

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. Theology puts God in a box.
 - b. Doctrine divides. Love unites.
 - c. Jews, Christians and Muslims worship the same God.
 - d. Jesus is more loving and compassionate than the God of the Old Testament.
 - e. You shouldn't waste your life on temporal things.
 - f. My body is a temporary residence for my immortal soul.
 - g. All sin is the same before God.
 - h. You're not supposed to judge.
 - i. The safest place to be is in the center of God's will.
 - j. God won't give you more than you can handle.
 - k. Christianity is not a religion—it is a relationship.
 - l. I don't need church to have a relationship with God.

Notes

- I. *Urban Legends of Theology* by Michael Wittmer, B&H Academic, 2023
 - A. Wittmer covers 40 myths or legends under four headings:
 1. God and Theological Method
 - a) "Theological method is how a person approaches the interpretation of the Bible and how they arrive at the doctrinal implications of that interpretation." A. Naselli
 2. Humanity and Sin
 3. Jesus and Salvation
 4. Church and Last Things
 - B. Mixed in with the above list, he includes ten "mini myths" and six "suburban legends."
 - C. 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. General meaning

1. Urban legend, also called urban myth, contemporary legend, or modern legend, in folklore, a story about an unusual or humorous event that many people believe to be true but that is not true. *Britannica*

a) The term urban legend began appearing in folklore studies in the mid-20th century, and it was used to describe the genre of modern “too good to be true” stories shared through oral accounts. The phrase was popularized in 1981 with the publication of *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings*, a book by American folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand. *Britannica*

B. 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. ¹⁵ “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Matthew 7:15-18

C. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ 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. ¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ 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, ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ **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

VI. Twelve misconceptions considered in light of biblical truth

A. Theology puts God in a box.

1. This assertion is most commonly directed toward conservative believers who typically espouse specific doctrinal views (especially ones that pertain to human sexual identity, gay marriage and abortion).
2. In a *Time* magazine interview, Katherine Jefferts Schori, bishop of the Episcopal church in America was asked whether her belief in Jesus was the only way to heaven. She replied, “We who practice the Christian tradition understand him as our vehicle to the divine. But for us to assume that God could not act in other ways in, I think, to put God in an awfully small box.”
3. In this regard, liberal theology falls into the same category as conservatives or anyone else who may define or describe God.
 - a) Not uncommonly, liberal leaning folks will say things like, “My God would never condemn homosexual marriage,” or “God would never send anyone to hell.” Such statements affirm limits on God and in so doing create a theological box.
4. On the surface, Schori’s answer sounds somewhat reasonable, after all, we believe God is omnipotent and sovereign therefore he can do anything he wants. Or can he?
 - a) Orthodox Christian faith accepts that God has revealed himself in the Bible. Therein God both defines and describes himself to us. God is therefore limited only by his own revelation which he cannot and will not contradict. Human imagination or conjecture are not resources for theological understanding.
 - (1) “Theology cannot possibly be accused of stuffing God into a box when it binds itself to divine revelation. Putting God in a box requires [our] taking the initiative, but sound theology doesn’t initiate anything. It responds to God’s initiative in his revelation. . . . He is the source, the agent, the speaker of his divine word. Theologians get into trouble when we surmise that we are the knowing subjects and God is the object of our knowledge. This is exactly backwards. God is the subject of theology. He is the actor; we are the objects who receive his word. His revelation apprehends, constrains and acts upon us (Heb. 4:12, 13) He is in the driver’s seat; we are along for the ride. False theology storms heaven to capture God and imprison him in a system that seems safe and manageable. It crams its idol into a box it can live with. True theology confesses that God seizes the initiative. All that we know originates with him. If he did not speak, we would know nothing about him.” *Wittmer*
 - (2) God transcends his revelation but never contradicts it. God is more than he has revealed about himself but never less.

B. Doctrine divides. Love unites.

1. What does this graphic communicate?



a) So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. Galatians 6:10

b) ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. Matthew 5:44, 45

2. The assertion that doctrine divides while love unites arose out of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the early 20th century.

a) “The Fundamentalists are driving in their stakes to mark out the deadline of doctrine around the church, across which no one is to pass except on terms of agreement. . . . Has anybody a right to deny the Christian name to those who differ with him on such points and to shut against them the doors of the Christian fellowship?” Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” 1922, sermon

3. Division was a reality Jesus acknowledged as an effect of his first coming.

a) ³⁴ Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Matthew 10:34-36

4. Holding clear doctrinal distinctives does not necessitate a spirit of animosity.

a) ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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

b) ²⁴ And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth. 1 Timothy 2:24, 25

c) ¹ Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, ² to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people. Titus 3;1, 2

5. Paul implies that doctrinal denial or distortion can require division.

a) I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. Romans 16:17

6. It should also be noted that doctrine unites.
 - a) Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel. Philippians 1:27
 - b) Weekly across the world, believers differing in race, ethnic background, nationality, political persuasion and socioeconomic standing gather together for worship around the biblical Gospel of Jesus.
7. Love is to characterize those who follow Jesus.
 - a) ¹²and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. 1 Thess. 3:12
 - b) Love and truth are inseparable components of Christian discipleship.
 - (1) “It is no coincidence that love’s climax is the cross of Christ, who embodies both “grace and truth.” Without truth, grace smooshes into sappy sentimentality that is easily pushed around. . . . Without grace, truth turns into a stern taskmaster that is perpetually disappointed. . . . Grace and truth are not opposites. They are two sides of the same coin. Grace needs truth to effectively save people. Truth needs grace or no one is saved. Switch out grace and truth for love and doctrine and you will see that just as grace without truth isn’t grace and truth without grace isn’t the truth, so doctrine without love isn’t Christian doctrine and love without doctrine isn’t Christian love. Doctrine and love must never be pitted against each other. They are left and right wings that keep our faith aloft.” *Wittmer*