

Praise for Unbinding Christianity

If you have found it impossible to continue believing in some of the doctrines the church has taught to be essential and don't know if you can continue being a Christian, Jan Linn offers some much needed guidance. He invites readers to think along with him as he makes distinctions between believing in doctrines and having value-enlivened belief, between being a Christian and being Christian. His message is that just because your integrity demands you give up on some traditional Christian ideas doesn't mean you need to become a Christian dropout.

—The Rev. Craig Watts, D.Min, author of *Bowing Toward Babylon*

Unbinding Christianity is a thought-provoking argument for expansion of Christianity's often employed litmus tests of inclusion and rejection. Jan Linn addresses this complex issue in a clear, concise, and easily accessible manner. A great read!

—Joshua Santana, Attorney-at-Law

This book is a wake-up call to all of us who choose to follow Jesus, a challenge for us to rethink what it truly means to be Christian. Jan Linn's thesis is simple, yet profound—it is what we do on a daily basis, not what we believe, that is the core of a Christian life.

—Heather Cargill, Psy.D., Licensed Clinical Psychologist

In a biblically well-informed and a life-experience challenging way, *Unbinding Christianity* explores a central question: Are we called to follow the values of the life Jesus lived or are we merely following a set of beliefs the Church has offered? This book offers hope to those who have felt excluded by the latter and want help with following the culturally-challenging way that Jesus lived.

—Kevin Campbell, Director, US Long Term Disaster Recovery,
Habitat For Humanity

Being Christian, it seems to me, is less a set of beliefs and more a way of life. While I have believed that for many years, Jan Linn's clear, concise, and compelling book clarifies why this is so, and how the very future of the faith depends on its recognition. This book will benefit everyone concerned about the future of Christianity and the future of the church.

—The Rev. Nathan Wilson, Director of Communications,
Christian Theological Seminary

Jan Linn argues that the Christian faith has become distorted by a focus on beliefs rather than the values Jesus taught. For many Christians his message will be welcomed with relief, even joy, as they struggle between their resistance to certain required Christian beliefs and their love for their church.

—Judy Foster, Ph.D., Professor of English, St. Cloud State University, Retired

Jan Linn offers a much-needed challenge to those who claim to follow Jesus: move beyond easy "believe-ism" to embrace the demands the gospel places on us. Linn argues Jesus asks us to live like him, not merely to believe like him. This is a crucial insight at this pivotal moment in our history.

—The Rev. Derek Penwell, Ph.D., author of *Outlandish: An Unlikely Messiah, A Messy Ministry, and the Call to Mobilize*

Unbinding Christianity

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**Choosing the Values
of Jesus over the Beliefs
of the Church**

Jan G. Linn



Universal Publishers
Irvine • Boca Raton

*Unbinding Christianity: Choosing the Values of Jesus
over the Beliefs of the Church*

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Universal Publishers, Inc.
Irvine • Boca Raton
USA • 2020
www.Universal-Publishers.com

ISBN: 978-1-62734-292-6 (pbk.)

ISBN: 978-1-62734-293-3 (ebk.)

Typeset by Medlar Publishing Solutions Pvt Ltd, India
Cover design by Paul Champie

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication Data
available at the United States Library of Congress

For
The Gathering House



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Acknowledgments

Thanking my wife, Joy, for her role in everything I write usually comes last. I finally realized that was backwards. She should be the first person I acknowledge. Ultimately she is the reason my work sees the light of day. She has a keen eye for mistakes in the text and a marvelous sense of what does and does not read well. For this particular book, though, her years of experience in ministry and her understanding of what being Christian means have contributed far beyond style and tone. Her substantive contributions run through every chapter. More than anything, though, she has always helped me to believe in my own writing and never to question its value. That is what loving support truly means.

The Reverend David Digby was the first person I asked to read this material. It was in its early stage, but I knew of no one whose objective theological assessment of my argument I trusted more than his. Not only did he encourage me to keep writing, but offered insights that provided needed direction when I seemed to be floundering. For that kind of help, and the fact that we have been friends and colleagues in ministry for many years is something I hope never to take for granted.

And then there is Bill Blackwell. It is rare for a writer to have a best friend who has a copy editor's eye without ever having worked as one professionally, though he does hold an advanced degree in literature. In addition, he has the strength of intellect to speak candidly about the quality of my argument and the efficacy of the writing. Perhaps most important, though,

is that Bill lives a life that is consistent with Christian principles and values without having been raised in a church or attended one as an adult on any regular basis. He is, in fact, precisely the kind of person to whom I am hoping this book will appeal.

I also want to thank my publisher, Jeff Young, for being willing to take on this project. We had worked together on *What's Wrong With The Christian Right*, a very satisfying experience for me from beginning to end. Because I had some unconventional ideas regarding this book's publication, Jeff was the first person I wanted to contact to see if he would at least give me a hearing about them. Obviously, he did more than that, and once again the collaboration has been a pleasure throughout.



Endorsements

There is nothing unusual about endorsements for a book, except in the case of this book there is. Endorsements function to assure potential readers that a book has been judged by qualified critics to have credibility on the subject and is worth the time to read. The credibility of endorsements depends, of course, on the people giving them, usually scholars and/or people who possess expertise in the subject matter of the book. The value of an endorsement is obviously enhanced significantly if it is written by someone with name recognition.

During more than thirty-five years of writing, I have been fortunate to have secured a wide spectrum of endorsements from people I respect and admire and in a few instances people well known to the public. For this book, though, I chose to approach soliciting endorsements in a different way, by asking people who represent the book's intended reading audience to evaluate it, and, if willing, to add their endorsement. Specifically, I wanted to ask past and present congregational ministers who bear primary responsibility for teaching church members what being Christian means to consider an endorsement. More specifically, I sought those who exemplify the pastor/scholar model in their practice of ministry. There was a time when pastor/scholar was the model to which young ministers aspired. Today only a few do, or stay with it if they try, because of the demands of modern congregational life that amount to expecting ministers to be all things to

all people. The clergy who gave endorsements are beloved pastors and respected thinkers. Each of them is an advocate for social, economic, and racial justice. At the same time they have authored books and academic articles, and in one instance writes a regular column for a major mid-western city newspaper. These are ministers who are well qualified to assess the book's distinction between being a Christian and being Christian because they embody it in their own lives.

The non-clergy endorsements share equal status with the ones written by the pastor/scholars. One of them lives and moves and has his being in the ministry called Habitat for Humanity. He didn't study for the ministry, but he did choose to make service to others his life's vocation. Daily he works with and on behalf of families that need a safe and respectable place to live. He may or may not attend church regularly, but his life teaches and preaches the core message of this book, that being Christian should be defined by the values Jesus lived and taught.

Another one is a highly successful attorney in Kentucky who is a first-generation American of Puerto Rican heritage, is active in a main-line denominational church, and whose law practice includes providing pro bono counsel and legal representation to workers and migrants who would otherwise be at the mercy of a legal system that can be unmerciful and unfair. He knows the difference between being a Christian and being Christian, a distinction the book will explain in detail.

The third one is a highly respected child psychologist who came to organized religion as an adult, allowing her to experience first hand the struggle to be Christian while not being able to embrace various claims the church told her she should believe. In addition, throughout her practice she continues to confront some of the obstacles parental religious beliefs can create in her efforts to help children recover from infant and early childhood emotional and physical trauma.

The final non-clergy endorser was until recently Professor of English at a state university, and a writer herself. She is from a small southern city and raised in traditional Christianity. It became obvious to her as a young adult that she did not believe what she had been taught were the basic tenets of Christian belief. During this same time she was developing a growing commitment to social justice while seeing much evidence that her church shared that commitment. Eventually she abandoned traditional Christianity

for Unitarian Universalism where thinking was valued rather than resisted and theological fringes were seen as normal. Since that time she has become a major leader in her congregation and a visible advocate for social justice in her community. She said from the beginning that she would read the book as a Unitarian Universalist which would shape and inform any endorsement she might write. That sealed the deal for me.

And then there was the endorsement that got away. This rather intriguing story is too long to tell, but the gist of it is that a Christian scholar was unexpectedly given a copy of the manuscript. Much to my surprise he read it and then took the time to write to me with his suggestions for revision. He appreciated the argument I was making, he said, but had some major concerns with my thesis. I took his critique seriously, making some of the revisions he suggested and then sent them to him for further review. He seemed pleased with my effort, but was candid in saying that he still had some reservations about the core argument I was making. He then added, “But to reiterate. You’re saying something important that lots of people will experience as—if I may say so—salvific.”

We exchanged more emails, and when the manuscript was completed I took the bold step and asked if he would consider writing an endorsement. He declined, or, in his word, “demurred.” because he was still concerned about the sharp distinction he thought the book made between doctrine and practice. Were he to write an endorsement, he explained, he would need to address his concerns which, he believed, would defeat the purpose of the endorsement.

I share this story because it is a testimony to the personal integrity of this fine scholar and man. It also underscores the reason endorsements matter and can aid potential readers in evaluating a book. They are not taken lightly by the people who write them, which is why they do serve the interests of potential readers in evaluating a book. Ironically, his refusal also points to the reason I wrote the book in the first place, to challenge the church’s beliefs-based Christianity that often limits this kind of honest and open exchange. A preoccupation with church authority has stood in the way of intellectual debate and exploration, something I think has played a significant role in the church’s decline today. Perhaps this book will nudge all of us who claim the name Christian to a place where beliefs are respected even as values define what it means to be Christian.



Why A Book Like This

I have written this book for anyone who is Christian, has been Christian, or for any number of reasons has an interest in Christianity. But it is written most especially for Christians who don't believe everything the church has told them they should believe to be a Christian. My thesis is simple: You can be as Christian as anyone else without letting the church tell you what beliefs you must hold to qualify. I describe it as the difference between being Christian that is focused on living by the values Jesus lived and taught and being a Christian that is defined by "right" beliefs. This difference is about an understanding of Christianity that doesn't dismiss Christian beliefs, but is free of the church wrapping Christianity into a small package of creeds, doctrines, dogma, and right beliefs that has squeezed the life out of it for many people who cannot accept those beliefs as "gospel."

The challenge as I see it is what I call the unbinding of Christianity that shifts its meaning from beliefs, creeds, and doctrines to the values Jesus actually talked about. There is a story in the gospel of John about a man named Lazarus who suddenly becomes ill and dies whose ending speaks directly to what I think Christianity desperately needs. Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, lived in a small town called Bethany a couple of miles from Jerusalem. When their brother dies, Mary and Martha send word to Jesus of what has happened. Staying in the region around the Jordan River where he had been teaching, for some unknown reason Jesus delays going to Bethany four days. By the time he arrives Lazarus had already been

wrapped in grave clothes and placed in a tomb similar to the one in which Jesus himself would be placed after his crucifixion. Eventually Jesus goes with Mary and Martha to the tomb where, the story says, Jesus broke down and wept. He then instructs some men to roll the stone from the grave's entrance, after which he surprises the crowd by calling Lazarus to come out. To everyone's astonishment Lazarus appears at the tomb's entrance. Jesus immediately says to those gathered, "Unbind him, and let him go" (John 11:1-44).

How ironic that all these centuries later the simple message of Jesus about how to be in the world without being of it needs to be set free of the wrappings of death much as Lazarus was. Not that the church's statements of faith were intended to function as grave clothing, but I think that is precisely what has happened. As a result, today's Christianity is for all practical purposes a religion about Jesus while his own words about the values by which Christians can and should live have been pushed aside. What is more, the divisions that separate American Christians from one another today are largely rooted in the fault lines of beliefs about Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit, the future of the world, and the like. It often seems as if the church is determined to argue and fight over beliefs about Jesus rather than focusing on equipping people to live their lives the way he lived his.

Adding to the problem is that over the centuries church hierarchy has become less tolerant of dissent and more determined to exercise its authority and power to force conformity of belief. If you grew up in the church you were probably taught traditional Christian beliefs such as Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, was God in the flesh, died for the sins of the world, was raised from the dead, and will one day return to judge the living and the dead. It is possible your church allowed you to question these beliefs, but it is more likely that you were told to accept them at face value. You may still be in a church that is saying this, or you may have dropped out for that very reason. What I hope this book will show you is that there is an alternative to this kind of Christianity that focuses on values instead of beliefs. Before we get there, though, let's put our discussion in some historical context.

In significant ways the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century was a successful challenge to a beliefs-based faith, but the diversity of beliefs it produced happened more unintentionally than intentionally, a by-product of freedom from church authority that had forced conformity of beliefs for

centuries. While the door to theological diversity in today's Catholic parishes is opened slightly, theological debate and disagreement is more prevalent within and among Protestant denominations and independent groups. This in fact is a major reason for Protestant splintering in the first place. It is why Christian beliefs themselves represent stunning diversity across and within denominational lines.

The upside is that modern Protestant Christians are exercising their right to think for themselves when it comes to matters of faith and morals rather than allowing a church or denomination to tell them what to believe. Instead of seeing this as something positive, though, many church leaders see this as a bad thing. If they happen to be in positions of authority, they often become quite defensive of the church's right to define Christian beliefs everyone should embrace. I think this has been a major factor in the massive exodus from the church we have witnessed in the last forty plus years, and now we are seeing its effects on the credibility of Christianity itself.

I am not suggesting that there are no normative beliefs in Christianity, only that the history and diversity of their development don't justify using them as tests of faith or fellowship. They can serve as statements of faith, which interestingly enough was the original purpose of church creeds in the first place.¹ Conformity of beliefs has never served Christianity well, mainly because it divides rather than unites Christians. It doesn't have to be this way. The Christian faith is quite capable of being examined and challenged and re-evaluated, if it understands itself to be about values instead of beliefs.

I am not talking about a new Christianity. I am talking about the focus Christianity should have had in the first place. Religions promote specific beliefs, but my argument is that the words of Jesus make it abundantly clear that following him is about a particular way of living in the world. Not that the church doesn't know this. It just chose to emphasize right beliefs, in large part because right beliefs served the goal of establishing ecclesial authority that in turn helped maintain at least some control over what Christians believed.

¹In his argument for the value of creeds in the book, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters* (Image Books Reprint, 2004), Luke Timothy Johnson makes the point that the value and role of creeds has suffered from the way the church has used them as tests of faith.

One of the criticisms I have already encountered in conversations about my thesis is that I am making an argument that is a distinction without a difference. “We live the way we believe,” I have been told, making what we believe essential to living the lifestyle to which Jesus calls Christians to live. But that misses the point. I am not saying that beliefs don’t matter or have no influence on what people do. My contention is that beliefs don’t matter as much as the church says and not in the way the church insists they do. A values-based Christianity is not in conflict with beliefs. If anything, a focus on values creates an environment that gives beliefs room to breathe and flourish. A focus on beliefs has the opposite effect on values, constricting their power to the point of nearly choking the life out of them.

The roots of my realization that beliefs and values represent a distinction that reflects a huge difference in people’s lives go back to growing up in a racist Southern culture where churches taught a form of Christianity that did not believe segregation was inconsistent with being Christian, but that is getting ahead of myself. As we begin I simply want to highlight the primary focus traditional Christian teaching places in beliefs when Christians would be better served by a focus on values.

If you self-identify as Christian or once did because you were raised as one, you have encountered first-hand this emphasis on right beliefs I find so troubling. In the course of my ministry I think I have met about every kind of Christian there is. I know Christians who believe what they believe and nothing is ever going to change them. I know other Christians who are the opposite of the ones just described. They are not sure what they believe so what they believe is pliable and flexible. Still others have strong beliefs, but are constantly reading and studying to learn more than they know and have no timidity in adjusting what they believe to new information. What all these people have in common is that beliefs matter to them. What differentiates them is that members of the first group have a faith defined by beliefs while the others at minimum are uncomfortable with the beliefs they have been told Christians should believe.

The nature of religion is such that diversity is always present whether it is embraced, resisted, or ignored. This book seeks to make a case for diversity in beliefs being core to the kind of Christianity that is focused on following Jesus rather than “believing in” him or explaining who he was. By the time you finish reading I hope you will at the very least understand that the

message of Jesus can be set free from all the wrappings of beliefs that have squeezed the life out of it for people who refuse to have “blind faith.” There is a Christian path forward that makes freedom of thought a gift of faith rather than something to be feared. Christianity focused on living rather than believing need never be afraid of people whose faith is open minded and open ended.

At the same time, though, I want to say unequivocally that I am not at all interested in trying to persuade anyone to give up something they fervently believe or believe in. Changing beliefs is an inside job that happens when people are ready for it and usually not a moment before. It can happen for a variety of reasons, but it seldom happens by someone trying to persuade another person to change his or her mind. More important is the fact that trying to persuade you or anyone to abandon one belief in favor of another misses the point of the book entirely. I don’t offer alternatives to replace the “right” beliefs you may have been taught or have heard define Christianity. Instead, I try to explain why a beliefs-based faith takes you down the wrong road and, thus, hinders rather than helps you live as a Christian in the modern world.

There are, then, three basic claims I make in the book. The first is the need to understand and accept the nature of beliefs. The second is the need to realize that the church defining what it means to be a Christian by beliefs was a mistake with enormous, even tragic, consequences. The third is the need to see that Jesus said very little about beliefs, but said a lot about living a particular kind of lifestyle based on values he lived and taught to others. What I hope you will discover if you are among those who have trouble believing what the church says you must believe is that you are not the problem. The church is. As you will see, I have a few things to say about the church throughout the book because it is impossible to talk about Christianity without mentioning the church. At the same time, the real focus is telling you about being Christian in spite of what you believe or don’t believe, not because of it. In these pages I suggest an alternative to a Christian faith bound and weighted down by creeds, doctrines, and dogmas—formal and informal.

It will help you to bear in mind as you go that the chapters are interconnected, succeeding ones building upon the ones that come before them and questions arising in one chapter being answered in a different one. By the

time you reach the end, though, I think you will have a clear sense of where you are and how you got there. My goal is not that you agree with what I have written, only that it helps you to think for yourself about matters of beliefs while understanding that being Christian has less to do with what you believe at any point in your life and more to do with how you live your life all the time. In the process I hope you will see what I see, that Christianity is a rich faith tradition that doesn't have all the answers, but does raise many of the right questions, and further, that its basic message is not about "right beliefs," but about "right living."

Unintended Consequences

Let's begin with the obvious, that Jesus was not a Christian, he was a Jew. This means he was raised to believe that faithfulness to God revealed itself in the way you treat others, whether they be your family, neighbors, strangers, or even your enemies. It is no accident, then, that as an itinerate rabbi this is how Jesus lived and what he taught that served to challenge a Judaism that by the first century had become Temple based and focused on rituals and the observance of Holy Days. It is ironic that Christianity has followed a similar path to Judaism by defining itself by beliefs, “right” beliefs, as it turned out, while neglecting what Jesus called “the weightier matters of the law” that have to do with behavior.

That Christianity is defined by beliefs is an enigma when you consider the nature of beliefs themselves. A belief is a belief, not a fact. Once a belief becomes a fact, it is no longer a belief. Thus, everything anyone—including me—believes about Jesus (or anything related to religion) is a belief, which means it may be true, then again, it may be false. Unfortunately, many churches, and thus, many more Christians, have chosen to ignore the fundamental nature of beliefs. In the process they are missing the power of believing I will talk about in the next chapter because they are too concerned about “proving” that what they believe is true. That, of course, is precisely what you cannot do with beliefs because by nature they do not yield themselves to proof.

A consequence of not understanding or appreciating the nature of beliefs is the temptation to make judgments about who is or is not a Christian.

2 Unbinding Christianity

I have been down this road more than once, where I have been told that I am not a “real” Christian because of things I believe or don’t believe. It’s true, of course, that I believe and don’t believe many things I was taught to believe growing up in the church. I once believed Jesus was born of a virgin, for example. Not anymore. I believed he was God. Not anymore. I believed he died for my sins. Not anymore. I believed he was coming back like a thief in the night, taking some back to heaven, leaving more behind. Not anymore. I believed Jesus was the only means of salvation. Not anymore. I believed the Bible was the word of God, infallible and inerrant in the original. Not anymore.

These changes in my beliefs have not made me less Christian, they have in fact strengthened my resolve to stand firmly in the Christian tradition. What has changed is that I now attend much more to being Christian rather than being a Christian, a distinction I will explain in more detail later. Here I need only say that the former focuses on values and the latter on beliefs. Making that distinction has been one of the most freeing discoveries I have ever experienced, one that was hiding in plain sight that for too long I failed to see. I hope this book will help you see it much sooner in your life than I did in mine.

The focus on right beliefs has had more than a few tragic consequences since the beginning of the Christian movement. Arius, Bishop of Alexandria, was declared a heretic for teaching that Jesus was not equal or “of the same substance” as God. A theologian named Pelagius suffered the same fate when he argued that “original sin” (as articulated by St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo) did not prevent human beings from choosing between good and evil, a moral decision he believed they were quite capable of making. Such controversies and the rise of the authority of the bishop of Rome led to a permanent split between Western Christianity and Eastern Orthodoxy. Add corruption to the conflict over power and authority and you get the Protestant Reformation, which itself immediately began splintering into thousands of sects, congregations, and eventually denominations because of controversies over beliefs.

A preoccupation with right beliefs led John Calvin, the most dominant of all Reformation theologians, to give his blessing to his Calvinist followers burning Michael Servetus at the stake in the 16th century because they considered him a heretic for disagreeing with what they believed. It is also

why anti-Semitism swept over Western Europe and laid the foundation for the Holocaust and the church's complicity in it, and why New England Puritan preachers supported the utter destruction of native American culture. It is what happens when you have a religion about Jesus instead of a community of faith living the teachings of Jesus.

The Believers Mistake

Symptomatic of both the success of a beliefs-based Christianity and the negative consequences it has caused is the fact that it is common today to hear Christians referred to as "believers." There is so much that is wrong with that adjective that it is difficult to know where to start, but perhaps the most important one is the fact that there is no reason to think Jesus called people to be believers. He, instead, called them to follow him as people committed to doing the will of God in their lives as faithfully as possible. That was his primary concern. Yet the Christianity most of us know is a message about beliefs. If you have thought of yourself as a "believer," you may still be determined to do the will of God as a way of showing you are Christian, but that is not the way the church has normally defined being Christian.

I find this emphasis on right beliefs in Christianity an enigma, not least because beliefs regularly prove themselves to be shifting sand that makes rigidity of beliefs the alternative for those unwilling to accept the subjective nature of beliefs. Beliefs have not only been shown to be wrong, they are often false and/or dangerous. The church itself has even admitted that things it once believed were actually false and things it said were false turned out to be true. Its 1642 condemnation of Galileo is a perfect example. Convinced the sun rotated around the earth, the church condemned Copernicus and Galileo for saying the opposite was true. Pope John Paul II declared the controversy over in 1992 by officially declaring the church was in error. It would have been better had Pope John Paul admitted that the church's preoccupation with right beliefs is what led to the mistake it made regarding Copernicus and Galileo.

I know the world of beliefs-based faith because I was raised in it. As was probably true with most of the kids I grew up with, I never thought much about what my home church taught me until I made the decision to become