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Cool Chapter-Chapter Synopsis

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THE PATH: CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

PART I: SETUP

Chapter 1: How a “New Ager” Landed in a Fundamentalist Church

A spiritual-but-not-religious couple visit a Black church in Virginia seeking ecstatic praise like they found in the Bahamas. It starts as a lark at Highview Christian Fellowship for Teri and Andy Murphy. Then it deepens as they are warmly welcomed and sermons seem to be communicating on the “subspace channel.” But when a young gay man is called to the altar for healing, Teri knows “the party’s over.”

Chapter 2: Confrontation

Armed with biblical arguments from a gay activist, Teri marches into the office of the pastor, Bishop Phil Thomas, expecting to be thrown out. Instead, he listens, apologizes for being unclear, and explains “busting” as community accountability. A wormhole opens between their realities. When she challenges him about homosexuality being sin, his calm response floors her: “I’d be eager to meet again so we can discuss this in more detail.”

Chapter 3: Background – No Coincidences?

Teri arrives home from her confrontation with the pastor to find an invitation to a first-ever “Metaphysical Bible Class” at her New Thought church. The coincidence gets her full attention. More alternate perspectives start flowing to her—a New Age clown who infiltrated a Bible camp, a family of Jehovah’s Witnesses who are Bible pros, and a bald, meditating, philosopher of consciousness.

Chapter 4: Rescuing Truth, Beauty, and Goodness from Postmodernists

That philosopher is Ken Wilber. His Integral Theory clarifies for Teri why she’s been uneasy with her postmodern spirituality. It suggests that in exploring Highview, she may not be spiritually slumming—she’s integrating what’s been lost.

Chapter 5: We Have Each Other’s Attention – Now What?

Teri tests the waters with provocative emails to Bishop Thomas, expecting rigid defensiveness. Instead he responds, “I am sitting here grinning from ear to ear asking myself, ‘What am I going to do with you?’” Teri is ready for round two – but first needs to surmount learning she’d been called “wicked and evil” from the pulpit.

PART II: GOD

Chapters 6-14: Teri challenges Bishop Thomas on all the appalling doctrines that seem to flow from a “literal” reading of the Bible. His nuanced and compassionate response strikes Teri as five “loopholes” in fundamentalism. Some of these loopholes force Teri to confront inconsistencies or even parallels in her own thinking. Could there be a way that Biblical literalism isn’t that bad—and isn’t even that literal?

PART III: BRIDGES

Chapter 15: Science vs. Religion 1: Evolution

When Bishop Thomas scoffs at evolution, Teri is horrified at this deal breaker. But a post-truth revelation throws them a line. She discovers her own blind spots and realizes she has just as much “faith” in her beliefs as he does in his.

Chapter 16: Science vs. Religion 2: What the Bleep Do We Know?

Teri invites Bishop Thomas to a movie night at her New Thought church, Celebration Center for Spiritual Living. The movie claims quantum physics “proves” their beliefs, and it calls Christianity “an ugly superstition.” Teri sinks in her seat expecting Bishop to walk out. His gracious response leaves everyone cheering a shared ideal of Christ Consciousness.

Chapter 17: Loophole #6: Wicked and Evil Isn’t That Bad

When Bishop Thomas calls most people “wicked and evil,” Teri’s New Thought friends are horrified. But his next words turn everything inside out. “Being wicked and evil isn’t that bad. There are no degrees of sin, so God loves us all equally.” Could knowing our “wickedness” boost our self-esteem?

Chapter 18: Co-Creation or Surrender?

Teri insists she’s a “co-creator with God” while Bishop demands complete surrender to God’s will. Their standoff dissolves when he reveals God’s actual plan for our lives—and it sounds suspiciously like the “kaleidoscope of possibilities” Teri’s been fighting for. Once again, perceived opposites collapse into something higher. And every time Teri argues for a benefit of New Thought, Bishop responds for the Bible, “It’s in there!”

PART IV: COMMUNITY

Chapter 19: Behind the Scenes at Highview

Being or doing? Teri volunteers at the preschool and appreciates the good works the church is doing for families. A father’s story of conversion in prison shows her the value of salvation for many.

Chapter 20: Living for Heaven or Earth?

Narrow-minded or single-minded? Andy drops his pants in a church skit and gets a standing ovation.

Chapter 21: Fundamentalists as Positive Thinkers

When Teri gets a cancer diagnosis, she is buoyed by an astonishing coincidence. It includes a command by Bishop Thomas to “garrison your mind” while twirling her finger around her head.

Chapter 22: If You Can’t Beat ‘em...

Teri asks to join Highview—with conditions. She wants to keep her Religious Science membership and still believes there are many paths to God. “We can work with that,” the pastor says.

Chapter 23: A Dialogue with C.S. Lewis

Reading “Surprised by Joy,” Teri feels like she’s having a mind-meld with the famous Christian apologist whose spiritual journey mirrors her own. But she can’t take the final step of saying the traditional salvation statement. Will this be a permanent barrier with her Highview brethren?

Chapter 24: Salvation: World's Biggest Loophole?

When Teri floats an intricate theory, Bishop declares, "There are no loopholes in salvation." And yet... he says he believes she is already saved. The way he gets there changes everything.

PART V CONSCIOUSNESS

Chapter 25: Who Needs Psychology?

Teri is floored when Bishop Thomas says he "only rarely meets people who need help from psychology." They tackle sacrifice vs. boundary-setting and healing vs. growth to goodness.

Chapter 26: Spiritual Practice, Spiritual Bypass

Teri sees contradiction between Bishop's claims to rely solely on the Bible vs. his actions that show awe at direct experience of God's presence and guidance. Her encounter with a spiritualist gives proof to Bishop's favorite scripture for discerning truth.

Chapter 27: Expelled from Bible Study

When Teri visits a Bible study, she knows that her questions put the pastor in an awkward spot among congregants who are coming from such a different perspective. But she can't help herself when his slides say "EXPERIENCE GOD" while he preaches against trusting experience.

Chapter 28: Prayer vs. Raising Consciousness

Teri believes that her other church's approach to raising consciousness is a gift she can offer Highview—until Bishop responds that every step of her "affirmative prayer" comes from the Bible. A Religious Science practitioner who joins them comes away declaring that Bishop's energy reminds him of "the Dalai Lama... with an edge."

Chapter 29: Hawaiian Repentance and the Three Faces of God

Integral philosophy and an ancient Hawaiian healing technique help resolve two major tensions – between co-creation vs surrender and between a personal God vs. impersonal force. Teri is left wondering if the Christian Trinity might actually make sense.

PART VI FLESH

Chapter 30: Gender Roles - What Are We Really Talking About Here?

Teri rides the church bus to the women's ministry to discuss avoiding "pantland" while her husband joins the men for "Taking Leadership in Your Family." Both come home surprised at how gender roles actually play out for the congregation. Bishop Thomas further confounds the picture when he suggests the frying pan option for mistreated wives.

Chapter 31: The Bible vs. Free Love - Why We All Left Church?

Teri admits the sexual revolution was "a valuable experiment that mostly failed." But her friend rages at Bishop Thomas that Christianity made her ashamed about sex. When the pastor's own daughter becomes pregnant, a remarkable public accountability session forces Teri to choose her perspective.

Chapter 32: Homosexuality Revisited

Despite several rounds of dialogue, homosexuality remains their most intense and frustrating topic. In a surprising moment, Bishop says he might handle things differently, "If I were God." Later in the book, God will hand them a chance to forge an astonishing compromise.

PART VII WORLD

Chapter 33: Evangelism - Good News and Bad

A magically appearing Krishna cookbook softens Teri up to the value of evangelism. Highview mothers counsel each other to just keep loving their children who are not "saved."

Chapter 34: The Interfaith Stretch... and the Muslims

Teri introduces Bishop Thomas to a Libertarian imam who respects Jesus. Bishop joins an interfaith civic group and faces the choice of how to pray there.

Chapter 35: McLaren Completes the Bridge

The title of Brian McLaren's "Generous Orthodoxy" crystallizes for Teri the vision emerging from her work with Bishop Thomas. McLaren's framing of salvation and judgment provide the final stones in the bridge across their world views.

Chapter 36: Law & Politics - Seeking a Way Beyond

A Virginia senator asks to address Highview about his bill to outlaw homosexuality. The reply that Bishop Thomas asks Teri to help him craft explodes all expectations.

Chapter 37: Beyond Politics Part 2 - Healing Our World

Bishop Thomas returns from a mission to Africa eager to promote social action along with personal morality and devotion. They grapple with the tension between helping vs. controlling.

Chapter 38: End Times - Fear Not

Teri braces herself as Bishop Thomas prepares sermons on the End Times. But his actual approach confounds her expectation of revenge fantasies and rivers of blood. They discover a shared vision of service and developing Christ Consciousness.

Chapter 39: God's Plan Revisited

As their dialogues feel complete, Teri feels she's come full circle. Her childhood faith in a loving God is restored at a deeper level and with missing pieces in herself made whole. Bishop Thomas acknowledges their work has forced him to examine his beliefs and will make him a more effective minister to non-Christians. But he feels Teri is still seeking something. So he charges her to continue reading the Bible and pray for illumination. He declares,

"Blessed are they that hunger and seek for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Matt 5:6

A LOVE STORY OF IDEAS AND OF GOD

*“Powerful! I can’t think of anything else like it.
This book will inspire you—no matter which ‘side’ you’re on.”*

—Brian McLaren, bestselling author, *Generous Orthodoxy*

*“A personal and spiritual tour de force. I learned something
in every chapter, and it often made me laugh out loud with joy.”*

—Amy Roth, Emmy-winning journalist, formerly of U.S. Embassy to the Vatican

*Was I offended? Yes. Did I laugh? Oh yes!
Especially when they took Bishop Thomas to that New Age movie.
I am a dyed-in-the-wool Christian, and Bishop Thomas
is my ideal pastor. I would LOVE to meet both him and Teri.”*

—Lindsey Antle, Parker, CO

*“Wow. Couldn’t put the book down last night until I finished it.
Very engrossing, very easy to read, very thoughtful—even though I disagree
with almost everything you say about New Age and New Thought.”*

—Kay Pentecost RScP,

New Thought Practitioner, Religious Science



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