

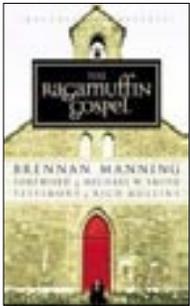


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The Ragamuffin Gospel

Book Review by Jeremy Cagle

The Ragamuffin Gospel,¹ written by Brennan Manning, was originally printed in 1990. Due to a continuing interest, Multnomah Publishers printed an expanded version in 2000 complete with a Study Guide and an after-word by Manning himself. The book has been publicized as having a major influence within various areas of Christianity. Contemporary Christian recording artist Michael W. Smith wrote a Foreword for the new edition in which he states that this book, “transformed me.” “It will shake you to your core and shuffle every idea you’ve neatly arranged in your brain,” (8). Smith, however, is not the only Contemporary Christian recording artist to be influenced by this book. Rich Mullins wrote a testimony for Manning’s updated version. In it, Mullins writes, “No author has articulated this message (of grace) more simply or beautifully than Brennan Manning,” (12).



Christian music is not the only area of Christianity that has been influenced by *The Ragamuffin Gospel* – Christian scholarship has been influenced as well. Max Lucado, author of more than 15 mainstream Christian books, writes, “Brennan does a masterful job of blowing the dust off of shop-worn theology and allowing God’s grace to do what only God’s grace can do – amaze,” (back cover). Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, *The New Testament in Contemporary Language*, writes, “This is a zestful and accurate portrayal that tells us unmistakably that the gospel is good, dazzlingly good,” (back cover).

In this latest edition, Brennan Manning even tells his readers of the impact of his work.

Since its 1990 publication, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* has spawned a cottage industry. Its theme inspired eight songs; the late Rich Mullins formed The Ragamuffin band; a recently published book (*Ragamuffin Prayers*), four paintings, three bookstores, and several poems carry the ragamuffin tag; and I have even been sent a little cardboard box with a baking mix inside for breakfast Rag-a-Muffins, (224 – 225).

With such excitement and influence, it is important for us to know and understand what this book is about. It is the purpose of this review to do exactly that.

Content.

Content is best viewed in quotation format. Here is what *The Ragamuffin Gospel* is about. First, it is a book about man’s depravity and the corresponding graciousness of God.

“Are you afraid that your weakness could separate you from the love of Christ? It can’t . . . Are you afraid that your inadequacies could separate you from the love of Christ? They can’t . . . Are you afraid that your inner poverty could separate you from the love of Christ? It can’t . . . Difficult marriage, loneliness, anxiety over the children’s future? They can’t . . . Nuclear war? It can’t,” (86).

“Through no merit of mine, I have been given a bona fide invitation to drink new wine forever at the wedding feast in the Kingdom of God. (Incidentally, for a recovering alcoholic, that’s heaven!)” (79)

“Raised from the dead, Jesus remains present in the community of disciples as the way to freedom. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of freedom. Jesus invites and challenges us to enter his kingdom, to walk the royal road to freedom, to be set free by the Father’s love. He

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calls ragamuffins everywhere to freedom from the fear of death, freedom from the fear of life, and freedom from anxiety over our salvation,” (142).

Second, Manning’s work is written for a particular audience, specifically the ‘down-and-out.’

“*The Ragamuffin Gospel* was written with a specific reading audience in mind . . . It is not for academicians who would imprison Jesus in the ivory tower of exegesis. It is not for noisy, feel-good folks who manipulate Christianity into a naked appeal to emotion,” (14).

“If anyone is still reading along, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* was written for the bedraggled, beat-up and burnt-out. It is for the sorely burdened who are still shifting the heavy suitcase from one hand to the other . . . It is for smart people who know they are stupid and honest disciples who admit they are scalawags,” (14 – 15).

Thirdly, the book discusses what the gospel and its adherents are not. Consider the following quotes:

“The Kingdom belongs to people who aren’t trying to impress anybody, even themselves. They are not plotting to call attention to themselves, worrying about how their actions will be interpreted or wondering if they will get gold stars for their behavior,” (53).

“Abba is not our enemy. If we think that, we are wrong . . . Abba is not intent on trying and tempting and testing us. If we think that, we are wrong . . . Abba does not prefer and promote suffering and pain. If we think that, we are wrong,” (76).

“Long prayers and big words do not suit ragamuffins . . . Neither are ragamuffins interested in pretensions to self-sufficiency,” (226).

Evaluation of Content.

Manning’s work should be evaluated in two areas: what it *does* say and what it *does not* say. It does say that salvation is by the work of Jesus alone and by no work of man. “At the cross, Jesus unmask[s] the sinner not only as a *beggar* but as a *criminal* before God. Jesus Christ bore our sins and bore them away. We cannot wash away the stain of our sins, but He is the Lamb who has taken away the sins

of the world,” (73). This echoes Biblical passages such as Romans 5:8, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” and Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The Ragamuffin Gospel also says that there is freedom in Christ. “Freedom in Christ produces a healthy independence from peer pressure, people-pleasing, and the bondage of human respect,” (146). This is Biblically seen in Romans 6:17 – 18, “But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.”

Manning’s work also spends considerable time discussing the love of God. “Human love will always be a faint shadow of God’s love. Not because it is too sugary or sentimental but simply because it can never compare from whence it comes. Human love with all its passion and emotion is a thin echo of the passion / emotion love of Yahweh,” (100). This sentiment of the merit of God’s love in comparison with mankind’s is very Biblical.

1 John 3:16 says, “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” and 1 John 4:16 correspondingly states, “We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.”

These three points are Biblical but much of the remaining content of *The Ragamuffin Gospel* is not, unfortunately. First, the Gospel is not for one particular audience, it is for every audience. In pages 14 – 15 (quoted above), Manning describes in detail who this book is written for. “It is not for the super-spiritual” or “for the fearless and tearless,” (14). It is, however, “for the wobbly and weak-kneed who know they don’t have it all together and are too proud to accept the hand-out of amazing grace,” (15). But on a book about Jesus’ saving work on the cross, it can be very confusing to write a book *for a particular audience*.²

If *The Ragamuffin Gospel* was written to tell about a Gospel that is only available or attainable by ragamuffins, it is no Gospel. If *The Ragamuffin Gospel* was written to

tell a universal Gospel to a ragamuffin audience, that is a different matter. Brennan Manning's dilemma, however, is that his book never clarifies which it is.

Either way, Jesus did not come to save a particular audience. In Matthew 8, we see Jesus cleansing a leper (vv. 1 – 4), the outcast of Jewish society³ and later a Roman centurion (vv. 5 – 10), who had 100 men serving under him⁴ and numerous slaves, (v. 9). The leper would have fallen under Manning's first category of "wobbly and weak-kneed" but the centurion had to have been "fearless and tearless." Yet Jesus shared the Gospel with them both.

We see that in other passages Jesus made this a common practice. He talked with Nicodemus, the "teacher of Israel" (Jn 3:10) of the new birth in John 3 and with an adulterous woman in John 8 of the coming of the Messiah. In Luke 5, Jesus healed a paralytic and in 14, a man with dropsy before speaking with the rich young ruler in chapter 18. Jesus chose no particular audience to talk with about the salvation He offered in the Gospels. Neither should we.

Second, Chapter 9 of *The Ragamuffin Gospel* is entitled "The Second Call." Manning introduces this second call in the following way, "Many people between the ages of thirty and sixty – whatever their stature in their community and whatever their personal achievements – undergo what can truly be called a second journey," (157). Here are some quotes from the chapter describing this:

"The second journey begins when we know we cannot live in the afternoon of life according to the morning program . . . For the Christian, this second journey usually occurs between the ages of thirty and sixty and is often accompanied by a second call from the Lord Jesus . . . The call asks, do you really accept the message that God is head over heels in love with you?" (159)

"This is what the call of Jesus means today: A summons to a new and more radical leap in hope, to an existential commitment to the Good News of the wedding feast," (165).

There is no 'second journey' in the Christian life. In an attempt to justify this theory of a 'second calling,' Manning refers to only two Biblical passages: Matt 22 –

Jesus' parable of the wedding feast (163) and John 8 – the story of the woman caught in adultery (166). Yet he does not directly quote from either one of them, or from any other Biblical passage, for that matter. However, he does manage to directly quote Gail Sheehy (157), Anne Tyler (158), Carl Jung (168), Max Planck (169), and Nikos Kazantzakis (171) in the chapter.

This idea of a 'second journey' is a figment of Brennan Manning's imagination and has no Biblical verification whatsoever. "For Christ also died *once for all*, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit," (1 Pet 3:18).⁵ Jesus' death and atonement for our sins were a one-time event. So is the moment of salvation. Romans 10:9 says, "if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." There is no discussion of a second time when salvation or any type of 'epiphany' experience happens in Scripture.

Third, God does not desire failure from His followers. *The Ragamuffin Gospel* gives the impression that God not only expects sin from His followers but that He is also content with it.

"According to an ancient Christian legend, a saint once knelt down and prayed, 'Dear God, I have only one desire in life. Give me the grace of never offending You again.' When God heard this, He started laughing out loud. 'That's what they all ask for. But if I granted everyone this grace, tell Me, whom should I forgive?'" (32)

On page 187, Manning relates a 'word' he heard from the Lord during prayer . . . "Yet on Easter night I appeared to Peter. James is not remembered for his ambition but for the sacrifice of his life for Me. Philip did not see the Father in Me when I pointed the way, and the disciples who despaired had enough courage to recognize Me when we broke bread at the end of the road to Emmaus. My point, little brother, is this: *I expect more failure from you than you expect from yourself*," (187).

God expects sin from His followers only in the sense that He has prepared His Son to be a sacrifice for it. He is not pleased by sin, nor does He desire His followers to be sinful. 1 Peter 1:16 says, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

1 John 3:6 states, “No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or known Him.” God is a Holy God – He is without sin⁶ and He desires His followers to be without sin. He knows that they still sin⁷ but He never expresses any pleasure or acceptance of it.

This lack of concern over sin is given a striking condemnation in Jude 4, so much so that Jude tells of their condemnation, “For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” God’s grace is not a license to sin. Brennan Manning should heed this warning from Scripture.

This is an evaluation of what the book *does* say. What it *does not* say is also very telling. First of all, this book – supposedly about the Gospel – does not say anything about repentance. In Luke 13:3, Jesus states, “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” Peter told the crowd at Pentecost in Acts 2:38, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” He later told another crowd in Acts 3:19 the same message: “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.” Jesus and His apostles obviously knew that repentance⁸ was a step necessary in salvation. Jesus said that, unless repentance took place, the sinner would perish (Lk 13:3).

Yet, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* treats sin as if it is a part of life that does not need to be dealt with. Consider the following quotes:

“The child doesn’t have to struggle to get himself in a good position for having a relationship with God; he doesn’t have to craft ingenious ways of explaining his position to Jesus; he doesn’t have to create a pretty face for himself; he doesn’t have to achieve any state of spiritual feeling or intellectual understanding. *All he has to do is happily accept the cookies: the gift of the Kingdom,*” (53).⁹

“Quite simply, our deep gratitude to Jesus Christ is manifested neither in being chaste, honest, sober and

respectable, nor in church-going, Bible-toting and Psalm-singing, but in our deep and delicate respect for one another,” (120).¹⁰

“The gospel of grace announces: forgiveness precedes repentance. The sinner is accepted before he pleads for mercy,” (181).¹¹

Not only does this book on the Gospel leave out and downplay repentance from sin, it downplays Jesus’ victory over it through Manning’s own personal testimony:

“Through no merit of mine, I have been given a bona fide invitation to drink new wine forever at the wedding feast in the Kingdom of God. (*Incidentally, for a recovering alcoholic, that’s heaven!*) (78)¹²

“Aristotle said I am a rational animal; I say I am an angel *with an incredible capacity for beer,*” (26).¹³

He talks about his former alcoholism as if it is a trivial thing or something that will bring him greater pleasure in Heaven but he does not speak of any victory over it. In fact, victory over sin is not mentioned in any of this book’s pages. A book about the Gospel could not be written without discussing Jesus’ victory over sin.

1 Corinthians 15:56 – 57 says, “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

2 Corinthians 5:17 states, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” 1 John 5:4 says, “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith.”

Biblical Accuracy.

See ‘Content’ above.

Consistency.

There are several inconsistencies in *The Ragamuffin Gospel*. Some are subtle; some are obvious. First, on page 225, Manning comments that, “Ragamuffins do not complain about the feeble preaching and the lifeless worship of their local church.” Yet *The Ragamuffin Gospel* is a book written in response to “feeble preaching” and “lifeless worship” in

the local church. Consider the following statements about the specific reading audience that Manning is writing to:

“It is not for muscular Christians who have made John Wayne and not Jesus their hero . . . It is not for academicians who would imprison Jesus in the ivory tower of exegesis . . . It is not for Alleluia Christians who live only on the mountaintop and have never visited the valley of desolation . . . It is not for red-hot zealots who boast with the rich young ruler of the gospels: ‘All these commandments I have kept from my youth’ . . . It is not for legalists who would rather surrender control of their souls to rules than run the risk of living in union with Jesus,” (14).

Such declarations sound like complaints against some form of lifeless worship in the local church. Where else are the “muscular Christians” and the “Alleluia Christians” if not in the local church? Where could you find academicians who imprison Jesus in an ivory tower of exegesis or red-hot zealots who boast that they have kept all of God’s commands but in some local body of professing believers? Manning’s indictments against all these groups (or their behavior) are a contradiction.

The second inconsistency in *The Ragamuffin Gospel* is not as subtle. It may even seem almost trivial to many readers but it is very important to understand that contradictions concerning anything of a Doctrinal nature are very serious. In discussing the authority of the church, Manning discusses how he, being a former priest, was questioned over his marriage in 1982 to his wife Roslyn.

“The law says an ordained priest (which Manning was) cannot marry. While I disagree with the law, *I vigorously defend the church’s right to require mandatory celibacy for ordained clergy. With equal vigor, I reject the ecclesiastical verdict that Roslyn and I are living in adultery,*” (141).¹⁴

But how can Brennan Manning defend the church’s right to require mandatory celibacy for its priests and reject an ecclesiastical verdict arguing that his breaking of it is adulterous? This is an obvious contradiction.

Third and finally, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* presents an inconsistency over the way we should view our ‘selves.’

“On the contrary, the more fully we accept ourselves, the more successfully we begin to grow,” (49).

“The danger with our good works, spiritual investments, and all the rest of it is that we can construct a picture of ourselves in which we situate our self-worth,” (58).

“The moment the focus of our life shifts from your badness to his goodness and the question becomes not ‘What have I done?’ but ‘What can he do?’ release from remorse can happen; miracle of miracles, you can forgive yourself because you have been forgiven, *accept yourself because you have been accepted,* and begin to start building up the very places you once tore down,” (115).

“Several years ago I made a thirty-day silent retreat in the snow-covered hills of Pennsylvania. One word sounded and resounded in my heart throughout that month. Jesus did not say this on Calvary, though He could have, but He is saying it now: ‘I’m dying to be with you. *I’m really dying to be with you,*” (162).

Yet, how can we accept ourselves and refrain from giving self-worth to ourselves? How can we refrain from giving self-worth to ourselves if we believe that the God of the universe died to be with us? We cannot. This is an inconsistency.

Scholarship.

The worth of any piece of literature, especially those of Doctrinal nature, can be evaluated by its scholarship. If its sources are good and it applies them correctly, a book could be a great tool in anyone’s hands. Here are some examples of the scholarship behind *The Ragamuffin Gospel*.

One source Manning quotes is the liberal theologian Paul Tillich to describe what a sinner must do to accept God’s grace. “You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps you will do much. Do not seek for anything, do not perform anything, do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.’ If that happens to us, we experience grace,” (29).

Such a statement, however, is not Biblical at all. In John 10:9, Jesus says, “I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.” Rom 10:13 says, “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Salvation – grace – occurs by no other name but the name of Jesus Christ (Jn 14:6). To say, “Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later,” is to be lost. Quoting such a statement as a source in a book on the Biblical Gospel is very poor scholarship.

A second source quoted in *The Ragamuffin Gospel* does not constitute a serious doctrinal error, but it is a very poor source scholastically. In the beginning of Chapter 2 (34-36), Manning gives several impressive figures about the rotation of the earth, its weight, and its corresponding planets in the solar system. Manning’s source for this information? “This fascinating collection of scientific data was drawn from a Rotary Club presentation in Sea Island, Georgia, in 1978. The speaker’s name is not available to me at this time,” (206).¹⁵

In a publicized book that has become so popular that it has been given an expanded edition, two pages are devoted to an unpublished source that has no name or precise date. This is poor scholarship by its author who, unfortunately, poorly serves his readers as well.

A third scholastic problem with this book is not a source cited but an idea presented. In Chapter 5, Brennan Manning attempts to express the doctrine of God’s omnipresence. In doing so, he makes the following

statement: “Grace abounds in contemporary movies, books, novels, films, and music. If God is not in the whirlwind, He may be in a Woody Allen film or Bruce Springsteen concert,” (94 – 95). Manning goes on to quote a theologian (without providing the theologian’s name or source for the quotation) in saying that Springsteen’s “Tunnel of Love” gave Catholics a stronger lesson on morality than the recent Pope’s lectures on the same subject (95).

2 Corinthians 6:14 says, “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?” What can Bruce Springsteen or Woody Allen teach about a God they do not know? Their sins separate them from God and bring them under His wrath (Col 3:6 – 7) and yet Brennan Manning encourages us to learn about God from them? This is poor scholarship, indeed.

The Ragamuffin Gospel does not have strong doctrinal, Biblical, or scholastic worth. It is unfortunate that such a work has had such a strong influence in mainstream Christendom. Although the purpose of this article is not to condemn its author, it is this article’s purpose to inform readers on what is right and wrong according to God’s word. Brennan Manning’s book is not an adequate representation of the Gospel and is not recommended.

Doctrinal Scale. 2 (out of 5).

Endnotes

¹ Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2000).

² It is okay for Gospel-related books to be written for particular audiences. Books on witnessing to people from different walks of life or on Jesus’ interaction with different people groups can be Biblically sound. If, however, certain aspects of the Gospel are left out (repentance, victory over sin, etc.) for the benefit of a particular people group, the Gospel of Scripture is no longer offered. In other words, a book entitled “The Gospel for the Muslims” would contain the same Gospel as “The Gospel for the Mormons” or it would be no Gospel at all. The Gospel can be given a different presentation but it cannot be given a different content.

³ Lev 13:43 – 46 states that when a Jewish man is found to be with leprosy, he must cover his face and cry, “Unclean, unclean!” wherever he goes. Once the priest confirms the leprosy, the leper must then live outside of the camp. Verses 47 – 52 go on to state that, if leprosy were found on a garment, the garment was to be burned.

⁴ The word *cent* means hundred. *Percent* means 100% or ‘whole,’ ‘entire.’ *Century* means 100 years. A *centurion* was a Roman soldier who had 100 men at his command.

⁵ Italics mine.

⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998). “God’s holiness is his absolute purity or goodness,” (311).

⁷ 1 Jn 1:8.

⁸ “The negative aspect of conversion is the abandonment or repudiation of sin. This is what we mean by repentance,” (Erickson, 947).

⁹ Italics mine.

¹⁰ This is a blatant disregard for God’s commands to live with chastity, honesty, sobriety and respect, and church attendance. A repentant life is one of obedience. An unrepentant life is one of disobedience. This quote is a sentiment of an unrepentant life.

¹¹ Such a statement contains no Biblical justification.

¹² Italics mine. A repentant sinner does not look back upon his sin – the actions that separated him from his Lord – with favor. It is disturbing that Manning, a former alcoholic, could refer to drinking alcohol as “heaven” when it has placed him in an alcohol rehabilitation center (123-130).

¹³ Italics mine.

¹⁴ Teaching the Bible verse-by-verse.

¹⁵ Italics mine.

¹⁶ Italics mine.

¹⁷ Italics mine.