

MICHAEL ADAM BECK



# Distortions

*How to Recognize False Christian Claims and  
How to Respond as an Altogether Christian*

*A Visual Guide*



# Introduction



## *Almost Christian or Something Else Entirely?*



*“I believe in God,  
just not the church.”*

**-VALENTINA**

*A 20-something-year-old college freshman*

Valentina is a bright undergraduate student who grew up in a nominally Christian household where faith was more cultural than transformational. Though she believed in God and occasionally attended church, her experiences left her feeling judged, unseen, and spiritually hungry. In college, she began exploring mindfulness apps, tarot, and social justice causes—seeking connection, purpose, and healing outside institutional religion. When someone invited her to a dinner church gathering that felt more like a family meal than a service, she was surprised to find authenticity, warmth, and space to ask questions. For the first time, she wondered if maybe what she had walked away from wasn't Jesus—but a distortion of him.

Valentina believes in God, maybe even Jesus—but not the church. She's not alone. Across the country, millions share this feeling. They've seen distorted versions of Christianity: judgment without love, ritual without meaning, community without compassion. And they've walked away.

***But what if what they've rejected  
isn't Christianity at all?***



In Acts 26, King Agrippa listens to Paul’s impassioned defense and replies, “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” (Acts 26:28 KJV). John Wesley saw this “almost” posture in his own day—people who appeared religious but lacked the inner fire of love for God and neighbor. We see it today too, but now it’s often worse: the faith isn’t just diluted, it’s deformed.

**IN THIS VISUAL GUIDE, WE’LL EXPLORE  
SIX DOMINANT DISTORTIONS OF AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY:**

**1 Churchless Christianity**



**2 Consumer Christianity**



**3 Prosperity Gospel**



**4 Conservative Family Cults**



**5 Jesusless Progressive Christianity**



**6 Christian Nationalism**



Each offers just enough truth to be convincing, yet enough misdirection to be spiritually dangerous.

Through self-assessments, comparisons, and reflections, we invite you to ask: *Is my faith shaped by Christ—or by culture?*

***This guide is not about shame***—it’s about clarity. Not condemnation, but invitation. It’s for people like Valentina—and maybe for you too. Our hope is that by unmasking these distortions, we can help you move toward an “altogether Christianity”—a faith of love, justice, and deep joy, rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

# The Bible

*As we've engaged with various church communities, we've often heard people say, "I want to go to a church that preaches the Bible." We agree wholeheartedly—but we'd rather go to a church that **lives the Bible**.*

Not all churches that preach the Bible seem to faithfully live it. A church that lives the Bible invites us into the messiness of real, tangible discipleship. In such a church, you'll smell homelessness in the space you offer to shelter the stranger. You'll hear growling stomachs as you scoop food and sit together at the table. You'll pick up a friend on their way to a recovery meeting. Teach a fatherless child the meaning of "amen." Clasp a withered, IV-pierced hand in the ICU. Be searched with a wand before entering the substance abuse rehab.

This is what Christianity looks like when it's lived according to the Bible, especially the words and actions of Jesus Christ that we read there. Not everything that bears the label "Christianity" is, in fact, Christianity.



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# Theology

*Each culture across history has shaped its own form of theology. In the early church, theologians like Tertullian, Origen, and Irenaeus reflected different cultural worldviews, forming three major streams: law-focused, truth-seeking, and history-rooted.*

Of these, Irenaeus's theology—practical, embodied, and holistic—has deeply influenced Wesleyan thought. Unlike more abstract systems, it emphasized a Spirit-led, grace-centered faith lived out in community. This is the stream that shapes our approach.

It's a theology that values both piety and justice, individual holiness and communal healing. It's not a rigid system but a "practical divinity," forged not in ivory towers but on horseback and in mission fields.

Which raises a hard truth: there has never been one single *orthodox theology*. Even the four Gospels reflect different theological emphases. So, when groups claim to be “preserving orthodoxy” by breaking away from others, we ask—which orthodoxy are you preserving?

The term *orthodoxy* has often been weaponized—used by extremist camps to discredit groups they disagree with. But this isn’t new. Jesus faced something similar from the Pharisees and Sadducees, who used their interpretation of God’s law to establish religious superiority.

Jesus called them “*blind guides*” (Matt 15:14 NRSVue). Their blindness wasn’t just about sight—it was about heart: *pōrōsis kardia*, a hardened heart (Mark 3:5). Their rigid certainty led them to judge, exclude, and ultimately reject Jesus himself.

True Christianity holds together orthodoxy (right belief), orthopraxy (right practice), and orthopathy (right heart). These aren’t just theological categories—they’re spiritual postures. When one is elevated above the others, distortion creeps in.



Irenaeus, in contrast to Hellenistic theologians like Tertullian and Origen, grounded his theology in lived, embodied faith. He saw Jesus’s incarnation not as Plan B but as the very purpose of creation: “*Because of his immeasurable love [Christ] became what we are in order to make us what he is.*” Methodist theology inherited this grace-centered, holistic vision—one that invites all of us to ***become fully alive in God.***

This vision deeply influenced liberation theology too. It reminds us that the gospel is not only about personal salvation—it is also about dismantling the systems that oppress and alienate. That is the gospel that comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.

In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus lays out a “uniform faith” rooted in the apostles’ witness—faith in one God, the incarnate Christ, and the Spirit who breathes life into the Church. It’s a faith centered on incarnation, resurrection, and the recapitulation of all things in Christ.

We, as United Methodists, stand in that stream. We believe in a church where all are welcome to lead and serve. We trust that God is still active in human history, and that redemption is not a legal transaction but Christ drawing us into victory over sin and death.

John Wesley wasn’t a systematic theologian; he was a field preacher. His theology came alive on horseback, in bands and societies, through sweat and song. His legacy to us is made clear in this early church saying: “*In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.*” And also, in his own words: “*Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?*”

Even Methodism, for all its gifts, is a kind of cultural Christianity. It was born in a time and place marked by hardship and injustice. Its genius was in its adaptability, its practical structures, and its attention to the needs of real people.

As Lesslie Newbigin said, “*The idea that one can or could at any time separate out by some process of distillation a pure gospel unadulterated by any cultural accretions is an illusion.*” The gospel is incarnate—it meets us in the flesh. It is both particular and universal. And so is the church: real people, in real places, sharing real love.

The distortions we’re about to examine—Churchless Christianity, Christian Nationalism, the Prosperity Gospel, and others—are not new. They are the cultural accretions of our day. But we can name them. We can unmask them. And we can recover something real. We can become altogether Christians.



**1 IN THE PAGES BELOW,** you’ll find a series of questions, exercises, and brief descriptions to help you recognize false Christian claims. You’ll see how they contrast with John Wesley’s ideas about what it looks like to be an “*altogether Christian.*”

**2 NEXT,** you’ll work through a brief self-assessment, to understand more clearly your own ideas and behaviors, and the ways they might not truly align with what you most deeply believe.

**3 FINALLY,** you’ll find a brief set of helps for thinking about all this in small groups; these might be at church or any other gathering of people who trust one another and are open for the conversation.

*Let's begin.*