

## URBAN LEGENDS OF THEOLOGY (Part 3)

### Dismantling common misconceptions about God, the Bible and the Christian life

Fall 2024.1

Class Objective: To refine our faith and understanding by dismantling misconceptions regarding God, the Bible and the Christian life.

#### Class Overview

1. Introduce *Urban Legends of Theology* by Michael Wittmer
2. Clarify the meaning of the term urban legend as used in this class
3. Understand the degree of personal impact connected with various misconceptions
4. Elevate the pursuit of truth as the ultimate goal of analyzing error
5. Emphasize edification as the primary purpose of this study
6. Explore the following misconceptions in light of biblical truth:
  - a. The Bible is our only authority.
  - b. Satan is tempting me.
  - c. I should never feel shame.
  - d. We should not be motivated by fear.
  - e. All children who die before the age of accountability will be saved.
  - f. Christianity is not a religion—it is a relationship.
  - g. I don't need church to have a relationship with God.

#### Notes

#### Review

- I. *Urban Legends of Theology* by Michael Wittmer, B&H Academic, 2023
  - A. Wittmer covers 40 myths or legends.
  - B. It is a companion book to three previous books by David Croteau:
    1. *Urban Legends of the Old Testament*
    2. *Urban Legends of the New Testament*
    3. *Urban Legends of Church History*
- II. The Meaning of Urban Legend
  - A. Wittmer's use of urban legend
    1. "Something popularly believed—in the church or in culture or both—that is not true."
- III. The Potential Impact of Various Myths or Urban Legends
  - A. "Some legends are more wrong than others, and some are more damaging than others. Some legends will rob you of peace and joy while others will damn you to hell. We must discern one from the other so we know how to handle each. Briars and wolves are both detrimental to sheep, but not in the same way. Wise shepherds gently guide sheep away from dense thickets, where as they shoot wolves dead. Likewise, some of these legends will merely scratch you faith, while others will have you for lunch. Still others are setups, meant to slow your walk so you are easier the catch." Wittmer
  - B. <sup>15</sup> "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup> You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Matthew 7:15-18

C. <sup>28</sup> Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. <sup>29</sup> I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup> and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. <sup>31</sup> Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. Acts 20:28-31

IV. The Pursuit of Truth Is the Ultimate Goal of Analyzing Error.

A. "Deconstruction [of error] is only the first, and by far easiest part, of following Jesus. Anyone can deconstruct, even those who do not believe in him. As we tear down these legends, we must give ourselves wholly to the truth that supplants them, lest we become wise as demons (James 2:19)."

*Wittmer*

V. Edification Is The Primary Purpose of This Study.

A. "This is not a book to wave in someone's face for misstating doctrinal points. . . . If theology does not lead you to trust in Jesus more . . . you are doing it wrong. You are not following the truth but, quite possibly, an urban legend." *Wittmer*

B. <sup>11</sup> And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup> until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, <sup>14</sup> so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. <sup>15</sup> **Rather**, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. Ephesians 4:11-15

I. Urban legend #11: **The Bible is our only authority.**

A. Statements about the authority of the Bible, both contemporary and historic, are often interpreted by modern-day readers to assert that the only source of spiritual authority for the Christian is the Bible.

1. Many doctrinal statements have contained words similar or equivalent to this sentence, "The Bible is our only rule for faith and practice."

II. God has appointed two primary means of revelation.

A. General revelation

1. The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

<sup>2</sup> Day to day pours out speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> There is no speech, nor are there words,

whose voice is not heard.

<sup>4</sup>Their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world. Psalm 19:1-4

2. <sup>18</sup>For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup>For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup>For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

Romans 1:18-20

## B. Special revelation

### 1. Scripture

a) <sup>16</sup>All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16

b) . . . <sup>20</sup>knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. <sup>21</sup>For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. 2 Peter 1:20, 21

### 2. Jesus

a) <sup>1</sup>Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup>but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. <sup>3</sup>He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. Hebrews 1:1-3

## C. Why would we need anything more that Scripture?

### 1. All revelation, Scripture included, requires interpretation.

a) Interpretation – the action of explaining the meaning of something

b) Using our minds to discern the meaning of Scripture is certainly necessary and appropriate. However, our conclusions are never equal to Scripture.

(1) “We find in the New Testament that Jesus and the New Testament authors will often quote a verse of Scripture and then draw logical conclusions from it. They reason from Scripture. It is therefore not wrong to use human understanding, human logic, and human reason to draw conclusions from the statements of Scripture. Nevertheless, when we reason and draw what we think to be correct logical deductions from Scripture, we sometimes make mistakes. The deductions we draw from the statements of Scripture are not equal to the

statements of Scripture themselves in certainty or authority, for our ability to reason and draw conclusions is not the ultimate standard of truth—only Scripture is.” Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*

2. We need assistance in interpreting Scripture for at least three reasons:
  - a) We are limited in our reasoning and knowledge.
  - b) We have subjective bias.
    - (1) Subjective bias - personal opinions or perspectives that influence the way an individual views and interprets information.
  - c) We are sinful.
3. “No one reads the Bible from nowhere. We are all products of a past that began centuries before we were born, and those who are least aware of this past are most at its mercy. . . . those who don’t know how Platonic philosophy or Freudian psychology or American self-reliance or postmodern liberalism or expressive individualism have influenced their minds will not realize when they are reading these into the biblical text.” Wittmer, 35

III. God has appointed, in Scripture, means of illumination to aid our understanding of Scripture.

A. Apostolic example

1. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you. 2 Thessalonians 3:7
2. I urge you, then, be imitators of me. 1 Corinthians 4:16
3. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. 1 Corinthians 11:1
4. Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. Philippians 3:17
5. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:9

B. The gift of teaching

1. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. 1 Corinthians 12:28
2. <sup>11</sup>And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, <sup>12</sup>to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup>until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Ephesians 4:11-13
3. The gift of teaching in Christ’s church has been exercised since the first century and has produced many writings by which the church continues to gain wisdom and perspective in

understanding of the Bible. These take the form of creeds, confessions, catechisms, commentaries and sermons.

- a) The Apostles Creed (Its earliest forms date to the second century A.D.)
- b) The Ecumenical Councils
  - (1) Nicaea (A.D. 325)
  - (2) Constantinople (A.D. 381)
  - (3) Ephesus (A.D. 431)
  - (4) Chalcedon (A.D. 451)
- c) Confessions and Catechisms
  - (1) For example: Westminster, Helvetic, Belgic, Heidelberg, London, Augsburg, Dordt
- d) Church Fathers and Theologians
  - (1) Church Fathers (teachers and church leaders of the early centuries). They are sometimes grouped geographically. Apostolic, Greek, Latin, Desert. Among them were Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, and Gregory. This period (patristic period) ended in A.D. 749.
  - (2) Theologians. Leading names among them include: Augustine, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Johnathan Edwards.

4. Though these resources have been revered in the church over the centuries, due caution has been expressed within many of these writings to elevate the authority of Scripture above them all. For example, the following is taken from the Second Helvetic Confession 1566 (Swiss Reformed Church):

- a) **[regarding the true interpretation of Scripture]** The apostle Peter has said that the Holy Scriptures are not of private interpretation (2 Pet. 1:20), and thus we do not allow all possible interpretations. . . . But we hold that the interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned from the Scriptures themselves (from the nature of the language in which they were written, likewise according to the circumstances in which they were set down, and expounded in the light of unlike passages and of many and clearer passages) and which agree with the rule of faith and love, and contributes much to the glory of God and man's salvation. **[regarding interpretations of the church fathers]** Wherefore we do not despise the interpretations of the holy Greek and Latin fathers, nor reject their disputations and treatises concerning sacred matters as far as they agree with the Scriptures; but we modestly dissent from them when they are found to set down things differing from, or altogether contrary to, the Scriptures. Neither do we think that we do them any wrong in this

matter; seeing that they all, with one consent, will not have their writings equated with the canonical Scriptures, but command us to prove how far they agree or disagree with them, and to accept what is in agreement and to reject what is in disagreement.

**[regarding ecumenical councils]** And in the same order also we place the decrees and canons of councils. Wherefore we do not permit ourselves, in controversies about religion or matters of faith, to urge our case with only the opinions of the fathers or decrees of councils; much less by received customs, or by the large number of those who share the same opinion, or by the prescription of a long time. Who Is The Judge? Therefore, we do not admit any other judge than God himself, who proclaims by the Holy Scriptures what is true, what is false, what is to be followed, or what to be avoided. So we do assent to the judgments of spiritual men which are drawn from the Word of God. Second Helvetic Confession 1566 (Swiss Reformed Church)

5. While we should certainly exercise the aforementioned caution, we should nonetheless not elevate ourselves above the work of the Holy Spirit in his church throughout the centuries.

a) “You do not have to read the Bible alone. You should not read the Bible alone. Read the Bible through the lens of the Apostle’s Creed and from what you know about the first four councils and the confessions and catechisms of your denomination. The creeds of the church are not higher than Scripture, but they are higher than you. If you think you have found something in the Bible that you have never seen before, and your pastor and trusted friends have never seen, you may have a heresy.” Wittmer, 37

IV. The Bible is not our only authority but it is our ultimate authority.

A. This means that every resource we might use for illumination of Scripture must be tested against the full grammatical, theological and historical context of the Bible itself.

1. “But it is also very important for each person to resolve not to believe any individual doctrine simply because this textbook or any other textbook or teacher says that it is true, unless this book or the instructor in a course can convince the student from the text of Scripture itself. It is Scripture alone and not “conservative evangelical tradition” or any other human authority that must function as the normative authority for what we should believe.” Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*

B. Holding to Scripture as the final authority in all matters of belief and practice is well reflected in the concluding paragraph of the first section of The Westminster Confession of Faith.

1. “The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.” Westminster Confession of Faith 1647 1.10

V. “What then are the limits on our use of our reasoning abilities to draw deductions from the statements of Scripture? The fact that reasoning to conclusions that go beyond the mere statements of Scripture is appropriate and even necessary for studying Scripture, and the fact that Scripture itself is the ultimate standard of truth, combine to indicate to us that we are free to use our reasoning abilities to draw deduction from any passage of Scripture so long as these deductions do not contradict the clear teaching of some other passage of Scripture.” Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology

Belgic Confession 1561 (Dutch Reformed Church)

We believe that this Holy Scripture contains the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it.

For since the entire manner of service which God requires of us is described in it at great length, no one— even an apostle or an angel from heaven, as Paul says— ought to teach other than what the Holy Scriptures have already taught us.

For since it is forbidden to add to the Word of God, or take anything away from it, it is plainly demonstrated that the teaching is perfect and complete in all respects.

Therefore we must not consider human writings—

no matter how holy their authors may have been— equal to the divine writings; nor may we put custom, nor the majority, nor age, nor the passage of times or persons, nor councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God, for truth is above everything else.

For all human beings are liars by nature and more vain than vanity itself.

Therefore we reject with all our hearts everything that does not agree with this infallible rule, as we are taught to do by the apostles when they say,

“Test the spirits to see whether they are from God,”

and also,

“Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching.”