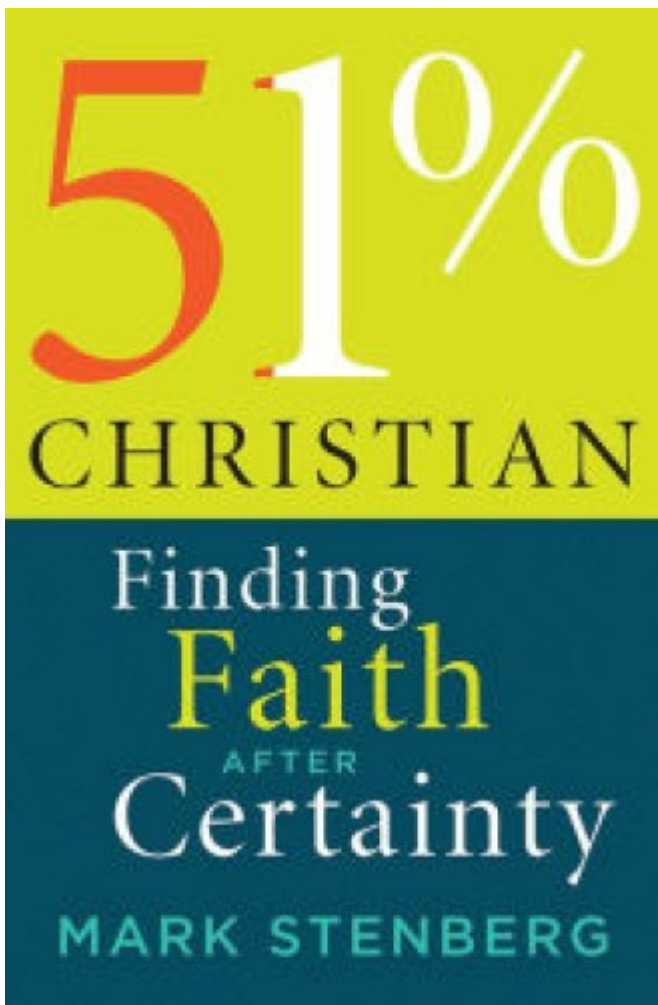


Does humility require doubt?

Mark Stenberg takes aim at Christian certainty. I'm not certain that's our problem.

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [September 14, 2016](#) issue

In Review



51% Christian

By Mark Stenberg
Fortress

Many theologians pine to write for a broader audience and not just fellow guild members. Few ever try it. Perhaps we're afraid of being taken less seriously. Perhaps reading and writing for others with Ph.D.s causes us to lose basic social skills. Blessed is the rare theologian who even tries to communicate more popularly.

Mark Stenberg tries and mostly succeeds. His theological lights are ones that I share: he quotes Barth and Luther and the Council of Chalcedon with approval. He draws on the insights of non-Christian religious sources, popular culture, and postmodern philosophy. He is vouched for here by some of the best pastor-theologians we have (Nadia Bolz-Weber, David Lose, Debbie Blue). The theology he proposes is vibrant, engaged with the world, and generous toward outsiders.

Like Stenberg, I am an academically trained theologian trying to prevent our discipline's treasures from being locked away from the whole church. Like me, Stenberg comes from an area with strong residual Christianity, a large and loud neofundamentalist set of neighbors, and a growing body of other neighbors repulsed by the whole charade (Minnesota for him; North Carolina for me). Perhaps my forthcoming criticisms show the narcissism of small differences.

A central premise of the book, announced in the title, is that Christians are overly fixated on certainty. We need instead to grant people permission to doubt, since certainty has often led to violence in religion's name. It is past time that Christians embrace the postmodern milieu in which we find ourselves. The book's announced patron saints are Pascal and Kierkegaard (although strangely they don't come up again explicitly). When Stenberg asks for all interested in "critical Christian orthodoxy" to unite, I'm in.

But I'm not certain our problem is too much certainty. The question of whether and how we know something is modernity's founding question, beginning with Descartes's radical doubt and leading to every sophomore philosophy student's question, *How do you know?* There have been responsible philosophical answers—such as John Henry Newman's riposte that he's certain England is an island, despite not having examined every square inch of coastline himself; or Wittgenstein's change of subject from truth and falsehood to the integrity of language.

No doubt there have been times when certainty has "legitimized discrimination, persecution, violence, and war." But there have also been times when certainty has undercut them: Wilberforce's claim that slavery is wrong, King's that the beloved

community looks very different than the Jim Crow South, Mother Teresa's that people ought not die in the gutter, Flannery O'Connor's that the kingdom's reality makes our current one look trifling indeed. These saints all had their own sort of doubts as well. But it's too broad a brush to say that "certainty" is always the problem. "Isn't it time that Christians embrace this postcertain climate we now inhabit?" Stenberg asks. But mainline and liberal Christians have done precisely that for generations now, perhaps a bit too avidly.

I think what Stenberg is actually after is the virtue of humility: confident in Jesus' Lordship, Christians express an open hand to all others. Stenberg seems awfully certain we should be less certain. I don't think this is as incoherent as it sounds. He's been formed by the gospel of Jesus, which should leave us not boasting, but serving. But we need a more nuanced account of "certainty" rather than its unequivocal condemnation.

Second—and this will sound like insider guild speech—Stenberg routinely pillories Platonism. It's Plato's fault that we speak of a transcendent God in a hierarchical relationship with creation. This "toxic" view of reality explains modernity's temptation to approach God with only our brains. If only Plato weren't so "nervous" we wouldn't constantly be seeking the ideas behind our sense data.

Ancient Christians found Platonism useful, certainly. But they didn't find it saving. Nor is it the case that modernity's various unhappy inheritances are all due to Platonism. Plato may be wrong, but he was no fool or coward. Ancient Christians treated the ideas of their heretical interlocutors more charitably than today's theologians speak of Plato.

Why inflict condemnation of Platonism upon readers without theological training? Stenberg doesn't even really mean it. He speaks of God's "otherness" and lauds John Zizioulas's reintroduction of Greek patristic notions of *perichoresis*, both of which owe a heavy debt to Christian Platonism.

In addition, Stenberg seems uncomfortable with the doctrine of election, here strangely muted. The scandal of particularity—God's choice of a specific people to be God's saving presence in the world—can leave us twitchy for good reasons. For Stenberg, Israel's chosenness "doesn't happen all at once"; in fact, "it keeps moving on." Babylon conquered the "so-called" chosen people. The prophets showed that chosenness is only for justice, not conquest. There's hardly a positive reference to

the patriarchs in Stenberg's book, and Moses comes up only as a counterweight to modernist efforts to "think" our way to God.

I fear the sort of supersessionism here that sees Israel as good only insofar as it matches what "we" now think. But election is messier than that. It is God's unequivocal identification with a people in all its stubbornness and all its beauty. We gentile Christians think this chosenness is now open to us in Christ. But God isn't taking back the witness of the rest of the Torah or Israel. How we develop nonsupersessionist theology is open to dispute. That we must do so is not.

The final problem may be the most puzzling. There is no example in this book of an actual church living out what Stenberg says. Stenberg has had a hand in planting two influential churches in the Twin Cities, House of Mercy and Mercy Seat Lutheran. His mentor, Jim McClendon, began his systematic theology with stories of specific saints. So why not include such stories of communities faithfully living out the faith? I find this omission baffling.

Perhaps we see now why theologians don't often try this sort of popularizing work. While they try to talk to ordinary people, colleagues like me open fire on their flanks. I hope I'm wrong. I hope a broad audience of Christians will take this book up and read profitably. I'm confident that if they do their churches will be more faithful and theology will have done its primary job.