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Three Nagging Problems with Andy Stanley's Approach to the Bible

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For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

— [1 Corinthians 1:17](#)

Pack a lunch.

By now, you are probably at least somewhat familiar with the firestorm resulting from NorthPoint Church pastor Andy Stanley's teaching on the Bible and its suitability for (initial) apologetic/evangelistic engagement, most notably found in [his recent teaching series](#) but also in [a conversation with Russell Moore at the most recent ERLC](#) conference. He has been called everything from a liberal to a heretic, and not all of the criticism has reflected biblical wisdom and charity. Two of the better critical offerings came from Southern Seminary's [David Prince](#) and Midwestern Seminary's [Rustin Umstatt](#). (There are many more. Google is your friend.)

[Stanley has formally issued a response to the responses at Outreach Magazine](#). It's this latter statement I want to spend some time interacting with, as I think his previous statements have been well-parsed and I find that—even after this attempted rebuttal and

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clarification—there are some glaring problems with Pastor Stanley’s approach to the Scriptures that not many are addressing. Certainly he isn’t addressing them himself. I am not certain he is even aware of them. Here, then, are three nagging problems I still have with Stanley’s use of the Bible:

1. Affirming the Bible’s inerrancy is not the same as trusting its sufficiency

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I can’t speak for other critics, of course, but I for one never doubted that *on paper* Stanley would affirm inerrancy. Indeed, in [his Outreach comments](#), he reaffirms his agreement with [the Chicago Statement](#).

He is referring here, of course, to Norman Geisler, and I found this shared exchange between the two rather telling in a way Stanley probably doesn’t intend:

“Andy,” [Geisler] said, “I understand what you are saying but not everybody does. You need to put something in print so they know you hold to inerrancy.” I assured him I would. But I also assured him the they he referred to wouldn’t change their opinion because I’ve been in this long enough to know my take on inerrancy is not really the issue. He laughed. “I know, but you need to put it in print anyway.”

So for anyone out there who is still a bit suspicious, I affirm The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. Heck, I studied under the man who co-authored the whole thing.

Stanley is right, I think. Inerrancy isn’t really the issue. At least, *formal, theoretical affirmation of inerrancy* is not the issue. Sure, one can quibble with his statements appearing to undermine the Old Testament accounts of the Jericho wall, and so on, but he is right that it is not his formal commitments that are problematic—it is the way he applies (or in this case, doesn’t apply) them.

As David Prince recently [tweeted](#), “Affirming inerrancy in principle, while rejecting its sufficiency in practice, is like saying your wife’s perfect while having an affair.” This is exactly right. To put it in parlance Stanley’s tribe may be more inclined to consider: as the apostle James says, “Faith without works is dead.” If you say you have faith, but your deeds do not show faithfulness, your faith is under question. Further, affirmation of inerrancy without the practical application of sufficiency is dead. If you believe the Scriptures are totally reliable, why would you obscure them?

Further—and this is by far the biggest error of the entire attractional church enterprise—this approach to teaching/preaching presumes that the Bible is not living and active, that

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the gospel is not power, that the book is in fact kind of an old, crusty thing that really should be saved for after people have been softened up by our logic and understanding. In other words, Stanley believes the Bible needs our help, that his words are more effective than the Bible's at reaching lost people. Which is just a way of saying that God's Word isn't good enough. A formal affirmation of inerrancy with a practical denial of sufficiency is actually an informal denial of inerrancy.

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2. Sharing the gospel necessarily entails leaning on the gospel's power.

I would be shocked if Stanley believed that anybody was ever argued into the kingdom. Surely he would agree that the best apologetic arguments and logical explanations have never been able to do what the good news of Christ's finished work can do. Which is what makes it even more fascinating to read Stanley (and others) bending over backwards to explain that the Bible needs to come *later* in an evangelistic conversation. I can't speak for all critics, but I agree with Stanley that apologetic/evangelistic conversations can take a variety of forms and begin in a variety of ways. We can ask questions, find common ground with our lost friends, and so on. But there's never any doubt in my mind that it's the good news of what Jesus has done that actually saves people. So it's increasingly strange to hear people whose entire model of "doing church" is built around reaching the lost continually relegating the news of the gospel to codas at the end of sermons or only for special services altogether.

It's beyond bizarre that in NorthPoint and other churches like it that are predicated on reaching the lost, every week you find not a steady dose of gospel but a steady dose of how-to's (law, basically) that not only can't save anyone, but can't even be carried out in a way that honors God unless and until someone's heart is captured by the gospel.

Stanley spends many paragraphs hand-wringing over the new post-Christian era in America—a phenomenon, I'd argue, his mode of evangelicalism has been highly influential in producing—attempting to lay the case that his approach to preaching and ecclesiology is best-suited for turning the spiritual tide. Here is one statement from this excursus:

I'm not sitting around praying for revival. ... I grew up in the pray for revival culture. It's a cover for a church's unwillingness to make changes conducive to real revival.

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Well, it can be. But “not sitting around praying for revival”—apart from being a strawman—can also be a cover for a church’s embrace of pragmatism. Stanley goes on to say this:

Appealing to post-Christian people on the basis of the authority of Scripture has essentially the same effect as a Muslim imam appealing to you on the basis of the authority of the Quran. You may or may not already know what it says. But it doesn’t matter. The Quran doesn’t carry any weight with you. You don’t view the Quran as authoritative.

This is really important. Don’t miss what Stanley is unintentionally revealing here. He is saying that the Bible has the same effect on the lost as the Quran. There is zero room here for the actual reality of the Bible as God’s living Word. There is zero room here for the *supernatural reality* that the Bible carries a weight with lost people they don’t often expect it to! But this inadvertent nod to materialism and pragmatism is certainly expected from those with a proven track record of treating the Bible like an instruction manual rather than as the record of the very breath of God. If we truly believed the Bible was the very word of God, inspired by the Spirit and still cutting through to the quick, dividing joint and marrow, we wouldn’t for a second save it for special occasions. And we certainly wouldn’t equate its potential effectiveness with the Quran’s.

Stanley says:

I stopped leveraging the authority of Scripture and began leveraging the *authority* and *stories* of the people behind the Scripture. To be clear, I don’t believe “the Bible says,” “Scripture teaches,” and “the Word of God commands” are incorrect approaches. But they are ineffective approaches for post-Christian people.

This is a big assumption that places Scripture under the authority of “what lost people want.” Certainly Jesus and Paul did not find that “according to the Scriptures” lessened the effectiveness of God’s word for pre-Christian people. I’m not sure why we should expect God’s Word would be less effective for post-Christian people unless we believe the Holy Spirit is at some great disadvantage because people are smarter than they used to be or something.

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Stanley's approach puts the post-Christian in the driver's seat; they are the ones with the authority, really. This doesn't mean our preaching shouldn't address questions and objections skeptics and doubters have. It simply means you don't let the questions move you off reliance on the gospel's power. (Tim Keller's preaching is a good example of that which is undeniably gospel-rich and yet directly applicable to key concerns and challenges lost folks have.)

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Later in the *Outreach* piece, Stanley cites Paul's words in [1 Corinthians 9:19-23](#) as a defense of using anything to reach people. But this of course is not what Paul says. He says "all possible means." The hitch here is on what one deems *possible*. If we take what else Paul has said about sharing the gospel, it is quite difficult to conclude, as Stanley appears to do, that "anything goes." This is a standard line in the attractional movement: "We'll do anything to reach people for Jesus" — anything, it appears, but rely on the sufficiency of the Word of God.

No, when Paul says "all possible means," he is speaking to his personal adaptability, not the gospel's. In any event, I am not sure what point Stanley is trying to drive here, as I don't know anybody who would deny the appropriateness of missional adaptability and contextualization. To me, this is another example of Stanley showing little understanding of his critic's actual concerns or their own methods. Our concern is not about missional contextualization but about the place of the Word of God in the mission, and the place of God in the church (which I'll get to in a minute).

If I may reiterate here an agreement I have with Andy Stanley (and nearly every other attractional church leader): we want lost people to know Jesus! We want the unsaved to be saved! We agree on this. And we also want to employ whatever is actually the most effective means of accomplishing this.

Stanley earlier said, simultaneously offensively and defensively, which is a neat trick:

Close to half our population does not view the Bible as authoritative either. If you're trying to reach people with an undergraduate degree or greater, over half your target audience will not be moved by the Bible says, the Bible teaches, God's Word is clear or anything along those lines. If that's the approach to preaching and teaching you grew up with and are most comfortable with, you're no doubt having a good ol' throw-down debate with me in your head about now — a debate I'm sure you're winning. But before you chapter and verse me against the wall and put me in a sovereignty-of-God headlock, would you stop and ask yourself a question: Why does this bother me so much? Why does this bother me so much — really?

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Well, he's just said we can't use the Bible to argue that the Bible's authority (sufficiency and potency) are "good enough," so that's convenient. He doesn't want to hear "chapter and verse." So that's telling. But I'll start with this: I did not grow up with the kind of gospel-centered expository preaching Stanley is denigrating here. In fact, I pretty much grew up in the kind of teaching Stanley has been part of pioneering. I was trained to preach and minister actually in the very model he's espousing. I ate, slept, breathed this stuff and 15 years ago would have been right there alongside him saying everything he is saying. What I've discovered, actually, is that, contrary to Stanley's approach to Scripture, the Bible's words are powerful. They don't need my help. And if we will proclaim Christ from the Bible clearly, passionately, and copiously, it will actually have the effect we all agree we want—people being saved by Jesus and growing in their walk with him.

I also submit that it is quite fascinating to discover that you will hear more good news in one of these "traditional"* churches doing gospel-centered expository preaching than you will in the attractional "5 steps to be a better whatever" churches every Sunday. I mean, let's suppose we actually care about lost people hearing lots of good news. This leads me to my final critique here:

3. Reducing the Bible in or removing the Bible from your worship service is how you show you don't know, biblically speaking, what a worship service is.

If I may speak to another issue I believe central to the more recent debate about the sufficiency and reliability of the Bible in worship gatherings and in evangelism and apologetic conversations with unbelievers: I think if we trace back some of these applicational missteps to the core philosophy driving them, we find in the attractional church a few misunderstandings. The whole enterprise has begun with a wrong idea of what — biblically speaking — the worship gathering *is*, and even what the church is.

In some of these churches where it is difficult to find the Scriptures preached clearly and faithfully as if it is reliable and authoritative and transformative as the very word of God, we find that things have effectively been turned upside down. In [1 Corinthians 14](#), Paul uses the word "outsider" to describe unbelievers who are present in the worship gathering. He is making the case for our worship services to be intelligible, hospitable,

* Stanley and others in the attractional tribe frequently bring up the label "traditional" as a kind of scare-label, a boogeyman to use against their critics, ignoring the fact that the traditional church is really kind of gone already and most of the kinds of churches where criticism for the attractional model might come from run the gamut in worship styles, building aesthetics, and Sunday attire. But it's easier for attractional leaders to be defensive by dismissing their critics as stuffy pharisaical institutional people.

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and mindful of the unbelievers present, but his very use of the word “outsider” tells us that the Lord’s Day worship gathering is not meant to be primarily focused on the unbelieving visitor but on the believing saints gathered to exalt their king. In the attractional church paradigm, this biblical understanding of the worship gathering is turned upside down—and consequently mission and evangelism are actually inverted, because Christ’s command to the church to “Go and tell” has been replaced by “Come and see.”

Many of these churches—philosophically—operate more like parachurches. And the result is this: it is the sheep, the very lambs of God, who basically become the outsiders.

This is by design in the attractional church. In an exchange on Twitter with a NorthPoint attendee a few weeks ago, he was making the case for treating the worship gathering like an evangelistic conversation with the lost and said to me, “Imagine you are in a coffee shop with an unbeliever...” I said to him (basically), “I don’t have to imagine that. I’ve been in that coffee shop and other places like it numerous times.” The point we agree on is that evangelistic conversations in coffee shops (or wherever) don’t need to sound like sermons. But it’s also this: the gathering of the saints for worship doesn’t need to sound like a coffee shop conversation with a lost person. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of what the worship service is. And of course this misunderstanding only breeds more errant practices, like the idea that you can conduct a worship gathering (or two or three) without any Bible in it. As if our very existence does not center on the power and authority of the Word of God. “Sorry, God, this morning we’re going to be ‘leveraging the power’ of stories.”

Stanley cites the example of Peter preaching to the Gentiles in Cornelius’s home, which in fact is a good example of one of those coffee shop-type evangelistic conversations. But it’s not a worship gathering. But in his example, Stanley still fudges a bit. He uses this exchange as proof that Peter does not appeal to the Bible’s authority, but in fact he does, just not in those words. You only need to look at the cross-references for [Acts 10:34-43](#) to see how much Bible is present in Peter’s evangelistic presentation, and of course there aren’t much clearer demonstrations of “thus saith the Lord” than the synonymous “All the prophets bear witness” in 10:43.

Of this line (in v. 43), Stanley says, “It reads as almost an afterthought.” We’ll have to agree to disagree on that.

In any event, I note two things: Peter is not not relying on the Scriptures in his exchange, but this exchange is not an example of a Lord’s Day gathering of the church. There is not really a biblical precedent for turning the gathering of believers into a “seeker service.” (I know, because I used to think there was and I looked.)

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In his last example, Stanley cites Paul's preaching in the Areopagus. It's a powerful scene, of course, but, again—it's not a worship service.

Look, if all Stanley is saying that the phrase "the Bible says so" is unnecessary and sometimes unhelpful: okay. But I think he's saying more than that. I think he's saying that, effectively, we have biblical precedent for turning a worship service without a Bible into a gospel presentation without a gospel. And I think he's wrong.

In his *Outreach* article Stanley subtly suggests that his critics don't actually know any "post-Christians." This is another standard self-defensive response, sort of the new "I like my way of evangelizing better than your way of not evangelizing." Or a new take on the strawman about Calvinists, that they don't evangelize. But it's lame. And out of touch. Like Stanley's strange rant about selfish parents in small churches, it demonstrates no awareness of the gospel-centered movement and its incredible commitment to church planting and multi-faceted approach to missional community. So it's time to lay down the defensiveness. As Stanley himself notes, the spiritual state of the United States is not great. The number of professing Christians is in decline—even as the number of attractional megachurches increases. Are approaches like Stanley's the frontlines of actual revival? No. In fact, as they continue to marginalize the Scriptures and treat the gospel like grandma's wedding china, they are actually part of the problem.

I believe what we need in our day is not to presume the ineffectiveness of the Holy Spirit working through the preached Word but to repent of our decades of pragmatic methodology and materialist theology and to reclaim the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ as the power of salvation for anybody, anywhere, any time. The United States desperately needs a church recommitted to the weird, counter-cultural supernaturalism of biblical Christianity. And this means a recommitment to rely on the gospel as power.

An Appeal to Andy Stanley and Others Like Him

I've been inside this model and was a huge advocate for it. I know what it's like to feel criticized by "traditional" church people who "don't get it." So I also know that for all the innovation and relevancy we espoused, we were also closed-off to considering criticism. My appeal to the attractional church folks is this: set aside the defensiveness and the idea that you've got it all figured out, just for a minute. Listen and consider. Don't write off anybody who objects to your methods as legalistic or pharisaical or stuffy or eggheads or unloving or old-fashioned. Unstop your ears. Consider the possibility that sincere motives don't baptize bad methods. And don't be afraid of the question, "What does the Bible say about this?" It is not irrelevant to this debate.

I would like to turn your own challenge back around:

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Are you willing to take a long, hard look at everything you're currently doing...? Are you ready to be a student rather than a critic? We don't have time for tribes. We don't have time for the petty disagreements that only those inside our social media circles understand or care about. We're losing ground. The most counterproductive thing we can do is criticize and refuse to learn from one another. So come on. If you believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, that's all I need to know. And in light of what's at stake, in light of who is at stake, perhaps that's all you need to know as well.

I would only offer this: When it comes to bodily resurrections, our Lord quotes in his parable this:

"If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead." — [Luke 16:31](#)

*Our worship shows whether we truly accept
God's Word as our authority and submit to it.
— John Calvin*

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