"Christian" Rules That Every Christian Ought to Break as Often as Possible
Jesus answered him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word.”

John 14:23
Whatup
Punk Rock John and the Enslaving Ex-Christianity of Death

Never #1
Never follow a rule that follows your liver, your heart, your pancreas, or any other bodily organ that could conceivably have its mind changed by the shifting of the wind.

Never #2
Never follow a rule that wasn't written in stone a very, very long time ago (doubly so if the grass is only greener on the other side because it's made of plastic).

Never #3
Never follow a rule just because it makes sense (especially if it promises to work because it makes sense [and especially, especially if it either contains the words “spirit-led” or can be entirely explained by a petri dish full of midi-chlorians]).
Never #4
Never follow a rule because it benefits you now (and if it mentions “abundance,” run screaming from the room).

Never #5
Never follow a rule that has to start over (again and again . . . and again . . .) again.

Never #6
Never follow a rule that doesn’t like rules.

Never #7
Never follow a rule in order to justify yourself. Seriously.

And So
Never Never Ever Landing on the Wrong Side of God’s Justice
Whatup

Punk Rock John and the Enslaving
Ex-Christianity of Death

Christian Punks
Are Posers

He was a good kid. He played in a punk rock band and worshiped with punk rock style. He was a good kid. He didn’t just go to church, but he was a Christian, on fire and unafraid to step out of the box for Jesus. That was what the Church needed: less fear, less hesitancy, more living by the Spirit, more real religion.

He was a good kid. He played in a Christian band. He hung out with Christian friends. He lived the Christian life. He worked hard to get people saved. He struggled after God’s will for his life. He set aside time for prayer. He set aside time to play his guitar. He mixed the two together and sang out songs of praise to his heart’s content. Soon he’d go to college, and then he’d marry his girlfriend. Maybe he’d be a pastor. Maybe he’d be a worship leader. All he knew was that what he wanted for the rest of his life was to feel this way, to live this life, to know what he knew, and to find a way to help more people do the same.

Then he met a missionary.

It all started innocently enough. He was online, the way he often was, surfing the punk rock forums in search of a few new chord progressions. He clicked a link. It took him to a punk rock site. There was an in the corner and a pretty girl with blue hair on the sidebar . . .

No biggie. He’d been to these sites before. This was the punk rock world. Nothing wrong with it. Well, there were all sorts of things wrong with it. That’s why he played Christian punk rock.
But there really wasn’t anything wrong with blue hair or sweet riffs. He was about to click back when something else caught his eye—not the girl or the paraphernalia—but some words. Words he didn’t like. Words that made him angry. Words that made him click the link.

“Christian Punks Are Posers”

It was written by the missionary. It was written with passion and zeal. But it was the wrong mission. The missionary said Christian punk rock was a lie. True punk rock was anti-authority, anti-prejudice, anti-conformity, anti-establishment. And what could be a more authoritative, prejudiced, conformist establishment than Christianity? What was more, the missionary said, Christians were all idiots living in a total delusion about reality. They didn’t just deny science, they based all their decisions on feelings and blindness.

He was a good kid. He wanted his heart to break over how wrong the missionary was. But what scared him more than anything ever had, what terrified him till his pulse quickened, was that his heart wasn’t breaking the way it should. He wasn’t feeling the way he was supposed to feel. Instead, he was thinking the things he wasn’t supposed to think: the missionary made sense. The missionary sounded right.

He turned off the computer as fast as he could. He got out his Bible, and he tried to pray. It was always hard to pray because the emotions never came easily. That’s why he needed music—for the emotions. He tried to pray, but the feelings didn’t come. “God, are You there?” he asked.

It wasn’t long before he was back on the same site, reading more. It was like a light had dawned. He started posting in the forum, asking questions, looking for guidance. He learned a lot in the next few months. He watched Zeitgeist: The Movie on YouTube and learned that Jesus was just another version of the pagan gods. He read about Martin Luther and how he was a Nazi. He wanted to stop. He wanted to find something to tell him that what he read was wrong. So he went and talked to his youth pastor.

“I think I’m becoming an atheist,” he confessed in the eerily warm stuffiness of the office, sweat beading uncomfortably under his arms. The couch had always felt so welcoming and hip, but now it felt too large.
He was sinking in it. He wished he could sink in it—and hide. “I found all these arguments on the Internet. They make a lot of sense. I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to be an atheist. I used to be on fire. What happened? I don’t understand.”

“Is there sin you’ve been hiding?” the youth pastor asked.

“No!” he said right away. He felt guilty saying no, even though he couldn’t think of a good reason for it. Maybe he did have hidden sin. “I just need answers,” he said, shoving the thought away. “I learned that Christmas is just Roman sun worship and that our church body is sexist. I don’t know what to think or feel.”

“I understand,” the youth pastor said. “There are a lot of Satan’s messengers out there. They will say all sorts of worldly things to plant doubts in you. You just can’t trust them.”

“But how can I know that? How do I even know that God is there?”

“Just look at the world. How could it exist without God?”

“I don’t know. Evolution?”

“Listen, God loves you. He wants you to have a good life full of purpose and meaning. Trust me. Just pray about it. God will give you the answer you need.”

“But I have prayed.”

“Pray more. God loves you. He will answer.”

**But . . . God . . . didn’t . . . answer.**

He was still a good kid, but now he was an atheist. He got rid of his Christian T-shirts and deleted his Christian punk rock MP3s. It took him a while, but he eventually told his parents. They took it hard. He understood. But they were deceived. They believed in faith, but faith didn’t have answers. Science had answers. Now he had answers too. And he had a new community that supported him, accepted him for who he was, without insisting he conform to their standards.

“But weren’t you on fire for Jesus?”

“I thought I was. But it was just a show. It was just make-believe.”

He was a good kid. But his faith in Christianity was **BROKEN**.
DIRTY CROW TRICKS

The story of Punk Rock John is fictionalized, but it also is terribly, terribly true. I’ve heard different versions of it multiple times from too many real people. “What happened to my kid? I don’t understand. He used to be so in love with church. He went on mission trips. He went to youth group. He was on fire for Jesus. I don’t know where it went wrong.”

Stolen Seeds

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear. (Matthew 13:3–9)

One of the darkest secrets of Christianity in America is that we are losing our kids. We hide it with light shows and Christian dance video games, but it’s true, and it is nothing new. It has been happening for more than fifty years. It is still happening right this very moment.
Worse than that, it’s not just happening to kids. It’s happening to college students and senior citizens. It’s happening to emerging adults and the midlife-crisied. Christians are losing faith. Christians are falling away. Christians once on fire are burning out.

Jesus knew about this problem. He once told a story about it. He said the Christian faith was like seeds being planted. Many people would believe in Him, but for too many, their faith would then die. The cares and trials of this world would overwhelm them and choke them. Missionaries for atheism or Buddhism or some secret mystery would find them and convince them that they could get a better deal than Jesus somewhere else. Although they once sprang up with joy and grew like they could never grow enough, their roots would suddenly find themselves trying to creep through a layer of bedrock. They would be thirsty, but no one would give them a glass of water. They would wither. They would die. Their faith in Christianity would be broken.

The story about Punk Rock John is not unique, and according to Jesus’ parable of the sower, there’s more going on than meets the eye. Not only do the cares and trials of this life present a real threat to Christianity, but there is also the role that the devil plays in undermining the Christian life. Long before the roots of faith dry up under persecution or the dangers of American culture choke faith to death like a weed, the devil has first achieved victory with his primary strategy—his most essential tactic. Like a dirty crow he has swept in from above and stolen away the source of faith. The devil’s primary goal is to make the Christian forget about the Sower’s seed.

Martin Luther once wrote that the old serpent, the devil, first converted Adam and Eve to unbelief by making them “enthusiasts.” By “enthusiasts,” he meant that the devil convinced them that the real source of goodness was not in God’s Word. It was in themselves. They should be enthusiastic about their own abilities to discern good and evil, to learn of it, and to rule by it. “The old devil . . . led them away from God’s outward Word to spiritualizing and self-pride. And yet, he did this through other outward words” (Smalcald Articles III VIII 5).
This means that long before the devil ever breaks the faith of well-meaning Christians with his lies, he first must teach them “enthusiasm” as if it were genuine Christianity. Long before a missionary for atheism deceives you with plausible arguments based on merely human thinking, the devil first teaches you to try growing your faith on something other than God’s pure Word. He teaches you that the Holy Scriptures are not the real place to find the Holy Spirit, that the human words in the Bible are flawed, that the Church is full of errors and confusion. He teaches you a counterfeit Christianity.

Ironically, this hardly keeps him silent, but like a dirty crow, he caws constantly, filling the world with a stream of yapping, twisting, and wily black words. “It is the spirit that you really need,” he says to Christians. “It is the renewed life. Abundant living. The next step.” With all the noise made by the flapping of his jowls and wings, many well-meaning Christians hardly notice that the seed from which their faith first grew is slowly stolen away, swallowed in a maw of black feathers. Before you know it, belief in a pure Word from God is simply gone.

A Famine Not of Bread

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it. (Amos 8:11–12)

This is nothing new. It has happened before, and it will happen again. But every time it happens, every time Christianity declines in a society, it happens for the same reason: because genuine believers tried laying a foundation on something other than God’s Word. Like the people
of Israel in the days of the prophet Amos, they might still be saying, “God surely lives!” and “I know the Way!” But their stomachs still rumble. There is no wheat growing in the fields to harvest. The seed has been stolen away, and suddenly even pastors of the Church struggle to give a satisfying answer for the hope within them.

**Famished**

Our world has always been **insane**. Previous ages were tough. There is nothing new under the sun, and the heart of man is always and only continually evil from youth. But there is something doubly gnarly about our wild Western civilization of the twenty-first century. A cultural perfect storm shreds the spiritual landscape of the United States. It blows on the winds of a growing ignorance of history and the Bible. It drips with the dew of an insatiable appetite for entertainment and leisure. It billows on the clouds of a mounting desperation for success, even as civilization slips into streamlined decline. Into this chaos the remnant of the Church of Jesus Christ stumbles.

What is the Church’s status at this party? Theoretically, the “modern era” of the last century was supposed to show her the door. (That’s what all the well-paid scholars thought, at least.) “Soon,” they taught, “that pretentious old nun will be gone.” But then, she didn’t go away. She stuck around. She tried really hard. She bought some new clothes. She learned a few dance moves. But is she attracting a crowd because she’s really the life of the party, or is she just drunk? It’s hard to tell.

The Church has buildings and storefronts, radio stations and cable channels. But at the same time, she seems a little strung out. She’s the girl who tries so hard to be cool and convince everyone she belongs that she ends up making everyone who talks to her feel uncomfortable. Her lipstick is too red, and the low-cut bodice doesn’t flatter her body type. Even her friends are kind of embarrassed by the way she dances when she’s left alone with the wrong sort of guys. Sure, the Church hasn’t died and gone away like the twentieth-century atheists predicted, but neither has she achieved wild success the way so many of
her own leaders prophesied. Evangelism didn’t explode. Each one didn’t reach one. Mission wasn’t multiplied. New technology did not complete the Great Commission.

The Church didn’t change the world. Worse, the world appears to be growing daily more content to keep going on its merry way, ignoring her best dancing. To make matters worse, the world appears to have changed her, and not for the better. The expensive new hairstyle looks downright forced, and her refusal to face the music is beginning to appear manic. Meanwhile, good Christian people like Punk Rock John find themselves overtired, frustrated, and confused. The clothes have been changed so many times, the next step taken so many times, the future predicted so many times, that they’re no longer sure why they came to the party as a Christian at all. Didn’t it have something to do with Jesus?

The DJ plays a dirge, but the Church dances. Then he plays the flute, but she weeps. She stumbles through the steps. Her body is anemic. Her breath is growing short. Did she survive the Enlightenment after all? How do we know this is even the real Church? Maybe you’re not even a real Christian. Maybe Christianity isn’t real to begin with . . .

The old serpent is up to his same old tactic. He’s a talented pony, but he’s got only the one trick.

**Postmodernism:** The dominant philosophical system of twenty-first-century American thought, combining multiple previous systems of thought under the central notion that all methods of thinking are merely “constructions” of a culture, holding in themselves no universal meaning. Where the modern world would say, “Truth is always true,” the postmodern world says, “Truth is always (only) your opinion.”
For all the perfect storm of our hypercultural age, for all the distractions and amusements and cares of this American life, for all the scorching pressures of conforming to the modern world and the postmodern mind, it is still only the one foil the devil is using to attack the faith. It’s the same foil the youth pastor (unwittingly) taught to Punk Rock John as if it were God’s own gospel truth. It’s the same foil countless well-meaning Christian pastors preach and Christian people try a little harder to believe every single week. It is the lie that

“God wants you to find Him somewhere other than in His Word.”

“Pray,” the devil said to Punk Rock John. “Pray, and God will answer.” He wasn’t told “God has given you answers to your questions. Look, here they are written in His Word.” He wasn’t told “The idea that Jesus is based on Roman sun worship is a joke of pseudo-scholarship. Here, let me show you what Scripture says . . .” He wasn’t told “Luther wasn’t perfect, but he wasn’t a Nazi either. But Jesus of Nazareth was perfect, and there are good historical reasons to believe it. Here, let me show you what Scripture says . . .” He wasn’t told “Yeah, sometimes I find it hard to believe that God is there because it doesn’t always feel like He is. But here, let me show you what Scripture says . . .” Nope. For Punk Rock John and countless other American Christians there aren’t any real answers being given, just a warmed-over, squishy-spiritual sermon of Rely on Yourself done up with enough lipstick and a low-cut bodice to keep them coming back because there’s no one else to dance with anyway.

This is why Christians are losing faith in our age. They give up on dancing with the Church because the kind of Christianity she is preaching is BROKEN. This is why our children are leaving the Church and heading to the after-party somewhere else. A bent version of Christianity isn’t capable of giving them a Jesus worth believing anymore. This is how you risk losing your faith. A superficial spirituality filled with words that are not the words of the Bible is a counterfeit Christianity.
**Behold the Cow of God**

[Aaron] received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. . . .

And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.” (Exodus 32:4–5)

The old crow never tells you he is stealing your corn. He knows you know your first love once was the words of and about Jesus. He knows you know that you need these words, these Scriptures, in order to remain a Christian. But he also knows you are human, which means you are forgetful, distracted, and more than a little lazy. He’s a one-trick pony, but it’s a darned good trick. With a sleight of hand, he fans into flame a fire in your heart that he tells you is “for Jesus,” but he slips into your fire fuel for something else—anything else. He even doesn’t mind if you call your shiny, new golden cow “Jesus,” because he knows that once you’ve started fueling your faith with something other than the real Jesus’ words, it’s only a matter of time before you wake up to find your faith beat up, burned out, BROKEN, and without a single clue how it happened. He knows, at that moment, you’ll be ready to believe anything in the world he tells you, especially if it gives you a reason to leave behind your messed-up excuse for a religion. “It’s not your faith in God that’s broken,” he says then. “It’s Christianity. Christianity is the problem. The Bible is the problem. Even Jesus would never have wanted it to be this way. Even Jesus would be proud of you for walking away before it gets any worse.”

This is a bitter potion the devil brews, a clever web he weaves. But it is still and always the same trick. It is the same Lie. I’m sick of it. I’m not going to sit back and take it anymore.
The Golden Cow’s New Clothes

There once was an emperor who wanted the finest clothes money could buy. In his luxury, he hired two weavers who promised him the most exquisite clothes of all: a robe that could be seen only by people cool enough to see it. It would expose all liars, posers, and idiots, and show him who the true royalty were. You can imagine the emperor’s distress when they first presented him with the outfit, and he could not see it himself. He could lose his kingdom over this! So he pretended it was the most amazing article of clothing he’d ever seen. He looked around and found that all his ministers agreed with him. He nodded and smiled, his fear mounting with every step. Next thing he knew, he was dressed to impress the world and embarking on a grand parade through his capital city. All the people were captivated. It must be a truly extraordinary design! But the silence was deafening. Why did they not cheer? Then a single, solitary voice rang loud and clear throughout the citadel. A child was laughing and calling to his mother, “Why does the emperor have no clothes?!”

The classic tale by Hans Christian Andersen is not supposed to be about Christianity. But it is. It is the tale of a Christianity that has forgotten her first love because her first love was stolen by thieves and liars. It is the tale of countless faithful Christians who feel in their gut something is terribly wrong, but who are frozen into silence by the fact that everyone else (just like them) is pretending not to notice. It is a tale of blindness, arrogance, and paranoia, of teachers who don’t teach and believers left with nothing to believe. It is a tale of willful ignorance, of failure to face the cold truth about the situation, and of the refusal to repent. And, it is the tale of a child’s faith, the simple, wonderful, naïve gift of calling a thing what it is.

My goal is to call with that infant’s voice. I make no claim to some personal, grandiose insight into the deep and hidden things of God. I am no more than a child astride the hip of his mother. But her lullaby has been filled with words that never change. Her song transcends time and space, culture and style, with words of
eternal meaning. She sings of an enemy, an ancient foe, whose guile and
great might are armed with cruel hate. There is no equal to him in all the
earth. So fierce is his warfare that with all human might there is nothing
to be done. Soon were our loss effected! But my mother’s song is not only
of the danger. She croons also of the valiant One, a man (and more than
a man) who fights for us, whom God Himself elected. Who is this? He is
the King of kings! Christ Jesus, Mighty Lord. The God who is the **Word**,
the Word you can sink your faith into and never have it drown. He holds
the field forever.

**The Valiant One**

With might of ours can naught be done,
   Soon were our loss effected;
But for us fights the valiant One,
   Whom God Himself elected.
Ask ye, Who is this?
Jesus Christ it is,
   Of Sabaoth Lord,
And there’s none other God;
He holds the field forever. (*LSB* 656:2)

There is only one attack the devil uses to destroy the Church of
Jesus Christ—remove Jesus. He does this by removing the way Jesus
reigns: by removing Jesus’ words. There is nothing new to this. He’s
been a liar from the beginning. But he always tells the same lies. We
can learn them. We can discern them. We don’t have to believe them.
As the crow sweeps in to steal the seed, we can recognize his caw and learn to fight back by scattering the seed all the more.

How Dumb Do We Have to Be?

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:6–8)

In this book, I will dissect this tactic of the thief. We will look at how the devil uses such good gifts from God as your heart, your mind, and your hands to try to trick you into placing your trust not in God but in yourself. We will explore the seven counterfeit “Christian” rules he tries to play off as if they were authentic Christianity. We will expose these rules as patterns of thinking that try to break your faith in Christianity by creating doubt. We will call these philosophical systems what they are: lies. And then we will challenge those lies with the truth given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ.

The crow comes cawing, promising you freedom, but telling you that you must earn it. He promises you supernatural wisdom, but tells you that you must figure it out. He promises you comfort, but insists that you find it inside yourself. He tells you that you’re just on the other side of glory, if only you can create it. He offers you the world, but he leaves you hanging on a cross all by yourself, fed up with it all and wondering in anger and frustration where Jesus is. He was supposed to make it all better.
He does this the only way he can: he steals Jesus’ words, and he uses you to do it. I am not going to let that happen. The house may have grown dirty, but we are going to sweep it clean, and once we do, we’re not going to leave it empty so the one-trick pony can slip in and start excreting his filth all over again. Oh, no. We are not going to reduce this Good News to a one-hit wonder. Under the cross of Jesus, we will find emotion kindled on a fire that doesn’t burn out. In the resurrection of Jesus, we will find a good reason for faith that answers the toughest questions. In the pure Word of God, we will find true purpose for our lives built on a foundation infinitely more solid than the shifting sands of “me.”

For all of you Punk Rock Johns out there who aren’t sure how much longer you can hold on: hang on for one more round. This book is written for you.
Never follow a rule that follows your liver, your heart, your pancreas, or any other bodily organ that could conceivably have its mind changed by the shifting of the wind.
The Devil’s First Rule

There are only two kinds of spirituality in the world. One is wrong and one is right. One is false and one is true. One is a lie and one is real. One takes the form of the countless spiritualities that have gone out into the world as manifestations of the Antichrist, and the other is God’s own holy spirituality. But which is which? How can you learn to tell one from the other?

Let’s begin by understanding that there is only one attack the devil uses in his war to destroy the Church of Jesus Christ. It’s an attack he uses over and over again, but it is just one attack. The one-and-only attack the devil uses to destroy the Church is to remove Jesus. This is the devil’s first rule.

But there is only one way to remove Jesus, and it’s not the way that most people think. As far as the devil is concerned, it’s perfectly cool to have a picture on the wall of a guy in a white bathrobe with long brown hair and a beard. It’s even perfectly cool to call that guy in the picture “Jesus” and tell all the children that this “Jesus” guy loves them. The devil doesn’t care whether you keep that picture up or take that picture down, because the devil’s first rule is that he must remove Jesus—not just some idea about some imaginary guy named “Jesus,” but the actual, real Jesus. There is only one way to do that: remove the actual, real Jesus’ words.

The devil’s first rule is to get us to forget all the things that the real Jesus actually said. The best way to do that is not to take down all the pictures of that long-haired guy walking through fields with some sheep, but to start replacing His words with other words. Our words. Other spiritualities. A counterfeit Christianity. By slowly leaching away the real Jesus’ words and replacing them, one by one, with his own, the devil can eventually lead us into worshiping a guy named “Jesus” who is not actually there.

But first, if the devil is ever to slip in his own words as if they were Jesus’ words, he must get us to trust him. You might think that would be quite a challenge, but in the end it is actually very easy.
All he has to do is lie.

The devil really has only one lie. It is The Lie. It’s the same Lie he has been telling ever since the beginning (John 8:44; Genesis 3:4–5). As a result, he’s very practiced at it. He’s learned that there’s more than one way to put a little spin on the same deception. He dresses up The Lie in new clothes, and he gives The Lie a new name. And at the drop of the hat, he can do it again. And again. And again. First he points you left. Then he points you right. But both directions are off the path and lead down into a bog, where the waters are muddy and fog blurs the sight. Slogging through those waters gets tough, but then along comes The Lie again (the same lie, but this time with a pretty wig and some fake eyelashes), whispering for you to try yet another direction. Not back to the path—no, never that! Just, “This way.” “Over yonder.”

With each new step, the fog gets denser, and memories of the path grow dim. Your hands rub raw on the weeds and thorns. Your feet bruise on the stones sunk beneath the mud. Your conscience feels ragged and tired. Then here comes The Lie again (it’s the same lie, but now with a top hat, a monocle, and a refined, compelling accent), and this time he says, “You know, you have that cursed path to blame for all of this. If you’d never been on that path in the first place, none of this would have happened to you.”

You would think we humans, after all we’ve been through, might start to recognize that we’ve fallen for the same dupe so many times before. But the devil is the master of disguising his Lie. He is like a cook preparing immaculate masterpieces worthy of gobbling up to the last delicate crumb. To the unwary, each dish looks like a new creation, something never before seen or tasted. That is the true talent of The Lie. Even so, just as with any other kind of ingredient for a meal, there are only so many things you can do with The Lie. No matter how many spices you add to a tomato base, you can take it only so far, and after all that, it is still going to taste like tomatoes. For all the countless tweaks the devil stirs in to spice up his dish, at the end of the day it’s the same old ingredients in the same old recipe.
For the next six chapters, I am going to break down the devil’s recipe book. We are going to examine the six primary spices he uses to disguise the flavor of his food, not fragrant leaves and ground-up seeds, but words. Words are what the devil uses to mask The Lie until he convinces the world that it is the truth.

There are only two kinds of spirituality in the world. One is right and one is wrong. The goal of the wrong one is to convince you that it is the right one; to get you to eat The Lie, to swallow his dish whole, digest it, and then, despite the stomachache, go back for seconds. The devil’s goal is to convincingly replace Jesus’ words with his Lie so that you arrive at the place where you trust in his rules—rules that he teaches as if they were God’s rules. Every Christian must learn these rules of the devil, these rules that are designed to remove the words of Jesus, not that we would follow the devil’s rules, but rather, so every Christian might break them as often as possible.

**Deconstructing Emo Greek Mythology**

Punk Rock John once had a friend. His name was Emo Dan. Emo Dan starred in a five-minute segment on a DVD produced by a superchurch out California-way. It was edgy and cool-ish, marvelously shot and edited. But, despite all its best intentions, it was also godless.

Picture this: Our hero Emo Dan stands on a blacktop court somewhere in suburbia. Time-lapse photography paints clouds rolling overhead in an azure sky. The grass waves a deep, organic green. Light shifts from midday to late afternoon, while acoustic guitar and hidden keyboard swells tear at your heart before a word is even uttered.

“I was in a really dark place.” Emo Dan’s slightly awkward teen voice raises the tension further, begging you for authenticity and understanding. “I grew up in Church, but I didn’t know if God was real. I was alone one afternoon, walking out on a playground.” The music grows more raw. You feel like crying for him. “Then, just as I was really questioning and doubting, a cloud covered the sun completely and
left me all alone in the darkness. And it was, like . . .” he pauses. The timed-lapse stills roll into overcast. The colors fade, and the green grass goes pale and pasty. “It was like God had abandoned me.”

“But then!” Emo Dan’s voice tears apart the melancholy melody, while bright, immaculate images flash on the screen, and a fresh new riff lifts up the beat. “Right then! Right when I was ready to give up, the sun came out again!” Dan’s happiness is tangible. Everything is right with the world again! “I could feel the sun’s warmth on my face, and I knew—I just knew! I knew that God was there.”

As I sat in my apartment, watching the video for the first time, I almost dove off the bed yelling at the monitor: “Which God?! Which God?!” But that was it. That was the end of the segment. The rest of the video brought us no more knowledge of the life and times of Emo Dan. After all his pain, after all his doubt, Emo Dan made peace with his spirituality by learning how to worship the sun.

It’s not a terribly new idea. Sun worship has been around since before we started recording history. In ancient Greece, for example, Apollo was the god of the sun, and he pretty much rocked. Every morning, he took his chariot of fire out for a ride across the sky. At night, he and his solar steeds returned to Mount Olympus to rest. This meant that whenever the perturbed and moody ancient cousin of Emo Dan—let’s call him Emo Danomidious—started to question his family’s belief in Apollo, all Papa Danomidious had to do was take his son out in the field on a sunny day, point at the sky, and say, “Watch. There goes Apollo. See how he moves. He is watching us. He is protecting us. He is real.” And Emo Danomidious could feel the warmth on his face and know, just know, it was true.

Seriously, if you are ever going to be a pagan, Apollo is a pretty sweet god to have. Besides being tough when it comes to a fight, he also holds the superpowers of light, knowledge, medicine, and music. ¹

¹ Would you believe that Apollo’s avatars were often either a serpent or a raven? But who’s paying attention to coincidences?
other gods have a lot to offer too, but for the average Joe, Apollo is about as sweet a deity as you can hope to have turn his balmy eye your way any lonely afternoon on the blacktop. There’s just this one thing that really isn’t so hot about worshiping Apollo: Apollo is not actually God. He’s not even really a god. The sun is a burning ball of gas in outer space, and the stories of Apollo are just that—stories.

But here’s the thing. Emo Dan knew this just as well as you do. Yet that didn’t stop him from building his faith on the sun anyway. One pivotal afternoon he put all his hope and trust in the chance movements of the clouds and called those movements “God.” More than that, his church decided to make a DVD to teach youth groups everywhere that they should do the same.

But this is not quite fair. Emo Dan wasn’t really teaching kids everywhere to put their faith only in the sun. He wasn’t saying that God will always prove Himself to you in the exact same, mildly surprising happenstance event involving the sun and the clouds. No. He was just saying that God will always prove Himself in mildly surprising, happenstance events. So he wasn’t really preaching Apollo. He was only preaching Mysticism.

**Consumer-Market Mystics**

The first rule that every authentic Christian ought to fight to the death (in order to break as often as possible) is Mysticism. Mysticism is like a seductive woman, sitting at a sidewalk café watching everyone who passes by. She is always dressed in the latest fashions and styles, and while she rarely yells, her voice is always heard above the crowd. “Whoever would be spiritual, let him talk to me,” she says. “Learn from me my spiritual disciplines. I will teach you to experience God. Let me teach you my newfound methods. I will help you learn to discover God through what you feel. Follow me and my advice, and I will show you the trick to finding God in your heart.”
Mysticism: The belief that direct knowledge of God can be attained through your subjective experiences of God or something godlike. Mysticism, then, is nothing more than worship of your emotions.

Mysticism has found many ready listeners in American culture because American culture is a melting pot of trying to feel good. Humans have always made feeling good a high priority, but in our age we have made it an art form. Both Christians and non-Christians alike spend most of the waking day trying to feel good. When we feel bad (which happens a lot), we begin casting around the market for something new to consume in order to try and feel better. Once we find an answer, we remain as diligent in trying to make the feeling better last as long as possible. This is our way of life. It is our economy, our national pastime, and our greatest export. We believe, teach, and confess that the key to happiness is managing discomfort by increasing good feelings instead, and we are so successful at it that we’ve also come to assume God approaches religion the very same way. Why wouldn’t God want me to be happy? Why wouldn’t God want to meet my needs, take away my cares and worries, and lift me up? Why wouldn’t a truly good God want me to find Him by learning to feel the goodness of His presence? It only makes perfect, heartfelt sense.

For this reason, all over America, every week, a vast number of the most well-meaning of us congregate in special houses that we have built for the sole purpose of trying to feel God together. By combining applied motivational speeches and creative musical arrangement with the latest and best gimmicks of technology, we listen to the promise that we can and will feel good by finding God (and find God by feeling good). We consume these carefully manufactured divine experiences like any other product, expecting them to be over on the hour so that we still have plenty of time to trot back to our lives of buying, selling, and trying to feel even more good in all the ways we possibly can. Fresh off the assembly line, we don’t mind applying whatever bits of
personal skill development the preacher told us was this week’s key to directly enhancing our experience of God. None of us feel manipulated. We would be angry if you told us we were just consumers being sold a fast-food religion. “Mysticism” is just a big word without any meaning to us. But every week we buy it anyway. We go to our churches in search of a better feeling, and when we find it, we believe we have found the real presence of God.

**The Road to Nowhere**

But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down). (Romans 10:6)

There are two main problems with this mystic pursuit of God through feeling. The first (and the biggest for Christians) is that Jesus never actually taught it. The Bible never tells you that the path to finding God lies hidden within positive experiences. It’s not that Jesus has a problem with hearts or emotions in general; after all, He created them. But He didn’t create them in order to speak to us through them. That was why He created **words**.

The second problem with believing that we can find God in our hearts is that human emotions always have an unintended side effect: **they wear off**. Feelings can come with extraordinary strength. They can be as real and potent as the sun warming your face. They can fill you with confidence, conviction, and daring. They can motivate you, get you to turn your life around, and press you to achieve things you never thought possible. But they inevitably also do what emotions always do—**change**. One week you wake up to discover that the methods once so good at helping you feel God last week—the songs, the advice, the practices, and all the other things that gave you such strong comfort and assurance—suddenly don’t quite lift you up the way they used to.
They feel muted. The experience is dulled, if only slightly. At this point, the trained mystic begins seeking, casting about for a new source of feeling better—a catchier song, a more vintage or innovative practice, some new, compelling advice. It really doesn’t matter what. If the sun breaking through the clouds holds the potential to help you feel your way past the tolerance you have built up to the rush you believe is the presence of God, Mysticism is more than happy to let you find God in the sun.

This is precisely where Mysticism is the most dangerous (and a little scary). Once you’ve given her your heart, she is more than content to show you God’s presence in just about anything. She knows a time is coming when seeking God in your emotions will start to build up a tolerance. She knows you will start to shift from feeling lifted up to feeling tired, from being purposeful to being worn thin, and from experiencing conviction to experiencing a nagging hint of betrayal. After all the work she has done to get you this far, the last thing she wants to do is risk that in your moment of weakness someone else might tell you the mistake you have made is trying to find God in your heart. So she’s ready, right there beside you, to whisper her lie, only spiced with different colors. “This is the moment we’ve been waiting for,” she says. “You weren’t ready to truly experience God before. First, you had to grow and learn. But now you are ready. All of this is just a test you are facing because you have come so far. Now is the time to take finding God in your heart to the next level.”

That next level might still include the name Jesus, or it might not. It might come with a few verses quoted from the Bible, or it might not. It doesn’t matter so long as you dig into the pie and start practicing the new practices, applying the new methods, and putting your trust in the new promises that you will and can find God in what you feel. “This time it will be for real. This time the feelings will last. This time you will really, really learn to experience God.”

Mysticism was waiting for Emo Dan on that cloudy day, ready to bring a ray of sunshine into his angst-filled life as a promise that his personal experiences were the key to knowing God and to knowing how God feels about him. But I wonder what would have happened if the
weather vane didn’t turn. What if it had started to rain instead? Having been promised that life with God is about feeling good, now suddenly convinced by the bad feeling of an overcast sky that God is not real, what will Mysticism offer him next? For a great many people, experimentation with sex, alcohol, and drugs (or some combination of the three) is the natural answer to the quest of feeling better. After all, there aren’t many more effective ways to manipulate one’s emotions than through substance abuse. But these, too, wear off. Tolerances build up. People get strung out. What then? Sometimes you don’t have to wait even that long. Just a few years ago in Philadelphia, two high school girls threw themselves in front of a train because their boyfriends had dumped them. They weren’t thinking that day. They were feeling. They were doing exactly what they had been taught to do: follow their hearts. The dark side of Mysticism wasn’t sleeping, even while the rest of us were. With The Lie spiced just right for the moment, Mysticism was waiting to whisper to those heartbroken children, “This is the next step. This is the path to feeling better. This is how you get to a better place. Just follow me. Just jump.”

{Mysticism’s lie: You can find God in your heart.}

But the dark side of Mysticism isn’t always such an early tragedy. For many, Mysticism dances with them through decades of church attendance, purposeful living, and chasing after a successful life. For many, it isn’t until they’re sitting alone in a nursing home, forcing down fifteen pills a day, and hoping for a visit from anyone, that the despair and doubts about God buried beneath endless rays of sunshine come flooding back as the perfect storm of a broken life. Sometimes it’s later, sometimes it’s sooner, but it is inevitable that the lows tip the balance back from the highs. How many times can feelings fix the real questions of faith? What about after the divorce, after the layoff, after the bankruptcy, after the sin? What will give Emo Dan hope next?
Though he will rarely admit it to himself, the Mystic Christian wakes up every day feeling a little bit weaker, needing to try something a little bit newer, in order to recover the emotions he was convinced he had finally captured in a bottle the day before. If Emo Dan walks this path long enough, if he eats The Lie long enough, then it is only a matter of time until one of those days he wakes up royally angry (and not quite sure why), filled with a growing awareness that his attempts to feel God just aren’t working. Too tired to go seeking yet another emotional proof, unwilling to force-feed himself yet another quest for experience at yet another new church, fed up with believing that this next trick will work when all the others have been such limited failures, Emo Dan will conclude that his problem is God. This is exactly what Mysticism is waiting for. This is her plan. She knows Emo Dan won’t take out his anger on her (after all, Emo Dan doesn’t even know she is the one he’s been worshiping, because all along Emo Dan thinks he has been worshiping the God of the Bible).

On that day, Emo Dan will wake up and blame his failures of trying to feel God on Christianity, because Christianity is what he thinks he has been practicing. He has tried with all his heart and all his mind and all his soul to feel God, and as a direct result he now feels with utmost, experiential certainty that Christianity is the most untrustworthy religion in the world. What will he try next? Maybe a nice, safe religion that promises a better walk with God through healthy living, with some regular stretching and breathing exercises. Maybe he’ll go join Punk Rock John at the local Atheistic Apologetics Festival. Then again, maybe his ears will be perked by the latest religion making a splash among young men in Western civilization, the one that guarantees that a real, ultimate God experience comes fastest by strapping explosives to your chest and walking into a café.

This is the great danger of Mysticism. She is terribly powerful. Once you’ve believed the lie she tells—that you can find God in your heart—she is capable of convincing you to try anything.