

A BACK PORCH *Theology* BOOK

Lisa Harper

Foreword by Scot McKnight

A Jesus
Shaped
Life

How Diving Deeper into Theology
Can Transform Us and Our World with the
Radical Kindness of God

“There’s simply no one like Lisa Harper. In *A Jesus-Shaped Life*, she bridges the gap between sound doctrine and a flourishing life. She makes theology both accessible and desirable for all, inspiring us to receive the unconditional love of our merciful and gracious Savior. You will laugh, cry, be challenged, and be compelled to lean in more fully to a Jesus-shaped life.”

Christine Caine, founder of A21 and Propel Women

“Like the Master Storyteller, Lisa Harper knows how to draw you in through stories. She talks about theology in a way anybody can relate to. As you would expect if you’ve heard or read Lisa before, this book is like a conversation. But more than that, it’s an invitation into deeper conversation—about, and especially with, God Himself.”

Dr. Craig S. Keener, FM and Ada Thompson Professor of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary

“Lisa’s wit and humor are well known throughout the Christian world. Her ability to bring the Bible to life in unique and life-giving ways has always been her trademark. And now she combines those gifts to bring us a very readable and enjoyable work on our core Christian theological beliefs. Everyone should buy this book. Pick it up, grab a cup of coffee, and devour it!”

Dr. Jim Howard, professor in the Doctor of Ministry program at Denver Seminary, senior pastor at Dillon Community Church, and cohost of the *Back Porch Theology* podcast

“I can tell you from experience that sitting on an actual back porch with Lisa Harper is the best way to learn theology from her, preferably after you have laughed until you cried

and eaten enough chips and guac to bust the top button on your denim—but this book is the next best thing! My big sister has never gotten over the grace of God. From the vantage point she loves best, on her knees at the feet of her Savior, she will help you discover the way to a Jesus-shaped life, and you will never be the same.”

Levi Lusko, author of *Blessed Are the Spiraling: How the Chaotic Search for Significance Can Lead to Joy Through Life's Shifting Seasons*

“When you see a book about theology, it may scare you away or maybe intimidate you because you don’t feel like you’re smart enough to understand it. However, in *A Jesus-Shaped Life*, we learn that sound biblical theology makes us more Christlike and gives us a road map for how we should live.”

Sadie Robertson Huff, author, speaker,
and founder of Live Original

“Lisa Harper shows us how theology is supposed to work: She takes her personal experiences of pain and loss and her questions of doubt and shame and holds them up to the light of Scripture. In *A Jesus-Shaped Life*, her signature humor and deep empathy blend with clear theological truths: God loves us, pursues us, and forgives us, always and forever. Grab a coffee and settle in for a theology lesson like you’ve never had before—real-life tested and fearlessly faithful to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Lynn H. Cohick, PhD, Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Houston Christian University

A Jesus-Shaped Life

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Lisa Harper



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This book is dedicated
to my dear friend of many years,
Allison Allen,
and to my spiritual mentor of many years as well
(because it's taking me longer than most of his students
at Denver Seminary to finish my doctorate),
Dr. Jim Howard.

Both of these saints have also become beloved cohorts and coconspirators on a podcast called *Back Porch Theology*. And I'd be remiss if I didn't include Rahny Taylor, our podcasting boss and tireless advocate, in this emotive dedication. Because Rahny took a huge risk in putting our motley crew on the air—he actually believed us when we told him that deep, biblical theology and copious belly laughs don't have to be mutually exclusive!

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Foreword

Somewhere early in the book in your hands, my friend (whom I admire because of her love of Christ and whom my wife, Kris, loves—and Lisa likes her more than me, but I digress) Lisa Harper writes a stunning sentence: “Biblical *orthodoxy* (what we believe to be true of God) must lead to Christoformic *orthopraxy* (how we live in light of what we believe to be true of God).” You can tell she’s been to seminary, can’t you? So have I, so I liked her sentence and graded it with “Exquisite!” And at times my students write sentences just like that, and they are just as proud of themselves as Lisa and I are of ourselves.

Here’s the problem. Lisa’s perfectly manicured sentence above is a great idea until, like the good idea about the importance of forgiving others, you have to look at the face in the mirror to see if it looks like Jesus. If it doesn’t, and I’m pretty sure it doesn’t (at least once a day, or in my case, three times a day), then we need to take to heart that theology is meant to be lived. Lisa is right: Biblical orthodoxy is

supposed to lead to Christlike orthopraxy. (I slightly adjusted Lisa's wonderful term *Christoformic*.)

I want to turn this around or upside down, and I ask you to consider this next statement. At some level, our biblical orthodoxy is actually Christoformic orthopraxy turned into theological theory and abstractions. Think about orthodoxy as the best ideas at work in a Jesus-shaped life, and you have what I am trying to say. Lisa's wonderful book ties both sides of these statements into a single whole. I'll give an example. I wrote a book called *The Jesus Creed* about Jesus's teaching, and that book contends that Jesus wanted us to practice the ancient Jewish Shema ("Hear, O Israel . . ."—found in Deuteronomy 6) and a commandment He tied to it, found in Leviticus, that instructs us to love our neighbor as ourselves. What a wonderful creed to live by, which is why I called the book *The Jesus Creed*. (I won't bother you now with how I tricked my editor into that becoming the title, but I really did.) So, the book has a good idea: The Christian life is about loving God and loving others (and loving ourselves). The trick is living it. One day I said something a bit un-Jesus-Creed-like to Lisa's friend, my wife, Kris. Kris said, "That wasn't very Jesus-Creed-like." I agreed but decided not to say much or I'd have to apologize. So I waited. A couple of weeks later, Kris said something a bit—well, for her—strong to me, so I piped up with a good one: "That wasn't very Jesus-Creed-like." Her response slayed me: "I didn't write that book."

Now, that's an illustration of what you will encounter in this book. But that little story I tell about myself is better than an illustration. I was held to the ideas of the Jesus Creed more intensively because I had written about how

central and important and vital . . . and other good words . . . the Jesus Creed was. I had some solid biblical orthodoxy, but orthodoxy without orthopraxy is, to use the words of Jesus's brother, James, plain ol' dead faith. What good is faith if you don't practice it? James asked his audience. The answer—and you can almost hear the echoes from the first century—was “No good. No good.” (Sing that to the tune of a Neil Diamond song, and you can get the room swinging arms and bobbing.) Orthodoxy and orthopraxy, for Jesus, are tied so closely together that separating them ruins both.

Lisa's book explores, like a piece of music that continues to deepen and widen with more and more instruments coming into play, what a Jesus-shaped life looks like. We need to learn about this because we are not Jesus, Jesus is not us, and when we give Jesus just a fair examination, we discover very quickly that we've got a long way to go. The deeper we go into the Jesus-shaped life, the more we realize that Jesus is simply unfathomable, and the irony is that His unfathomability draws us to Him in ways we would never expect.

Lisa's *Jesus-Shaped Life*, from her opening story about taking her beautiful daughter, Missy, to school with a little cream cheese on her perfectly pressed blouse to the very end of the book, reminds us all that theological education that does not lead to spiritual formation is not what God wants. “No good, no good.” Sing it. Say it. Live it.

Scot McKnight

Introduction

As I'm writing this introduction, someone I love very much has just been moved into hospice care, and his neuro-oncologist has informed us that his death is imminent, within the next few hours or days. If you've experienced what seems to be an untimely death of someone you love, you've probably grappled with some of the same questions I have: *Why didn't this show up on earlier scans? Why didn't that experimental drug work? Why is such a good man having to navigate such a hard death? God, why are You letting him die now when his family needs him?* When life doesn't turn out the way we planned or prayed, emotional wrestling often follows.

The older I get, the more grateful I am that we have a Creator Redeemer who isn't disappointed or dishonored by our honest tussling. Instead, He invites us to bring *everything* to Him—our delight and despair and gladness and grieving. And He doesn't just “allow” us to ask questions; He effectively leans down and inclines His ear to listen (Ps. 116:2), whether we're lauding His greatness or listing

our pain and disappointment. The King of all kings is not a faraway deity, ruling over the earth as we know it like a dispassionate, iron-fisted autocrat. *He is a relational God*, who deigns to make Himself knowable! Who loves us more than we can possibly ask or imagine. Who through His inscripturated Word and Holy Spirit is always beckoning us to come closer. While I labored to fill this book with sound biblical content and theological truisms (I sacrificed a lot of blood, sweat, tears, and cold, hard cash getting my doctorate at Denver Seminary, y'all, and I'll be darned if I'm not going to use a few of those big words I memorized!), it's not an academic tome as much as it is an encouragement to live life in lockstep with the Lover of your soul because accruing information *about* God pales next to experiencing intimacy *with* Jesus. That's why I've formatted the chapters in such a way that we can engage our minds with the cognitive information *and* engage our hearts with some practical ways to internalize and embody truths about who God is and who He's called us to be as His image bearers.

I've been a follower of Jesus Christ for more than fifty years now, as well as a vocational minister for almost forty years, and in my experience it's only when Christ followers develop real intimacy with Jesus that our stories resonate with the beautiful, broken world around us. Lost and lonely people are rightly repelled by religiosity. But they are compelled by genuine kindness. By Christians who at least faintly resemble the One they profess to follow. The most Christlike believers I've had the privilege of doing life with—the saints who walk what they talk and have grown into means of grace God is using to impact the world for His kingdom purposes—aren't necessarily

the most knowledgeable; they're the ones who've spent the most time lingering in His embrace.

Thank you so much for your generous willingness to even pick this book up. If you find yourself reading a chapter or two or three, my huge hope and fervent prayer is that your heart will shift a bit closer toward Jesus with every turn of the page.

Gratefully,

Lisa

ONE

Theology Is Meant to Be Lived

For millions of Christians, God is no more real than He is to non-Christians. They go through life trying to love an ideal and be loyal to a mere principle.

A. W. Tozer

I have a confession to make. I've never worn a WWJD band around my wrist. Even in the nineties, when they first became popular, I never donned one. I understand admitting my aversion to those spiritually themed fashion accessories may come as a bit of a shock, but I have an aversion to how they tend to soak up dirt, body oil, and grime and become discolored and odiferous.

In fact, if you're wearing a WWJD or friendship bracelet right now—maybe it's a nostalgic reminder of a meaningful mission trip, or your adolescent daughter gave it to you

in a rush of affection when she found out you bought her and her bestie tickets to a Taylor Swift concert—go ahead and lift your wrist to your nose and tell me I’m wrong. It’s surprisingly offensive, isn’t it? Which is the main reason I never jumped on the WWJD bracelet bandwagon. But I’ve often regretted the persnickety choice not to wear a tangible *WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?* memory aid because I regularly need to be reminded of how our Savior would’ve responded in situations where I don’t remotely resemble Him!

I experienced fresh regret recently while driving my daughter Missy to school. She’s normally a really, really sweet kid (I brought her home from Haiti through the miracle of adoption in 2014, and most days still find me in the honeymoon stage of parenting), but she is most certainly not a morning person, and unfortunately for her, I am. Suffice it to say, a sleepy seventh grader with surging hormones and a chatty middle-aged mother with perky intonations are a train wreck waiting to happen. Here’s how that morning played out:

Me (with positivity, albeit in a too-high-pitched voice):

Honey, why don’t you go ahead and start eating your bagel because we’ve only got another ten minutes before we get to school, and remember your lunch period is pretty late this year, so you’re going to be really hungry by math if you don’t go ahead and eat some breakfast.

Missy (turns her head to look out the passenger’s window but not before I recognize an exasperated eye roll): *Harrumph.*

Ninety seconds pass while lovely Lauren Daigle lyrics echo through the heavy silence in the car.

Me (with intentionally lower-pitched positivity): *Hey Miss, honey, I know you would rather have a sausage biscuit this morning, but we didn't have time to stop at Huff's, so why don't you go ahead and start eating your bagel, okay?*

Missy (remains fixated by the scenery outside her window but emits a heavy sigh): *Pfeuuuuuuu.*

Two minutes pass, and Brooke Ligertwood lyrics extolling the name of Jesus begin reverberating through the emotional impasse in the car. A still, small voice in my head reminds me that companionable silence can be a very effective peace offering between mothers and teen daughters. But after waiting another long moment or two, I kick that proverbial petite voice in the shins and open my big mouth anyway.

Me (with forced, mostly fake positivity): *Hey Babe, we're only a few minutes away from school, and the cream cheese on your bagel has started to melt now, so when you do take a bite, will you please lean forward and hold it over your paper plate so it doesn't drip all over your uniform?*

Mind you, her shirt was navy blue, and I'd ironed it perfectly that morning after starching her khaki pants with a beautiful, standing seam because, well, you know, I'm one of the oldest and one of the few single parents at her Christian

school, so I'm passionate about making sure her uniform is on point to compensate. Unlike most of the other (and much younger!) middle school moms, I'm rarely wearing makeup, much less a matching Lululemon outfit, when we come barreling into the school parking lot mere minutes before her first class begins in the morning. Instead, I tend to be a sweatshirt-and-pajama-pants-with-her-hair-shoved-into-a-ball-cap kind of drop-off parent! I also don't bring homemade treats to class parties because, due to my work and travel schedule, our gleaming stainless-steel double oven functions mostly as kitchen art. Therefore, a guilt-ridden mom's gotta do what a guilt-ridden mom's gotta do, right? And that morning, it meant making sure my miracle child's outfit was as immaculate as a military cadet at roll call!

However, when another minute passed and I glanced over to gauge Missy's bagel consumption, I was horrified to see a big blob of cream cheese goo on her chest. I gasped involuntarily because for a second I thought maybe I'd hit a pothole and the ensuing bounce hurt my precious kid. Or perhaps she'd come down with a ferociously fast case of food poisoning. But then it dawned on me that the blob was in the shape of a perfect circle, almost as if it had been stamped with a cookie cutter. And I realized with growing frustration that my precious daughter had purposely twisted her bagel apart and smashed it on her navy-blue shirt in stubborn defiance!

So, I did what parents have been doing since Henry Ford invented automobiles in which we tote our precocious progeny around while they ignore us and text on their phones: I jerked the car over to the shoulder of the road, causing

a dramatic spray of gravel, and bellowed, “I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU JUST DID THAT, YOUNG LADY! THAT WAS TOTALLY UNCALLED FOR! WE DO NOT PULL STUNTS LIKE THAT IN THIS FAMILY!” Then, as if my making-a-mountain-out-of-a-cream-cheese-molehill tirade wasn’t enough, I finished the angry spiel with a word that’s not in the Bible. Since this is a Christian book, that particular word will not appear in print, but it’s not a term I’d use in front of my pastor. At least not on purpose! And the moment that ugly expletive flew out of my mouth, Missy gasped, and her eyes widened in shock. After staring at me in dismay for a few seconds, she announced accusingly, “Mom, Jesus does NOT like it when you say that word.”

You’d think that would’ve been enough to put a plug in my piehole. But nope, I had an encore, which I bellowed even louder for emphasis: “**IF JESUS WAS HERE, HE WOULD’VE SAID IT TOO!**”

Yikes, nothing like a vocational Bible teacher spewing something about Jesus that’s utterly indefensible according to Scripture! And what in the world does this confession have to do with theology, besides underscoring my glaring, perpetual need for divine grace? Well, basically everything, because theology is so much more about developing intimacy with our Creator Redeemer than it is about dumbfounding our church friends with multisyllabic seminary terms. And the closer we get to our Savior, the more we’ll begin to resemble Him and bear the Fruit of the Spirit, and thus our mildly rebellious loved ones will be more apt to receive our patience than our wrath! Sound biblical theology won’t necessarily make us smarter, but it should definitely make us more Christlike.

Taking the Plunge

All too often, biblically orthodox theology (that is, a belief system and worldview that are based on the promises and parameters found in the Holy Scriptures) is perceived as a lofty, somewhat sterile subject pursued by academics and seminarians. But if theology was merely a scholastic system through which people could organize their thoughts and suppositions about God and it didn't lead to the love of Jesus Christ, it would be the religious version of entomology—we might as well be pinning dead bugs to a corkboard. Theology was meant to be *lived*, and our Creator Redeemer is not a proposition to be examined; He's a personhood

whom we get to engage with and ultimately emulate!

Theology
was meant
to be *lived*.

For those of you who identify as type A, Enneagram one, or Enneagram eight, or who simply want to temporarily mute that chick in your small group who tends to com-

mandeer conversations by parroting what she's heard on podcasts or YouTube, the "official" definition for theology is as follows:

theology (Gk. θεολογία), lit. the "science of God." Among the Greek Fathers it comes to have two specific references: it can denote either the doctrine of the Trinity (i.e., of God's being, as opposed to his dealings with the created order), or it can mean prayer (as it is only in prayer that God is truly known). Later it came to mean the science of the Divinely revealed religious truths. Its theme is the Being and Nature of God and His creatures and the whole complex of the Divine dispensation from the Fall of Adam to the

Redemption through Christ and its mediation to men by His Church, including the so-called natural truths of God, the soul, the moral law, etc., which are accessible to mere reason. Its purpose is the investigation of the contents of belief by means of reason enlightened by faith (*fides quaerens intellectum*) and the promotion of its deeper understanding. In the course of time theology has developed into several branches, among them dogmatic, historical, and practical theology. The methods of classification of the sub-disciplines, however, fluctuate in different theological systems.¹

Now don't worry, we're about to responsibly truncate that complicated mouthful of a definition! The original Greek root words that the English word *theology* is translated from are *theos*, which refers to God, and *logos* or *logia*, which refer to utterances, sayings, or words. Therefore, the basic definition of *theology* is "conversations about God." And conversation implies relationship, right? Furthermore, genuine relationships framed in the context of conversation are not purely transactional; they're personal. They require some measure of mental energy and emotional engagement. They affect our minds and our hearts. The tempo and trajectory of our day can be changed by one conversation, can't it?

The basic definition of *theology* is "conversations about God."

Prior to his death in 2021, Dr. Bruce Demarest, who was a beloved professor at Denver Seminary (where I studied

1. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., eds. F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), s.v. "theology."

for a doctorate, thereby proving old dogs really can learn new tricks!), was a renowned biblical scholar for decades *before* he learned to lean into God's embrace. He explains the spiritual journey from brilliant academic to beloved son in poignant detail in his book *Satisfy Your Soul: Restoring the Heart of Christian Spirituality*:

Strangely enough, while conservative Christians have distrusted human intellect, we have relied heavily on the teaching of Bible doctrine to produce mature Christians. It hasn't worked, and now we're getting the picture: The soul begins to die when we view the faith chiefly as a set of intellectual propositions. Just as the thought of food will not satisfy an empty stomach, cognitive truth alone is not sufficient to form and nourish the Christian soul. What the inner man longs for is knowledge of God that comes from encountering, grappling with, participating with God in all levels of human experience—mind, body, and spirit. We were made to crave God with our whole being.²

Dr. Demarest's story resonates deeply with me, not because I'm a brilliant scholar but because for far too long I was more comfortable working hard on God's behalf than reclining against His breast. Dating back to the first Bible study I led in high school and well into adulthood, much of my desire to accrue knowledge about God and His Word was fueled by feelings of inadequacy. I was so afraid someone would look under the hood of my life and find me to

2. Dr. Bruce Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul: Restoring the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1999), 29.

be a fraud. It took an emotional crisis in my forties—which I later came to realize was designed by our compassionate Redeemer to eviscerate the shame and self-reliance that were slowly choking the hope and peace out of me—to finally learn that information *about* God is a poor substitute for intimacy *with* Him.

Theology is so much more than a system to organize our thoughts about God and so much better than a belief system to modify our behavior and ensure we won't say bad words when our children smear cream cheese goo on their Christian school uniforms—instead, it's a gorgeous, curving, adventure-strewn path that leads us deeper and deeper into the unconditional love of the one true God. Sound biblical theology doesn't produce smug scholars; it produces grateful and passionately devoted—albeit still flawed—disciples of Jesus Christ.

If you've put your hope in Jesus Christ and have begun to get to know Him better through Scripture, then the Holy Spirit will guide you and affirm that God's Word is inerrant for His intended kingdom purposes, but He never intended this sacred text to be used as a club to beat up on His image bearers! The Bible isn't a rule book or a collection of morality tales; at its core it is a divine love story, and the parameters we find in this redemptive narrative were written for our *good*—they're promissory and protective for God's people, not punitive. Every single word God breathed needs to be understood and applied under the canopy of His grace. And as we begin our descent into the wonderful waters of biblically orthodox theology, let's keep in mind that the Bible itself is not the treasure we're seeking; *Jesus is*.