

Book Review:

Jesus Is _____, Find a New Way to Be Human, by Judah Smith (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 202 pp., paper \$16.99

Judah Smith and his wife Chelsea are lead pastors of the City Church in Seattle, Washington, and rising stars within the evangelical community. *Jesus Is _____* has been on the New York Times Bestseller's List and is endorsed by an interesting number of Christian leaders including the controversial Steven Furtick, pastors from Hillsong Church in New York City, Tommy Barnett, Matthew Barnett (the founder of the Los Angeles Dream Center), bizarre pastor Ed Young, golfer Bubba Watson and the stylist for Justin Bieber. Bieber calls Smith his pastor. Smith was a featured speaker at Lou Giggio's 2013 Passion Conference, along with Beth Moore and John Piper, where he spoke to 60,000 young people under the age of 25. The book *Jesus Is _____* is part of a large campaign of billboards, bus signs, Facebook apps, bumper magnets and social outreach events in the Seattle area. The idea behind the project was to get people thinking about who Jesus is.

Smith follows in the vein of other young, popular "postmodern" Christian authors (his style reminds me of Rob Bell's) who are long on hype, short on content and too happy with contradictions and frustrations to really understand. Smith admits that he does not think in a linear fashion and it shows when one tries to comprehend his message. In an effort to do so this reviewer will break *Jesus Is _____* into several categories:

Correct Teachings

At points Smith articulates correct biblical teachings such as one's inability to rely on good deeds for salvation (pp. 15, 94), the wrongness of judgmentalism (p. 19), Jesus' love for us despite our sins (p. 26), spiritual birth being by grace through faith (p. 43), the impotence of rules to save us (p. 56), Christ having dealt with our sins on the cross (pp. 68-72), the three components of sin: guilt, power and effect (pp. 68-69), Jesus as the point of life (pp. 96, 110, 112), God seeing Christians as righteous (pp. 101, 195), the mercy of God toward mankind (pp. 174-175), the good news of Jesus'

resurrection (p. 181), and fearfulness being an indictment against God (p. 185).

In emphasizing these cardinal truths, among others, we can rejoice. Smith proclaims rightly many of the fundamentals of the faith. Someone reading *Jesus Is _____* will not be led astray by works-righteousness, but instead will recognize that salvation is only possible because of the grace of God received by faith alone. That Jesus is to be the focus of our lives is also strongly emphasized. These are some of the commendable points in the book. But, sadly, all is not well.

Contradictions and Errant Teaching

Jesus Is _____ is filled with statements that contradict much of its solid teachings, as well as numerous exaggerated comments and harmful theology. Below is a sampling accompanied by brief rebuttals:

- Jesus is not your accuser...He is not your judge. He's your friend and rescuer (p. 12).

Rebuttal: Throughout the book Smith is speaking to both believers and unbelievers. This must be kept in mind. Such statements pointed toward unbelievers are clearly untrue for [Romans 5:10](#) tells us that before salvation we are the enemies of God. Jesus is their rescuer but only if they receive Him as Savior. For those who reject Him, Christ is in fact their judge. Even Smith would have to admit that Jesus was not the friend of the Pharisees but rather their accuser. Jesus' friendship for believers is true but it must be recalled that Jesus said, "You are my friend if you do what I command" ([John 15:14](#)).

- Jesus wasn't out to prove how good He was or how bad they were. He just wanted to offer them hope (p. 22).

Rebuttal: This is absolutely untrue. Jesus needed to demonstrate the perfect sinless life as He came to reveal the Father ([John 1:18](#); see [Mark 10:18](#)). As for the people, hope could be found in Christ only as they recognized their hopelessness because of their wickedness. It is the sick who need a physician ([Mark 2:5, 17](#)), and Jesus exposed their sin-sickness. He in fact showed them how bad they were so that they would see a need for a Savior.

· You don't have to be good to be Jesus' friend. You just have to be honest (p. 22).

Rebuttal: It is true that our good deeds cannot win the favor of God which comes as His gift to the redeemed. However, there is no justification in Scripture to say that we become Jesus' friend by being honest. In this case honesty is just another empty good deed.

· To see oneself as a "filthy sinner who deserves to go to hell" is an "extreme [which] come[s] from focusing on rules rather than on a relationship with Jesus" (p. 25).

Rebuttal: In ourselves we are filthy sinners who deserve hell (see [Eph 2:1-3](#)) and the Law of God was given to demonstrate this. It is only the mercy of God that makes us righteous.

· We are to be friends of sinners but not to rebuke or evangelism them (p. 28).

Rebuttal: Friendship with the lost is an honorable thing, but Smith goes too far. Being my friend will do no one any eternal good per se, neither was it Jesus' mission ([John 1:36](#)) nor our commission ([Matt 28:19-20](#)). We are called to make disciples.

· Jesus showed unconditional acceptance (p. 31).

Rebuttal: Hardly! Only those who meet the condition of receiving Christ become His children ([John 1:11-12](#)).

· People would fall in love with Jesus if we would only act more like Him (p. 31).

Rebuttal: When Jesus acted like Jesus, the world despised Him and crucified Him. Such a statement reveals Smith's misunderstanding of the depravity of mankind, as well as its attraction to Christ. By nature people reject Christ.

· People are closer to God than we realize (p. 31).

Rebuttal: On the contrary, people are alienated from God and without hope ([Eph 2:12](#)). [Romans 3:11-12](#) tells us that "none seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless."

- Jesus is not mad or disappointed in us (p. 61).

Rebuttal: Jesus was clearly disappointed with His disciples at times, even as He loved them ([Mark 8:14-21](#)). Paul was clearly disappointed with those who abandoned the work of God (see [2 Tim 1:15](#); [4:10](#)). Jesus pronounce scathing “woes” on the Pharisees—He was in fact deeply disappointed with them ([Matt 23:13-36](#)).

- After writing that Jesus is the point of life (p. 96), Smith then claims we are Christ’s first priority and He is not in a hurry to fix us (p. 101).

Rebuttal: The glory of God is His first priority, and the Lord earnestly desires to mold us into the image of Christ for His glory ([Romans 8:28-30](#)). While our Lord is never anxious He in fact is constantly drawing us to maturity ([Col 1:28](#)).

- People can be accepted and belong to Jesus long before they believe (pp. 126, 135).

Rebuttal: We do not belong to Jesus before we believe. Prior to faith we are His enemies ([Romans 5:10](#)), alienated from God, hostile to Him and engaged in evil deeds ([Col 1:21-22](#)). Jude warns of those who do not know Christ attempting to be part of the church (Jude 12-13).

- As an example of those who belong before they believe are homosexuals (p. 126).

Rebuttal: [Romans 1:26-29](#) shows clearly that those living in homosexual sin have been “let go” by God to live in their sin. They in no sense should experience belonging to Him prior to salvation. Instead they will not inherit the kingdom of God ([1 Cor 6:9](#)). By God’s grace and power, however, homosexuals, like other sinners, can be justified and then belong to the Lord ([1 Cor 6:11](#)).

- All 66 books of the Bible point to God’s love for humanity (p. 151).

Rebuttal: Perhaps God’s love could be read into every book, but a number of books (e.g. Obadiah, Amos, Joel) are written to warn of, or announce, God’s judgment for sin.

· While never totally denying God's wrath and judgment, Smith brushes it aside as quickly as possible because it simply does not fit his feel good message. For example he writes, "Well they say, sometimes he comes in his wrath, and he comes with judgment, and he comes –*Hold on*. You mean to tell me that you don't think God is for you? He's so far for you that he died for you. What other proof do you need" (p. 157)?

Rebuttal: Smith is taking [Romans 8:31-32](#) out of context and misapplying it. It is true for the Christian that God is for us and His love will never be taken away from us. But that does not mean that God's wrath is not being poured out even now on unbelievers ([Rom 1:18](#)) nor that He has, and will, come in judgment upon the unrepentant ([Rev 14:9-20](#)).

· Smith, while admitting bad things happen to good people (p. 159), seems to misunderstand both how God uses suffering (p. 158) and implies, through the misuse of [Jeremiah 29:11](#), that God plans only good things for us (p. 158).

Rebuttal: For the believer the Lord works all things together for good ([Romans 8:28](#)), but no such promise is given the unbeliever (see [Psalm 73:18-20](#)). Even for the Christian God's sovereign plan leading towards good often includes pain, suffering and hardship ([James 1:2-4](#); [1 Peter 5:10](#)). [Jeremiah 29:11](#) is not a promise to all people at all times that God plans only good for them. In the context it is a promise to Israel about a definite time in the future. Other Scriptures speak of God's plans to bring suffering at times, but these are seldom quoted by most people (e.g. Jere 39:16).

· While correct that God is far greater than Satan and that ultimate victory is ours, Smith greatly minimizes the power of Satan when he writes, "We are opposed by a little bitty devil...The devil is nothing but a dog on a leash. He is a toothless lion. He is a magician hiding behind a curtain, trying to manipulate us through smoke and mirrors" (pp. 187-188).

Rebuttal: Scripture presents a far more potent foe who is seeking to devour and destroy us ([1 Peter 5:8](#); [Eph 6:10-18](#)). Satan is not omnipotent but we must always be on guard for his schemes and temptations ([2 Cor 2:11](#)).

Unbalanced Statements

It is hard to put a label on this next category of concerns. Smith is the consummate cheerleader; as such he wants his readers to be happy, to feel

good about themselves, to be an optimist like himself. To press his message he is willing to distort Scripture through exaggeration, out-of-balanced, one-sided arguments, and pure fabrication. The result is a mix of half-truths, erroneous views of Jesus and the Christian life, all packaged in an unrealistic wrapper. Some examples:

- God is so proud of us that He is constantly posting photos of us in heaven (p. 46). Of course, nothing like this is found in the Bible.
- “Grace is a person and his name is Jesus” (p. 51). No, Jesus is a person who is characterized by grace, as well as many other attributes including justice and wrath.
- Although Scripture abounds in commands to teach, exhort, instruct and admonish one another ([2 Tim 4:22-5](#); [Rom 15:14](#)), Smith says that the longer he is a pastor “the less prone I am to tell people what to do and the quicker I am to just hug them and pray with them” (p. 59). Hugs are often appropriate and may make people feel better but it is the Word of God that equips us for every good thing ([2 Tim 3:16-17](#)).
- Smith assures us that we would be “blown away” if we knew what Jesus thought of us. Jesus is crazy about us, obsessed with us and proud of us (pp. 77-78). This is a pure man-centered view of how the Lord sees His people. His love is real and deep, but He is not a doting grandfather who just can’t get enough of us.
- The author mocks Christians struggling with sin and misrepresents the purpose of the Law. To such people he apparently recommends “a little sin might do you good” (p. 95). While emphasizing love and grace, Smith shows little of either toward those battling sin. He is overly tolerant toward those who live in open sexual sin, but has no tolerance for those who are judgmental or legalistic. This plays well in our society which will tolerate anything but intolerance.
- Smith totally misunderstands the book of Ecclesiastes when he says that the “high point of the book is that everything is meaningless” (p. 107). On the contrary the high point is showing that the meaninglessness of life should drive us to consider God (12:13-14).
- We are assured by Smith that “Jesus was the happiest guy around. He told jokes. He poked fun at people. He laughed” (p. 123). Of course none of this

is found in Scripture; this is pure fabrication. We are told that Jesus was “a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief” ([Isaiah 53:3](#)), but never that He laughed, poked fun or told jokes. Perhaps He did, but if so neither we or Smith knows it. When we start adding characteristics to Jesus not supported by revelation we border on blasphemy.

- Speaking of blasphemy, on three occasions Smith uses the popular blasphemous slang phrase, “Oh, my God” (pp. 128, 145, 187). Such terms may relate to his audience but it profanes the name of God.
- The author’s view of inspiration is weak. When addressing John’s comment that he was the disciple Jesus loved Smith claims John is flaunting that he is Jesus’ favorite. That is bad enough but Smith adds, “Was he Jesus’ favorite? We don’t know. It doesn’t really matter, because he believed he was” (p. 148, cf. p. 150). The Holy Spirit is not recording John’s opinion, but rather that which is true.
- And it gets worse because it doesn’t matter, Smith believes, if John thought he was Jesus’ favorite because the truth is “We are all God’s favorites.” In addition to being a line directly out of the heretical novel *The Shack*, there is no biblical support for such a statement. It fits well with the world’s current philosophy in which we are all winners and all equal. But we know that the Lord chose some to be His ([Eph 1:4](#)) and He handpicked only twelve to be His apostles, etc. How all this works out in the mind of God is a mystery to us, but to put into the Lord’s mouth that we are all His favorites is both meaningless and beyond Smith’s knowledge.
- In addition, like some sort of starry-eyed teenager we learn that God “is head-over-heels in love with you...and your biggest fan” (p. 156). While attempting to elevate the love of God such language cheapens it.
- Zombies are all the rage these days, so of course Jesus is described as the ultimate zombie (p. 179). But zombies are supposedly the living-dead. There is nothing dead about Jesus. He died but He has been resurrected and is fully alive. This zombie metaphor again belittles the person of Christ.

Miscellaneous Silliness

Smith is popular today because he is entertaining. He gives the main Bible characters accents when he preaches—of course accents that they did not have (p. 5). His imagination borders on the absurd. He envisions Zacchaeus,

for example as a gangster of the hip-hop variety. They rolled out the red carpet and cameras showed up when he made an appearance with a lady on each arm, wearing sunglasses and greeting people with “Hey y’all” (pp. 5-7). When Jesus ate with sinners they enjoyed being with Him because He was just “chilling” with them (p. 29). In heaven Jesus is “lounging around with His feet kicked up and a cold drink in His hand” (p. 193). While entertaining, these pictures are neither accurate nor respectful of true people, and especially of Christ. Our Lord is not an eternal teenager lounging around and chilling. Such depictions of Him are inappropriate at best.

CONCLUSION

The message of *Jesus Is _____* could be summed up toward the end of the book. “[Jesus] is telling me that he is proud of me, that he is pleased with me, that I am amazing” (p. 195). There is much talk in the book about how amazing Jesus is, but when the dust has settled it is this man-centered, feel-good message that has made

Jesus Is _____ a New York Times best seller. While we can appreciate the accurate teaching within the book, it is distorted by the deep inaccuracies documented above. Truth mixed with this much error is truly a dangerous thing.

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