

LET GO AND LET GOD?

**A Survey and Analysis
of Keswick Theology**

ANDREW DAVID NASELLI
FOREWORD BY THOMAS R. SCHREINER

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This book packs an extraordinary amount of useful summary, critical analysis, and pastoral reflection into short compass. One does not have to agree with every opinion to recognize that this is a comprehensive and penetrating analysis of Keswick theology down to 1920. 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
Deerfield, Illinois

For years popular Christian teachers have been telling us 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 book—the definitive history and critique of second-blessing theology. You'll learn not only where this theology went wrong, but will also discover afresh the well-worn old paths of biblical faithfulness and holiness. Andy Naselli is an extraordinarily careful scholar who leaves no stone unturned, but also a compassionate guide who longs to help and serve the church of Jesus Christ. Readers of this work will be instructed and encouraged in their Christian walk.

Justin Taylor
Vice President of Editorial; Managing editor, *ESV Study Bible*
Crossway
Blogger at [*Between Two Worlds*](#)
Wheaton, Illinois

Keswick theology cast a wide and long shadow over twentieth-century church life in America. Curiously, though, it never received a sustained, thorough analysis. Until now, that is. Andy Naselli has filled in the gap, doing us all a favor by immersing himself in the literature and the ethos of the movement. The result is an even-handed and substantial critique.

Keswick theology, especially in terms of its telltale doctrine of “victorious living,” strikes me as falling under the category of seeming like a good idea at the time that then quickly veered down a rocky road. Sadly, many have been left in its wake of deferred dreams of the victorious life. Dr. Naselli’s book offers great insight into what went wrong, and even guidance on how to get back on track.

Stephen J. Nichols
Research Professor of Christianity and Culture
Lancaster Bible College
Lancaster, Pennsylvania

As a pastor, I don’t get asked to read many dissertations. I can’t say I was pining for more. I have enough to read without having to slog through a bazillion footnotes on the role of dyslexic cobblers on the development of pre-industrial French mercantilism. But alas, my suspicions of nascent scholarship were born of ignorance. At least Andy Naselli proved them wrong in a big way on this occasion. Andy’s work on Keswick theology is first-rate. I knew it would be. But I didn’t know it would be so interesting . . . and edifying . . . and applicable . . . and easy to read. This is a model of scholarship serving the church. I’ve already incorporated his analysis of Keswick’s history and his tight theological work on sanctification into my preaching. I enjoyed this book. I learned from this book. I was able to help my congregation by reading this book. I couldn’t ask for more from a few hundred pages and a few thousand footnotes.

Kevin DeYoung
Senior Pastor at University Reformed Church (RCA)
East Lansing, Michigan

Andy Naselli's thorough description and careful analysis of Keswick theology makes a major contribution to contemporary evangelical theology and to the Christian doctrine of sanctification, more broadly. Like many others, I was early influenced by Keswick theology through books and teachers in the Keswick tradition. While I came to appreciate their stress on Christ's ability, by His Spirit, to enable faithful Christian living, their "let go, let God" methodology is both unbiblical and deeply misleading as a means of sanctification. I wish that Naselli's excellent study had been available when I struggled with these issues. And so now, I gladly commend this book to all sincere Christians who can both learn from the excesses of the Keswick model while also coming to see more clearly and rightly the Bible's pathway of progressive growth in sanctification.

Bruce A. Ware

Professor of Christian Theology

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Holiness movements are part and parcel of the church in every age. In their emphasis on the need for Christianity to make a difference, they represent an important biblical emphasis; but in their detachment from a biblical anthropology, they often tend inevitably towards legalism, lack of assurance, and, worst of all, self-righteousness. In this work, Andy Naselli subjects one of the most influential of modern holiness movements to vigorous, but fair-minded, analysis. In so doing, he makes an important contribution not just to church history but also for all those who seek to address the relevant issues in an informed and thoughtful manner.

Carl Trueman

Academic Dean, Vice President of Academic Affairs, and Professor of
Historical Theology and Church History

Westminster Theological Seminary

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Forty years ago, as a brand new Christian, I devoured Keswick theology, which had great appeal to me as a vibrant and dynamic faith. I wrote “Let go and let God” inside my Bible. But the more I studied Scripture and looked at my own life, the more I saw that much of this theology didn’t ring true. As a former insider, I found Andy Naselli’s critique to be fair, accurate, theologically sound, and biblically persuasive. Andy’s book offers the bonus of serving as an insightful study of the doctrine of sanctification. I highly recommend it.

Randy Alcorn

Founder and Director of Eternal Perspective Ministries

Sandy, Oregon

Evangelical churches in the English-speaking world have worked hard in recent decades to reflect the styles and moods of our time. But with fixation on the present can come amnesia about the past. A pity—because to a great degree our past defines and can entrap us. Yet knowledge of the past can also liberate. Here lies the service of this wonderfully organized, concise, and insightful study. It clarifies core aspects of the Christian identity of most “evangelical” groups in the world today as they have morphed and expanded over the past two centuries. It yields invaluable biblical, theological, and self-understanding regarding how Christians claim to grow in faith—what “sanctification” is. It questions Keswick views without disparaging them and commends alternatives without oversimplification. We are in the author’s debt for this irenic and ultimately constructive breakdown of a debate that has shaped us all.

Robert W. Yarbrough

Professor of New Testament and Department Chair

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Deerfield, Illinois

The history presented in this book is fascinating, and Andy Naselli is a gentle but firm guide away from pitfalls and precipices to straight and narrow exegetical and theological paths.

James M. Hamilton Jr.
Associate Professor of Biblical Theology
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, Kentucky

I highly recommend the work on the history and theology of the Keswick movement by Dr. Naselli. This study reveals the wide influence of the Keswick views and practices of sanctification. Naselli's research on the early history brings out the great variety of perspectives that shared a common approach to sanctification. The pervasiveness of the Keswick influence gained a canonical status in many circles. It may have been a powerful ideological movement, but its adherents often experienced disappointment in their own experience. Many Christians have been inspired by the movement, but have also become exhausted by it. This book explains the strong emotions associated with the movement, both positive and negative.

Willem A. VanGemenen
Professor of Old Testament
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
Deerfield, Illinois

Understanding what the Bible teaches about sanctification is extremely important, but the abundance of paradigms and systems makes that task more complex than it might seem at first. If we grew up in the church, we carry assumptions inherited from our youth that shape our perspective on both life and the biblical texts. The songs we've sung, the verses we've heard quoted in testimonies and sermons, and the path of our own Christian growth have all shaped the way we think and talk about the Christian life. The assumptions about sanctification on which many

evangelicals and fundamentalists stand are most often inherited from Keswick teachings.

That's why I believe this book by Andy Naselli is so important. It provides very valuable help in understanding the nature and impact of Keswick teaching. This is an evenhanded critique that does a wonderful job of putting together a thorough explanation of both the various strands and unifying features of Keswick teaching. Naselli doesn't go after straw men. He demonstrates that he has heard and understood before he critiques.

Theology shapes ministry, so any book that helps me, as a pastor, to think more clearly is a great blessing from God. That's the kind of book this is. Take up and read!

David M. Doran

Senior Pastor, President, and Professor of Pastoral Theology
InterCity Baptist Church and Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary
Allen Park, Michigan

Throughout the world and in every corner of Christendom, people are searching desperately for the higher life, the deeper life, and their best life now. The appealing nineteenth-century theology associated with the Keswick movement is alive and well in the twenty-first century and is astonishingly prevalent in many evangelical and Reformed churches. This insightful and scholarly work by Andy 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 and difficult doctrine. This is the sort of practical scholarship that the church most desperately needs.

Burk Parsons

Associate Minister, Saint Andrew's
Editor, *Tabletalk* magazine
Orlando, Florida

Critiquing Keswick theology requires charitable prudence. On the one hand, it would be painful, perhaps even presumptuous to appear to critique many of the beloved figures in Church history who have testified so fervently to its blessed alteration of their lives and service. On the other hand, even the most cherished beliefs must be scrutinized objectively. Those found to be imbalanced or erroneous should be exposed scripturally.

Andy Naselli avoids unnecessarily demeaning Keswick's followers. But he lays bare the mistaken emphases that have resulted in the delusion and despair of many frustrated Christians. His work is factual, fair, and liberating from the well-intentioned but futile pursuit of a crisis-sanctification.

Mark Minnick
Senior Pastor and Professor of New Testament
Mount Calvary Baptist Church and Bob Jones University
Greenville, South Carolina

Dr. Naselli's work *Let Go and Let God* provides a fascinating account and perceptive critique of early Keswick—a movement that has had widespread influence on conservative Christianity. The potentially deleterious impact of these ideas is more clearly seen in the historical and theological context that Naselli describes, especially the heterodox strains of some early leaders such as Palmer and Finney. Not just an historical tool, but a valuable insight for those who shepherd God's people, this book will prove a useful resource for both pastor and theologian.

Rodney J. Decker
Professor of New Testament
Baptist Bible Seminary
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This is a book that every evangelical Christian should read because it addresses the widespread belief that there is a chronological separation between the believer's justification and sanctification, which results in two categories or classes of Christians, the "carnal" and the "spiritual." Naselli gives fifteen theological critiques of such Keswick theology, arguing that it is not heresy but it is "dangerously erroneous." Along the way he gives a historical survey of the Keswick movement and addresses several topics of extreme importance for the Christian life, including perfectionism, free will, Spirit-filling, abiding in Christ, and false assurance. The charts and thorough bibliography add to the book's usefulness and value.

W. Edward Glenny
Professor of New Testament and Greek
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Few theological movements in twentieth-century American Protestantism enjoyed as broad an acceptance as Keswick theology. Proponents included such diverse groups as Baptists and Anglicans, Presbyterians and Pentecostals. Still today many Christians speak much of "surrender," "dedication," and "the victorious Christian life." These people may not even know how to pronounce *Keswick*, yet Keswick's influence on their thinking is unmistakable. *Let Go and Let God?* serves pastors and parishoners alike by unfolding the history of the Keswick movement and articulating the views of the well-intentioned (though often misguided) early proponents. What readers will find most helpful is the author's careful Scriptural analysis of Keswick theology. Andy Naselli's work will help believers identify Keswick's problems, recognize where it crops up today, and think more biblically about their sanctification.

Matthew C. Hoskinson
Senior Pastor
The First Baptist Church in the City of New York

The godly man is a diligent man, but he is also a man profoundly conscious that even his energy and diligence (let alone his gifts) are directly traceable to the grace of God at work in him. That was Paul's self-analysis in 1 Corinthians 15:10. For as long as I have known him, Andy Naselli has exemplified the reality of that passage, particularly in his research and writing ethic. His treatment of Keswick theology is some of the fruit of God's laboring grace in him.

The Christian's secret to a happy life is learning to interpret his experience through the lens of revelation (consistently contextualized), rather than interpreting Scripture through the lens of personal experience. Throughout the history of the church, this struggle with perspective has manifested itself in both doctrinal and devotional arenas, and on the personal as well as the ecclesiastical level. One area that has both doctrinal and devotional, ecclesiastical and personal, ramifications is the issue of sanctification. A biblically conditioned perspective on this subject has far-reaching implications for all believers individually, for the local assemblies of which they are a part, for the church of Christ in the earth and, consequently, for the glory of God. Andy Naselli's excellent analysis of Keswick theology in the area of sanctification is a perspective-correcting contribution that is at once charitable and candid, fair and insightful, thorough and concise, accessible and theologically precise. It was a privilege to serve on the doctoral committee overseeing its original production as a dissertation, and a privilege now to commend it warmly to a wider audience.

Layton Talbert
Professor of Theology and Exposition
Bob Jones University and Seminary
Greenville, South Carolina

Dr Naselli's study of 'Early Keswick Theology' combines careful historical, theological, and exegetical analysis and judgment to provide an important study of this hugely influential movement. Carefully nuanced so as to distinguish the earlier movement from the more recent character of these annual events, this study introduces famous figures such as Hudson Taylor, Handley Moule, Andrew

Murray, and Amy Carmichael, and helpfully describes the contours of the theology of this movement. While appreciating its strengths, Dr Naselli presents a compelling argument that Keswick doctrine does not stand up to the scrutiny of Scripture at critical points. Many Christians have wrestled painfully with their spiritual condition when confronted by well-meaning proponents of ‘the Higher Life’. I pray that Dr Naselli’s clearly written book will have a wide readership and will provide true biblical hope and challenge to Christians who wish to live a sanctified life.

Alistair I. Wilson
Principal
Dumisani Theological Institute
King William’s Town, South Africa

Naselli provides the church with a tremendous analysis of the origins of the Keswick movement, showing where strands of the early Keswick roots continue to wrap themselves within the theology of modern evangelicalism. Naselli solidly affirms the New Testament and Reformed teaching on the relationship of justification and sanctification, while exposing the errors of a chronologically separated, two-stage view of the same. Fair in its criticisms of well-known evangelical leaders of the modern era, this work will stand tall alongside of contemporary works within the resurgence of Calvinistic soteriology that are pushing against Pelagian writings about Christian growth that emphasize balancing the believer’s spiritual experience.

Eric C. Redmond
Senior Pastor and Assistant Professor of Bible and Theology
Reformation Alive Baptist Church and Washington Bible College
Temple Hills and Lanham, Maryland

Every Christian struggles with sin. How to deal with its effects and how to overcome them serves as the central question for Keswick teachers. But do they have the right answer? Andy Naselli's comprehensive analysis of Keswick's history and theology provides us with sufficient evidence that they do not. But Naselli's treatment does not merely attack Keswick's errant approach, it also serves us well by offering a scripturally helpful alternative, one founded upon the historic Protestant view of sanctification. If frustration, confusion, and irritation are words that describe your battle with sin (and who among us can deny these realities as we travel the road to the Celestial City), then you need to read this book.

Jonathan R. Pratt
Vice President of Academic Affairs and Professor of New Testament
Central Baptist Theological Seminary
Minneapolis, Minnesota

If you are seeking a biblical understanding of the Christian life, read Andy Naselli's *Let Go and Let God?* If you wish to avoid sidetracks that can absorb years of your life in fruitless confusion, then pay attention this careful study of the Bible's doctrine of sanctification and searching critique of the Keswick theology. With this book, Naselli has provided an important service to many Christians who have been or might be led astray by well-meaning but false teaching on the Christian life.

Richard D. Phillips
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To Jenni,
my second blessing

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FOREWORD

Thomas R. Schreiner

I became a Christian when I was seventeen years old, and the first theology I knew was Keswick theology. I read many books and heard numerous sermons that exhorted me to “let go and let God,” to live the victorious Christian life, to surrender absolutely and completely to the Lord, to live in unbroken victory for significant periods of time, to live as a spiritual Christian instead of a carnal Christian. I read Hannah Whitall Smith, Charles Trumbull, Andrew Murray, Watchmen Nee, Major Ian Thomas, John Hunter, etc. My youth pastor, who discipled me and taught me the rudiments of the Christian faith, gave a steady diet of Keswick teaching as well. When I attended seminary, at my youth pastor’s suggestion, I attended a church that promulgated Keswick theology because I was convinced that those who did not share such a theology were less biblical.

Let me be quick to say how much I learned from Keswick theology. It upholds the Scriptures as the authoritative and inerrant word of God. It highlights the majesty and beauty of Christ. It embraces and rejoices in orthodox Christian theology. Most important, it takes the Holy Spirit seriously. Christians can and should live in a way that pleases God through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not a theological cipher; his presence is vital and energizing so that believers can triumph over the flesh.

Nevertheless, Keswick theology, which was so wonderful to read about, did not match my experience. I didn’t enjoy the sustained victory over sin that I read and heard about in books and sermons. I comforted myself with the thought that I was a young Christian. I hoped that when I was more mature I would experience consistent victory. In my seminary years, however, two things weaned me away from Keswick theology. For the first time in my life I started doing serious exegesis. It became apparent to me fairly quickly that Keswick theology does not match up with what the scriptures teach. The Christian life has an

already-not yet tension, and sanctification is progressive and partial. Believers do not and cannot live on clouds during their earthly sojourn. Second, I was getting older and more mature. I noticed that my pastor who espoused Keswick theology, although he was a godly man, was not adept at recognizing his own sin. His “theology,” unbeknown to him, did not match his experience either.

Keswick theology is still popular today. Unfortunately, thoughtful and helpful evaluations of the movement are relatively hard to find. I received much help over the years by reading B. B. Warfield’s *Perfectionism* and J. I. Packer’s *Keep in Step with the Spirit*. Warfield’s analysis is perceptive, though he could have shown more sympathy for Keswick thinkers. Packer’s summary and evaluation are the most accessible for believers today. Andy Naselli, however, 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.

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PREFACE

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.

That's what J. I. Packer wrote about a teaching that has destroyed many people and continues to destroy more today. It nearly destroyed me.

Trying to “Let Go and Let God” in High School and Bible College

When I shared my Christian “testimony” in my high school and early college years, I would say something like this: “I was saved when I was eight years old, and I surrendered to Christ when I was thirteen.” By “saved,” I meant that Jesus became my Savior and that I became a Christian. By “surrendered,” I meant that 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 story 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. There were always two steps: first you get saved, and then you get serious. Too many Christians were saved but not serious. They were living a defeated life rather than a victorious life, a lower life rather than a higher life, a shallow life rather than a deeper life, a fruitless life rather than a more abundant life. They were “carnal,” not “spiritual.” They experienced the first blessing but still needed the second blessing. Jesus was their Savior, but he still wasn't their Master. So preachers often urged them to make Jesus their Master. How? Through surrender and faith: “Let go and let God.”

The small college I attended 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, I became frustrated, then disillusioned, and then suspicious. Was this teaching really biblical? It didn't seem to fit with what I was reading in the Bible.

I appealed to Mike Harding, 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 in Detroit, and I devoured them. By the time I was a senior in college, I was nearly expelled for not embracing my school's two-tiered view of Christian living. I was definitely not the school's poster boy. A deacon at the church who disagreed with its direction gave me some wise advice not to make any waves in the last months of my senior year: "Andy, when you're in prison, don't spit on the guards." I graduated and gladly moved on.

Exposing "Let Go and Let God" in Grad School

I entered grad school with this issue still on my front burner. I wanted to go deeper, so I wrote several class papers related to the issue as I completed an MA in Bible and then worked on a PhD in theology. I met more and more people who had experienced the same frustration with this view of Christian living and became aware of even more people who continued to propagate it.

When it came time to choose a dissertation topic, I decided to try to drive a nail in the coffin of what I had then pegged as "Keswick theology." So my first dissertation surveys the history and theology of that two-tiered view of sanctification and then analyzes it.

Still Exposing “Let Go and Let God”

I finished my first dissertation in summer 2006 and immediately moved to Deerfield, Illinois, to work on a second PhD at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. That one was in New Testament Exegesis and Theology and focused on other issues, but second-blessing theology has remained on the back-burner. People regularly contact me with questions about it; colleges and seminaries have asked me to lecture to their faculty and students about it; and churches have asked me to speak to their congregations about it. Just recently someone else brought it up again in my care group. Why so much interest? Because it’s not a dead issue. And that’s unfortunate.

Second-blessing theology 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. Second-blessing theology offers a quick fix to this struggle, and its shortcut to instant victory appeals to genuine longings for holiness.

This book lightly updates my first PhD dissertation: “Keswick Theology: A Historical and Theological Survey and Analysis of the Doctrine of Sanctification in the Early Keswick Movement, 1875–1920” (Bob Jones University, 2006). I later condensed it to about twenty percent of the original size for the 2008 William R. Rice Lecture Series, delivered on March 19, 2008 at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary and published as “Keswick Theology: A Survey and Analysis of the Doctrine of Sanctification in the Early Keswick Movement,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 13 (2008): 17–67.

Who Should Read This Book?

Many people have a form of second-blessing theology in their background: some of them still embrace it enthusiastically; some embrace it unknowingly; some know there’s something not right about it but can’t clearly

explain why; some reject it and would like to know more. This book is for them. I deeply desire to help.

Some people don't have much second-blessing theology in their background. Some of them aren't sure why it's wrong, and others believe it's wrong but would like to know more. This book is for them, too.

How This Book Exposes “Let Go and Let God”

This book's thesis is simple: Keswick theology is not biblically sound. It demonstrates this by answering three basic questions:

1. Where did Keswick theology come from (chap. 2)?
2. What exactly is it (chap. 3)?
3. And why is this second-blessing theology not a blessing (chap. 4)?

If you've encountered some aspect of second-blessing theology, you'll be fascinated to see how it fits in the story in chapters 2–3. And you'll be challenged to consider its serious flaws in chapter 4. My goal is not to make you an arrogant know-it-all who pugnaciously goes on a second-blessing witch-hunt. My goal is to edify you by warning and equipping you. I'll consider this book a success if it helps you understand second-blessing theology better, see why it's not a blessing at all, and follow a better—more biblical—way in your Christian walk.

Most of this book is controversial, but I don't want to end solely on a negative this-is-why-that-view-is-wrong note. So the last appendix recommends works on sanctification from a Reformed viewpoint. These works will also help you move beyond the destructive elements of second-blessing theology by constructively moving forward in your Christian life.

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“Because from him and through him and unto him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.”

–Romans 11:36

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