbornly insisted that Gentiles could not receive mercy through Jesus unless they lived as the Jews lived—specifically, unless they were circumcised, ate kosher, kept the Sabbath, and generally engaged in every religious practice that Jews did. Under one way of translating Galatians, Paul refers to this group as the Circumcision Party. But, in this paper, I will utilize the title the "Judaizer faction."

3. Cf. Galatians 1:6.

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of the gospel can be accurately rendered as I have rendered it—***Jesus will advocate for those who prove themselves worthy because, as faithful followers of him, they keep all the requirements of the Mosaic Law.***

When a person really understands that he deserves death and destruction—not Life—he will manifest a merciful spirit toward others, not a spirit of self-righteousness and moral superiority. Self-righteousness always arises from a person’s believing that he is worthy and deserving. He feels entitled. He believes that he is morally superior to others. But such a self-understanding is not consistent with the understanding of one who knows he deserves death and destruction. Hence, the understanding of one who knows he deserves death and destruction will never lead to self-righteousness. Therefore, self-righteousness is always and necessarily an indication that one believes he is “worthy.”

For Paul, how the members of the Judaizer faction looked at and treated others spoke louder than any doctrines they explicitly espoused. They may have said—in complete harmony with the apostles—that salvation is a gift of divine mercy granted to the followers of Jesus. But their attitude toward others said otherwise. Their true belief (as evidenced by their inner spirit and attitudes) was that salvation comes to the *worthy and deserving* followers of Jesus, who render themselves worthy through their obedience to the Law of Moses. *This*, Paul insists, was not the same gospel as that proclaimed by the apostles. In the apostolic gospel, being worthy and deserving had nothing to do with it. There is only mercy. Jesus provides the basis upon which one is granted mercy. To transform following Jesus into a basis for self-righteous pride and self-satisfaction (by linking it to Law-keeping) was a complete perversion of what salvation through Jesus actually was. It was to turn the gospel of Jesus into a “different” gospel. Granted, the Judaizer faction likely did not articulate their gospel in the way that I did just now, but—as Paul saw it—the way I articulated it was the gospel that they *actually* believed, and it was the gospel that they actually propagated through their lives and influence.

The impact of the Judaizer faction was significant. We have the vast majority of our New Testament because one apostle or another (mostly Paul) was forced to write letters to combat the influence of this Judaizer faction. The Judaizer faction presented the first important challenge to the truth about Jesus to ever emerge in history. The Judaizer faction built upon the foundational belief that Jesus was the Messiah a superstructure made of utterly false and mistaken beliefs. These false beliefs appealed to a certain kind of false believer. They appealed to the pride of Jews (and to some Gentiles) who preferred to believe that they *deserved* their salvation rather than believe that it was an undeserved gift. Employing the metaphor we explored in the first paper, these Judaizers built upon the foundation of Jesus’ messiahship a community that consisted of much hay, wood, and straw—that is, of much inauthentic belief.

The Judaizers’ alternative to the gospel was appealing for a variety of reasons. Mostly, it seemed a very plausible way to understand belief in Jesus, for it seemed to do justice to Torah (Old Testament Scriptures). To resist it required a rather mature and sophisticated understanding of both Torah and the purposes of God. Anyone who was too lazy and/or uninterested to pursue a mature and sophisticated understanding of Torah would never equip himself to be able to see what was wrong with the Judaizers’ alternative. We have clues in the New Testament that—in

terms of popular support—the Judaizer alternative likely won out over the apostolic gospel in many communities. As Jesus had predicted, the “narrow way” of truth was less travelled than the wider path to destruction mapped out by the Judaizer faction.

While authentic apostolic belief did not win the hearts and minds of a majority of first-century individuals, the conflict between the Judaizer faction and the apostolic gospel resulted in a very important victory for the apostolic gospel—namely, it placed into historical concrete a written record of the teaching of the apostles. The New Testament is, in great measure, a record of the authentic gospel of the apostles in contradistinction to the false gospel of the Judaizers. The New Testament is a very valuable legacy from the apostles that was left to us precisely as an out-growth of this perilous conflict.

While the Judaizer faction may have been victorious over apostolic belief in the time and culture of the late first century, it did not survive very long. In the end, the Judaizer faction lost out to yet another important alternative to authentic apostolic belief: the Christian religion.

## (2) The Challenge of the Christian Religion

Religion is a natural impulse of every human being—at least of every sinful human being.<sup>4</sup> So, it was inevitable that human beings would eventually transform the message of Jesus into a religious system. And it was equally inevitable that that religious system would become institutionalized. The process of turning the teaching of Jesus into an institutionalized religion began almost immediately and developed over three centuries until, by the end of the fourth century, it was well-established as a state-sanctioned religion of the Roman Empire.

The truth that Jesus brought into the world was not the truth about how to be religious in the right sort of way. Religion had played an important role in the history of God’s dealings with his chosen people, the Jews. But religion was not God’s ultimate purpose. God’s ultimate purpose was to set apart a distinctive set of human beings who were destined to exist beyond the grave. And how did God set them apart? Not by turning them into faithful practitioners of the “right” religion. Rather, by transforming the hearts and minds of select individuals so that they knew, understood, trusted in, and desired all that God wanted for them. He would set them apart by transforming them into people who desired to know and honor God, who desired to know the truth, who desired to emulate God’s goodness, love, and integrity, who submitted to God’s purposes in all that he willed for them, and who rejected any and all lies and falsehood.<sup>5</sup> These were not *religious* people. They were *righteous* people who were distinctively interested in God. Their commitment was not to religion and the church; their commitment was to God, truth, and all that pertained to God and truth.

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4. It is noteworthy that the first recorded religious ritual in the biblical record was an offering offered up by the unrighteous murderer Cain. (Cf. Genesis 4:3–5) Arguably, Cain was the human individual who invented religion as a way to relate to God.

5. This is the truth that lies behind what Jesus said to the woman at the well in Samaria, “... *an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.*” (John 4:23)

The false mindset that came to prevail in the early centuries of Christianity is that a true follower of Jesus will perform all of the prescribed religious practices of the Church. To be faithful to the Church—a decidedly religious institution—became tantamount to being faithful to Jesus. This was false. It was a complete perversion of Jesus' gospel. And it was a case of bad teachers building upon the foundation of Jesus the Messiah with teaching that introduced wood, hay, and straw into the superstructure of the believing community. The Christian Church that was created during this and subsequent times was primarily attractive to individuals who desired to be religious, not to individuals who desired to know God and truth.

Furthermore, institutionalizing the Christian religion only made matters worse. A human being's relationship to his creator is an individual, existential reality. It cannot be programmed, scripted, or institutionalized without completely destroying its authenticity. Authentic Jesus-followers, for most of Christian history, have forged an authentic relationship to God in spite of the religious institution of which they found themselves a part, not because of it.

We can see, then, that the Christian religion posed a very important alternative to the apostolic gospel.<sup>6</sup> It was then—and it remains today—a seductive and appealing option. If I become a faithful practitioner of the Christian religion, I do not need to do the hard business of confronting the unflattering and difficult truths that following Jesus force me to confront. In this important sense, religion truly is the "opiate" that Marx says it is. The primary function of religion is to allow me to *feel* righteous. Through religion I can come to believe of myself that I am wise (or, enlightened) and good. But if I can view myself as wise and good, the gospel of Jesus ceases to have any real relevance to me. Who needs the "good news" that God will be merciful to unrighteous sinners when he is not an unrighteous sinner? If one is, rather, a wise and good person, how is divine mercy "good news" to him? Who needs a physician when he is not sick?

### Specific Falsehoods Introduced by the Christian Religion

There are innumerable ways in which the teaching of Jesus could have been turned into a religion and institutionalized. Arguably, the Judaizers, had they prevailed, would have turned Jesus' gospel into an institutionalized religion as well. But their religion would have looked remarkably different from the Christian religion that actually emerged in history. What were the specific factors that shaped the Christian religion that actually came into being in history? It seems to me there were three important factors: (1) a perversion of Paul's teaching in the New Testament with regard to the irrelevance of the Jewish Law, (2) the incorporation of pagan magical notions and

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6. I know that virtually every Christian religious tradition thinks of itself as the only faithful repository of the teaching of the apostles. It is one thing to make such a claim. It is quite another to vindicate it as true. The only way to judge whether a Christian tradition is, in fact, right about their faithfulness to apostolic teaching is to compare their doctrines and practices to an understanding of the Bible itself. I submit that no Christian tradition can rightly claim to be purely and unfailingly apostolic. Some come closer than others, but none of them is unfailingly faithful to what the apostles taught. All of us need to be continually seeking to adjust our beliefs and values to bring them into conformity to a more thorough and accurate grasp of the Truth. Such a grasp of the Truth can result only from a humble, intelligent, and diligent study of the Bible.

ideas, and (3) the incorporation of Greek philosophical assumptions and prejudices and Greek metaphysical speculations.

- (1) Paul, in the context of his striving to refute the Judaizers, had emphasized the equal standing that Gentiles had with Jews when it came to the ultimate blessing of Life beyond the grave. As he made his case, he would often suggest that doing “works of the Law” was unnecessary and irrelevant. Paul, of course, meant that doing “works of the Law” was unnecessary and irrelevant with respect to determining who would be granted mercy and Life. He did not mean that doing works of the Law was altogether unnecessary and irrelevant—that it, that it was unnecessary and irrelevant in any and every respect. But a perversion of what Paul taught could easily lead one to exactly that conclusion. Notably, that because of Jesus, the Mosaic Law had become altogether obsolete; it had become irrelevant and unnecessary in absolutely every respect. In other words, Jesus had come into the world to start a brand new religion, a religion that was meant to replace the obsolete Jewish religion. Having apparently adopted just such a mindset, the inventors of the Christian religion saw no need to devise religious practices that were continuous with the religious practices of the Jews. So they did not. They devised decidedly Gentile religious practices and invented a thoroughly Gentile religion in the process. Jews—whose whole life, culture, and identity had been informed by the Mosaic Law—became alienated from this utterly foreign and unrecognizable religion that was created. They found no place in the Christian church, and the Church became thoroughly Gentile in its demographics. The mindset and belief that led to this was clearly a perversion of the teaching of Jesus (and of Paul). There is nothing in what Jesus taught that justifies the belief that God had rejected and forsaken his chosen people the Jews and had embraced Gentile Christians in their place. But this is the very mindset that took root in this new Gentile religion that Christians had created.<sup>7</sup> Since neither Jesus nor Paul had ever taught anything that would support or justify this mindset, it follows, clearly, that the teachers who invented the Christian religion were, in this respect, building upon the foundation of Jesus the Messiah with wood, hay, and straw.
- (2) When Jesus came on the scene, the Gentile world was steeped in pagan polytheism. At a popular level, belief in magic was a prominent characteristic of pagan religion. Magic is a very appealing idea. Which of us would not want the power and ability to control our lives? If the right potion, incantation, secret phrase, or talisman can get the job done, who wouldn't want it? If the Christian religion was going to compete with the pagan worldview and belief systems, it would be advantageous to offer a little magic of its own. That appears to be exact-

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7. Some will object that this mindset within the Christian religion did not entail God's rejection of his people the Jews, for God continues to be willing to grant eternal Life to any Jew who believes in Jesus. However, to believe in Jesus—within this mindset—is to become a faithful practitioner of the Gentile Christian religion. Hence, this Christian mindset is that God has not forsaken any Jew who is *willing to forsake his own Judaism*. But this is clearly a perversion of both Jesus and Paul. Neither Jesus nor Paul ever taught that it is necessary for a Jewish follower of Jesus to cease being a Jew in any practical sense. And nothing in what they taught—rightly understood—could ever suggest that they would concur with such a teaching. Hence, the teachers who invented the Christian religion were building upon the foundation of Jesus the Messiah with wood, hay, and straw in this respect.



ly what happened. Utterly magical thinking began to inform the doctrines and practices of the Christian Church. Wine was magically transformed into the magically powerful blood of Christ to magically impart saving grace to those who partook of it. That is just one of many such notions that began to dominate the everyday beliefs of ordinary participants in the life of the Church. As appealing and attractive as magical thinking is, it has no place in the truth taught by Jesus. It is a foreign mindset imposed on apostolic teaching. It is ultimately incompatible with the Bible's worldview. Hence, pagan magical ideas caused wood, hay, and straw to be built upon the foundation of Jesus the Messiah.

- (3) The non-Christian intellectual elite of the first few centuries after Jesus shared a set of speculative metaphysical assumptions that were reflected in the various schools of Hellenistic philosophy at the time. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these assumptions here. Suffice it to say that anyone who wanted to be intellectually respectable to the Roman/Hellenistic world of that day would have to think, speak, and argue in terms of concepts that were derived from these philosophical assumptions. Therefore, the Christian thinkers who were forming the Christian religion were strongly influenced by these very same concepts. As a consequence, the theological systems developed by these early Christian intellectuals were influenced and shaped by Hellenistic (Greek) thought as much as, if not more than, by biblical concepts and ideas. The articulation of, and arguments for, the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, were shaped much more by the assumptions of Greek metaphysics than they were by the Jewish worldview found in the Bible. Once again, the theologians who created orthodox Christian theology were building on the foundation of Jesus the Messiah with wood, hay, and straw as they sought to make belief in Jesus intellectually respectable to the cultured elite of their day.

### Important Things the Christian Religion Preserved

However, even though the Christian religion departed significantly from the apostolic teaching, there were three important aspects of apostolic truth that it preserved:

- (1) It preserved the basic broad outlines of the apostolic worldview with respect to God and his relation to created reality. The Christian religion, in harmony with the apostles, understood God to be a personal being who transcended his creation and who was totally sovereign over everything within it. It would seem that relatively few Christians had a thorough, accurate, and insightful grasp of the nature of God, and virtually all of them had distorted ideas about God due to the influence of Greek philosophy, but—in broad and approximate terms—the Christian religion preserved a belief in the Jewish concept of God that was found in the Bible.
- (2) It preserved the essential content of the hope of the gospel—namely, salvation from death. Its concept of existence beyond death typically departed widely from the biblical concept (having been greatly modified by the assumptions of Greek philosophy). And it did not always have a very clear picture of what that hope was grounded in. But it did clearly keep alive the basic idea: through belief in Jesus, one's existence need not be nullified and destroyed by death.

- (3) Of greatest importance, it preserved the historical record of the message, teaching, and worldview of Jesus and the apostles. The greatest gift the Christian religion gave to mankind was the Bible. They preserved the Scriptures. They copied the Scriptural manuscripts carefully and meticulously. They left us a very faithful and accurate record of what the apostles and their colleagues wrote. In the concrete record of the Bible, the gospel was accurately and completely preserved. They may not have believed the gospel that was taught in its pages. They often did not read their Bibles. They typically utilized odd and unreliable methods of interpreting their Bibles. All in all, the Bible did not really inform the typical Christian's understanding and beliefs. But while the Christian religion did not give heed to the Bible as it should have, it did take care to preserve the Bible itself. And by doing so, it accurately preserved the apostolic teaching. Many years later, others would come along who would give heed to what the Bible said.

### Important Things the Christian Religion Failed to Do

While there were a few important positive contributions the Christian religion made, there were two important things that it failed to do:

- (1) The apostolic teaching—following Jesus—had approached the Scriptures from the standpoint of commonsense rationality. They interpreted the Bible insightfully, intelligently, and straightforwardly. They did not speculate, make things up, and use various hermeneutical parlor tricks to spin tendentious arguments out of the Biblical text. The apostles, quite simply, just read their Bibles to determine what they said. Unfortunately, this approach to the Bible was not preserved in the Christian religion. Very quickly, Christian theologians developed various rules, techniques, and devices whereby they exploited the biblical text for their own "Christian" purposes rather than sit and read them to see what they actually said. It is highly unfortunate that the commonsensical, rational approach to Scripture taken by Jesus and the apostles was largely set aside and lost for several centuries.
- (2) A sound understanding of the gospel as the good news of divine mercy granted to authentic followers of Jesus was severely challenged by the Judaizer faction. Their mindset and attitudes threatened to eclipse and replace this sound understanding of the authentic gospel. Unfortunately, the Christian religion did not restore a sound understanding of the actual gospel. True, by preserving the Bible, it preserved the record of a sound understanding of the true and authentic gospel. But in the typical beliefs and attitudes of the time, Christianity was no better than the Judaizer faction in its grasp of the gospel of God's grace. Granted, it did not propagate a Jewish-flavored self-righteousness, pride, and entitlement. But it did, nevertheless, propagate essentially the same thing in a different flavor—it propagated a Gentile-Christian-flavored self-righteousness, pride, and entitlement.

### (3) The Challenge of "Christian" Gnosticism

Another alternative to the apostolic gospel that emerged alongside Christianity in the early centuries of the modern era was Gnosticism. Not every Gnostic teacher attempted to connect his message to Jesus, but many did. Those who did presented a widely divergent version of the

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gospel of Jesus. And their message posed a dangerous challenge to the gospel message of the apostles and Jesus.

The message, teaching, and worldview of these Gnostic teachers bears virtually no similarity to the message, teaching, and worldview of the apostles.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, it is rather amazing that these Gnostic teachers cast their message and teaching into terms and concepts derived from Christianity and that they tried to pass their Gnostic belief system off as the true "Christian" message of salvation. It was a truly audacious effort. But it proved effective and fruitful for these Gnostic teachers. If my memory serves me, there are some historians who maintain that Gnosticism almost prevailed over the Christian religion.<sup>9</sup> For a period of time, it was not at all clear in what direction the hearts and minds of the Roman world would turn. As a matter of historical fact, they turned toward Christianity, not toward Gnosticism. In fact, Gnosticism was relegated to the dustbin of history. It became little more than a religious and intellectual relic of past times.<sup>10</sup> But, if my sense of things is right, it could easily have turned out otherwise.

If Gnosticism rather than Christianity had gained the victory, the result would have been devastating for true apostolic belief. Even though the Christian Religion was and is a dangerous alternative to apostolic faith as well, it is a very positive thing that Christianity (the Christian Religion) won out over Gnosticism. A victory by Gnosticism would have dealt a very deadly blow to any cultural memory of the apostolic gospel. We would have been robbed of the Scriptures; we would have lost even the barest outline of the Judaeo-Christian worldview and concept of God; and we would have lost completely the content of the hope of the apostolic gospel. In short, we would have lost virtually everything apostolic.

The Gnostic teachers challenged the Scriptural canon. They recommended other sacred books or no sacred texts at all. In any event, they cast serious doubt on the legitimacy, accuracy, and authority of the Bible. If Gnosticism had won out culturally, it is the Bible—instead of Gnosticism—that very possibly would have been relegated to the dustbin of history.

The beliefs of the Gnostic teachers were grounded in the worldview and assumptions of Neoplatonism, not in the Judaeo-Christian worldview and assumptions found in the Bible. The God of the Gnostics was a very different God from the God of the Bible. The problem that faced mankind according to these Gnostics was of a very different sort of problem from the one that faced mankind according to the Bible. The created reality described by the Bible was understood to be a very different sort of reality by these Gnostics. No important element of the Biblical worldview was shared with Gnosticism. Therefore, if Gnosticism had won out culturally, the Judaeo-Christian worldview and its concept of God would very likely have been lost to history. What's more, the very nature of salvation and the content of mankind's hope would very possibly

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8. A survey of the doctrines, beliefs, practices, and worldview of Gnosticism would be a rather long and involved discussion. It is outside the scope of this paper to examine the exact nature of Gnosticism here.

9. I do not recall, from memory, who these historians are. Hence, I cannot say with confidence whether it is an assessment and judgment that I can fully trust.

10. Although some elements of Gnosticism are still alive and well in the "mysteries" and "secrets" of secret societies like the Masons.

have been forgotten. All of this would have created a significant distance between the dominant cultural understanding and the apostolic gospel. To come to true and authentic belief in Jesus would have been made very difficult indeed.

The reader who does not already have some understanding of Gnosticism has probably found this section rather unsatisfying. For that I am sorry, but an adequate survey of the tenets and worldview of Gnosticism is beyond the scope of this paper. If you have no familiarity with Gnosticism and are having to take my word for it, the most important thing to know and understand is this simple fact: the worldview of Gnosticism could not have been more radically and qualitatively different from the the worldview of the Bible.

The lesson that the history of Christian Gnosticism has for us today is this: the power of culture is such that it can induce a person to adopt a worldview that is radically incongruent with the worldview of Jesus and—at the same time—to believe that, in doing so, he is doing it in the name of Jesus. If culture can induce us—against all reason—to embrace a widely divergent worldview from the one Jesus believed and taught, then certainly it can induce us to embrace more subtle departures from the apostolic teaching. Clearly, then, culture is something against which we must certainly be on our guard. This is the most important lesson that the challenge of Christian Gnosticism teaches us.

### The Crisis of Protestantism

Having won out over the challenge of Gnosticism, Christianity (the Christian Religion) reigned as the dominant cultural paradigm for over a millennium. One very good thing resulted from that: certain important elements of apostolic belief became deeply embedded in the cultural consciousness. The authority of the Bible, a distorted but discernible outline of the biblical view of God and reality, and a distorted but recognizable concept of the hope of salvation were the most important of these elements.

The presence of these elements ultimately led to the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers were men who took the authority of the Bible seriously, a mindset that was sanctioned by the Christian Religion itself, even if it was not typically put into practice within the Christian Religion.

The net result of the Protestant Reformation was a step forward toward creating a cultural environment that was more conducive to belief in the true, authentic, apostolic gospel. The legacy of the Reformation consists, mainly, in these three things:

- (1) The Reformation restored the authority and role of the Bible to a place of greater prominence and acceptance within Western Civilization.
- (2) The Reformation, to a great extent, restored to a place of wider acceptance in Western culture an intelligent, commonsensical, and rational approach to understanding and interpreting the Bible.
- (3) The Reformation made accessible to a greater number of people in Western culture an understanding of the gospel of Jesus that, to a great extent, captured the spirit of the true and authentic gospel proclaimed by the apostles—even if it did not capture exactly how the apostles

presented and articulated their gospel. The Reformers understood and taught the gospel as the good news of divine mercy and grace given to authentic believers in Jesus. And they understood and identified as fallacious any perspectives that turned belief in Jesus (or Christianity) into a basis for self-righteous pride and self-satisfaction. They rejected any teaching or mindset that made "belief" into something that made the believer deserving of salvation.

The Reformation was not perfect. It was the offspring of medieval Roman Catholicism. As such it shared many of its doctrines, beliefs, and assumptions. And many of those were contrary to the apostolic teaching and worldview. So the Reformation did not give us a full restoration of the apostolic message, teaching, and worldview. But it was a very noble attempt to do so. They sought to scrutinize and evaluate what they had inherited from the Christian religion in the light of the Bible. At that point in history, that was a monumental task. They had a long distance to travel to get from the medieval Roman Catholic religion to the truth as Jesus or Paul would teach it.

The net result was another version of the Christian Religion. It was a new, better, less distorted version of the Christian Religion; but it was still the Christian Religion.<sup>11</sup> As such, Protestantism—no matter which form of Protestantism we have in mind—still poses a dangerous alternative to the true and authentic gospel of the apostles. Being a religion, it poses all the same challenges to authentic belief that any religion does—namely, it offers a way to feel righteous that prevents me from confronting the gravity and reality of my unrighteousness. And, being the offspring of hundreds of years of the Christian Religion, Protestantism remains a superstructure—built on the foundation of Jesus the Messiah—that is composed of much wood, hay, and straw.

#### (4) The Challenge of Liberalism

Not since the Gnostic teachers of the early centuries had anyone posed the kind of serious challenge to true belief as was posed by Liberal Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the heart of what made Liberal Christianity what it was was a rejection of the accuracy, reliability, truthfulness, and authority of the Bible. Liberal Christianity sought to preserve the institution, practices, form, and shape of the Christian Religion, while fundamentally rejecting the very texts and teachings upon which it was allegedly founded.

Liberal Christianity had its origin in a negative, destructive critique of the Scriptures. The traditional Christian Religion had maintained that the Bible was the supernatural revelation of God. God had supernaturally overseen the production of its text such that it was infallible in its teaching and inerrantly accurate in its every claim. Nineteenth century biblical criticism challenged

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11. The best way for an individual to honor and respect the Reformers is to continue the task they started. Their task was to reevaluate everything that Christianity offered and advanced in the light of the Scriptures. To continue that task is the most important way that a person can honor their work. To embrace a Reformer's doctrinal system as the final word on God's truth is to do nothing more than swap the orthodoxy of his system for the orthodoxy of medieval Roman Catholicism. This violates the very spirit of what that Reformer stood for. The only "orthodox" system is the one taught and proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles. Hence, the only "orthodox" system is the one taught and proclaimed in the Bible.

that. According to biblical criticism, the Bible was just one more artifact of history. Human beings, not God, created the Bible. The Bible did not contain divine truth, it contained human insight, fallible though it might be. All the chance and exigencies of history that create any other cultural artifact had played a role in the origin of the Bible. Therefore, as interesting and potentially insightful as the Bible might be, it is not something to which we ought to grant any real authority.

In particular, it did not portray history as it actually occurred. The Jesus on the pages of the gospels is not the Jesus who actually kicked up dust along the roads of Galilee. The miracles performed by the Jesus of the gospel accounts did not actually occur in history. How could they? Those things don't happen. The beliefs and perspectives that the so-called apostles had with respect to Jesus were not beliefs and perspectives that Jesus held with respect to himself. Neither were they beliefs and perspectives that he encouraged. They were legendary, exaggerated beliefs and perspectives that emerged because of various cultural currents and historical forces that shaped them.

Nineteenth century biblical criticism presented itself as a "scientific" study, with all of the shining certainty that only "science" can bring. In truth, it was no such thing. There was nothing "scientific" about it. Biblical criticism did not even permit the possibility that the Bible was historically accurate. The Bible's lack of historical accuracy was an *a priori* assumption. Hence, nineteenth century biblical criticism—far from being "scientific"—offered a completely fictionalized account of the origin of the Bible—an account of its origin that was manufactured and concocted in order to make plausible their own philosophical dogmas.

However, this challenge to biblical authority had a significant amount of appeal. On the heels of the enlightenment, where intellectuals had come to realize that all past traditional authorities had failed them, the Bible was just one more traditional authority to be jettisoned. At a time and place where everyone had been enculturated into the Christian religion, liberal Christianity allowed the emerging modern person to have his Christian Religion and reject it to. He could keep all the aesthetically beautiful forms and products of the Christian Religion without having to take seriously any of its more difficult and challenging claims. In other words, he could remain a Christian without having to embrace the apostolic teaching contained within its Scriptures.

All of the alternatives to apostolic belief that had emerged through history had offered just that option, of course. But throughout most of Christian history one had to confront the memory of the apostolic teaching contained in the Scriptures that he claimed to believe. In Liberal Christianity, one no longer needed to confront that embarrassing reality. He needed no longer to take the Scriptures seriously, for they were nothing more than a creation of human culture.

In place of the Jesus of the Bible, the field was now clear for any and every version of Jesus that the human mind might imagine. Cut loose from the biblical account, Christian intellectuals were free to imagine a Jesus more to the liking of nineteenth or twentieth century culture. A wide range of different portraits of Jesus ensued. They ranged from a gentle-Saint-Francis-brother-sun-sister-moon-flower-child type Jesus to a wild-eyed-end-of-the-world-screaming-street-

preacher type Jesus. And his alleged teaching ranged from a message of the universal brotherhood of all men to the revolutionary overthrow of every citadel of institutional evil.

All of this was so much wood, hay, and straw erected on nothing but the bare name of Jesus. Whom did it attract? Not genuine, authentic children of God. It attracted unbelievers who were interested in some specific sort of belief system to put in place of the apostolic gospel.

One of the most important elements of the legacy of Liberal Christianity was the skepticism it fostered. Because of Liberal Christianity, it is widely taken for granted in our culture to this day that the true historical person of Jesus and the true teaching of Jesus is unrecoverable. No one can ever know who Jesus was and what he taught. This widespread assumption obviously presents a very significant obstacle to belief in the apostolic gospel. Why would I believe and embrace a teaching that I cannot even know is authentic? This obstacle to biblical belief today is as great as anything that history has erected. Such skepticism is not the result of greater knowledge and enlightenment by us moderns—as its proponents would have us believe. Rather, it is the result of a false religion invented by individuals in rebellion against the truth who offered it up as an alternative to biblical faith.

Did Liberal Christianity make any *distinctive* positive contribution? Not in my estimation. Granted, it challenged the rigidity of tradition. But that was not unique to Liberal Christianity. The Reformation had done that quite powerfully before it. When I consider Liberal Christianity, I can think of no distinctive positive legacy that it left to us. Its primary legacy was a deep-seated cultural skepticism toward the Bible.

### (5) The Challenge of the Social Gospel

Liberal Christianity cleared the way for any number of false alternatives to authentic belief in Jesus. One of the most lastingly influential of those alternatives was the Social Gospel.

The "Social Gospel" grew out of the soil of the political turmoil and milieu that grew out of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the militaristic, secular "evangelism" of Napoleon. At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, socialism, marxism, and political nihilism became very popular and influential throughout Western Civilization. They all shared one thing in common: mankind's most pressing problems would be solved through social-political transformation. Nothing was more important than the establishment of "social justice" in the here and now. If Jesus is the "savior" that Christians say he is, then most certainly he will be a prophet of social justice through social-political transformation. There is no other way to be a real savior.

This cultural mindset is what gave birth to the Social Gospel. It was a complete refashioning of Jesus' gospel message. The gospel was understood to be Jesus' declaration of the power and purpose of God to bring about his kingdom on earth. And, most importantly, it included a call to Jesus' disciples to enter into God's power and purpose in this regard by working to reform all of the social and economic institutions and work to make them just.

While the Social Gospel did not typically deny the eternal salvation of the individual human being, it tended to minimize it. ("Oh, yes, Jesus came to save individual sinners from ultimate de-

struction, but let's not forget the really important stuff that Jesus came to do. ....") The clear emphasis of the social gospel was its call to work diligently to fight institutionalized evil and to bring about "social justice." And its overwhelming flavor tended to become political. The emphasis did not fall on fighting institutional evil by rescuing the victims of injustice one by one, in individual acts of love. Rather, one must fight to destroy the evil institutions themselves. And to do that, one must use the political institutions and the power of politics. In time, the common ground between progressivism—the political ideology—and the social gospel increased. For some such Christians today, it is difficult to see much difference between their mindset and beliefs and those of a secular progressive.

The primary legacy of the Social Gospel is the eventual impact it had on Evangelicalism. Within Evangelicalism today is the deeply-ingrained perspective that, in order to be relevant, belief in Jesus must lead and give support to the fight for social justice. Anything else would be a kind of pie-in-the-sky Christianity that lacks all relevance and plausibility.

### (6) The Challenge of Pagan-Pentecostal Spirituality

Since the very beginning of the proclamation of the gospel, there has always existed an understanding of spirituality that rivaled the spirituality taught by the apostles. We first get a glimpse of it in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. A faction of Jesus-believers in Corinth believed that the Spirit of God<sup>12</sup> manifested itself in the life of a disciple of Jesus by producing various "spiritual" experiences. These alleged experiences were of two types: (1) The spirit of God would produce an ecstatic experience that rivaled any they had had as pagans in their worship of, for example, Bacchus or Dionysius. (2) The spirit would produce a dramatically supernatural miracle of one kind or another (a prophetic revelation, a supernatural healing, etc.). The mindset of these believers seemed to be that whenever and wherever the Spirit of God was present and active, such experiences would necessarily be present.

Throughout the medieval period—especially in the monasteries—a number of Jesus-believers advocated meditation as a religious practice that would allow one to achieve a sort of ecstatic experience that they interpreted as some-sort of union with God. This, as it had been for the faction in Corinth, was the hallmark of Christian spirituality for them.<sup>13</sup>

But while this alternative view of spirituality was always around in the background, my (inadequately informed and very possibly faulty) sense of things is that it never became an important and significant challenge to authentic belief until the twentieth century. The early twentieth century saw the birth of Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism was a distinctive alternative version of

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12. The Spirit with respect to whose coming Jesus had made promises to his disciples. Cf. the "Upper Room Discourse" in the gospel of John.

13. This concept of spirituality was actually mainstream within Medieval Theology. All of the major theologians speak of the "beatific vision" as the ultimate blessing that awaited an individual as his reward after death. In the monasteries, various individuals were simply seeking to experience a foretaste of the beatific vision in the here and now. Pursuit of the beatific vision (arguably a sort of ecstatic experience) was at the heart of their concept of spirituality.



Christianity that adopted this very view of spirituality—namely, spirituality as the pursuit of ecstatic experiences from God and/or dramatic displays of supernatural power.

At first Pentecostalism remained on the margins of the Christian religion. But, in time, it grew in respectability and influence. During the Jesus Movement of the late 1960's, the Charismatic movement was born. The Charismatic movement was a milder and more socially respectable version of Pentecostalism. But it shared essentially the same view of spirituality. Because of the Charismatic movement and its ongoing effects into the 1970's, this understanding of spirituality became a widely accepted viewpoint within mainstream Christian culture. It remains so to this day. The views and attitudes of most Christians today have been significantly influenced by the spirituality of Pentecostalism through the Charismatic movement. It exists as an influential alternative to authentic belief in Jesus.

But why does Pagan-Pentecostal Spirituality make this top-six false alternatives list? Surely there are many false beliefs that Jesus-followers embrace? They are not all part of this survey. When does a false belief cross over from simply being a false belief to being a perilous belief, a belief that poses a danger to authentic belief?

It is noteworthy that in 1 Corinthians—where Paul focuses on this Pagan-Pentecostal Spirituality most extensively—Paul does not accuse this faction that he believes is ignorant of true spirituality with proclaiming a “different gospel”—as he does the Judaizer faction in the book of Galatians. Have I exceeded Paul in being alarmed at the danger presented by Pagan-Pentecostal Spirituality? Is this view of spirituality a mistake without being a dangerous mistake?

True, Paul does respond to the mistake of Pagan-Pentecostal Spirituality differently from how he responds to the mistake of the Judaizer faction. But I think we can understand why. The views of the Judaizer faction are a direct assault on the meaning and significance of Jesus' death on the cross. The same cannot be said for the mistaken view of spirituality represented by Pagan-Pentecostal Spirituality. The mistake that the latter represents does not necessarily need to directly challenge the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion. One could fully affirm and embrace the meaning and significance of Jesus' death on the cross and yet still have the faulty view of spirituality that is represented by Pagan-Pentecostal Spirituality. It is a faulty view of spirituality and it is a significant mistake to make. But it is not a mistake that constitutes a direct assault against the most central element of the gospel—the significance of Jesus' death for God's saving purposes. That, I believe, is why Paul does not level the accusation that they are advancing a “different gospel” when they advance their faulty view of spirituality.

But while they are not advancing a “different gospel” it is nonetheless a significant and dangerous mistake. Why? Primarily because it puts a strong pressure on the individual to shift his focus off the hope of the gospel (as Jesus and the apostles would define it) and on to one's experience in the here and now. The more one becomes intent on experiencing God NOW (whether through an ecstatic experience, some other kind of psychological state, or through being connected to a display of God's miraculous power), the more the real and essential hope of the gospel—freedom from ultimate destruction and the finality of death—fades into the background. To put it another way, an emphasis on experiencing God NOW tends to minimize—perhaps even trivialize—the true content of the believer's hope. To the authentic child of God, the hope of the true gospel is

truly “good news.” To the Jesus-follower who is not an authentic child of God, the hope of the true gospel is relatively uninteresting and unimportant.

I was once in a conversation with another follower of Jesus where I was trying to suggest that the essential core of our faith was salvation from death, destruction, and personal unrighteousness. The other person wanted to promote the importance of healing, miracles, and other dramatic manifestations of God’s power. After I had identified what I believed to be the truly and essentially good news contained in the gospel—namely, salvation from sin and death in the age to come—my friend said, “Well if that is all Jesus has to offer, then I don’t want any part of it.” I doubt that he really meant that, but it expresses very well how the heart of unbelief responds to the gospel message of Jesus. The heart of unbelief does not see the value in it, it does not see the goodness in it, and it does not find it particularly interesting or compelling. “Eternal life, whoop-de-do, that’s pretty irrelevant to me.” To the unbelieving heart, Pagan-Pentecostal Spirituality seems vastly more interesting, exciting, and relevant. It is something it finds compelling, something worth investing in. But therein lies the problem. If I can be seduced away from finding the true gospel of Jesus interesting, then what does that say about me? How can I be a *bona fide* disciple of Jesus and a true child of God if what God calls “good” news I do not find good?

Herein lies the peril that Pagan-Pentecostal Spirituality poses to true and authentic belief. It offers a seductively appealing alternative focus for my hope and my existence. It can thereby foster and promote a shortsightedness that results in a callous indifference toward and apathy with respect to the true hope of the true gospel. In other words, it can subtly promote unbelief with respect to the actual gospel of Jesus. In truth, many who are attracted to Pagan-Pentecostal Spirituality—while ostensibly believing everything that the apostles teach about Jesus and the gospel—actually believe none of it. They have swapped the true and authentic gospel of Jesus for the false gospel of experiencing God.

### What About Evangelicalism?

Having a keen sense that they have deftly navigated the dangers and perils to authentic belief that I have just outlined above, Evangelicals tend to think of themselves as the true heirs to authentic belief in Jesus. There is a certain amount of truth to their perspective. There is much to justify it.

Evangelicalism has its roots in the Fundamentalist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Fundamentalists were a group of Christian intellectuals who sought, in their time, to defend the Christian religion and its doctrines against the widespread influence of Liberal Christianity throughout the institutions of Christian culture. Fighting a losing cause and losing influence within one institution after another, the Fundamentalists withdrew from cultural engagement altogether and formed their own subculture. Largely as a reaction to traditional Fundamentalism’s withdrawal from culture and their lack of cultural engagement, Evangelicalism was born as an alternative form of culturally-involved Fundamentalism.

For a few decades, Evangelicalism was the most influential defender of the traditional Christian Religion as that had been rediscovered by the Protestant Reformation. However, over time, Evangelicalism—with its emphasis on cultural engagement and a naivety about the power of the

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“world”—came much more to be influenced by American culture than American culture was influenced by it. More and more, the influences of Liberal Christianity, the Social Gospel, and Pagan-Pentecostal Spirituality—currents that were still running strong in the wider American culture of the latter half of the twentieth century—all began to fashion and shape Evangelicalism. Which of these has had the greater influence will vary from one Evangelical to the next. However, it is easy to find individuals who self-identify as Evangelicals today who (i) are skeptical with respect to the accuracy of the Bible, (ii) believe that social justice is the central call of the gospel, and/or (iii) believe that the apex of spirituality is ecstatic experience and/or some dramatic supernatural effect.<sup>14</sup> Far from being the heir to authentic belief in Jesus, Evangelicalism has become nothing more than a reflection of the most important alternatives to authentic belief that are abroad in the world today.<sup>15</sup>

## Part 2: The New Peril to Faith : Postmodern Christianity

My contention here, in this paper, is that we face the emergence of a new and different alternative to authentic belief in Jesus that is just as dangerous and perilous as, if not more perilous than, any of the six challenges to authentic belief discussed above. We are seeing the emergence of Postmodern Christianity. In the final paper in this series, I will attempt to make clear why I label it “Postmodern Christianity.” It is sometimes given the title “Progressive Christianity” by some of its proponents. (Presumably because of its clear affinities with progressivism as a political philosophy.)

My contention is that Postmodern Progressivism has been firmly established as the “civil religion” of American society. Postmodern Christianity is simply the baptized, Christian version of Postmodern Progressivism. Hence, Postmodern Christianity is, and will continue to be, an acceptable expression of the reigning civil religion. As such, it will quickly become the only politically and socially acceptable version of Christianity. That is, it will be the only version of Christianity that will receive state and cultural support. As a consequence, individuals who embrace true and authentic belief in Jesus will soon become enemies of the state and marginalized outcasts within American culture.<sup>16</sup>

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14. Most recently, the challenge of the Judaizers is beginning to reemerge as well. There is a modern emphasis among certain Evangelicals on rediscovering the Jewish roots of their faith. While that rediscovery *per se* would be a VERY good and positive thing, in fact something else quite different is occurring. Evangelicals are assuming that a rediscovery of the Jewish roots of their faith consists of living like a Jew. The attitude that, in some cases, is beginning to manifest itself is that a person cannot be an authentic disciple of Jesus unless he adopts the life and practices of Jews who seek to obey the Law of Moses. This is nothing else but the same, old-fashioned Judaizing fallacy that Paul confronted in his letter to the Galatians.

15. Here is the incredible irony. Evangelicalism, with its self-concept of being the true heir of authentic apostolic belief in Jesus, has actually become a movement that embraces every one of the six important challenges to authentic belief to which history has given birth, except one—Gnosticism. Within Evangelicalism, we can find evidence of all of the following being accepted: the mindset of the Judaizers, the Christian Religion, Liberalism, the Social Gospel, and Pagan-Pentecostal Spirituality.

16. Arguably, they have already become marginalized within American culture. It is only a matter of time that they become officially enemies of the state. Do we not already see it beginning to be the case?

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If this is right, the obstacle to true authentic belief will become as great or greater than it has ever been. Arguably, it will be as great an obstacle to true belief as any human being has ever faced. This invites the question: when Jesus returns, will he find faith on the earth?

In the third and final paper, I will explore the beliefs, attitudes, and mindset of Postmodern Christianity and show its contrast to the truth of apostolic teaching.

## Concluding Remarks

What motivates me to write this series of papers? What is the point of my composing the above historical survey of the perils to authentic belief?

To be warned of danger, especially a danger that I am helpless to do anything about, is always frightening. And we are loathe to listen to anything that is truly frightening. But it is important to remember our biblical history: the most common response of godless people to a prophet's warning that "judgment is coming" was always to criticize the prophet—to impugn his motives, his character, or his sanity—and to altogether dismiss his warning with a contradictory claim, "Peace and safety, peace and safety. That's what lies ahead. Peace and safety." (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11)

I can already anticipate one of the criticisms that will be leveled at me with regard to these papers:

Jack, you are being inappropriately scary. You shouldn't scare people. You should be encouraging people and giving them hope. You know that God is big enough to take care of anything that is going on in our culture today. You know that God is up to the task. You know that God will not lose one single human being whom he has chosen to belong to his eternal kingdom. That is our hope and comfort. Preach that, Jack. Don't get all gloomy on us. You are talking like someone who doesn't have enough faith in God.

Let me briefly respond to such a criticism.

We have seen that coming to true saving belief in Jesus has, from the very beginning, been a difficult and perilous task. There have always been counterfeit versions of the gospel that the child of God must "have victory over."<sup>17</sup> Do I think God is up to the task? Of course I do. Not one human being whom God has chosen to belong to his eternal kingdom can or will fail to gain victory over the world. Every individual whom God has chosen will find his way to true and authentic belief in Jesus. I do not write these papers thinking that, without my warning, some who would otherwise believe will fail to come to true belief in Jesus. God is bigger than that. God is bigger than the world. In spite of any and every cultural force arrayed against a person, God will draw to himself every individual whom he wants. So why do I write these papers? And what exactly is the point of the above historical survey?

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17. Cf. 1 John 5:4–5. The "world" is the culture created by human beings in this present evil reality. True faith is always a matter of having victory over the forces and currents of that culture—including the religious beliefs and values that are advanced by that culture.

Notice that when Paul heard of the inroads that the Judaizer faction was making among the Galatians, he did not kick back and say, "God is greater than the world. No worries. Every one of God's elect will make it." No, he wrote the letter to the Galatians instead. Why did he do that? Did he lack faith in the power of God to keep those who were his? No, of course not. Rather, he wrote Galatians because love demanded that he do what he could to equip the Galatians to confront the lies and falsehoods of the Judaizer faction. They needed to understand the truth clearly, and he was in a position to impart the necessary understanding to them. Just because God will ultimately give his children victory does not rule out his using secondary, less ultimate influences to bring that victory about. Paul was willing and eager to be a secondary, less ultimate influence in the lives of the Galatians.

I am writing this set of papers for reasons comparable to why Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians. I am not Paul. I am not an apostle. And I do not have Paul's insight, clarity, or wisdom. But love demands that I share what insight I might possibly have with others in order that they might be better equipped to confront the challenges that lie ahead. By God's grace, my words and perspectives might play a role in God's giving my readers victory over the world.

Whenever a person has victory over the world, it is because he discerns the good from the bad, the true from the false. We all need such discernment. (And we can all help one another to attain such discernment.) The peril of counterfeit truth claims is a real and present danger to us. Just because God is powerful enough to overcome this peril does not mean that the peril is not real. It is real. And it will be overcome only by very real countermeasures. It will be overcome by our attaining the ability to discern the true from the false. Granted, it is only by God's grace that any of us will ever acquire such ability. But it is an ability that we must acquire through training, instruction, and practice. And, notably, it is an ability that is directly related to our understanding of the Bible. Hence, we will acquire the necessary discernment only through careful study of our Bibles.

I write these papers in hopes that what I say here might contribute to the wisdom and discernment that all of us will need in the days ahead. We gain the intrinsically valuable traits of wisdom and discernment through practice. May we begin today to practice the discernment that, by God's grace, will give us our victory in the days ahead.