

THE BROAD ROAD IN CHRISTIAN CLOTHING

False Assurance, Counterfeit Conversion, Normalized Sin, and the Biblical Marks of Saving Faith

CHAPTER 5

WHEN CHRISTIANITY IS REWRITTEN

**Liberal, Progressive, Therapeutic, and Inclusive
Gospels**

“For if a person comes and preaches another Jesus whom we did not
preach ...”

[2 Corinthians 11:4](#), CSB

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Chapter 5: When Christianity Is Rewritten: Liberal, Progressive, Therapeutic, and Inclusive Gospels

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RESEARCH AND THEOLOGICAL NOTE

Scripture governs the theological claims in this chapter. The chapter follows the approved architecture of The Broad Road in Christian Clothing and redevelops the author's mature work on biblical authority, the sovereign self, another Jesus and another gospel, New Age spirituality, religious pluralism, and semantic capture without mechanically reproducing earlier prose. Historical liberal and contemporary progressive positions are treated as diverse rather than as one undifferentiated movement. Primary or representative sources are used where possible, including contemporary Unity materials, an archived ProgressiveChristianity.org statement, Lausanne documents, and current philosophical definitions of religious pluralism. Research on spiritual abuse, religious trauma, deconstruction, and current official trauma-informed-care guidance is used to protect vulnerable readers and to distinguish honest questioning and clinical care from theological revision. The chapter also subjects conservative proof-texting, nationalism, prosperity, clerical domination, and selective morality to the same biblical standard.

Abstract

This chapter examines a particularly dangerous form of false assurance: Christianity can be verbally preserved while its governing meanings are rewritten. A church, teacher, movement, or individual may continue to speak of Jesus, love, grace, justice, the Spirit, inclusion, salvation, and even Scripture while assigning those words meanings that no longer correspond to the apostolic gospel. The result is not always open unbelief. It may be a recognizable Christian vocabulary functioning as a protective shell around a different authority, a different Christ, a different account of sin, a different hope, and ultimately a different gospel. The chapter argues that Scripture, rightly interpreted in its historical, literary, and canonical contexts, remains the final norm for Christian doctrine and life. It therefore distinguishes faithful contextual interpretation from revisionism, legitimate moral re-examination from the subordination of revelation to contemporary intuition, honest deconstruction from departure from apostolic faith, biblical justice from political salvation, trauma-informed care from therapeutic reductionism, and Christian hospitality from affirmation that refuses repentance. Theological liberalism, progressive Christianity, universalism, religious pluralism, New Thought and New Age reinterpretations of Christ, expressive individualism, and therapeutic spirituality are represented fairly before being tested by Scripture. The chapter also turns the same scrutiny toward conservative counterfeits that protect nationalism, prosperity, clerical power, cruelty, greed, or human tradition from biblical judgment. Its controlling claim is that the church is not authorized to make the gospel safe from the offense of the cross. The good news is better than every revision: the holy and loving God has acted in the incarnate, crucified, bodily risen, and returning Son to forgive, regenerate, reconcile, sanctify, and finally glorify all who repent and believe. Biblical warning therefore serves assurance rather than destroying it, because it strips away counterfeit Christs and brings the reader back to Christ Himself.

Keywords: biblical authority; Sola Scriptura; progressive Christianity; theological liberalism; deconstruction; religious pluralism; universalism; therapeutic gospel; New Age spirituality; false assurance; another gospel; Christian discernment

Introduction: When Christian Words Survive but Christian Meanings Die

Christianity can be rejected by denying its words. It can also be rewritten by keeping the words and changing what they mean. The second strategy is often harder to recognize because familiarity lowers the guard. A sermon can mention Jesus, love, grace, justice, inclusion, the Spirit, healing, and salvation and still leave the hearer with a Christ the apostles did not preach, a love detached from holiness, a grace detached from repentance, a justice detached from reconciliation to God, a Spirit detached from Scripture, and a salvation detached from the cross and resurrection. The vocabulary remains Christian. The grammar of the gospel has changed.

The preceding chapters have already removed several false refuges. Chapter 1 showed that saying "Lord, Lord" does not by itself prove that Christ knows the speaker. Chapter 2 defined salvation as the gracious work of the triune God in Christ, received through repentant faith and applied by the Holy Spirit. Chapter 3 exposed confidence in ancestry, ritual, decisions, institutions, experiences, knowledge, ministry, and morality when these displace Christ. Chapter 4 established that grace excludes merit without making repentance, holiness, obedience, and perseverance irrelevant. The present chapter asks

the next question. What happens when the very words by which those truths are expressed are redefined until they no longer confront the self?

This problem can be called semantic capture. A word survives while its biblical content is emptied, narrowed, expanded, or redirected. "Love" becomes affirmation without moral truth. "Justice" becomes whatever a political coalition currently requires. "Grace" becomes exemption from repentance. "Faith" becomes confidence in oneself or a technique for producing desired outcomes. "Spirit" becomes intuition, atmosphere, energy, or private certainty. "Christ" becomes a symbol of universal consciousness. "Resurrection" becomes personal reinvention. "Sin" becomes ignorance, trauma, social maladjustment, or failure to live authentically. "Salvation" becomes emotional flourishing, inclusion, political liberation, self-acceptance, or awakening to inner divinity. None of these substitutions requires a church to remove the cross from the wall. They require only that the cross be interpreted through a different story.

The author's recent work has already traced several strands that converge here: Scripture as final authority, the sovereign self as a rival moral court, the recasting of Christ and salvation in New Age and therapeutic categories, and the use of familiar Christian language to carry meanings foreign to the apostolic gospel (Sangwa, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026e, 2026f). This chapter does not reproduce those treatments. It reorganizes and advances them around the problem of false assurance: how a person or church can preserve Christian vocabulary while becoming increasingly insulated from the Christ who rebukes, forgives, commands, sanctifies, and judges.

The danger is not confined to one ideological camp. The progressive church can put Scripture beneath contemporary moral approval. The conservative church can put Scripture beneath nationalism, denominational tradition, a celebrity pastor, prosperity expectations, patriarchal privilege, racial or tribal loyalties, or party politics. A church that redefines sin to protect sexual autonomy and a church that redefines righteousness to protect greed or cruelty are practicing the same deeper rebellion: something other than God's Word has become final. The broad road has many lanes, and self-rule can wear either progressive or conservative Christian clothing.

The strongest case for contemporary revision must therefore be heard rather than mocked. Christians have misread Scripture. Churches have defended slavery, segregation, colonial domination, abusive leadership, misogyny, anti-intellectualism, and other evils while quoting verses. Survivors of spiritual abuse have sometimes discovered that leaders used "submission" or "touch not the Lord's anointed" as weapons. Scholarship has corrected faulty translations, exposed historical ignorance, and clarified contexts. People asking difficult questions are not automatically apostates. Psychological treatment, trauma-informed care, movements for justice, and attention to marginalized testimony can identify realities that churches have neglected. A theology that refuses self-criticism simply because it calls itself biblical can become a mechanism for preserving human power.

But the abuse of Scripture does not authorize the abolition of Scripture's authority. The fact that interpreters are fallible does not imply that revelation is negotiable. The cure for a false interpretation is a truer interpretation. The cure for proof-texting is context. The cure for abusive leadership is the whole counsel of God, including God's judgment on shepherds who devour the flock. The cure for legalism is grace as Scripture defines it, not autonomy. The cure for harshness is biblical love, not the reclassification of every divine command as harm.

The distinction that will govern this chapter is therefore between reform and revision. Reform returns the church to the Word, correcting inherited interpretations, customs, and abuses where they fail the text. Revision places the Word beneath another court and preserves only what receives

permission to remain. Reform can be painful because Scripture judges our traditions. Revision can feel compassionate because contemporary intuitions judge Scripture. Only one posture leaves God as God.

The question is not whether Christians interpret. We always interpret. The question is who finally has jurisdiction. When Scripture and my preferred identity conflict, which one must change? When the apostolic gospel and my moral intuition collide, which one is permitted to examine the other? When Christ's words cost social approval, professional opportunity, sexual freedom, political belonging, comfort, or reputation, do I still call Him Lord in the sense He claims?

This chapter will argue that a Christianity that cannot be contradicted by God is no longer Christianity under God. Yet the purpose is not to make believers afraid of every question, development, or act of compassion. It is to recover the freedom of standing beneath a Word we did not invent and before a Savior we do not control. The church does not need a gospel adjusted until the age finds it reasonable. It needs the gospel that raises the dead.

The church is free to correct its interpretations. It is not free to correct the God who speaks.

5.1 Biblical Inspiration, Authority, and Sola Scriptura

Every debate in this chapter eventually becomes a debate about authority. Before asking what Christianity should say about any contested doctrine or moral question, the church must answer a prior question: who is authorized to define Christianity? If Scripture is merely one historical witness among many, then later experience, moral intuition, academic theory, ecclesial tradition, or political necessity may revise it. If Scripture is God's written Word, then all those authorities can serve interpretation but none may sit above the text as its final judge.

Paul's language in [2 Timothy 3:14-17](#) is deliberately comprehensive. Timothy has known the sacred Scriptures from childhood, writings able to give wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Paul then says that "all Scripture" is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that God's servant may be equipped for every good work. The text does not present inspiration as a religious feeling produced in the reader. The writings themselves are theopneustos, breathed out by God. Their purpose is not merely to comfort. Scripture teaches, rebukes, corrects, and trains. A church that receives encouragement from the Bible while refusing correction has not accepted the function Paul assigns to Scripture.

In context, the sacred writings Timothy had known from childhood are chiefly the Scriptures of Israel; therefore [2 Timothy 3:14-17](#) should not be made, by itself, to prove the precise boundaries of the later New Testament canon. The wider New Testament nevertheless presents apostolic teaching as received from Christ and binding on the churches, and it can speak of apostolic writings alongside the Scriptures ([1 Corinthians 14:37](#); [1 Thessalonians 2:13](#); [2 Peter 3:15-16](#)). The canonical question therefore requires historical and theological care, but such care does not transfer final authority from the God who speaks to the reader who receives His Word.

Peter makes a complementary claim in [2 Peter 1:16-21](#). Apostolic proclamation was not built on cleverly invented myths. Peter appeals to witnessed glory and then describes prophecy as speech that did not arise from human will but from people carried along by the Holy Spirit. Divine authorship does not erase human authorship. Luke researched and arranged testimony. David wrote poetry out of real anguish. Paul addressed local congregations and concrete disputes. John narrated witnessed events.

Inspiration means that God sovereignly spoke through real human writers rather than bypassing their histories, personalities, vocabularies, genres, and circumstances.

This immediately rules out two equal and opposite errors. The first is a wooden biblicism that treats every verse as though genre, covenant, authorial intention, historical setting, and canonical development do not matter. The second is revisionism that uses context as a solvent until any unwanted command can be made to disappear. Faithful interpretation is neither "the verse says it, no questions allowed" nor "the verse was ancient, therefore it no longer governs." It asks what the text meant in its original context, how it functions within the canon, how Christ fulfills rather than abolishes God's redemptive purposes, and what obedience looks like now.

The 2024 Seoul Statement of the Lausanne Movement expresses this balance with useful precision. It affirms the Bible as God's written, divinely inspired, God-breathed, authoritative, unerring, wholly true, and trustworthy Word, while insisting that faithful reading attends to historical, literary, and canonical contexts, depends on the Spirit's illumination, learns from the church's interpretive tradition, and remains alert to the influence of local culture (Lausanne Movement, 2024). This is an important corrective to the false choice between authority and interpretation. A high view of Scripture is not permission for careless interpretation. Indeed, because Scripture is authoritative, interpreters have a greater obligation to read it responsibly.

Sola Scriptura therefore does not mean solo Scriptura. It does not mean that one isolated reader with an English translation is infallible. It does not mean church history is useless, scholarship is rebellion, creeds are worthless, or pastors should ignore Hebrew, Greek, archaeology, textual criticism, philosophy, psychology, law, and science. It means that Scripture alone is the final infallible norm by which every subordinate authority is tested. The Westminster Confession classically described the supreme judge in religious controversies as the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture, not councils, ancient writers, private spirits, or human traditions. The Lausanne Covenant similarly calls the Scriptures the only written Word of God and the only infallible rule of faith and practice (Lausanne Movement, 1974).

The distinction between the infallible Word and fallible interpretations is essential. A pastor can misread. A denomination can protect its inheritance. A scholar can smuggle philosophical assumptions into exegesis. A survivor can understandably read every authority text through the memory of abuse. A conservative can treat local custom as divine command. A progressive can treat present moral consensus as self-evident revelation. Sola Scriptura humbles all of them because no party owns the Judge.

Historical criticism can therefore be a servant rather than an enemy. Questions about date, authorship, sources, genre, redaction, manuscript transmission, social setting, and historical reference can clarify meaning. The problem begins when a method is governed by a conclusion that excludes biblical claims before evidence is considered. If miracles are ruled impossible by metaphysical naturalism, then every miracle report must be legend or symbol. If predictive prophecy is ruled impossible, any accurate prophecy must be dated after the event. If bodily resurrection is ruled impossible, Easter can only become metaphor, community memory, or existential meaning. Those are not conclusions reached by historical investigation alone. They are philosophical decisions about what history is allowed to contain.

The church should be equally suspicious when conservatives commit a mirror-image error. A preacher who declares his political interpretation "what the Bible says" without doing the textual work has not honored authority. A leader who quotes [Hebrews 13:17](#) to demand unquestioning loyalty while ignoring [1 Peter 5:1-4](#), [Ezekiel 34:1-10](#), and the qualifications of [1 Timothy 3:1-7](#) is not defending

Scripture. A husband who cites submission while practicing intimidation has not embraced biblical order. A prosperity teacher who isolates promises of blessing from the theology of suffering and the cross has not submitted to the text. Inerrancy on paper does not guarantee obedience in practice.

The moral classification is therefore clear. Receiving Scripture as the final norm for doctrine and life is not a matter of private taste or denominational culture. It is integral to Christian discipleship because Jesus authorizes the prophetic and apostolic witness and subjects human tradition to God's command ([Matthew 5:17-20](#); [Matthew 15:1-9](#); [John 10:35](#); [John 17:17](#)). The methods by which Christians study Scripture often belong to wisdom, and disagreements about some interpretations remain legitimate. But the church has no Christian liberty to establish another final authority over God's Word.

The pastoral question is sharper than "Do I believe the Bible?" Most churches in danger of rewriting Christianity can still answer yes. The searching question is: what happens when the Bible tells me no? When a text contradicts my desires, my politics, my theology, my family tradition, my preferred identity, or the moral instincts of my social world, do I return to the text to understand it more faithfully, or do I search for a method that will make the contradiction disappear? Submission becomes visible where agreement ends.

5.2 When Contemporary Moral Intuition Judges Scripture

Modern moral intuition carries real force because people do not experience ethics as abstract propositions. They encounter suffering bodies, abused children, exploited workers, racial injustice, war, discrimination, hypocrisy, and people whose stories expose the cruelty of systems that once called themselves normal. When someone says, "I cannot believe a loving God would command or condemn that," the sentence may arise from compassion rather than arrogance. Christians should not answer compassion with contempt.

Scripture itself affirms conscience. [Romans 2:14-16](#) describes Gentiles who do not possess the Mosaic law yet show the work of the law written on their hearts, with conscience accusing or excusing. Human beings are moral creatures because they bear God's image. The prophets repeatedly appeal to moral realities that ought to be recognizable: dishonest scales, bribery, violence, exploitation of widows, neglect of the poor, and perversion of justice. Jesus can ask hearers to judge what is right ([Luke 12:57](#)). Moral reasoning is therefore not an enemy of revelation.

But conscience is not infallible. The same Paul who affirms conscience also describes minds darkened by idolatry and cultures that can approve what God condemns ([Romans 1:18-32](#)). Conscience can be weak, defiled, misinformed, hardened, or seared ([1 Corinthians 8:7-12](#); [Titus 1:15](#); [1 Timothy 4:2](#)). Human beings can feel morally certain and be wrong. History supplies abundant examples. Slavery, racial hierarchy, colonial exploitation, antisemitism, caste oppression, infanticide, honor violence, corruption, and sexual exploitation have all been defended by societies that possessed moral intuitions and cultural consensus. A present consensus cannot be made infallible merely because it is present.

The strongest rebuttal to biblical authority often points to moral progress within Christianity itself. Churches once used Scripture to defend chattel slavery and segregation. Some discouraged women from reporting abuse in order to preserve family reputation. Clergy have protected abusers. Missionaries sometimes confused the gospel with colonial culture. If earlier believers were certain and wrong, why should contemporary believers not allow moral learning to correct the Bible itself?

The first half of the argument is important. Christians must confess that Scripture has been used wickedly. The history of interpretation should produce humility. Moral testimony from victims can

expose questions interpreters ignored. Abolitionist Christians, for example, did not need to discard Scripture in order to condemn race-based chattel slavery. They brought the whole canon to bear on human dignity, man-stealing, neighbor-love, the equal lordship of Christ, and the moral transformation of relationships in the body of Christ. The church can learn from history because interpreters are corrigible.

The conclusion, however, does not follow. Discovering that an interpretation was wrong is not the same as discovering that revelation was wrong. If a physician misreads an X-ray, the correction does not prove that radiography is useless. If a judge misapplies a statute, the existence of judicial error does not mean the law should be whatever the next judge feels. The relevant question is whether the earlier reading actually represented the text in its canonical, historical, and theological context.

This distinction guards the church from moral arrogance in both directions. Conservatives sometimes say, "The Bible is clear," when what is actually clear to them is an inherited interpretation. Progressives sometimes say, "We know better now," when what is actually operating is a new set of cultural axioms that have never themselves been examined. Both postures can make the interpreter final.

Contemporary moral intuition should therefore function as a questioner, not a sovereign. It can ask whether we have read faithfully. It can expose neglected consequences. It can force attention to texts about justice, mercy, oppression, hypocrisy, and power. It can alert us that a tradition may have baptized local prejudice. But after the interpretive work is done, conscience must itself be instructed by the God who speaks. Christian discipleship includes the possibility that revelation will correct not only ancient cultures but modern ones.

The cross makes this unavoidable. No moral intuition naturally invents a salvation in which the holy God justifies the ungodly through the substitutionary death and bodily resurrection of His Son. The gospel is not the religious expression of humanity's best moral instincts. It judges those instincts. The cross condemns self-righteousness, reveals the gravity of sin, displays divine love, and announces that reconciliation is received rather than achieved ([Romans 3:21-26](#); [Romans 5:6-11](#); [1 Corinthians 1:18-25](#)).

There are therefore moral claims that Christians should revise because they were never biblical, moral applications that may vary because Scripture gives principles rather than one universal form, and explicit biblical teachings that must not be reversed simply because obedience has become culturally costly. Sorting these categories requires exegesis rather than slogans.

A useful self-examination follows. When I say, "A loving God would never..." am I expressing a conclusion reached after careful attention to everything God has revealed about His love, holiness, justice, patience, wrath, mercy, and redemptive purposes? Or have I defined love in advance and permitted God to retain only those attributes that fit my definition? A God who can never contradict my moral intuition is not necessarily the God who is love. He may be my moral reflection projected into heaven.

5.3 "That Was for Another Culture"

Few phrases are more useful in biblical interpretation than "context matters." Few phrases are more dangerous when used as a universal escape hatch than "that was for another culture." Scripture was written in real cultures, languages, political arrangements, households, economies, and religious worlds. Ignoring those settings can produce serious error. Yet cultural distance does not by itself cancel moral authority. Murder was committed in ancient cultures. So was adultery, oppression, greed, false

worship, and deceit. The fact that a command addressed ancient people does not mean only ancient people can disobey it.

A responsible hermeneutic begins by asking what the text actually says before asking how it applies. Historical context asks what circumstances occasioned the instruction. Literary context asks how the passage functions in the argument or narrative. Canonical context asks how the teaching relates to the whole biblical story, including covenantal development and fulfillment in Christ. Theological context asks whether the command is grounded in creation, God's character, the gospel, church order, or a temporary redemptive-historical arrangement. Application then distinguishes enduring moral norm from the cultural form by which that norm was expressed (Klein et al., 2017; Thiselton, 2009).

This process is not mechanical, and faithful Christians sometimes disagree. The command to greet one another with a holy kiss ([Romans 16:16](#)) clearly contains an enduring call to familial affection and fellowship, while the exact form of greeting can vary. Old covenant food laws belonged to Israel's covenantal holiness and are treated as fulfilled and transformed in the New Testament ([Mark 7:18-23](#); [Acts 10:9-16](#); [Colossians 2:16-17](#)). The command to care for widows remains morally binding even when the church's administrative structures differ from those of [1 Timothy 5:3-16](#). Some other texts generate serious debate about how principle and form relate, and humility is appropriate where the interpretive evidence genuinely permits more than one responsible conclusion.

Several tests help expose the misuse of "culture." First, is the instruction grounded in creation rather than merely local circumstance? Jesus' teaching on marriage, for example, reaches behind first-century convention to Genesis ([Matthew 19:4-6](#)). Second, is the norm repeated across different New Testament settings rather than tied to one local crisis? Third, does the apostolic rationale appeal to the gospel, God's character, or created order? Fourth, does later Scripture explicitly transform or set aside the earlier form? Fifth, can the proposed cultural limitation be demonstrated historically, or is "culture" being invoked only because the reader dislikes the command? Sixth, does the interpretation preserve the author's argument, or does it reverse the conclusion the author was making?

The last question is especially important. Context can clarify a command; it should not be used to make the passage teach its opposite without compelling textual evidence. A common revisionist pattern works backward. A contemporary conclusion is treated as morally certain. A difficult text is then labeled culturally conditioned. The precise cultural condition may be speculative or unverified, but it is assigned enough authority to neutralize the passage. This is not contextual interpretation. It is contextual exemption.

Conservatives can commit the same error in reverse by universalizing a cultural form. A local dress custom, a nineteenth-century family arrangement, an American political assumption, an African tribal expectation, or a denominational practice can be given biblical status because it feels traditional. Chapter 14 will examine command, principle, wisdom, conscience, and liberty in detail. The present point is that both moral permissiveness and legalism collapse distinctions Scripture requires. One treats a command as culture; the other treats culture as command.

The strongest objection remains: all readers are culturally located. We cannot climb out of history and read from nowhere. That is true. The 2024 Seoul Statement explicitly acknowledges that culture and language shape interpretation and that local communities can contribute genuine insights to the wider church (Lausanne Movement, 2024). African Christians may see communal dimensions Western individualists overlook. Christians from persecuted contexts may hear texts on allegiance with greater clarity. Survivors may notice manipulative readings that comfortable leaders missed. Poor believers may hear warnings about wealth more sharply than affluent readers.

Cultural situatedness, however, is an argument for communal humility, not for relativism. If every reading is nothing more than culture, then the statement "this text was only for that culture" is itself merely another cultural reading with no superior claim. The church needs something capable of judging all cultures, including its own. Scripture supplies that external norm precisely because it comes to us through history without being reducible to the preferences of any one historical community.

The moral posture of the interpreter is therefore part of the method. Jesus says that willingness to do God's will is related to recognizing the source of His teaching ([John 7:17](#)). This does not mean sincere people never disagree. It means interpretation is not ethically neutral. We can search for understanding, or we can search for permission. A reader asking, "What does obedience require?" approaches the same text differently from one asking, "How can I make this no longer apply?"

The phrase "another culture" should therefore lead to more work, not less. It should send us to history, language, genre, covenant, canonical theology, and the wisdom of the global and historic church. If that work shows a culturally specific form, Christians should not manufacture a universal law. If it shows an enduring command, Christians should not manufacture an exemption. Context is a servant of truth, not a solvent of truth.

5.4 Theological Liberalism and Progressive Christianity

Theological liberalism and progressive Christianity should not be treated as a single uniform movement. The labels cover diverse scholars, churches, and historical developments. Some who identify as progressive affirm classical creeds, bodily resurrection, and the uniqueness of Christ while using the term mainly for social and political commitments. Others openly reinterpret or reject supernatural doctrines, final biblical authority, substitutionary atonement, exclusive salvation through Christ, traditional sexual ethics, or final judgment. Fair criticism requires specificity.

Modern theological liberalism arose in part from an intellectually serious question: how can Christian faith speak in a world transformed by Enlightenment criticism, modern science, historical consciousness, and new understandings of human subjectivity? Friedrich Schleiermacher resisted reducing religion to metaphysical propositions or moralism and emphasized the immediacy of religious consciousness and the feeling of absolute dependence. David Friedrich Strauss subjected Gospel narratives to historical-critical analysis and interpreted many elements through the category of myth. Adolf von Harnack sought an "essence" of Christianity beneath later dogmatic development. Rudolf Bultmann's program of demythologization attempted to interpret the New Testament's proclamation for modern hearers without requiring them simply to adopt an ancient cosmology (Bultmann, 1984; Harnack, 1901; Schleiermacher, 1799/1996; Strauss, 1972).

These projects differ, and caricature helps no one. Bultmann, for example, should not be reduced to the claim that every biblical statement is meaningless myth. His concern was how the kerygma addresses existence. Liberal theologians have often sought to preserve faith rather than destroy it. They exposed dead traditionalism, challenged anti-intellectualism, took historical questions seriously, and refused to pretend that modern people could simply forget the intellectual revolutions through which they had passed.

The theological crisis appears when Christianity is permitted to survive only after translation into categories already authorized by modern thought. If the resurrection may remain only as existential possibility because bodily resurrection is ruled impossible, modern metaphysics has become judge. If divine wrath must disappear because contemporary therapeutic morality regards judgment as psychologically harmful, therapeutic morality has become judge. If apostolic moral teaching may

remain only where it agrees with present ethical consensus, the consensus has become judge. The church has not interpreted revelation. It has negotiated the terms under which revelation may continue speaking.

Contemporary progressive Christianity often expresses the same transfer of authority in less academic language, although no single statement represents every person who uses the label. The 2011 version of ProgressiveChristianity.org's "Eight Points," preserved in the organization's archive, describes Jesus' teachings as one among many ways to experience the Sacred, values questioning over absolutes, and emphasizes inclusion, justice, care for creation, lifelong learning, compassion, and selfless love (ProgressiveChristianity.org, n.d.). Several of those concerns contain goods Christians should not dismiss. The church should welcome honest questions, resist racism and exploitation, practice hospitality, care for creation, and work for justice. The decisive issue is whether these goods are defined beneath the lordship of Christ or used to revise His identity and the apostolic gospel.

When Jesus becomes "one of many ways," the change is not merely a softer tone toward neighbors of other faiths. It contradicts the apostolic claim that salvation is found in no other name ([Acts 4:12](#)) and Jesus' own claim that no one comes to the Father except through Him ([John 14:6](#)). When "questioning" is given greater value than any settled truth, the method undercuts itself because that principle is itself treated as a settled truth. When inclusion becomes an ultimate moral criterion, repentance becomes difficult to preach because repentance necessarily says that some desires, beliefs, and practices must not be carried unchanged into the kingdom.

The strongest progressive objection is that traditional churches have often used certainty to harm people. That is true. Certainty can become arrogance. Leaders can weaponize "biblical truth" to silence questions. Churches can prefer doctrinal correctness to mercy. The answer is not less truth but truth joined to humility, repentance, evidence, patience, and love. Paul could condemn another gospel in [Galatians 1:6-9](#) and still describe Christian knowledge as partial in [1 Corinthians 13:9-12](#). Humility is not uncertainty about everything. It is truthful recognition of creaturely limits beneath a God who is not limited.

The chapter must also refuse the lazy conservative assumption that every change is liberalism. The Protestant Reformation changed inherited ecclesial claims by returning to Scripture. Abolitionists challenged traditions that baptized slavery. Churches rightly revise safeguarding practices when evidence shows that old customs enabled abuse. Better translations can overturn cherished proof texts. The criterion is not novelty versus antiquity. It is fidelity versus autonomy.

Nor should "progressive" function as a moral slur. It is possible to be progressive in public policy and orthodox in theology, just as it is possible to be politically conservative and theologically heterodox. Christian discernment must test actual claims rather than tribal labels. The problem addressed here is theological progressivism when "progress" means that later moral consciousness possesses authority to correct the prophetic and apostolic Word.

Jesus does not authorize His church to preserve a recognizable ethical spirit while detaching it from His identity and saving work. He is not merely the source of values that later generations may improve. He is the eternal Son through whom all things were made, the crucified and risen Lord before whom every knee will bow ([John 1:1-18](#); [Philippians 2:5-11](#); [Colossians 1:15-20](#)). Christianity cannot move "beyond" Him without moving beyond Christianity.

The self-examination must again turn inward. Which doctrines do I find myself hoping scholarship will remove, not because the text is genuinely unclear, but because obedience is costly? Which biblical judgments embarrass me before my peers? Which teachings do I emphasize because my tribe rewards

them, and which do I quietly neglect because my tribe would punish me? Theological revision rarely begins with a press release announcing apostasy. It often begins with the desire for a Christianity that never makes us ashamed in front of the age.

Pastors, scholars, and teachers carry a particular burden here. The temptation is not always public denial; it can be the preservation of orthodox vocabulary while every costly doctrine is qualified until nothing remains that can summon the hearer to repentance. Intellectual sophistication must not become a priesthood that rescues us from the plain force of Scripture merely because Scripture embarrasses our social world. Yet anti-intellectualism is no remedy. The servant of Christ must do the harder work: interpret carefully, state uncertainty honestly, correct inherited error when evidence requires it, and refuse to call a settled apostolic claim obsolete merely because the age has changed.

5.5 Deconstruction: Honest Questions or Departure from Apostolic Faith?

"Deconstruction" has become one of the most emotionally charged words in contemporary Christian conversation. For some, it names a process of asking questions that were previously forbidden, separating the gospel from cultural baggage, confronting abuse, and rebuilding faith on firmer ground. For others, it names a predictable path from doubt to progressive Christianity and then to unbelief. Both descriptions correspond to real stories. Neither should be turned into a universal definition.

Recent discussions and research confirm that people use the term in different ways. Paquini (2025) describes faith deconstruction among young Christians as questioning shaped by diverse information sources, changing social values, and attempts to reconcile inherited faith with difficult intellectual and moral questions. In a 2023 survey of 2,003 U.S. adults reported by Barna Group (2024), 37% of respondents who currently identified as Christian said they had deconstructed the faith of their youth, including similar shares of practicing and nonpracticing Christians. Such self-report data do not tell us whether a person's theology became more or less faithful, and they cannot measure regeneration. They do show that "deconstruction" is not synonymous with becoming an ex-Christian. At the same time, deconstruction can culminate in disaffiliation or deconversion. The word tells us that inherited beliefs are being critically examined; it does not tell us in advance which claims will be retained, rejected, or recovered.

The Bible does not condemn questions as such. The Psalms are full of protest, confusion, and lament: "How long?" "Why?" "Where are you?" Habakkuk questions God's tolerance of evil. Job speaks out of bewildering suffering. The father in [Mark 9:24](#) can say, "I do believe; help my unbelief." Thomas refuses secondhand certainty and is confronted by the risen Christ ([John 20:24-29](#)). The Bereans are commended for examining Paul's message by the Scriptures ([Acts 17:10-12](#)). Jude tells believers to have mercy on those who doubt (Jude 22). Christianity has no biblical mandate to punish honest inquiry.

Some deconstruction is also a response to real spiritual harm. Vigdel, Nygaard, and Kleiven's (2024) qualitative study of sixteen people leaving contexts they perceived as spiritually abusive found shame, leader-mediated claims about God's will, emotional strain, and the need to disentangle faith from abusive authority structures. Panchuk's (2024) philosophical treatment of religious trauma likewise demonstrates why religious beliefs and practices can be implicated in experiences of profound harm. These findings should not be sensationalized into the claim that conservative Christianity is inherently abusive. They should make pastors sober about the damage done when divine authority is borrowed to protect human domination.

A survivor asking, "Was that really God, or was that my leader controlling me?" may be asking exactly the question Scripture requires. Ezekiel 34 condemns shepherds who feed themselves instead of the flock. Jesus condemns leaders who tie up heavy burdens while refusing to lift them ([Matthew 23:4](#)). Peter forbids elders from lording authority over those entrusted to them ([1 Peter 5:2-3](#)). Paul does not tell the Galatians to submit to any teacher who claims spiritual authority; he says even an angel must be rejected if another gospel is preached ([Galatians 1:8](#)). A faith that cannot question leaders has already assigned to them an authority Scripture does not give.

The danger begins when deconstruction ceases to test human interpretations by revelation and instead places revelation under an authority that cannot itself be questioned. "I am dismantling toxic tradition" can quietly become "I will retain only what fits my current moral identity." The language remains therapeutic and liberating, but the final court has shifted. The person is no longer asking whether a doctrine is biblical. The person is asking whether it is acceptable to the self that emerged from the deconstruction process.

This is why the distinction between deconstruction and reformation is so important. Reformation can dismantle false beliefs, abusive systems, and inherited assumptions, but it does so in order to hear God's Word more faithfully. It removes human scaffolding so that the house may rest more securely on Christ. Destructive deconstruction treats every external authority as suspect while leaving the deconstructing self exempt from suspicion. It can become an asymmetrical skepticism: the Bible must prove itself, the church must prove itself, historic doctrine must prove itself, but contemporary identity and intuition are treated as innocent until proven otherwise.

The strongest defense of deconstruction says that people cannot simply return to naive certainty once they have seen contradictions, hypocrisy, historical complexity, scientific evidence, or institutional corruption. That is correct. Mature faith is not the recovery of ignorance. A believer should not be asked to pretend textual variants do not exist, that church history is spotless, that every apologetic answer is equally strong, or that every difficult biblical text is easy. Faithfulness does not require intellectual anesthesia.

But Christian maturity also refuses the opposite myth that sophistication consists in permanent suspicion. The New Testament contains truths it expects believers to know, confess, guard, and hand on. Paul summarizes the gospel he "received" and "passed on" concerning Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and appearances ([1 Corinthians 15:1-8](#)). Jude speaks of "the faith delivered to the saints once for all" (Jude 3). John identifies confessions that distinguish the Spirit of truth from error ([1 John 4:1-6](#)). There is a difference between humility about our interpretations and agnosticism about whether God has spoken.

A church responding to deconstruction should therefore resist two pastoral failures. The first is panic. Treating every question as rebellion teaches people to hide doubts until they erupt in isolation. The second is flattery. Treating every deconstructive conclusion as courageous growth can accompany someone away from Christ while calling the departure healing. Pastors need enough courage to say, "Your question is legitimate," and, when the evidence requires it, "That conclusion is not compatible with the apostolic gospel."

The moral classification depends on what is being deconstructed and by what authority. Examining human traditions, interpretations, church practices, and abusive claims is often wise and sometimes morally necessary. Reconsidering a doctrine because stronger exegesis demands it can be faithful reform. Rejecting the deity of Christ, the bodily resurrection, the apostolic gospel, or God's moral

authority is not a neutral exercise in intellectual development. It is departure from foundational Christian claims.

For the wounded reader, this distinction matters pastorally. You do not need to choose between returning to an abusive system and abandoning Jesus. The pastor who harmed you is not your mediator. The institution that failed you is not your savior. You are permitted to tell the truth, seek safety, pursue qualified psychological care, report crimes to appropriate authorities, question manipulative interpretations, and grieve what was lost. But do not let an abuser's misuse of Christ steal Christ from you. Bring every leader, every memory, every doctrine, and also every new conclusion under His Word. The Shepherd who condemns wolves is not the wolf.

5.6 Another Jesus and Another Gospel

The New Testament's warnings about false teaching are not warnings against religion in general. They are warnings about counterfeits close enough to Christian truth to deceive Christian hearers. Paul fears that the Corinthians may tolerate someone who preaches "another Jesus," receive a "different spirit," or accept a "different gospel" ([2 Corinthians 11:3-4](#)). He tells the Galatians that a message which alters the gospel is not a harmless variation but a distortion deserving the strongest apostolic condemnation ([Galatians 1:6-9](#)). John commands believers to test spirits because religious claims can use spiritual language while denying the apostolic Christ ([1 John 4:1-6](#)).

The phrase "another Jesus" is especially important. The question "Do you believe in Jesus?" is not precise enough when the name can carry radically different meanings. Muslims honor Jesus as Messiah and prophet while denying the Christian confession of His divine Sonship and saving crucifixion. Jehovah's Witness theology uses biblical language for Jesus while placing Him on the creature side of the Creator-creature distinction. Latter-day Saint theology uses Christian terms within a different doctrine of God and human exaltation. New Thought and New Age systems may speak warmly of Jesus while presenting Him as a uniquely awakened teacher of universal divine potential. Progressive Christians may retain Jesus primarily as a moral exemplar of inclusion, liberation, or nonviolence while treating classical Christology as later dogmatic construction. These traditions are not identical and should never be collapsed into one caricature. The common question is whether the identity being confessed is the apostolic Jesus.

The New Testament's answer is remarkably thick. The Word who was with God and was God became flesh ([John 1:1-18](#)). All things were created through and for the Son, who is before all things and sustains them ([Colossians 1:15-20](#)). He truly shared flesh and blood, was tempted yet without sin, died, and rose bodily ([Hebrews 2:14-18](#); [Hebrews 4:15](#); [1 Corinthians 15:1-8](#)). He is the one Mediator between God and humanity ([1 Timothy 2:5](#)). He will judge the living and the dead ([2 Timothy 4:1](#)). A Jesus who cannot create, atone, rise, rule, judge, and uniquely reconcile is not merely a different emphasis on the same person.

New Thought provides a particularly clear example of semantic capture because it frequently retains biblical language while changing the Creator-creature relation. Contemporary Unity materials describe all spiritual paths as leading toward the same divine source, speak of discovering "inner divinity," and interpret "Christ within" as an innate divine reality common to human beings (Crawford, n.d.). A Unity interpretation of [John 14:6](#) explicitly distinguishes Jesus of Nazareth from a "Christ" understood as divine presence within all people and reads the way to God as realization and expression of one's innate divinity (Unity, n.d.-a). Another Unity interpretation reframes sin as forgetting one's true

divine identity and interprets Christ as the divine nature within rather than the unique incarnate Son (Unity, n.d.-b).

This is not a minor difference in spiritual vocabulary. Biblical union with Christ never means that human beings are divine by nature. "Christ in you" describes the astonishing grace of belonging to the risen Christ through the Spirit, not the discovery that the creature was secretly God all along ([Colossians 1:27](#); [Galatians 2:20](#)). Believers become "partakers of the divine nature" in [2 Peter 1:4](#) through God's promises and moral transformation, not by crossing the ontological boundary between Creator and creature. Christian adoption is greater than self-deification because it gives real communion without erasing the distinction that makes communion possible.

The cross is another dividing line. The apostolic gospel says Christ died "for our sins" according to the Scriptures and rose from the dead ([1 Corinthians 15:3-4](#)). Jesus interprets His death as a ransom for many ([Mark 10:45](#)) and His blood as poured out for forgiveness ([Matthew 26:28](#)). Peter says He bore our sins in His body on the tree ([1 Peter 2:24](#)). Paul says God presented Christ as the atoning sacrifice so that God might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus ([Romans 3:25-26](#)).

If humanity's deepest problem is ignorance of inner divinity, the cross cannot remain what the apostles say it is. It must become symbol, demonstration, archetype, or technique. Some Unity materials explicitly reject blood atonement and reinterpret Jesus' significance through spiritual evolution and oneness with the Divine. Again, the point is not to mock sincere spiritual seekers. It is to name a doctrinal fact. A system that changes the human problem from guilt and rebellion to ignorance of divinity must also change the saving work of Christ. Different diagnosis, different Christ, different gospel.

Other modern counterfeits are more familiar inside evangelical churches. The therapeutic Jesus exists to validate the self but rarely commands self-denial. The prosperity Jesus exists to activate health, wealth, favor, and destiny but becomes strangely silent about taking up the cross. The nationalist Jesus functions as a sacred mascot for one nation, party, race, or civilizational project. The activist Jesus is reduced to a symbol of one political program. The conservative cultural Jesus becomes guardian of a nostalgic social order even where that order includes greed, racial prejudice, exploitation, or contempt for the poor. In each case, real aspects of biblical concern may be present. Healing matters. God provides. Nations matter. Justice matters. Families and social order matter. The counterfeit appears when a partial concern absorbs the identity of the Lord.

A common objection says that all Christology is interpretation. The early church used philosophical vocabulary such as "nature" and "person" that does not appear in the New Testament in its later technical sense. Therefore, it is argued, contemporary communities are equally free to reconstruct Christ for their own contexts. The premise is partly true and the conclusion false. The church did develop conceptual language, but it did so to protect the scriptural data against distortions, not to replace those data. "Trinity" is not a license to make God whatever the church wants. It is a summary term disciplined by the biblical witness. Contextual language is legitimate when it carries apostolic content, not when it reverses it.

Another objection says that insisting on one Christ is exclusionary and culturally arrogant. Yet truth claims are not made humble by becoming vague. The Christian does not say, "My culture invented the best spiritual teacher." The gospel says God acted decisively in a Jewish Messiah, under a Roman governor, in a public crucifixion and a claimed bodily resurrection. The scandal is historical particularity. If God has acted there, refusing to make Christ one symbol among many is not ethnic superiority. It is submission to the event and testimony at Christianity's center.

The pastoral test is simple. What must Jesus never say to you? If the answer is, "He must never contradict my deepest identity, challenge my politics, expose my greed, judge my sexuality, command forgiveness, call me to costly truth, or require allegiance above family and nation," then the Jesus being protected may already be another Jesus. The biblical Christ comforts the brokenhearted, but He also commands the dead to rise. He receives sinners, but He does not receive sin as lord. He is gentle and lowly, and He is the Lamb whose wrath terrifies the kingdoms of the earth ([Matthew 11:28-30](#); [Revelation 6:15-17](#)). We do not make Him safer by editing Him. We make Him imaginary.

5.7 Judgment, Hell, Universalism, and Religious Pluralism

Few doctrines place modern moral intuition under greater strain than final judgment. The instinct is understandable. Christians confess that God is love, desire the salvation of people they cherish, and know that human knowledge is limited. The thought of final exclusion, punishment, or destruction is dreadful. A theology that treats hell casually has not understood what it is saying. Jesus weeps over Jerusalem even while warning it. Paul speaks of enemies of the cross "with tears" ([Philippians 3:18](#)). Christian warning should never sound like delight in another person's ruin.

Precisely because the subject is severe, positions must be defined carefully. Traditional eternal conscious punishment holds that the finally impenitent endure irreversible conscious punishment. Conditional immortality, often associated with annihilationism, holds that the finally lost are judged and ultimately destroyed rather than consciously tormented without end. Faithful evangelicals have defended both views while agreeing that judgment is real, final, morally serious, and not automatically escaped by everyone. Christian universalism goes further, maintaining that all people, or ultimately all rational creatures, will finally be reconciled to God. Inclusivism generally maintains the primacy or finality of Christ while allowing that people outside explicit Christian faith may receive salvation through Him. Religious pluralism denies the unique salvific primacy of Christianity and understands multiple religions as valid approaches to ultimate reality. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's current treatment rightly distinguishes exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism rather than using "pluralism" as a vague synonym for tolerance (Basinger, 2025).

Universalism has serious arguments and should not be dismissed as mere sentiment. It appeals to God's universal saving desire ([1 Timothy 2:4](#); [2 Peter 3:9](#)), the cosmic scope of reconciliation language ([Colossians 1:19-20](#)), Adam-Christ parallels ([Romans 5:18](#); [1 Corinthians 15:22](#)), the final subjection of all things to God ([1 Corinthians 15:24-28](#)), and the conviction that infinite divine goodness must finally overcome every creaturely resistance. David Bentley Hart (2019), one of the strongest contemporary advocates, argues that eternal torment is incompatible with the goodness of God and the ultimate victory announced by the gospel. Older Christian history also contains universalist voices, although universal reconciliation was never the simple consensus of the historic church.

These texts deserve careful exegesis. God's saving desire reveals the generosity of His heart, but Scripture also distinguishes what God commands and desires from what rebellious creatures do and from the judgments He decrees. The statement that God is patient, "not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance," appears in a passage that still warns of coming judgment ([2 Peter 3:9-10](#)). [Colossians 1:20](#) speaks of cosmic reconciliation through the blood of the cross, yet the same letter warns of wrath and requires persevering faith ([Colossians 1:21-23](#); [Colossians 3:5-6](#)). Romans 5 uses sweeping Adam-Christ parallels while Romans as a whole repeatedly distinguishes those justified by faith from those under judgment. First Corinthians 15:22 says that "in Christ" all will be made alive within an argument ordered around those who belong to Christ at His coming ([1 Corinthians 15:23](#)).

The clearest obstacle to dogmatic universalism is not one isolated proof text but the cumulative pattern of Jesus and the apostles. Jesus contrasts the narrow way leading to life with the broad way leading to destruction ([Matthew 7:13-14](#)). He warns of exclusion from the kingdom and speaks of "eternal punishment" in contrast with "eternal life" ([Matthew 25:46](#)). John says the one who refuses to believe in the Son does not see life but remains under God's wrath ([John 3:36](#)). Paul describes Christ returning in judgment and speaks of eternal destruction away from the Lord's presence ([2 Thessalonians 1:7-10](#)). Revelation depicts final judgment and the lake of fire after the resurrection of the dead ([Revelation 20:11-15](#)). Christians may debate the exact nature and imagery of final punishment, but the canonical witness does not authorize the church to promise universal restoration where Scripture issues final warning.

Religious pluralism presses the challenge from another direction. Its strongest moral appeal is humility. Billions of people inherit religious traditions through family and culture. Many adherents are sincere, morally serious, and intellectually responsible. Christians have sometimes paired exclusivist claims with colonial arrogance or coercion. Interreligious friendship can reveal virtues in people Christians were taught to fear. The epistemic fact of religious diversity should make believers examine whether they have confused familiarity with truth.

None of this makes incompatible claims compatible. Christianity says the eternal Son became flesh, died for sins, and rose bodily. Islam denies central parts of that confession. Classical Buddhism does not teach a Creator God who reconciles sinners through the atoning death of His incarnate Son. Advaita Vedanta and biblical Christianity give different accounts of ultimate reality and selfhood. New Age monism and Christian Creator-creature distinction cannot both be true in the same sense. Respect for persons does not require the pretense that contradictions are complementary perspectives (Hick, 2004; Sangwa, 2026d).

Jesus' claim in [John 14:6](#) must be heard in its farewell-discourse context. He is preparing disciples for His departure and promising access to the Father through Himself. "No one comes to the Father except through me" is not a slogan invented by a later colonial church. It is bound to John's entire Christology, in which the unique Son makes the Father known ([John 1:18](#)), gives life ([John 5:21-26](#)), lays down His life for the sheep ([John 10:11-18](#)), and rises as Lord. Peter's declaration in [Acts 4:12](#) similarly places salvation in no other name after proclaiming the crucified and risen Jesus.

An inclusivist can reply that these texts establish the necessity of Christ without establishing the necessity of explicit knowledge of Christ. The question of those who have never heard the gospel has therefore generated genuine intra-Christian debate. Some evangelicals defend strict access through explicit faith; others argue that God may apply Christ's work to people responding to general revelation or grace without full gospel knowledge. This chapter need not pretend that every detail is equally clear. What can be said with confidence is that Scripture never presents another religion as an independent saving path. If anyone is saved, that salvation is because of Christ, not because religious sincerity possesses atoning power. The uncertainty Christians may have about unreached persons is not permission to announce what Scripture does not announce.

Religious tolerance must also be distinguished from pluralism. Christians should defend the civil freedom of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, traditional religionists, atheists, and others to live without harassment or coercion. They can cooperate in disaster relief, peacebuilding, neighborhood safety, health, education, and other common goods. They should listen respectfully and represent other beliefs accurately. None of these actions requires joint confession that all religions save. Love of neighbor and theological agreement are different categories.

The false assurance generated by universalism and pluralism appears when warning is declared impossible in principle. If everyone will certainly be saved, or every sincere path reaches the same destination, repentance loses its eschatological urgency. The cross becomes one symbol among many rather than the reconciling act of God. Mission becomes exchange without proclamation. Jesus becomes guide rather than Lord.

Yet fear must not become the alternative savior. Christians do not enter life by achieving sufficient terror of hell. They come to Christ. The doctrine of judgment is meant to destroy presumption and magnify grace. The Judge is the One who bore judgment for sinners. The door remains open now. No reader should hear this section as an invitation to speculate about who is beyond mercy. If you are alive and hear the gospel, the command is present: repent and believe ([Mark 1:15](#)). The warning is severe because the mercy is real.

5.8 Redefining Sin and Replacing Repentance with Affirmation

False gospels often begin by changing the problem. If sin is redefined, salvation will be redefined with it. If humanity's deepest problem is ignorance, the remedy is education. If the problem is low self-esteem, the remedy is affirmation. If the problem is exclusion, the remedy is inclusion. If the problem is repression, the remedy is authentic self-expression. If the problem is trauma, the remedy is healing. If the problem is unjust structures, the remedy is liberation. Each diagnosis can identify a real dimension of human suffering. None is large enough to replace the biblical category of sin.

Scripture describes sin as lawlessness, idolatry, unbelief, corrupt desire, omission of known good, injustice, pride, deceit, sexual immorality, greed, hatred, partiality, and rebellion against the Creator ([Romans 1:18-32](#); [Romans 3:9-23](#); [James 2:1-9](#); [James 4:17](#); [1 John 3:4](#)). Sin can become social and institutional as well as personal. A corrupt procurement system can normalize bribery. A racist institution can distribute injustice. A church culture can protect abusers. Yet social explanation does not erase personal agency, and personal responsibility does not excuse social evil.

The modern language of affirmation becomes spiritually dangerous when it collapses the distinction between dignity and moral approval. Every human being bears God's image and must be treated with neighbor-love. The person caught in sexual sin, the greedy executive, the corrupt official, the angry spouse, the addicted person, the religious hypocrite, the proud theologian, and the skeptical seeker all possess dignity that sin does not erase. The church must reject mockery, dehumanization, bullying, violence, coercion, and contempt.

But love does not require affirming every belief, desire, behavior, identity claim, relationship, or self-understanding. Parents know this intuitively when a child wants what is destructive. Physicians know it when a patient requests something harmful. Friends know it when honesty requires contradiction. If disagreement is automatically hatred, moral community becomes impossible because no one can warn another without violating the highest rule.

Jesus embodies a more demanding love. He eats with tax collectors and sinners, provoking religious scandal, but explains His presence in medical terms: the sick need a doctor, and He has come to call sinners ([Mark 2:15-17](#)). He refuses self-righteous exclusion and refuses to pretend sin is health. He receives Zacchaeus, and grace produces concrete changes in his relationship to wealth and restitution ([Luke 19:1-10](#)). He protects a woman caught in adultery from a murderous crowd and then tells her to leave her life of sin ([John 8:1-11](#)). Whatever textual questions surround the manuscript history of that last passage, the pattern is consistent with the wider canonical Jesus: mercy does not need moral falsehood in order to be mercy.

A common progressive objection says that "repentance" has been used to force vulnerable people into shame, self-rejection, or conformity with oppressive norms. This is sometimes true. Churches have demanded repentance for being abused, for suffering mental illness, for questioning leaders, for cultural traits Scripture does not condemn, or for violating human traditions elevated into divine law. Such practices are not arguments against repentance. They are reasons to identify sin accurately.

Chapter 4 has already distinguished temptation, suffering, weakness, compulsion, failure, and settled rebellion. That precision remains essential. A survivor is not guilty for another person's abuse. An intrusive thought is not identical to chosen consent. Trauma symptoms are not automatically moral rebellion. Clinical disorders require competent care. A believer fighting temptation is not in the same posture as someone demanding that God rename the temptation righteousness. The church injures people both when it calls suffering sin and when it calls sin harmless.

Conservatives need the rebuke as much as progressives. It is easy to defend biblical language about culturally visible sexual sins while quietly redefining greed as ambition, cruelty as strong leadership, gossip as discernment, ethnic favoritism as loyalty, political slander as courage, family domination as headship, luxurious excess as blessing, and refusal to forgive as boundaries. Jesus' warnings against hypocrisy make selective morality impossible ([Matthew 23:23-28](#)). A church that requires repentance from outsiders while protecting its preferred sins has already rewritten sin.

The gospel alternative is confession without annihilation. First John does not say believers must deny sin to preserve dignity. It says walking in the light includes honest confession, with cleansing grounded in God's faithfulness and Christ's advocacy ([1 John 1:5-2:2](#)). The proud self hears "you sinned" as an existential threat because it has no righteousness outside itself. The gospel frees the believer to say, "I was wrong," because justification rests in Christ rather than in a flawless self-image.

Affirmation has a proper Christian place when it affirms what God affirms. The church should affirm creaturely dignity, the possibility of forgiveness, the reality of spiritual gifts, the goodness of obedient love, the legitimacy of lament, the courage required to tell the truth, the worth of the abused, the welcome of repentant sinners, and the believer's adoption in Christ. It should not affirm what God calls darkness simply because contradiction feels unkind.

The sharp question is not whether the church is affirming. Every church affirms something. The question is whether its "yes" and "no" are disciplined by Jesus. A gospel that can only say yes is not more loving than Christ. It is less able to rescue because rescue sometimes begins with the mercy of being told the truth.

5.9 "God Is Love" Detached from "God Is Holy"

"God is love" is not a liberal slogan. It is Scripture ([1 John 4:8, 16](#)). Christians should be suspicious of any theology that treats divine love as a concession to modern softness. The God of the Bible is not less loving than the most compassionate Christian imagination. The Father sends the Son so that sinners may live through Him. Christ lays down His life for enemies. The Spirit pours God's love into believers' hearts. Love is not one minor attribute among many.

The distortion occurs when "God is love" is made to mean "God cannot judge," "God cannot command," "God cannot exclude," "God cannot oppose my desires," or "God's love guarantees that every person is saved regardless of repentance and faith." Scripture never defines love that way. The same apostle who says God is love also says God is light and there is no darkness in Him ([1 John 1:5](#)), warns against loving the world ([1 John 2:15-17](#)), describes sin as lawlessness ([1 John 3:4](#)), and speaks of abiding

under God's wrath for refusing the Son in the Gospel associated with the same Johannine witness ([John 3:36](#)).

Isaiah's vision does not begin with therapeutic reassurance. The seraphim cry "Holy, holy, holy" before the Lord whose glory fills the temple, and Isaiah becomes conscious of his uncleanness ([Isaiah 6:1-7](#)). Yet holiness does not end in annihilation. God provides cleansing. [Exodus 34:6-7](#) likewise refuses the false choice between mercy and justice. The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in faithful love and truth, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin, yet not simply treating guilt as morally unreal. Biblical revelation places the attributes together because God is one.

The cross is the clearest answer to every attempt to separate love and holiness. [Romans 3:21-26](#) presents Christ's atoning work so that God may be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. [Romans 5:6-11](#) presents the same event as the supreme demonstration of love toward sinners and enemies. If holiness could simply ignore sin, the cross becomes incomprehensible. If love had no intention of saving sinners, the cross becomes incomprehensible. Calvary is not a negotiation between a loving Son and an angry Father. The triune God acts in holy love to reconcile enemies at divine cost (Carson, 2000).

Divine wrath must therefore be distinguished from human temper. Scripture condemns uncontrolled human anger and revenge ([James 1:19-20](#); [Romans 12:17-21](#)). God's wrath is His settled, righteous opposition to evil. A God who felt no moral opposition to genocide, rape, torture, exploitation, trafficking, abuse, racism, deceit, and predatory power would not be more loving. Indifference to evil is not compassion for victims.

A sophisticated objection argues that punitive conceptions of God reproduce violent human systems. If people imagine God primarily as punitive sovereign, they may imitate domination in families, churches, and politics. This concern deserves attention. Abusive theology can indeed sanctify human violence. Christians must never infer that because God has final judicial authority, pastors, husbands, parents, or states possess unlimited coercive authority. Vengeance belongs to God in precisely the passage that tells believers not to avenge themselves ([Romans 12:19](#)). Divine judgment limits human vengeance rather than licensing it.

The opposite distortion appears in some conservative settings where holiness is preached without the tenderness of God. The congregation learns that God is always disappointed, perpetually suspicious, and waiting for failure. Assurance becomes impossible. Repentance becomes a technique for preventing divine anger rather than returning to a Father who receives prodigals. Scrupulous believers can be driven into obsessive self-monitoring. This is not the biblical holiness revealed in Jesus, who welcomes the weary, restores Peter after denial, touches lepers, receives children, and becomes the propitiation for sins ([Matthew 11:28-30](#); [John 21:15-19](#); [1 John 2:1-2](#)).

Legalism and permissiveness thus commit opposite reductions. Legalism can imagine holiness without grace. Therapeutic revision imagines love without holiness. One produces fear without gospel rest. The other produces reassurance without repentance. The cross destroys both constructions. God does not lower His holiness so that sinners may enter. He provides the righteousness, sacrifice, cleansing, and new life sinners cannot provide.

The moral implication is not that Christians must balance God as though He were partly love and partly holiness. His love is holy love; His holiness is not loveless. His patience is not indifference. His judgment is not cruelty. His mercy is not moral amnesia. His jealousy is not insecurity but the rightful covenant claim of the Creator and Redeemer. His wrath is not loss of self-control. His forgiveness is not denial that evil mattered.

This changes the way warning should sound. A preacher who enjoys frightening people has not understood the God whose patience delays judgment. A preacher who removes judgment to avoid discomfort has not understood the love that warns before danger becomes irreversible. Jesus can weep over a city and announce its coming judgment in the same ministry ([Luke 19:41-44](#)). Warning and love are not enemies when the danger is real.

The reader should therefore ask not merely, "Do I believe God loves me?" but, "Have I allowed God to define His love?" The God who loves you may oppose what you love because it is destroying you. He may wound pride in order to heal the person. He may deny a desire in order to free the worshiper. He may expose false peace because He intends to give a better peace. Holy love is not the enemy of assurance. It is the only love strong enough to make assurance truthful.

5.10 The Therapeutic Gospel

The language of therapy has become one of the most influential moral vocabularies of the modern West and, increasingly, of a global digital culture. People speak of trauma, triggers, boundaries, validation, self-care, emotional safety, healing, attachment, toxic relationships, narcissism, and mental health in ordinary conversation. Much of this language names realities churches once ignored or handled badly. A Christian critique that treats psychology as inherently godless would be both intellectually careless and pastorally harmful.

Trauma is real. Abuse can produce lasting psychological and physiological effects. Depression, anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, psychosis, post-traumatic stress, substance-use disorders, and other conditions are not cured by accusation. Qualified clinicians can provide genuine help. Medication can be appropriate. Boundaries can protect people from ongoing abuse. Rest is a creaturely need. Counseling can help people recognize destructive patterns, grieve losses, and develop skills for healthier relationships. Current U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) guidance describes trauma-informed care as an organizational approach that realizes trauma's effects, recognizes signs and symptoms, responds by integrating that knowledge into practice, and seeks to resist retraumatization (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2026). None of these clinical or pastoral goods requires redefining salvation as psychological comfort or moral truth as whatever feels emotionally safest.

The therapeutic gospel is not therapy. It is a theological reduction in which psychological well-being becomes the controlling definition of salvation and emotional discomfort becomes the controlling definition of harm. In that framework the supreme questions become: Does this make me feel safe? Does it affirm my self-understanding? Does it support my flourishing? Does it protect my peace? Does it validate my experience? These are sometimes wise questions. They become idolatrous when they are the court before which God must justify Himself.

Philip Rieff's classic account of the "triumph of the therapeutic" described a cultural shift in which psychological management increasingly replaces sacred moral order (Rieff, 1966). Decades later, Smith and Denton's (2005) large study of American adolescents coined the phrase "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" for a common practical creed: a God who wants people to be nice, is not deeply involved unless needed, and exists significantly to help people feel good and happy. Their findings were historically and culturally situated, not a universal description of all young people or all churches. Yet the category remains analytically useful because it names a religious posture recognizable far beyond adolescence: God as distant therapist, Christianity as niceness, salvation as subjective well-being.

The problem is not that God cares nothing about well-being. Scripture cares about grief, fear, loneliness, bodily illness, rest, community, and hope. Jesus heals bodies, weeps at Lazarus's tomb, invites the weary to Himself, and teaches anxious disciples to trust the Father's care ([Matthew 11:28-30](#); [John 11:33-36](#); [Matthew 6:25-34](#)). The Psalms give language to despair rather than demanding emotional performance. The church is commanded to bear burdens, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, and practice patient care ([Galatians 6:2](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:14](#)).

But the biblical Jesus is more than a life coach for emotional equilibrium. He forgives sins, commands repentance, claims lordship, bears the cross, rises from the dead, and will judge the world ([Mark 1:15](#); [Mark 10:45](#); [Acts 17:30-31](#)). He does not promise that obedience will always feel psychologically safe. Following Him may divide families, cost status, expose disciples to persecution, require confession, and bring grief over sin ([Matthew 10:34-39](#); [Luke 9:23-25](#); [2 Corinthians 7:8-11](#)). A therapeutic framework that treats discomfort as proof of wrongdoing cannot make sense of a cross-shaped discipleship.

The slogan "protect your peace" illustrates the need for distinction. It can mean refusing unnecessary chaos, setting boundaries with an abuser, limiting exposure to manipulation, or stewarding mental health. Those can be wise and even necessary. But "protect your peace" can also become permission to avoid reconciliation, correction, difficult conversations, sacrificial service, accountability, or any person who exposes selfishness. Jesus did not protect peace by refusing the cross. Biblical peace is reconciliation with God and the fruit of righteousness, not immunity from every emotionally costly demand ([Romans 5:1](#); [James 3:17-18](#)).

"Your feelings are valid" requires similar precision. Feelings are real experiences and deserve truthful attention. A frightened child should not be mocked. A grieving spouse should not be corrected for grieving. A trauma survivor should not be told that a physiological response is moral failure. Yet feelings are not infallible moral verdicts. Jealousy can feel justified. Rage can feel righteous. Lust can feel natural. Fear can misread safety. Shame can accuse the innocent. Emotional experience is data about the person, not a canon above the person.

The therapeutic gospel also intersects with New Age and New Thought spirituality. Wellness language can shift from evidence-based care into metaphysical claims about energy, vibration, manifestation, divine consciousness, or the higher self. Unity's contemporary materials, for example, can combine positive mindset, meditation, "Christ within," inner divinity, and a spirituality of oneness (Crawford, n.d.). Christians should distinguish legitimate stress reduction, breathing exercises, physical therapy, and psychological skills from metaphysical claims about spiritual energy or innate godhood. Similar words such as "healing" and "alignment" can conceal very different worldviews.

Trauma language can also be misused in the opposite direction. Some leaders dismiss any complaint as "a wounded person projecting trauma" in order to avoid accountability. Others weaponize therapeutic labels such as "narcissist" or "toxic" against anyone who disagrees with them. Psychology can become a new vocabulary of accusation just as theology can. Neither pastoral authority nor clinical terminology should be used to diagnose people from a distance without evidence and competence.

The strongest defense of therapeutic Christianity argues that many people cannot hear doctrinal correction until they experience safety. Jesus, it is said, met people where they were, restored dignity, and healed wounds. Churches that lead with condemnation may retraumatize those already injured by religion. There is truth here. Pastoral sequencing matters. A person in acute crisis may need protection, sleep, food, medical attention, or stabilization before a long theological conversation. An abuse survivor

may need to hear clearly that the abuse was evil and not his or her fault. Gentleness is a biblical virtue ([Galatians 5:22-23](#); [2 Timothy 2:24-26](#)).

Yet gentleness and truth are not sequential opposites. Safety cannot ultimately be built on falsehood. A counselor would not validate a delusion simply because contradiction causes distress. A physician may deliver painful information because reality matters. In the same way, pastoral care must distinguish wounds that require comfort from sins that require repentance, while recognizing that the same person may carry both. The adulterer may have childhood trauma and still be betraying a spouse. The abused spouse may need therapy and have no moral guilt for being abused. The addict may be experiencing clinically significant compulsion and still need responsibility, support, treatment, repentance, and protection from access to what enslaves.

Biblical salvation is therapeutic in the deepest sense that Christ heals the human person, but it is more than therapy. It addresses guilt through justification, spiritual death through regeneration, alienation through reconciliation, bondage through redemption, shame through adoption, disordered desire through sanctification, mortality through resurrection, and suffering through the hope of new creation. It does not tell wounded people they are merely broken, nor guilty people they are merely wounded. It tells the truth necessary for both mercy and transformation.

The self-examination is therefore precise. Do I want Jesus to heal me, or only to validate the self I refuse to surrender? Do I use psychological language to understand complexity, or to remove every moral category that makes me uncomfortable? Do I use biblical language to force responsibility where someone is actually suffering? The church must become safe enough for truth and truthful enough for salvation.

5.11 "Live Your Truth" and the Authority of the Autonomous Self

"Live your truth" can mean something modest and necessary. Tell the truth about what happened to you. Stop performing a false identity to win approval. Acknowledge your grief. Refuse coercion. Do not lie about abuse to protect an institution. In those senses the phrase can express moral courage. Scripture itself condemns hypocrisy and calls people to walk in truth.

The phrase becomes a rival gospel when "your truth" means that inward experience creates moral reality. Then the self becomes author, interpreter, judge, and protector of identity. Authenticity is no longer truthfulness before God; it is fidelity to the desires perceived as deepest within. External authority is legitimate only insofar as it confirms the inner voice.

Modern scholarship on expressive individualism helps explain why this vision is attractive. Bellah and colleagues (1985) described an American moral culture increasingly shaped by individual choice and self-realization. Charles Taylor's work traces the modern turn toward inward authenticity within a much longer history of the self (Taylor, 1989). Carl Trueman (2020) develops the argument in relation to contemporary identity, showing how the inner psychological self increasingly seeks public recognition. These thinkers differ in methods and conclusions, but they illuminate a common shift from identity primarily received through given orders to identity increasingly experienced as a project of self-authorship.

Christianity does affirm individuality. God calls persons by name. Conscience matters. Gifts differ. The body of Christ is not a machine producing identical members. Scripture makes room for wisdom, conscience, cultural variation, and personal vocation. Abuse often thrives where individuality is

crushed in the name of submission. A church that cannot tolerate personality, questions, vocational differences, or matters of conscience is not more biblical simply because it is communal.

The biblical denial is not of the self but of self-sovereignty. Jesus says, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me" ([Luke 9:23](#)). Self-denial does not mean self-hatred, refusal of legitimate needs, acceptance of abuse, or destruction of personality. It means the fallen self is no longer final. The person receives identity from the Lord who created and redeems rather than requiring the Lord to endorse an identity generated autonomously.

This is why "follow your heart" cannot function as a Christian moral rule. Scripture treats the inner life seriously but not romantically. Human hearts can love God and neighbor, but they can also generate evil desires and self-deception ([Mark 7:20-23](#); [James 1:14-15](#)). [Proverbs 14:12](#) warns that a way can seem right and end in death. Jeremiah's language about the deceitfulness of the heart in [Jeremiah 17:9](#) is often applied too simplistically as though regenerate people can know nothing true about themselves, but its warning against naive confidence in inward judgment remains important. Feelings can be sincere and mistaken.

"Be true to yourself" therefore requires a prior question: which self? The self as created in God's image? The self as wounded by history? The self as currently tempted? The self as socially performed? The self as united to Christ? Paul can say, "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" ([Galatians 2:20](#)). He does not cease to be Paul. He becomes Paul re-centered in union with the Son of God. The gospel does not erase personhood. It rescues personhood from the impossible burden of being its own creator and savior.

The New Age version of autonomous spirituality takes the inward turn further by locating divinity itself within the self. The deepest truth is not merely personal preference but divine consciousness waiting to be awakened. Unity materials explicitly speak of innate divinity and "Christ within" as the route to oneness with God (Unity, n.d.-a; Crawford, n.d.). Manifestation cultures can then treat thought, intention, or energetic alignment as mechanisms by which the self participates in creating reality.

Biblical faith is almost the reverse. The Christian does not discover that the deepest self is divine. The Christian discovers that the deepest need is reconciliation to the God who is not the self. Prayer is not mental causation. Faith is not confidence in one's power to attract outcomes. Providence is God's wise rule, not the universe mirroring personal frequency. The Holy Spirit indwells believers as gift; He is not a higher layer of human consciousness.

A strong objection says that the alternative to self-authorship is oppressive heteronomy, submission to external authorities that may be abusive, arbitrary, or culturally alien. Christian history gives this objection credibility. Parents, pastors, governments, and spouses have invoked divine order to demand unjust submission. Yet biblical Christianity does not replace autonomous selfhood with autonomous leaders. All human authorities are derivative, limited, accountable, and judged by God. The Bereans can examine apostolic preaching. Nathan confronts David. Paul confronts Peter. Prophets confront kings. Christians obey God rather than human authorities when commands conflict ([Acts 5:29](#)).

The true alternative to self-sovereignty is therefore not human domination but divine lordship. Creaturely dependence is not humiliation. It is reality. We did not create our bodies, establish moral order, design death, or raise ourselves from the grave. The self cannot carry the weight modern culture places upon it. To invent identity, meaning, morality, purpose, community, and ultimate hope from within is exhausting. The promise of autonomy eventually becomes a demand to save oneself.

Christ offers a different freedom. "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" is spoken in a context where freedom means liberation from slavery to sin through abiding in Jesus' word ([John](#)

[8:31-36](#)). Truth is not possessed because it is mine. It frees because it is true. Jesus does not say, "I affirm your truth." He says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" ([John 14:6](#)).

The diagnostic question is therefore simple: can God tell me that my most sincere self-understanding is mistaken? Can Christ name a desire sinful even if it feels central? Can Scripture command a duty I did not choose? Can the church, when acting faithfully, correct me? If the answer to all four questions is no, then "Christianity" has become a spiritual language for protecting sovereignty of the self.

5.12 Social Justice Without Reconciliation to God

Christians have sometimes reacted to politicalized forms of social justice by speaking as though justice itself were a secular distraction from the gospel. Scripture will not permit that reaction. The God of the Bible loves justice. He condemns bribery, dishonest scales, exploitation, partiality, oppression of the poor, abuse of immigrants, predatory wealth, and courts that favor the powerful. Isaiah calls God's people to seek justice and defend the oppressed ([Isaiah 1:17](#)). Amos rejects worship severed from righteousness and demands that justice roll like water ([Amos 5:21-24](#)). Micah joins justice, covenant love, and humble walking with God ([Micah 6:8](#)). James condemns partiality toward the rich and the withholding of workers' wages ([James 2:1-9](#); [James 5:1-6](#)).

Any church that preaches personal morality while ignoring corruption, racism, tribalism, exploitation, trafficking, abuse, unjust labor practices, or predatory systems is not preserving a pure gospel. It is practicing selective obedience. Conservative Christians should be especially careful not to label every concern about structural injustice "Marxism" merely to avoid examination. The prophets were not Marxists when they condemned land theft, judicial corruption, and economic exploitation. The categories come from God's righteousness before they belong to any modern ideology.

The opposite error is to reduce salvation to social transformation. If the deepest human problem is located entirely in unjust structures, the gospel becomes liberation from structures. Sin is externalized into systems. Repentance becomes political consciousness. Conversion becomes activism. The kingdom of God becomes a social program. The cross becomes a symbol of solidarity with victims rather than God's atoning act for guilty sinners. Resurrection becomes the persistence of hope after oppression.

Liberation theology in its many forms emerged from real contexts of poverty, dictatorship, racism, colonial legacies, and institutional violence. Its best representatives forced comfortable churches to hear biblical texts about the poor and exposed the ideological interests hidden beneath supposedly neutral theology. Christians should not pretend that a theology produced in affluent safety is automatically less contextual than a theology produced among the oppressed. Every theology can become captive to social location.

But social location cannot become the gospel's final norm. Scripture does not divide humanity into an innocent oppressed class and a sinful oppressor class. Oppression is real, but oppressed people remain sinners who need reconciliation to God; oppressors remain image-bearers who can repent and be transformed. Zacchaeus's economic repentance matters because he has encountered the saving Lord. The early church creates a new community across Jew-Gentile, slave-free, and status divisions because believers are first united in Christ, not because those social differences were imaginary ([Galatians 3:28](#); [Ephesians 2:11-22](#)).

The Lausanne Covenant offers a particularly useful evangelical distinction. It affirms Christian responsibility for justice, reconciliation in society, and liberation from oppression, while stating that reconciliation between people is not reconciliation with God, social action is not evangelism, and

political liberation is not salvation. It then refuses the opposite reduction by insisting that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both Christian duties (Lausanne Movement, 1974). This avoids two gospels: a privatized gospel with no public righteousness and a politicized gospel with no atonement or new birth.

The Cape Town Commitment and the 2024 Seoul Statement develop the same integration. The gospel is the story of God's creation, human rebellion, Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, return, and God's new creation. Those who believe are formed into communities that practice love, justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation while proclaiming the gospel and awaiting Christ's return (Lausanne Movement, 2010, 2024). Works of justice are therefore fruits and signs of the kingdom, not substitutes for the King.

A strong objection says that preaching reconciliation to God without addressing unjust conditions can become a method of social control: "Accept Jesus, endure your oppression quietly, and wait for heaven." History contains examples of such misuse. Slaveholders could preach obedience to enslaved people while ignoring God's judgment on kidnapping, violence, and exploitation. Authoritarian governments may welcome a Christianity that spiritualizes every injustice. The objection must be accepted where it is true. Biblical hope in the age to come does not authorize indifference in this age.

Yet political salvation has its own dangers. Every political movement divides good and evil in ways that can flatter its own coalition. Activism can provide righteousness by group identity. Public confession can become ideological conformity. Enemies can become less than human. Violence can be justified as necessary for a promised future. The Christian doctrine of sin denies every party the innocence required to become messiah.

The kingdom of God therefore relativizes both quietism and revolution. Christians seek justice because Jesus is Lord, not because justice earns salvation. They defend the poor because people bear God's image, not because the poor are sinless. They oppose racism and tribalism because Christ has made one new people, not because secular movements have discovered a better gospel. They expose corruption while confessing their own temptations. They work for better laws while knowing no law can regenerate a heart. They vote, advocate, teach, build institutions, reform systems, and sometimes suffer for righteousness, while refusing to call any state, party, movement, or policy platform the kingdom of God.

The pastoral self-examination cuts both ways. Does my Christianity have enough justice to disturb my comfort? Does my justice have enough gospel to tell me that I also need forgiveness? Do I love the poor as neighbors or use them as symbols? Do I defend unborn life while ignoring exploited workers? Do I denounce racism while excusing sexual exploitation? Do I speak against corruption when my own tribe benefits? The cross leaves no group with clean hands and no repentant sinner without hope.

Reconciliation to God is not less than social justice. It is the vertical reality from which a new horizontal life grows. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" belongs in the same passage that says God reconciles sinners to Himself and then entrusts them with a ministry of reconciliation ([2 Corinthians 5:17-21](#)). The church does not choose between souls and societies. It refuses to confuse them.

5.13 Churches Afraid to Offend

A church can lose the gospel without formally denying it. It can simply stop saying the parts that cause friction. No council needs to vote against repentance. Sermons merely stop naming it. No statement of

faith needs to remove judgment. Judgment quietly disappears from preaching. No pastor needs to deny Christ's exclusivity. The subject is avoided whenever visitors might object. The doctrinal page remains orthodox while the actual ministry is governed by reputational fear.

The desire to remove unnecessary offense is not wrong. Paul adapts his communication to different audiences and seeks to become "all things to all people" for the sake of the gospel ([1 Corinthians 9:19-23](#)). Peter commands believers to defend their hope with gentleness and respect ([1 Peter 3:15-16](#)). Paul tells Timothy that the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but gentle, patient, and able to teach ([2 Timothy 2:24-26](#)). Rudeness is not courage. Poor communication is not persecution. Christians should not congratulate themselves for being disliked when they are disliked for arrogance, ignorance, partisan aggression, or cruelty.

Seeker-sensitive ministry can therefore identify a legitimate missional concern. Churches should explain unfamiliar language, welcome visitors, remove needless cultural barriers, care about hospitality, answer honest questions, and communicate clearly. Paul reasons in synagogues and marketplaces. Jesus uses ordinary images of seeds, debt, meals, farming, families, and money. Faithful contextualization makes the gospel intelligible without making it negotiable.

The line is crossed when the anticipated reaction of the audience determines what may be preached. Paul asks the Galatians whether he is seeking human approval or God's, and says that servanthood to Christ cannot be governed by pleasing people ([Galatians 1:10](#)). He warns Timothy that a time will come when people accumulate teachers according to their desires and turn away from truth ([2 Timothy 4:1-5](#)). He reminds the Ephesian elders that he did not shrink from declaring anything profitable and the whole counsel of God ([Acts 20:20, 27](#)).

Churches can fear many audiences. A wealthy donor may dislike preaching on greed. A politically connected member may resent criticism of corruption. Young adults may reject sexual ethics. Older members may resist repentance for racism, tribalism, or harsh family patterns. Influential pastors may resent accountability. Professional classes may consider miracles embarrassing. Charismatic congregations may resist testing prophecy. Conservative churches may avoid admitting spiritual abuse because critics would feel vindicated. Progressive churches may avoid biblical judgment because it threatens inclusion. Fear of offense is ecumenical.

Digital media intensifies the pressure because disagreement is public, fast, and economically measurable. A sermon clip can be removed from context within minutes. Sponsors can withdraw. Institutions can face campaigns. Algorithms reward outrage. Leaders know that one sentence may become a global identity marker. Prudence is therefore necessary. Not every issue needs to be addressed every Sunday, and wise pastors consider timing, audience, evidence, and pastoral consequence.

But prudence cannot become cowardice. If the church's message is continuously shaped by the question "What can we say without losing people?" it has already forgotten Jesus' ministry. John 6 records disciples leaving after a difficult teaching, and Jesus does not revise the truth to recover the crowd ([John 6:60-69](#)). This does not authorize pastors to imitate every rhetorical severity in isolation from context. It establishes a deeper principle: truth cannot be held hostage by retention metrics.

The strongest objection is pastoral. People are fragile. Many carry church wounds, shame, or fear. If sermons constantly emphasize sin, judgment, and cultural controversy, the church can become spiritually unhealthy. Correct. A ministry that knows how to rebuke but not how to announce grace has not preached the gospel. The New Testament contains comfort, adoption, hope, prayer, friendship, joy,

wisdom, generosity, creation, resurrection, and the beauty of Christ. Churches should not turn every sermon into a culture-war alarm.

The solution is the whole counsel of God. Truth "in love" in [Ephesians 4:15](#) is not a strategy for softening doctrine until no one objects. It is the manner and ecology of mature Christian speech within the body. Love determines that the church will not humiliate people for entertainment, speculate about motives, repeat unverified accusations, or weaponize the pulpit. Truth determines that love will not reassure what God warns against.

A healthy church should be safe for confession but unsafe for hypocrisy. Safe for the abused but unsafe for abusers. Safe for questions but unsafe for manipulation. Safe for repentant sinners but unsafe for the doctrine that repentance is unnecessary. Safe for people of every ethnicity, class, and background but unsafe for racism and tribal superiority. Safe for those struggling with temptation but unsafe for the redefinition of temptation as righteousness. Safe for political disagreement but unsafe for worship of party, nation, or leader. Safe for wounded consciences but unsafe for false peace.

Pastors and teachers also need the gospel themselves. Fear of people often grows from identity tied to ministry success. If attendance, reputation, funding, invitations, publishing opportunities, or social approval become the hidden verdict on faithfulness, the preacher will eventually discover doctrines that attract and doctrines that cost too much. The antidote is not heroic personality. It is fear of God joined to assurance in Christ. The servant who knows that justification is not earned by applause is freer to tell the truth without cruelty and absorb rejection without panic.

Church members bear responsibility too. Congregations train pastors by what they reward. If members punish every sermon that exposes their preferred sins and celebrate only sermons that condemn other groups, they create the market Paul describes in [2 Timothy 4:3](#). If they leave whenever Scripture becomes uncomfortable, they may eventually find a church that never contradicts them. That may feel like peace. Matthew 7 warns that a broad road can feel spacious precisely because it does not require surrender.

Eschatological readiness makes this more urgent without making it sensational. A church that revises doctrine whenever obedience becomes socially expensive is not preparing believers for deeper pressure. Jesus' return should not produce date-setting, panic, or obsession with headlines. It should produce sober faithfulness. The bride prepares by clinging to the Bridegroom, keeping His Word, loving His people, resisting deception, and refusing to sell truth for temporary acceptance ([Matthew 24:42-51](#); [1 John 2:18-28](#); [Revelation 19:6-9](#)).

The church does not exist to be offensive. It exists to be faithful. Sometimes faithfulness will attract because grace is beautiful. Sometimes it will offend because the cross destroys boasting and Christ claims lordship. The church has no authority to increase the offense through cruelty and no authority to remove the offense through revision.

Conclusion: The Gospel Does Not Need to Be Rewritten. We Need to Be Reconciled.

This chapter began with a danger more subtle than open unbelief: Christian words can survive after Christian meanings have died. Scripture can remain on the lectern while another authority governs interpretation. Jesus can remain in songs while becoming a therapist, activist, national mascot, prosperity provider, or universal Christ-principle. Grace can remain in sermons while repentance

disappears. Love can remain central while holiness and judgment are declared incompatible with it. Justice can remain urgent while reconciliation to God is forgotten. Healing can become salvation. Authenticity can become lordship. Inclusion can become a doctrine that no one may be told to turn.

The great temptation in every version is the same. Christianity is asked to protect the self from the God Christianity proclaims.

Theological liberalism often began with the desire to make faith intellectually credible. Progressive Christianity often begins with the desire to make faith morally compassionate. Deconstruction may begin with questions that deserve answers or wounds that deserve care. Therapeutic spirituality may begin with the desire to heal genuine pain. Justice movements may begin with the cry of people genuinely wronged. Interfaith openness may begin with friendship, humility, and rejection of coercion. None of these starting concerns should be mocked.

But no concern, however humane, can bear the weight of final authority. The church cannot save Christianity by changing the identity of its Savior. It cannot heal sinners by removing the category of sin. It cannot make God more loving by correcting His holiness. It cannot honor victims by silencing the Judge who promises to judge evil. It cannot achieve unity by declaring contradictions harmless. It cannot protect the wounded by giving the autonomous self the burden of godhood.

The same judgment falls on conservative revision. A church cannot defend biblical authority while protecting greed from biblical judgment. It cannot proclaim family values while tolerating domestic cruelty. It cannot condemn progressive sexual revision while baptizing nationalism, corruption, racism, tribalism, lies, or predatory leadership. It cannot praise holiness while crushing tender consciences under rules God did not make. It cannot invoke spiritual warfare to avoid evidence or use prophecy to place leaders beyond correction. The Word is not a weapon owned by one tribe. It is the sword that turns toward every heart.

The gospel that remains after all counterfeits are removed is not thin. It is better than the revisions because it addresses the whole human condition. The God who confronts us is the God who made us. He is holy and love, just and merciful, patient and truthful. We are His creatures, made in His image, fallen in sin, capable of real suffering and real guilt, unable to reconcile ourselves to Him. The eternal Son became truly human without ceasing to be God. Jesus Christ lived without sin, bore sins in His body, died, was buried, rose bodily, ascended, reigns, intercedes, and will return. The Holy Spirit does not awaken hidden divinity. He gives new birth to those who were spiritually dead, unites believers to Christ, indwells them, sanctifies them, produces fruit, and seals them for the day of redemption.

The response is not intellectual surrender to a church institution, emotional conformity, moral self-improvement, or a formula. It is repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ ([Acts 20:21](#)). Repentance does not mean you must solve every doubt before coming. It means you stop demanding the right to be final. Faith does not mean you understand every mystery. It means you entrust yourself to the Christ Scripture proclaims.

For the reader who has been wounded by a church, come to Christ without pretending the wound did not happen. Tell the truth. Seek safety where needed. Report criminal abuse. Receive competent professional care. Reject manipulative interpretations. Forgive only in the biblical sense that does not erase justice, truth, consequences, or necessary boundaries. But do not confuse the shepherd who injured you with the Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep.

For the reader who has deconstructed inherited faith, ask what authority now stands where the old authority stood. It is possible to leave legalism and discover grace. It is possible to leave a false church culture and discover the church more truly. It is possible to abandon bad apologetics and gain a deeper

confidence grounded in better evidence. But if the process ends with a Jesus who can never contradict you, the demolition may have removed not only scaffolding but the foundation.

For the reader drawn to New Age or New Thought spirituality, Christ offers more than an inner divine spark. He offers adoption by the Father. More than manifestation, providence. More than reincarnation, resurrection. More than energy, the Holy Spirit. More than spiritual techniques, communion with the living God. More than "Christ consciousness," the incarnate Christ who loved sinners and gave Himself for them. You do not need to discover that you are God. You need to be reconciled to God, and reconciliation has been purchased.

For the progressive reader, the call is not to become cruel, anti-intellectual, indifferent to injustice, or nostalgic for every traditional arrangement. Bring your compassion to Scripture and let Scripture deepen it. Bring your concern for marginalized people to Jesus and let Him judge both oppressive systems and sexual, economic, relational, and spiritual sin. Bring your questions. But do not require the apostles to become acceptable to the age before you permit them to speak.

For the conservative reader, do not use this chapter as ammunition against "those people." The sovereign self can quote inerrancy. False assurance can wear orthodoxy. You can believe every correct sentence in a creed and still resist the Lord whose truth the creed summarizes. Ask where your own Christianity has been rewritten around money, status, national identity, denominational loyalty, male privilege, academic pride, family reputation, political anger, or contempt for sinners. The narrow gate does not widen because your sins are unfashionable.

The church's answer to a rewritten Christianity is not a harsher Christianity. It is biblical Christianity. Not truth without love, but truth as love tells it. Not holiness without grace, but grace that trains us to renounce ungodliness. Not justice without atonement, but reconciled people practicing justice. Not psychological neglect, but care that refuses to call falsehood healing. Not sectarian arrogance, but humble confidence that God has acted in Christ. Not fear of questions, but courage to follow questions all the way to the risen Lord.

Jesus' warning in [Matthew 7:13-23](#) remains the controlling alarm. Many will call Him "Lord." The question is whether the Lord named is the Lord who actually speaks, saves, commands, judges, and knows His own. False assurance says, "My Christianity must be safe because it uses Christian words." The gospel asks whether those words still refer to the realities God has revealed.

There is no need to wait until every cultural argument is settled before coming to Christ. The invitation is present. The One who exposes counterfeit gospels is not hiding the true one. "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day" ([1 Corinthians 15:3-4](#)). Everyone who comes to Him in repentant faith finds a Savior more merciful than permissiveness and more holy than legalism. He does not offer false peace. He gives peace with God ([Romans 5:1](#)).

To the tender conscience, do not turn these warnings into a new law requiring flawless interpretation before Christ will receive you. Saving faith rests in Him, not in your ability to solve every theological dispute. Bring known error into His light, keep learning, repent where His Word corrects you, and rest in His finished work. To the presumptuous conscience, the opposite word is necessary: do not use "God is love," "God knows my heart," "I am authentic," or "my church is biblical" to silence a Christ who is calling you to repent. The same Savior who does not crush the bruised reed also says that those He loves He rebukes and disciplines ([Matthew 12:20](#); [Revelation 3:19](#)). His correction is not the opposite of love. It is one of love's severe mercies.

And He is coming again. The Blessed Hope is not an escape hatch from careful discipleship. It is a summons to remain awake. A church awaiting the Bridegroom cannot afford a Bible reduced to advice, a Christ reduced to symbol, or a gospel reduced to affirmation. Watchfulness means guarding the apostolic faith, testing spirits, loving truth, practicing holiness, pursuing justice, enduring suffering, proclaiming Christ, and refusing to let the age rename the One who will judge the age.

The final prayer is therefore not, "Lord, make Christianity acceptable." It is, "Lord, make us faithful." Search what we have inherited. Correct what we have misunderstood. Expose what we have protected. Heal what has been wounded. Tear down every counterfeit assurance. Bring the skeptic, the progressive, the conservative, the wounded, the proud, the spiritual seeker, the activist, the scholar, the pastor, and the nominal Christian to the same cross.

Do not rewrite the gospel to save yourself from Christ. Come to Christ, and let Him save you.

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