

Pastor Stef's Book Review – June 2016

This month's book review may appear as a contradiction to last month's. With our two, three, four and more Christian views on such a plethora of topics, are there any views that actually step outside of what we can genuinely call a Christian belief? Roger Olson, and I, would say yes. It is for this reason that Olson wrote ***Counterfeit Christianity: The Persistence of Errors in the Church (2015)***. The warning he makes in this book is that many of the unchristian beliefs creeping into our church today are doing so because of what he calls "folk religion" – that is, the popular and often unexamined "Christian" views of many sitting in our Sunday morning services. Roger Olson is a big proponent of (and has even written for) the *Views* series, for the very purpose of that series is to help us "examine" our beliefs.

Olson spends the first two chapters of *Counterfeit Christianity* describing what heresy and orthodoxy are. He then uses the next eight chapters to discuss eight different heresies. Though these mistaken beliefs are found in popular forms of "Christianity" most of them are heresies that were dealt with by the early church. By not knowing our Christian history and early creeds we find ourselves repeating mistakes that have already been dealt with.

Chapter three is entitled "The Mother of all Heresies" because, from the days of the NT to today, every age in the church has continued to battle it as it is the root of most other heresies. Olson is talking about Gnosticism. It appears whenever you have ideas in the church that say that God's creation is bad, or you equate your fallen nature with your literal flesh, or you believe that the goal of life is to escape this world into a higher spirit world. Olson points out how many of these ideas are found in both new age thinking and in a number of our hymns from the early 1900s. Songs like *I'll Fly Away*, that talks about being like a bird trapped in a cage or the line in *Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus* that says that "the things of earth will grow strangely dim" both have a whiff of Gnosticism in them. Unfortunately, because of sentimental value and the hymns vs choruses' debate, some have put the hymns beyond criticism.

Roger also warns about views that so want to uphold Jesus' deity that, for all intents and purposes, they deny his humanity. It is the "god in a bod" idea that makes Jesus not *really* human. Then there is making the Bible so divine that it practically fell from heaven and is worshiped, instead of worshipping the one it points us to. Again, notice how these views about Jesus and the Bible are each about denying the earthy/human side of things (i.e. Gnosticism).

Other heresies Olson deals with are the stress on free will that forgets to emphasize the initial work of the Holy Spirit to set our wills free. Then there is the reducing of Christianity to moralism and making it all about being good and asking "What Would Jesus Do?" There is also the "Health and Wealth gospel" which appears anytime God is reduced to a vending machine and prayer is reduced to magic. The purpose of God is to help us be all we can be, get the best deal on a new car, the closest parking spot at the mall and heal me from all my aches and pains. Along with this comes much in the area of self-help, positive thinking, new thought and mind over matter. Obviously there is some truth in all of these ideas, but that is exactly the problem with heresy – a mix-up of truth and falsehood.

At just over 100 pages Roger Olson has given us a great book to help us sharpen up our beliefs and protect ourselves from sloppy ideas that can cause us to misstep, particularly in difficult times.