

**On Emerging from the Protestant Theological Cocoon: A Radical Reframing
of the Biblical Message for Pentecostals and Charismatics:
An Introduction to Jon Ruthven's *What's Wrong with Protestant Theology:
Traditional Religion vs. Biblical Emphasis* (Tulsa: Word & Spirit Press, 2013)**

**Jon Mark Ruthven, PhD
Professor Emeritus,
Regent University School of Divinity**

A story in the Talmud, “The Oven of Akhnai” (*Bava Metzia* 59b), recounts a dispute over an interpretation of the Torah that broke out among some prominent early rabbis probably about the time the Gospel of John was written. John’s gospel came quite possibly in *response* to this interpretation that defined normative Judaism, and traditional Christianity, ever since.

A small time Jewish contractor had built an outdoor oven to rent out to the neighborhood. He made an innovative “beehive coil” pattern of ropes of clay separated by a layers of sand. Someone complained to authorities that this arrangement could become unkosher. This Jewish FDA/EPA arrived to shut down his operation. Akhnai filed a restraining order in the person of the highly charismatic, and feared, rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (40-120CE), who believed, against the majority on the rabbinic committee, that his client’s oven was perfectly kosher.

To prove it, he made 49 arguments from the Torah; he caused a Carob tree to be uprooted, thrown, and planted 100 cubits away (some said, 400); he also made a stream to flow backwards, and in a particularly personalized attack, he made a wall in the rabbinic academy to collapse. If all this weren’t enough, the heavenly voice (*bat qol*) went forth to the debaters saying, “Why are you disputing with R. Eliezer, for his *Halakhah* is correct at all times and all places.”

So what do you want for a nickel? Shouldn’t that end the discussion if *God himself* came down on the side of R. Eliezer? Well, the majority opinion, even today, stands firm, *against the voice of God*, on the principle that once God revealed the written Law (Torah) to mankind, it remained for only the scribes (rabbis, experts in the *Torah/Law*) to interpret it. Miracles and even the voice of God were not enough to interfere with the mandate of the scribes to interpret and apply the Law to mankind. They rejected this

divine interference ostensibly on Deut 30:12, but more firmly on Deut 17:11.¹ If rabbis divide over an interpretation (*halakah*), they are “to incline toward the majority [the many]” (Ex 23:2)² and not to defer to God for the understanding. Despite this position, the scribes in this story hedged their bet: they weren’t finished: they recruited Elijah the prophet to inquire of “The Holy One, Blessed Be He” to confirm their *halakah* that Akhnai’s oven was not kosher. Elijah reported back that the Holy One laughed out loud, and exclaimed, “My children have defeated me! My children have defeated me!”

This position of normative Judaism, as we have seen in the biblical material outlined in my new book *What’s Wrong with Protestant Theology*, clearly violates the overwhelming teaching and modeling of the Hebrew Scriptures themselves! Nevertheless, a modern Jewish scholar summarizes the consensus of his community today on excluding any divine input (prophecy, miracles, illumination) in interpreting the Law, once it was given by God:

If the law is the product of the agreement of people and sovereign, and itself creates the sovereign, the sovereign must be bound by it. The Holy One is the God of Israel because of the covenant at Sinai and that covenant, though dictated by Him, doesn’t create Him as its interpreter. The Law, rather, is not in Heaven and doesn’t require Heavenly intervention to be understood. So, God’s sovereignty itself requires His withdrawal from the system; the covenant, and its internal logic, must be allowed to work itself out without further divine intervention. We, not the human or divine Authors of the covenant, must take control of it. (Cited from online lecture by Daniel Greenwood at Hofstra University: <http://bit.ly/oF5tSI>)

Most charismatic Christians would be aghast at people’s rejecting the voice of God as authoritative, especially when they *acknowledge* it is the voice of God. Isn’t this similar to Jesus’ saying about blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (Matt 12:31–32, also Heb 6:4–6)? This certainly clarifies Jesus’ complaint in John 5:37b–39 against the scribes. A sage of the early Hellenistic period summarizes the position of

¹ "For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. ¹² It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' ¹³ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' ¹⁴ But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (Deu 30:11-14 ESV).

“And you shall come to the Levitical priests and to the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision. ¹⁰ Then you shall do according to what they declare to you from that place that the LORD will choose. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you. ¹¹ According to the instructions that they give you, and according to the decision, which they pronounce to you, you shall do. You shall not turn aside from the verdict that they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left. ¹² The man who acts presumptuously by not obeying the priest who stands to minister there before the LORD your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall purge the evil from Israel” (Deu 17:9-12 ESV).

² Ex 23:2, astonishingly, *denies* that one should simply side with the majority in a court case, but judge it only on its merits.

rabbinic Judaism: “Up to now prophets have prophesied by the holy spirit [*sic*], from now on, incline your ear and listen to the words of the sages” (*Seder ‘Olam Rab.*, 30). Apparently against the Christian emphasis (was the Oven story really about Jewish conflict with Christians who did “*not* refuse the One who speaks?”), Jewish scholars were not to appeal to any intervention by God—his miracles or even his direct word—to decide on applying His Torah (since, to their thinking, they had probably ceased anyway).

If we think about it, however, this Jewish position is essentially that of scholastic Protestantism (paragraph 1 of WCF) and of many conservative evangelicals today. This Talmudic position lays out the essence of traditional Protestant theological education, which is all about endless *information* ranging from such “teachers of the Law” as Sunday school teachers, preachers, and scholars. Thus Protestantism focuses on “repent and be baptized” (preparation) and very little on encounter with God’s prophetic voice: “and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (the goal of the preparation) in Acts 2:38–39, a text that fulfills John’s description of Jesus’ mission as bestowing the Spirit (Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33).

Against this scribal position (learning and obeying a document), apparently well-established by his time, Jesus’ main criticism of these scribes (teachers of the Law) went directly against their normative, definitive approach, which denied both miracles (signs) and immediate revelation into one’s heart, in order to discern and apply God’s will for their lives:

But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John [“John did no miracle”]. For the *works* that the Father has given me to accomplish, the *very works that I am doing*, bear *witness* about me that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent Me, He has borne witness of Me [in signs]. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. And you do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent. [Isn’t this R Eliezer’s line of argument?] You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life. (John 5:36–40)

.....
But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say? (Jn 5:46-47)

Ruthven, "On Emerging from the Protestant Theological Cocoon:
A Radical Reframing of the Biblical Message for Pentecostals and Charismatics"

Jesus, against traditional religion of all ages, faithfully follows the emphasis of the Bible, which is to promote the central mandate of mankind: to hear and heed God's voice and to imitate Jesus, who modeled this perfectly. This "word of the Lord" draws us into intimacy with Him, while directing us to confront evil, even at great cost and pain, because it opposes God's life and rule. But following a characteristically human tendency to avoid God's voice, the Protestant tradition, following rabbinic Judaism explicitly, focused on exposition of Scripture, which resulted in de-emphasizing the central goal Scripture itself proclaims. This central goal is not only intimacy and communication with God but also acknowledging God's work prophetically and asserting His authority over the created order to guard it against the serpent and destroyer (Gn 1:26–28; 2:15; Mark 3:14; Luke 10:17–21). Christians live by a messianic epistemology based on immediate revelation by the Holy Spirit as its ideal—even central—characteristic, as Isaiah 11:2–3 shows. Is not this prophecy of the Messiah also an example to be followed?

The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears.

The mandate, then, is to hear God's immediate voice, which usually commands the hearer to live out an experience of God's might working against opposition and testing. Scripture describes this process as faith.

By contrast, the Protestant tradition has focused on the *preparation* for the life of faith. The Protestant central focus was born of a specific conflict over a fairly simple question: "How much does it cost to go to heaven?" Against the greed of a decaying Church, which was offering passes out of Purgatory for a price, the Reformers came up with an answer: "It's free, and here's why." This answer centered subsequent theology on the atonement of Christ for sin as the New Covenant. To support this new doctrinal emphasis, the Reformers' theology stripped the authority of the Pope and Church tradition by placing it on the "apostles' doctrine" in the Holy Scriptures as expressed in the creeds. The Reformation generally defended their emphasis on scriptural authority by denying any "miracles" or revelatory spiritual gifts which might be used to accredit or form new doctrine (whether Catholic or Radical

Reformation). To a large extent, scholastic Protestantism followed the creedal tradition of the Church by explicitly substituting an intellectual knowledge of doctrine for a knowledge of God by immediate revelation in, or to, the human heart. This issue was central when Jesus confronted the scribes, "His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen" (Jn 5:37). This doctrine of "It is not in heaven," excluded the voice of God (or his miracle power) from influencing the conduct of one's life.

This conflict is the central issue Paul addresses in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, in the contrast of the two covenants in 2 Cor 3. The whole Book of Hebrews addresses this same conflict: will the reader regress into the old covenant or enter the new covenant of the Torah written in the heart? Three times the readers are urged, "*Today*, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts [ability to 'hear'] as in rebellion" (3:7, 15; 4:7). The climax of the epistle is the admonition to enter the new covenant of the Spirit: "Do not refuse the One who speaks" (12:25).

In rejecting the immediate voice of God, as expressed in the so-called "revelatory" and "extraordinary" charismata, Protestants took a wrong turn in that the scriptural authority they sought to defend emphasized the very miracles and especially the immediate, ongoing revelatory voice of God that they denied (the point of John 5:43–47). Their emphasis upon "salvation" from sin by repentance and baptism expresses a "gospel of preparation", which is contrary to the emphasis of Scripture itself. This gospel Jesus himself introduced (Is 61:1–2>Luke 4:18); modeled in his earthly ministry of kingdom power; ratified in his blood; vindicated by his resurrection; and now bestows from heaven. He even becomes the New Covenant by his very presence in our lives. This mission of Jesus, clearly emphasized in the New Testament, is described in *What's Wrong with Protestant Theology*, Part IV: Where Is Jesus in All of This? (pp 203-41).

Jesus' mission was to introduce and mediate the kingdom of God, the Spirit of God, and the New Covenant (the three concepts are largely synonymous but retain distinct senses). The goal of his mission is expressed in the call to action within the charter message of Christianity: the Pentecost address of Acts 2. There, vv. 38–39 allude to a rarely noticed promise of the Spirit of prophecy in Isaiah 59:19–21. This

Ruthven, "On Emerging from the Protestant Theological Cocoon:
A Radical Reframing of the Biblical Message for Pentecostals and Charismatics"

promised Spirit is the essence of "My covenant with them" (Is 59:21). Peter, in typical rabbinic practice, summarizes "this promise/covenant is for you and your children" in the following citation:

"And as for me, this is my covenant with them," says the LORD: "My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children's offspring," says the LORD, "from this time forth and forevermore." (Isa 59:21 ESV)

The revelatory-prophetic nature of this covenant comports with the more familiar New Covenant passage from Jeremiah 31:31–34, where the knowledge of the Lord is described as immediate, written in the heart, not taught by tradition.

This book establishes this thesis after outlining the key features of Protestant theology, by showing that the central emphasis of Scripture involves the process of the prophetic word of God coming to mankind, directly and immediately into individual hearts.

This emphasis of Scripture is proven by:

- the recurring, central plot line of biblical narratives
- the central temptation to mankind (Gn 3; Matt 4||Luke 4)
- the essence of the New Covenant as prophetic revelation by the Spirit, and
- the central, explicit mission of Jesus: to bestow the prophetic Spirit.
- and the explicit details in Jesus' commissions to his disciples.

The work then specifies this biblical emphasis through a concluding section showing Protestant distortions of discipleship—how the essential nature of the gospel is vitiated by traditional, anti-biblical methods of transmitting God's message—and experiential reality—to the next generations.

So What *Is* Wrong with Protestant Theology?

Let's start with the positive: Protestants did a lot of things right. Protestants challenged the idolatry of greed and the usurpation of power in the traditional Church. Protestants initially tried to remove the highly-evolved system of "mediators" or buffers between God and man, ranging from "the Mother of God" (Mary), the Pope, the saints, and the "vicars" of Christ representing the Pope, that is, the priesthood. Luther introduced the idea of the priesthood of all believers (that is, until his movement started taking it a little too seriously by going charismatic and undermining his academic authority).

This unshackling of the individual believer, however, succeeded in shifting the power to grant "salvation" to God himself in Christ Jesus and away from the manipulation of traditional religion. The power shift also moved authority from Papal encyclicals to the Scriptures, and from the Pope to the first Popes (the apostles). "Saints" became all those who were regenerated by the power and blood of Christ, a sacrifice that released "unmerited favor" (grace) that was given to all who expressed "saving" faith. These were liberating concepts, that historians claim planted the seeds of the scientific and industrial revolutions, as well as the political revolution toward freedom and democracy.

On the other hand, when we examine Reformation theology, hastily(?) forged as it was, in the heat of polemics and persecution, and measure it against the emphases of Scripture (believed to be the prime source of authority for Protestants), then we can see the essential flaws. Again, the emphasis markers of the Bible are the temptation narratives, the common plot line of narratives, central characteristics of biblical role models (Heb 11), conceptual repetitions, space devoted, summary statements, goal statements, and the covenants, etc. All of these emphasis markers point to the primal biblical experience: the New Covenant Spirit that causes us to "hear" and "know" God, resulting in our being empowered to fulfill His "word" of commission. With this in mind, herewith is a list of what's wrong with Protestant theology:

- 1) **Christian Epistemology.** For all the emphasis the Protestants placed upon Scripture as their ultimate doctrinal authority, they tended to use the Bible as a source for proof texts rather than

allowing it to speak with its own voice and emphasis. As Protestantism expanded the creeds into their catechisms, theologies, and institutes, it becomes clear that the emphases of Protestantism were not shaped by the emphases of Scripture. I have argued here that even the earliest Protestant academics had been so trained in this “wrong tree” epistemology, that their starting point and thinking is far closer to that of the Jewish scribes of Jesus’ time than the epistemology (directly “hearing” and obeying the Father) of Jesus himself. This starting point spun off into other crucial flaws that substantially clouded the message of Scripture.

- 2) Hence, **the notion of “word” in Protestantism shaded more toward a collection of ideas—a creed, assent to which conferred the status of “Christian.”** Motivated by the fear of runaway Spirit movements and by claims to revelation and ultimate authority by the papacy, Protestants refused in practice, if not in theology, the central theme of the Bible: the word of God as directly and normatively revealed in the human heart that demanded obedience. The New Testament idea of “word” included, not only its prophetic verbal nature, but its wondrous power as well. As a consequence...
- 3) **Signs and wonders, the central way God (and his Son) revealed himself in the Bible, were rejected by Protestants as obsolete devices** to “prove” doctrine—as “signs” with no value except as they pointed to an accredited Gospel creed. This misconception resulted in ...
- 4) **The loss of the “big picture” of Jesus’ mission.** The Protestant alternative to the Mass and the sale of indulgences (which got you sprung from Purgatory), was their emphasis on the “free” gift of Christ’s sacrifice, which paid for our damning sins. By contrast, the New Testament portrays Jesus’ Kingdom mission as introducing, modeling, ratifying, vindicating, commissioning, and bestowing the New Covenant charismatic Spirit—a synonym for the Kingdom of God—a concept traditional theology largely ignored (See Sec. III in *What’s Wrong*). Within Protestantism, the Reformed tradition ironically failed to grasp the essentially charismatic nature of its own central tenet: the New Covenant!

- 5) By denying Jesus' central Kingdom mission, **traditional Protestantism seriously messed up New Testament discipleship**, by denying the essential work of the Spirit in the life and mission of the believer. The New Testament emphasizes that a disciple necessarily takes the commissioning accounts seriously by imitating the mission of Jesus Christ exactly: that is, to minister in the power of the charismatic Spirit to advance the Kingdom of God throughout the world (Lk 24:14; Mt 28:19-20), as well as within the Christian community (Rom 12; 1Cor 12-14; 1 Th 5:19-21; 1 Pt 4:10-11).
- 6) Instead, **in traditional theology, the believer's role is essentially that of a consumer: to receive "salvation," meaning a place in heaven, and to "be good" until then.** In this, Protestantism, failed to "discern the body," that is, those endowed with charismatic blessing, the New Covenant in the blood of Christ, which ratified this charismatic "inheritance/blessing" found in the "body of Christ" (1 Cor 11-14). Crucially, traditional Protestantism fails to grasp the central essence of the biblical message: that "the Kingdom of God does not consist of talk but of miracle power"—that "your faith not rest on persuasive words of 'wisdom,' but on God's miracle power" (1 Cor 4:19-20; 2:4-5, cf. Rom 1:16; 1 Th 1:5; 1 Pt 1:5).

So what is wrong with traditional Protestant theology? It tends to deny the very Scripture it purports to defend, especially as the Bible centrally points away from itself to the experience of God in personal revelation and power. It's a case of "focus on the finger." It fails to appreciate the wider mission and Gospel of Jesus as bearer and bestower of the Spirit. It is enslaved to a pagan educational system that values a "detached" uncommitted "objectivity" toward its subject, and which either devalues, ignores, or even denies the core experiences and empowering of a true, New Testament disciple.

In contrast to a traditional Christian "disciple" as one who is primarily a consumer of grace ("unmerited favor") to produce "fruit" of an ethical life, a New Testament disciple is one who receives grace ("generous empowering">charismata) to live out the New Covenant mission in the Spirit of

prophecy and power, to fulfill *all* the commissioning accounts, including those traditionally limited to the apostles (Mt 10; Mk 6; Lk 9, 10; Mt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8).

What's wrong with Protestant theology? Other than this, not much.

In our answer, however, let us offer qualifications. This reframing of the Christian message, like the present expressions of our divine gifts, is partial—"we know in part and we (even) prophesy in part." We gratefully recognize that only in that glorious future "when the perfect comes, these partial things will be done away."

Certainly, the discerning reader will find much that is "in part" in this book, just as I believe we found corresponding incompleteness in the work of those brave, godly, faithful, divinely-guided, but incomplete men who confronted and conquered great darkness during their soul-trying times some 500 years ago. Certainly, we can proclaim further truth in the Church only as we build on the insights, wisdom, and sacrifices of these indispensable pioneers of the faith.

It is, nonetheless, my hope that the overall message of this book will not be discarded because of perceived imprecise characterizations of traditional theology. Clearly I have painted this project with a broad brush. More importantly, I hope that this work will not be received merely as information or ideas. If that is the result, then this book has utterly failed. Rather, it is written to encourage us to experience the true "knowledge" of the "word" of God, to be immersed in His loving presence, and to accept the charismatic commission that the Spirit of Christ Jesus has revealed to us, even as He empowers us to fulfill it. Jesus, after all, commissioned us to make, not scholars, but disciples.

Jon Mark Ruthven, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Regent University School of Divinity

Copyright © Jon Ruthven – Used by Permission