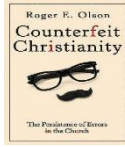


2025 Summer Virtual Study



“Counterfeit Christianity”

By Professor Roger E. Olson

Session 5: Reducing God to Manageable Size & Using God for Personal Gain

August 7, 2025

7:30 PM

Session 4 Recap...

In Session 4 of our study, we examined the heresies of Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism as it relates to our salvation experience. While early Christians discussed and debated the role of “grace” and “good works” in the salvation experience with Christ, some early Christians took the debate too far. While the orthodox Christian belief is that if a person is saved it has nothing to do with his or her goodness, but only to do with God’s undeserved favor and grace, Pelagius in response to Augustine argued that “people are capable of obeying God on their own without any special help from God’s grace.” He went on to say that a sinful life is not “inevitable”, in fact, Pelagius rejected the idea of original sin, that there was no inherited sinfulness, and humans were able to live a moral/good life without God’s help. Augustine was outraged and wrote that nobody except Jesus (because conceived without sin) is capable of obeying God without the special aid of grace. For Augustine, salvation is totally dependent on the cross of Christ and God grace through faith and the sacraments. The Christian Church exiled Pelagius and his teachings.

After Pelagius, a group of monks tried to find a middle ground between Augustine and Pelagius – and are referred to as Semi-Pelagius. They argued human beings are not so damaged by original sin that they cannot, or themselves, without supernatural grace, initiate a good will toward God. The Semi-Pelagians taught that normally the initiative in salvation is the human side; the first exercise of a good will toward God is the sinners without supernatural prevenient grace. At the Synod of Orange, the Church rejected

the belief that sinners can initiate a saving relationship with God or cooperating with grace in any way that would lessen the necessity of grace or give saved persons room to boast. The Church also condemned any belief that God predestines anyone to evil (“double predestination”). Elements of Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism can be seen in folk religion, Christian TV shows, gospel songs, and even in evangelistic preaching/altar calls. Pelagian thoughts can also be seen in Mormonism and practices by Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Our second chapter focused on “Divine Determinism”, a belief, whether explicit or implicit, that God determines all things according to a preconceived plan and by his omnipotent power, including sin and evil. While not exactly a “heresy”, this disputable belief system was supported and taught by many early Christian fathers and throughout the centuries of Reformation (for example, Augustine, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, etc.) Augustine was the first and biggest supporter of this movement. The debated centered on God’s sovereignty – God’s rule over the world and history. Two key distinctions of God’s sovereignty was a play. First, what is referred to as “*de jure*” – God’s right to rule, and second, “*de facto*” – God’s actual *control* of events. Augustine believed in both. Non-Augustine theologians believed that God is always sovereign “*de jure*”, but not yet sovereign “*de facto*”. Instead, God chooses not to determine everything yet, allowing creatures/humans to resist God’s perfect will, which is how sin enters the world. Tied closely to this is *predestination* – God’s will in relation to individual’s ultimate destiny in either heaven or hell. For Augustine, God chooses who to “save” separate from their free choice. Augustine did not, however, teach “double predestination” – that God predetermines anyone to hell. Wycliffe, Zwingli, Calvin, Edwards, Sproul, and Piper have supported “divine determinism” through the centuries. Standing in opposition was John Wesley, and Arminian theology, who argued that God’s love is the very essence of dispute against “predestined” thought. God’s love/salvation is available to all, and for God to limit to a specific few, it does not reveal the fullness of God. A step further, making God the author of sin and evil is a heresy.

Opening Prayer

Session 5 Video – “Reducing God to a Manageable Size”

Reducing God to a Manageable Size: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

The Problem of “Folk Religion”

- Sometimes heresy rears its ugly head in the form of “folk religion”, the final stage of religion
- “Folk religion” – the loss of tradition and intellectual engagement with culture and the devolving of the religion into individualistic, privatized spirituality that thrives on clichés, popular beliefs, feelings, and experiences – “almost Christian”
- Many agree that vast groups of American Christianity are falling into a folk religion called “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD) – at best, a dim reflection and faint echo of true Christianity – most who adopt it, believe it is real Christianity
- Argument: (1) Deism is a heresy, and (2) It is still very much alive and well and an attractive option for many Christians
- Many devout Christians adopt either MTD or GHW (Gospel of Health and Wealth) as their primary belief systems without awareness of the orthodox, biblical alternative – Christianity
- These are heresies only in the informal sense that they stand in such stark contrast to the gospel of Jesus Christ and historic Christianity – both are influenced by modern culture
- Folk religion replaces tradition, orthodoxy, scholarship, inquiry, biblical hermeneutics, and theology with beliefs based on comfort and spiritual excitement or satisfaction – cliché religion
- Resistant to examination and critical thinking, and tends to rest on results and especially good feelings
- “Not all folk religion is totally wrong or heretical, but it’s a fertile seedbed in which heresy can grow and flourish. And folk religion divorces religion from public life and reduces it to a coping mechanism for individuals caught in the complexities of life. When a great world religion like Christianity is reduced to a folk religion, it loses its ability to influence public, communal life together.” (p. 140)

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

- Preferred alternative to historical, religious traditions including classical Christianity
- Core theme – “divinely underwritten personal happiness and inter-personal niceness”
- Dominant religion in the United States today
- MTD’s five guiding views...
 1. A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
 2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught into the Bible and by most world religions.
 3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
 4. God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem.
 5. Good people go to heaven when they die.
- Two types of MTD in contemporary religion...
 1. A non-Christian version that does not explicitly include Jesus Christ as anyone other than the founder of the Christian religion and perhaps a religious prophet.
 2. A Christian version found especially among young people raised in all kinds of Christian churches; Jesus Christ as the perfect revelation of God’s will, bring comfort and assurance as a friend
- In both, God does not directly intervene or become involved in individual, personal life except when the person has a problem that only God can solve – guidance, strength, comforter
- Modern examples – Bett Midler’s song, “From a Distance (God is Watching Us)”, Dottie Rambo’s gospel song, “It’s Me Again, Lord”
- Main ingredient – Deism – embraced by free thinkers of the Enlightenment

Deism as a Historical Movement

- Deism – rose with the Enlightenment, revolution in religion – knowledge of the universe based on observation and logic apart from revelation, tradition, and faith

- First, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (d. 1633) – “religion of reason” – depended on no supernatural revelation from God or on church authority; replace “sectarian religion” with a minimal religion that everyone could agree on; his ideas planted a seed for the future
 - There is a Supreme Deity
 - This Deity ought to be worshipped
 - Virtue combined with piety is the chief part of divine worship.
 - Men should repent of their sins and turn from them.
 - Reward and punishment follow from the goodness and justice of God, both in this life and after
- With the rise of Enlightenment, eventually religion was subjected to natural, rational explanation; Deism was the 18th century movement in religion, involving Christians and non-Christians, called “natural religion”
- John Toland, *Christianity Not Mystical* (1696) – even divine revelation must be judged by reason and that any doctrine that was ultimately and finally mysterious, not capable of rational explanation, could not be essential to true religion – including Christianity - book was the clarion announcement of pure reason to come
- For Toland, his god was not remote, distant, or uninvolved (as most view “Deism” to be), but also not in the nature of interfering
- Matthew Tindale, *Christianity as Old as the Creation; or, the Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (1730) – the real “Bible” of Deism; Christianity is not a set of supernaturally revealed truths surrounding miracles and it does not include any supernatural beliefs; Christianity to ethical monotheism – belief in a personal God who created and governs the world and who is best worshipped by living a good life according to natural law ethics (right and wrong)
- Voltaire (d. 1778) – god was not the god of traditional, orthodox Christianity, but the architect of the world, its supreme moral governor, and rewarder of those who live according to reason
- Thomas Jefferson (3rd President of US) – “Jefferson’s Bible”, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* – cut out everything he considered contrary to reason and natural morality, no miracles/supernatural; nominally a member of the Episcopal Church, “a sect by myself”

- Thomas Paine, Ethan Allen – virulent tracts attacking Christianity and promoting own views of Deism; President Teddy Roosevelt referred to Paine as “that filthy-little atheist”
- Deism filtered into the fabric of American culture

Deism’s Subtle Influences on American Culture

- There is no large, organized religion of “Deists”; instead scattered throughout culture
- Deism is often attractive to intellectuals, because this approach can be adopted to meet your “spiritual needs”, while giving to a belief in a God combined with belief in a universe ruled by iron-clad natural laws
- Deists are not “atheists”, they are “almost Christian”
- Another manifestation – “civil religion” – belief in God as a guarantor of the rights of individuals and the rules that govern American constitutional polity; “In God We Trust” slogan; for them, God established the truths upon which American law is based
 - Stops at the threshold Jesus and Christian orthodoxy and worship
 - “god” of civil religion may be overlaid in individuals’ minds with Christian symbolism and doctrines, but in public the deity is “the Almighty”, “Providence”, or “the Creator”
- “Deism appears in popular religion whenever people believe in a creator and moral governor of the universe who is uninvolved in day-to-day life but still somehow cares enough to help, punishes the wicked, and forgives all who are sorry for their sins. Few who think of God this way would call their religion Deism; most consider themselves Christians.”
- Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* – MTD is the natural result of two and half centuries of churches shacking up with “the American dream”

Why Deism is Heresy

- Every culture adapts Christianity to its own context
- Is it heresy?
 1. Does not have a clear and distinct denial of Christian orthodoxy.
 2. Become so much a part of American religious culture, that it rarely appears in any “pure” form, mainly in attitudes and dispositions

- Why Deism IS a heresy?
 1. It is “another gospel” than the one we find in the New Testament.
 - a. True religion is about sin and grace, not being good.
 - b. Jesus called for repentance, not better ethics.
 - c. Jesus demands trust in him above all others, reliance on his mercy, and even fear of his judgment; not self-actualization
 2. It distorts the biblical and orthodox picture of God, our selves, and salvation.
 3. It denies miracles. (God is “watching from a distance”.)
 - a. The one event in human history that is essential to Christianity and cannot be anything other than a miracle is the resurrection of Jesus – not a rise of faith in hearts and minds.
 - b. If God is the Creator of everything, wouldn’t miracles be possible.
 - c. “The God of traditional Christianity is not “outside of nature” anymore than he is locked within it.” (p. 150)
- Deism reduces the biblical and Christian picture of God to something so small as to be unimportant.

Responding to Deism (and MTD)

- “Christians need to rediscover, without going overboard or to extremes, the God who is involved, who hears and answers prayers, who is both loving and just, and who cannot be captured and tamed.” (p. 151)
- It is shallow religion
- Antidote...
 1. Reintroduce “thick description” of Christianity – biblical, historical, classical Christianity.
 2. Christians need to recover a sense of the countercultural nature of the gospel. – it is an offense to common sense and a scandal to ordinary reason.
 3. Listen to the voices of Christians from non-Western churches and Christian movements.

Questions to Ponder...

1. Scripture Focus – 1 Corinthians 15:12-19. How does this apply to the Church today?
2. What do you believe about miracles? Did they happen in the Bible? Have you or someone you know experienced a miracle? Are science and miracles incompatible?
3. How do people settle for a weak, small, and relatively powerless God, when they could experience the God of the Bible? How big is “my God”?

Using God for Personal Gains: The “Gospel” of Health and Wealth

The Prosperity Heresy of Positive Faith

- “Prosperity Gospel”/” Gospel of Health and Wealth (GHW)” – heresy that has been exported from America especially to the Global South
- Two different manifestations: (1) a “New Age” positive thinking religion rooted in 19th century movement called “New Thought”, and (2) a neo-Pentecostal, charismatic religion touted by TV evangelists that revels in miracles
- For both...
 - God is a kind of cosmic vending machine who MUST provide health and wealth to all who have “positive faith” expressed in words of faith – spoken affirmations or declarations that create reality through divine power
 - Treat prayer as “magic” without realizing it
 - Deny God’s sovereignty and put God and his power at human disposal
 - Elevate health and wealth to the status of ultimate goods
 - Claim Christianity, but distort views of orthodox Christianity
- “New Age” manifestation is promoted by “positive thinking” spiritual gurus; often includes belief in reincarnation; “god” is an impersonal power resident in everything (not personal, transcendent, or holy);

closely tied to the divine healing of 19th century and revivalism of the 20th century

- GHW is a heresy because its emphasis on something extrabiblical and foreign to classical Christianity, and because of its distorted image of God
- Very popular in the South – Latin and South America, Asia, Africa
- Possible to gain health and wealth by “naming and claiming it” – power that brings it is God, but means of accessing this power is the individual (i.e. “I am a child of the King and possess powerful abundance. All that is God’s is mine. I am well and rich.”)
- Must speak health and wealth into existence – “confront” God with your problems

Why the GHW is Heresy

- Many are taken for granted because so widespread; churches who emphasize this ideology are often “Unity” (New Age version) and “Word Faith” (neo-Pentecostal/charismatic)
- Why a heresy?
 1. Takes one aspect of biblical revelation, distorts it, elevates it to part of the gospel, and treats God as a “vending machine”
 2. Offers false hope to people facing illness and poverty and *implies* that these are a result of lack of faith.
 3. Blames victims for their own wretchedness.
 4. Confuses prayer with magic and faith with presumption.
- Most GHW teachers focus on a few verses as proof texts for this message...
 - **Jeremiah 29:11** – “plans to prosper you (NIV)
 - **Malachi 3:10** – popular among supporters of “seed faith” – extension of GHW that emphasizes giving money to Christian ministries with the promise of financial reward
 - **John 10:10** – “abundant life”, includes perfect health and prosperity
 - **3 John 2** – “that thou may prosper and be in health” (KJV)

- Movement based on these four passages, personal testimonies, evangelegends (stories told by religious people without any proof), and New Thought philosophy
- However, scripture emphasizes God's ideal (antecedent will) - what God wishes were the case - and God's permissive (consequent will) – what God allows because of humanity's sinful condition
- Opposition to GHW – Paul's thorn in the flesh – even considered it “from God”
- GHW emphasizes the biblical “life abundant” as gospel liberty – being made free from guilt and bondage to sin and the law by God's grace
 - Our gospel is not about physical health and financial prosperity; it is about God's mercy, forgiveness, and inward transformation into the likeness of Christ
- GHW can lead to “doubting” faith and salvation, especially if you remain sick or wealth does not find you
 - “Healing in the atonement” – a Pentecostal doctrine is in the background of the GHW; Christ's death on the cross secured physical healing for all who faith to be healed
- According to GHW preachers and teachers, God is obligated to heal and provide financial prosperity to those who approach him in faith – “name it and claim it”
 - Includes acting as if the promise is already fulfilled
 - “Law of attraction” – these are attracted to a person by acting as if they are already one's possession
 - Instead, our God is sovereign and cannot be manipulated – to think so is to trivialize God – “poor and pathetic view of God”
- Offers false hope to desperate people – very popular among poorer segments of society
- GHW logically “blames” the victims of illness and poverty for their conditions
 - “You cannot be a good witness for Jesus from a wheelchair” – TV evangelist
 - If there is no health or wealth, must not be exercising good faith
 - “Persevere in faith”, “Claim it” until it appears

- If nothing, someone other than God is responsible (self, family)
- GHW treats *prayer* as *magic* and *faith* as *presumption*
 - Magic(k) – any technique for manipulating reality through paranormal means
 - Magic is not prayer; prayer is asking God to do something, recognizing God's sovereignty alongside God's power; when it seeks to manipulate God – then becomes magick
 - “Law of attraction” – magick – acting a certain way (well or prosperous) will automatically attract to these to the acting person
 - Meditations/recitations – not directed to a personal God, so not prayer – attempt to gain power over God – force Him to keep his “alleged” promises
 - Faith – is trust; presumption – is distrust; to “presume” in a relationship is to step over a boundary and impose one's own will because do not trust the other – same with God
- There are beliefs and teachings about health and wealth that are not heretical.
 - Bible encourages (at least does not forbid) desiring well-being and asking God for it.
 - God does *wish* his people well, but far cry from God *must* provide health and wealth to everyone who has faith.
- GHW crosses a line between biblical orthodoxy and heresy when it places health and wealth at the center, not God.

The History of the GHW

- No simple answer to how GHW arose; lies in margin of American life
- 19th century – Phineas Quimby, philosopher – positive thinking could heal a person of virtually any illness; first practitioner of “New Thought” – a distinctly American philosophy of “mind over matter”
 - The human mind is able to tap into the infinite power of God through positive thinking
 - One of most famous followers – Mary Baker Eddy, founder of the Church of Christ, Science (Christian Science)

- Eddy, *Science and Health with a Key to the Scriptures* – matter is illusion, sickness and death are not really real – denial of this is “faith”
- Christian Science – very popular in 19th and 20th centuries
- “Unity School of Christianity” – most influential form – founded by two New Thought believers – Charles and Myrtle Fillmore
 - Did not deny reality of matter or sin/sickness
 - Added financial prosperity to Christian Science’s emphasis on healing
 - Speak positive “affirmations” – “God is my source; I claim abundant good.” – positive declarations kept around places for motivation
 - New Age Movement was a great stimulus for “Unity” growth
 - God is the “Mind” of the universe, present in all beings whose power for good is infinite and always available - not the Trinity; Jesus as the ultimate teacher/practitioner of faith
- Guru of Pentecostal GHW – healing evangelist E.W. Kenyon (d. 1948) – believed physical healing was provided in Christ’s atonement and that God wanted to and will heal when people prayed for healing with faith
 - Many followers and practitioners still today
 - “Healing crusades”, Oral Roberts University
 - Kenyon’s teachings did not catch fire with the masses, but it did introduce healing evangelists to the Unity and New Thought
- Kenneth Hagin, Sr – launched the Pentecostal GHW movement – “Word Faith Movement (WFM)” – founded Rhema Bible College; Tulsa became the “headquarters” of this movement
 - WFM is synonymous with Hagin and his followers
 - God wants everyone of his people to live in perfect health and financial prosperity
 - Path – speaking them into existence; live as if they are already prosperous and healthy – law of attraction
 - Follower, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland – TV program, writes books, large conferences

- New of the scene – Joel Osteen, pastor of Lakewood Church of Houston, megachurches – TV, talk shows, books
 - Teaches personal well-being and success through positive thinking
 - Problem is the *emphasis* he places on personal success and well-being at the expense of self-sacrifice, suffering for Christ, and growth in holiness
- New Thought is distinctly American – optimistic and practical

Responding to the Gospel of Health and Wealth

- Run from it! On the surface it sounds good, but underneath it is dangerous.
- Many of its promoters/practitioners are “born again” Christians, but people are reluctant to believe the message is dangerous or mistaken
- Rediscover the truth – God wants to heal the sick and does not want people to starve.
 - Prayers for the sick is biblical, but presumptuous “faith” is counterfeit faith.
 - Strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God

• Follow Up Questions...

1. What is the distinction between asking God and demanding or claiming something from God? In your experience, is God a kind of vending machine?
2. Have you heard “Name it and claim it” before? Now might you respond when the wish is not granted? If a follower of GHW, how does this shake the core of this belief/practice?
3. Having a positive attitude is a good thing, but bad things happen despite and sometimes because of a person’s faith. How does GHW offer false hope? Can you be a Christian witness from a wheelchair? Do you know some people who are witnesses despite or even because of their illnesses or disabilities?

Closing

- The beliefs we have labeled heresy do not make their adherents evil or dangerous – except to people's spiritual well-being.
- Being Christian implies believing certain things – orthodox beliefs.
- *“At the heart of Christianity lies the gospel – good news to all people and especially those suffering from guilt and despair. The good news is that God has acted to reconcile them to himself through Jesus Christ and give them hope. All the heresies described here undermine that good news in some way. All of them twist and distort it into a “different gospel” that does not speak real hope into people's lives and does not bring reconciliation between them and God.” (p. 172)*

Closing Prayer