

I. Introduction

- A. Welcome to Pathway
- B. You probably know I'm a city boy. I spent most of my life in the City of Chicago as a pastor.
- C. I grew up there, and I began ministry there. I also spent a full year in seminary (that's just a master's degree for pastors) studying urban systems, leadership, and ministry. So part of my schooling is a graduate certificate in urban ministry leadership.
- D. I earned this certificate in downtown Chicago in a program called SCUPE (Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education).
 - 1. This was a program where students came from different seminaries from all over the US and Canada. We met up for a one year urban plunge and intense training.
 - 2. We slept overnight in missions, ate in soup kitchen, prayed with people on the streets in the roughest neighborhoods in Chicago, and studied theology in the light of urban experience.
- E. One hard thing about this program was that of all the students there, only three of us were solidly evangelical in our theology... in that place of historic biblical Christianity, aka evangelicalism.
- F. The rest of my cohort were theologically liberal. Here's what that sounds like.
 - 1. For example, the President of SCUPE began a prayer saying, "We pray to the Supreme Being whoever he or she may be."
 - a) To him, God was our Holy Mother, and the goddess of earth.
 - 2. Another example, the most common teaching in this program was universalism, the teaching that all roads lead to God.
 - 3. We were taught theological perspectives called Liberation Theology, 70's Radical Feminist Theology, and Social Gospel Postmillennialism.
 - 4. Another of my professors came from a seminary that also taught Wicca.
 - 5. Jesus was portrayed as liberator and social justice prophet more than as an atoning sacrifice for sin.
 - 6. In fact, sin was defined as a systemic problem in the power structures of society, not as a corruption cutting through every human heart.
- G. So that was my one year urban program.
- H. I was stressed out that whole year.
- I. You have to understand that I went through this program in my 20s. I grew up with a very conservative biblical theology from childhood.
- J. So, this whole year forced me to question everything.
- K. But it was so stressful for me. So I came up with a way of re-stabilizing my own evangelical theology every time I went to SCUPE.
- L. It had to do with where I parked.
 - 1. Scupe met a few blocks from another school in downtown Chicago called Moody Bible Institute. This was named after a famous evangelist named Dwight Moody in the 1800s.
 - a) Moody Bible Institute was like a headquarters for conservative evangelical theology.
 - 2. So I always parked my car on the far side of Moody, near the Cabrini Green housing projects, a rough neighborhood.
 - 3. But I did this so that on my way to school, I could walk through the Moody campus and breathe the evangelical air. Then, on my way back to my car I could walk through the Moody campus and get recentered.
 - a) I also prayed that my car would still be there.
 - b) Hopefully with all the tires.
- M. I'm saying I have lived in this world of liberal theology.
- N. I understand the thinking. I understand the theology. I was the valedictorian of my cohort. I understand the people. I love them. I made really great friendships.
- O. And I came out more convinced than ever before that the Word of God is true, the Gospel is the only way of salvation, because Jesus Christ, crucified and risen again, is the only Savior and only hope of the world, and when I pray, I bow my knee to the Creator God who is a Trinity and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- P. That's just my street cred for this sermon.

II. Introduction

- A. Welcome to our summer series at Pathway.
- B. The series is called
 - 1. **"What's the Difference?"**
 - a) We recognize there's a wide variety of systems that claim the label of Christian.
 - b) And there are many other systems that are not on the Christian map at all.
 - 2. So we're asking "What's the Difference?"
 - a) And we're doing this with love and respect. And also with a clear-eyed view that there are differences and that many of these make other viewpoints incompatible with the claims of Christ.
 - (1) For each topic, we're giving you these cards as a thank you for actually coming to church on that week.
- C. My talk today is about the version of Christianity I experienced at SCUPE.
 - 1. This is called **Mainstream Protestant Christianity**.
 - a) And it is part 5 in our series.
 - 2. This includes many churches you might see with names like:
 - a) The United Church of Christ
 - b) The Episcopal Church
 - c) The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
 - d) Presbyterian Church (USA)
 - e) The United Methodist Church

- f) Disciples of Christ
- g) American Baptist Churches
- 3. In fact, these seven specific groups of churches are called The Seven Sisters. They are described as: “theologically and politically liberal and pluralistic.”

III. Areas of Agreement

- A. Before I diagnose the problem, I want to acknowledge what's genuinely good in the mainline tradition.
 - 1. First, there's the commitment to inclusion and compassion.
 - a) Mainline churches have championed care for the poor, advocacy for the marginalized, and a faith that actually touches the physical world and not just the soul.
 - 2. Second, there's intellectual rigor.
 - a) Mainline seminaries have produced some of the most sophisticated scholarship in history. The University of Chicago Divinity School, Union Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary — these institutions have engaged in theological thinking at the highest academic levels.
 - 3. Third, there's a deep liturgical and sacramental heritage.
 - a) Many mainline churches retained a liturgical richness that evangelical churches lost in the name of authenticity and simplicity. The Book of Common Prayer, the Methodist liturgical traditions, the Reformed confessional standards — there's genuine theological depth there.
- B. That being said, there are some major problems with these churches... and I want to lay them out... with all love and all respect.
- C. Four ways they have drifted.

IV. Drift 1: The Bible Gets Demoted

A. The Mainstream Protestant Viewpoint

- 1. The Bible gets demoted from God's final Word to a spiritual resource
- 2. The Bible may still be present. It may still be read in worship. It may still be quoted in sermons. It may still be carried in procession, printed in bulletins, and placed on church websites. But it's alongside modern scholars and poets, as if they were equal.
- 3. In the mainstream tradition, you will hear things like this:
 - a) “Yes it had discrepancies, contradictions, historical errors, glaring scientific mistakes, and so on. Of course it did.” — Bart D. Ehrman, *Appreciating the Myths of the Bible*
 - b) “The Bible is a human product: it tells us how our religious ancestors saw things, not how God sees things. As such, it contains stories that never happened and statements that are not factually true.” — Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (2001)
- 4. Once you say that the Bible has errors, you begin to allow other voices to climb to the top of the hill.
- 5. And supreme among them is the voice of culture. What does our culture say is right or good or true or moral... that becomes the measuring stick, not the Bible.
- 6. The issue is whether or not you will set your viewpoint above the Bible or the Bible's viewpoint above yours. That is not an easy question.
 - a) Can Scripture correct your politics? Can Scripture correct your sexual ethics? Can Scripture correct your definition of justice? Can Scripture correct your assumptions about God, sin, salvation, judgment, heaven, and hell?
- 7. Because if the Bible can only say what the culture already approves, then the Bible is no longer functioning as authority.
- 8. It is functioning as decoration.
- 9. And that is the hallmark of these mainstream churches.

B. The Evangelical Response

- 1. **The evangelical response is a hard no to this demotion of Scripture.**
 - a) Evangelicals believe in the inerrancy and authority of Scriptures.
- 2. This dividing line is the essence of historic biblical Christianity. No mistakes. No errors. And nothing gets tossed out because it is culturally out of date...
- 3. So the Bible says:
 - a) “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness...” (2 Timothy 3:16)
 - b) “Much in every way! Chiefly because to them [the Jews] were committed the oracles of God.” (Romans 3:2)
- (1) **Jesus said, “The Scripture cannot be broken.” (John 10:35)**
- 4. Inerrancy is the platform on which all other truths we believe are built and stabilized.
 - a) What confidence can we have in a secure salvation if the Word that proclaims it is insecure?
 - b) “And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” (2 Peter 1:19)
- 5. No matter what church you go to, ask them if they believe in the inerrancy of Scriptures. If they say no, I lovingly say to find another church.
 - a) If they get evasive, and say “we prefer to say the infallibility of Scripture,” I say to find another church.
- 6. Once the Bible gets demoted, everything else becomes negotiable.

V. Drift 2: Jesus Gets Reclassified

A. The Mainstream Protestant Viewpoint

- 1. Jesus gets reclassified from the only Savior to one inspiring way among many.
- 2. He is still painted as compassionate, courageous, inclusive, prophetic, revolutionary, and morally beautiful.

3. He is human, but he is not God. Jesus is slowly moved from the category of Divine Savior into the category of example.
 - a) He becomes a moral teacher.
 - b) A social prophet.
 - c) A justice advocate.
 - d) A spiritual guide.
 - e) A symbol of love.
 - f) A model of inclusivity.
4. Some examples
 - a) "Jesus was a Jewish mystic, a healer, a social prophet, and a movement founder. He was not primarily a savior figure concerned with the afterlife." (Marcus J. Borg, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, 1994)
 - b) "Jesus was an itinerant Jewish peasant who taught radical egalitarianism [equality]. His program was justice, not apocalyptic salvation." (John Dominic Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, 1994)
5. But if that is all Jesus is, He cannot save you.
 - a) An example can inspire you. A teacher can instruct you. A revolutionary can challenge you.
 - b) But only a Savior can forgive your sins and outfit you for heaven.

B. The Evangelical Response

1. The Bible presents Jesus as the eternal Son of God.

- a) God the Son and the Son of God (Titus 2:13)
 - b) Born of a virgin (Matthew 1:23)
 - c) Sinless in His life (2 Corinthians 5:21)
 - d) Miraculous in his works (Matthew 4:23-24)
 - e) Substitutionary in His death (Isaiah 53:5)
 - f) Bodily raised from the grave (Luke 24:39)
 - g) Ascended to the Father (Acts 1:9)
 - h) Coming again in glory (Matthew 24:30)
2. The is not one Savior among many, he is the one Savior. The only Savior. There is no other way.
 - a) That is not a side issue. That's my Jesus.

C. Scripture

1. "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)
2. "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.'" (John 14:6)
3. "Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints." (Jude 1:3)

D. One Savior.

1. And I know that sounds narrow to modern ears. But narrowness is not always cruel.

E. If a rescue worker says, This is the only way out of the burning building, that is love.

1. If Jesus is the only Savior, then saying so is not unkind. It is the most loving thing the church can say.

F. If you're looking for rest, peace, purpose, love, wisdom, hope, truth, mercy, strength, healing, guidance, grace, courage, joy, forgiveness, life, light, salvation, comfort, redemption, and heaven forever... then I'm here to tell you you're looking for our precious Lord Jesus Christ, just as he is presented in Scriptures.

VI. Drift 3: Grace Gets Hollowed Out

A. The Mainstream Protestant Viewpoint

1. Grace gets hollowed out from a blood-bought rescue from wrath to vague acceptance without judgment
2. This may be the most important drift to clarify.
3. A lot of mainstream Christianity still uses the word GRACE.
4. But the word gets emptied out.
 - a) Grace becomes kindness.
 - b) Grace becomes inclusion.
 - c) Grace becomes affirmation.
 - d) Grace becomes God saying, You are fine exactly as you are.
5. But that is not biblical grace.
 - a) Biblical grace is deeper, stronger, and more costly.
 - b) Grace is not God pretending sin is no big deal. Grace is God dealing with sin at the cross through the blood of His Son.
6. If you remove the wrath of God, you empty grace of all its power.
 - a) "There is no God who judges, punishes, or condemns. Only love." (John Shelby Spong, Episcopal Bishop, A New Christianity for a New World, 2001)
 - b) "God is Love; there is no divine wrath to be appeased." (John Hick, Anglican Theologian, The Metaphor of God Incarnate, 1993)
7. In 2013 the Presbyterian Church USA was putting together a new book of songs and hymns. They wanted to include the song In Christ alone. It's a beautiful song and we sing it here.
8. But they wanted to replace one of the lines.
 - a) They wanted to replace:
 - (1) "Till on that cross as Jesus died / the wrath of God was satisfied."

b) with:

(1) "Till on that cross as Jesus died / the love of God was magnified."

9. The songwriters, Keith Getty and Stuart Townsend, refused to grant that permission and the song was not included.

10. I say well done.

B. The Evangelical Response

1. To erase the wrath and justice of God is to make grace meaningless.

a) *"Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him."* (Romans 5:9)

b) *"He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."* (John 3:36)

c) *"and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come."* (1 Thessalonians 1:10)

2. The grace of God is the justification of the love of God without sacrificing the wrath of God.

a) Not sentimental grace.

b) Not bloodless grace.

c) Not therapeutic grace.

d) There is no such thing as a Crossless Bloodless Grace.

3. We believe in:

a) Costly grace. Cross-shaped grace. Wrath-bearing grace. Resurrection-powered grace.

(1) If God has no wrath for sin, then the death of Jesus on the cross is a colossal waste of a beautiful life.

(2) If God is not a God of judgment, then forgiveness is only a feeling and it is actually optional.

4. But the gospel says Jesus bore the judgment you deserved so you could receive the welcome He deserved.

5. That alone is the tough, exacting beautiful thing worthy of the name, Amazing Grace.

VII. Drift 4: Eternity Gets Forgotten

A. The Mainstream Protestant Viewpoint

1. Salvation shifts from preparation for the world to come to improvement of this world only.

a) Justice now. Healing now. Inclusion now. Liberation now. Community now. Dignity now.

(1) *"The Kingdom of God is not a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming life on earth."* (Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 1917)

(2) *"The focus of faith is not on life after death but on transforming this world."* (Harvey Cox, *Harvard Divinity School, The Secular City*, 1965)

2. The entire focus of mainstream Protestant churches is to relocate Christian hope from eternal salvation to social, political, and communal transformation now.

3. Leaders argue that modern Christianity should abandon "otherworldly" concerns and devote itself to justice, liberation, and human flourishing in the present age.

4. This is precisely the drift away from truth. It makes the primary mission of the church the ushering in of the kingdom of God without Jesus coming first.

5. This is the mainline academic liberalism that shaped the last 60 years of Protestant theology.

B. The Evangelical Response

1. The church should care about real pain in the real world.

2. But biblical Christianity does not stop with this world.

3. Jesus came to save you from sin, death, hell, and judgment, and to bring you into everlasting life with God.

a) If the church only talks about this world, it will eventually lose the urgency of salvation.

4. But Jesus said:

a) *"For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?"* (Mark 8:36)

5. The world matters, and the quality of life on earth matters immensely.

6. But eternity matters more, and that is the urgency of the Scriptures because it is the heart of God. If heaven and hell are real, and you have an ounce of love in your heart, then you cannot stay silent over the fact that heaven and hell hang in the balance for every human life. And the clock is ticking down.

VIII. The Awesome Surprise

A. There was one golden moment in my year at SCUPE I will never forget.

B. We took a field trip to one of the most respected urban churches in Chicago. This church was in Uptown, one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the city.

1. There was rampant homelessness.

2. There was rampant crime.

3. Social disruption. Poverty. Drugs. All the urban problems concentrated in one spot.

C. This church had a soup kitchen. It had a shelter. It opened its doors so people could sleep inside at night. It had recovery ministries. It had mercy ministries. It knew its neighborhood. It matched its message to its mission field.

D. The pastor was named Jim Queen, and the church was Uptown Baptist Church.

E. So there we were, a bunch of eager seminary students, sitting in a massive, old, rundown church building.

1. The room smelled like mildew.

2. The chairs were worn out and did not match.

3. The wood floors were worn and scuffed.

4. Bare lightbulbs hung from metal fixtures.

- 5. The windows were dirty, and the winter light cast strange shadows across the room.
- F. We were waiting for this famous urban ministry hero to walk in.
- G. And then he came in.
- H. He looked like a truck driver. Big. Burly. Scruffy beard. Messy mustache. Messy hair. He looked like he could fix your transmission, break up a bar fight, and preach Romans all before lunch.
- I. This was Pastor Jim Queen.
- J. And by this point in the year, I had been stretched and bent in a thousand different ways. My faith had been challenged. My upbringing had been challenged. My stress level was maxed out.
- K. Then Jim Queen stood in front of us, introduced himself, and said something I have never forgotten.
- L. He said:
 - 1. **“I don’t care how many hungry people you feed. I don’t care how many homeless people you shelter. I don’t care how many hurting people you help. I don’t care how many oppressed people you deliver. If your church is not getting people saved, you’re not Christian.”**
- M. And I wanted to jump out of my seat and hug the man.
- N. Finally.
- O. Finally, someone said the quiet part out loud.
 - 1. I found my creed that day.
 - a) Not because feeding the hungry does not matter. It does.
 - b) Not because sheltering the homeless does not matter. It does.
 - c) Not because justice, mercy, compassion, and human dignity do not matter. They absolutely matter.
 - d) But they are not the center.
- IX. Jesus is the Center
 - A. Jesus is the center.
 - 1. The cross is the center.
 - 2. Blood-bought Grace is the center.
 - B. Because the deepest human problem is not only hunger, homelessness, trauma, injustice, or loneliness.
 - 1. The deepest human problem is sin. So the deepest human need is to be saved.
 - 2. We will bend every effort to tell them:
 - a) God loves you. Sin has separated Him from you. Jesus shed his blood and died to bring you back to God. Believe in him, receive him for yourself, and be saved.
 - 3. That little message is love with a backbone.
 - 4. That is grace with blood on it.
 - 5. That is Christianity.
 - 6. Because that’s my Jesus.