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An Unmitigated Theological Disaster — Kirby Godsey Strikes Again

Is God a Christian? presents a trajectory and set of theological arguments that reveal what happens when biblical authority is denied and the faith once for all delivered to the saints is repudiated.

Send

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“Most Christians assume that Christianity is the one and only religion that is God-inspired and that carries the imprimatur of God’s blessing,” laments R. Kirby Godsey. In his new book, *Is God a Christian?*, Godsey sets out to oppose that assumption and to argue that “the stakes for mankind have grown too high for any of us to engage our faith as if our understanding of God represents the only way God’s presence may be known in the world.”

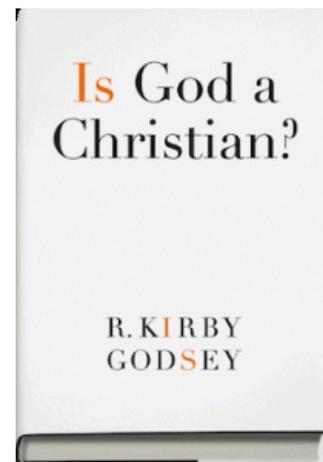
The great question of the exclusivity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is necessarily bound up with the most central teachings of the Christian faith, which is why an argument like this must be considered so carefully. A closer look reveals that Godsey is not merely calling upon Christians to reconsider how we define and defend the Gospel — he is calling for a total reconstruction of everything that Christianity represents.

Godsey is no stranger to controversy, of course. In 1996, he stood at the center of a firestorm that erupted after the publication of his book, *When We Talk About God ... Let's Be Honest*. That controversy was well deserved, since in that volume Godsey denied that Jesus is God, argued that Jesus is not to be worshiped, rejected the authority of the Bible, and asserted that the crucifixion “is not the saving act of God.” In that book he also rejected the claim that Jesus is the only Savior and denied that faith in Christ is needed for salvation.

Back in 1996, Kirby Godsey was serving as president of Mercer University in Georgia — a post he held for 27 years. Mercer was then the largest institution affiliated with the Georgia Baptist Convention and one of the most venerable universities claiming a Southern Baptist heritage. The controversy eventually reached the point that the Georgia Baptist Convention Executive Committee established a study committee that found Godsey guilty of having “failed his spiritual fiduciary responsibility as leader of Georgia Baptists’ largest institution” by holding to doctrinal positions that “dramatically deviate from orthodoxy.” The convention finally voted to sever ties with Mercer University in 2005.

In *When We Talk About God ... Let's Be Honest*, Godsey embraced positions that the church has openly declared to be heresy. In *Is God a Christian?*, Godsey just picks up where he left off in his earlier book, but this time he is even more explicit in his embrace of radical pluralism.

“Christians need to get over it,” he admonishes. “Jesus is not God’s only word.” As he explains, “Every person is a word from God that has never been spoken and will never be spoken again in exactly the same way.” He also admonishes Muslims to “get over it” when they claim exclusive status for the Qur’an. The very idea of exclusivity is a “peril” that “simply defies reason.”



For the most part, Godsey studiously avoids engaging the biblical text. That is at least consistent with his marginalization of biblical authority. “The notions of inerrancy and infallibility are treacherous human fallacies,” he argues. In his earlier book, he had asserted that “the authority for our faith should not rest on the Bible alone, or even primarily.” In his newest book, he declares, “I do not believe that God actually ordered Joshua to kill every man and woman and child during his invasion of Canaan.”

Instead, he argues that Christians should “weigh scripture against the word that we have heard and seen from God in Jesus.” At this point, Godsey is left in an untenable position. What does he know of Christ apart from the Scriptures? This is a familiar predicament for liberals who deny biblical authority but claim a knowledge of Jesus. Whatever knowledge of Jesus we have apart from the Bible is just a figment of our imagination. If the Bible is not the authoritative source of divine knowledge, we are left with nothing more than our own imagination and arbitrary judgment. We can make Christianity anything we might want it to be.

In the place of the Bible, Godsey claims human reason as his authority. Thus: “No rational pathway can lead us to the conclusion that Christians alone or Muslims alone have sole access to the ultimate reality that underlies the meaning of the universe.” Based on that judgment, Godsey then argues that claims of exclusivity are immoral because such claims turn Christianity “into a self-centered, narcissistic religious system that says to the rest of the world that they must become like us if they wish to be accepted by God.”

He then turns John 14:6 on its head by arguing that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life only for those “for whom Jesus is the light of the world.” In other words, he denies that Jesus was making any exclusive claim — an interpretation that simply flies in the face of both the text and the context of the passage. Undeterred, Godsey then asserts: “It is simply unnecessary and it is clearly saying more than we know to claim that the light by which another lives and calls by a different name is a different light and an unauthentic word from God.”

There are different forms of universalism and inclusivism within theological circles today, but the most intellectually embarrassing form of pluralism is the very one that Godsey champions. He writes as if all the religions of the world are basically similar, when even a cursory knowledge of the belief systems of the world reveals how dissimilar they are. Godsey does not even privilege monotheism, arguing that Christians should see adherents of all other religions as “equals before God.”

Long before the controversies over his books drew attention, Godsey had already incited controversy with a series of theological lectures he delivered at Houston Baptist University in 1987. In those lectures and in the ensuing controversy, Godsey denied that Jesus died in order to pay the just penalty for human sin. In his new book, Godsey repudiates any substitutionary understanding of the atonement, arguing that the idea of substitution “winds up making God responsible for Jesus’ death.”

Of course, this is exactly what the Bible claims — that it was the Father’s determined purpose that the Son should die in the place of sinners. Jesus, Godsey insists, “did not die to appease an angry God.” In a clear refutation of the New Testament, Godsey asserts that no beliefs are necessary for salvation. “God loves us and forgives us already,” he argues, “no conditions, no prerequisite, no plans of salvation to follow.”

Furthermore, Godsey rejects all doctrines as unnecessary and unhelpful. “Doctrines are simply the residue of religious experience,” he claims.

This applies even to the doctrines concerning the person and work of Christ. Amazingly, Godsey warns against seeing Jesus as “a larger-than-life religious figure.” He stresses the humanity of Jesus and criticizes those who “are often so eager to ascribe divinity to Jesus.” In his view: “I believe it is most appropriate and most revealing to treat Jesus as one of us.”

He allows that Christians can use the language of divinity concerning Christ, but his argument is breathtaking in its rejection of orthodox Christianity: “To ordinary eyes, Jesus was not divine. Affirming the divinity of Jesus is a way of acknowledging that, for the Christian, Jesus becomes the principal port through which the divine enters our lives.”

It follows logically that Godsey then argues that “the focus of the Christian faith should not be reconstructed into the worship of Jesus.”

Amazingly, he then offers one of the least credible theological sentences imaginable: “The very earliest church saw Jesus as a simple and plain person who brought the reality and character of God down to earth.” No reading of the New Testament, no matter how inventive and radical, can reveal that the early church thought of Jesus only as “a simple and plain person.” This statement is not even consistent with the trajectory of liberal New Testament studies, which has tended to accuse the early church of exaggerating the divinity of Christ. Not even the liberal scholars deny that the early Christians believed in the divinity of Jesus.

In many ways, *Is God a Christian?* is not really a serious work of theology at all. Its arguments are too thin and unsubstantial, and its structure is pervasively eccentric. Godsey rejects orthodox Christianity and frames his own theology, but he studiously avoids any real engagement with the Bible. He writes a book filled with critical judgments, but includes not a single footnote.

But, even if this book falls short of a serious theological treatise, Godsey does deal with the most serious theological issues. And the great tragedy is that he repudiates orthodox Christianity at virtually every turn. Heresy, by definition, is a gravely serious matter.

At the same time, this book also serves as a warning of where Southern Baptists were headed by the decade of the 1980s. Though Godsey’s views are not representative of most SBC “moderates” who opposed the conservative redirection and recovery of the denomination, Godsey and his heresies have yet to be repudiated.

To the contrary, Kirby Godsey has been a major figure in moderate Baptist life. His leadership at Mercer University was championed and fiercely defended by the moderate establishment, and this book is published by Mercer University Press. Godsey is credited with envisioning what became the New Baptist Covenant meeting in Atlanta in 2008, largely convened by former President Jimmy Carter. An event celebrating the book, complete with a book signing, is scheduled for the upcoming meeting of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Tampa, Florida.

Is God a Christian? presents a trajectory and set of theological arguments that reveal what happens when biblical authority is denied and the faith once for all delivered to the saints is repudiated. This book is an unmitigated theological disaster.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

R. Kirby Godsey, *Is God a Christian?: Creating a Community of Conversation* (Mercer University Press, 2011).

