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Theological Malpractice: Dr. Timothy Johnson's New Book

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Much of Timothy Johnson's charm is found in his ability to explain complex medical issues in simple terms. His soothing, yet authoritative voice conveys both credibility and compassion. When it comes to medical advice, Dr. Johnson may influence more Americans than any other living physician. The story of Dr. Johnson's transformation from young medical graduate to television expert is a tale of an ambitious young man who stood at the intersection of medicine and the power of television. Just weeks before graduating from medical school, he saw an edition of The Huntley-Brinkley Report. During that broadcast, a representative of the American Medical Association attempted to respond to a controversial issue in the news. In the end, he was so incompetent at the task that, as Johnson relates, "When the program came back to Huntley and Brinkley, they were laughing out loud, and the newscast had to divert immediately to a commercial break."

Johnson's confidence that medical news could be covered in a more competent, informative, and interesting way led to a morning talk show he hosted on KCVB-TV in Boston, and eventually to Good Morning America and ABC News.

So far, so good. But Dr. Timothy Johnson's latest book isn't about medicine at all, but theology. In *Finding God in the Questions: A Personal Journey*, Johnson offers a mixture of autobiography, spiritual reflection, and theological analysis. *Finding God in the Questions* tells us a great deal about Dr. Timothy Johnson and his spiritual pilgrimage. Unfortunately, it is not a consistent testimony to the faith "once for all delivered to the saints."

Timothy Johnson is not only a medical doctor; he is also a seminary graduate. Before turning to medicine, he had enrolled at the University of Chicago Divinity School, where he was confronted with liberal theology and approaches to the Bible that were very different from what he had received from his family and in his childhood congregation, part of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

Relating a story all too common to those who study in such liberal institutions, Johnson recalls, "under the challenge of some very bright and skeptical teachers at the University of Chicago, I began to doubt almost everything I had pretty much taken for granted: that the Bible is the Word of God, that Jesus was the Son of God and that God rules the universe (not to mention our world) and has a plan for it and for me."

Experiencing doubt that led to physical illness and anxiety, Johnson was led to Dr. Granger Westberg, a chaplain and Lutheran minister who also taught at the divinity school. With the help of Dr. Westberg and others, Johnson "slowly came to understand what I could believe—and to live with what I couldn't understand."

Later, Johnson was to graduate from his denomination's seminary and, during a time of training at a hospital setting, he "became increasingly drawn to the field of medicine and to the way doctors could definitively and so often quickly be of help to people." Medical school soon followed and medicine became the main trajectory of Johnson's career.

Now, with the publication of *Finding God in the Questions*, Johnson returns to theology and our knowledge of God. As he relates: "In a sense, writing this book has been an attempt to be totally honest about my religious beliefs for the first time in forty years. I graduated from seminary forty years ago; and ever since, I have been able to avoid facing the full consequences of what I truly believe—and what I can't believe. Since I never became a full-time minister to a congregation but instead went to medical school and became a physician, I never had to examine what I believed thoroughly enough to allow me to be a person of spiritual integrity day in and day out. In other words, I was able to have it both ways: I could believe what was comfortable and useful in my mostly secular life without having to test it in the fires of real spiritual struggle to determine what I actually believed—and what that belief required of me in the choices of my daily life."

The title of his book indicates that Timothy Johnson continues to live with many open questions about basic theological issues. He traces this back to his faith crisis experienced at the University of Chicago Divinity School. "Ever since that time I have been comfortable with intellectual and spiritual doubt—and now I welcome it as a companion that stimulates me to think about what I really believe," he explains.

Dr. Johnson begins his theological considerations with an affirmation of meaning and design in the universe. Accepting some form of the cosmological argument for God's existence, Johnson insists that the universe is not an accident, and thus testifies of a Creator.

Nevertheless, he accepts some form of the theory of evolution, even as related directly to human beings. As he explains, "I accept that the human race has been shaped by millions of years of life evolving from very simple forms of life into the kind of complex organism we know today. I also believe that during this evolution, the process of natural selection has played a definitive role."

Thus, Johnson argues that natural selection has worked because the universe has been intentionally designed to make this process possible and central to its development. "In other words, I don't see any discoveries of modern science, including natural selection, as a threat to the basic idea that there's some kind of intelligence at work in the unfolding of this incredible universe that we inhabit." Nevertheless, he doesn't explain how evolutionary theory can be reconciled with the biblical text.

According to Johnson, it would be "unfair" if God revealed himself only through human reason, "since that would obviously give advantage to those with greater intellectual resources." Dr. Johnson cannot believe and cannot respect or worship a deity who he finds to be unfair according to his own standard of fairness—a theological principle that appears at several points in this uneven volume.

What about the Bible? Rejecting a simple 'God said it, I believe it!' approach to the biblical text, Johnson argues that most Christians "have a more complicated understanding of their Bible."

As might be expected, Johnson accepts many of the conclusions and principles central to modern biblical criticism. He asserts that the Bible "is the central guide for Christian faith," though "some extreme groups use the Bible abusively in the name of God." As he explains, "Some people stay away from the Bible because it is confusing or has been used as a weapon to enforce doctrine or manipulate others according to agendas we impose on it."

In tracing his way through the Bible and its interpretation, Johnson affirms the so-called "Documentary Hypothesis," accepting the claim that the first five books of the Bible "were formed into written documents over a six-hundred-year period beginning around 1000 B.C."

Still, Johnson argues that, "whatever else the Bible is," it continues to inspire and illuminate. As for its contemporary application, Johnson states: "I must speak in personal terms at this point. While I deeply revere the Bible (including both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament) as an inspired record of God's truth in changing historical circumstances, I do not believe that the biblical record is primarily intended to provide a detailed blueprint of exactly how we should live today."

That statement goes a long way in explaining where Timothy Johnson will land on many of the most controversial issues of the day. His understanding of the Bible falls woefully short of any affirmation of its verbal inspiration, total authority, inerrancy, or infallibility.

As an example of his approach, he relativizes the Apostle Paul's prohibition of women preachers by arguing that Paul "was speaking to a very specific problem in which some people were disrupting worship with their insistence on speaking out of turn." Pointing beyond the issue of women in the pulpit, Johnson offers a lament: "Unfortunately, some religious leaders today still use selected biblical passages clearly tied to past cultural beliefs or some specific circumstances of biblical times as normative for today's world—using them as support for particular personal biases rather than taking the time to discover the underlying universal themes of Scripture that would override particular historical practices."

This approach has been tried many times before, but the reduction of the authoritative text of Scripture to "universal themes" reveals more about the interpreter than about the text.

Johnson suggests that the gospels are generally reliable as a guide to what Jesus did and said, but he redefines miracles and reinterprets many of the most significant events related to Jesus' life and work. The miracle narratives appear to be something of an embarrassment, as Johnson explains that "Jesus himself did not insist on belief in miracles as a precondition for following him or for spiritual growth," a statement that flies in the face of the Lord's clear call to belief, and the Bible's clear presentation of the miracles as historical events.

He rejects a substitutionary notion of Christ's atonement, arguing that this is simply the result of a dogmatism that developed in later centuries. In the end, Dr. Johnson rejects the biblical teaching that Christ had to die for our sins, but allows that he is "willing to see in Jesus' death a divinely ordained message about the intent of God to show love and forgiveness for us in any way necessary."

In an incredible chapter, Johnson levels his attack on the Council of Nicaea and the early church's affirmation that Jesus is "fully God and fully Man," and of the same "substance" as the Father. This, Johnson declares, "is enough to make me weep—this reduction of the vibrant Jesus portrayed in the Gospels to the stilted language of church leaders under pressure from the emperor to settle their theological differences."

Jumping from his inadequate understanding of the incarnation to his superficial understanding of salvation, Johnson argues that talk about "believing in Jesus" or "accepting Jesus into my heart" is "mystical at best, bizarre at worst," at least to outsiders.

Dr. Johnson has little use for warnings about Hell and for teachings about "salvation" that suggest that some kind of "transaction" had to take place that would change a person's relationship with God. He also accepts some form of universalism, believing that all persons may be saved, so long as they respond positively to God in some way.

In *Finding God in the Questions*, Dr. Timothy Johnson offers a "god of the gaps" for the cultural elite. This is not biblical Christianity, but a relativized and accommodated argument for spiritual meaning without the full substance of historic Christianity. What Dr. Timothy Johnson offers in this book is what previous generations recognized as unadulterated theological liberalism. This book offers a prescription for doubt, rather than the assurance of biblical faith. Sadly, this book is an exercise in theological malpractice.

