

21 TOXIC BELIEFS FROM THE BOOK TOXIC FAITH

Toxic Faith (a summary by B. Jackson)

1. INTRODUCTION

A. The following is a summary of the book Toxic Faith by Stephen Arterburn & Jack Felton (Oliver-Nelson, 1991)

B. I wrote this during the most trying time of my life when the issues raised by Arterburn and Felton came as a godsend to me. They apply the insights of family systems theory and religious addiction to life in the church. I helped to father a church in Indianapolis that had aspects of toxicity and these principles and truths enabled me to understand and explain much of my history in both my family of origin and the church

21 erroneous beliefs that can fuel toxic faith (various forms and degrees of unhealthy Christianity)

1. Security and significance with God depend on my behavior

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

1. The Bible and the Christian Church threaten God's punishments, including everlasting torment in Hell, on all who fail to behave. Christianity is the most toxic religion imaginable when it teaches that the lost who die will go to Hell forever. Even a sect that battered its recalcitrant members would be less controlling and mean.

A faith that says people will be damned for not having the right beliefs is worse than one that says people will be damned for failing to do good works.

2. When tragedy strikes, true believers should have a real peace about it

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

2. Asking people to be at peace when disaster strikes them is asking them to become complacent in the face of evil. It is putting pressure on them to pretend to be happy. It is being unsympathetic. If the believer "should" experience a real peace then the believer is being accused of being somehow defective if he or she doesn't. And you can't make yourself feel peace in the midst of tragedy. You either feel it or you don't. There is no should about it.

3. If you had real faith, God would heal you or the one you are praying for

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

3. Jesus himself said that faith heals. He started the deadly faith healing tradition that has contaminated the religious world since.

4. All ministers are men and women of God and can be trusted

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

4. The tendency to regard all men and women of God as trustworthy is especially strong among Catholics. The Protestants see the men and women of God as holy and trustworthy just because they have a minister role but the Catholic sees the priests, for example, as being that and more. The priest is seen as another Christ and in possession of Christ's greatest powers. The Catholics have seen priests and nuns - but not Protestant ministers - as worthy of absolute trust. This led to the culture of cover-up for child abuse and other crimes.

5. Material blessings are a sign of spiritual strength

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

5. The Old Testament God spoke of material blessings being a sign of his favour.

6. The more money you give to God, the more money he will give to you

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

6. Christianity teaches that God rewards all who give money to his cause. It might not be the reward of more money but a spiritual blessing. In response to point 6, Jesus Christ himself is to blame for the teaching of some that the more money you give the Church the more you will get back. Catholics tend to believe that God will give you back double the money you pay for the upkeep of the Church. Jesus said that if you abandon all for him you will get more back from him in return.

7. I can work my way to heaven

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

7. I can work my way to heaven is listed as a sign of toxic faith. Some people are happy to believe they have done enough to get in.

The Protestant belief that Jesus obeyed God for us to earn our heaven for us so that we can go there even if we are just after committing a murder is far more toxic.

8. Problems in your life result from some particular sin

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

8. Christians think that problems are all in the mind and the reason we suffer is because we are too prideful to accept what God allows to happen to us. They think we make our suffering worse by refusing to accept God's will.

9. I must not stop meetings other's needs

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

9. The Bible itself says that we must sacrifice ourselves to devote ourselves to the needs of others as if they were better than us. You are asked by Paul in the Bible to think of others as better than you.

10. I must always submit to authority

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

10. The notion that, "I must always submit to authority" is condemned. If I say I don't, I am wrong. I submit to my own authority. Believers say we must always submit to God's authority. Point 10 seems to be referring to constant submission to human authority. What is the problem with that? If its simply bad to have to obey somebody all the time then its bad whether or not it is God that is being obeyed.

As for the notion that its different to obey God all the time, we meet the following problem. Is anybody who follows man necessarily better off than anybody who follows man's interpretation of God and his will? There is no difference in reality.

11. God only uses spiritual giants

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

11 Nobody thinks that! Spiritual giants are no use on their own - they need to be of use to those who are not spiritual giants but who are just spiritual.

12. Having true faith means waiting for God to help me and doing nothing until he does

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

12 Jesus Christ did that. He refused to walk away from his impending execution though he had the chance.

The believer argues God is in control. If you help yourself, all you are doing is co-operating with how God has decided to help you. So you are not really helping yourself. It is a short step from the notion that your efforts in themselves are unimportant to the notion that you may do nothing to help yourself or others for God will help anyway. In fact, if it is all about God then helping yourself is not really helping yourself at all!

13. If it's not in the Bible, it isn't relevant (all truth is in the Bible)

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

13 True Christians believe that the Bible alone contains the essential knowledge that God wants us to have. This doctrine does not claim that there is no such thing as truth outside the Bible. Nobody would claim such a thing! But we do see that all that implies that the truth that matters and that we are obligated to accept is solely in the Bible. The one who truly accepts that cannot for example complain if somebody starts forbidding the creation of new medicines. To complain implies that there are truths outside the Bible that we have a duty to accept.

14. God will find me a perfect mate

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

14 Christians seem to believe that. They believe in prayer even though it fails half time. And any seeming benefits or results could have nothing to do with it.

15. Everything that happens to me is good

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

15 Christianity argues that evil is not a thing or a power. Rather it is merely good that is in the wrong place. Thus everything that happens to a person is in reality good.

God alone matters in Christianity. Thus the motive for assessing evil as not being a thing is to glorify God and give him a good reputation. It is not about helping people who demonise evil as if it were a power and who trap themselves in fear. It is not about compassion.

Suffering is real and no truly good person sees suffering as good that is in the wrong place and time.

16. A strong faith will protect me from problems and pain

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

16 Suffering is experiencing what is useless to you and others. If you bring good out of your suffering it does not follow that the suffering is any less bad. The good appears in spite of it and not because of it.

There is more glory in seeing good coming in spite of suffering. There is more courage in the person who refuses to use crutches and blindfolds when it comes to suffering. There is more wisdom in that person and that person will only get stronger. The crutch helps temporarily but it will break and break hard. Helping you to get and keep a crutch is the job of priests and ministers. They are the real enemy. A real friend wants you to stand on your feet and throw the crutch away.

Faith forbids you to see suffering as useless for an all-good God cannot allow useless suffering to happen. He would be evil himself if he did. So this doctrine suggests that a strong faith will not keep problems and pain away but will protect you a bit.

17. God hates sinners, is angry with me, and wants to punish me

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

17 The Bible repeatedly speaks of the anger and wrath of God. The teaching that Jesus has died for us on the cross claims that the anger and wrath is directed at us and Jesus just took the punishment for us. It's still our punishment though he bore it for us.

18. Christ was merely a great teacher

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

18 Surely the teaching of Christ if its useful and good is more important than Christ himself?

19. God is too big to care about me

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

19 The Catholics pray to saints for they don't want to deal with God directly. That's an example of a religion that thinks God is too big to care about people. But typically, it pretends not to think that!

20. More than anything else, God wants me to be happy (free from pain)

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

20 By condemning that view, Christianity shows its true colours.

The Church hates that view. It accuses God of needlessly allowing evil to happen. The Church argues that the reason God puts up with them is that it is his plan to make us good and happiness takes second place. If there is a choice, he wants you to be good and not happy.

A believer who thinks God opposes pain and suffering could be seen as motivated to fight them. But it won't last for it contradicts reality.

21. You can become God

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

21. The book condemns you thinking you are God. If God can allow evil to happen, why can't you think you are God and taking on human vulnerability for some purpose? In fact a religious faith that forbids you to think you are God is toxic. It insinuates that you are offending God and it doesn't matter if it helps you to think you are God.

Those who say they are servants of God are lying. They are servants of what they want to think about God. In other words, they hide their self-interest and call it God-interest. The God they give you is an idol they have created from perceptions and doctrines. By implication, they are the real gods for they give you God and create God for you. To honour their God is to honour them more. It is really honouring them not their creation.

C. 7 irrational thinking patterns common in religious addiction

1. Thinking in extremes: driven by an all or nothing, black or white mentality (no gray; my way or the highway) that causes the addict to be very hard on himself/herself and others

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

1 There is nothing more extreme than the Christian division of people into saved or unsaved and those ready for eternal Heaven and those fit only for eternal torture.

2. Drawing invalid conclusions, not based in reality; global thinking i.e., using words like "never, always."

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

2 Don't Christians say that God never lets you down? They deny that being let down is really being let down. Don't Pentecostal Christians often encourage taking stupid risks to prove your faith in God to be true? Don't Catholics say that blasphemy and sex outside marriage is always wrong? Don't Catholics say that Jesus was an ordinary man who was also God and who struggled to get himself to risk his life in the hope that God would raise him from the dead?

3. Filtering out the positive and distorting reality. These people selectively hear only the negative and are consequently negative about everything, especially themselves; in response to positive input they say, "yes, but..."

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

We are all selective.

The problem with religion is that it gives us extra stuff to be selective about!

4. Filtering out the negative and distorting reality. These people selectively hear only the positive to shield their already low self worth. They allow in themselves what they would condemn in others. A lot of relational wreckage; the weight of restitution can be crushing when they finally see it

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

If the Churches took point 4 seriously they would not last much longer.

5. Thinking with the heart; feelings become the basis for reality because I think my perception is "certainly accurate."

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

The Bible claims that God enables us to know what we do not know. Christians claim to know their faith is true. This doesn't make sense so they say its a miracle of God. They are in reality just pretending to know. All religious war mongers and bigots start off thinking they somehow know what they cannot know.

6. "Should, ought" thinking; constant self condemnation of not being able to measure up

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

Christianity says we have an evil nature. How's that then for self-condemnation?

Instead of thinking "I should" I should always think, "I could".

7. Co-dependency; egocentric feeling of being responsible for everything; must be in control; eyes always on the needs of others at the expense of their own

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

Jesus Christ was an all or nothing teacher. He said that whoever is not for him is against him. He exaggerated how bad the unfulfilled willingness to sin is. He made out that looking at a woman in lust is committing adultery with her in one's heart and that the one who hates should be treated like a murderer.

Christians themselves engage in global thinking. They say God always answers their prayers. Even when they don't get what they ask for they say he gave them something better so he did answer them after all.

Believers often feel that if they feel something is true that makes it true. An atheist would see through the folly of doing that. But the believer imagines that his feelings are a communication from the Holy Spirit. The believer is more likely then to be irrational than the atheist.

It is interesting that the list condemns "should" thinking when the Bible is full of commandments from God and Jesus about what we "should" do.