

# The Slippery Slope and the Jesus Box

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Over twenty years ago, while in seminary, I was present during a hallway conversation with a professor who then seemed to be moving toward liberal theology. A student asked how this man's higher critical methods would enable him to remain a Christian. The professor gave quite the revealing answer: "I have a Jesus Box that I never touch." By this, he meant that he had drawn a line of piety around his faith in Jesus to keep out the implications of his liberal scholarship. I remember thinking at the time how vain was this hope. Method always gobbles up message, and no pietistic zeal will ever protect us from our actual lack of faith. That professor has long since moved on, and from his seat in a liberal college he has not surprisingly revised his former evangelical faith in Jesus.

This conversation came to mind yesterday when I learned of [Fred Harrell's tweet endorsing a denial of Christ's propitiation on the cross](#).<sup>1</sup> He commented: "As the living Word of God, Jesus regularly forgave sins without the need for retributive justice." [The article to which Harrell linked](#), written by Derek Vreeland on *Missio Alliance*, asks: "Is the Cross Even Necessary?" Informed readers will recognize the argument made here, which amounts to a blend of Abelard's moral influence theory and the New Perspective on Paul.

More interesting than Vreeland's standard denial of penal substitutionary atonement is Fred Harrell's endorsement. Trained in ministry under Tim Keller at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, Harrell planted a high-profile and well-funded PCA church in San Francisco in 1997. His career charted a path that progressive ministers in the PCA long to emulate: RUF campus minister; associate at progressive-leaning urban church; pioneering church plant in a progressive city. In 2006, [Harrell led City Church out of the PCA and into the liberal RCA](#) on account of a change of heart regarding the ordination of women (which the PCA does not permit). At the time, defenders chalked up the change to the pressures of charity in an uber-progressive setting. In 2015, however, [Harrell announced that City Church had changed its view on homosexuality](#), so as to "no longer discriminate based on sexual orientation." Harrell insisted that City Church had not abandoned its high view of Scripture. Yet it was clear from Harrell's explanation that the shift resulted from factors other than more careful exegesis: LGBT men and women were coming to the church, wanting to be Christian while also enjoying homosexual marriage; Harrell lamented hearing "stories of harm" resulting from the church's rejection of homosexuality; and based on "pastoral conversations and social science research," he and his elders decided to change their view of Scripture's teaching. Those who defended Harrell argued, "What's the harm if they are trying to reach people for the gospel?" Yesterday's tweet supplies the answer: the method of cultural accommodation in theology and Bible interpretation eats up the gospel and demands that it, too, accommodate to the doctrines of the world.

What are some of the lessons of Fred Harrell's progression from the ordination of women to the acceptance of homosexuality and now, apparently, to the rejection of penal substitutionary atonement and the propitiation of Christ? I can think of at least three:

1. *There is such a thing as a slippery slope in theology and faith.* While this claim infuriates progressives, Fred Harrell serves as exhibit no. 4,742. What is the slippery slope? It is the unstoppable descent into liberalism and unbelief that begins when the authority of Scripture is compromised out of cultural accommodation. The slope is slippery because without the friction of an inerrant, divinely authoritative Bible, faithfully interpreted, there is nothing left to restrain the downward gravitational pull of the world's demands.
2. In the late-20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, *the slippery slope has tended to begin over the issue of women's ordination.* The reason for this is not because there is something especially nefarious about women being ordained, but because this is the point of maximum cultural outrage at which progressives have tended to capitulate. "We will never accommodate homosexuality," they then cry, "and we will certainly never abandon an evangelical understanding of the gospel." Yet - let the PCA beware! - the fact is that the cost of abandoning the clear biblical teaching of male-only ordination is the abandonment of the authority of Scripture against all further demands of secular culture. As Paul Gilbert once wrote about Harrell: "The principles of biblical interpretation employed in embracing the ordination of women opens the door wide for these same principles to be employed in more devious ways in relation to the core doctrines of Scripture."
3. *Yes, the slippery slope will destroy your "Jesus Box."* In short, it is not an aberration that Fred Harrell has tweeted in rejection of penal substitutionary atonement and the doctrine of propitiation. It was only a matter of time. And this will not be the end. Harrell's example adds just one more straw that is breaking the camel's back in proving where the slippery slope ends up: in a blatant rejection of the very gospel, on behalf of which well-meaning progressive Christians called themselves humble, gracious, and open-minded--when, in fact, they were proudly and callously abandoning the authority of God through his Word.