

Is being right the point of Christianity?

By [James F. McGrath](#)

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Recently in my Sunday school class, we continued a discussion that started the previous time, sparked by [Hebrews 12](#), which depicts God as one who disciplines—or [more literally “whips” or “flogs”](#)—his children for their benefit. There was general agreement that, while some ancient people may have viewed misfortunes that came their way as divine punishment, there are good scientific, moral and even biblical grounds for challenging that viewpoint.

That topic eventually led us to a discussion of the relationship between Christian faith and practice on the moderate to liberal end of the spectrum, and how it relates to what we find on the conservative to fundamentalist part of the spectrum. One member of the class mentioned feeling frustrated at not always having good responses for a friend who is conservative and likes debating theology. I said that, even if I could run circles around the friend theologically, doing that would in and of itself be counterproductive. I would much rather ask the friend in question why they are persuaded that being a Christian is about *being right*.

This cartoon that recently appeared on a [mostly random blog](#) illustrates the point:



What I took from this cartoon, in light of our recent Sunday school discussion, is that one will always lose if one allows the framework provided by one's opponent to define the rules of interaction. If might is defined by soldiers, then the person with a pen will lose. But the whole meaning of "The pen is mightier than the sword" is not that the pen will win against the sword on the sword's terms, but that the nature of might itself must be reconsidered.

If we allow conservatives to define the terms of interaction, then some of us may be able to outdo their theological acrobatics and their proof texting. But [actually playing that game is already surrendering what is most important to us](#): the belief that [being right, having all the answers](#), is not what matters most.

[Arni Zachariassen suggested in a recent post](#) that creationists are not crazy, and that if you accept that inerrancy is the appropriate foundation, then their stance is logical. But I don't think that creationists are actually consistently treating the Bible as inerrant, and to grant that they do so is to surrender very important ground unnecessarily. In practice they only take some parts of it as inerrant truth, not those parts too inconvenient to take literally—whether the dome in Genesis 1 or the call to give up all one's possessions in Luke. (See too [Tyler Francke's recent treatment](#) of young-earth creationists' alleged literalism.)

I disagree with inerrancy because it doesn't fit what we actually find in the Bible. But that isn't the only reason. It is also a highly toxic teaching, in my opinion. Inerrancy is really about being able to say "[I know I'm right](#)." An allegedly inerrant text, which one is confident one has interpreted correctly, allows one to avoid learning, to sidestep challenging conversations, and to practice an arrogance and pride that are ironically at odds with key teachings of that allegedly inerrant text.

The question of whether belief, practice, or some combination of the two should be paramount continues to confront Christians of different sorts. For some [conservative interpreters](#), Paul wrote using the method of a newspaper reporter. Everything important goes towards the beginning, and the [exhortations and ethical teaching](#) at the end are really just to fill space—they can be cut if necessary. Those practical teachings are not central, the doctrine is.

For liberals, Paul's "therefores" are there for a reason. The point of the exegetical attention to Abraham is to provide a basis and inspiration for actually living out the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles in community. And the point of the focus on Jesus' sacrifice is not to accept another's sacrifice on our behalf, but to get us to offer ourselves as living sacrifices—willing to risk and even give our lives as we put into practice the prioritization of love, the boundary-transgression, and the inclusive fellowship that Jesus himself practiced and preached.

*Originally posted at [Exploring Our Matrix](#)*