



West Suffolk Epistle



Volume 12 Issue 7

West Suffolk Baptist Church

July 2025

Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) is a contemporary term used to describe a common but **unbiblical belief system** that has gained widespread acceptance in modern culture, particularly among younger generations. It was first coined by sociologists **Christian Smith** and **Melinda Lundquist Denton** in their 2005 book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, which summarized the findings of the **National Study of Youth and Religion**. While not a formal, organized religion, MTD reflects a set of **vague, shallow beliefs** about God, morality, and personal happiness that significantly departs from historic Christian orthodoxy.

History of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

Sociological Origins: MTD emerged as a descriptive term after Christian Smith's sociological research on the religious beliefs of American teenagers and young adults in the early 2000s. Smith and his team interviewed teenagers who identified as Christian, Jewish, and even religiously unaffiliated, and they discovered a striking commonality in their views of God and religion, regardless of denomination or religious background. These views were not deeply rooted in traditional Christian theology or any historic religion but represented a broader cultural mood about spirituality.

Cultural Shifts: MTD can be seen as a reflection of broader cultural trends in Western society over the last few decades, particularly the growing emphasis on individualism, personal happiness, and moral relativism. In contrast to traditional Christian teachings, which emphasize God's holiness, human sinfulness, and the necessity of redemption, MTD presents a more therapeutic approach to faith, emphasizing a feel-good belief in God who wants people to be happy and good but does not require much else from them.

MTD has become especially prominent in societies where secularism and consumerism have reduced religious beliefs to a vague sense of spirituality rather than commitment to specific doctrines or practices. It reflects a shift from religion as truth to religion as personal benefit.

Theology of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

MTD consists of five basic beliefs, which, while superficially related to some elements of traditional Christianity, represent a distortion of orthodox doctrine. These beliefs are:

1. **A God Exists Who Created and Orders the World and Watches Over Human Life on Earth:** This view acknowledges the existence of a distant and somewhat detached deity—similar to the God of Deism, who is primarily a creator but not actively involved in the day-to-day affairs of the world or individual lives. This is in contrast to the biblical teaching of a personal, relational God who is intimately involved with His creation and sustains all things by His power (Colossians 1:16-17).



West Suffolk Epistle



West Suffolk Baptist Church

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

Continued from Page 1

2. **God Wants People to Be Good, Nice, and Fair to Each Other, as Taught in the Bible and by Most World Religions:** MTD promotes a moralistic worldview, where being “good” is the primary purpose of life. This moral code is vague, mostly consisting of kindness, tolerance, and fairness. The ethical teachings of MTD are generally reduced to a lowest common denominator of ethical behavior without any grounding in the specific demands of God’s law or the holiness to which the Bible calls believers (1 Peter 1:16).
3. **The Central Goal of Life is to Be Happy and to Feel Good About Oneself:** The therapeutic aspect of MTD is its most distinctive feature. Rather than focusing on worshiping God, repentance, or salvation from sin, MTD teaches that the primary purpose of life is to achieve personal happiness and self-fulfillment. Religion, under MTD, exists to support self-esteem and help individuals achieve their own goals and desires. This conflicts with the Christian teaching that the goal of life is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever (Isaiah 43:7; 1 Corinthians 10:31).
4. **God Does Not Need to Be Particularly Involved in One’s Life Except When God is Needed to Resolve a Problem:** In MTD, God functions more like a divine therapist or cosmic butler, stepping in to help with personal problems but otherwise remaining in the background. This is a significant departure from the biblical portrayal of God, who is sovereign and actively involved in the world, and who desires a deep, covenantal relationship with His people (Psalm 139:1-18; Romans 8:28).
5. **Good People Go to Heaven When They Die:** MTD offers a simplistic and universalistic view of salvation, suggesting that as long as a person is generally good, they will go to heaven. This view entirely dismisses the necessity of repentance, faith in Jesus Christ, and the atoning work of Christ on the cross (John 14:6; Ephesians 2:8-9). The biblical gospel teaches that no one is inherently good (Romans 3:10-12), and salvation is a gift of grace through faith in Christ alone, not through moral works.

Why Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is Heretical

MTD represents a serious departure from historic Christian doctrine, and it has been recognized as a heresy because it undermines the core teachings of the Christian faith. Key theological issues with MTD include:

1. **Denial of the Gospel:** MTD reduces Christianity to a message of moral behavior and self-improvement, without acknowledging the reality of sin or the need for salvation through the work of Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches that humanity is sinful and separated from God (Romans 3:23), and that salvation is possible only through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9). MTD bypasses the cross, making Jesus’ sacrificial death unnecessary in its framework of self-centered morality.



West Suffolk Epistle



West Suffolk Baptist Church

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

Continued from Page 2

2. **A Therapeutic God, Not a Holy God:** MTD presents God as primarily interested in human happiness, rather than holiness. In contrast, the Bible reveals that God is holy and just, and He calls people to repentance, faith, and sanctification (1 Peter 1:15-16). The focus on feeling good rather than being transformed by the gospel distorts the true nature of God's character and His desire for His people.
3. **Minimization of Divine Sovereignty:** In MTD, God is portrayed as distant and uninvolved in the details of human life unless called upon. This view minimizes God's sovereignty and providential care, which are central to biblical theology (Psalm 103:19; Isaiah 46:9-10). The Bible teaches that God is intimately involved in the world and in the lives of His people, orchestrating all things according to His good purposes (Romans 8:28).
4. **Works-Based Salvation:** The MTD view that "good people go to heaven" undermines the biblical doctrine of justification by faith. Salvation in Christianity is not based on human goodness but on the work of Christ's righteousness, imputed to believers through faith (Philippians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 5:21). MTD fails to recognize the biblical truth that all people are sinners in need of redemption through Jesus (Romans 3:23-24).

Historic Christian Orthodox View

In contrast to MTD, the historic Christian orthodox view upholds the following key doctrines:

1. **The Sovereignty and Holiness of God:** Orthodox Christianity teaches that God is sovereign, holy, and actively involved in His creation (Psalm 115:3; Isaiah 6:3). God's ultimate purpose is not to make people happy, but to glorify Himself and bring about His kingdom purposes. Believers are called to live in holiness, reflecting God's character, not simply to pursue personal happiness.
2. **Human Sinfulness and the Need for Redemption:** The Bible teaches that all humans are fallen and sinful, incapable of saving themselves (Romans 3:23; Ephesians 2:1-3). Salvation is not achieved through moral behavior or good works, but through faith in Jesus Christ, who died to pay the penalty for sin and reconcile people to God (John 14:6; 1 Peter 2:24).
3. **The Gospel of Grace:** Salvation in Christianity is a gift of grace (Ephesians 2:8-9), not based on human merit or moral effort. The gospel is centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ—His life, death, and resurrection—and calls people to repentance and faith. The Christian life is not about self-fulfillment but about following Christ and being conformed to His image (Luke 9:23-24; Romans 8:29).



West Suffolk Epistle



West Suffolk Baptist Church

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

Continued from Page 3

4. **Sanctification and God's Active Role in Life:** In contrast to MTD's distant God, Christianity teaches that God is actively involved in the believer's life through the work of the Holy Spirit, transforming believers into the likeness of Christ (Philippians 1:6; 2 Corinthians 3:18). The Christian life is one of ongoing sanctification, where believers grow in holiness and are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live for God's glory.
5. **A Biblical View of Heaven:** The belief that "good people go to heaven" is a significant error in MTD. Christianity teaches that no one is good by their own merits, and heaven is not the reward for good behavior. Instead, eternal life is a gift given to those who trust in Christ for their salvation (Romans 6:23). It is through Christ's righteousness, not our own, that we are justified before God.

Conclusion

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism represents a serious departure from historic Christian orthodoxy, as it reduces the gospel to a self-help moralism and ignores the central truths of human sinfulness, the need for grace, and salvation through Christ. It presents a distant, uninvolved God who exists primarily to serve human happiness, rather than the sovereign, holy God of Scripture who demands repentance and offers redemption through Jesus Christ. Orthodox Christianity, in contrast, teaches the full gospel of grace, where salvation is not based on being good, but on faith in Christ, and where God is intimately involved in the lives of His people for their sanctification and His glory. ~ *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism* | *Monergism*

How Do I Glorify God in the Gray Areas?

As a pastor, I have the privilege of teaching people God's Word, explaining its implications in their lives by clarifying a passage of Scripture or a point of doctrine. Among the common concerns people raise, I can't remember anyone ever asking me if it was wrong to cheat, steal, lie, commit murder, commit adultery, or covet. Nor can I recall someone wanting to know whether a Christian should read the Bible, pray, worship God, or tell others about salvation in Jesus Christ. God's Word is unmistakably clear about those things.

What people do often ask, though, are questions regarding issues or activities that are not specifically addressed in Scripture—matters that fall somewhere between what is obviously right and obviously wrong. The issues aren't black and white but involve aspects of Christian liberty that fall into the "gray areas."

What sort of entertainment is acceptable? What kind of music is OK? What about what you wear, where you go, or how you spend your free time? How does the Bible speak to those issues?

Some would say, "The Bible doesn't address them. I can do what I want to do. I'm free in Christ!" But Paul has a warning to believers who would exercise their freedoms to the hilt: "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12; cf. Galatians 5:13).



West Suffolk Epistle



West Suffolk Baptist Church

How Do I Glorify God in the Gray Areas?

Continued from Page 4

You might know believers who abuse their freedoms. Their lives are routinely bombarded by temptation—often it's temptation they've unnecessarily heaped upon themselves through their own choices. And the closer they get to the line between sin and liberty, the harder it is to stay on the right side of it. Over time, that kind of lifestyle is an invitation to moral shipwreck.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from unbridled Christian liberty is legalism. In that camp are believers who want to make hard-and-fast rules about matters on which Scripture is silent.

I attended a college where we didn't have to struggle through decisions on gray areas because everything had already been decided for us. There were rules about what time we got up, what time we went to bed, what hours we studied, and whom we could talk to. There were even rules about how far we could walk with a girl beside us before we had to separate—right down to the number of feet! There were rules for just about everything. And while those rules simplified life on a superficial level, they also made it hopelessly complicated on an internal level.

The biblical pattern for dealing with life's gray areas isn't found in either of those extremes. While it is true that the Bible doesn't specifically mention every possible decision you might face, it provides general principles and parameters that help you make decisions that honor God. ~ *Dr. John MacArthur*

What “Jireh” Means in the Bible

Of all the Hebrew names for God in the Old Testament, one of the most well-known is Jehovah Jireh, usually translated as “the Lord provides.” Many of us grew up in church singing the children's song “Jehovah Jireh, My Provider.” Yet despite this Hebrew name being relatively well known, many are unaware of the interesting linguistic and literary background of the name.

The Hebrew behind the concept of “provide” is fascinating. The Hebrew word translated as “provides” is literally the verb “to see.” When this word appears throughout the Old Testament, it is usually translated “to see,” indicating literal visual sight. However, the word has levels of meaning. At times, the same word can be translated as “to understand,” as if to say that to “see” something rightly is to “understand” the nature of the thing. It then can have the sense of “committing yourself to act” on the situation. In this sense, one commits to “seeing to it” or “seeing that it will be done.” One might think of the emotional scene in the musical *Les Misérables* when Jean Val Jean “sees” the need of the orphaned Cosette and pledges to care for her as her adoptive father. “I will see it done! I will see it done!” he cries repeatedly. In this “see it done” sense, the Hebrew word can rightly be translated “provide.” But it is worth knowing that when the Hebrew speaks of “providing,” it is not simply speaking of “giving us something” that we need; it is speaking of truly “seeing” the need, “knowing and understanding” what must be done, and pledging oneself to “see it done.” It is a multilayered idea that moves far beyond mere benevolent giving.



West Suffolk Epistle



West Suffolk Baptist Church

What “Jireh” Means in the Bible

Continued from Page 5

What about the literary context? While the verb “to see” is used throughout the Old Testament in various contexts, the combined term Jehovah Jireh (“the Lord provides” or “the Lord will provide”) occurs in only one verse in the entire Old Testament. That verse is Genesis 22:14. The context there is full of consequence.

In Genesis 22, the Lord tests Abraham and tells him, *“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you”* (Genesis 22:2). God had previously promised Abraham that he would have a son and that through his offspring, God would make Abraham into a mighty, blessed nation through whom He would bring blessing to all nations (Genesis 12:1–3). After twenty-five years of waiting and trusting in the Lord, God finally opened Sarah’s womb and gave Abraham and Sarah the promised child in their old age. And now, the Lord was commanding Abraham to offer up this beloved, promised son as a sacrifice to the Lord.

As Abraham and Isaac obediently made their way to Mount Moriah, we are told that “Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw”—the same Hebrew word in question—“the place from afar” (Genesis 22:4, emphasis added). Abraham “saw” this place with his eyes, and he clearly “understood” what needed to happen. Then, Isaac asks his father, “Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham responds, “God will provide”—same Hebrew word—“for himself the lamb” (Genesis 22:7–8, emphasis added). Literally, Abraham says that God sees the situation, and He will see to it Himself.

When they came to the altar and Abraham *“took the knife to slaughter his son,”* the angel of the Lord cried out to Abraham to stop (Genesis 22:10–11). Abraham had passed the test. He had not withheld his son, his only son, from the Lord. Abraham immediately lifted up his eyes and saw—same Hebrew word—a ram in the thicket, and Abraham then took the ram and offered it as a sacrifice to the Lord. The text then declares, *“So Abraham called the name of that place, ‘The Lord will provide’;”—literally “the Lord will see it done”—“as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided’”—literally, “it shall be seen through”* (Genesis 22:14).

What we can draw from this name is that the Lord does far more than simply give us good gifts as generous acts of provision. The Lord sees us. He sees the very depth of our need. He sees and fully understands what must be done, and He pledges Himself, with all His omniscient foresight and omnipotent power, to see it done. He did this for Abraham on Mount Moriah, and this provision points us ahead to the ultimate act of provision on the cross.

God saw and understood our great need in our sin. He saw our desperate need for atonement and cleansing and righteousness, and He pledged Himself to see it done. God the Father “provided” His own Son, whom He loved, as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (see John 1:29). He did not spare Him but gave Him up for us all (see Romans 8:32). And in Jesus’ death on the cross for our sin, it is finished. God saw the work of our salvation through to the end. He raised Jesus from the dead, and now the risen Christ will certainly see our salvation through to its final consummation. We can fully trust Him. He will see it done. ~ **Reverend Aaron D. Messner - Senior Minister of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Atlanta and Adjunct Professor of Pastoral Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary Atlanta.**



West Suffolk Epistle



West Suffolk Baptist Church

A Prayer for the Ages

It is hard to overstate the importance of the Lord's Prayer. Throughout church history, new converts and children have been disciplined chiefly in three areas: the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. For most of the last two millennia, it was assumed that if you were a Christian, you knew, memorized, and frequently prayed the Lord's Prayer.

In one sense, John 17 is more precisely the Lord's Prayer. It is the longest recorded prayer in Scripture from the Lord Jesus. What we know as the Lord's Prayer is not the prayer Jesus prayed (at least not exactly—how could he say, “Forgive us our debts”?), but the prayer he taught his disciples to pray.

There are two versions of the Lord's Prayer, one in Luke and the more familiar one in Matthew. I don't think one prayer is dependent upon the other. A simpler explanation is that Jesus, like any itinerant preacher, taught on the same things over and over, with different words and in slightly different ways.

In Luke 11:1–2 Jesus's teaching is prompted by the disciples' request, “*Lord, teach us to pray*” (v. 1). They must have heard something in the way Jesus was praying that made them think, “We have a lot to learn.” Notice what Jesus did *not* talk about in response to their request. He didn't teach them how long their prayers should be, or at what time of day they should pray, or how many times each day they should pray, or what they should feel as they pray, or whether they should be standing or sitting or kneeling, or if they should close their eyes and fold their hands, or whether they should lift their hands and eyes to heaven.

It's not that concern about those things is wrong. But surely it's instructive that Jesus was most concerned with *what* they prayed, more than with when or where or for how long. This may be the most obvious and most important lesson to learn from Jesus about prayer. We can pray in the morning or in the evening, for a long time or a short time, with eyes open or eyes shut. There is freedom in a great many elements of prayer. But (1) we must not neglect praying, and (2) we must pray for the sort of things Jesus tells us to pray for.

The passage in Matthew 6:5–9 is part of Jesus's famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). You've probably realized that before. What you may not have noticed is that this section in the Sermon on the Mount covers the three foundational acts of Jewish piety: almsgiving ((6:1–4), prayer (6:5–15), and fasting ((6:16–18). These were the “spiritual disciplines” for first-century Jews (they would have memorized much of the Bible, but most couldn't read it daily because much of the population was illiterate, and individual families did not have Scripture scrolls in their homes). If they made New Year's resolutions back then, they would have thought of giving to the poor, praying, and fasting.

Unlike Jesus's teaching in Luke, here in Matthew Jesus is concerned not just with the *what* of prayer but with the *how* of prayer. Specifically, Jesus wants to make sure we are praying for the right reasons from the right heart. In fact, that is his central concern in discussing all three acts of piety. When you give to the needy, don't make a big deal out of it. When you pray, don't do it to look good. And when you fast, don't draw attention to yourself. Jesus understands the pride and vanity that dwell in every human heart. Being religious doesn't mean you no longer seek vain-glory. In fact, being religious is one of the chief ways in almost every culture that men and women find ways to nurture their pride and their vanity. What better way to look impressive before others than to be *spiritually* impressive?



West Suffolk Epistle



West Suffolk Baptist Church

A Prayer for the Ages

Continued from Page 7

So don't think for a moment, "Well, I'm a Christian, I go to church, and I'm spiritual and religious. I'm not in danger of these things." Actually those realities may mean we are in particular danger.

Of Course We Pray

Before we get into those specifics, however, look at the first four words of Matthew 6:5: "And when you pray ..." Jesus doesn't have to teach his disciples that they should pray. That was already a given. He assumed they would pray, and they would have understood that prayer was not something for super-spiritual people but something that every Jew did. Don't think, "Prayer is what pastors and missionaries do," or, "Prayer is something I will do when I'm older." Prayer is for everyone who is a true follower of God.

While it can be hard to know exactly when certain Jewish traditions developed, it seems clear that by the time of Jesus, prayer was offered in the synagogue three times a day. This may have grown up out of Daniel's practice of praying three times a day (Daniel 6:10), or perhaps it goes back to Psalm 55:17: "*Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice.*" Typically, the time of synagogue prayer began with a recitation of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4) followed by the Eighteen Benedictions. These benedictions are not in your Bible, but they deal with biblical themes. In fact, you can hear echoes in the Lord's Prayer of some of the language in them. These were a series of prayers asking God to bless Israel. We don't know exactly when they were codified, but the main development of the prayer almost certainly took place before the destruction of the temple in AD 70.

If that's the case, Jesus and his disciples would have been familiar with these prayers. Jesus could assume not only that his disciples would have times of private prayer (like Jesus did), but more obviously that they would regularly attend times of corporate prayer (think of the words "our" and "us" in the Lord's Prayer). When someone asks, "How is your prayer life?" we probably think, "How am I doing with my daily devotionals first thing in the morning?" That's not bad. But Jesus's disciples probably thought of corporate gatherings where they came together and prayed. Think about the Lord's Prayer itself. There is not one example of a singular pronoun in the model prayer Jesus gave to his disciples.

No one—not Jesus, not his followers—questioned that God's people would pray. The same is no less true today. If you are a part of the family of God, you will talk to your Father. If you never talk to your earthly father (if he is alive), especially if you live in the same house, something is very dysfunctional. Of course we talk to God in prayer. He is our heavenly Father. You can't be a Christian and not pray. There is no such thing as a non-praying Christian. ~ **Kevin DeYoung - The Lord's Prayer - Learning from Jesus on What, Why and How to Pray**



West Suffolk Epistle



West Suffolk Baptist Church

Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

If you have a birthday or anniversary in July that is not posted here or is listed in error or you do not want to be published in this newsletter, please contact Walt or e-mail him at gwlcf10415@gmail.com.

Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner July 2025

Birthdays

Sadie H. (13)
Elijah D. (16)
Jubilee H. (18)

Teresa H. (21)
Emily L. (25)
Nic G. (29)

Anniversaries

David and Jennifer A. (4)
Les and Jessica T. (17)

John 14:15–21 (ESV) *Jesus Promises the Holy Spirit*

15 “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. **16** And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, **17** even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. **18** “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. **19** Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. **20** In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. **21** Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”



West Suffolk Baptist Church Leadership

The West Suffolk Epistle is a monthly publication of West Suffolk Baptist Church.

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