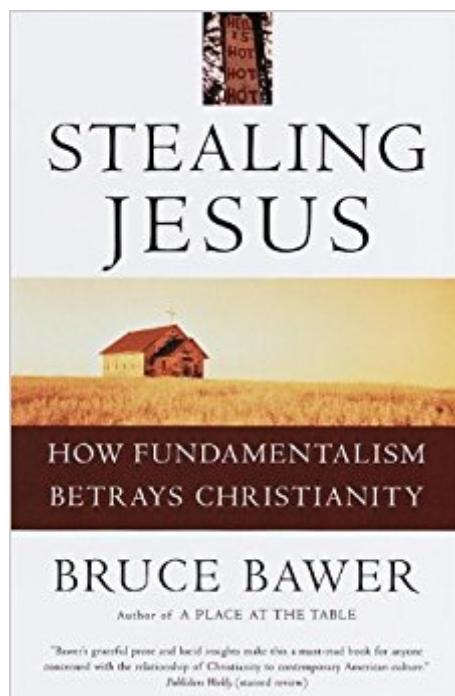


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# Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity



## Synopsis

From the author of the widely acclaimed *A Place at the Table*, this is a major work, passionately outspoken and cogently reasoned, that exposes the great danger posed to Christianity today by fundamentalism. The time is past, says Bruce Bawer, when denominational names and other traditional labels provided an accurate reflection of Christian America's religious beliefs and practices. The meaningful distinction today is not between Protestant and Catholic, or Baptist and Episcopalian, but rather between "legalistic" and "nonlegalistic" religion, between the Church of Law and the Church of Love. On one side is the fundamentalist right, which draws a sharp distinction between "saved" and "unsaved" and worships a God of wrath and judgment; on the other are more mainstream Christians who view all humankind as children of a loving God who calls them to break down barriers of hate, prejudice, and distrust. Pointing out that the supposedly "traditional" beliefs of American fundamentalism--about which most mainstream Christians, clergy included, know shockingly little--are in fact of relatively recent origin, are distinctively American in many ways, and are dramatically at odds with the values that Jesus actually spread, Bawer fascinatingly demonstrates the way in which these beliefs have increasingly come to supplant genuinely fundamental Christian tenets in the American church and to become synonymous with Christianity in the minds of many people. *Stealing Jesus* is the ringing testament of a man who is equally disturbed by the notion of an America without Christianity and the notion of an American Christianity without love and compassion.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In 300-odd pages, Bruce Bawer has opened a floodgate of incisive religious criticism that will reverberate across the American political scene. He has put into eloquent and decisive language what many mainline Christians and non-Christians have quietly suspected but been unable to verbalize--namely that Fundamentalist Christianity is barely Christian at all. A Baptist theologian says he is "not interested in who Jesus was." Pat Robertson argues the Golden Rule as Jesus's justification that "individual self-interest is being a very real part of the human makeup, and something not necessarily bad or sinful." In page after page, Bawer reveals a so-called Fundamentalist movement that readily displays a blatant disregard for the most salient message of the Gospels: selfless love and service to all. As for the significance of this revelation in the face of the ballooning presence of Fundamentalist Christians in American politics, readers will have to decide for themselves. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Author of *A Place at the Table*, a groundbreaking book on homosexuality, and of articles on religion, Bawer argues that fundamentalism is a recent development that defies the values of Christianity. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book had some great points, and I appreciate someone taking the time to research and look at our culture today and how often we are at two different points of view when it comes to Christianity. This book is like a text book so it takes time to read and digest. I would imagine many would have a hard time getting through it. I had a minister quote from this book and it struck up my interests, because I personally have had conversations with fundamental believers and have had difficulty with the literal interpretation of their views of the bible.

Bruce Bawer's anti-fundamentalist bias shows itself numerous times in this book; as a self-admitted homosexual, while he doesn't focus overly much on fundamentalist issues with gays, he still shows a tendency to generalize about all fundamentalists when in fact, as legalistic as they all are, they are NOT all a bunch of extremists. There ARE fundamentalists who can show great amounts of love, whether you're one of the "saved" or not, who don't interpret every last line of the Bible as literally true (I know two who think Pat Robertson is wonderful but who nevertheless believe in evolution) and who haven't turned Jesus into a Rambo-style warmonger. Still, it's a decent read and well-researched, in my opinion (and I've been watching and researching the fundies for over fifteen

years now so this is not a new issue for me). His profiles of BNFs (Big-Name Fundamentalists) like Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed are right-on. His dissection of fundamentalist belief, when he's not overgeneralizing, is right-on as well. It's easy to see why the fundies are so annoyed with him...in countless cases he hits their issues squarely on the head. There is little refutation, in my opinion, of his contention that fundamentalism by and large IS anti-intellectual, prejudiced and bigoted, and contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Don't rely on this book alone to form your opinions on Christian fundamentalism, but it's a great addition to your library.

I approached this book as a member of the choir Bawer was preaching to, so I was surprised by my increasingly negative feelings the more I read. I believe, as does Bawer, that many, if not most, Fundamentalists are narrow-minded, ill-informed, and as un-loving a group as ever called themselves Christian. But Bawer's heartfelt screed eventually becomes as intolerant as those he fulminates against. I feel he could have made a much better case if he had stuck to the historical ignorance (both religious and secular) that his subjects evince. He also could have made strong points against a group that give voice to wanting better education, but does so at the expense of having their children LEARN anything other than the 'three Rs'. But by clouding the waters with homosexuality and a confusing discourse on popular films, Bawer hurts his case badly. However one feels about gays in our society (and I'm much closer to Bawer's point of view than the Christian Right's), there are a lot of well-meaning non-fundamentalists who have problems with gay marriage or with films like "Priest." To seem to pretend, as Bawer does, that all fundamentalists damn gays and all non-fundamentalists embrace them, is exactly the kind of black or white position that Bawer condemns in the Christian Right. To question one Christian writer's tying AIDS to promiscuous behavior seems ingenuous at best. I also had problems with Bawer's trying to make the film of the "Sound of Music" some kind of failed attempt at showing religion honestly--it's a musical comedy for Pete's sake--even the Nazis are fairly sugar-coated. All in all, I'd say this is an important subject that needs to be tackled by someone with less of an axe to grind.

This book raised many interesting spiritual issues for me. While it contains some ideas and arguments that I do not accept, it affords a context within which I can examine my own spiritual journey, and it has helped me articulate the discomfort that I felt with the churches that my family attended while I was in high school. It distinguishes between "law" and "love" as the bases for different strands in contemporary Christian movements. (Guess which one it prefers.) The tone is a little strident (especially in the chapters that amount to personal attacks on certain leaders of the

religious right), and I have run into one or two passages that make assertions with which I am predisposed to agree but which I cannot accept uncritically and which the text does not document, but it is well written and makes several interesting points. The most informative part was perhaps the history that traces contemporary fundamentalism to social movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Bruce Bawer is a thoughtful, passionate, exciting, writer who is worth reading no matter what side you're on. I highly recommend another of his books, *While Europe Slept*, if you are interested in Modern Islam. Here he takes on the issue of Christian fundamentalism in the US -- what it is, where it came from and \*\*SPOILER WARNING\*\* why it's all wrong. This topic has only become more important since *Stealing Jesus* was published. Bawer's arguments are well thought out, well-informed and well presented. He is passionate but, I think, fair. Also, unless you are a professional in this field you will learn a great deal about how protestant Christianity evolved over the past 150 years in the US. This could easily be a dry topic by the way but this is not a dry book. I can't say I always agreed with Bawer -- he makes a case at one point that form and ritual are more important than laws, which is hard to reconcile with Jesus's own ministry which did not focus on ritual at all. But his essential point, that many protestants in the US have moved far away from the essential message of love, is worthy and well-made. This would be a great book for a book club...if you can all agree to remain friends after discussing a religious topic!

Wonderful book. Brings the essences of Jesus's message to a beautiful light.

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