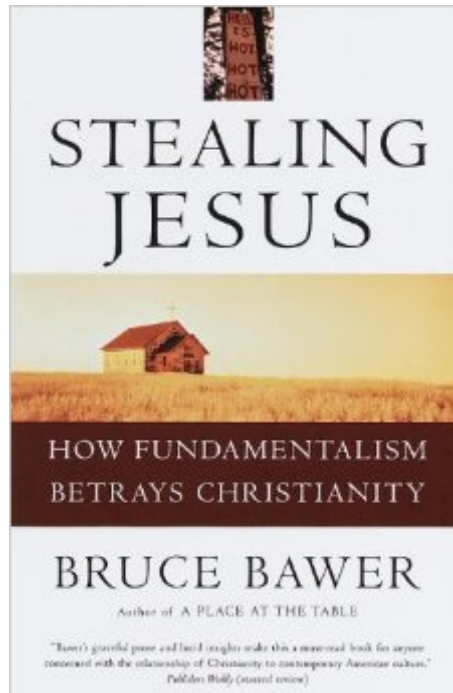


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Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity



Synopsis

From the author of the widely acclaimed *A Place at the Table*, this is a major work, passionately outspoken and cogently reasoned, that exposes the great danger posed to Christianity today by fundamentalism. The time is past, says Bruce Bawer, when denominational names and other traditional labels provided an accurate reflection of Christian America's religious beliefs and practices. The meaningful distinction today is not between Protestant and Catholic, or Baptist and Episcopalian, but rather between "legalistic" and "nonlegalistic" religion, between the Church of Law and the Church of Love. On one side is the fundamentalist right, which draws a sharp distinction between "saved" and "unsaved" and worships a God of wrath and judgment; on the other are more mainstream Christians who view all humankind as children of a loving God who calls them to break down barriers of hate, prejudice, and distrust. Pointing out that the supposedly "traditional" beliefs of American fundamentalism--about which most mainstream Christians, clergy included, know shockingly little--are in fact of relatively recent origin, are distinctively American in many ways, and are dramatically at odds with the values that Jesus actually spread, Bawer fascinatingly demonstrates the way in which these beliefs have increasingly come to supplant genuinely fundamental Christian tenets in the American church and to become synonymous with Christianity in the minds of many people. *Stealing Jesus* is the ringing testament of a man who is equally disturbed by the notion of an America without Christianity and the notion of an American Christianity without love and compassion.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Bawer's book starts out brilliantly and had me tentatively recommending it to people by the end of the first chapter. He makes some very insightful points, and he has the enviable ability to create a sound bite that actually has deep meaning; there were several points in the book where he sums up complex spiritual issues in one terrific sentence. Unfortunately, the book does not live up to the promise shown at the beginning. The points Bawer brings up about Fundamentalist Christianity are all valid, but his support for many of them is rather weak. He does not use footnotes, his references are incomplete, and the bibliography adheres to no style I've ever seen. This wouldn't matter if I wanted to accept his work as truth in and of itself, but I prefer to check sources. Bawer also tends to express opinion as fact. He twice makes the claim that legalist Christians (his term for Fundamentalist Christians) know their doctrines are untrue, although they will never admit it to themselves. To make such a claim is arrogant and uninformed-Bawer does not know the true feelings of individual legalist Christians. I know several people who fit Bawer's definition of legalists, and they hold their beliefs more dear than anything else, including things most people cherish such as family and career. If scientific or empirical evidence refutes these beliefs, the evidence is wrong, and the people who bring this evidence against Christianity are deceived. One could easily and truthfully say legalists are just putting their heads in the sand, but that doesn't mean they do not believe their doctrine. Bawer also rails against Pat Robertson, his editors, and his readers for not checking facts or having any knowledge about the subjects of his writing.

This is an important book that should be read by all Americans--whether of a religious persuasion or not. The agenda of American Fundamentalists (and their close cousins, conservative Evangelicals) is a true threat, not only to freedom of religion in particular, but to freedom of thought in general. It is not surprising that so many Fundamentalists are offended by this book--the truth sometimes hurts. But as many of the reviews on this post indicate, it doesn't always open eyes. I do agree with some of the criticisms aimed at this book--I disliked Bawer's choice of a general bibliography rather than more specific documentation; and he does, at times, sound a bit bitter. As to the former, I was raised in the Southern Baptist Church and graduated from a conservative evangelical college. I have followed the careers of many of the people Bawer discusses in this book and the activities of many of the organizations he mentions. Allow me to be a witness: he is right on the money. As to the latter, Bawer's experiences as a homosexual in a bigoted "church" have certainly earned him the right to a little bitterness. Comments made by admitted fundamentalists on this post only underscore Bawer's point. Consider such comments as "What you are not free to do is claim to be

OF US WHILE DENYING WHAT WE BELIEVE" and "...why continue the pretense of naming oneself Christian?" These are people who claim the authority to define what Christianity is. The rest of us either fit their definition or we are out of the picture. How sad and how devious. This cannot be the church that Jesus intended.

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