
RE-BOOTING CHRISTIANITY © www.iesustheheresy.com (2016)

There comes a time when the user operating system becomes so overloaded or corrupted that there is little choice but to shut down and start over. Just over two millennia since the birth of Christ and nearly half a millennium since the posting of 95 theses by Martin Luther, early in this third millennium may be such a time.

Why Re-Boot?

With church doctrine, more is less. If there is to be doctrine, link it to what Jesus taught – accepting no theological extrapolations (which may be ok for personal speculation, but not for the essentials of Christianity).

Apply the childproof test of Jesus, when he opined:

“Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

- Matthew 18:3
(NKJV)

Seven theses are posted for consideration - summarized as follows:

- 1) Jesus intended **heterodoxy**, not orthodoxy.
- 2) The doctrine of the trinity is **not scriptural**, but rather was conceived for political purposes, has unnecessarily severed Christians from counterpart monotheistic faiths, and should be reopened for renewed debate.
- 3) **Distinctives of the way** include Jesus’ divine mission, death by crucifixion and resurrection; all else is open for personal interpretation.
- 4) A careful reading of the New Testament demonstrates that salvation may be available through **multiple paths** mediated through divine encounter – all tailored to individual needs and capacity to receive.
- 5) While the Protestant Reformation served to rediscover the concepts of salvation through grace and the priesthood of believers, this **reformation remains undone**.
- 6) Judgement clearly is a biblical concept; however, ‘hell’ as a place of eternal damnation should be viewed as a concept **not clearly delineated** in the Scriptures as currently received.
- 7) The **canon has never been closed** and should be considered open for review in the light of increasingly available archaeological/textual evidence.

Seven Reasons Detailed to Re-Boot Christianity

A more detailed narrative description of each thesis now follows.

1) Jesus intended heterodoxy, not orthodoxy. It was Jesus who said that he did not come to bring “peace to earth ... but rather division.”

Jesus never articulated many of the doctrinal positions now viewed as integral to the Christian faith; rather, these concepts were suggested by New Testament writers following Jesus or others subsequent to the apostolic church. Paul the apostle illustrates the approach of one who could preach unity but often practiced division. Paul openly opposed those with whom he disagreed, including the apostle Peter whom he opposed “to his face.”

The apostle Paul espoused a mission of unity, but was quick to take on his opponents within the 1st century church. The vehemence of the divisions Paul incited is evidenced by his letter to the churches at Galatia.

In apparent exasperation, Paul says what he really thinks, namely that:

“I wish that those who are upsetting you would castrate themselves!”

- Galatians 5:12 (ISV)

Beginning with Paul’s conflict with Peter and James the brother of Jesus, Christendom has been plagued with a view that only the orthodox are saved; all others are subject to damnation. This *winner take all* approach was solidified by Roman emperor Constantine’s conversion to Christianity and his imperially inspired Nicene Creed of the 4th century – and again almost 1,200 years later by the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century.

2) The doctrine of the trinity is not scriptural, was conceived for political purposes, has unnecessarily severed Christians from counterpart monotheistic faiths, and should be reopened for renewed debate.

The term “trinity” is never used in the New Testament. The scriptures provide numerous references to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but the case can be made that the Father (God) is pre-eminent and pre-existent to the Son and Holy Spirit. A compelling verse on behalf the trinity (at I John 5:7) speaks stipulates that “these three are one;” however, this rendition of the verse is a late medieval redaction *not found* in earlier New Testament manuscripts.

The concept of a Trinitarian three-in-one godhead was first formalized as church doctrine at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. Credal wording of the Son as “consubstantial” with the Father was advanced by none other than the Roman emperor and recent convert Constantine. This same emperor went on to murder his eldest son and boil his wife in her bath.

The notion of a “three-in-one” Trinity violates the long-held Jewish (and Old Testament) view of “God as one,” and later also conflicted with a remarkably similar Muslim vision of one God – each tracing their ancestry to Abraham. Christian churches at the eastern end of the Mediterranean and North Africa who did not support the political decision of the Nicene and subsequent Church-wide Council formulations would three centuries later welcome the Islamic invasion as preferential to the religious imperialism of the so-called universal Catholic church. The great centers of early Christian activism and theological inspiration – Caesarea, Ephesus, Antioch, Galatia, Alexandria, Carthage would be virtually lost to Christianity forever.

3) Distinctives of the way include Jesus' divine mission, death by crucifixion and resurrection; all else is open for personal interpretation.

First century
Roman and anti-
Christian author
Tacitus describes
Christ as one
"who suffered
death in the
reign of Tiberius,
under his
procurator
Pontius Pilate."
He goes on to
say that "this
pernicious
superstition"
resurfaced in
Judea and then
spread to Rome.

As author of *The
History of the
Church*,
4th century
theologian
Eusebius says
that the story of
Jesus death and
resurrection was
communicated
by Pilate to
emperor Tiberius
who "formed no
evil designs
against the
teachings of
Christ."

Jesus' death and resurrection are attested to by all four canonical gospels, by other New Testament writers including Paul and Peter, and by a wide variety of non-canonical writings from the period of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. In contrast, Jesus' ostensible virgin birth is referenced by only two of four gospel writers and not elsewhere in the New Testament; Matthew's use reflects a mistranslation of Isaiah 7:14, the Hebrew text of which literally reads "Behold a maiden (not virgin) shall conceive."

As part of the Godhead, Jesus' mission as the Son of God (and Son of Man) is clearly portrayed both within and outside the biblical canon as coming at the direction of God the Father. Early Christian and pagan writings identify Jesus as one who taught and performed miracles involving healing and altering natural phenomena. In a clearly secular (but still disputed) account, the first century Jewish historian Josephus refers to Jesus as a "doer of wonderful works – a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure."

4) A careful reading of the New Testament demonstrates that salvation may be available via multiple paths mediated through divine encounter – all tailored to individual needs and capacity to receive.

The closest that Matthew's Jesus comes to describing the path to salvation is in response to the question of the rich young man: "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus first responds with a litany of several Mosaic commandments: do not murder, commit adultery, steal, or bear false witness. Honor your parents and "love your neighbor as yourself."

The young man presses his luck: "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" Jesus' response: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." If followed, this is a formula led by works, not faith.

The writer of the Gospel of John pursues a path of salvation that is markedly different from the three synoptics – of Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is John that presents the faith-based concept of "believe in me" by Jesus as a hallmark of his gospel.

The apostle Paul reinforces John's theme of belief, for example, with the well-known statement to the jailer who asks what he can do to be saved. Paul's answer suggests opportunity for not just individual, but communal salvation: "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

The decidedly non-canonical Gospel of Thomas places an interesting spin on Jesus' views of what is owed to God versus the state ... versus his own well-being.

After viewing a gold coin of the realm, the Jesus of Thomas offers this twist on the New Testament version:

"Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, give God what belongs to God, and give me what is mine."

Jesus' brother James takes a decidedly different tack than Paul with his rhetorical question: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?" The simple answer: "... faith without works is dead."

Peter appears to be somewhere in the middle, based on the epistles attributed to his authorship. He articulates a sentiment only implied by Paul – that salvation is a process, the results of which become apparent only over time. Peter talks of "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

In summary, early Christian writings (in and outside the New Testament canon) suggest multiple paths to salvation may be possible. These paths appear to include belief and faith, works and self-denial, and the process of seeking. When it occurs, salvation may be personal or corporate (as for the whole household).

Whether traveling all paths is required or just one path will suffice remains a matter for continued divine inspiration and human testing. At the very least, those seeking salvation are invited to consider the full range of options – then follow as the Spirit leads. As the Jesus of Matthew (and Luke) says: "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."

Or as the Jesus of the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas puts it: "Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find. When they find, they will be disturbed. When they are disturbed, they will marvel, and will rule over all."

5) While the Protestant Reformation served to rediscover the concepts of salvation through grace and the priesthood of believers, this reformation remains undone.

In 1517, Augustinian monk Martin Luther, posted a notice on the Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences. These 95 Theses essentially called an end to the 1,200 year era of holy Roman Catholic hegemony over western Christian belief and practice. Luther rediscovered the concept of salvation via grace as espoused by the apostle Paul's epistle to the Galatians. However, this German protestant proved unable to go the distance as Luther:

- Advocated the saving power of grace, but re-established a new church authority emphasizing performance via a new set of Protestant works.
- Preached the priesthood of believers over papal authority, then implemented a new Lutheran hierarchy similarly intolerant of internal and external dissent.

“Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason, I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me.”

- Martin Luther

- Threw off papal authority, but left the imperial creed of Nicaea essentially intact.
- Stressed the importance of individual faith over collective belief, but rejected the role of individual reason with equal vehemence.
- Turned on and advocated the persecution of those with whom he disagreed – including Jews, Anabaptists, and nearly 100,000 dead peasants.

Luther failed to throw off the shackles of Nicaea, to accept and celebrate diverse interpretations of the Jesus message, and to center a revived church on the message of creative conflict rather than monolithic uniformity. Luther continued down the millennium long path of intolerance and repression that continues to obscure the diversity, the true eclecticism, and the individuality of Jesus’ message. Full fulfillment of the reformation promise has yet to come.

6) Judgement clearly is a biblical concept; however, ‘hell’ as a place of eternal damnation should be viewed as a concept not clearly delineated in the Scriptures as currently received.

Biblical use of the term “hell” is on a downward trend. The English King James version of the entire Bible contains 54 references to “hell” in 54 verses. However, the New King James (NKJV) has 32 and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) has even fewer – only 15 such references.

Beginning with Saint Augustine, followed by Dante and then Jonathan Edwards, hell has been perceived by Catholics (and Protestants) as a place of physical torment. It is for unrepentant humans and fallen angels. The punishment is disproportionate to any human failing and never ending.

As the always smoldering garbage dump for Jerusalem, Gehenna was described by Jesus as a place “where the worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.”

- Mark 9:47

The New Testament applies the Teutonic word “hell” as an all-encompassing term for three distinct words found in New Testament manuscripts.

“Gehenna” is the term most frequently used, derived from a Hebrew phrase for the “valley of Hinnom,” serving as the garbage dump for Jerusalem which was virtually always on fire – a place where “the worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.” Hades is the Greek term for the place or abode to which all people (both the good and bad) go upon death. Tartaros is a term used far less frequently – primarily by Peter. The word Tartaros is a variation on the Greek (Tartaroo) which is translated as to cast down into hell.

The Old Testament (OT) version of hell – Sheol – is never used in the New Testament except for the occasion when it is loosely translated as Hades. And recent translations of Sheol make it increasingly clear that this place “of the deep” was not necessarily conceived of by Old Testament Jews as the same

type of place as Gehenna or Hades or Tartaros in the New Testament.

The apostle John never uses any term for *hell* in his gospel. References to hell in the writings of Paul also are nowhere to be found.

If Jesus intended for hell to be perceived as more than a metaphor for Jerusalem's garbage dump, his articulation of the concept seems to fall short of the mark. The closest he came was his tale of Lazarus – the kind of hell (actually Hades) where one could see directly across and communicate to heaven. Nor is there a clear message provided as to whether consignment to Hell is intended to be of temporary or eternal duration.

7) The canon has never been closed and should be considered open for review in the light of increasingly available archaeological and textual evidence.

For at least a century after Christ, oral tradition was favored over a written New Testament. The early 2nd century patriarch Papias stated: "For I did not think what was to be gotten out of books would profit me as much as what came from the living and abiding voice."

"... consider that the long-suffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.."

- II Peter 3:15-16.

Today, fundamentalists argue that inspired scripture equals inerrant scripture; more liberal theologians suggest that inspired does not necessarily mean either inerrant or literal.

We suggest that both sides miss the underlying question: *What is scripture?*

For 1st century Paul the apostle, the scripture was a body of writings comprising what is now known as the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures). His sometimes nemesis Peter is actually the first to suggest that, while some of his writing may be difficult to understand, Paul's epistles nonetheless might be considered scripture on a par with the Old Testament.

In 367, Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria and chief defender of the Nicene Creed, compiled a list covering all 27 books of the New Testament canon. Though generally accepted by the late fourth century, this New Testament would not be formally canonized by any church-wide assembly for more than another millennium.

The spark for formal canonization came from none other than the protestant Martin Luther – who explicitly stated that the books of Hebrews, James (in particular), Jude and Revelation were of inferior worth, not belonging to "the true and certain chief books of the New Testament." In 1546, the Roman Catholic Church made biblical content an absolute article of Faith at the Council of Trent. The Vulgate was declared to be "authentic."

Even today, there are holdouts. The 39 Articles adopted by the Church of England in 1563 list the works of the Old Testament canon but omit any statement of a New Testament canon. No canon is specifically recognized to this day by Lutheran confessional statements.

In effect, the historical case for as-needed canon reconsideration rests on four points:

- a) New Testament works were gradually collected and did not fall into place at one single point in time;
- b) The New Testament did not come into being through any formal ecclesiastical council, process of peer review or clearly divine process; rather, this collection of writings came to be regarded as inspired scripture over time;
- c) There is more to the story than would be suggested by saying that no act of human authority imposed a particular set of books on the rest of Christendom -- as an accretion of individual incremental steps can lead to similarly unsupportable results; and
- d) despite the mantle of orthodox sanction, there have been voices of dissent along the way, notably even Martin Luther as well as Luther's opponents.

Two millennia after the subject of the New Testament walked the earth, a case can be made that the canon remains open – for new information, for renewed argumentation, and quite possibly for multiple interpretations. Rather than ignoring these voices, this may be just the time for a more robust conversation.

Re-Boot Now, Not Later

Next year is the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther posting his 95 theses on the door of the All Saints' Church at Wittenberg. Both insurgent Protestants and the incumbent Catholic church have reaped the fruits of this reformation.

Just as God's kingdom here on earth needed a full clean-up then, another re-boot is in order now. The alternative is that the kingdom leaves behind those of hardened heart for greener pastures – as in the Southern Hemisphere.

Reviving the existing church of Europe, North America and diminishing remnants of the middle east is by no means assured. God has walked away from ossified peoples before; it can happen again.

The price is that God's kingdom here on earth suffers. The earth groans as God's blessing is replaced by the darkness of an age without reason. With no guarantee that's what's lost will be recovered now or in millennia to come.