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THE
TEN
COMMANDMENTS
OF

PROGRESSIVE

CHRISTIANITY

MICHAEL J. KRUGER

The Ten Commandments of Progressive Christianity

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ENDORSEMENTS

“It’s amazing just how many of these new ‘Ten Commandments’ are taken for granted in our culture and also roll easily off the tongue in Christian circles. As a highly gifted surgeon, Michael Kruger refuses to offer a light diagnosis or superficial cures. This is a timely and convicting analysis that we all need to hear.”

Michael Horton, Westminster Seminary California

“Don’t let the brevity of this book fool you. Mike Kruger has written a trenchant critique of the intellectual bankruptcy and theological deviancy of progressive Christianity. Churches, pastors, students, youth groups, Christian schools, and Christian colleges would do well to appropriate the wisdom in this short but devastating little book.”

Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor, Christ Covenant Church (Matthews, NC); Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

“I recognize these Ten Commandments of Progressive Christianity from growing up in the Protestant mainline and from many churches in my community today. There’s nothing new in their message, even as such churches portray themselves as our future. Michael Kruger helps us see the internal inconsistencies of their teaching as they decry certainty with, well, certainty. We must be equipped to see why such attempts to revise Christianity will never turn the world upside down, as did the apostles with the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Collin Hansen, editorial director, The Gospel Coalition; author of *Blind Spots: Becoming a Courageous, Compassionate, and Commissioned Church*

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INTRODUCTION

A Master Class in Half-Truths

In 1923, J. Gresham Machen, then a professor at Princeton Seminary, wrote his classic text, *Christianity and Liberalism*.¹ The book was a response to the rise of liberalism in the main-line denominations of his own day. Machen argued that the liberal understanding of Christianity was, in fact, not just a variant version of the faith, nor did it represent simply a different denominational perspective, but was an entirely different religion. Put simply, liberal Christianity is not Christianity.

What is remarkable about Machen's book is how prescient it was. His description of liberal Christianity—a moralistic, therapeutic version of the faith that values questions over answers and being "good" over being "right"—is still around today in basically the same form. For this reason alone the book should be required reading, certainly for all seminary students, pastors, and Christian leaders.

Although its modern advocates present liberal Christianity as something new and revolutionary, it is nothing of the sort. It may have new names (e.g., "emerging" or "progressive" Christianity), but it is simply a rehash of the same well-worn system that has been around for generations.

The abiding presence of liberal Christianity struck me not long ago when I came across a daily devotional from Richard Rohr that listed ten principles he thinks modern Christianity needs to embody. These ten principles are actually drawn from Philip Gulley's book, *If the Church Were Christian: Rediscovering the Values of Jesus*.²

In this devotional series, ironically titled “Returning to Essentials,”³ Rohr sets forth the ten principles as a kind of confessional statement of modern liberalism (while at the same time pretending to deplore confessional statements). They are, in effect, a Ten Commandments for progressive Christianity.

Indeed, these ten sound like they were gathered not so much on the mountaintop as in the university classroom. They are less about God revealing his desires and more about man expressing his own—less Moses, more Oprah.

But take note: each of these commandments is partially true. Indeed, that is what makes this list, and progressive Christianity as a whole, so challenging. It is a master class in half-truths that sound appealing on the surface until you dig down deeper and really explore their foundations and implications. Benjamin Franklin was right when he quipped, “Half the truth is often a great lie.”

Over the next ten chapters we will diagnose and critique each of these tenets, offering a biblical and theological response to each, and dipping occasionally into Machen’s classic volume. If the church is going to hold fast to “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), then we must be able to distinguish the true faith from those things that masquerade as the true faith.

My hope and prayer is that this brief volume will make that vital task just a little bit easier.

CHAPTER 1

Jesus Is a Model for Living More Than an Object for Worship

Let's jump right into the first commandment: *Jesus is a model for living more than an object of worship.*

In many ways, this is a fitting first commandment for progressive Christianity. When given the choice between worshipping Jesus (which requires that he is divine) and merely looking at Jesus as a good moral guide, liberals have always favored the latter.

Of course, one might object that this first commandment isn't really rejecting the divinity of Jesus because of the phrase *more than*. Could it be that progressive Christianity affirms the divinity of Jesus but just puts the priority on his moral example?

Not according to Gulley's book. Plainly and unabashedly, Gulley rejects the virgin birth, the sinlessness of Jesus, and the miracles of Jesus as myths designed to elevate Jesus to a "divine status." Indeed, Gulley insists that "the church's worship of Jesus is something he would not have favored."⁴

So it's clear that the progressives are not merely putting the priority on Jesus as a moral example. Rather they are directly rejecting the divine status of Jesus. And such a move is nothing new. In Machen's day, this is also how liberal Christianity operated:

Liberalism regards Him as an Example and a Guide; Christianity as a Saviour: liberalism makes Him an example for faith; Christianity, the object of faith.⁵

But we must dive deeper into this issue. Does Christianity work if Jesus is simply a moral example? Several problems arise here.

JESUS CLAIMED TO BE MORE THAN A MORAL EXAMPLE

We can begin by acknowledging that Jesus was, of course, a moral example for his followers. Indeed, he often called his followers to do what he has done (e.g., John 13:15).

But is Jesus *merely* a moral example? Or to put it differently, do the Gospels present Jesus as just a wise sage—a Gandhi-like figure offering tips for practical living?

An honest reading of the Gospels shows the answer to this is a resounding *no*. Indeed, throughout these texts, Jesus is presented as not merely a good teacher but as the divine Lord of heaven and earth. Aside from the obvious Johannine passages that show this (e.g., John 1:1; 1:18; 8:58; 10:30), scholars have argued that Jesus's divinity is also evident in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

As just one example, Michael Bird's recent book, *Jesus the Eternal Son*,⁶ has argued that even Mark—often thought to be the Gospel which presents the most “human” Jesus—offers a decidedly high Christology. Jesus is the “Lord,” Yahweh visiting his people, the one who forgives sins, the ruler of the wind and the waves, and the judge of all the universe. This reality led C.S. Lewis to offer his well-known quote on Jesus as “just” a good moral teacher:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him: I'm

ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice.⁷

JESUS' FOLLOWERS WORSHIPED HIM AS LORD

While the first commandment of progressive Christianity seems quite hesitant about worshipping Jesus, that is not how the earliest Christians felt. Indeed, because Jesus was viewed as their Lord, they unreservedly devoted themselves to worshipping him.

And here's the kicker: the earliest Christians did this while also being fully committed to monotheism. Even as Jews, they worshiped Jesus precisely because they believed he was the one true God of Israel.

We should also note that Jesus never rejected this worship. Nor did he seem sheepish, uncomfortable, or hesitant about it. He welcomed it without reservation. A few examples:

- The Magi worship Jesus (Matthew 2:11).
- The disciples worship Jesus on the boat (Matthew 14:33).
- The disciples worship Jesus after his resurrection (Matthew 28:9; Luke 24:52).
- The man born blind worships Jesus (John 9:38).
- Every knee will bow in worship of the Lord Jesus (Philippians 2:10).
- The angels worship Jesus (Hebrews 1:6).

- Virtually the entire book of Revelation is about the worship of Jesus.

And this quick sampling does not even consider the numerous doxological declarations offered to Jesus, nor does it consider worship practices of the earliest Christians showing the type of devotion to Christ that is reserved for God alone.⁸

JESUS' MORAL EXAMPLE IS BINDING ONLY IF HE IS LORD

While liberal Christians make much of Jesus' moral example, what is so oddly missing in their system is why anyone should care. After all, if Jesus is just an ordinary man, why would we think his particular moral code is any better than anyone else's? Why should we think his moral code matters at all?

Indeed, isn't it the progressive Christian system that is always pushing back against people who make absolute moral claims? Morality is relative, we are told. Morality is ever-changing and culturally conditioned. There is no one true morality; don't push *your* morality on me.

So why should Jesus get a pass? Why do such criticisms not apply to him, if he is just another human being like us?

I suppose one could argue that Jesus has moral authority not because he is divine, but because he is a prophet from God. But how does one *know* he is a prophet from God? Scripture is the only way we know enough about Jesus to draw such a conclusion.

This, of course, just raises the question of what progressives think about Scripture. Many progressives don't take Scripture as reliable and plainly reject its inspiration. And if Scripture is unreliable and uninspired, how do they know Jesus is a prophet?

Other progressives might want to claim that they accept the inspiration of Scripture. But if they do that, why don't they accept the plain teaching of Scripture that Jesus is not just a prophet? Why don't they accept the passages above that show Jesus as the all-deserving object of worship?

Either way, the progressive Jesus-is-just-a-good-moral-teacher approach simply doesn't work.

On top of all of this, one might understandably be confused by the progressive appeal to Jesus as a guide for morality when many progressives won't, in fact, *follow* Jesus' moral teaching! For example, are progressives willing to stand by Jesus' plain teaching that marriage is between a man and a woman (e.g., Matthew 19:5-6)? Or that he is the only way of salvation (John 14:6)?

If not, then why the eagerness to appeal to him as a moral teacher?

CHRISTIANITY IS NOT ABOUT MORALISM

Here is where we come to the most foundational problem with this first tenet. By removing the person of Jesus from the equation as an object of worship, it essentially makes Christianity a religion of moralism. What matters most, we are told, is not doctrine or theology, but behavior. Deeds over creeds.

But this absolutely contrary to historic Christianity, which is a religion of grace, not a religion of merit. It's not primarily about what *we* do, but what God has done in Christ. Or, in the words of John: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). Machen himself captured it well:

Here is found the most fundamental difference between liberalism and Christianity—liberalism is

altogether in the imperative mood, while Christianity begins with a triumphant indicative; liberalism appeals to man's will, while Christianity announces, first, a gracious act of God.⁹

WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER

This first commandment of progressive Christianity precisely reflects what has been happening in the Western world for more than a century. It represents yet another vain attempt to preserve Jesus' morality while jettisoning his divine identity.

In the end, this simply doesn't work. Jesus' moral teaching only works when we retain his identity as Lord. The two should never and can never be split apart.

“What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matthew 19:6).

CHAPTER 2

Affirming People's Potential Is More Important Than Reminding Them of Their Brokenness

There are few issues that divide progressive Christianity from historic Christianity more than the issue of sin. Indeed, it is the loss, downplaying, ignoring, or sometimes even the outright rejection of sin that fundamentally defines progressive Christianity. Generations ago, Machen made this same observation: “At the very root of the modern liberal movement is the loss of the consciousness of sin.”¹⁰

We come then to the second commandment of progressive Christianity: *Affirming people's potential is more important than reminding them of their brokenness.*

The core issue in this second tenet is the issue of sin.¹¹ Are people sinners? If so, how big of a deal is it? More than that, how important is it that people *know* they are sinners? Should we tell them? And how we do balance people's sinfulness with their potential as God's image-bearers?

BALANCING SIN AND HUMAN POTENTIAL

Of course, we should acknowledge from the outset that this second tenet is partially true. The Christian message is not *only* about our sin and our brokenness. “You are a sinner” is not all that can or should be said. Christ saves us from our sin, yes, but then he begins a renewing work inside each believer. And that renewing work begins to restore the beauty of God’s image within us.

In that sense, we can truly say that people have potential. And that potential should be affirmed and celebrated. But we cannot forget that it is potential wrought only by the saving grace of God and the death of Christ, which conquered our sin. Apart from that, any affirmation of human potential quickly devolves into a version of humanistic moralism.

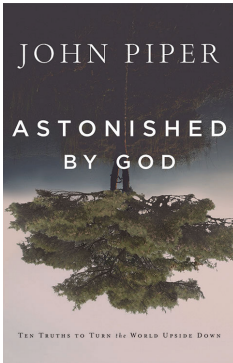
Put differently, we must affirm *both* our deep depravity and the amazing potential we have as God’s image-bearers. The two belong together.

But this is precisely the problem with the progressive message. They are eager to accept the latter, but hesitant about the former. Again, they have separated what the Bible joins.

REJECTING THE BIBLE’S TEACHING ON SIN

Now one might object that not all progressives deny the sinfulness of humanity. Some progressives, it could be argued, are quite willing to affirm both of these truths.

But if we return to Gulley’s book—the basis of Rohr’s list—we quickly discover that Gulley himself does not affirm both truths. In fact, he is quite adamant that the historical Christian teaching about sin is fundamentally mistaken. Consider the following:



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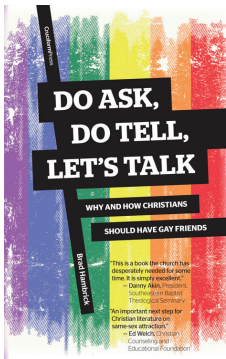


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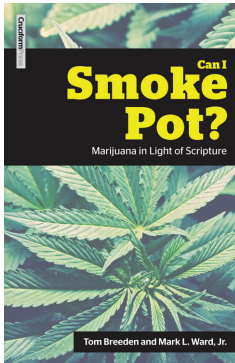


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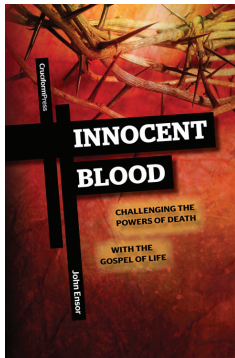


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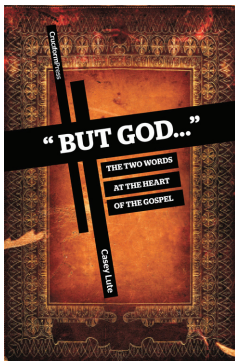


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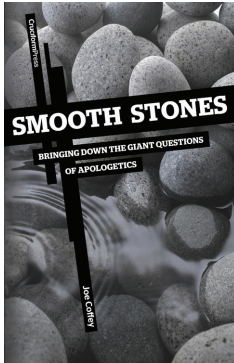


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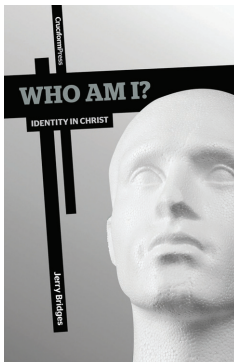


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