

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php

Reformation
& Revival



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 5, Number 1 • Winter 1996

the two million for whom God has impressed me to pray who will fast forty days.”

- 2 In the book, *The Coming Revival* (New Life: Orlando, 1995), p. 28, Bright writes of fasting as a means to deeper spiritual power and Sanctification:

... I want to be cautious that I am not misunderstood. Fasting does not make one a member of the spiritual elite. One does not have to fast to be used of God. Everyone who joined us at the fasting and prayer gathering has had successful ministries. But there is no doubt in my mind—gained from Scripture, history, and experience—that those who fast with pure motives will be drawn closer to the great heart of God and experience a quality of life in the Spirit that is not possible apart from fasting.

One can hardly avoid the notion of a “spiritual elite” in the light of such an observation. If I can “with pure motives” be “drawn closer to the great heart of God and experience a quality of life in the Spirit that is not possible apart from fasting,” does this create another plane of life known only to those who truly fast, and that with “pure motives”?

- 3 The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, done in 1531, is a lengthy explanation of each article of the Confession. Both the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Apology* are part of the *Book of Concord*, which is the compilation of the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church compiled from 1530 to 1580 (ed. Tappert, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959).

Sometime ago my own evangelical denomination reprinted a chapter from the book, *What Would Jesus Say?* (Zondervan, 1994), authored by Lee Strobel, a teaching pastor of the well-known Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Illinois. This book offers several chapters dealing with the question “What Would Jesus Say?” to modern personalities such as O. J. Simpson, Rush Limbaugh, Billy Graham, and Madonna. Strobel’s chapter on Madonna was excerpted for the material that my denomination used for evangelistic outreach. After reading the material I concluded that more than the method of evangelism was being changed by this approach. I wrote to the editor of the publication expressing my concerns, and the material presented herein is the content of my letter.

It is important to begin by stressing that the content of the Gospel is essential to the work of evangelism itself. If we tamper with the content of our message then we risk invoking the disapproval of Christ Himself. Further, we may very well mislead “little ones,” causing them to stumble over the message of our Lord.

Strobel’s presentation of the message of salvation is not the biblical Gospel in that it humanizes God improperly, exalts man unduly, and minimizes sin significantly. He fundamentally misrepresents the nature of man, the nature of sin, the person of Christ, and the nature of Salvation. Since each of these falls within the circle of what is historically orthodox, they are not negotiable areas of unimportance.

What I wish to do is to point out the errors of this particular presentation. I do this because I am deeply concerned that a host of otherwise good evangelical people are falling into some serious traps in their preoccupation with marketing the message of the Gospel to modern listeners.

Each of the points quoted below in italics are taken directly from Strobel’s book. These are his essential points, and thus I will state them and respond to each.

1) *I believe that Madonna—at least, to some degree, in her own way—is seeking God.*

Romans 3:10-11 states that no one seeks God. And while some New Testament passages (e.g., Matt. 7:7; Luke 11:9) exhort men and women to seek God, two things are clear: (1) Those truly seeking God do so because the Spirit is working in their hearts (John 14:6; cf. John 6:37,44; and John 16:8-11). No one comes to God except through Christ; no one comes to Christ unless he is drawn by the Father; and the Father does the drawing through the work of the Holy Spirit whose presence is demonstrated by an increasing conviction of personal sin. Can this truly be said of Madonna? (2) Rather, it is clear that Madonna has much more in common with those of whom it is said that God “gave them over” in Romans 1:24, 26, and 28. In fact, this series of verses in Romans 1 reads almost like Madonna’s press guide. Yet, Strobel can say that she is seeking God. It is clear that he has a woefully deficient understanding of the Scripture relating to the sinful nature of man.

2) *I’m going to propose three pairs of unexpected words that He might say to her. . . . “I’m grieved.” You might suspect He would say this because of what she does, but I could picture Him uttering those words because of what was done to her.*

Strobel is right. I do suspect that Jesus would express grief over Madonna’s wickedness. What student of the Bible wouldn’t? Yet he chooses another, more creative, path. Strobel goes on in the following paragraphs to assert that Madonna’s behavior stems from (1) an improper view of God which itself stems from (2) the inaccurate and distorted teaching she received as a child. He says, *Whether this was because of the content of what she was taught, or the way in which she was taught, the result is that she emerged with so many misunderstandings about God that it’s no wonder she’s spiritually befuddled.*

Strobel expects us to believe that Madonna’s sinful lifestyle and wicked heart are the consequences of poor religious

training. This is blatantly unbiblical. Those involved in the Pelagian controversies of the early church centuries debated this over and over, and came to the conclusion that man is a sinner by nature, and that his sinful actions stem from what he is. Further, sin permeated all of man’s being. The prophet Jeremiah summed it up this way: “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick” (Jer. 17:9)! Paul clearly teaches that, through Adam’s one transgression, this innate sinfulness (sin nature) was passed to all of his descendants (Rom. 5:18; 1 Cor. 15:22). Strobel seems to be much closer to the Roman Catholic teaching that the cross wiped out original sin, and thus sinners become sinners only when, and to the extent that, they sin.

Madonna, as is true of all sinners, sins because of who she is: a sinner by nature. Her greatest problem is not poor religious training, but the pervasive depravity of her heart. Paul says Madonna is by nature a child of wrath (Eph. 2:3). James states that “Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death” (James 1:14-15). The primary responsibility for Madonna’s behavior lies with Madonna.

The greater problem is to represent the Savior as more interested in Madonna’s poor religious training than her wicked heart. It is true that we all are motivated and influenced by others in many ways. Our upbringing and other influences greatly shape who we are. Still, this does not change the fact that the root problem with every man and woman is their sinful nature which issues forth in their sinful behavior. Jesus said He came to call sinners (Mark 2:17); His message was one of repentance (Mark 1:15) and righteousness (Matt. 5:20). Jesus’ encounters with people were specifically orchestrated to get them to recognize their sin. (Note the rich young ruler: Matt. 19:14-26; the Samaritan woman: John 4:7ff., which Strobel completely misinterprets.) Jesus confronts her with her im-

reality first; Strobel says “*he gave her the divine truth she was thirsty for.*” In fact, the text says no such thing. She was thinking only of physical water, as the story clearly shows. Jesus had to turn the conversation to spiritual things. It was not the woman who was seeking truth, but Jesus who was seeking to make a sinner into a worshipper (see verse 23). As the angel said, Jesus came to save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). He never tired of pointing out sin, using grace combined with truth. We can do no less.

3) *And when you do get beyond the misconceptions and come to a more balanced understanding of who God is, you’ll discover that He’s awfully hard to resist.*

Strobel goes further to say that not only is Madonna’s poor religious training the real reason for her behavior today, but it is also that which keeps her from loving and serving God. Her misconceptions have kept her from seeing Him correctly. And if she will see Him correctly, she will find it so hard to resist loving Him. Is this the New Testament Gospel? Is the reason people are not coming to Christ by the thousands, because they do not have the right information? Jesus Himself teaches just the opposite. In the story of Lazarus and the rich man, the rich man speaking from Hades asks that Lazarus be sent back to convince those still living to follow God. But Abraham replies, “They have Moses and the Prophets. . . . If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16: 29, 31). Now this is not to say that we don’t need to preach the Gospel, for later in His life Jesus commands us to. The point is that those who reject Christ don’t do it because they lack information. Rather, they have the information, and still choose to remain in their sinful ways. In fact, if good information were all that was needed, you might expect the Jews to be the best Christians alive. If Strobel is right, then those who heard from God throughout the Old Testament and walked beside Christ while He was on earth would have, to a man, believed and followed

Him. Certainly they had the best information, best instruction, and best religious training.

However, I find just the opposite to be true. The god of this world has blinded the eyes of the unbelieving (2 Cor. 4:4). This blindness makes the things of God foolishness to them, and in fact, they can’t even understand them (1 Cor. 2:12ff.). Consequently, by nature, when left to themselves unbelievers do not find God attractive (Isa. 53:6; Rom. 1:21-23), and they willingly run to idols (Rom. 1:23). For an example, look at Mark 2:1-3:6: Jesus confronts the religious leaders with His truth, punctuating it with miraculous healing. They see firsthand the power, authority, and personal magnificence of the Savior. Their reaction? “And . . . immediately (they) began taking counsel . . . against Him, as to how they might destroy Him” (Mark 3:6).

The truth of Scripture is that even though God has revealed His invisible attributes, eternal power and divine nature in creation (Rom. 1:20), man, being by nature a sinner and willfully in rebellion against God, will not come to God unless God brings him (John 6:44). How powerfully this is shown in Christ’s poignant cry: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem. . . . How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it!” (Luke 13:34). Yes, they were unwilling to come to Christ; not because of misconceptions or poor religious training, but because of the hardness and wickedness of their hearts. And unless sinners are brought to see their own worthless estate, the heinous nature of their sin before a Holy God, and their own inability to recover an acceptable position before God, they will never come to see, understand, and glory in the Cross, and in the redemption extended through it to those who entrust themselves fully to Christ.

4) *He’ll show you that He’s not a God of shame.*

Perhaps more than any other statement in the article, this one demonstrates that Strobel does not know the Bible. What can Strobel be thinking here? At first I considered that he had

something else in mind. I tried several different interpretations: (1) God never intends to bring shame on anyone. (2) God brings shame but hates doing it. (3) God is never ashamed of anything He does. (Only the last one is true, but surely that is not what Strobel is trying to relate!) I can only conclude that he actually believes what the words he has chosen mean: that the Almighty God, who gave us the Ten Commandments, actually does not desire men to feel shame.

At this point I am, frankly, astounded at what I am doing. Can it really be that I am trying to give evidence to our denominational home office people that our God is a God whose holy Law has one primary purpose: to make the shame of sin undeniably apparent to sinful man? In only ten minutes I got tired of writing down all the references relating to the shame of sin in the eyes of God, and the fact that shame is supposed to be connected with sin. Here are a few of the most clear: 2 Kings 19:25ff.; Ezra 9:5-7; Psalm 31:17; 44:7; 53:5; 89:45; 129:5; 132:17-18; Isaiah 44:9; Jeremiah 8:9; and Daniel 9:8.

Perhaps 1 Corinthians 1:27 sums it up best: "But God has chosen the foolish things (see v. 23) of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong." This is speaking directly about how God intends to bring shame to sinners through the preaching of the Gospel, through the ministry of the church. Second Thessalonians 3:14 states emphatically that one of the primary purposes of church discipline is to bring the offender to the place where he feels the shame of his sin.

Can Strobel really say he proclaims the Gospel when he presents a God who does not want sinners to feel ashamed of their sin? Not only does this show Strobel's deficient view of sin, but it speaks volumes about his humanized view of God. He has recast God in the mold of his favorite therapist, which becomes even more apparent later in the article.

It is amazing to me that at a time when this Christian leader is trying to do away with shame, our society is being told that

the reemergence of shame is necessary and important to the righting of our capsizing nation. *Newsweek* magazine (February 6, 1995) carried a cover story titled: "Shame: How Do We Bring Back a Sense of Right and Wrong?" Imagine this scenario: My unsaved neighbor gets the message from the secular press that shame works in the battle to curb aberrant behavior *the same month* that an evangelistic magazine tries to tell her that God isn't really in the shame business, and Madonna (seemingly a poster-girl for decadent America) need not feel any sense of shame!

5) *He wants to help you constructively face up to your wrongdoings so He can completely forgive you and remove the acid of guilt that can eat away at your life.*

Is this the Gospel? Did God send Jesus to die on the cross, taking the complete penalty of sin on Himself, and fulfilling the demands of God's holy law in my place so He can help me face up to my wrongdoing? Strobel seems to make God's forgiving grace dependent on my first dealing constructively with my wrongdoing. Again, the saints of history are his jury. Is God's grace of forgiveness conditioned upon my first dealing with my wrongdoing in a constructive way? Or is it the case that my repentance and faith (biblical words for dealing with sin in a constructive way) are consequences of God's initiating love? The Bible and church history agree with the second option. "We love, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" (the grace and faith are God's gifts!) "not as a result of works" (even the work of "constructively" facing up to my wrongdoings) "that no one should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). The truth is that our movement toward God is a function of the Spirit working in our lives. It is not the case that God waits until I face up to my sin before He moves on me in love; rather, I come to see my sin and the necessity of Christ precisely because He has made me an object of His redeeming love and has, through the combined power of the

Gospel and the Spirit, worked a work of grace in my life. If Madonna comes to Christ, it will be in the same way. It is a lie to tell her otherwise.

Also, since Strobel has already said God is not responsible for shame, I can only conclude that the *acid of guilt* Jesus takes away is either brought on by society rather than God, or the behavior which brings about such guilt is not something for which Madonna should feel ashamed. Neither of these makes any sense! How can Madonna have an *acid of guilt* before God if there is nothing of which she needs to be ashamed? The Gospel of Christ brings no such confusion. Sinners are in trouble with God. They need to feel the enormity of their crimes against Him. They need to acknowledge their sins, repent of their wickedness, and accept the gift of righteousness graciously extended through the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter stated it very well in Acts 2:22-40.

6) *He's not a God who arbitrarily issues rules to undermine your enjoyment of life, but He lovingly offers you wise and sensible counsel to save you from ultimately hurting yourself and others.*

Strobel takes his views to their logical conclusion. If God is not a God of shame; if His goal in Madonna's life is not to make her feel bad, but only to clear up some misconceptions, then Strobel is right to cast Almighty God as a counselor or advisor. But this distorts the nature of sin, and severely minimizes the Person of God. Yes, He is the wonderful counselor, but He is also the righteous judge and the holy God. It is interesting that almost every time (perhaps every time), God or His representative appears to a human in the Bible, that human is consumed with fear. Why? Not because he is filled with inappropriate misconceptions about God, but precisely because he knew Him all too well! He knew Him to be a holy and righteous judge who will not abide the presence of sin. To picture Almighty God as nothing more than a consultant on sensible living is to reduce Him to the role of cosmic psychologist. That

is not the view we get from the Bible (see Isa. 6; Ezek. 1:28).

Second, Strobel is in error regarding the central purpose in Salvation itself. The primary reason God moves in love to capture and transform the hearts and lives of sinners is not to "*save them from hurting themselves and others.*" He saves them to worship Him, to serve Him, to make His glory known!

Strobel is so entrenched in a man-centered theology that it permeates his presentation of the Gospel at every turn. First, he minimizes the effect of sin on the nature of man; then he downplays God's attitude toward sin; having shoved the painful subject of sin aside, and reformed God into a grandfatherly patron, he can now edit the nature of Salvation so that it fits into his Gospel puzzle. To Strobel, Salvation is not the reforming of the sinner into a person intent on bringing glory to God through holy living; rather, Salvation is all about man's well-being. But the Scripture is clear. God's purpose in Salvation is much bigger than Strobel suggests. God is building worshippers who worship Him in holiness and truth, even to the point of sacrifice. This part of the Gospel message, about which Jesus Himself had so much to say (see Matt. 19:16ff. and Luke 14:25ff.), seems to have no place in Strobel's presentation.

7) *So what about Madonna—what inner dynamics are driving her outrageous behavior?* In answer Strobel quotes Madonna: "*I still have to prove that I'm SOMEBODY.*"

Over the course of several paragraphs Strobel identifies just what is the main problem in Madonna that makes her act the way she acts: It is her low level of self-worth. He says that if she would come to see God as He is, "*that would settle her self-worth once and for all!*" Here is an instance in which Strobel is correct, though I doubt very much that he would appreciate the truth of this. If Madonna does flee to Christ because she has come to see the eternal weight of her sin, her self-worth will be taken care of! But first, her self-esteem would be exploded. Look at Isaiah. He is the inspired example that when

you come face to face with the living God, He will ruin your self-esteem! "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips!" (Isa. 6:5). Obviously Isaiah did not know that God is not in the shame business! He had the *fatal misconception* that Almighty God hates sin, will not tolerate it, and that only the work of God can put back together what sin destroys.

Again, it is ludicrous to suggest Madonna's basic problem is that she doesn't think highly enough of herself. Like so many others in our day, Strobel has rejected the truth that the core problem with man is his sin nature, wicked heart, and depraved mind; rather, man's greatest problem is low self-esteem. If this is true, we no longer need Christ, the cross, the church, or the New Testament Gospel. But it is not true. It is a wicked lie that has sucked the marrow out of Gospel preaching in our day. Theories come and go, but the truth of God's Word remains: "All have sinned and (as a result) fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Sin is the problem, the Gospel is the solution, and our challenge is to get the message out without compromising it to suit our society or personal sensibilities.

8) *To Jesus, she already is somebody. Like the loving father of the prodigal son, Jesus is frantically scanning the horizon, watching for Madonna to return to Him. He is absolutely convinced that she's so valuable that she's worth dying for—and that is what He did for her on the cross.*

The errors here are too great and deep to deal with properly. But first, read that paragraph again. Is that the Gospel? Can you really believe that Jesus, the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, is currently in a state of being that is best described as *frantic*? Hebrews 10:12-14 suggests something quite different. Christ has completed the task, and now is seated in the heavenlies: "But He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God. ... For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who

are sanctified." How can He be frantic when redemption has been accomplished? The great chain of Salvation given in Romans 8:29-30 has been fully forged, and Jesus has proclaimed, "It is finished."

Strobel also is confused regarding the reason for the death of Christ. Can it really be that he understands the motive for the Cross to be the value of sinners? Is Strobel suggesting that Christ died because we were so valuable? Romans 5:6-8 makes exactly the opposite point: The great love of Christ is exhibited precisely in that He died in the place of those who had, at that time, no value! We were ungodly, helpless sinners! Perhaps for a righteous man someone would die, Paul says. But for the unrighteous? Only God! In verse ten he says we were enemies of God, yet God died to redeem us. Notice well: The primary reason Christ went to the cross was not because we were so valuable, but because God's law was so valuable, and God's justice was so valuable that it had to be met and upheld. God's love could have found another way; His justice and holiness demanded the cross.

Strobel overlooks all the passages in which God states His hatred of sin and sinners: "The boastful shall not stand before Thine eyes; Thou dost hate all who do iniquity" (Ps. 5:5; see also Eph. 2:1-3). Now you may be saying that I overlook the passages on God's love. Certainly God has, over and over, expressed His great love for sinners (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8, etc.). However, it is instructive to note that God's love for sinners was manifest in the work of His Son. Christ's person and work are the demonstration of God's love; that is how He loves the world. This display of love does not overrule His pervasive hatred of sin, or His promise to punish sin. Neither does it preclude His bringing the consequences of sin down upon those who persist in it. In fact, the Bible describes those outside of Christ as objects of God's wrath (Rom. 1:18) who enjoy life only to the extent that the protective shield of His common grace obstructs His judgment.

9) *I'll heal whatever's driving you to affirm your self-worth in self-defeating ways. But I can only help you if you let me.*

I plead with you to read that statement again. Is that the message of the Cross? Is that the message of the apostles? Is that the Gospel of Christ? I say it is not. In Romans Paul shows that from first to last, Salvation is of the Lord. It is from faith to faith; it is all of grace, not of any works! How can Madonna help God? What can she add? Romans 8:28-30 shows that the whole work of grace in the heart of a sinner is dependent upon God from first to last. Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6), but He had previously clarified the Father's work in John 6:44: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him."

Strobel's views take him to a God that needs human assistance in order to accomplish the plan which He set in action before time began (Eph. 1:4). However, this is not the God of the Bible: "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" (Ps. 115:3; see also Dan. 4:34-35).

Strobel has downplayed the effects of sin on human nature, downplayed God's view of sin, reduced the Almighty to the place of a consultant, stripped the Cross of its severity, and generally created a Gospel tapestry made up mostly of psychological assumptions with just enough "God-talk" thrown in to make it seem appropriate to the modern believer. Unfortunately, this is not the Gospel, and still more unfortunate is the fact that the Gospel is the only vehicle through which the gracious gift of salvation is extended to man (Rom. 1:16-17). Not only is Strobel wrong, but by claiming to offer the Gospel, his presentation may well lead some to think wrongly of God, of sin, of Jesus, of their guilt, and ultimately to place their hope in a message that, in the last day, will be demonstrated as false. When the stakes are so high, can we afford to play fast and loose with the Gospel?

Perhaps Strobel got off track by presuming to speak for Jesus in the first place. Jesus has already spoken to Madonna.

His words of love are contained in the Gospels, and in the writings of the Old and New Testaments (Luke 24:44). Now comes Strobel and presumes to speak for Him. Yet, he boldly recasts Jesus and the message of sin and repentance, of love and redemption, of judgment and forgiveness, into the more palatable Jesus as Counselor who wants only to clear up your misconceptions, raise your self-worth, and keep you from continuing your self-destructive behavior. He uses little Scripture, and misuses what he does use. How can he use Romans 8:1 as a proof text that God is not a God of shame when that text is a summary of chapters 1-7 in which Paul, like a surgeon, has dissected the sinful nature of man, and shown that man's cosmic guilt is only erased through the healing grace of the Sovereign God?

I can find, further, no merit in Strobel's chapter on the "The Top Ten Things Jesus Would Say to David Letterman." In fact, I am embarrassed that any minister feels the need to reduce Jesus Christ to the status of a stand-up comedian. Just what is he trying to do? Is he afraid that the real pressing problem in America is that they think too highly of the Savior? Does he really think that if we can dress Jesus in a baseball cap and give Him a late-night talk show that the masses will run to repent of their sins? Frankly, several of these "Ten Things" Strobel has put into the mouth of Jesus Christ are blasphemous. I stand with A. W. Tozer who said, "The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him." Again, I plead with you to read what is written in this chapter in light of what we know about Jesus Christ from the Scripture. Can you honestly find joy in hearing Jesus say that He sometimes wishes He were not omniscient? Has humor become the *sine qua non* of modern theological reflection? I pray daily that my congregation will have higher and grander thoughts of Christ, and I trust you will see the great challenge we all face in a country that seems not to take anything seriously anymore. Please, let's stick to the business of Gospel

preaching, and leave the stand-up comedy to those not charged with heralding the message of life.

In the work of the Gospel, success is faithfulness. By this I mean that our success in God's eyes will be based on the degree to which we tell the truth. We plant and water, but He gives the increase. Since the end result is His, and His alone, our part is to remain faithful in planting and watering according to the pattern He has left us in Scripture. I find it very insightful that in the Parable of the Soils (Mark 4:1ff.) the sower threw the same seed over all four types of soil. He did not test the soil first, and then manipulate the seed to fit the need of the soil. Rather, he was a faithful sower: He threw the same seed everywhere, and waited for the Lord of the Harvest to bring forth the fruit. In this story, the seed is the Word, the Gospel. We do not need to manipulate it to fit what we think are the hearts and attitudes of our audience. We are called to tell the truth. And to the extent that we do that, we can put our heads on our pillows at night and hear "Well done, good and faithful slave." Any gospel that does not match the truth as revealed in Scripture is a compromised gospel, and is ultimately just another piece of machinery in the idolmaking factory of modern society. I encourage you to remain faithful to the Gospel, and to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

I realize that these thoughts have been long, and may seem at times to be full of criticism. I do not bear Lee Strobel any malice. I think he is wrong, as he no doubt thinks me wrong. In this, the Bible must be the final judge. My concern is that what he has written is not the Gospel of the Bible. It is not a clear representation of how God addresses sinners, nor of how they may deal savingly with the eternal guilt and bondage of their sin. And because it is not the truth, it is ultimately not loving, for it leads unbelievers down the path to spurious faith and hardened hypocrisy. This grieves me, for my heart beats for souls! I am called to stand in front of God's people and the

sinful world, and bring *God's* message, not mine. I am a witness, a messenger. I am not an author of my own message, and neither do I have editorial rights over God's Word. In these days of creative thinking about church growth, I suggest that one place creativity will kill us is in the content of the Gospel. We have compromised almost everything else. Here we must stand firm.

In 1804 an anonymous editor of *Western Missionary Magazine* wrote the following in an article titled, "Directions to a Friend: How to Distinguish Between True and False Doctrines in Religion":

One leading sentiment of the Bible is that the way in which God saves sinners tends to exalt the Godhead as the Alpha and Omega of their salvation; to humble their pride; to strip them of their self-righteousness; to cure them of their vain boasting; and to drive them from every lofty stronghold and refuge of lies, to Christ, the only ark of safety.

I believe this quote sums up my perspective. And I believe those who repackage the Gospel so as not to humble sinners and strip them of their self-righteousness fall under the same condemnation as the wicked priests described in Malachi 2:8: "But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by the instruction." A less than adequate presentation of the truth is really a stumbling block placed in the path of sinners, and turns out ultimately to produce the *many* described by Jesus who, while sincerely feeling they have standing before God, will hear Him say, "I never knew you; depart from Me you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23). As a minister called to Gospel preaching, I want no part in any program that helps produce such spurious Christians. Rather, we must preach and defend the truth vigorously.

If you, or your fellowship, have fallen into preaching a message like this I humbly urge you to return to the Gospel of

the New Testament immediately. Only here will you find an anchor that will allow you to hear a “well done, good and faithful slave” in the Last Day.

Author

David W. Hegg is senior pastor of Corona Evangelical Free Church in Corona, California, and has frequently reviewed books for *Reformation & Revival Journal*.