

Andrew David Naselli

QUICK
NO
FIX

WHERE
HIGHER LIFE THEOLOGY
CAME FROM,
WHAT IT IS,
+ WHY IT'S HARMFUL

- Afterword by -

John MacArthur

“This book packs an extraordinary amount of useful summary, critical analysis, and pastoral reflection into short compass. The book will do the most good, however, if it encourages readers in a more faithful way to pursue that holiness without which we will not see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).”

—D. A. CARSON, research professor of New Testament,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School;
president and cofounder, The Gospel Coalition

“Andy Naselli provides us with a thorough explanation of Keswick theology and uncovers its biblical and theological weaknesses. Naselli’s work is judicious but kind. The Keswick movement has done much good, and we are allies and friends in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Still, iron sharpens iron, and Keswick theology has too often produced discouragement and despair with its exalted and finally unbiblical view of sanctification. Naselli’s work helps us to see why Keswick doesn’t measure up, and he provides a more satisfying and biblically faithful alternative.”

—THOMAS R. SCHREINER, James Buchanan Harrison
Professor of New Testament Interpretation, professor
of biblical theology, and associate dean of the School of
Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Andy’s work on Keswick theology is first-rate. This is a model of scholarship serving the church. His analysis of Keswick’s history and his tight theological work on sanctification are extremely valuable. I enjoyed this book. I learned from this book. I will be able to help my congregation as a result of reading this book.”

—KEVIN DEYOUNG, senior pastor,
Christ Covenant Church (Matthews, NC)

“Andy Naselli’s *No Quick Fix* is an easy-to-read and sure-handed critique of ‘higher life’ theology. Writing from personal experience and with scriptural clarity, he guides Christians out from error and into a biblically wholesome approach to Christian living. Highly recommended!”

—RICHARD D. PHILLIPS, senior minister, Second Presbyterian
Church (Greenville, SC); council member, The Gospel Coalition

“The history presented in *No Quick Fix* is fascinating, and Andy Naselli is a gentle but firm guide away from pitfalls and precipices to straight and narrow exegetical and theological paths.”

—JIM HAMILTON, professor of biblical theology,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; preaching
pastor, Kenwood Baptist Church (Louisville, KY)

“*No Quick Fix* is superb! Readers may not know Keswick theology by name, but many Christians in Britain and North America have been influenced by its teachings regardless. If you want to explore a truly biblical understanding of progressive sanctification while avoiding the pitfalls of some popular well-intended but misguided teachings, you’ll benefit greatly from this book. I enthusiastically recommend Naselli’s winsome, insightful, and instructive treatment and pray many will grow in their Christian lives as a result of giving careful attention to this book.”

—BRUCE A. WARE, T. Rupert and Lucille Coleman Professor of Christian Theology, chairman of the Department of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“For years popular Christian teachers have been enticing us with the ‘secret key’ to the victorious, higher, deeper, more abundant Christian life. We’ve been told just to ‘let go and let God.’ If you’ve heard that teaching, you’ll want to read this clear and accessible book. You’ll learn not only where this well-intentioned teaching goes wrong, but you will discover afresh the well-worn old paths of biblical faithfulness and holiness. Andy Naselli is a careful scholar and a compassionate guide who longs to help and serve the church of Jesus Christ. I predict you will not be disappointed.”

—JUSTIN TAYLOR, executive vice president of book publishing and book publisher, Crossway

“I am so pleased to see this work in print. For years I have required my doctoral students to read the original academic version of this incredibly helpful work. Now it’s finally available to everyone in a more accessible format. It is so clear, concise, well-organized, and understandable that anyone interested in an evaluation of the ‘higher life’ movement—educators, students, pastors, or laymen—can profit from Andy’s research. No one who wants to know more about this influential movement can afford to be without this valuable resource.”

—DONALD S. WHITNEY, professor of biblical spirituality and associate dean of the School of Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Some books on the Christian life are practical ... but shallow. Others are profound ... but so dense they put you to sleep. This book is both ‘practical’ and ‘gripping.’ It will draw in any reader who has wrestled with the how-to of spiritual growth. Read this for rich insights, challenge, and encouragement regarding yourself and God’s wondrous movements on your behalf to transform your life and soul.”

—ROBERT W. YARBROUGH, professor of New Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

“Every Christian struggles with sin. How to deal with and overcome it serves as the central question for higher life teachers. But do they have the right answer? Andy Naselli’s comprehensive analysis of higher life theology provides us with sufficient evidence that they do not. While the higher life quick fix to the sin problem would be nice, Andy gives us ten reasons why this theology is so harmful. And the appendix provides an abundance of helpful resources to encourage believers in their Christian walk. If frustration, confusion, and irritation are words that describe your battle with sin, especially if you’ve been seeking an easy way to victory, then you need to read this book.”

—JON PRATT, vice president of academics and professor
of New Testament, Central Baptist Theological Seminary;
elder, Eden Baptist Church (Burnsville, MN)

“When I was in high school, I ordered a book called *They Found the Secret*, which described the second blessing experience of twenty godly people. I wanted the kind of victory over sin and communion with Christ the book described, but the breakthrough experiences they described remained elusive. I wondered if I was somehow a ‘less-than’ Christian. *No Quick Fix* finally made sense of what I read in that book as well as much of the other teaching I received in my early years that came out of camps heavily influenced by higher life theology. By explaining the teaching and its fallacies, as well as giving the history and personalities behind it, this book not only fascinated me; it also equipped me to recognize this faulty teaching when I see it and to replace it with a more solidly biblical perspective.”

—NANCY GUTHRIE, Bible teacher and author

“In this condensed and repackaged version of his earlier work on Keswick theology (*Let Go and Let God?*) Andy Naselli provides a spiritual feast for those of us who are serious about following Christ and living the Christian life. His main focus is the doctrine of sanctification, but this is not a dry academic treatment of that theological topic. His presentation is engaging, and throughout the book he provides practical instruction for the everyday questions and struggles of the Christian life. He also addresses a host of related themes that are extremely important for Christians, including perfectionism, free will, Spirit-filling, abiding in Christ, and false assurance. If you are serious about living the Christian life and ministering to others who are struggling in their Christian experience, then *No Quick Fix* is a book you need to read.”

—W. EDWARD GLENNY, professor of New Testament Studies
and Greek, University of Northwestern (St. Paul, MN)

“No *Quick Fix* is more than a catchy title—it captures a profound biblical truth with significant ramifications for personal spiritual growth, our view of discipleship, and the overall health of local congregations. Much of contemporary Christianity, sadly, has been shaped by a culture wired for immediate gratification and a perpetual parade of spiritual quick fixes offering some combination of ‘secrets’ and ‘steps’ that will guarantee immediate spiritual victory. Andy Naselli has done a great service to the church in tracing the roots of this quick-fix theology and graciously, yet clearly, exposing its errors. Andy offers an evenhanded critique that does a wonderful job of putting together a thorough explanation of the various stands and unifying features of Keswick teaching. He has listened carefully to Keswick’s arguments before answering them with equal care. Bad theology hinders spiritual growth and hurts discipleship. No *Quick Fix* shines the light of Scripture on some bad ideas that have frustrated believers for decades. Releasing believers from false burdens and expectations sets them free to pursue Christlikeness. Real growth and real discipleship will be strengthened by this book. I highly recommend it!”

— DAVID M. DORAN, senior pastor, Inter-City Baptist Church
(Allen Park, MI); president and chairman of the Practical
Theology Department, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary

“No *Quick Fix* offers an introduction to the falsities of higher life theology that is important for those in both the pulpit and the pew to read. Accessible and filled with simplifying charts, lists, and graphics, Naselli’s retooled dissertation provides a solid, biblical understanding of sanctification. It exalts the grace of God in Christ, counters contemporary expressions of Pelagianism, and exposes the weaknesses of a two-tiered ‘mature’ vs. ‘carnal’ Christianity. Believers who are intentional in disciple-making especially will find this book rewarding.”

— ERIC C. REDMOND, assistant professor of Bible, Moody Bible Institute

“Throughout the world people are desperately searching for the higher life, the deeper life, and their best life now. The nineteenth-century theology associated with the Keswick movement brings many dangers, and it is alive and well in the twenty-first century and running rampant in many churches. This insightful and scholarly work by Dr. Andrew David Naselli is well suited for professors and pastors as well as for the concerned layperson. Naselli provides a gracious and thorough assessment of various aberrant views of sanctification while offering reasoned, biblical exegetical conclusions on this most vital doctrine of the faith once delivered to the saints.”

— BURK PARSONS, co-pastor of Saint Andrew’s Chapel
(Sanford, FL); editor of *Tabletalk* magazine

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What It Is, and Why It's Harmful

Andrew David Naselli



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*To Jenni,
My second blessing*

Introduction

It is not much of a recommendation when all you can say is that this teaching may help you if you do not take its details too seriously. It is utterly damning to have to say, as in this case I think we must, that if you do take its details seriously, it will tend not to help you but to destroy you.¹

That's what the influential theologian J. I. Packer wrote about higher life theology. It has harmed many people—including me.

I TRIED TO “LET GO AND LET GOD”

I'm not sure when God first enabled me to turn from my sins and trust Jesus. I probably became a Christian when I was eight or twelve years old. In my teen years, I deeply desired to be holy. I wanted to serve God with my heart and soul and mind and strength. I didn't want to waste my life.

When I shared my Christian “testimony” in my high school and early college years, I would say something like this: “God *saved* me from my sins when I was eight years old, and I *surrendered* to Christ when I was thirteen.” By “saved,” I meant Jesus became my Savior, and I became a Christian. By “surrendered,” I meant I dedicated myself to Jesus—I finally gave full control of my life to Jesus as my Master and yielded to do whatever he wanted me to do.

Most of the Christians I knew—especially preachers—used those categories, so I did, too. Young people in my youth groups or at summer camp commonly told their stories the same way: “I accepted Christ as my *Savior* when I was eight years old, and I accepted Christ as my *Lord* when I was thirteen.” That was the standard God-talk lingo.

1. J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit: Finding Fullness in Our Walk with God*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 130.

There were always two steps: first you get *saved*; then you get *serious*. Too many of us Christians were saved but not serious. We were living a lower life rather than a higher life, a shallow life rather than a deeper life, a defeated life rather than a victorious life, a fruitless life rather than a more abundant life. We were “carnal,” not “spiritual.” We experienced the first blessing but still needed the second blessing. Jesus was our Savior, but he still wasn’t our Master. So preachers urged us to make Jesus our Master. How? Through surrender and faith: “Let go and let God.”

The small Bible college I attended as an undergraduate was a ministry of my church, and preachers in my college and church took this carnal-spiritual dichotomy to another level. It became their primary focus and distinctive passion. Whether the text was from Exodus, Jeremiah, Matthew, or Revelation, nearly every sermon had the same application to Christians: Be Spirit-filled. That’s *the* key.

At first, I genuinely tried to go along with the program, but it just didn’t work for me. During my freshman and sophomore years of college, I became frustrated, then disillusioned, and then suspicious. I became frustrated because I still struggled with sin. I became disillusioned because higher life theology seemed too good to be true. And I became suspicious because this teaching didn’t seem to fit with what I was reading in the Bible.

I appealed to one of my former pastors for guidance, and he guided me safely through this storm. He recommended books, articles, sermons, and syllabi from his seminary, and I devoured them. By the time I was a senior in college, my school’s president and vice president nearly expelled me for not embracing their two-tiered view of Christian living.

EVALUATING HIGHER LIFE THEOLOGY

I entered graduate school with this issue on my front burner. I wanted to go deeper, so I wrote several research papers related to the topic as I completed an MA in Bible and then worked on a PhD in theology. I met more and more people who were victims of higher life theology, and I became aware of even more people who continued to propagate it.

So when it came time to choose a dissertation topic, I decided to evaluate higher life theology. I wrote a dissertation that surveys the history and theology of that two-tiered view of progressive sanctification and then

analyzes it.² Then I lightly revised that dissertation as a book for Lexham Press: *Let Go and Let God? A Survey and Analysis of Keswick Theology*.³

This book is a miniature version of my more detailed and academic work *Let Go and Let God?* I have stripped out most of the academic jargon and repackaged it to make it more inviting for thoughtful lay people.⁴ For example, I usually use the term *higher life theology* instead of *Keswick theology* since higher life theology is a more intuitive label. I also want to be careful to distinguish higher life theology from the Keswick Convention today.⁵ (By the way, *Keswick* is pronounced KEH-zick. The *w* is silent.)

I have become more and more convinced that the “let go and let God” approach to Christian living is a quick fix. A *quick fix*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “a quick and easy remedy or solution”—or negatively, “an expedient but temporary solution which fails to address underlying problems.” That’s what I think higher life theology is—an easy but temporary remedy or solution that fails to address underlying problems. And that’s why the title of this book is *No Quick Fix*.

2. Andrew David Naselli, “Keswick Theology: A Historical and Theological Survey and Analysis of the Doctrine of Sanctification in the Early Keswick Movement, 1875–1920” (PhD diss., Bob Jones University, 2006). I later condensed the dissertation to about twenty percent of its original size for a journal article: Andrew David Naselli, “Keswick Theology: A Survey and Analysis of the Doctrine of Sanctification in the Early Keswick Movement,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 13 (2008): 17–67.

3. Andrew David Naselli, *Let Go and Let God? A Survey and Analysis of Keswick Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010). It’s available exclusively from Logos Bible Software (in electronic format, not in print format).

4. I do not exhaustively (and exhaustingly) footnote what I assert in this book, so researchers looking for primary and secondary sources should consult *Let Go and Let God?* Chapter 1 surveys previous works (pp. 49–72); the rest of the book interacts extensively with primary and secondary sources (mainly pp. 76–295); and a relatively comprehensive bibliography concludes the book (pp. 328–459).

5. Keswick is a small town in northwest England, and since 1875, it has hosted a weeklong meeting in July for the Keswick Convention. From 1875 to about 1920, those meetings featured higher life theology. Beginning in the 1920s, the Keswick Convention’s view of sanctification began to shift from the view that the leaders of the early Keswick Convention promoted from 1875 to 1920. William Graham Scroggie (1877–1958) led that transformation to a view of progressive sanctification closer to the Reformed view. More recently its speakers have included people like Don Carson, Tim Chester, and Sinclair Ferguson, whose views on the Christian life differ significantly from the early Keswick movement.

WHY IS HIGHER LIFE THEOLOGY SO POPULAR?

My story is not unique. Hundreds of Christians have shared their stories with me about how higher life theology has harmed them. I have tried to do my part to drive a nail in the coffin of higher life theology, but higher life theology is by no means dead. So if higher life theology is so harmful, why is it so popular?

It is pervasive because countless people have propagated it in so many ways, especially in sermons and devotional writings. It is appealing because Christians struggle with sin and want to be victorious in that struggle—now. Higher life theology offers a quick fix to this struggle, and its shortcut to instant victory appeals to people who genuinely desire to be holy.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK?

This book is for you if you have a form of higher life theology in your background. You may embrace higher life theology enthusiastically; you may embrace it unknowingly; you may know there's something not right about it but can't clearly explain why; or you may reject it and would like to analyze it more penetratingly.

This book is also for you if you *don't* have a form of higher life theology in your background. Higher life theology is so widespread that you will be able to serve your brothers and sisters in Christ better if you understand what it is and why it's dangerous.

A silver lining of theological controversy is that it can help you refine how you understand what the Bible teaches. In this case, analyzing higher life theology will help you better understand the Christian life.

HOW THIS BOOK EVALUATES HIGHER LIFE THEOLOGY

This book has two parts. Part 1 tells the story of higher life theology (chap. 1) and explains what it is (chap. 2). Part 2 evaluates whether higher life theology agrees with the Bible (chaps. 3–4).

My goal is not to make you an arrogant know-it-all who pugnaciously goes on higher life theology witch hunts. My goal is to edify you by warning and equipping you. I'll consider this book a success if it helps you understand higher life theology better so that you follow a more biblical way in your Christian walk (see the appendix). There is no quick fix.

PART 1

Where Higher Life Theology Came From and What It Is

Before we can responsibly evaluate higher life theology (part 2), we must understand it. We must listen before we critique. So part 1 tells the story of where higher life theology came from (chap. 1) and explains what exactly it is (chap. 2).