

A CRITIQUE OF “BLUE LIKE JAZZ”

By Dr. Mike Powell

Blue Like Jazz, written by Donald Miller, has sold more than a million copies and is currently being made into a movie, set for release in the spring of 2009. Campus Crusade for Christ and other campus ministries are distributing the book nationwide as a part of their freshman survival kits.

I appreciate the author’s transparency about his own struggles, failures and doubts. He addresses many critical issues concerning modern Christianity and provides a number of helpful insights. The author is concerned about many of the same things I am concerned about in the modern evangelical church.

1. Areas Where I Believe That The Author Is “Right On”

a. He is reacting against an impersonal legalistic Christianity.

Sunday school classes did much to help us memorize commandments and little to teach us who God was and how to relate to Him. 4

For me . . . there was a mental wall between religion and God. I could walk around inside religion and never on any sort of emotional level, understand that God was a person, an actual Being with thoughts and feelings and that sort of thing. To me, God was more of an idea. It was something like a slot machine . . . that dolled out reward based on behavior and, perhaps chance. 8

. . . the devil tries so hard to get Christians to be religious. If he can sink a man’s mind into habit, he will prevent his heart from engaging God. 13

b. He recognizes our fallen nature.

Because of sin, because I am self-addicted, living in the wreckage of the fall, my body, my heart, and my affections are prone to love things that kill me . . . Jesus gives us the ability to love the things we should love, the things of Heaven . . . I found myself trying to love the right things without God’s help and it was impossible . . . my natural desire was to love darkness. 77

I realized that I desired false gods because Jesus wouldn’t jump through my hoops, and I realized that . . . my faith was about image and ego, not about practicing spirituality. 94

c. He, in places, seems to realize that life is about God, not us.

God is not here to worship me, to mold Himself into something that will help me fulfill my level of comfort. 92

d. He is strongly opposed to hypocritical Christianity.

. . . what I believe is not what I say I believe; what I believe is what I do . . . If I do not introduce people to Jesus, then I don’t believe Jesus is an important person. 110

I don’t think any church has ever been relevant to culture, to the human struggle, unless it believed in Jesus and the power of His gospel. If the supposed new church believes in trendy music and cool Web pages, then it is not relevant to culture either. It is just another tool of Satan to get people to be passionate about nothing. 111

The answer to problems was not marketing or program, but rather spirituality. If we needed to reach youth, we wouldn't do a pizza feed and a game night, we would get together and pray and fast and ask God what to do. 136

e. He opposes mixing right-wing conservative politics and religion.

The churches I attended would embrace the war metaphor . . . only they wouldn't clarify . . . They left us thinking that our war was against liberals and homosexuals . . . The truth is we are supposed to love the hippies, the liberals, and even the Democrats. 132

The church has lost touch with people who didn't know about Jesus . . . we needed to repent and start loving people who were very different from us . . . 135

. . . as representatives of the grace and love of God, our communication should be seasoned with love and compassion. 183

When the church does not love its enemies, it fuels their rage. It makes them hate us more. 219

In spite of the good things I find in the book, I am concerned about some of the beliefs, attitudes, and impressions that it might leave with young and undiscerning Christians.

Some may say that this is only a story of Donald Miller's personal journey and should not be taken as a theological treatise. Miller however has chosen to approvingly include statements and situations that can be harmful and misleading. There are several areas that I am concerned about.

2. Areas I Am Concerned About

a. Blue Like Jazz presents an unbalanced view of God.

Miller writes: *"I never liked it when the preacher said we had to follow Jesus. Sometimes they would make Him sound angry. . ."* 34

However, both the Old and New Testaments clearly teach that God is not only loving, He is also angry.

2 Chronicles 36:16 . . . the *wrath of the LORD* arose against His people, until there was no remedy.

John 3:36 "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the *wrath of God* abides on him."

Romans 1:18 For the *wrath of God* is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

Romans 2:5 But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up *wrath* for yourself in the **day of wrath** and revelation of the righteous *judgment of God*,

Ephesians 5:6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the *wrath of God* comes upon the sons of disobedience.

Revelation 19:15 From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce *wrath of God*, the Almighty.

b. Blue Like Jazz has an unbiblical view of the nature of mankind.

Miller writes:

“Jesus didn’t just love me out of principle; He didn’t just love me because it was the right thing to do. Rather, there was something inside me that caused Him to love me.” (p. 238).

The Bible doesn’t teach that God loves us because He finds something good in us.

The Bible teaches that there is nothing in us that is lovable.

Romans 7:18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not.

Jeremiah 17:9 "The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?"

Romans 3:10-18 as it is written, "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;¹¹ THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;¹² ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE."¹³ "THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE, WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING," "THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS";¹⁴ "WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS";¹⁵ "THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,¹⁶ DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,¹⁷ AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN."¹⁸ "THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES."

Hebrews 2:6 . . . "WHAT IS MAN, THAT YOU REMEMBER HIM? OR THE SON OF MAN, THAT YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT HIM?"

Cf Psalm 53:2-3; Isaiah 64:6

God loves us in spite of how bad we are.

Romans 5:7-8 For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die.⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Cf Ephesians 2:1-9

God loves us because it is His nature to love. (Cf 1 John 4:8; Psalm 86:15)

If God saves us based on something good He sees in us, then our salvation is not based solely on His grace, but on our value.

An unbiblical view of mankind leads to a confused message of salvation.

c. Blue Like Jazz presents a confused gospel.

The author does on rare occasion deal with the issue of sin.

I had already come to believe that Jesus was who He said He was, that Jesus was God. . . this time I just prayed and asked God to forgive me. And that is when I became a Christian. 49

In most places however the book presents a confusing gospel.

(It teaches that the gospel is about felt needs and being rescued from Satan.)

When I understood that the decision the hostages had to make to follow their rescuer, I knew then that I needed to decide whether or not I would follow Him. The decision was simple once I asked myself, Is Jesus the Son of God, are we being held captive in a world run by Satan, a world filled with brokenness, and do I believe Jesus can rescue me from this condition? 34

Is the gospel message simply that we are being held captive by Satan and have to decide whether to follow a rescuer?

(Rick) didn't really see evangelism . . . as a target on a wall in which the goal is to get people to agree with us about the meaning of life. He saw evangelism as reaching a felt need. 114

Is the gospel really about reaching a "felt need" ?

The message is that man sinned against God and God gave the world over to man, and that if somebody wanted to be rescued out of that, if somebody for instance finds it all very empty, that Christ will rescue them if they want; that if they ask forgiveness for being a part of that rebellion then God will forgive them. 124

Is the gospel about being rescued from the world and a feeling of emptiness?

On what basis does God forgive them? There is no mention of Christ's payment for sin.

The Bible says the gospel message is that Jesus died on the cross for our sins.

(It is on this basis that we can be forgiven.)

1 Corinthians 15:1-4 Now I make known to you, brethren, *the gospel* which I preached to you, . . . that *Christ died for our sins* according to the Scriptures, ⁴ and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

Ephesians 1:7 In Him we have *redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses*, according to the riches of His grace

1 Peter 2:24 and *He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross*, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.

1 Peter 3:18 *For Christ also died for sins* once for all, *the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God . . .*

Cf Matthew 26:28; John 1:29; Romans 4:25; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 1:4; Ephesians 5:2

d. Blue Like Jazz seems to dismiss the Bible's call for us to live godly lives.

The author seems to have no problem with cussing.

He speaks positively of cussing pastors. 133-134

Speaking about his "Christian" roommates he writes: *"We were all smoking pipes. Andrew the Protester. . . He is always talking about how outrageous the Republicans are or how wrong it is to eat beef. Mike Tucker . . . He posed nude on his brochure . . . Simon*

is a womanizer, always heading down to Kell's for a pint with the lads or to the church to pray. . . Trevor . . . is my Nintendo buddy. We yell profanities at each other while playing NFL Blitz.” 179

Curt . . . cusses all the time and tells dirty jokes. But he tithes, sort of. 193-194

The Bible says:

Ephesians 4:29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of *the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear.

Ephesians 5:4 and *there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.*

The author presents present stealing in a positive light.

“They were stealing from the rich to feed the poor. We were eating food from the wealthy table of the white man.” 208

The Bible teaches:

Ephesians 4:28 He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have *something* to share with one who has need.

The Bible exhorts Christians to live godly lives. We are not to sin against God or become a stumbling block for others.

Romans 6:13 and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin *as* instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God.

2 Corinthians 6:3 giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited,

1 Thessalonians 5:22 abstain from every form of evil.

1 Peter 1:15-16 but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior; ¹⁶ because it is written, "YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY."

Cf Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 4:1

Unfortunately some of the readers of *Blue Like Jazz* are getting the wrong message.

Christianity Today (June 2007) included testimonials by those who have read the book.

One woman said, “I’ve already bought Blue Like Jazz 13 times. But I gotta have all these to give to people. I’m a Jesus girl, but I also like to go out and do tequila shots with my friends. This is a book I can give to my friends.”

Another person said, “I love Blue Like Jazz because it’s, like, a Christian book, but it doesn’t make you feel bad about yourself.”

- e. Blue Like Jazz does not reflect a respectful loving attitude toward other Christians or Christian leaders.**

The author writes:

“I WAS A FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIAN ONCE. It lasted a summer . . . I hit my self-righteous apex while working at a fundamentalist Christian camp in Colorado . . . We would fast all the time, pray together twice each day, memorize Scripture, pat each other on the back and that sort of thing.” 79

Yet each of these is encouraged in the New Testament.

“There’s not a lot of work in the Christian market if you won’t write self-righteous, conservative propaganda.” 188

They were cute, these little Christian people . . . They reminded me of my roots, where I had come from . . . before my month in the woods with the pot smokers and the hippies and the free love for everybody.” 211

Yet the Bible says:

John 13:34-35 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

1 John 3:14 We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death.

Cf Ephesians 5:2; 1 Thessalonians 4:9

f. Blue Like Jazz does not seem to hold the Bible in high regard.

In places the author seems to question both God and the Bible

“Today I wonder why it is God refers to Himself as “Father” at all. This, to me, in light of the earthly representation of the role seems a marketing mistake. Why would God want to call Himself Father when so many fathers abandon their children?” 4

Is the author questioning God’s judgment? Does the author imply that he knows better than God how He should present Himself? Is the Bible out of date? Do we need to revise it to fit postmodern times?

To ask a question without providing some attempt to answer it can leave the reader with false impressions.

“My Sunday school teachers had turned Bible narrative into children’s fables. They talked about Noah and the ark because the story had animals in it. They failed to mention that this was when God massacred all of humanity. . . .The children’s story stuff was the thing I felt Christians were holding behind their back. . . I couldn’t give myself to Christianity because it was a religion for the intellectually naïve. In order to believe Christianity, you either had to reduce enormous theological absurdities into children’s stories or ignore them.” 30-31

Is this still the way he thinks?

The author relies solely on contemporary stories to explain salvation, spirituality, etc. He doesn’t use the Bible as his authority for explaining the need or way of salvation.

The Bible teaches that God uses the scriptures to save souls and change lives.

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Jeremiah 23:29 "Is not My word like fire?" declares the LORD, "and like a hammer which shatters a rock?"

Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Cf 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:23

Does the author think that he can persuade those who reject God's word to come to Christ with his stories? What kind of Christianity are they then actually accepting?

g. Blue Like Jazz strongly encourages a liberal political agenda.

Miller claims to be against the politicizing of religion (p. 115), yet Miller himself constantly mixes political statements into his writing. There are many negative statements about conservatives and Republicans. Until recently, the Blue Like Jazz website (bluelikejazz.com) had a section on activism where he linked readers to some of the most radical liberal political, environmental and animal rights groups.

h. Blue Like Jazz teaches that faith is not rational. It is something you feel.

The author writes:

And I love this about Christian spirituality. It cannot be explained, and yet it is beautiful and true. It is something you feel, and it comes from the soul. 57

Sooner or later you just figure out there are some guys who don't believe in God and they can prove He doesn't exist, and some guy other guys who do believe in God and they can prove He does exist . . . Who knows anything anyway? 103

For me, the beginning of sharing my faith with people began by throwing out Christianity and embracing Christian spirituality, a nonpolitical mysterious system that can be experienced but not explained. 115

The Bible teaches something very different.

Deuteronomy 29:29 "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed *belong to us* and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.

Isaiah 1:18a "Come now, and let us *reason* together," Says the LORD . . .

Matthew 22:37 And He said to him, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, **AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.**'

Matthew 13:11 Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted *to know* the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.

Romans 15:4 For whatever was written in earlier times was written *for our instruction*, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

1 Corinthians 2:14-16 But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.¹⁵ But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one.¹⁶ For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ.

Although we cannot understand everything about God or His plan, He has revealed things to us that He wants us to understand with our minds. What God reveals to us is rational and reasonable. We can know it because He gives us the ability to understand.

Why were all the New Testament epistles written if they cannot be explained, only felt?

- i. **Blue Like Jazz looks to personal revelation, personal experiences, feelings, and non-Christian sources for its certainty and authority.**

The author writes:

I heard God speak to me. 48

. . . what she says is right because my personal experience tells me so. 226

I could feel that it was true 229

The author appeals to Ghandi, Bono, pop psychology, hippies etc. but not the Bible.

He has many confusing non-Christian heroes and role models in addition to Jesus. Several are either irreligious or followers of a non-Christian religion. This can be confusing.

The Bible points to itself as the ultimate source of truth and authority.

Luke 16: 31 "But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Acts 17:11 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so.

2 Peter 1:19-21 So we have the prophetic word *made* more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. ²⁰ But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is *a matter* of one's own interpretation, ²¹ for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Cf Isaiah 8:20; John 5:39; 2 Timothy 2:15; 3:15-17; 2 Peter 3:15-16

- j. **Blue Like Jazz has an unbiblical view of love.**

It views love as uncritical acceptance and tolerance of sin.

I couldn't be myself with my Christian friends. My Christian communities had always had little, unwritten social ethic like don't cuss . . . 210

I wanted tolerance. I wanted everybody to leave everybody else alone, regardless of their religious beliefs . . . I was tired of the biblical ethic being used as a tool with which to judge people rather than heal them. 216

The Bible teaches a different kind of love.

We are to reach out to all unbelieving sinners with the message of hope, repentance, and forgiveness.

We are also called as Christians to lovingly and firmly keep one another accountable to God's Word and righteous standard.

1 Corinthians 5:1-2, 9-13 It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. ² *You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst . . .* ⁹ I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; ¹⁰ *I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world.* ¹¹ *But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler-- not even to eat with such a one.* ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within *the church*? ¹³ But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.

2 Thessalonians 3:6 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you *keep away* from every *brother* who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.

Cf Matthew 18:15-18; Romans 16:17; 2 Thessalonians 3:14; 2 Timothy 3:1-5

Note that all of the above passages are New Testament instructions to us. The Bible does not equate love with tolerance and hate with accountability.

k. Blue Like Jazz has an unbiblical view of false teachers and false gospels.

The book implies that doctrinal distinctives are unimportant.

I like attending a Catholic service every once in a while . . . I grew up Baptist . . . Some of my friends have left their churches and gone Greek Orthodox. I think that sounds cool. 130

I began to attend a Unitarian church. . . . was wonderful. 215

Unitarians deny the deity of Christ and salvation by faith in Christ alone. They see all Christian and non-Christian religions as paths to God (if He/She/It exists at all).

The author does acknowledge that their theology was "flaky".

I began to understand that my pastors and leaders were wrong, that the (theological) liberals were not evil . . . 215

The Bible however teaches us that false teachers are evil and that we are to beware of them.

Matthew 7:15 *"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves*

Acts 20:28-31 "*Be on guard* for yourselves and for all the flock . . . ²⁹ "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock . . . ³¹ "Therefore *be on the alert* . . . "

Philippians 3:2 *Beware* of the dogs, *beware* of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision;

2 John 1:10-11 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, *do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting*; ¹¹ for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.

God reprimands those who are unwilling to separate from them. Cf Revelation 2:14, 20

Revelation 2:14 '*But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam* . . .

Revelation 2:20 '*But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel* . . .

Cf Matthew 24:11, 24; 2 Corinthians 11:3-4, 13-15; Galatians 1:6-9; Ephesians 4:14; Colossians 2:4,8 2 Timothy 3:13; 2 Timothy 4:3; 2 Peter 2:1,17

i. Blue Like Jazz teaches a different view of Jesus and our relationship to Him.

In the book we read:

Sometimes I picture . . . Jesus talking with His friends around a fire, except He is not rambling about anything, He is really listening, not so much pushing an agenda . . . speaking some truth and encouragement into their lives. Helping them believe in the mission they feel inside themselves . . . 235

This is not the Jesus of the Bible.

We are here to fulfill His mission. He is not here to help us fulfill our agenda.

Jesus said:

Luke 6:46 "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"

John 14:15 "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.

m. Blue Like Jazz relies heavily on pop psychology.

One example is the author's statements about the relationship between love and faith.

. . .the key to everything rests in the ability to receive love. . ." 226

. . . the authority to love myself, to feel that it was right to love myself. 232

Nobody will listen to you unless they sense that you like them . . .If a person senses that you do not like them . . .then your religion and your political ideas will all seem wrong to them. 220

Though this may generally be true, we must remember that Jesus, the prophets, John the Baptist, and the apostles were sometimes more confrontational.

Matthew 3:7-10 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"⁸ "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance;"⁹ and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham."¹⁰ "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Matthew 23:31-33 "So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets."³² "Fill up, then, the measure of *the guilt* of your fathers."³³ "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?"

Acts 7:51 "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did.

The book ignores how Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles defined the problem and preached the Word.

It believes that we can convert people who are hostile to the Bible by loving them and showing them truth from pop culture.

The reason people don't receive Christ is not because they don't feel loved, but because they have hard hearts and love their sin. They are sinners by nature.

In summary, *Blue Like Jazz* is based upon an unbiblical worldview.

It ignores how Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles defined the problem and preached the Word.

It makes post-modern cultural icons the source of authority, not the Bible.

The author appears to believe that we can convert people who are hostile to the Bible by simply loving them and showing them truth from pop culture.

I am concerned with the impact *Blue Like Jazz* is having upon the Christian community.

I see it encouraging a critical, condescending attitude toward traditional Christians, churches and authority in general.

I am grieved by the pride and attitudes I have seen.

The book devalues biblical truth and embraces the unbiblical values of pop culture.

It is easy to see why some readers use the book to justify ungodly lifestyles.

This review is not intended to be a personal attack on the author. It is a call to evaluate what is taught in *Blue Like Jazz* through the lens of scripture. Remember, like antifreeze, false ideas can be dangerous to your (spiritual) health. I agree with the author when he says:

What people believe is important. What people believe is more important than how they look, what their skills are, or their degree of passion. (pp. 109-110)

A copy of these notes can be found at <http://www.universitybible.org/resources/ppapers.shtml>