

Smoky Mountain Bible Institute

Biblical Studies III, Ladders

“Which Witch is Which?” This is a phrase that has been used to teach grammar in children’s books and education entertainment for decades. In a similar way we could ask which ladder is which. In our world today, full of little churches and mega churches trying to sell you ways to God, saying, “Come over here, we have the ladder you didn't even know you needed or wanted!” But how does one get to the real Jesus? Well, first let’s make a typically Lutheran statement: you do not find Jesus, he finds you! That is all fine, good, and true, but not very helpful in responding to the constant barrage of ways to get to God. So, let’s briefly review the three main ladders that are often used to answer the question, “how do I get to God?”

The reason for identifying these false models is to help us pick them out in their various manifestations in the veritable sea of theological positions. Even those of us who hold to sound biblical doctrine fall into these traps for lack of ability to recognize them, or to put it the way Luther did, “the Church is like a drunken peasant that climbs out of one ditch only to stagger across the road and fall into another.” (In this case we could ask, “which ditch is which?”) These metaphors may be a bit of an over simplification, but good books have been written to deal with this topic in detail. I would recommend these three: Broken: 7 "Christian" Rules That Every Christian Ought to Break as Often as Possible (Dec 5, 2012, by Jonathan M. Fisk), Spirituality of the Cross (Feb 1 2010, Revised Edition, by Gene Edward Veith), The Quest for Holiness: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Investigation (August 26, 2004, by Adolf Koberle & John C. Mattes).

The “ladders” I’m speaking of here are 1- The mind, ladder called speculation 2- the feelings ladder called mysticism or enthusiasm and 3 the Works ladder called legalism or moralism. We will discuss The Emotional ladder this month and Mind and Works ladders we will discuss next month.

“The Emotional Ladder” mysticism or enthusiasm being the theological terms for this ladder. Shallow and self-centered this ladder calls us to trust our feelings and emotions to know whether God loves us. Those who use this ladder talk about Jesus a lot, but Jesus is not really the one acting in any of the verbs. They do not talk about what Jesus did or does for you, but rather how he makes them feel. In truth, Jesus does not manipulate our emotions. Emotions are a gift from God, but our specific feelings come from ourselves, not Jesus. Indeed, when we sing his praises, hear his word, or share how he has blessed us, it can and should make us feel good, but those feelings are not Jesus, and they are no indication of how close he is to us. The one who bled and died for our sins is always close no matter how we feel. Even when I do not feel good, am grieving, hungry, or sick, Jesus is there, suffering with me, tending to my needs through the loving actions of others.

Furthermore, when we are hurting, he provides means to assure us of his presence, and we don’t have to doubt this truth because his word plainly spells it out. He gives us pastors to proclaim absolution to us when we confess. He gives us baptism in which he takes ownership of us by putting his name on us and washing us into his death and resurrection. He gives us bread and wine that is his flesh and blood; forgiveness we can smell, taste and touch. When we need him the most, he is there providing the peace he promised. So, if someone says, “Look, here is a fine ladder to feel how close God is to you!”, say, “No thanks, my feelings are not very dependable, and I know He is here at my side!”

Now, even if we are aware of these “ladders”, the great deceiver does his best to disguise falsehoods in a myriad of ways, trying to get us to focus on these things instead of our Savior. While it is important for us to keep our focus on who Jesus is, it is also helpful to know who he is not, to avoid putting our focus in the wrong place. With the eyes of faith, it is easy to see where Jesus is to be found. When you’re looking for Waldo on a busy multi-colored page, you know exactly what Waldo looks like (his candy cane shirt and hat, the glasses and blue jeans are unmistakable), but he can be difficult to pick out. It is the same with seeing God, without the gift of faith, which shows us exactly where he is: in his word and sacrament. The true Jesus might make you feel good, and he will indeed bless you, but not necessarily in the way you wish. Science and history are his friend, but those things are not how you will know him. You will know him because he is where he says he will be in his word and sacraments. You can know with absolute certainty that you are a baptized child of God whom he loves more than his own life which he gave on a the cross. He regularly nurtures you through his word

proclaimed and His (body / bread) and (blood / wine) put in your mouth for your forgiveness. Take comfort in his assurance "Lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Portier