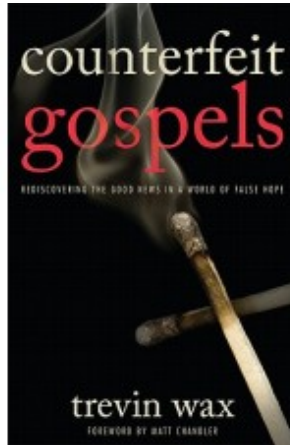


## REVIEW & PREVIEW



*Counterfeit Gospels: Rediscovering the Good News in a World of False Hope*  
*Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary*

**Wax, Trevin**

Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2011

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The Christian church in the West is undergoing deeply trying times. Thousands of churches close every year in the midst of a culture undergoing moral decline at a seemingly exponential rate. Government policies seem to favor secular interest and are becoming ever more overtly hostile toward Christianity. Unfortunately, however potent attacks against the people of God seem coming from outside of the church, the much more dangerous and subversive attacks originate within the church itself. To the end of exposing this subtle and destructive trend, Trevin Wax has written Counterfeit Gospels: Rediscovering the Good News in a World of False Hope. Underscoring this idea, Wax poses these provocative questions early on in the text:

If the seeds of destruction can come from the counterfeit, could it be such seeds are slowly being planted through the counterfeit gospels within the

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church? Could it be that we are unwittingly participating in ‘printing’ the counterfeit gospel? What if we are manufacturing counterfeit currency by the way we think and speak about the gospel? (12-13)

It is these questions that drive the reader toward a better understanding of the never-ending tendency of the Christian church to veer subtly away from the Gospel of Christ and toward idolatry.

After introducing the reader to the sinister nature of “counterfeit gospels” arising from within the church, Wax gets to the business of evaluating the problem at the ground level and proposing an outline for addressing it. The thesis of the book seems almost hidden in the introductory chapter of the book, inconspicuously taking up residence in the paragraphs immediately prior to Wax’s “Threefold Crisis of the Church:”

All Christians everywhere must realize that we are at war. Our battle is not “against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers ... of this age, “... Awareness of the battle can help alert us to counterfeit gospels that the Enemy wishes to spread into our churches, counterfeits that will destabilize us, confuse us, and cause us to lose confidence in the biblical gospel. (13)

Wax makes a very important and timely point with his thesis here: the Christian life is one of battle against a very real enemy who does not tend to grow content or apathetic, as we so easily do. Christians would do well to take notice of the military imagery used in the New Testament and feel the desperate need to fight what is actively trying to kill us and undermine the glory of a gracious God. To that end, Wax sets forth an argument balancing the true Gospel of the scripture against several counterfeit gospels that have infiltrated the church, highlighting all the while how only the true Gospel of Christ can satisfy where the counterfeits are cheap and empty.

In *Counterfeit Gospels*, Trevin Wax wastes no time outlining the “big picture” of his book. On page 17 of the initial chapter, Wax introduces the idea of “the three-legged stool,” his metaphor for an untainted Gospel:

So the gospel is like a three-legged stool. Cut off one of these legs, and the whole thing tips over. The counterfeit gospels in the church today resemble the biblical gospel in some ways, and yet fail to incorporate and integrate all that the Bible says about the good news. Each counterfeit is like a colony of termites, eating away at one of the legs of the stool and therefore toppling the stool and damaging the other components as well.

This “three-legged stool” provides the structure of the remaining chapters of the book. Wax subdivides the body of his argument into three segments, each headed by a leg of his stool, followed by two examples of counterfeits that exist to undermine that particular “leg” of the Gospel.

The first “leg” of the Gospel stool is the Gospel story. This leg is of primary importance because, according to Wax, the Gospel, in order to be truly appreciated and fully understood, must be put into its proper context. To explain to someone that Jesus died for the sins of all mankind is true, but it lacks the context necessary to convey a full sense of what was really occurring when Jesus was on the cross. Jesus came as the result of an entire Old Testament of promises, fulfilling each and every one while preparing to become the ultimate Passover lamb, once and for all accounting for the sins of man and ushering in a Kingdom where subjects could rest in their relationship with God, graciously restored on their behalf. If we do not understand the linkage of Christ’s ministry on Earth, culminating in his death, with the promises of the Father, revealed to the world through His chosen people from the beginning, then we do not fully grasp the scope of the Gospel. Wax sums up the narrative scope of scripture in four acts: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Seeing testimony of scripture through this lens gives Christians a better understanding of their faith and what it really implies for their lives.

The first counterfeit Wax describes is one that he calls the “therapeutic gospel.” This counterfeit attacks the overall story of the Gospel in scripture by downplaying the effects of the fall of man. Whereas sin leads to an insurmountable separation from God for all mankind, the therapeutic gospel leads its followers to believe that sin is merely an inconvenience on the road to their happiness. God will come along and help them through, but they can do it on their own. This is fundamentally destructive and offensive to the work that Christ has done on our behalf. If humanity can overcome sin, Christ wasted His time. Next, the “judgmentless gospel” exists to undermine the Gospel story, in that it renders it inconsequential. If God does not exist as a perfect and holy judge and there are no consequence for the actions of men then everything is permissible. A judgmentless gospel, that seeks to downplay the holiness of required of humanity and downplays the eternal separation and torment destined for those without Christ, is an empty and unfulfilling gospel. Again, if there is no judgment, then Christ died in needlessly an in vain.

The second leg of the true Gospel is the Gospel announcement. This idea encapsulates the essential nature of Jesus as proclaimer of the Good News, ushering in an Eternal Kingdom in which man no longer need be separated from God. Jesus' life and ministry displays and calls attention to God's fulfillment of generations of prophecy and promises to the benefit of all mankind. Jesus healed the sick, made the blind see, and the dead rise from the grave. He displayed a God's complete victory over Satan, sin, and death. He calmed the storms, fed the hungry, and claimed the throne as rightful King of Creation. This is the news that Jesus brought and this is the news that we cling to as Christians today. This work of proclamation was absolutely necessary for the spread of the Gospel and is inherent to it.

A counterfeit associated with the gospel announcement is the "moralistic gospel." This counterfeit subverts the Gospel announcement by affirming that sinners need to be saved, but informs them that it is within their own power to save themselves. Jesus is the one who initially transfers people from being "lost" to being "saved," but it is then their job to keep themselves that way through righteous living. This has been disastrous to the church, leading to people who are either self-righteous Pharisees or people in deep despair. If the holiness required of creation is not fully appreciated, people can be convinced that they can achieve that state on their own. When holiness is understood outside the context of grace, the necessary conclusion is despair. The Gospel Announcement upholds the ultimate holiness of God, while pairing it with the grace and loving kindness of God through Jesus. Another counterfeit, the "quietist gospel" takes the proclamation completely out of the equation. The Gospel goes from being something that is primarily universal and becomes primarily individual, to the point where people ignore what goes on around them in order to not disturb their own comfort.

The final leg is the Gospel Community. With this leg, Trevin Wax highlights the importance of the visible people of God as a necessary byproduct of the Gospel. He raises a few great points in favor of a community centric gospel: the entire Old Testament is about the history of the people Israel, most of the New Testament is written to churches rather than individuals, and Jesus came with good news about the Kingdom, not good news about the personal relationship. In Wax's words: "The gospel announcement births people into God's kingdom, and God makes His kingdom visible through the formation of His church" (155).

One counterfeit that undermines the gospel community is the “activist gospel.” This counterfeit works to coopt the community of believers and organizes them around a common goal of their choosing rather than Christ. This is particularly distressing since the church is charged with being salt and light in the world and should most definitely serve in the larger secular community. It is when the gospel community loses focus on Christ that the essence of the Gospel is lost. The second counterfeit under this leg is the “churchless gospel.” This counterfeit confuses the definition of “church” between the building in which the people of God meet and the people of God themselves. The church has always been the people. We do not “go to church,” we are the church. This counterfeit is very efficient at short-circuiting community because it downplays the necessity of being a part of the Gospel community for believers. If church is a place you go or something you do and not who you are, then you be as autonomous as you want.

Trevin Wax has used this book as a platform very well. In particular, the structure of his book places the focus of study where it should be: what the Gospel actually is. The sections outlining the several counterfeits he describes serve as a means to more fully articulate the importance of getting the primary aspects of the true Gospel correct and expose common misconceptions about the Gospel within the church. This book could have very easily turned into a list of “counterfeit gospels,” an encyclopedia of how to get it wrong. The good news is that Wax put the main focus on the tools necessary to understand what the true Gospel is, providing both the means for readers to know it when they see it as well as the ability to sniff out the many counterfeits they will encounter. This value of this book is found in its adherence to a robustly biblical understanding of the Gospel and a timely examination of several places in which the church finds itself in error.