

**BLOOD -
BOUGHT
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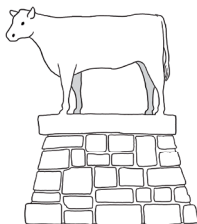
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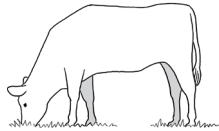


JESUS, IDOLS, AND THE BIBLE

Toby J. Sumpter

canonpress
Moscow, Idaho 

*For my daughter Felicity Elizabeth,
a wise and beautiful woman who lives and loves
like her Savior bought this place*



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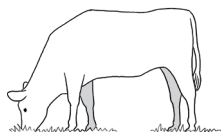
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P R E F A C E

The journalist Finley Peter Dunne, in the mouth of his fictional character Mr. Dooley, first coined the phrase “comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable.” In context, he was speaking of the power of newspapers, but the phrase has been picked up and applied to many different causes including, quite understandably, the calling of pastors in the Christian Church. If this book tilts in a particular direction, it tilts toward the latter part of that phrase. Of course the danger with any sort of tilting is the possibility of overbalancing (or overcompensating) and taking a tumble. Martin Luther is remembered for having once said that the “world is like a drunken peasant. If you lift him

into the saddle on one side, he will fall off again on the other side. One can't help him no matter how he tries. He wants to be the devil's." So if Luther is right, we don't really need any help leaning. Apparently we're born at a tilt. But if salvation really is a precarious balancing act, ever threatened, always unlikely, or (more truthfully) utterly impossible, I offer this book's "tilt" with a prayer that the Holy Spirit will weave it into His balancing grace.

Since this book leans in the "afflict the comfortable" direction, I want to acknowledge at the outset that I run the risk of afflicting the *afflicted*, or at the very least encouraging people who do. There are many tools in a good pastor's toolbox. Paul told Timothy to "convince, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2). There are different tools for different tasks. This, the book in your hands, is not a tool for every task. But I trust it will be a useful tool for some.

Western civilization as we know it is crumbling, falling in big chunks all around us. The confusions and abominations are growing steadily and increasing rapidly. Meanwhile, there are piles of churches, especially in America, and millions of professing Christians, and yet apparently we are not salt and light. Apparently, we are powerless. We are chased by our enemies. We

are fearful of the giants in the land. Which leads me to believe that we are mostly a bunch of Pharisees and scribes and hypocrites. We need a major reformation: we need lots of Christians to become Christians. We need lots of clean-cut, churchgoing folks to meet Jesus in a dark alley and have Him rough them up. It's my prayer that Jesus would be pleased to use this brief offering to that end.

In his book *Against Christianity*, Peter Leithart said, "Contextualization be damned." That quote works as a great three-word summary of his whole book. His thesis is that "Christianity" is a domesticated form of the faith Jesus actually bled and died for. "Christianity" is the neutered version of the vision that Jesus gave to His apostles. "Christianity" is like "religion"—it can be safely studied and handled by professionals with latex gloves behind glass, and the masses are free to think random, vaguely "Christian" thoughts in their heads so long as the thoughts stay there neat and tidy with their shirts tucked in and their hairs all combed. In other words, "Christianity" is neutered and domesticated precisely by being contextualized. If "Christianity" can remain generic, warmed-over thoughts about a deity in the sky, it can be crammed into various philosophies and cultural expressions, like the little

girl who dresses up the family bull dog in an Elizabethan bonnet. And inevitably, a neutered “Jesus” gives us piles of little neutered Christians.

But what God has in mind is the complete renovation of the world. Jesus didn’t send His apostles out to start a social club, a special interest group, or a new “religion” that could be filed in the yellow pages, right there between Cats and Creeps. Jesus didn’t send His apostles out to make deals, to compromise, and offer alternative lifestyles. Jesus claimed *all* authority in heaven and on earth. He claimed all of it, and sent His apostles to announce that claim in the words of the gospel and to enact it with water, bread, and wine, with His full authority. That’s what evangelism is: *Hello, World: Jesus bought this place with His blood. Deal with it.* The real faith, once delivered to the saints, is driven by the Spirit of Jesus, a wild, rambunctious, healing force set on the redemption of the world. Men who know this Jesus have no patience for a polite social club with religious jargon.

But this heresy called “Christianity” slips in everywhere. It slips into lots of Reformed Churches who obsess about buzzwords like “gospel” and “gospel-centered” or their pet confessions of faith, and these become mantras and formulas for gatekeeping,

shibboleths that justify heresy hunts and rivalry. And some turn to fat theology books and confessions and strain out philosophical gnats in their peer-reviewed journals. Others go for the conference circuit and book signing, and still others measure their holiness by followers on Facebook and retweets on Twitter. And when people get bored with this, there are many places to get new highs with icons and talking to dead people and playing liturgical dress up, while everyone says words like “mystery” and “symbolism” in hushed tones and lots of quotations from old, dead saints.

In other words, too often, “contextualization” is just a buzzword for the sell outs, the insecure Christians who feel the need to pretty-up the gospel. And depending on whom you’re whoring after, the gospel gets done up in all kinds of different styles. The academics need lots of footnotes and David Bentley Hart vocabulary so that they can feel deep and profound. Others need rock music and strobe lights and screens and tattoos. And still others need relics and icons and bearded men with fancy hats. But Jesus isn’t making any deals. Jesus doesn’t want a place at the table of coolness. Jesus isn’t trying to get His voice to be heard. His voice is what holds the whole universe up. His Word is what commanded this world into

existence. It's only His mercy that keeps our atoms from flying apart.

“Contextualization be damned” because Jesus comes with the life of God for the world, and the world is dead and dying and demon infested. You don't contextualize life for dead people. What good would that do? Does it really matter what Jesus was wearing when He got to the grave of Lazarus? Would Lazarus have been a little more reluctant if Jesus was wearing His blue tunic or led the crowd in singing a traditional hymn? Jesus came to establish His Kingdom, His culture, His life in this world. Our job is to deal with it.

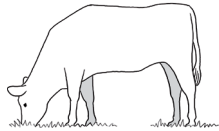
And this is the thing: Jesus *has* succeeded. He has been conquering this world by His Word and Spirit these last two thousand years. And that's why we have cool things like theology books and confessions of faith and liturgies and hymns. And because we're human, there is always *that* context. It's inescapable. We always come into the middle of a conversation. We are born into the middle of a conversation. Our stories wake up in the middle of the Great Story. And no one can object to that reality. What *Jesus* objects to is allowing any of His gifts to be used as leashes on the Spirit or His people. Jesus refuses to be domesticated.

So on the spectrum of traditional and contemporary, I'm way over on the traditional side (even though there's a southern California hippie deep inside my soul). But that means that the dangers I (and my people) face are the temptations of turning the Conquest of Jesus into a formula with old prayers, rituals, and a tidy liturgy. That's "Christianity," and we're against that.

So what do we do? Where do we turn? We turn to Jesus. We cry out to our Savior, our God, our King. We ask Him to save us from ourselves, to save us from all our programs, all our fads, all our theologizing, and we ask Him to pour out the Holy Spirit on us. But we don't need some kind of cheap spray-on revival. We don't need some kind of dress-up, some kind of toupee of holiness. The Church is already full of enough clowns and cowards. We need the Holy Spirit to come and raise us from the dead. We need Jesus to breathe His life into us. And when this happens it will be unmistakable, because it will make lots of people really mad. It will turn the world upside again, like it did the Roman Empire centuries ago. And for the first time in a long time, we will hear men preaching all of Jesus, all of the Bible, and, for a change, they will speak clearly into the microphone, and people will actually listen

because they have met the real Jesus. They won't sell out for anyone, because now they have backbones.

When people know the real Jesus they become real men and real women—really human—and that makes them bold, creative, fearless, compassionate, and glad. When people know Jesus, they know they have nothing to lose, nothing to fear, and the world is before them. And Jesus sends them out with His blessing to discover, invent, create, rule, bless, heal, explore, and die with smiles on their faces, because they know the Man who is truly Alive, and now they can't stay dead anymore.



I N T R O D U C T I O N

READING THE STORY WRONG

It has been pointed out that one of the greatest failures of every attempt to dramatize the gospels has been their complete inability to capture how Jesus could elicit such intense, visceral hatred to the point of mob justice, incited by the Jewish religious leaders and a troop of complicit Romans. No Jesus-actor has ever captured this. They are all too nice and too soft spoken, and even in their rare angry moments they seem utterly nonthreatening, barely copping an effeminate whine. If we are paying attention to these dramatizations, it's almost impossible to sympathize with the

Jewish leaders, with the crowds calling for His blood, with the difficulty of Pilate's political plight. For all our professed love of story arc and depth of character, we are left with a one-dimensional Jesus and flat, simplistic bad guys. We are left with narrative tautologies. They do bad things because they are bad guys. Jesus does good things because He is good.

But this is not merely a failure of imagination; this is a failure of exegesis, a failure to read the story carefully. And this has had (and continues to have) disastrous results in the Christian Church. What is there to imitate in such a Jesus? What is there to avoid in such Pharisees? Faithful imitation is impossible because we cannot imitate a cardboard cutout of God (not to mention the Christological heresies involved). And faithful denunciation is impossible because we cannot imagine such folly actually showing up in the real world. We are training ourselves to identify bad guys by their labels and uniforms—probably dressed up like Jewish High Priests in turbans or Roman Governors bedecked with olive-leaf crowns and everything. Anything short of a Halloween spectacle, and people immediately start tsk-tsking you for being so judgmental. *How can you know their hearts?* And feelings get hurt.

But it's not just the Savior that we read poorly—though that is the center of the problem. We do the same with Paul and Peter. And with Moses and David. Perhaps we are a bit better with the Old Testament heroes. But because of our simplistic reading of Jesus, we still force everything into rigid moralistic categories, tending to opt for the when-in-doubt-remember-they-aren't-perfect option. And so we have something of a binary switch to flip off and on with our Sunday School flannel graph presentations. *David killing the giant = good. David committing adultery with Bathsheba = bad.* And sure, that's right as far as it goes, but we have no categories for Rahab's righteous deception, for Gideon's godly vandalism, and for the countless breaches of decorum found in the prophets.

Don't misunderstand: this is no trendy call for narrative relativism. In fact, I sort of flinch every time I hear words like "story" and "narrative" these days. I start bracing for the vanilla-latte sellout, complete with stylish glasses and a Madonna mic. Usually it starts with edgy exegetical points making fun of fundamentalists and literalism, and ends up with a book deal, a feature in *O! Magazine*, and eventually saying a blessing over the nuptials of a guy who wants to have sex with his poodle.

There are all kinds of problems with that, but here is the point I want to make in this book: there were about fifty steps in front of the exegetical gymnastics that led to the poodle abuse in which all the sharp edges and pointy parts of Scripture were explained away, watered down, and functionally deleted. In other words, a dramatic failure to read the actual *story*. We only hear what we wanted hear, what we expected to hear, what we assume the authors meant to say.

And plenty of *well-meaning* Christians contribute to this problem. They do it with their don't-try-this-at-home exegesis of Scripture. But they also do it by reading the Bible in such a way as to cover the whole thing in a clear preservative lacquer that leaves nothing to try at home even if we wanted to. All we are left with are a number of unimaginable bad examples and a few Precious Moments poses, hands pressed together, gazing longingly into heaven, with angels lispng and prancing in the background. These well-meaning Christians are (unintentionally) holier than God, and they leave us unarmed, unprepared, and ill equipped for the real world.

Of course it's totally hip to give fundamentalists the finger these days, and at the end of the day, we have to say that they were simply wonderful in some ways

and completely awful in others. Forced to choose between the fundies and the liberals, we should choose to be a fundy going to heaven any day over a liberal who'll make good kindling on the last day. But a good illustration of the "Precious Moments" problem is the whole prohibitionist movement that co-opted many sectors of the Church for decades.

Honestly, I'm somewhat afraid that the return of dark beer and other alcohol to the Church may not necessarily be any more momentous than rock bands and strobe lights in many modern worship services, which is to say, only indicative of another line of compromise. Now our Christian frat boys can get tipsy like the world too . . . But be that as it may, the Bible does teach that God gave wine to make our hearts glad. Jesus turned water into wine, not Welch's grape juice. And at the Last Supper, Jesus commanded His disciples to celebrate a particular meal until the end of the world—and that meal includes sharing real, dangerous wine. The Bible clearly teaches that wine is dangerous. Wine is a mocker. Wine may deceive. The drunkard and the glutton and the sluggard are three friends with a similar sad fate. But the fact remains that Jesus gave us wine *because* wine is a fiery drink—a spirit that reminds us of the Holy Spirit, dangerous

and powerful. In other words, God gives His people dangerous things like wine, and the Word of God, which is the sword of the Spirit.

If the Church in the West is to recover from its current stupor, we need once again to be filled with the fire of the Holy Ghost. We need to unsheathe the sword of the Spirit. Usually, in whiskey making, the whiskey is watered down when bottled, sometimes for taste, sometimes to meet regulations. The actual alcohol content of the whiskey in its cask varies but is known as “cask strength” or “barrel proof,” referring to the natural intensity of the whiskey coming straight out of the barrel. We need the undiluted intensity of the gospel to burn our throats and kick us in the gut. We need a barrel-proof gospel. We need to let the sharp edges of Scripture cut us. We need to let the actual words, the actual story, the actual characters, confront us, shape us, scare us, repulse us. If the Church is to rise up again full of preachers, missionaries, evangelists, men who don’t give a damn about the fleeting pleasures of this life, and care only for the glory of Jesus and His Kingdom, we must once again see Jesus, know Jesus, and grasp what made Him so immanently *killable*. Because I’m afraid that until crosses fill the nations of the West, until we once again embody

the threat that Jesus and His disciples so clearly were, there will continue to be only superficial conversions and a cultural “Christianity” that constantly sells out to the latest fads and trends.

At the moment we are inundated with idols. Idols are what the descendants of Adam make out of their fears. Idols are Fear Incarnate. Nothings made of metal, stone, wood, and paint. And then, because of the gravity inherent in the world that God made, those who serve the images become like them. Instead of fixing our eyes on Jesus, instead hearing His word and becoming like Him, our vision grows dim and our hearing dull, and we become like the lifeless icons we kiss and fondle.

This book consists of three parts. The first part illustrates the offense of the gospel, the sharp edges of Jesus and His favorite men. The second part describes various ways we try to hide from this real Jesus and craft idols to protect ourselves from the full force of His claims. And finally, the third part turns to the duty of obedience in faith, in worship, in mission, in work, in the Church, and in our homes and families.

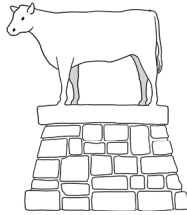
In the meantime, we cannot be surprised that the Church embodies its Jesus-actors so well. The best Christ-imitators ought to be our pastors, our elders,

our leaders, our men, but what are they imitating? Are they imitating a Jesus who would threaten anyone anywhere? Or are they imitating a Jesus who said vague, pious sounding aphorisms and performed random, benevolent magic tricks to impress the media? We tend to make men who are either overly emotional or overly intellectual, but the center of a man, the center of his courage, of his virtue, of his faithfulness was meant to be his chest. As C.S. Lewis prophetically noted decades ago, “In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”

May Jesus be kind and once again give us men with chests.

PART 1

**LEAVING SHARP
EDGES SHARP**



CHAPTER 1

ANGER WITHOUT SIN

The introduction on the previous pages runs the risk of sounding alarmist or like a lot of bluster. And that is the tack many men take when they are unable to actually lead. Instead of doing the hard, sacrificial work of explaining the truth, serving the weak, and standing there cheerful, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, they turn up the volume and get mad. It has the appearance of strength, often starts fights, and occasionally gets a little bit done. Young bucks are particularly susceptible to the allure of wrath. The problem is that the long-term results are uniformly disappointing and

disastrous. “A wrathful man stirreth up strife: but he that is slow to anger appeaseth strife” (Prov. 15:18). Elsewhere Proverbs says that an angry man not only stirs up strife but ends up in trouble constantly. And the moment you bail him out, he’s back at it five minutes later like a dog on a bone (Prov. 19:19).

But the gospels are not shy about recording the fact that Jesus frequently stirred up strife. Occasionally, Jesus even acted in anger: “And when he had looked round about them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other. And the Pharisees went forth, and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him” (Mk. 3:5–6). We need to learn how to get into trouble like Jesus.

The text clearly says that Jesus was angry, and then the Pharisees went out and plotted with the Herodians. If you can’t imagine the media frenzy, then you aren’t reading your Bible right. If you can’t imagine the concerned conversations, the puzzled posts on Facebook, the hand-wringing emails that hit His inbox that afternoon, you aren’t paying attention. *Jesus, you really should be more careful, more mindful of your*

audience, more tactful, more aware of how some people might misinterpret you. Even His friends might be concerned. Might there not be a more sensitive way to approach things with the Pharisees?

Too often we read our Bibles like they are fairy tales and comic books, with all the good guys and bad guys clearly labeled, missing the complexities in the story—the complexities that would actually require us to grow up into wisdom.

The Bible confronts us with the difference between the wrath and bluster of the flesh and the fierce boldness of the Spirit that rested on Jesus. When we talk about the real Jesus, the One who made people around Him mad with some regularity, we know we are not talking about a man with anger management issues. We know that Jesus didn't stir up strife because He was a wrathful man. Jesus never flew off the handle. And we know that no disciple of His may either. Paul says explicitly that the leaders of the church must be self-controlled, gentle, temperate, and not quick-tempered or violent (1 Tim. 3:2–3, Tit. 1:7–8). James also insists: “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God” (Jas. 1:19–20). And Paul again: “Be ye

angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath; neither give place to the devil” (Eph. 4:26–27).

So how are we to distinguish between the kind of trouble Jesus was constantly in and the kind of trouble angry men find themselves in? What is the difference between the righteous anger of Jesus and the wrath of man that only stirs up strife and the devil? And just to make matters more complicated, let’s not forget to point out that plenty of angry men, who deserve every ounce of trouble they bring upon themselves, will be the first to point out they are just victims of their circumstances, *like Jesus*, suffering for righteousness’ sake.

This is why it is not enough to merely assert the difference. We must not merely repeat our tautologies. *Good guys do good things; bad guys do bad things.* This is only to beg the question, and in the end we’re left to the tyranny of popular opinion. If you get enough complaints, if there’s enough offense taken, if respected leaders hint you were less than tactful, then you should probably apologize, probably take the post down, probably just stick to happy texts in your preaching.

Or worse, the reply comes back *Jesus was God, and you’re not Jesus.* Right. Agreed. But this Jesus is our