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Eight Reasons to Reject

Stanley's Irresistible

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Andy Stanley is a master communicator, popular author, and prominent pastor. In his book *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed from the World*, Stanley argues that the church with its modern version of faith is ineffective and too easily resisted. He conjectures that people resist the modern church and Christianity because the Old Testament is mixed into it. Consequently, when believers defend the Old Testament's historicity and accuracy, they alienate what he refers to as "post-Christians."

Irresistible is filled with clever phrases, including chapter titles such as "Temple Tantrum," "Splittin' Up," "Homebodies," "The Apoplectic Apostle," "Trending Horizontal," "Obsolet-r Than Ever." Using wit, humor, satire, anecdotal comments, wordplay, and wordsmithing, Stanley presents his belief that the church must become "unhitched" and "unmixed" from the Old Testament. He uses his rhetorical skills to urge believers against integrating Old Testament truth into Christianity, thus dissuading believers from defending the historical reliability and believability of the Old Testament. His arguments, however, exemplify logical errors, simplistic exegesis (which is often eisegesis), errant theology, reductionism, and very serious hermeneutical errors. Consider these eight reasons to reject his thesis.

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1. His contributions are marred by his thesis.

At times Stanley speaks highly of the Old Testament as Israel's history, while at other times he misrepresents and disparages the Old Testament and its historicity, truthfulness, and inspiration. Messengers, teachers, and preachers have a stewardship to faithfully dispense God's Word. This trust entails speaking clearly, consistently, and accurately about the Word of truth. Stanley's book falls far short in this regard. While the book does present some positive insights and contributions in respect to post-Christians and contemporary ministry challenges, these contributions are unfortunately marred by his thesis.

Every book has a thesis, and every thesis contains two literary components: a subject and a complement. Few can disagree with Pastor Stanley's general subject: the church needs to be more irresistible so that what he calls the "nones" (unchurched nonbelievers) and the "deconverted" (those who have left Christianity) will have fewer reasons to discredit it.

The problem with *Irresistible* is not so much the general subject but rather the complement to the subject. Stanley argues that since Christianity is completely new and since the Old Testament is completely fulfilled, Christianity must be detached or unmixed from the Old Testament. Hence Christians should, he says, simply dismiss the Old Testament challenges that many post-Christians find objectionable. But doing this downgrades the Old Testament for apologetic purposes and for ministry contextualization.

2. His imbalance in contextualization leads to cultural accommodation.

The pursuit of *knowing Biblical truth* in American evangelicalism is being replaced with pursuing the immediate *value or relevance or practicality of truth*. This transition has created an imbalance in contextualization that oftentimes leads to cultural accommodation. Unfortunately, Stanley seems to be pursuing this end.

One popular trend in American evangelicalism is to view some Old Testament events as fictitious or as literary, nonhistorical episodes that simply have a broader narrative purpose. A number of self-identified evangelical scholars and certainly many postconservative scholars today reject the historicity of Adam and Eve as the progenitors of the human race, God's justice in Noah's flood, the Red Sea judgment, the Canaanite genocide, elements of prophecy, and so forth. Stanley argues that the historicity or even believability of some Old Testament events is simply unimportant, since the Old Testament is an obsolete record of the Hebrews and Israel. He also minimizes and/or rejects the importance of infallibility and inerrancy. Contextualization, however, must consider both the message of truth and the medium that communicates the message. But

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Stanley accommodates (“adapts”) the truth of Scripture, conforming it to today’s culture in order to enhance its medium and receptivity.

Biblical apologetics is meant to explain and defend Scriptural truth claims. This in turn provides justification for the truthfulness of belief in God and Christianity, which hopefully will lead to personal faith in Christ and His work. Stanley, however, makes the Old Testament obsolete, alleging it is all fulfilled and thereby dismissing any challenges from skeptics. He believes that by unhitching and removing the Old Testament from the Christian faith, the church will not be sidetracked to answer many of the tough and even embarrassing questions presented in the Old Testament.

3. His approach requires a nonorthodox theological method.

Stanley is not, however, simply promoting a new apologetic. He surmises that his thesis needs to be integrated into every aspect of faith and practice so Christians themselves don’t stumble over skepticism. His approach requires a different and nonorthodox method in how to theologize (“apply theological method”). To unhitch the Old Testament from Christianity—thereby removing 39 canonical books from Christian theologizing—is indeed dangerous and leaves incredible gaps in a person’s theological system. This approach will eventually lead to a kind of Christian critical-cultural-historical-scientific syncretism.

Stanley’s theological method demonstrates additional and very serious concerns. He correctly speaks of the resurrection as the determinative event of Christianity. Indeed both Christ and His atoning work are God’s supreme revelatory work. However, Stanley consistently downgrades the New Testament as merely a record of the resurrection (293–300). But the New Testament is not simply a record of the resurrection event. Rather, the New Testament is itself revelatory and carries God’s authority. Stanley prefers to say the writers of Scripture were inspired (not the Scriptures, 302), and he does not treat the New Testament as God’s authoritative revelation.

4. His apologetic and his method of theologizing are incorrect and naïve.

Stanley confuses truths that have direct, immediate application to believers with descriptive truths that may not directly apply to believers today. Some truths do not have immediate application, though these truths still play a critical part of a Biblical-theological foundational system. However, if these truth assertions are not true, or are not historical, or are unhitched from Christianity, then Christianity will cease to be fully Christian. Stanley does not address the negative consequences to the Christian faith if such truths as the Creation or the fall of mankind—or the Psalter, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, or the prophetic literature—are excluded. One important component

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of Christian apologetics is to appeal to the entire Scriptures in presenting a consistent, coherent worldview. Stanley's method disallows this important apologetic tool.

Jesus Himself repeatedly authenticated the Old Testament's veracity and knowability. If the Old Testament is not true or historical, Jesus—Who repeatedly claimed the Old Testament was indeed true and historical—would be a false prophet. Additionally, New Testament writers repeatedly cited the Old Testament as inspired and true while integrating it into the New Covenant. If Christianity ever needed to compromise Old Testament truth to make it fit with hostile cultural views, it would have been at the inception of Christianity. But the New Testament writers did exactly the opposite of Stanley's suggestions.

Many of the current Old Testament challenges that Stanley probably hopes to dissuade the church from defending are also present in the New Testament. Just a few examples include the persons of Adam and Eve as the progenitors of the entire human race ([Luke 3:38](#); [Act 17:26](#)), marriage as a one man—one woman lifelong union ([Matt. 19:4–6](#)), Cain ([Jude 11](#)), Abel ([Heb. 11:4](#)), God's retributive justice including eternal judgment and exclusivism of faith alone in the Messiah (Christ) alone ([Matt. 25:46](#)), Noah's flood judgment ([Luke 17:26–27](#)), Sodom and Gomorrah ([Luke 17:29](#)), and Balaam's transgression ([Jude 11](#)). Additionally, many moral laws in the New Testament are rooted in the Old Testament.

Stanley correctly focuses on Christ's resurrection as the key apologetic event and as a key component of the gospel, though he does so at the exclusion of all other Biblical evidences for theistic belief. In the [Luke 16:19–31](#) account of Lazarus, when the unbelieving rich man in eternal torment begs for the Lord to send a messenger to warn his unbelieving family of impending judgment, Jesus says, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead" ([Luke 16: 31](#)). Stanley is simply naïve to suggest that accommodating the historicity of the Old Testament will gain a credible hearing for evangelism.

Further, Stanley suggests that the "Christian Bible should precede the Hebrew Bible since if "it weren't for the New Testament, there wouldn't be an Old Testament" (284). He repeatedly and mistakenly implies that all of the Old Testament is synonymous with Old Covenant law or is simply stories. He then mistakenly argues that all aspects of the Old Covenant and the entire Old Testament were fulfilled and thus have been brought to completion.

He further errs when stating that fourth-century church leaders bestowed on the Hebrew Scriptures the "same authority as the Gospels and epistles" when they bound the Hebrew Scriptures with the Christian Scriptures to form the canon (155). Rather, the New

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Testament writers always viewed the Old Testament as just as inspired and just as authoritative as the New Testament; not doing so was considered heresy. Stanley, however, confuses authority and inspiration of all Scripture with covenant application to a particular reader. In reality, the writer's meaning always governs the application or meaningfulness to a reader.

5. He posits that the Old Testament has been completely fulfilled.

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Stanley is correct that the church has at times incorrectly understood the Old Testament and in some cases has used the Old Testament to subjugate and coerce others. Rather than discussing the hermeneutical mistakes and complexities that led to abuses, Stanley simply posits that the entire Old Testament is now fulfilled and should be detached from the New Testament.

He incorrectly argues that the mere appearance of fulfillment formula in the New Testament refers to complete, exhaustive fulfillment of all Old Testament promises and prophecies. He repeatedly cites the Abrahamic promises as being completely fulfilled, since Abraham was blessed by God and since Christ came through Abraham's lineage. Stanley writes that Jesus uses the fulfillment formula as His way of saying "God's conditional, temporary covenant with Israel was coming to an end, the intended-from-the-beginning end" (109). Meanwhile, Stanley ignores the unconditional land promises given to Abram and his descendants (Israel) that have not yet been fulfilled. He ignores all the future unfulfilled promises in the prophetic literature. And he discredits the Song of Solomon as well, since the writer had over 300 wives.

At times the writers of Scripture use the New Testament–fulfillment formula to confirm that a New Testament incident agrees with the Old Testament. At other times they use it to explain a point given in the Old Testament or to draw a parallel between a New Testament event and an Old Testament one. Sometimes the New Testament writers indicate complete exhaustive fulfillment, while at other times they point out that only one aspect of a prophecy was satisfied. Stanley fails to acknowledge any of these New Testament uses of the Old Testament complexities. The context of a New Testament use of an Old Testament passage must always be compared to the Old Testament historical text to validate the New Testament's type of usage and fulfillment. (See my "Literal Interpretation and Theological Method: What Is It and How to Do It?" *Ariel Ministries*, December 2017, 18–23.)

Furthermore, Stanley incorrectly declares that Jesus' prediction of Daniel's future "abomination of desolation" in [Matthew 24](#) does not refer to the last days, but rather was fully fulfilled in the destruction of the Jewish temple in AD 70 (62–65). Stanley develops this incorrect interpretation to support his view that Judaism and thus the Old Testament

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authority ended in AD 70. This promotion of preterist eschatology ignores the actual context of [Matthew 24](#). Jesus qualified His prediction through universal, global, cosmic language. He described this future abomination of desolation as the worst tribulation “such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” ([Matt. 24:21](#)), and He links the termination of this Great Tribulation to His own second coming ([Matt. 24:27–31](#)). Stanley, on the other hand, decontextualizes the “abomination of desolation” description, a common practice by evangelical preterists in their attempts to answer liberal and skeptical critics who oppose predictive prophecy.

Stanley also uses replacement nomenclature, suggesting some agreement with reformed theology that the church has permanently replaced Israel. Additionally, he incorrectly argues that Deuteronomy’s genre alone proves its complete conditionality. (For an extensive critique and rebuttal of some of these views, see David A. Mappes and H. Wayne House, “A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* [Spring 2013]: 5–56.)

6. His view of objectors’ skepticism is incomplete.

Stanley is correct that some previously successful apologetic methods are less effective in this postmodern era and that the church should be open to rebranding some of its apologetic methodologies and ministries. He argues that the majority of people he has talked to who have abandoned their faith have lost faith in Jesus “because they lost confidence in ... the Old Testament” (110). Stanley is to be commended for talking with those who have rejected their faith; however, most apologists point to a lack of Christian charity and church integrity as leading to stumbling and rejection. Stanley fails to acknowledge that most of the Old Testament truths people find objectionable are also repeated or affirmed in the New Testament. Furthermore, skeptics who deny Old Testament events often also deny miraculous New Testament events. Meanwhile, Stanley provides no examples of New Testament writers suggesting that the Old Testament is less than historically accurate, nor does he provide any examples of New Testament writers depreciating the Old Testament.

The skepticism of objectors is never only an intellectual issue but always has a spiritual component. Removing embarrassing, difficult challenges does not create in a nonbeliever a neutral interest in what the believer has to say. A far better method entails continually pivoting to the gospel message and respectfully explaining Biblical-theological doctrine in addition to living an authentic Christian lifestyle.

To summarize, Stanley is creating an apologetic that accommodates the Scriptures to the views of the “nones” and the “deconverted” that he is attempting to reach. He recasts Biblical inspiration and the authority of Scripture. He also excludes the Old Testament as

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a viable apologetic and theological source. Additionally and sadly, he hints at the classic liberal view of differentiating and distinguishing the angry God of the Old Testament and the loving God of the New Testament.

7. His characterization of God is irresponsible.

Incredibly Stanley asserts that God's loving nature is unique to the New Testament, saying, "*God is love* is a uniquely Christian idea" (223). Stanley indicates that in the Old Testament God loved only His covenant people (Israel). Stanley also describes the God of the Old Testament as angry, judgmental, and mad, "putting everybody in time-out" (251).

To caricature the Great "I AM" through this kind of rhetorical wit is simply irresponsible in any setting and for any reason. Consider what Stanley says when describing the ancient world warfare: "The gods of the ancient world were human rights violators... . This was standard fare ... [so that if] the God of [the] Jews was going to establish a nation for himself, he would have to wade into the fray and play by the rules of the day" (163). Stanley is implying that God necessarily had to accommodate Himself to the horrific actions and lies of the ancient Near Eastern world and pantheon of gods. Then he implies, contrariwise, that in the New Testament God did not accommodate Himself to the vile notions of the Greco-Roman worldview. This kind of cherry picking denigrates the uniqueness of the Scriptures as God's Word and distorts God's nature. The Great "I AM" of the Old Testament is the same Lord of Lords that was revealed in the New Testament. To suggest otherwise is not orthodox.

Furthermore, Stanley fails to interject that the New Testament is replete with references to both God's love and His wrath. Interestingly, when discussing Hell, Stanley discusses the vice of being judgmental but does not address the reality of Hell. Certainly the wrath of God is seen throughout the New Testament in references to eternal damnation and the substitutionary atonement.

8. He undercuts the inspiration and authority of the entire Scriptures.

Stanley undermines Biblical inspiration and the authority of Scripture, including the New Testament. First, he insists that the Scriptures are not inspired but that the writers were inspired (a grave error). Second, he argues that the foundation of someone's faith is not the Scriptures, but God Himself (300–304), thus separating God from His Scriptural Self-expression.

Additionally, Stanley incorrectly argues that since the term *Bible* did not exist during the writing of Scripture and since New Covenant believers are no longer under the authority

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of the Old Testament, believers must not appeal to the Bible's or the Scriptures' authority. Stanley further bolsters his case by clever wordsmithing as he promotes an errant view of canonicity, writing, "The Bible did not create Christianity. It's the other way around" (111).

In the strictest sense, the actual term *Bible* may have not been used until the canon was fully discovered and put into the collected manuscript form; however, the apostles repeatedly referred to both their writings and the Old Testament as Scripture. Before the canon was fully recognized, church fathers also spoke of both Testaments as comprising Scripture. Long before the full canon, and based on the Old Testament as Scripture, the church fathers fully rejected both a works-righteous legalism and gnosticism.

Stanley writes that the "credibility of our faith is not contingent upon our text being infallible or inerrant." It rests securely in an "event" (the resurrection, 306). He ignores that the Scriptures both teach and theologize the resurrection.

Astonishingly Stanley says the Christian faith doesn't "teeter on the brink of extinction" or collapse based on the archaeology, history, historicity, credibility, or "even the believability of the Old Testament" (290). Further, he does not adequately address that approximately 10 percent of the New Testament quotes the Old Testament and that up to 28 percent alludes to the Old Testament. Stanley's position is illogical: The resurrection of Christ authenticated Jesus' person, work, and words, including His belief in the historicity of the Old Testament. Every New Testament writer appeals to the historicity and accuracy of the Old Testament. In fact, in [2 Peter 2](#), Peter uses the Old Testament to prove the promise of future judgment at Christ's return.

Stanley is correct that churches add unnecessary components to the gospel. He also correctly reveals the importance of engaging those who are doubting or are outright skeptics. Believers do need to learn the art of recrafting conversation and debate, thereby leading people back to the gospel. But recrafting a conversation does not entail recrafting, dismissing, or accommodating truth. Ministry leaders are called to equip the church to understand, practice, and defend the historical, Scriptural truthfulness of Christianity. Stanley's clever wordsmithing and methodology serve to undermine legitimate apologetics.

Conclusion

Stanley's call for this novel apologetic reveals an anemic theological method that has resulted in denying what the Scriptures teach about themselves. This denial then leads to confusing contextualization of the faith with cultural accommodation. But Christian truth cannot be adequately contextualized or defended unless there is clear understanding at

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the exegetical and theological level. Unfortunately Stanley is making the Bible resistible in order to make his “faith dialogue” and ministry appear irresistible.

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