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PART ONE

Loser Theology

CHAPTER ONE:

What Is Loser Theology?

Let me begin with a confession. In my younger years, I used to believe the sort of Loser Theology I've since come to reject, and which I denounce in this book. I didn't take any seminary classes called "Loser Theology." It was more organic than that. I absorbed it from the Christian environment I was exposed to as a young man. I found it attractive because it gave me plenty of spiritualized excuses for being weak and lazy.

In college, my spiritual life grew quickly, but the framework shaping me was the "third way" model popularized by teaching on the prodigal son. On one side were dramatic, prodigal son-type sinners who supposedly understood the gospel best, since

their sins were most obvious. On the other side were “elder brother” Christians who were dutiful and disciplined but were distant and cold toward God. They were constantly suspected of legalism. Faithfulness is found in a gospel-centered “third way,” which was the way of Jesus, the humble, middle path between these two ditches. The villain of the story is the elder brother. He represented the self-righteous Pharisees of Jesus’s day. The message was subtle but unmistakable: If your life looks ordered, obedient, and responsible, you’re probably the elder brother, and therefore the villain.

In their sermons, pastors hammered hardest on the sins of elder brothers. There were three reasons for this. First, prodigals had already repented of their obvious sins, so they were treated like spiritual success stories. They were the ones who truly “got” the gospel. Second, obedient Christians were treated as ticking time bombs of pride, requiring constant self-examination for self-righteous motives. Their Christian vigilance was likely indicative of heart idols they hadn’t yet uncovered.

Third, elder-brother Christians were more likely to be conservatives, which made them safe to rebuke. Conservative Christians are used to being a punching bag. Prodigal sons were more likely to be left-leaning, which made them “cool” and “edgy,” and pastors wanted their approval. A new convert with tattoos and piercings would be photographed and prominently featured on the church’s website, giving them instant missional street cred as the church that “really cares about the

lost.” Prospective visitors will see their photo and know right away that this isn’t one of those judgmental churches that talk a lot about sin. Their website might even have a tagline that says, “We’re not your grandmother’s church.” Boring, conservative-looking churches give off elder-brother vibes. Thus, right-wing Christians became easy scapegoats for all that’s wrong with the church, while left-wing Christians were appeased and used in marketing campaigns to attract more of them.

This was the spiritual atmosphere that shaped me. I wanted to avoid “elder-brother Christianity,” so duty and obedience seemed lame and legalistic. I assumed humility meant being timid and insecure. As I worried about becoming an elder-brother Christian, I grew increasingly introspective, anxious that strong desires might be heart idols. Duty felt dangerous. Even though I’m driven by nature, my ambitions started to feel like arrogance. And I wasn’t alone. An entire generation of Christians was taught that being a “loser” for Jesus is the best way to comprehend the gospel.

The elder brother had become such a reliable foil that ordinary obedience got a bad reputation. The bride of Christ slowly became the fashionable omnivillain in the stories we told. It became common to talk about the church as though she were a blight on the human race. A popular book in those days was *Blue Like Jazz*, which tells a funny story about how some Christians did outreach on a college campus. They set up a “confession booth” in the middle of campus and invited students to enter. When they did, the Christians inside would confess the wicked

things the church has done throughout her history, such as the Inquisition, the Crusades, or the Salem Witch Trials.¹ The church became an embarrassment, and being an accuser of the brethren became an evangelistic strategy to attract progressive secularists. Not only is this a distortion of the gospel, but it has also wreaked havoc in both the church and the culture.

The results hit hard. In living memory, Christianity was a dominant force in our society, ordering our collective consciences and behaviors according to scripture. I'm not saying everyone who claims to be Christian is a born-again believer, but certainly Christianity shaped our society's vision of what is good, and losing it has been devastating.

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), America's largest Protestant denomination and a bellwether for evangelicalism, peaked in 2006 at 16 million members.² By 2024, it had shed nearly 3.6 million of them, with no floor in sight.³ Other denominations report similar declines. Around the same time, those reporting no religious affiliation climbed to 28 percent, the highest on record.

Not everyone sees this loss as a disaster. Some see these shrinking numbers as God cleaning house, purging the

1. Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Thomas Nelson, 2003), 115–18.

2. I planted my church through the Southern Baptist Convention in 2010, where we are still members.

3. "Annual of the 2019 Southern Baptist Convention," Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, 2019, sbhla.org/digital-resources/sbc-annuals.

hypocrites and driving out the posers so the faithful few can flourish. In his book *Onward*, Russell Moore said, “The Bible Belt is teetering toward collapse, and I say let it fall.”⁴

I understand the concern behind that sentiment. Cultural Christianity, the kind common in the Bible Belt, which apes the outward forms of faith without the inner renewal of the Spirit, is a real problem. Local churches often experience “blessed subtraction.” When a disgruntled or unbelieving member leaves the church, those who remain can enjoy a healthier and more unified fellowship. I’ve seen this many times in my own church.

But Moore is talking about something quite different. He openly advocates for the collapse of Christian influence in society, not just pruning church membership rolls of uncommitted members. He contends the church is most faithful when she exists as a “prophetic minority,” never a “moral majority,” exiled to the margins of society where she can properly express her pilgrim identity and bear witness to the gospel free from the corrupting temptations of cultural power.⁵

This is the basic posture of Loser Theology. Loser Theology regards itself as the truest and most humble expression of Christianity, delivering an embattled yet faithful minority report in the midst of a hostile culture. Exiles make better witnesses than culture warriors, Moore says. Given this self-identity, advocates

4. Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel* (B&H, 2015), 62.

5. Moore, *Onward*, 28.

of Loser Theology gladly concede the majority position to secularists, to whom they bear their prophetic gospel witness.

Strangely, Moore's vision ends up in alignment with secular culture: They both agree that secularists get to be in charge. Secularists want Christians to lose because we would otherwise stand in the way of their godless agenda. But Loser Theology's advocates also want Christians to lose because Christians are most faithful when we lose. They both arrive at the same destination, though they took different routes to get there.

Russell Moore is one of the most influential evangelical voices in America. He served as president of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) from 2013 to 2021, giving him a platform to shape the moral and cultural instincts of the largest Protestant denomination in the country. He served as editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today* from 2022–2025, arguably the most widely read evangelical publication in the world. Few voices have done more to persuade American evangelicals that cultural retreat is a form of faithfulness.

I studied under Moore at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, as he was my systematic theology professor. We were also members of the same church in Louisville, KY, though we were not well acquainted at the time. In those early days, Moore earned my trust as an advocate for biblical orthodoxy, and I watched his ascendancy in the SBC with delight.⁶ He

6. I documented my personal observation of Moore's trajectory in this article: Michael Clary, "The Many Faces of Russell Moore," *Center for Baptist*

wrote a wonderfully insightful piece on biblical sexuality for the Evangelical Theological Society that sharpened my own understanding.⁷ (He would later repudiate that piece.)⁸ From his position in the ERLC, Moore even had the President's ear, being invited to the Obama White House at least five times. My former seminary professor and fellow church member was advising the president at the White House!⁹

Moore's message of cultural surrender was difficult to reconcile, since he had more political power than most Christians could ever dream of. He climbed the ladder of the SBC and then used its platform to preach against the very institution that built it.

When one of the most *powerful* voices in evangelicalism is telling us to give up power—when one of the most *influential* voices in evangelicalism is telling us to give up influence—it starts to feel like you're being played. If we heed his counsel, we'll be handing victory to the enemies of Christ. The church empowered him to be our voice to the secular culture, but

Leadership, December 30, 2024, centerforbaptistleadership.org/the-many-faces-of-russell-moore.

7. Moore published this piece in 2006: Russell Moore, "After Patriarchy, What? Why Egalitarians Are Winning the Gender Debate," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49, no. 3 (September 2006): 569–76.

8. Russell Moore, "Let's Rethink the Evangelical Gender Wars," *Christianity Today*, March 2023, christianitytoday.com/2023/02/lets-rethink-evangelical-gender-wars.

9. Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Russell Moore Wants to Keep Christianity Weird," *Christianity Today*, September 2015, christianitytoday.com/2015/09/russell-moore-wants-to-keep-christianity-weird.

instead he used his power to become secular culture's voice to us. It feels like he's working for the other side. If the coach you hired is telling you to throw the game, he's betrayed your trust.

This is how Loser Theology ends up welcoming the culture's hostility. Being cast to the margins is not a problem to be solved; it is the condition that makes the whole framework meaningful. Like the enabling wife to an alcoholic husband, she *needs* him to stay addicted because his dysfunction gives her life purpose. Persecution and defeat is the air Loser Theology breathes; the church needs to lose to justify its theology. Being under the thumb of a hostile, secular culture provides many opportunities to play out one's fantasy of being a persecuted hero, just like the apostles. This is why many of Loser Theology's advocates regard victory-minded Christianity as a threat. A church that wins would deprive them of the losses they need to make their faith feel more authentic.

Skye Jethani is another advocate. He published a popular YouTube video called "Be a Loser Like Jesus," where he critiques Christians who misapply Bible verses at sporting events.¹⁰ For example, Philippians 4:13 says, "I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me." That critique is fair. Paul didn't write that verse to inspire clichéd halftime speeches.

But Jethani swerves into the opposite ditch, claiming Jesus gives us "the strength to lose," even calling Paul a "cheerful

10. Skye Jethani, "Be a Loser Like Jesus," Holy Post Media, November 5, 2024, YouTube video, 7:58.

loser.” He twists Christian contentment into a celebration of defeat, suggesting ambition or success are signs of discontent. Real Christians embrace loss, singing happy hymns while failing for Jesus. Jesus is thus recast as a permanent victim whose mission was to teach us how to lose well.

That’s Loser Theology in a nutshell: a half-Christ who always bears the cross, never wears the crown, and calls us to follow his example of losing. Some Christians have a cultural apologetic that only see believers as a marginalized minority, never as a powerful majority. Loser Theology has no vision for victory. In fact, victory feels almost unholy.

In 2015, the Supreme Court issued its *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, a legal fiction that established “gay marriage” as a constitutional right. *Obergefell* was a cultural atomic bomb. Biblical marriage isn’t peripheral Christian teaching; the covenant between husband and wife is Scripture’s own image for the gospel: Christ and his bride. And yet, five unelected justices decided that reality itself was under their jurisdiction, and they got away with it because the church had already surrendered her ability to shape the conscience of society.

Interestingly, Moore’s book *Onward* was also published in 2015, the same year as *Obergefell*, creating the perfect opportunity to put his “moral majority” vs. “prophetic minority” thesis to the test.¹¹ That year, support for “gay marriage” was at 60 per-

11. “Gay marriage” doesn’t actually exist. It is not a real marriage, despite its legal status, and should not be treated as having any legitimacy.

cent, already an alarmingly high number that had been steadily climbing due to a relentless, pro-gay propaganda campaign.¹² But in the years after *Obergefell*, that number skyrocketed to 70 percent in 2021. Personal LGBT identification followed suit. Among Gen Z, LGBT identification nearly doubled between 2017 and 2021, from 10.5 percent to 20.8 percent.¹³ That's roughly one fifth of an entire generation of children that were seduced into sexual perversion in the immediate aftermath of *Obergefell*. Many of these young people were raised in churches, whose identities were reshaped by a culture the church surrendered. According to Russell Moore, "Perhaps the best way to gain influence is to lose it."¹⁴ He continued, noting, cultural decline "may be bad news for America, but it can be good news for the church."¹⁵

Really? Tell that to Abigail Martinez, a devout Christian widow from California, whose daughter, Yaeli, was dealing with depression and questions about her sexuality. Her school's psychologist treated her depression with gender ideology, urging her to join the school's LGBTQ club without her mother's

12. Justin McCarthy, "Record-High 70% in U.S. Support Same-Sex Marriage," *Gallup*, June 8, 2021, news.gallup.com/poll/350486/record-high-support-same-sex-marriage.aspx.

13. Jeffrey M. Jones, "LGBT Identification in U.S. Ticks Up to 7.1%," *Gallup*, February 17, 2022, news.gallup.com/poll/389792/lgbtidentification-ticks-up.aspx.

14. Moore, *Onward*, 91.

15. Moore, *Onward*, 63.

knowledge or consent. When her mother refused to affirm her transgender identity, the state removed Yaeli from her mother's home and placed her in a foster home. Activists urged Martinez to have a "funeral" for Yaeli as a daughter and an "adoption" as a son.¹⁶ She was told she would never see Yaeli again if she talked with her about God. Tragically, Yaeli committed suicide. Martinez testified before Congress and told her story, saying, "My daughter was murdered by gender ideology."¹⁷

Is this the cultural decline we should welcome? I think not. There is no reason to believe this incident is an outlier. The cultural decline in the broader Christian West has allowed secularism to grow and assert its will. The same can be said of the growing threat of Islam as it is taking over Europe, where Christianity once thrived.

Loser Theology sowed the wind and reaped the whirlwind. The culture vacated by the church didn't stay neutral—it turned predatory. *Obergefell* was a catastrophic, cultural loss, and it unleashed a demonic legion of sexual chaos into our society leading to a free fall toward moral oblivion. As a pastor, I have dealt with the spiritual carnage personally as I've counseled

16. Jorge Gomez, "California Mom Who Lost Daughter to Suicide Over Gender Issues Urges Supreme Court to Protect Parental Rights, press release, First Liberty Institute, March 6, 2026, firstliberty.org/media/california-mom-who-lost-daughter-to-suicide-over-genderissues-urges-supreme-court-to-protect-parental-rights-2.

17. Elizabeth Troutman Mitchell, "California Took a Widow's Teenage Daughter to Transition Her," *Daily Signal*, September 8, 2024, dailysignal.com/2024/09/08/taken-california-stole-widows-daughter-transition.

members through adultery, pornography addiction, fornication, divorce, and transgenderism.

Loser Theology may not be the direct cause of these problems, but it is a character in the story nonetheless. It trained the church to welcome loss and embrace it as a friend. In all fairness, advocates of Loser Theology might personally oppose these things. So, the problem isn't that they affirm LGBTQ lifestyles, because they may not. The problem is attacking Christians who openly and forcefully condemn them as the *real* enemy.

On January 6, 2021, *Christianity Today* ran an article timed to coincide with President Biden's inauguration, entitled, "We Need to be Better Losers."¹⁸ This finger-wagging article lectured Trump-voting Christians for being sore losers, as though the election loss meant little more than our favorite football team losing a playoff game. "Christians of all people should model losing well," argued Daniel Bennett, the article's author. We need to do better at demonstrating "an ability to be good sports in defeat." A month later, the Gospel Coalition ran an article with a similar theme entitled, "All Christians are 'Losers.'"¹⁹ Defining faithfulness by loss creates perverse incentives that reframe the church's successes as a threat. For example, the Great Commission's success is disincentivized because

18. Daniel Bennett, "We Need to Be Better Losers," *Christianity Today*, January 6, 2021, christianitytoday.com/2021/01/christian-victory-election-loss.

19. Chris Colquitt, "All Christians Are 'Losers,'" The Gospel Coalition, February 12, 2021, thegospelcoalition.org/article/all-christians-losers.

widespread conversions to Christianity would undermine the conditions needed for holy defeat.

Moore's call for the church to function as a "prophetic minority" comes packaged with contempt for anyone who speaks with clear-headed, unambiguous, Christian conviction—the kind of rhetoric that was common amongst the Old Testament prophets. Moore rejects *that* kind of prophetic witness. Moral outrage is off the table, regardless of how outrageous society becomes. "Rage is no sign of authority, prophetic or otherwise," he notes. In fact, Moore says, "if outrage were a sign of godliness, then the devil would be the godliest soul in the cosmos."²⁰

In the place of moral clarity on hot-button cultural issues, Moore prefers what he calls "convictional kindness."²¹ That sounds reasonable enough, but in practice it becomes a one-way ratchet—all kindness and no conviction. Men who denounce culturally celebrated sins with the same level of moral clarity we see in the Old Testament will be accused of being mean-spirited.

Nevertheless, some outrage *is* morally acceptable if it is directed at Loser Theology's preferred target: conservative, victory-minded Christians. Moore once published this sentence at the Gospel Coalition about what happened on January 6, 2021: "As I watched on television images of angry mobs pouring into

20. Moore, *Onward*, 82.

21. Moore, *Onward*, 52.

the United States Capitol, my hands were trembling with rage.”²² So evidently, not *all* outrage is off the table. Secular culture gets “convictional kindness.” Conservatives get “trembling with rage.”

Moore describes another occasion where he found himself “enraged,” this time in 2025 after watching Idaho pastor Doug Wilson articulate the historic, Christian position on sexuality to a CNN reporter. Moore said, “One of the things that really enraged me about this CNN interview is the fact that there are so many non-Christians who are going to watch this and think that this is Christianity.”²³ There it is again—*rage*. Moore went on to say men who agree with Wilson don’t become responsible, faithful men—they “become *losers* who blame women for their own lack of responsibility.”²⁴ It would seem Moore believes some Christians really are *losers*, and it is morally acceptable to direct outrage at *them*.

Ironically, CNN was interviewing Pastor Wilson precisely because he’s *winning*. Pastor Wilson is cultivating an optimistic, victorious culture in Moscow, whose impressive cultural output includes church planting, a classical Christian school, a publishing house, nationally distributed television programs, and other

22. Russell Moore, “The Gospel in a Democracy Under Assault,” The Gospel Coalition, January 6, 2021, thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-gospel-in-a-democracy-under-assault.

23. Russell Moore, Clarissa Moll, and Mike Cosper, “Troops in DC, Doug Wilson, and Make America Healthy Again,” *The Bulletin* (podcast), *Christianity Today*, August 15, 2025, christianitytoday.com/podcasts/the-bulletin/199-national-guard-dc-doug-wilson-maha.

24. Moore, “Troops in DC.”

Christian media. When it comes to victory-minded Christians that Moore disagrees with, he has no problem being enraged at them and calling them losers. But when it comes to Christians who embrace losing as a way of life, Moore says, “We are stranger and exiles in the present time, that’s true. But we are not losers.”²⁵ After paying attention to this for the past twenty years, a pattern has become obvious to me. Moore doesn’t want *all* Christians to embrace the loser posture, just the conservative ones.²⁶

To be sure, Christians can be verbally cruel, which both dishonors God and repels unbelievers. Moore wasn’t wrong to point that out. But as he deploys it, “convictional kindness” means pandering to secularists while firing both rhetorical barrels at victory-minded believers. The convictions get buried under a mountain of kindness until they are no longer visible at all. When Moore said, “every genuine culture war starts with friendly fire,” we can take him at his word.²⁷

There are times when Moore does dance to the beat of victory drums. He once wrote, “We are not the losers in the arc of history. We are, according to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the future servant kings and queens of the universe.”²⁸ I agree whole-

25. Moore, *Onward*, 30.

26. This kind of logic has been called “Stockholm Syndrome Christianity” by John G. West. See John G. West, *Stockholm Syndrome Christianity: Why America’s Christian Leaders Are Failing—and What We Can Do About It* (Discovery Institute Press, 2025).

27. Moore, *Onward*, 70.

28. Russel Moore, “A Prophetic Minority: Kingdom, Culture, and Mission in a New

heartedly with this statement, but the victory he promises is incomplete. He locates the Christian hope of victory entirely in the eternal state as a coping mechanism for perpetual loss until that day arrives. In this life, we should only expect defeat. And we should *like* it too. Losing cultural influence is an “act of God’s grace” to prepare us for eternal victory in the end.²⁹ Thus, we should shed cultural power and be losers now in order to be true winners eschatologically. That’s the spiritual equivalent of a coach telling his team after a crushing playoff loss, “You guys are winners in my book.” Maybe so, but they still *lost* the game. No one plays any game in order to *intentionally* lose as a character-building exercise. The character-forming lessons we learn in loss only matter if we were *trying* to win.

Moore isn’t an outlier in evangelicalism; he’s the most visible example of a much broader pattern. And the pattern comes with carnage. A fifth of Gen Z now identifies as LGBTQ. Christian parents are losing custody of their children for their refusal to comply with gender ideology. All this happened as many evangelical leaders were leading us to not fight back faithfully but were lecturing us to lose with more dignity.

The secular press has taken note too. David French is a prominent evangelical voice who regularly publishes on similar themes in his column at the *New York Times*. Russell Moore

Era,” *RussellMoore.com*, September 10, 2013, russellmoore.com/2013/09/19/a-prophetic-minority-kingdom-culture-and-mission-in-a-new-era.

29. Emma Green, “The Freakishness of Christianity,” *The Atlantic*, August 4, 2015.

has been admirably profiled in the *Atlantic* and published by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Time* magazine. Both French and Moore take to the pages of these secular megaphones to publish criticisms of conservative evangelicals before a national audience. The late pastor Tim Keller was heralded in secular media as a model of what acceptable Christianity looks like. Keller was not merely a useful political ally but was taken seriously on his own terms as a spiritual authority. He was arguably the secular press's favorite evangelical, which is worth reflecting on, given what we know about why secular media celebrates certain kinds of Christianity.³⁰ That kind of approval is a tell. When the enemies of Christ can't stop praising your theology, that's a strong indicator that something is wrong with your theology.

In the realm of science, Francis Collins is a geneticist who led the Human Genome Project, served as Science Advisor to the President in the Biden Administration, and directed the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for twelve years. As a powerful, evangelical Christian, he was celebrated in the secular press because his Christianity didn't interfere with their agenda. One writer for *Slate* said, "If Collins' faith mollifies even a few political conservatives who would otherwise continue to waste time and money fighting research efforts that violate their specific religious tenets, then the benefits of

30. Nicholas Kristof, "Am I a Christian, Pastor Timothy Keller?," *New York Times*, December 6, 2016, p. SR19.

his faith should outweigh whatever qualms scientists might have.”³¹ In other words, Collins’s Christianity “benefits” secularists because it neutralizes evangelical opposition to their agenda. Perhaps that’s because Collins supports their agenda too. He championed embryonic stem cell research,³² including the use of fetal tissue obtained from aborted babies—in some cases up to forty-two weeks gestation—to create “humanized mice” models for research,³³ the dismissal of Christian scientists who were skeptical of Darwinian evolution,³⁴ the embrace of LGBTQ ideology (Collins wrote personally in celebration of Pride Month),³⁵ and the accusation

31. David Klinghoffer, “A Useful Christian: John West on Francis Collins and Stockholm Syndrome Christianity,” *Science and Culture Today*, February 24, 2025, scienceandculture.com/2025/02/a-useful-christian-john-west-on-francis-collins-and-stockholm-syndrome-christianity.

32. Justin Lee, “The Cautionary Tale of Francis Collins,” *First Things*, October 29, 2021, firstthings.com/the-cautionary-tale-of-francis-collins.

33. Judicial Watch: “New HHS Documents Reveal Millions in Federal Funding for University of Pittsburgh Human Fetal Organ Harvesting Project Including Viable and Full-Term Babies,” *Judicial Watch*, August 3, 2021, judicialwatch.org/hhs-documents-organ-harvesting. See also Meredith Wadman and Jocelyn Kaiser, “NIH Chief Defends Use of Human Fetal Tissue as Opponents Decry It Before Congress,” *Science*, December 13, 2018, science.org/content/article/nih-chief-defends-use-human-fetal-tissue-opponents-decry-it-congress.

34. John G. West, “The Tragedy of Francis Collins’s Model for Science-Faith Integration,” *Science and Culture Today*, October 18, 2021, scienceandculture.com/2021/10/the-tragedy-of-francis-collinss-model-for-science-faith-integration.

35. Francis S. Collins, “From the NIH Director: NIH 2021 Pride Month,” National Institutes of Health Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, June 2021, edi.nih.gov/

that Christians who declined the COVID vaccine were killing their neighbors.³⁶ Collins is the kind of Christian leader secularists will gladly affirm because he's working for their side.

Despite his track record, when Collins retired, evangelical thought leaders publicly celebrated him on X. French called him a "national treasure." Moore said, "I admire greatly the wisdom, expertise, and, most of all, the Christian humility and grace of Francis Collins."

These men would all say they used their positions of prominence to influence the culture for the sake of the gospel, but the evidence suggests they used their prominence to influence the church for the sake of secular culture. Jesus said, "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets" (Luke 6:26). When Christians are sufficiently immersed in elite institutions hostile to the faith, they stop seeing secular culture as something to resist and start seeing it as something to appease. They begin to sympathize with the hostility directed at their own people. Eventually they join in. The enemy isn't outside the gates anymore. He's leading the NIH.

Christians who follow their lead learn to perpetually surrender to the culture and welcome the rule of wicked men as a

[blog/news/nih-director-nih-2021-pride-month](https://www.religionnews.com/2022/02/03/francis-collins-on-covid-evangelicals-the-culture-war-is-literally-killing-people).

36. Adelle M. Banks, "Francis Collins on COVID-19 Politics: 'The Culture War Is Literally Killing People,'" *Religion News Service*, February 3, 2022, [religionnews.com/2022/02/03/francis-collins-on-covid-evangelicals-the-culture-war-is-literally-killing-people](https://www.religionnews.com/2022/02/03/francis-collins-on-covid-evangelicals-the-culture-war-is-literally-killing-people).

sanctifying gift. Persecution becomes a badge of honor. In this fantasy, it is presumed that our weakness would eventually melt the hearts of our enemies, who witness our faithful losing and fall under conviction and ask, “Why are you so joyful in your defeat while my life of success and indulgence is a dumpster fire? What is the reason for the hope that is in you?” And then, we’ll think to ourselves, “Yes! I knew it would work! I’ve been losing my whole life for this moment to arrive!” A revival will break out. But not too much revival, of course, because that would bring us dangerously close to winning. We can’t have that. If everyone gets saved, who will be left to persecute us? We’ll still need plenty of pagans around to persecute all the new Christians when the revival is over. They’ll need to learn that they’re supposed to be faithful losers too. After all, we’ve already determined that losing is the only way to truly win.

This sentiment is absurd, yet it pinballs across evangelicalism like some kind of upside-down sage wisdom. These are but a few of Loser Theology’s many smug, condescending absurdities. Prominent voices, whose very prominence undermines the Loser Theology they teach, cheer the church’s decline in the West, framing it as a necessary, purifying loss. Christians who follow their teaching think resisting tyrants is ungodly. Better, they believe, to suffer passively than to push back with strength. Faithfulness gets reduced to silence, retreat, and private inward devotion. Civic duty and cultural responsibility disappears. Christians are told to go down quietly, as lambs to the slaughter, because “that’s the way

of Jesus.” It’s a tragic distortion of our Lord, who calls kings and nations to bow before him in obedience.

WHY LOSER THEOLOGY IS ATTRACTIVE

Loser Theology is attractive to Christians for a number of reasons we’ll explore throughout this book, but three stand out.

First, Loser Theology is attractive because it makes Christians easier for the world to like. A Christian whose posture toward culture is warm, accommodating, and perpetually retreating poses no threat to the respectable idols of the age. Loser-minded Christians won’t be protested or canceled; they’ll be heralded in the *Atlantic* as the kind of Christian atheists can respect, invited onto NPR to reassure listeners that not all evangelicals are like *those* evangelicals. Loser Theology is the price of admission to elite respectability, and for Christians who move in those circles, the temptation is real. The approval of sophisticated unbelievers is a powerful drug, and Loser Theology is the dealer.

Second, Loser Theology is attractive because it genuinely feels like the more faithful path. It doesn’t recruit cynics; it recruits the sincere. The Christians most drawn to it are often the ones most tired of shallow, performative evangelicalism. They want real humility, paired with an earnest desire to save souls. They’re suspicious of power because they’ve seen its potential to be corrupted. These are good instincts. The tragedy of Loser Theology is that it takes those good instincts and

redirects them toward passivity, teaching believers that the most Spirit-filled response to a collapsing culture is to get out of the way and let it fall.

Third, Loser Theology is attractive because the alternative is hard. Our culture *is* in a state of accelerating decline, and many believers feel genuinely ill-equipped to do anything about it. The cultural ground we've lost took generations to build, generations to lose, and will take generations to recover. The institutional courage required to push back is costly. The personal discipline required to raise children who can engage the world rather than retreat from it is exhausting. Loser Theology offers a way out—a theological permission slip to accept defeat rather than do the painful work of resistance. It feels more like wisdom than giving up.

I see something similar to the body-positivity movement in all three of these features. Everyone knows being significantly overweight is bad for your health, the discipline required to change is difficult, and many find it more than they can sustain. So rather than accepting the truth and doing what it takes to address it, the body-positivity movement changed the story instead. "Fat is fabulous!" Every external signal that something is wrong gets reinterpreted as a cultural prejudice to overcome. The result is people who deceive themselves into feeling better about a condition that is slowly killing them.

Loser Theology works the same way. Rather than recovering cultural ground, rebuilding institutional courage, and training a

generation to engage the world with confidence, Loser Theology changes the story. When we see cultural decline and growing hostility from secularism, we say, “Being a minority in society is actually good. It’s better to lose than to win. This is the way of the cross.” Every external signal that something is wrong gets reinterpreted as a mark of authentic Christianity, leaving the church feeling more faithful as it shrivels away.

To change the analogy, Loser Theology works like the effect of *cordyceps*, a parasitic fungi, on the nervous system of ants. *Cordyceps* penetrates the ant’s outer shell and grows within its body, especially around its muscles, releasing chemicals that alter the ant’s nervous system and behavior. The ant ends up acting in ways that benefit the fungus: It leaves the colony, climbs vegetation, and clamps its jaws onto the underside of a leaf in a characteristic “death grip,” leaving it exposed to predators. Researchers call this phenomenon the zombie ant. The ant has been “reprogrammed” to act contrary to its own self-preservation.

Loser Theology has a similar effect on the church, convincing believers to think and act against their own self-interest, leaving them exposed, vulnerable, and easy prey. In practice, it looks like a young man suppressing his God-given ambition because he’s afraid it might be motivated by pride. It looks like the pastor who refuses to call out stylish sins celebrated by our culture because doing so would threaten his reputation for likability and winsomeness. Loser Theology isn’t restricted to a

particular denomination or tradition—sincere believers from any tradition can be convinced to view victory with suspicion and to welcome loss with open arms.

My calling is a pastor, first and foremost. My concern, therefore, is for the souls of men and women who may be hindered or even harmed by this teaching. In other words, this isn't theoretical. Loser Theology isn't just a doctrinal error. It harms real Christians. It produces men who won't lead their families, pastors who won't protect their flocks, and churches that won't defend their communities. I have sat across from these people in my office.

These same problems surfaced in Paul's day, and he addressed them in his letter to the church in Thessalonica. Assuming Christ would return at any moment, they took a passive approach to life, believing there was no point in working or building for the future. Paul's instruction included these words: "We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all" (1 Thess. 5:14). Three groups are mentioned, with different problems and remedies prescribed for each.

The first group was "idle." Their work ethic was poor, and they sinned by being lazy and failing to provide. Paul said these people should be "admonished" to repent of their laziness and work diligently (cf. 2 Thess. 3:6–12). The second group was "fainthearted." They weren't lazy; they were discouraged. They didn't need a stiff rebuke. What they most needed was to be "encouraged," which is what Paul told the church to give them. Someone might have said, "You've taken a few hits lately, but you've got what it takes.

I believe in you. Let me pray for you.” Finally, the third group was “weak.” They were weak because they lacked the necessary strength or skill to succeed. In other words, what they most needed was “help.” Someone could tell him, “This is a difficult task—how can I help you accomplish it?”

Some believers are passive because they’re lazy, some because they’re wounded, and some because they’ve been taught weakness is godly. Loser Theology gives each of them a pious excuse to stay that way. But God’s grace meets us in weakness so that he might strengthen us rather than allow us to wallow in our fragility.

WHY I USE THE TERM LOSER THEOLOGY

Allow me two caveats before we move on. First, some readers may object to my use of the term Loser Theology. Since few would apply this label to themselves, why use it? I use the term because it’s a theology that advocates for losing as the way to be faithful to God. Loser Theology can refer to theological perspectives and movements that emphasize passivity, retreat, and defeat, often conflating suffering and loss with humility. In other words, the Loser Theology label is not about petty name-calling, but about calling Christians to break free from the prison of Loser Theology that’s holding them captive.

Second, I do name a few popular Christian leaders in this book whose teaching has promoted Loser Theology. You might

even feel like I'm betraying good men. I get that. My intent is to be instructive, not vindictive. In fact, some of my sharpest critiques are directed toward men whose ministries have benefitted me greatly. That's actually part of the problem. I resisted disagreeing far longer than I should have precisely because I respected them and wanted to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Many of the leaders associated with Loser Theology (and their followers) seem sincere in their aims. They aren't trying to harm the church—they likely think they're being helpful. They apparently see themselves as calling the church away from worldly syncretism toward a more God-centered spirituality. Who could object to that?

The problem, as we shall see, is in its exaggerations, distortions, and (mis)applications to real life. Public ministry invites public criticism. That's the way these things work. I expect I'll receive public criticism for publishing this book. I'm prepared for that. Naming names is necessary to be helpful, and Scripture provides plenty of examples (2 Tim. 1:15; 2:17–18; 4:10, 14). I'm not trying to throw anyone under the bus; I'm trying to get the bus moving in the right direction again.

BREAKING FREE FROM LOSER THEOLOGY

Breaking free from Loser Theology wasn't instant for me. It took years of ministry, study, and the slow realization that some of the instincts I'd absorbed from good men were wrong. The

weekly rhythm of expository preaching and wrestling with the text of Scripture convinced me that Loser Theology was not only wrong, but it was also inflicting real harm on people I cared about. These people were sincere Christians who love Jesus and treasure his Word. And yet, they were attracted to Loser Theology precisely because it *feels* biblical, even when it doesn't make sense rationally. I observed firsthand how Loser Theology's influence operated at the precognitive level, shaping people's reflexes and presumptions before they ever opened their Bibles, convincing them that adopting a posture of weakness and defeat was honoring to Christ. I couldn't remain silent.

You may discover that men you respect teach some of these errors. Most of us believe what we believe because we trust those who taught us in the faith, and loyalty is a virtue, not a weakness. But Scripture calls us to "put away childish things," which means we must evaluate what we inherited and correct it where needed (1 Cor. 13:11).

You may even realize you have taught them yourself. That's an even bigger challenge, because you'll have to humble yourself and admit you were wrong. That's okay; don't panic. I've had to do this myself. This is why we all need grace. Many Christians have repeated slogans they later regret. Slogans are harder to correct because they stick. One bad slogan can do more damage than an error-riddled book that no one reads. Slogans lodge in the soul like splinters and keep shaping us long after the logic has fallen apart. That's why I've learned to

treat clichés as dangerous—attractive, yes, but often carrying a hidden cost.

To discern truth from error, you cannot stop at confronting bad ideas. You'll have to confront both the bad ideas *and* the emotions that reinforce them. Loser Theology's power works on spiritual reflexes before you're aware of it. It *feels* right even when it isn't. That emotional pull must be exposed for what it is: a conditioned intuition that incentivizes and rewards passivity.

Let me be blunt: Breaking free won't be easy. Loser Theology doesn't just occupy your theology; it occupies your instincts. It has to be rooted out at the level of reflex, not just doctrine. This book will force you to confront ideas that feel humble but aren't, and to embrace postures that feel arrogant but are simply faithful. That will be uncomfortable. Good.

The church was not built by men who believed in losing well. It was built by men who, having been crucified with Christ, also rose with him. And they lived like it. The same Lord who hung on the cross now reigns at the right hand of the Father, and it is before him that every knee will bow, kings and nations included. That is not a losing vision. It never was. This book is an invitation to recover it.