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How to Abandon Historic Christianity in Ten Easy Lessons

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One of the latest entries in the race to abandon the faith is John Killinger’s *Ten Things I Learned Wrong From a Conservative Church*. In this book, Killinger sets out to prove once and for all that he has outgrown the conservative Christian faith of his childhood and moved on to an enlightened postmodern form of religion.

Killinger is no stranger to those who observe liberal Christianity. As a young theologian, Killinger traced theological themes in modern literature. He held teaching positions at various colleges and universities, most notably a position in homiletics at Vanderbilt. Later, Killinger served as senior minister at the First Presbyterian Church of Lynchburg, Virginia and the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles, California. In *Ten Things I Learned Wrong From a Conservative Church*, Killinger caps his literary career with a testimony of how he moved from orthodox Christian conviction to something very different and very unorthodox.

Needless to say, Killinger’s approach is not subtle. The title of his book declares controversy and this author is looking for a scandal. Of course, those who would scandalize the church find themselves facing a new challenge in this generation. So many heretics have paved the way, it is now difficult to come up with anything genuinely new in terms of denial. But give Killinger credit—he is trying to catch up.

Basic to Killinger’s theological transition is his rejection of the Bible as the literal, inerrant Word of God. Having been taught as a young Southern Baptist that the Bible is, word for word, the very Word of God, Killinger moved on to see the Bible as a mere record of theological reflections, limited and corrupted as they are, of ancient people. Those who believe that the Bible is actually God’s Word are, by implication, just simplistic fools yet unenlightened by modern scholarship.

He is untroubled by questions related to biblical translation and accuracy because, “I believed then, and still do, that God rises above the Bible so majestically and transcendentally that whatever happens to the Bible in its various translations and paraphrases is not likely to have much affect on him.” What does that mean? Killinger evidently believes that the actual words of Scripture are relatively unimportant. God “rises above the Bible” whatever the translation.

In 1970, Killinger had written *For God’s Sake, Be Human*, arguing that Christians should outgrow their juvenile ideas of biblical authority. As Killinger now reflects, “I argued that the Bible should not be discarded in our time as an arcane book about a Middle Eastern divinity, but should be seen as a dynamic record of countless people over a span of thousands of years trying to break through the veil of mystery and comprehend enough of the being of God to reorient their lives and reposition their culture. The Bible’s authority, I suggested, rests in the very ingenuity and irresistibility of the experiences it describes, not in its having God as its author.” So, inerrancy and infallibility are to be replaced with ingenuity and irresistibility. Evangelicals must resist the ingenuity of that proposal.

Killinger lampoons conservative Christians, labeling those committed to biblical authority as fundamentalists. His heroes are on the theological left—like retired Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong, to whom he acknowledges “a strong kinship.” Spong, we might note, has abandoned virtually every Christian doctrine, suggests that the Apostle Paul was a repressed homosexual, and now calls upon the church to abandon monotheism.

As is common to much of the “I left conservative Christianity behind” literature, Killinger makes statements that can hardly be taken seriously. At one point, Killinger vows: “I love the Bible so much that it drives me to insist on its true character as a compilation of exploratory words about God, not the final, irrevocable Word of God as painted by the fundamentalists. To make of it anything more is to do it an ultimate disservice.” By that perverse logic, the most appropriate way to honor an important Christian doctrine is to deny it.

Along the way through his *Ten Things I Learned Wrong From a Conservative Church*, Killinger denies that human beings are fundamentally sinners in need of rescue from the wrath of God. Observing evangelicals, Killinger advises that “the theology of atonement appeals to people who carry around a strong sense of personal guilt.” So, theology is basically reduced to psychology and atonement is now a spiritualized form of personal liberation.

Conservatives completely miss the boat by believing that the wrath of God is ultimately something we should fear. Thus, God’s righteousness is reconstrued as something very different than the Holy One of Israel’s hatred of sin. Likewise, Killinger reinterprets God’s omnipotence in order to free the Creator from all responsibility for floods, plagues, tornados and other disasters. “The God I love is a limited God—limited as all artists are limited, as all builders are limited, as all parents are limited.”

Killinger’s limited God is not a moral judge we should fear, but rather “the highly Benevolent Mind and the Intelligent Heart behind every good and noble spiritual impulse we ever have.” Furthermore, God is the “Parenting Force,” and the “Restless Spirit,” who guides and urges us “ever onward toward love and fulfillment.” Just imagine a prayer addressed to “Our Parenting Force who art in Heaven.”

What about Jesus Christ? Killinger identifies belief that Jesus Christ is the only Savior and thus the only way to God as one of the lessons he had to unlearn in his theological pilgrimage. Of course, specific biblical texts such as John 14:6 are likely to get in the way. This is no problem for Dr. Killinger. He describes the Gospel of John as “a completely histrionic and somewhat unreliable Gospel,” that is “unreliable from a factual standpoint.” Well, with the Gospel of John out of the way, and the authority of the Bible denied, anything becomes theologically possible—and probable.

The Book of Acts is dismissed as “our at-times-somewhat-dubious ‘history’ of the early church.” Whether or not the Apostles taught the exclusivity of the gospel, it now must be abandoned in the name of Jesus Christ, “who taught universal love and acceptance.”

In a fascinating narrative, Killinger laments an attempt he made as a young believer to convert his father to Christianity. Given what he described as his “indoctrination,” Killinger had been convinced that his father was destined for hell because he had never confessed Christ. Concerned for his father’s salvation, he enclosed some evangelistic tracts in a birthday present. Killinger looks back on this evangelistic attempt with great embarrassment. “I have always been heartily ashamed of that. How presumptuous it was, and how invasive of his privacy!” This passage ranks among the saddest personal accounts in modern literature.

As should be clear by now, Killinger rejects conversionist theology. He acknowledges that human beings need transformation, but this transformation is nothing like the salvation of a sinner by grace. Killinger now declares that “after all these years of study and scholarship,” he cannot believe that “the Jesus of history or the Christ of faith would endorse a view limiting salvation to those who have publicly confessed him as their personal savior” and follow Christ in baptism. Of course, the Jesus of the Bible made precisely this claim. The only way around that is to claim some knowledge of Jesus apart from the Bible.

Conservative Christians, we are now told, are also hung up on sex. This leads to our repressive understanding of human sexuality and explains, of course, why we believe homosexuality to be sinful. Jesus, Killinger claims, “almost never said anything condemning sexuality.” Freed from a commitment to the comprehensive truthfulness of the biblical text, he can just ignore whatever passages declare all sexual expression outside of marriage to be sin.

In the confrontation between the Bible and science, science wins. We should not be concerned about this, Killinger assures, because, "God doesn't need an inerrant Bible to be God. True believers shouldn't need it either." At this point, Killinger commends the example of Benjamin Franklin, who said that he read the Bible as he ate fish, throwing aside the parts that would stick in his throat. Accordingly, Killinger relates that "I learned to live by the deep wisdom of the Scriptures without worrying about their literal facticity. If I preached on the creation story in Genesis, it was only to speak of the creativity of God or the beauty of the created order, not to apply a calculator and modern timetable to the schedule by which creation occurred."

If the Bible is taken too seriously, Killinger warns, we limit our ability to grow beyond its ancient worldview. Killinger points us to "the loftier passages" of the Bible and insists that "God never intended it to become the restrictive document it has become in the hands of the fundamentalists."

In the end, the Bible is to be acknowledged as containing many wonderful passages, "but it is only a passing record of humanity's experience of the Holy over a period of a few thousand years, and a somewhat limited record at that, considering the vast literatures of ancient Egypt, Greece, India, and China." In the end: "Any God whose parameters are defined by the Bible alone is too small for the yearnings and understandings of the twenty-first century heart."

In his first chapter, Killinger recounts a lunch conversation with Jerry Falwell, Pastor of Lynchburg's Thomas Road Baptist Church. One can only imagine the fireworks which must have resulted from the encounter between Falwell and Killinger during the years they served prominent pulpits in the same city. During their lunch conversation, Falwell warned of the slippery slope toward doctrinal compromise that follows the denial of biblical authority. At the end of *Ten Things I Learned Wrong From a Conservative Church*, Killinger acknowledges that Jerry Falwell was right. "Once we were able to say out loud that the Bible is not the inerrant word of God—that its inspiration is not really different from that of the Bhagavad-Gita or Thoreau's *Walden* or Maya Angelou's poems—then a great number of conservative and fundamentalist idols begin to topple." Furthermore, Killinger recounts that without an affirmation of the inerrancy of Scripture, it is "a simple step to denying that Jesus is the only way to God, or that he really had to die for our sins."

Conservative evangelicals will learn any number of important lessons by reading *Ten Things I Learned Wrong From a Conservative Church*. The ruptured relationship between John Killinger and orthodox Christianity is not a matter of misunderstanding. To the contrary, Killinger knows what he is denying and believes that conservative evangelicals are trapped in an unchanging system of doctrine based in the authority of an ancient book, and thus are completely out of step with the modern world.

As evangelical Christians, we must admit that Killinger is right in at least this one important respect. We are fundamentally out of step with the worldview of modernity and its rebellion against God. The only way to get in step with the spirit of this age is to abandon the truth claims of Christianity.

In this book, Killinger offers evangelicals an invaluable opportunity to look at ourselves in the mirror. Theologically speaking, John Killinger has traveled light years from the theological lessons he now so proudly leaves behind. The urgent danger is that evangelicals will eventually follow the same course. The lessons Killinger unlearned are—placed in their proper biblical frame—the very lessons the church must relearn in this generation.

