

Sermonettes

~ Volume 1

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1. The Bible: A Stumbling Block

The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." (Galatians 3:8)

Here is a most curious case of personification. In the Genesis account, it was God who spoke to Abraham, but in this verse, it is said that the Scripture – that is, the Bible, the book itself – spoke to Abraham. The word "Scripture" refers to something written, but even if what God said was immediately committed to written form, it was not in written form when he said it. Yet here it is said that the Scripture uttered the promise to Abraham.

Two divine characteristics are attributed to Scripture. First, Paul writes that the Scripture "foresaw" something. And notice the apostle makes a distinction between the Scripture and God – the Bible foresaw that God would do something. But was it not God who foresaw what he himself would do? The personification is total. He refers to the Bible as something that is alive, personal, and divine. Second, Paul writes that the Scripture announced, or preached, the gospel to Abraham. The promise came from God himself. This was not a statement related by a servant or messenger, but the initial pronouncement of the promise. God was the one who did it, and only God could do it. But here it says that the Bible did it.

Four inferences are drawn from this. First, one of the essential principles of the Christian faith is that, for many intents and purposes, God and Scripture are interchangeable. For example, God and Scripture should be considered identical in truth and in authority. Second, in many contexts, it is entirely appropriate to refer to Scripture as we would refer to God. In fact, this should be expected, even outright demanded, from all Christians. It should be natural to say, "The Bible commands you...", "The Bible forbids you...", or "The Bible predicts that..." We must be suspicious of a person if, from an analysis of his statements, we find a deliberate and consistent distinction between God and Scripture. Third, a formulation or application of the doctrine of Scripture that does not incur the accusation of bibliolatry from some quarters probably falls short of the Bible's own estimation of itself, and is thus unworthy of affirmation. Fourth, if the Scripture can possess divine foreknowledge and make divine pronouncements, then it can be slandered and blasphemed. Any statement made about the Bible that fails to identify it with God's very own truth, knowledge, and authority must be regarded as slander and blasphemy. The offender must be treated accordingly – that is, he must be removed from all church offices, interrogated before the church, and without complete retraction and repentance, expelled from all church premises and relations.

We realize that the Bible's message offends non-Christians. But the very form of its existence is also a stumbling block to them. If they were to believe in God at all, they

would not expect him to speak through the Bible, that is, through a book. Naaman said that he thought Elisha would come out to him, call upon his God, and wave his hand over his leprosy and cure him. Of course God could do it this way, although he did not give Naaman what he expected. But a wise servant reasoned with Naaman, so that he submitted to the prophet's instructions and was healed. Now non-Christians expect God to cause a hand to appear and write a message before them, or to speak from heaven in a thundering voice. Or, they expect Christ to appear in a blinding light, saying, "Fool, Fool, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the pricks." What? "I mean it is hard for you to keep hitting your head against the wall."

God had, indeed, done all these things, and contrary to many theologians, he could still do them if he wants. There is nothing in the Bible to guarantee us that he would always comply with the doctrine of cessationism. Nevertheless, in most cases the truth of Jesus Christ does not reach men by what they regard as spectacular ways. Instead, God hands them a book, and in effect, says, "Read it. Believe it and live. Disbelieve it and burn in hell." This is very difficult, even impossible, for non-Christians to accept. God designed this hindrance to expose those who are destined for hellfire, and to exclude them from eternal life. It is not that the divinity of the Bible is hidden, but that sinners are blind to it. As Jesus said, if someone refused to believe Moses, then he would refuse to believe even if a person were to return from the dead to speak to him. Men's refusal to hear the risen Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of this. But God awakens the intelligence of his chosen ones to perceive the Bible's wisdom and power, and to realize that the book is identical to the voice of God.

The Bible told Abraham that he would become the father of many nations, and that through him all kinds of people would be blessed. The promise was never meant to be fulfilled by the flesh, but by the power of God. It was never meant to come in the way that Ishmael came, but in the way that Isaac came. All nations would be blessed because through Abraham, Christ would be born, and his gospel would spread throughout the whole earth, converting multitudes to the truth, saving them from sin and hell, and ensuring them their place in heaven. They would be united by this one promise that came through Abraham. Whether Jew or non-Jew, male or female, rich or poor, they would be united – blessed by one promise – by their common faith in Jesus Christ.

2. Creation: In the Beginning

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)

There is some debate over the meaning of creation in this verse. The linguistic and historical arguments are not altogether unprofitable, but for those who lack the technical training, or who simply have no patience for academic wrangles, there is a way to settle the issue barehanded.

Matter cannot be eternal, in the sense of being timeless, for there is no before and after with that which is timeless. And if there is no before and after with matter, then it would be impossible for it to be one way before and another way after. Therefore, if matter changes at all, it cannot be eternal. And matter could not have existed forever, for if matter is bound to time but has existed forever, then it would have an infinite past. But if it has an infinite past, it could never have reached the present. If it has reached the present, the past cannot be infinite. Therefore, matter is not eternal, but bound to time, and it originated at some point in time.

God is uncreated. He is eternal, timeless, and immutable. And he created the universe out of nothing, that is, without the use of any existing materials, since there were no existing materials when he created. All linguistic and historical arguments that attempt to suggest an opposing view must be wrong. In fact, these kinds of arguments are irrelevant unless the logical arguments based on the very ideas of matter and creation are demonstrated to be inconclusive.

Due to its irrational and fallacious nature, science must be silent on the origin of the universe. When it comes to this topic, its reliance on sensation (which is unreliable), induction (whose conclusions are never necessarily inferred from the premises), and experimentation (which involves a systematic repetition of the fallacy of asserting the consequent), is even more evidently absurd than usual, as if that is possible. Rather than kowtowing to man's impotent method of discovery, and attempt to extract truth out of falsehood, we expose and discard it. If it refuses to honor biblical revelation, we shall whip it into submission with the hard chain of logic.

God created all things, including the light, the sky, the water and the land. And he also configured the relationships between these objects, including the movements and the interactions of the heavenly bodies, and the seasons. He created the vegetation, plants, and trees. Without any dependence or relationship with these, he made the sea creatures and sky creatures. And without any dependence or relationship with these, he made the land creatures. Each belong to their own kind without any direct association with the others.

Then, God created man in his own divine image. God made man's body from materials directly taken out of the ground, without any dependence or relationship with the plants or the animals. Nothing was taken from them to make man. After that, God breathed life into the body, so that an embodied human person is a dichotomy, consisting of the incorporeal and the corporeal, the spiritual and the physical. The essence of man is the life that God breathed out, since man is considered a person even when he is disembodied. Unlike the human body, this life came completely and immediately from God, without any dependence or relationship with previously created things, not even the earth itself. As for the woman, she was created from the man, again without any dependence or relationship with plant life or the animals.

It is common to assert that God no longer creates anything, especially out of nothing, since it is said that he rested on the seventh day. This is an unwarranted interpretation. Yet it is sometimes used with careless confidence, so that, for example, it is assumed that Jesus never restored missing body parts in his healing miracles, at least without using existing materials, because that would involve creation. There are a number of other farfetched applications. In any case, the rest of the seventh day is said only in relation to the work done on the previous six days. There is no indication that God would be at rest forever. In fact, Jesus said that the Father had never stopped working, and he said this in connection with the Sabbath (John 5:17). There is no basis to say that God will not create again, even out of nothing, or that he has not already done so.

This doctrine of creation provides a crucial basis for many other doctrines. It tells us about the nature of God, that he is full of wisdom and power. It tells us that God is in control of all things, since he created all things and determined the course of history according to his plan. It tells us about his special relationship with man, since he created man in his own divine image, and then declared to man his commandments. It tells us about how God perceived his own creation, that it was good. It tells us about God's design for man and woman, that they are to marry, that marriage is between one man and one woman, and that man is to have authority over woman. Above all, it tells us that man is to serve and worship God, that man is lost until he finds his place in the Creator through Jesus Christ, and that those who know God can possess the assurance that he has found the source, the purpose, and the rock of his existence.

3. Transgression: You Will Surely Die

And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." (Genesis 2:16-17)

God created the universe, the planets, plant life, and the animals. After that, he created the man and the woman, and placed them in Eden to work the garden. And God issued a command, that they were free to eat from any tree in the garden, but they must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and that when they eat of it, they would surely die.

Here we glimpse the essence of the original relationship between God and man. First, it was founded on verbal communication – God talked to man. He talked to man in terms that conveyed definite ideas, both concrete and abstract, such as personal identity ("you"), eating, trees, garden, knowledge, good and evil, time ("when you eat"), and death. Second, it was an intimate but unequal relationship. Man benefited from God's provision and generosity, but he also functioned under God's authority, which placed restrictions on man's activities. The standard of right and wrong rested solely on God's authority, not as something outside of him, but as identical to his will, and expressed in his instructions and commands.

Some theological traditions maintain that God's command to Adam involved, or amounted to, a covenant. This covenant declared a period of probation for man, so that if he proved to be obedient, he would inherit eternal life, but that if he proved to be disobedient, he would inherit everlasting death. However, there is no indication of probation in God's instructions to Adam. And there is no promise of promotion to a higher life after a period of obedience. Neither is there any trace of the establishment of a covenant. The doctrine is a human invention, and must be discarded.

From the Genesis account, it seems that either Satan took control of a serpent and spoke through it, or he took the form of a serpent and spoke. He tempted Eve to transgress God's command. Eve and the rest of Scripture would later describe his effort as deception. He lied to her. Temptations are characterized by false doctrines and false promises.

Temptation involves persuasion, which is a form of communication. This communication is different from causation, and in itself does not carry the power of causation. Satan persuaded Eve to sin, but he did not cause Eve to sin, for only God has the power to control a human soul. Likewise, Satan tempted Christ. He could not cause Christ to sin, but it is rightly said that he tempted Christ. Thus Satan is the tempter, but not the author of sin. The Bible calls him the "father" of lies, but this is said in a relational sense since it is already known that Satan is a mere creature. He is the chief representative of sin, but

this is not to say that he has the power to cause sin in the metaphysical sense, because only God has the power to cause anything at all in this latter sense.

Someone once challenged this view by refusing to acknowledge a distinction between communication and causation. The exchange was confusing because he consistently employed the ideas of temptation and persuasion as if they always succeed. For him, the upshot was that if God is not the tempter, then neither can he be the author of sin. However, if he is correct – if we must identify communication with causation, and tempt-to-sin with cause-to-sin – then he must reject the biblical account of Christ's temptation. The Bible says that Satan tempted Christ, but Christ did not sin. But if temptation (persuasion to sin) is identified with causation, so that temptation is always successful, then either Christ sinned when he was tempted, or he was never tempted in the first place. For this person to maintain his private and strange definition of temptation, he must call Christ a sinner or Scripture a lie, and thus make himself a non-Christian, and consign himself to hellfire.

Satan lied to Eve, and instead of holding on to God's command, she succumbed and ate the forbidden fruit. She gave some to Adam, who, although he was not deceived, also ate the fruit. Thus the man and the woman sinned, and when they did, they were changed in themselves, and their relationship with God also changed. As God predicted, their spirits died right away – the divine light was snuffed out – and their bodies would also perish in time.

When they heard God walking in the garden, they hid themselves from him. This is a tremendous insight. Since then sinners have invented sophisticated methods of escape from this reality, but the basic motive and purpose are the same. They are terrified of God, and they want to hide from him, but they are too stupid and dishonest to admit that they cannot. They may have become loud and boastful, but in their hearts they are still like scared little chickens running for cover. They run toward unbelief, false religions, and various systems of thinking and living to alleviate their fear, to appease their conscience, to maintain the appearance that they are doing something good or spiritual.

Our message to non-Christians begins with this: God is the creator and ruler of mankind, but you have transgressed his command, and you will surely die. You can complain all you want, but he is coming for you. He is coming to get you and to punish you. You can run and hide, but he knows where you are, and he knows what you have done. According to his perfect justice, he will throw you into a lake of fire and cause you to suffer extreme and endless pain. There you will scream out, but there will be no help and no escape. You will plead for death, but alas, you have already died. O, non-Christian, weak and stupid. You cannot save yourself. O, unbeliever, condemned to the flames! You must not wait. Today is the day of salvation. There is one way to escape damnation. Do you want it? Will you take it?

4. Redemption: He Will Save His People

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." (Genesis 3:15)

All things happen by God's will and power, and according to his knowledge. By this I mean that an event occurs only because he wills it and causes it. There is no power that is independent of him or that is in competition with him. This is necessarily true if for no other reason than that God reveals himself as one who possesses total and active control over all things, so that the very possibility of a second power is excluded. His knowledge is complete, so that he knows every event, even man's every thought and action. Since God decides and causes all things, his knowledge is necessarily connected with his will and power. That is, he knows all events because he decides and causes all events, and he knows his own plans and purposes.

The fall of man was not an accident. If a sparrow cannot die apart from God's will, and if a man cannot turn his own hair black or white, then like all events, the fall of man happened because God decreed it and caused it. This does not mean that God himself performed evil, but that he sovereignly and righteously caused man to perform evil. All attempts to refute this position must reduce God to something less than what he is, who is sovereign by right and by power, and whose decrees and actions establish the very definition of goodness and righteousness. There is no standard higher than or apart from God by which to judge him. We do not assume a standard to judge whether God is good, or to restrict what he is permitted to do; rather, we derive the standard of what is good by learning what he thinks and what he does.

Thus the fall of man was one step in God's plan. Scripture teaches that his ultimate purpose is to glorify himself, and he has decided to do this through his Son, Jesus Christ, who would rescue a chosen people, subdue all things, and deliver to his Father a kingdom of priests, of true worshipers. On the way to fulfil this purpose, it was necessary to plunge all of humanity into sin, spiritual death, and judgment, so that God may save some by Jesus Christ.

This plan of salvation was revealed, albeit in a broad form, immediately after the fall of man. Adam was the head of the human race, and when he sinned, all his descendants fell with him. From that time forward, every man and woman would be conceived with a sinful nature and with the guilt that incurs condemnation. It was at this point that God carried out the next step in his plan, and declared a division in humanity. He said that not all men would follow after Satan, but there would be another line of men who would oppose the devil and his children. This hostility would come to a head when it would receive ultimate fulfillment in a man. In due time, he would be born to a woman. He would become the champion of the line of the righteous. He would save his people and demolish the devil's power.

God would add to and develop this promise by his revelation, spoken and recorded by his prophets, but the basic idea had been announced, and those who looked to it and believed on it were manifested as members of the righteous line of humanity. It remained the same promise through the centuries. The difference was in the amount of information about this promise that was available. Each generation was required to affirm what God had revealed up to that point in time. As the details concerning this champion unfolded, it became obvious that he would be both fully divine and fully human, and this would be possible because he would be an incarnation of God. The fullness of revelation was manifested in Jesus Christ, and was expounded by his apostles.

Much had been built upon the initial declaration, but the promise was unaltered. From the very beginning, the promise referred to the coming of Jesus Christ to save his chosen people. It is not an anachronism, but rather an aid to unity in our understanding, to state that all who would believe on the promise throughout human history, including those who believed before the coming of Christ, are to be called Christians. Thus Hebrews 11 says that Moses preferred to suffer reproach for the sake of Christ than to indulge in the treasures of Egypt. And Peter wrote that the Spirit of Christ was in the prophets, and revealed to them even the times and circumstances surrounding the Savior's incarnation and ministry. Therefore, from the perspective of a complete revelation, we now realize that humanity was divided into the line of Christ and the line of Satan, or into Christians and non-Christians.

These are the two families that opposed each other throughout history, and the conflict would continue until the consummation of all things. The hostility was not alleviated but was accentuated by the coming of Jesus Christ. He said that he did not come to bring peace, but a sword. He would be the cause for increased strife between nations, cultures, and family members. The preaching of the gospel compels men to choose a side, or rather, it uncovers which side they are on. As we proclaim the Lord Jesus, the family of Satan arises in opposition, but the family of Christ awakes to faith and righteousness, to take up spiritual weapons, and to join the fight for the glory of God.

5. A Greater Threat than Moses

Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? (Hebrews 10:28-29)

It is a popular and persistent assumption that the Old Testament reveals the wrath of God, while the New Testament reveals the grace of God. This is a most inaccurate portrayal of biblical teaching. It is the Old Testament that says the Lord's mercy endures forever, and it is the New Testament that says it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

The true biblical teaching is that both wrath and grace belong to God's nature. Paul writes, "Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you" (Romans 11:22, ESV). Thus he shows wrath toward some men and shows grace toward others. The distinction is based on his decision, without regard to the conditions found in men, for he is the one who creates all conditions found in men in the first place, including faith. In fact, Paul writes that God creates some men as vessels of wrath and some as vessels for mercy, some to suffer damnation and some to enjoy salvation (Romans 9:21).

This is elementary. Indeed, the doctrine of predestination is one of the clearest, simplest, and least mysterious doctrines in all of Scripture. The whole doctrine is this: God creates, sustains, and controls all things. All additional expositions serve only to assure people that the doctrine means what it says. A retarded child can understand it. But even some of the most well-regarded theologians refuse to believe it, or to believe all of it, and to admit to the directness and fullness of God's power over all things, including human thoughts and decisions.

Thus, although few doctrines are more simple, misrepresentations remain common, and it is necessary to teach it again and again. Let us never become weary of basic doctrines, especially this chief of doctrines, that God is God. It is to be asserted, not with inordinate prudence and care, but with the bluntness by which it is presented throughout the Scripture.

The original point is that God is not one way in the Old Testament and another way in the New Testament. He has always been a God who damns and who saves, damning sinners and saving believers. Our passage is first directed to professors of faith, so that those who claim to believe in Christ will hold firm to their allegiance.

Now, the Bible teaches that God converts those whom he has chosen for salvation, and then he preserves their faith, so that not one true believer is ever lost. Surely he exercises a direct and hidden power in the souls of his chosen ones, so that they remain faithful to him. But in addition to this, he also uses various means by which he maintains their faith and encourages them to increase in the life of Jesus Christ. One of these means is the verbal warnings in Scripture concerning the unreasonableness and the consequences of abandoning this true religion. He preserves his chosen ones by issuing warnings and by causing them to heed these warnings. Reprobates and false Christians will not heed them. They do not reverence the words of God, and he does not cause them to heed these words. Rather, he hardens their hearts against them.

Although the first audience consists of professors of the faith, the argument hinges not on the identity of the audience, but on the superiority of Christ over Moses. The principle is universal regardless of the audience addressed. Therefore, the passage is readily adaptable to broader applications, so that it can be directed not only to professing Christians, but also to non-Christians. And the upshot is that the message of Jesus Christ sets forth an even greater threat against non-Christians than the message of Moses.

This destroys any notion that there is a disparity between Moses and Jesus Christ, as if Moses preached punishment while Christ proclaimed salvation. Rather, both preached damnation for sinners, unbelievers, non-Christians, and the threat of punishment is even more clear and acute in the Christian message. And both proclaimed one way to salvation: If we will look outside of ourselves for salvation, but rather look to Jesus Christ to save us, then we are manifested as God's vessels of mercy, as chosen recipients of his grace, so that God has already punished our sins in Christ. He is faithful and just to pardon all our transgressions, to impute the righteousness of Christ to our account, and to receive us as sons and daughters of the Most High.

6. Where is Your Brother?

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." (Genesis 4:9-10)

God asked Cain, "Where is your brother?" The passage makes it obvious that God asked the question not because he did not know the answer and needed a man to tell him. This is because when Cain denied that he knew, God revealed that he already knew what happened, that Cain had killed Abel. He said, "What have you done?" But again, he was not requesting information. It was a rhetorical question, for he immediately added, "Your brother's blood cries out to me."

From this we derive two principles that should control our thinking in theology and in biblical interpretation:

First, it is a nonnegotiable Christian dogma that God knows all things. We could add that God knows all things because he causes all things, including human thoughts and deeds, but it is possible to put that aside for now and focus on his knowledge. God knows the truth about all things, and he cannot be deceived. Cain's answer was contrary to the truth, but that did not affect God's knowledge. He knew the truth and saw through Cain's deception.

Second, it is established that when God asks a question, it never means that he does not know the answer, and therefore, when he asks a question, it must be for a purpose other than to obtain information. In fact, our passage stresses God's knowledge, since he knew the truth clearly even in the face of Cain's deception. Although God already knew what happened, instead of immediately confronting Cain, he produced an occasion or a context in which he could discuss it with the man.

Thus when God asks a question, or when he speaks in a manner as if he is less than omnipotent and omniscient, it is not due to any deficiency in himself, but it is for the purpose of effecting interactions with his creatures in a way that is intelligible and meaningful for them.

There are those who think that such interactions are possible only if God were limited in power and knowledge, and they seize upon passages where God acts and speaks in a manner that permits his creatures to respond. However, given the previous considerations, this doctrine is impossible, but it must be condemned as heresy and blasphemy.

Interactions that are intelligible and meaningful to the creatures does not depend on any impotence or ignorance in God, but it depends on what some would call his

condescension. A man cannot function as if he is deity; his mind cannot embrace or communicate all knowledge in an instant. If God and man are to interact with each other, God would have to communicate in a way that man can follow, understand, and respond, and this is what God has done throughout history, and in a public and permanent form, in the Bible.

Contrary to what some heretics have taught, this does not mean that God communicates with man solely in terms of analogies, or that man has only an analogy of information about God's being and God's mind. There is no biblical basis for the strange doctrine. God's condescension does not alter the nature or status of the information communicated – it is merely a different way to communicate.

John wrote that we shall know as we are known. But unless we become deified in heaven, and we will not, God will still have to condescend when he communicates with us, so that if we only have an analogy of the truth now, we shall have only an analogy of the truth forever. This contradicts John as well as the whole testimony of Scripture. Rather, if we shall remain human, and if we shall know as we are known, it means that we can possess univocal knowledge about God even now. The difference is only in the degree or amount of knowledge. Paul affirms as much when he wrote, "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." We have an abundance of knowledge about God now, and we shall have even more knowledge in the future, so much so that it can be said that we shall know then as we are known now.

All of this amounts to a refutation of the traditional doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God, which represents God as a mystery, even though we are made in his image, and even though he has revealed and explained himself. Ironically, the doctrine has been used as a test of orthodoxy, when the traditional formulation is itself a rejection of God and of Scripture, and an example of heresy and blasphemy. Christians should not be embarrassed to oppose it, and to overthrow those who assert it. Do not be afraid of the ecclesiastical powers. No theologian, seminary, or denomination, and no council or confession or church court, or any other human authority, has the right to usurp the power of Christ and force you to believe false doctrine. Throw off the yoke and fight back.

When God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, even though he said, "now I know" the patriarch's obedience, it was to maintain the interaction for the benefit of the man, and not because the omniscient God discovered something new. As the Lord stopped the sacrifice, a ram was already prepared, caught by its horns in the thicket. He knew the man's heart all along, but the command produced the occasion for Abraham to demonstrate his obedience, for God to renew and add to his promises, and for revelation to be recorded and interpreted, since Abraham's faith was a metaphor for belief in the resurrection.

When God showed Ezekiel a valley of dry bones and asked, "Can these bones live?" he was not requesting input that he needed. The prophet wisely answered, "Lord, you know." And of course the Lord knew, for he himself would cause the bones to arise and flesh to come on them. Likewise, when Jesus asked Philip, "Where shall we buy bread

for these people to eat?" the Bible explained, "He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do."

Now the Lord Jesus tests all men by the Christian message, for he sends us to ask on his behalf, "Who do you say that I am?" He asks this not because he does not know what people think – he is the good shepherd, and calls his own sheep by name. Rather, the divine shepherd condescends and interacts with men. By their reaction to the gospel, they are revealed to be either the children of heaven or the children of hell. Those who believe with their hearts and confess with their mouths that Jesus Christ is Lord shall be saved, and those who do not shall be damned.

There are those who, like Cain, attempt to deceive him, calling him, "Lord, Lord," although their hearts are far from him. But even as he asks men whether they would repent and believe the gospel, he already knows their hearts, and he will say to the imposters, "Why do you call me Lord, but refuse to do what I say? Surely I never knew you!" And he will cast them out into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

7. Faith in Resurrection

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death. (Hebrews 11:17-19)

I despise the man who is gullible enough to disbelieve in resurrection. Such a person cannot be very intelligent and trustworthy. In fact, we have a moral duty to adopt a low opinion of him. Do you wish to think highly of a person who insists that your Lord never returned from the grave? If so, there is something wrong with you, too. But I want to talk about Abraham.

God gave Abraham a son, Isaac, by an act of power. And he said that through Isaac, Abraham would become the father of many nations. But one day he told Abraham to offer up Isaac as a burnt offering (Genesis 22:2). This meant that Abraham was to kill his own son and burn the body. However, Abraham knew that Isaac had to live, because God had said that the promise would be fulfilled through Isaac (Genesis 21:12).

So, God made a promise that would have required Isaac to live, and now God commanded Abraham to kill Isaac, and to burn the body. This would have posed a dilemma for our theologians, but not for Abraham. Abraham did not believe that there could be paradox in revelation. And he did not believe in graded absolutism, the school of ethics that says God's commands often contradict one another, and that as long as we perform the higher ones, it is not regarded as sin to break the lower ones. Talk about "the lying pen of the scribes" (Jeremiah 8:8)! No, even when Jesus said that some of God's commands are greater than others, he said it only to declare, "You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone" (Luke 11:42).

The Bible says, "That prophet or dreamer must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 13:5). Now if the church does not have the power of execution, at least it has the power of excommunication. On the basis of the word of God, my judgment is that any person who affirms that there can be paradox in revelation or any person who affirms the ethics of graded absolutism must be excluded from all forms of ministry, and if we are truly zealous, even from parenthood, because these people are evil and dangerous. Those who teach rebellion against the Lord deserve punishment, shame, and exclusion, not honor and authority over God's people. Those who do not oppose them share in their sin, as Saul stood over the stoning of Stephen and gave his approval.

Abraham believed in God's intelligence and coherence. It was certain that the divine promise was to be fulfilled through Isaac – thus he had to live. It was also certain that the

divine command was to kill Isaac and burn the body – thus he had to die. Abraham considered this, and reasoned. And to a mind that had been enlightened by the faith of Jesus Christ, the implication was just as natural and sure: God would raise Isaac from the dead, even from the ashes. Although God stopped him at the last moment, Abraham was thoroughly prepared to perform the sacrifice, not knowing that God would stay his hand. Thus, as our text indicates, he indeed received his son back from the dead in a figurative sense, even from the ashes.

This is a model of Christian faith. The Bible says that the promise that came through Abraham is not reserved for those who are of the law, but it is given to those who follow his faith: "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: 'I have made you a father of many nations.' He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were" (Romans 4:16-17). Spiritual heritage is what matters "in the sight of God." Christians are Abraham's children not because they are necessarily his blood descendants, but because they follow his faith. And this faith, the passage says, is in "the God who gives life to the dead."

Therefore, because when the Bible talks about faith, it means the resurrection faith of Abraham, the doctrine of resurrection is a test of profession and orthodoxy. The true Christian believes that although Jesus Christ was murdered by crucifixion, and that he was dead and buried, God raised him from the dead. And he believes that God will likewise resurrect all who have believed on Jesus Christ, even if their bodies will have crumbled to dust, or if they have been burned to ashes. Unless a person believes this, he cannot be a Christian.

Non-Christians cannot accept this, because it boggles their tiny minds. They do not believe in resurrection because their intellectual horizon is narrow. Of course a person can rise from the dead, even from the ashes of his body. The impossibility of resurrection is rationally inconceivable. The denial of resurrection is foolish and irrational. It is an outworking of the fantasy world conjured by the non-Christian's grotesque imagination. But God has cured our ignorance and expanded our horizon, so that we can believe the truth, that resurrection is possible, that it has happened in the person of Jesus Christ, and that it will happen to all those who trust in him.

8. For Jonathan's Sake

David asked, "Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" (2 Samuel 9:1)

Back in 1 Samuel 20, David and Jonathan made a covenant of friendship, and swore that they would show kindness to each other, and to each other's descendents. Jonathan had an infant son, Mephibosheth. When Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle, and the house of Saul fell, a nurse hurriedly fled with the child, who was injured and became crippled in both feet.

After David was established as king, he remembered his covenant with Jonathan, and asked if there remained any person in the house of Saul to whom he may show kindness for the sake of his friend. Mephibosheth was found, and David said to him, "Don't be afraid...for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table." Thereafter he dined at David's table as one of the king's own sons.

Mephibosheth benefited from a covenant that he did not make, but he received kindness due to his association with a person who entered into covenant on his behalf. He did not press for an audience with David – the king sought him out. He was a cripple, and did not perform acts of valor to earn David's respect – the king decided to honor him. The only reason David bestowed on him a king's estate and a prince's place was because of his association with Jonathan.

Mephibosheth did not have to worry if he was good enough for this – he was not – but Jonathan was good enough in David's eyes. He did not have to gain David's acceptance, because David had already accepted Jonathan. And he did not have to wonder if David would change his mind and throw him into a dungeon the next day, because David made a promise to Jonathan and sealed it with a covenant. Mephibosheth's confidence rested on his knowledge of David's attitude toward Jonathan.

Likewise, there is nothing that we have or that we can do to gain God's attention and favor. We are not wise enough, righteous enough, beautiful enough. But concerning Jesus Christ, the Father declared, "This is my beloved Son. In him I am well pleased." And he gave evidence of his approval when he raised Jesus from the dead. Now in Jesus Christ we are loved, saved, justified, and preserved forever. We come boldly to the throne of grace, not because we have confidence in our own goodness, but even in our weakest moments, we are sure of the goodness of Jesus Christ, and we are sure that God accepts him, so that he is ever before the Father's throne to intercede for us. Do we doubt the Father's love toward us? We do not doubt the Father's love for his Son, and we can come before the Most High with the same measure of confidence that we have concerning the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

We should exude the same power as we preach the gospel. Unbelievers demand, "How dare you talk to us this way? Are you perfect?" We reply, "We are not perfect, but we speak for one who is. And it is to him that we command you to yield." That said, it is obvious that so many who claim to serve God do so on the basis of confidence in themselves. Sometimes my confidence so offends them that they accuse me of pride and self-importance. But of course my confidence is total – it reflects my opinion of Christ. They reply, "But you say that you are invincible in your defense of the faith." Of course! It is because Christ is invincible. Why, who are they defending, and who are they depending on? What does their accusation imply about their own thinking? Should we assume that the measure of confidence that they have in the gospel is really nothing other than the measure of confidence that they have in themselves? Or, perhaps the truth is that they have a low opinion of Christ. If either is true, are they even Christians? My brothers and sisters, when you speak for Christ, consider *his* perfection, proclaim *his* greatness, and stop thinking about your own!

Mephibosheth answered wisely: "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?" Any person who understands the truth about humanity would readily confess that he is but a dead dog before the Lord. And any person who preaches the truth will not hesitate to declare this. Non-Christian, do you see yourself as a dead dog before God? You say, "No, I am wise, I am good, I am able. I will reach the throne of God by my own efforts and command his attention. I will compel him to favor me." But you will not get an audience with David unless you are related to Jonathan. God will not hear you, and your life can have no value or purpose, other than for a display of divine wrath, unless you are related to Jesus Christ through faith. Come to him. But do not come as a prince, lest he strike you down. Come as a dead dog, with confidence that Jesus Christ stands as your righteous advocate before God, and you shall dine at the king's table, as one of his own sons.

9. The Confession of Sins

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. (1 John 1:8-10)

True religion must have a proper place for the forgiveness of sins. Theologies that are centered upon the dignity and welfare of men, if they include the idea of sin at all, cannot rightly interpret forgiveness. We can see this in the popular understanding of conversion, often attributed to the Christian faith, but in fact has no resemblance to it. This is illustrated in the analogy of the drowning man. It is said that the sinner is in trouble and is about to submerge, as Jesus Christ extends a helping hand. The Lord saves, but the man has to take the hand, and accept the assistance.

But if we are to think about it this way, why not make the analogy more accurate? Salvation does not occur in a vacuum. There are thousands of religions in the world, many of which acknowledge some kind of problem in man's condition and propose ways to save him. This may or may not be salvation from sin, from intellectual blindness, and from divine judgment, since some of them do not include these ideas. Nevertheless, each of them extends a helping hand. Thus what we really have is the ridiculous scenario of thousands of hands crowding around the head of the drowning man. The man-centered believer claims that, even in his desperate condition, he considers his options, weighs the arguments, and decides that the truth is in Jesus, and so he chooses the Christian faith. Even if there were only ten hands, that is one sharp drowning man. But is it possible that he is still in the sea, that he has submerged and passed out, and the rescue is nothing more than a dream, a wishful fantasy?

Consider the actual Christian teaching. The man is not drowning, but dead in the water. Thousands of hands reach up to seize him. We hear voices from the water. One of them says, "Come with us. Be with Buddha." Another says, "Come with us. Bow before the Bishop of Rome." Still another says, "You are not drowning. Just relax and come with us." But there are too many of them, and at times it is difficult to distinguish one from all the others. Suddenly, the noises merge together and a deeper voice demands, "Come with me. There is no difference. We are legion, but we are as one." As the hands reach up to drag the man down, a ship draws near. And a voice thunders from above, "THIS ONE IS MINE! LEAVE HIM!" Screams of terror rise from the water – "It is Jesus, the Son of God!" – and the shadowy figures turn back into the dark regions of the ocean. Jesus reaches out, and without any cooperation or awareness from the dead man, pulls him out of the water. And the Lord says to the corpse, "I command you, LIVE!" Immediately, life returns to the man – he opens his eyes, and wakes in the bosom of his savior.

You are a Christian because Jesus chose you, and not because you chose him. You were dead in sin, and in bondage to the powers and doctrines of demons. But Jesus took you away from them and raised you from the dead. He rescued you. He saved your life. A Christian consciousness that is unaware of this, or that fails to think of salvation as...salvation, is at best a defective faith, if it is genuine at all, since that awareness is itself a manifestation of salvation. It *is* faith in the gospel.

This awareness is what makes our sins all the more repugnant to us. If someone saves your life and takes you to his home, will you steal from him? Will you abuse his wife and his children? Whenever we sin, we betray our savior, and it pierces our soul with pain and regret. Peter cried bitterly. Judas, even though reprobate, killed himself. What does this say about those who complain that we take sin too seriously, or that we rebuke sinners too harshly? Oh, I stand in doubt of them.

But Jesus Christ continues to save us. The Bible says that he saves us to the uttermost – completely and all the way. We betray our savior in many ways and on many occasions. If we claim that we do not sin, we deceive ourselves, and we call him a liar, since he knows that we do sin. But if we will confess our sins, to declare our wrongs and ask for pardon, the Bible says that he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. What relief! What a necessary provision! What a God of mercy and patience!

Perhaps the most important feature of this teaching is that God makes forgiveness depend on his integrity, and not our goodness. We are not very good, and that is why we need forgiveness in the first place. Rather, "Jesus Christ *the righteous*" (2:1, KJV) represents us before the Father. The righteousness of Christ, and the faithfulness and justice of God, constitute an anchor for our souls. When we confess our sins, we are confident that we receive forgiveness, because it is easy to believe that Jesus Christ is righteous, and it is easy to believe that God is faithful and just to acknowledge that our sins have been paid by Christ's suffering.

If you are a non-Christian, or if you do not rely on Jesus Christ for your forgiveness, then be very afraid, because the same God has declared everlasting punishment against all sinners who have not received pardon. Just as he is faithful to forgive a Christian, because he is faithful to his own nature, he is also faithful to condemn you. His justice guarantees pardon for those who belong to Christ, but the same justice guarantees hellfire for those who do not cling to his Son for salvation.

Think on the goodness and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, then confess your sins. God pardons you because Jesus Christ is righteous, and because Jesus Christ has paid for the sins of those who believe in him. Confess your sins to the Father, looking to Christ as your only mediator and priest. By this, you will gain and regain immunity from accusation, confidence in fellowship, and boldness in service.

10. Let Him be Anathema!

If any person does not love the Lord, may a curse come upon him. You heard me. If a person does not love the Lord for any reason, whether it is because he is a non-Christian, or someone who claims to be a Christian but does not love the Lord, so that he is not really a Christian – a curse be on him! This is my theology. This is my statement of faith. And this is my message to you today.

Right now you may not be very pleased with me. Imagine, how many Christian leaders, preachers, theologians, churches, seminaries, denominations, parents, teachers, politicians, and people from all spheres of life, would denounce me for this utterly unchristian statement and attitude? How many people would pick up their Bibles to quote passages against me? How many people would complain that my faith is completely contrary to the religion of Jesus Christ and his apostles?

And this would tell me how many people are far from God and out of touch with the Christian faith, because I am merely repeating what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 16:22. In fact, verse 21 indicates that he took the pen away from the amanuensis so that he could write this by his own hand: "I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. If anyone does not love the Lord – a curse be on him." I, Vincent Cheung, also put my name on this statement. It has my full endorsement. My challenge to you is whether you will take up a pen and sign your name to it. Or is the Christian faith not "Christian" enough for you?

As much as the Christian faith is about a revelation of God's love for sinners, its chief concern is always the honor of God and not the welfare and comfort of men. Once you reverse this, you no longer have Christianity. My initial statement is a test of authentic religion, a test of orthodoxy and reverence. And as many as those who would reject it or criticize me for saying it, that is how many people who would fail this test.

If you were offended or embarrassed by that statement, if you even thought that I was a non-Christian because of it, and that it is wholly against the spirit of Christ, then there is something very, very wrong with you. You are out of touch with what the Christian faith really is, and what it really teaches. You are the one who is out of alignment with the spirit of Christ and the religion of the New Testament.

At a time when most of the Church has in mind the affairs of men and not the affairs of God, this is one way to draw the line and clarify the faith. Yes, God so loved the world that he sent his Son, so that whoever would believe on him shall be saved. Yes, he who loves the Son loves the Father also, and they will make their abode with him. Yet, if we are Christians we will also say, if anyone does not love the Lord, a curse be on him!

11. The Way of the Righteous

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.

But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. (Psalm 1)

A prominent theologian was expounding on the tradition that God's grace in some sense extends to all people and to all spheres of their lives. Although the tradition calls it grace, it is not a grace that saves, but a grace that is called common. The doctrine is interesting, not because it is true, but because it makes us marvel that some people can think like this. For the sake of illustration and emphasis, the theologian declared that he would even join hands and march together with Satan worshipers to protest an evil such as abortion.

Those of us who have not been brought up in the faith by this tradition may find the doctrine alarming, but in some circles it is almost a test of orthodoxy. It is remarkable how difficult it is for some teachings to survive when presented to those of a different heritage. Try to force a Chinese Pentecostal to accept the doctrine of cessationism, or common grace, or the covenant of works, and see how far you get. If he has never heard of it, he is going to ask you to prove it from the Bible. He will not permit you to cite tradition to assert an interpretation of the Bible, as the Catholics do, or to draw fantastic inferences supposedly from the Bible, but in fact *ex nihilo*. He will really make you prove it from Scripture. If you cannot do it, he does not have to believe it. But, of course, if your denomination is large enough, then he is still called the heretic.

The Bible makes a clean and consistent distinction between two kinds of men – the righteous and the wicked, the saints and the sinners, the believers and the unbelievers, the Christians and the non-Christians. The way of the righteous – that is, their way of life and their way of thinking – is completely different from the way of the wicked. They are so different that one excludes the other. The righteous man does not walk in the counsel of the wicked. He does not stand in the way of sinners. He does not sit in the seat of mockers. Rather, he delights in the law of God – he likes it. And he thinks about it all day. How different this is from how non-Christians live. How can the two walk together, unless they agree?

The doctrine of common grace, or some other invention, may give you an excuse to attend a sporting event with a blasphemer. If you are cowardly, you may crack a smile when he berates your Lord or makes some vulgar joke to your face. But the Bible teaches that a righteous way of life entails a separation. Some Christians are weary of the hostility, and they wonder if losing a drinking, smoking, gambling, cursing, fornicating friend is too great a price to secure a pious life with Christ.

Behind this attitude is disapproval of the God who makes this separation. Perhaps the difference has been obscured by sin and by circumstances, so that the weeds now grows together with the wheat, but he would not tolerate the confusion forever. He has determined that the wicked will not stand in the judgment, and that sinners will not stand in the assembly of the righteous. As for us, now is the time to perceive and to live out the distinction, lest we find that we were in the seat of sinners because that was our place all along.

Now if anyone complains that the theologian has misapplied the tradition, good. Let us apply it in a way that totally destroys it. And if anyone objects that the doctrine criticized has been poorly formulated, fine. Let us formulate it in a way that totally denies it. The point that interests me is that there is a difference between the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. The difference has been instituted by God, and is comprehensive in application, pervading all spheres of thought and life. We are to delight in the standard that defines and reveals this difference, which is the Word of God. Even if we refuse to do it, one day God will make it clear, and with force. We can only hope that those who defend the tradition will end up on the right side when he does so.

12. The Prosperity of the Wicked

But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. (Psalm 73:2-3)

The Bible is a book of answers, and not a book of unending puzzles. When his disciples asked why he spoke to the crowd in parables, Jesus answered, "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given" (Matthew 13:11, KJV). The inability to understand the things of God is not a religious attainment, but a sign of reprobation. Theologians have the self-damning habit of parading this curse of the demon-spawned as if it is an emblem of holiness and reverence. "But," you say, "don't you believe in the creator-creature distinction?" Of course! This is why when the creator tells you that you can understand something, you better bow down and admit that you can understand it, and understand it very well.

Jesus said to his men, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). What does this say about those preachers and theologians who impose a mandate of incomprehensibility upon the people of God, as if it is a moral duty for us to avoid understanding and to confess that understanding is impossible? It can only mean that they are not the friends of Christ, and that they do not want you to be his friends, either.

They say to us, "Come now, come with us to this cave of darkness. There we shall find God. And when we find him, he will make everything darker still, until everything becomes madness and confusion." But we reply, "Go away from us, you messengers of Satan! Our Christ is the light of life, and has come to expound on God and salvation. He has come to give us an understanding, to awaken our intelligence, to grant us interest and perception into the things of God. Ah, look up, look up! There he is, as bright as the noonday sun. We will not come with you, but we shall go to him."

One of the enduring questions that Christians agonize about is the prosperity of the wicked. Asaph, the writer of Psalm 73, saw that the wicked lived without problems, infirmities, and burdens. They increased in pride and violence, in wealth and followers. And they even boasted, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?" Yet trouble did not befall them, and their success continued unabated. Asaph was so disturbed by this that he had a crisis of faith. He thought, "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence." It seemed to him, as it appears to many others, that if anyone should be rich, strong, and happy, it should be the one who serves God in faith and reverence. Why are the wicked rewarded, and the righteous punished?

Even in this dismal condition, Asaph remained faithful at a crucial point. As he thought about this, the matter became "oppressive" to him. But he realized that if he had vented to others, "I would have betrayed your children." Many preachers and theologians today speak as if they are agents of the devil and of unbelief. They identify with men's bitter complaints against God in the name of empathy. They encourage men to unleash their suspicion and resentment against divine providence even in prayer, or especially in prayer, and assure them that in doing so, they would only be imitating the prophets and the best of the saints. Instead of saying, "Be still and know that he is God, lest you blaspheme in your mind or in your speech," they say, "He is your father! Blast him with all you've got!" This, in fact, seems to me as the majority view. But Asaph makes a right judgment – they are traitors, not teachers and comforters. They encourage God's people to blaspheme, and to do it right to his face.

Then, Asaph was held up by God's power, and guided by God's counsel (v. 23-24), and as he drew near to God, he perceived the answer that resolved the whole matter. He "understood their final destiny," and realized that the wicked prospered because God placed them "on slippery ground." He surrounded the reprobates with comforts and with friends so that they would increase in pride, and so that they would become callused in sin. The prosperity of the wicked is not a reward, but a snare.

Asaph realized something else. He perceived that God did not leave him with nothing, but he had the only thing that mattered – God himself. He wrote, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." The suffering of the righteous is to keep them alert in the spirit, and to compel them to mature in knowledge and godliness.

The prosperity of the wicked is to keep them spiritually asleep, and unaware of the fire and brimstone that will shortly rain upon them. When God arises against them, he "will despise them," because he "will destroy all who are unfaithful." Asaph concluded, "But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds." The divine counsel gave him renewed appreciation for his place in God, and renewed motivation for service.

Growing up, and before I was very familiar with the Bible, one of the enduring questions that I puzzled over was not the prosperity of the wicked, but why Christians would agonize over the prosperity of the wicked. It seemed to me that they were weak in spirit, unholy and irreverent. This opinion would meet with overwhelming opposition in almost all Christian circles, but it is the opinion of Scripture, God's own verdict on the matter. Asaph admitted that while his heart was grieved and embittered, he was "senseless and ignorant," even "a brute beast" before the Lord. If Christians could learn to agree with this, it would revolutionize our preaching and counseling, and produce true faith and reverence in God's people.

13. Counsel for Winners

"If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?" (Jeremiah 12:5)

Jeremiah had a difficult life. God called him to speak a message of punishment to the people, and because of this, they hated him, and even his own family plotted against him. He did not enjoy proclaiming such a message and antagonizing everyone, but it was the message that God commanded him to speak, and that he inspired in the prophet by the Spirit.

Thus in one place we read, "Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, 'I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,' his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot." (Jeremiah 20:8-9). Christians often cite verse 9 to express their eagerness to preach the gospel, but we insult Jeremiah if we ignore the original context. His task was to tell the people that God would send Israel's enemies to slaughter them and to capture them. This would come as punishment against their idolatry and disobedience. The decision was made, and judgment could not be averted. It was too late. God told Jeremiah that, even if Moses and Samuel were to pray for the people, he would not listen.

Jeremiah did not want to proclaim such a harsh message, but God wanted him to do it, and he placed such a spiritual compulsion in the earthen vessel that, even when the prophet decided to fold up his ministry, the fire burned within him until it was impossible to endure. He opened his mouth again, and "violence and destruction" came out. As Paul wrote, "Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God" (Romans 11:22, KJV). This is the kind of God we serve. When sinners aggravate him enough, he kills them and sends them to hell, and it is the right thing to do.

James wrote that Elijah was a man just like us. But he mentioned this so that we could imitate his example of faith in prayer (James 5:17), and not so that we could run when Jezebel pursues. If you stop the rain for three and a half years, then you might have an excuse to have a pity-party – well, not even then. In any case, if all you know to do is run when someone pursues, you are no Elijah.

Jeremiah was also a man like us, and he was feeling the pressure from the opposition, and exasperated, he prayed, "You are always righteous, O LORD, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?" (12:1). There seems to be a consensus in Christian literature, except for some Pentecostal and Charismatic writings that are often accused of a warped understanding of faith, that this kind of complaining prayer is

worthy of emulation. Christians are encouraged to vent their frustrations to God, even in a questioning and accusatory tone. This is counsel for spiritual losers, from spiritual losers. They appeal to the prophets and the psalms for support, but they fail to mention how God responded to this attitude.

For example, Asaph was disturbed by the prosperity of the wicked in Psalm 73, but he admitted that he was wrong, that his foot almost slipped, and that he was senseless and ignorant, and as a brute beast before the Lord. In other words, he should never have thought the way he did. But if even Asaph had no excuse, why do you think you have one, when you have the benefit of Psalm 73 and so much more? We ought to appeal to the prophets and the psalms to *forbid* this type of attitude and prayer. If you cannot say something reverent to God, shut your mouth, and read the answer that he has already given in the Bible. Then, begin your prayer with repentance for your weak faith and blasphemous emotions.

Jeremiah was a spiritual winner. That was his destiny. And God was not about to let him think like a loser – perhaps someone like you. So he said to the prophet, "If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?" In other words, "If you cannot keep up now, and if you stumble now, how will you succeed when things become even more difficult?" This is counsel for a spiritual winner, one who is destined for increasing greatness in the service of God.

Most of our troubles are nothing like the threats that Jeremiah faced, and the degree of faith and patience that he exhibited would be unfathomable for today's Christians. Thus to bring it down to their level, I might say, "If you are now immobilized with grief because your pet gerbil died, how can you encourage someone whose children perished in an accident, and how will you fight off atheists and heretics?" Understand?

God's counsel is stern when measured by the delicate and effeminate sentiments of modern Christianity. He challenges us to renounce our self-pity and unbelief by presenting to us even greater difficulties. He refuses to relax his demand for excellence. This is contrary to the loser mentality of non-Christian psychology, and that have poisoned the teachings of Christian preachers and counselors. Our Lord Jesus is not one who says, "I know, I know, just let it all out...", but one who exclaims, "How long do I have to be stuck with you? How long do I have to put up with this? Man, where is your faith?" (see Matthew 17:17, Luke 8:25). He wants his disciples to be spiritual winners. Ironically, today his approach would be considered unchristian, lacking in love and refinement.

14. More Counsel for Winners

Therefore this is what the LORD says: "If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman." (Jeremiah 15:19)

God called Jeremiah to speak for him. The message was not pleasant. His own countrymen would be taken captive, and many of them would be killed. His whole nation would be ruined. The prophet explained that the Lord had determined to punish them, and it was too late for prayer and repentance. To submit to God's will and to limit the casualties, they were to surrender to their enemies and serve their time in exile. For this message, Jeremiah was branded a traitor, although in his age there was no one more faithful than he.

The message was not only painful for Jeremiah to speak, but the backlash against him was also difficult to endure. Thus he complained against the Lord in chapter 12. Instead of offering what Christians today would call a compassionate response, God told him to become stronger, for even more trying times were soon to come. But by chapter 15, Jeremiah was at it again. He said, "Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?" (v. 18).

The context provided above is important, lest we think that the prophet was a weakling, bending to the wrath of men as a reed in the wind. No, he was an exemplar of spiritual power and moral courage, even a type of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 16:14). In terms of privilege, even the least of the Christians is greater than he. But in terms of the actual quality of service rendered to the Lord, he was worth more than five hundred thousand, nay, five hundred million, of what we so glibly call Christians today. This is not to say that he had an excuse, but rather, to show up our failures for the catastrophic displays of weakness, selfishness, and incompetence that they are.

At any rate, it was clear that Jeremiah faced much opposition and danger. In sheer anguish of mind, he cried out again. God was either unfamiliar with our counseling techniques, or he just did not want to produce spiritual losers like we do, so instead of indulging the weeping prophet, he rebuked him: "Therefore this is what the LORD says: 'If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman.'" (v. 19). God did not even address his complaints directly, but straightway told the man to repent, and to stop speaking nonsense.

Those who have been with my ministry for very long should be comfortable with this. Even when I was a teenage preacher, my counseling would make adults two to three times my age weep, with tears streaming down their faces. My words were so much more severe that their problems appeared insignificant by comparison. But when they listened,

they did not settle back into a mode of endless endurance. Rather, they fought and overcame their problems. This kind of counsel is not always appropriate, especially when counseling losers who would never amount to anything for the Lord. Sometimes the best one can do is to keep people from committing suicide. Am I trying to be humorous, or just frank? This is not always the right way to counsel, but it is certainly not always wrong, either.

If God told Jeremiah to repent, how much more does he despise your petty whining? As mentioned in a previous discourse, there is a common teaching that it is understandable to harbor doubt, anger, and resentment against God, and that when we do, we are to freely express these thoughts to him. Those who teach this horrible doctrine obtain examples from the prophets and the psalms, but they fail to acknowledge that those instances are marked by God's disapproval and the speakers' own repentance. To illustrate, God recorded the incident of David's sin with Bathsheba, not so that you too might commit murder and adultery, but so that you will not do these things, seeing the many deaths and tragedies that God brought upon David's family and nation because of his sins.

Those who urge this kind of complaining prayer teach God's people to blaspheme. They ought to be confronted and compelled to repent for spreading rebellion among the saints. They are losers, and they want you to be losers like them. Do not listen to them. Do not blaspheme. When oppressive thoughts arise, do not entertain them. Repent for the very feelings of dissatisfaction. Confront and destroy them with truth and reason. Do not speak against the Lord, but study the answers that he has already given in the Bible.

Christian doctrines, accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit, make weaklings into strong men and women. Paul wrote, "Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might." Those who grant license to feelings of victimhood and bitterness betray this gospel heritage. We enter the Christian life by way of the cross, but just as Christ was raised from the dead after his suffering, after the cross there is glory. After suffering, there is victory. We are more than conquerors in Christ Jesus, and we can have a taste of the power of heaven right here on earth, if we will only believe.

15. Christ and Self-Conference

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. (Psalm 43:5)

God created man in his own image. The most basic feature of this image of divinity is intelligence. By it man possesses an awareness of self. And through it man has the capabilities for thought and speech. The remarkable consequence is that man is able to think about himself and to talk to himself. He is not only capable of self-contemplation and self-examination, but also self-conference – he can consult with himself.

As with every other aspect of man, this reflection of divinity was corrupted when man transgressed the law of God and became enslaved to an evil nature. Now when a sinner talks to himself, he lies to himself. The Bible says that, although God has made his nature and his power evident to men, so that they know about him, in their wickedness they have suppressed this truth (Romans 1:18-20).

Some non-Christians find that they need to scream louder and louder to remain convinced, so that they even make a profession out of their unbelief. Perhaps the lies that they tell themselves might remain intact for a little longer if they can secure approval from other people, or if they can even baffle a few of those who affirm the reality of God, the very reality that threatens to erupt from their own minds and obliterate their sanity. The Bible says that they know about God's righteous standard and about the punishment ordained for offenders (Romans 1:32, 2:15), but because they are evil, and because they are feeble and dishonest in their intellects, they persist in their rebellion and wickedness (Romans 1:21-22).

Then, some unbelievers cannot even stand to lie to themselves about God, sin, and judgment. They prefer not to talk to themselves at all. So as much as possible, they spend their lives with other people, surrounded by noise and chatter. They could talk for hours about sports, music, politics, and sometimes even about religion, as long as it is to mock it, and as long as there is no personal application, or direct confrontation about their own spiritual state. It could be that they are extroverts, but some are so much so that the easier explanation is that they are terrified to face the truth about God. They loathe themselves, and they seek distraction from themselves. The alternative is suicide.

If they were to talk to themselves in honesty, there would be nothing good to say. The Bible says that non-Christians are without God and without hope in this world. They are pathetic and despicable now, and before them is only the guarantee of endless regret, pain, and hellfire. Their self-help manual suggests that they tell themselves, "Everyday in every way, I am getting better and better." But if the self-talk of non-Christians has any chance to truly help, they ought to look into the mirror every morning and say, "Everyday in every way, I am closer to hell, closer to endless pain, endless misery, endless fire that

burns my soul and my body, never waning, never relenting. Everyday in every way, I am closer to facing the God who will damn me without chance of pardon. I...I am afraid. I cannot help myself. I need someone to save me."

On the other hand, if we have faith in the Lord Jesus, it means that he has rescued us from this depressing condition. Now there is a basis for hope! Now truth empowers and rejuvenates! Now God is beautiful to us! We perceive many imperfections in us, but now we can face them. We do not fear that God will reject us for our wrongs, because our faith is a manifestation, an indication, of our unbreakable association with Christ, and God has already accepted him. Now in the secret chambers of our minds, we talk to ourselves about God, our sins, and the salvation that he has sent in Jesus Christ. And the more we speak to ourselves on the basis of this truth and this hope, the more we increase in knowledge, character, and strength. Neither are we afraid to face our remaining sins and call them what they are. We can be honest with ourselves and rebuke ourselves, and implore God to make us wiser, stronger, purer, by his Holy Spirit. In Christ, even when we scold ourselves, there can be an inner harmony. Our inner knowledge and inner conference agree.

In the Christian, intelligence has again become a blessing, and self-conference has again become profitable. If we have received training from the word of God, we often know what to say to another person in order to teach, remind, encourage, or rebuke him. Yet we sometimes do not take our own advice, because we do not give ourselves the same advice. Do not remain silent when it comes to your own affairs and your own spiritual condition. Preach to yourself. Encourage yourself. Rebuke yourself. Speak to yourself on the basis of the word of God, and stimulate yourself to greater heights in the faith of Jesus Christ.

16. Persistence in Prayer

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'"

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:1-8)

The lesson pivots on the *a fortiori* argument. This kind of argument first establishes one point, and then on this basis proposes another that, in the light of the prior, is advanced with even greater force. To illustrate, once it is assumed that calculus is more difficult than algebra, and calculus presupposes algebra, then if it is established that a person is proficient in calculus, we can assert with even greater force that he is proficient in algebra. Or, once it is assumed that a watermelon is heavier than an orange, then if a child can lift a watermelon, we can assert with even greater confidence that he can carry an orange.

This is the kind of argument that Jesus puts before us. He is, of course, not likening God to an unjust judge. Rather, the point is that *if even* an unjust judge, who does not respect God or care about men, would surrender to a widow's persistence and see to it that she is vindicated, then *how much more* would God, who is just, hear the persistent pleas for justice from his chosen ones? The teaching is that "they should always pray and not give up."

Perhaps there are things that we have been asking from God that have not happened, and time and suffering have wearied us to spiritual exhaustion. To us, Jesus offers something far greater than mere sympathy or sentimental counsel. He gives us solid reasons for faith that we can return to again and again:

First, he reminds us of the nature of God, that God himself is just, and not like an unjust man. Second, he reminds us that we are his chosen ones. We trust him because he first chose us. We love him because he first loved us. We do not have to wonder about his attitude – he has shown us that he cared for us even before we knew him, and we have come to know him because he cared for us in the first place. Then, these two truths, unassailable because they are based on God's own character and decision instead of

anything in us, are couched in the resistless logic of the *a fortiori* argument, that he is greater than an unjust man, so that they penetrate our consciousness with even greater force.

Therefore, if the things we ask for accord with God's ideas of justice and goodness, then we ought to continue in prayer concerning them. Let us persist especially for the advance of the gospel, so that the fame of Jesus Christ may conquer all nations and convert many hearts, and that the Father's doctrines and precepts may be established in all the earth. As verse 8 indicates, the question is not whether God is keen to enforce justice, but whether he will find faith among men.

At a time when reverence toward God appears to decline, even in the churches that claim his name, God honors us by making us a remnant. He has ordained us the heroes of this age. This is not to say that he shares his glory with us, since he shares his glory with no one, but that he glorifies himself by setting before the world, even before angels and demons, individuals who persist in faith and in prayer, even when all others forsake him. What a wonderful privilege to live as faithful believers in this evil and foolish generation, among evil and foolish men. May God continue to guide and uphold his people.

17. Faithful in Famine

~ 1 ~

"The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts." (1 Samuel 2:7)

The sovereignty of God is one of the first things that we should consider when we face lack, poverty, and famine. There are those who place little emphasis on God's sovereignty, and they think that our fascination with it is a matter of private preference. Indeed, some Christians are obsessed with this doctrine for illegitimate reasons. They have a view on the subject, and they do not like to be contradicted. They cannot state a cogent theological reason for making this their chief concern. They are obsessed with it, but they do not know what they are saying or what they are doing. In the same way, some people are obsessed with disputes about the sacraments, some about eschatology, some about covenants, and so on.

Those who accuse us of placing an inordinate amount of emphasis on God's sovereignty must not understand this doctrine very well. If they understood it, they would either forsake their faith in God, showing themselves to be reprobates, or they would rejoice in it with us, and proclaim and defend it with equal vehemence. On the other hand, their accusation of theological imbalance indeed applies to those who are always going on about God's sovereignty as if this is the only teaching in all of Scripture, and who cannot provide a sound reason as to why they give it such emphasis. They exalt the doctrine not because they understand its significance, but it is because they have identified themselves with it. It is a private obsession, and badge of their identity and tradition. They defend this God-centered doctrine from the perspective of man-centered interests. Thus the danger of false piety is real, and we need to examine ourselves, to see if we truly understand this doctrine.

When we say that God is sovereign, the meaning is that God is king over all his creation. He created the world, he sustains it, and he continues to exercise control over it. It is not enough to say that he *can* control all of creation. This leaves room for the false doctrine, affirmed by most of the people who claim to believe in his absolute sovereignty, and even by those who call themselves Calvinists, and who supposedly give the doctrine its strongest and purest expression, that there are some things that he does not directly cause, but that he merely permits to occur. This is blasphemy at the deepest level.

We must rather say that God can and God *does* control all of creation. If God can control all of creation but does not, then it leaves room for billions upon billions of events to be decided and caused by influences other than himself, even if these are somehow controlled by being "permitted" – a strange and self-contradictory doctrine. No matter how hard this perspective is defended, we are left with a God who is in direct control

only over the "big picture" of what happens in his creation. This God is different from the God of open theism only in degree. This is not the God of the Bible, but one that man has imagined to satisfy his own standard of what God should be and what he should not be.

The agenda is to distance God from being the direct cause of evil, and this is necessitated by the assumption that to cause evil in the metaphysical sense is to commit evil in the moral sense, a standard that is nowhere found in the Bible, and never successfully defended in the entire history of human thinking. So why has this standard been imposed on Almighty God? Is it not obvious? The underlying principle that forbids God to be the ruler over all things and the cause of all events is not reverence but self-worship. That is, if God must adhere to *your* standard in order to remain righteous, when he himself has declared no such standard, then in your thinking, he is not God, but *you are*. You are the one who sets the standard for him.

If we understand the doctrine, then when we say that God is sovereign, it is just another way of saying that God is God. And if he is not God over all, if he does not exercise direct causation over all things, all minds, and all events, then he is not God at all. Thus the idea of permission is only a hidden denial of actual and complete sovereignty, a denial of the true God. And this is why the doctrine of God's sovereignty ought to receive such emphasis.

God's sovereignty applies to things that are pleasant and things that are unpleasant to us. Our verse comes from Hannah's prayer. God had shut her womb, so that at first she bore no children. But she petitioned the Lord for a son, and vowed to offer him to serve the Lord all the days of his life. The Lord granted her request and opened her womb, whom she named Samuel. She brought the boy to Eli as she promised, and uttered this prayer from which our verse is taken. She realized that the Lord could shut up a woman's womb, so that she could not bear children, and afterward he could open it, so that she could bear children. Both are of the Lord.

She says in verse 6, "The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up." This is clear enough, but lest it eludes some people, let me paraphrase it. It means that God can *kill you* whenever he wants, and just as easily, he can make you alive again, and raise you from the dead. He can put you into the grave, and he can also bring you back out. He is the author and cause of both death and life. The same applies to poverty and wealth. God can make a person rich, and then take away all his wealth. And God can make a person poor, and afterward make him rich. He is the author and cause of both poverty and prosperity on all levels – the personal, the national, and the global.

This recognition should not lead to despair and grumbling, but to reverence, submission, and gratitude. This is because the exercise of God's sovereignty, whether pleasant or unpleasant to us at the time, is always for the good of his people. Consider the case of Hannah. She was barren, and berated and provoked by another woman because of it. In her plight she petitioned the Lord, who granted her a son. Born out of suffering and prayer, Samuel turned out to be one of the most faithful and powerful prophets in all of

biblical history. He brought great honor to her mother, and great blessing to his nation, and also to us, who read about his words and deeds, and who benefit from his ministry to David, out of whom Christ was descended.

~ 2 ~

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.'" Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD.

"You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands." (Haggai 1:2-11)

God's people had returned to their land to rebuild the city. This included the reconstruction of the temple, but they were so busy building their own houses and setting their lives in order that the house of the Lord remained a ruin. They cared more about their individual comfort and stability than the honor of the Lord, who was even the glory of the nation. By the mouth of Haggai, the Lord rebuked the people for their neglect and their wrong focus.

It is true that God does not suffer lack, hunger, or discomfort. And he does not really live in any physical building. One can draw the conclusion, "We need our houses, but the temple can wait. The Lord has need of nothing." But consider God's attitude about the matter. He knew that he needed nothing. The people's neglect did not in any way injure his being. Yet he insisted that his people should give his temple the priority, and he defeated their efforts to restore their own lives while temple construction was postponed. He regarded his honor and his program more important than the comfort and prosperity of his people. Those who have the mind of Christ will also prioritize their lives according to this order.

Because they neglected the Lord, their efforts at improving their own lives were frustrated. This happened not because of some natural order of things, but God actively

counteracted their efforts to attain stability and prosperity: "You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it....You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away." You may say, "God has no need of anything. He can wait." The Lord can indeed afford to wait, but can you afford to make him wait?

Most church members are freeloaders. They give very little money to the churches that they attend, and many do not give anything at all. This remark is not targeted at the poor, since some of them exhibit sacrifice and generosity that put others to shame. Jesus said that the widow who gave only "two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny" had put more into the treasury than all the others. He explained, "They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on." Now, whatever the motive or context, two coins remain two coins, and usually cannot make a financial impact except through extraordinary providence of God, who calls those things which be not as though they were. But he, who understands the economic realities of men, nevertheless esteems faith and devotion more than dollars and cents.

For those people who contribute anything at all, church giving is one of the first things to be cut from the budget when financial difficulty arises, or when they are told that the economy is not well. This is because church giving is considered an unnecessary expense. They would scheme hard to maintain their standard of living. They strive to keep their cars and houses, to keep eating well, and if possible, to keep on having their vacations and other luxuries. Church giving ceases immediately to make room for these. Even their television sets are more valuable than their pastors and the church workers. What, are they to keep watching the games on their small screens? And of course their children's education, which would translate into careers and earnings, is top priority. Let the pastors' children go hungry, and may the church crumble into dust, but no sacrifice is too great to provide a secular education for their own children.

A time of famine is also a time to reassess our priorities. For many people, it uncovers that their faith is a sham. When push comes to shove, they shove God right out of the door. Some things seem to be necessities. Some things are obviously luxuries. And some things seem good in themselves. But there is no excuse for putting anything before the Lord and his work on the earth. In a time of famine, the temptation of self-indulgence persists, and the instinct of self-preservation is aggravated. But only non-Christians are swept away by the lusts of the flesh and the instincts of beasts. As Christians, God has infused life into our souls, and we have been awakened to the realities of heaven and the powers of the world to come. Thus we are well able to overcome forces that hold unbelievers captive.

Where your treasure is, there is your heart also. You confess your faith by your words, but you also demonstrate your true priorities by your actions. You are either vindicated or condemned by them. If you confess the Lord, but contribute nothing to his cause, or if you cut him off whenever your own welfare is threatened, then this betrays that your allegiance belongs to someone or something else. At the very least, it shows that your

faith is weak, and that you trust in the method and system of man rather than the providence of God. You profess that he is able to provide, but by your works you deny it. You profess that the Lord is above all, and that he is the love of your life, and that your utmost desire is for his name to be honored among the nations. But when resources are scarce, suddenly your priorities become clear, and the Lord might not even make the list.

What are you to do? Do not stop giving to your church. And if you have not been giving as you should, now is the time to begin. You may plan, save, organize, and rearrange your finances, but whatever you do, you must support the work of the Lord with your money, and you must do it consistently. At a time when the Lord's people forsake him to appease Mammon, you can give voice to the Lord's remnant by your giving and by your testimony. Resist the temptation of self-indulgence. Control the animal instinct of self-preservation. Walk in the spirit, and act from your higher nature. Establish your faith by reading the Scripture and thinking on its promises. Pray for God to strengthen your inner man with might by his Spirit. Stir up the gift that is within you. Then go encourage your brothers.

You can also support your church in other ways, by offering your time and labor. The church needs money to pay its expenses and salaries, and to continue and expand its projects and outreaches. But it also needs personal participation. Ask your church leaders what you can do for the church, then accept your assignments without protest, and carry out your work with joy, as if you are doing it for the Lord, for indeed that is the case. In this way, you will help encourage morale, and your volunteer work will also lower the expenses for the church.

~ 3 ~

"My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.

"For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction – because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty. But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi," says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 2:5-8)

Even when the economy is poor, we must continue to support our churches and other organizations that promote the cause of Christ. This leads to the question of which churches we ought to support, or whether all churches deserve our support. Based on my own judgment, and on testimonies from brothers around the world, it would seem that it is no exaggeration to say that most churches should die. The world would be a better place, it would seem, if nine out of ten churches would perish today, and there are those who consider my estimate too charitable.

However, since there is no actual tabulation, let us say "many" instead of "most." That is, the cause of the Lord Jesus and the welfare of his people would be better served if many churches would perish. This is, of course, a statement about appearance, since the Lord himself controls and sustains all things, and designs the exact proportion of good and evil to advance his own plan. Thus it is a statement made relative to his precepts and not his decrees. His precepts are what we should consult to guide our daily thinking and behavior.

When resources are scarce, good churches suffer as well as bad churches. Even if you are unaffected by dismal economic conditions, many other people are affected, and whether due to their actual inability or to their fearful and selfish attitude, this translates into a withdrawal of support, and thus financial problems for churches. So it is more important than ever for you to withdraw support from churches that are indeed unfaithful and ineffective, and to redirect it to churches that are fulfilling the Christian mission.

Now is the time to decide if the church that you attend is a good church, and if it deserves the support that you give to it. Of course, it should go without saying that no church is perfect, and you will almost always find something to complain about. If your complaints are petty and personal, then the problem is with you and not the church. You are the one who needs to repent and change. But if the church compromises the gospel of Jesus Christ, or fails to live up to what is required of it in significant ways, and especially if it is confronted with this and fails to repent, then this is a church that deserves to die, and you

should consider withdrawing support from it and join yourself to one that truly honors the Lord.

Our passage tells us what God requires from spiritual leaders, and thus from the church, since the church consists of people. They must revere God and stand in awe of his name. This alone might disqualify all of the leaders in your church. True instruction must be in their mouths – they must teach sound doctrines. And "nothing false" must be found on their lips. This is said in contrast to "true instruction," so that it refers to false doctrines or heresies. Thus spiritual leaders must teach sound doctrines, and no false doctrines. This disqualifies not only heretics, but also those who teach nothing at all, or who are not diligent in the ministry of teaching, since it is said that "true instruction" must be found in their mouths.

God commands every person in every place to repent and to believe in Jesus Christ. He requires all men and women to become Christians, and then to grow as Christians, and to serve and worship as Christians. Those whom he has chosen for salvation will obey this command, but those whom he has actively chosen and created for damnation will reject the gospel. It is written of Eli's sons, who sinned against the Lord, that they "did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the LORD's will to put them to death" (1 Samuel 2:25). In other words, the Lord does not forgive or punish because of men's response; rather, men embrace or reject the Lord Jesus because of God's foreordination, or God's predetermined plan concerning them. In any case, it is the church's mission to declare the doctrines of the Christian faith to every person and in every place, and then to shepherd and educate those that God adds to the church.

If any church or ministry does not make specific and explicit effort at pursuing this purpose, then it is nothing more than a show of godliness, if even that, and a camouflage for negligence and rebellion. There is no legitimate reason for its existence as a Christian organization. Unless the leadership and the people repent and wholeheartedly commit to the propagation and the establishment of the Christian faith, that church or ministry must die without mercy. It is a waste and a drain on the resources of God's people. It should perish without delay. Anyone who helps it survive shares in its sin, and also incurs the guilt of failing to support faithful churches and ministries.

A church that honors the Lord is one that teaches sound doctrines, and also *applies and enforces them*. God, by the mouth of Malachi, defines the qualities of a spiritual leader, even one who serves before him as priest. And he states that he is one who walks in peace and uprightness. A Christian minister must exhibit personal holiness and integrity. He must live up to the gospel that he preaches. Then, he must also apply and enforce it when it comes to other people's lives. In the words of our passage, a good minister of Jesus Christ is one who turns many from sin.

A minister who turns people from sin needs to do a number of things. He needs to explain the nature of God, that he is holy and righteous, and that he does not tolerate transgressions. He needs to talk about judgment and hellfire. He needs to talk about sin, and to tell people that they are sinners. Then he needs to talk about God's forgiveness,

and that it is found only through faith in Jesus Christ. And if it is found only there, then it is not found anywhere else. Thus all non-Christians remain condemned, without forgiveness, for their many sins, and God will forever punish them in hellfire that cannot be quenched.

Again, to turn someone away from sin, you need to define sin. And sin can be defined only in relation to God and his commandments. Then, you need to explain the evil of sin, of transgressing the laws of God, and the consequences of sin, that of everlasting suffering in hell. Moreover, a true church must enforce what it teaches about sin. It must practice church discipline. This means that it must directly confront those who have sinned, and demand their repentance. If they refuse to repent, they must be expelled from the church. It is again crucial to define sin, so that the private preferences of the leaders are not enforced, but rather the holy precepts of God. Sin must be defined also because so that nothing will be missed. For example, to affirm and spread heresy, to adore images, and to use God's name in vain are sins just as much as murder and adultery.

If the above paragraph alone speaks more clearly and abundantly about sin than your church does over an entire year, if not longer, yours is not a Christian church, but a gathering of demons. You need to confront your church and call the leadership to repent, or you need to take your support to another church, which is not another, since yours is not a church in the first place. You must not support a church that refuses to turn people away from sin, since that should be one of its chief duties. This is not an insignificant difference of opinion – revolt or leave, but do not share in its guilt.

If your church is not founded on the perfection of the Bible, its inerrancy and infallibility, it should die. If your church denies the sovereignty of God, that God is God, it should die. If your church shuns the penal atonement of Christ, that he died a bloody death at the hands of the Jews to pay for the sins of his people, it should die. If your church shrinks from the doctrine of hell, a place that punishes all unbelievers with acute and extreme agony forever, it should die. If your church does not practice church discipline, calling out sinners for their sins, imploring, admonishing, rebuking, threatening them, and expelling those who refuse to repent, it should die.

And if your church endorses abominations like abortion, homosexuality, divorce and remarriage, and other such things, it should die. If your church holds yoga classes, palmistry workshops, and astrology seminars, it should die. Churches are called to fight these things, not to teach and applaud them. Churches are called to confront sinners, and to shame those who refuse to repent, and not to glorify them, or to make them into heroes. God's wrath is poured out upon all those who practice evil, and also on those who approve of these people.

These are only some of the necessary characteristics of a true church, and to fulfill them makes one nothing more than a minimally faithful congregation. It is a description of a normal church. It is how every church should begin and continue, and not some extraordinary spiritual height to be aspired to and attained after many years, if ever. Yes, most churches should probably die. Today. Let it not be your fault that they live one

moment longer. Whether any given church survives is God's hands, but your duty is to support those that are good and oppose those that are evil.

Good churches suffer partly because bad churches thrive. Bad churches thrive because people are gullible and rebellious. And people are gullible and rebellious because most of them are not even Christians. They support leaders and churches that tell them what they wish to hear, so that they may appear to seek God, but still believe and behave the same as before. And they are able to get away with this because Christians have failed to declare God's inflexible standard with clarity and boldness.

What you sow, you will also reap. If you support unfaithful churches, they will grow stronger, and you will reap destruction. If you sow fear and compromise, sins and heresies will increase. But if you support faithful churches, those that preach, apply, and enforce the doctrines of Jesus Christ, and if you join them in doing these things, then the Christian faith will thrive and take root, and the harvest will be peace, righteousness, and prosperity.

~ 4 ~

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4)

As Paul was writing his letter to the Philippians, he considered the prospect of death and said, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Whether a person thinks this way depends on who he is and what he values. He was a Christian, so that for him to live was to serve Christ, and to die was to be with Christ. Although he was eager to serve Christ by preaching the gospel and strengthening the church, he much preferred the death of the body, so that his soul might ascend to Christ. He was a Christian, so that he had a relationship with Christ. And he valued Christ, so that he desired the presence of his Lord above all else.

Surely this is the correct way to see things. When a Christian fails to think this way, it is because his mind has not yet been renewed. He needs to be taught, not just by men, but by the Lord. And he can be taught, because the life of God is in him. But a non-Christian cannot do it at all, because of who he is and what he values. He is a non-Christian, and so he has no peaceful relation with God, and rather than holding Christ in high esteem, he values the indulgence of the flesh, and other abominable desires and prospects.

The Christian perceives the value of suffering. Now, there is no value in suffering itself. Some people suffer and become bitter. Some people suffer and blaspheme God. Suffering is constructive only when it is dealt by God to a person in a loving manner, for the purpose of training and discipline. In other words, suffering is meaningless in itself, and it is destructive for the reprobates. On the other hand, suffering provides the occasion for Christians to consider their ways, to strengthen their faith, to rekindle their compassion, to renew their resolve to overcome all distractions and temptations, and to express their dependence on God by their worship and persistent petitions. It provides occasion for them to reevaluate their habits and their priorities, and to lay aside every weight that hinders them.

James writes that we should rejoice when we face different kinds of hardship, because the testing of our faith develops perseverance, which in turn is able to lead us to become mature and complete. This can apply only to Christians, because only Christians have faith to be tested in the first place. And only Christians will develop perseverance and other fruits of the Spirit when faith is tested. The students of Christ can rejoice when facing hardship because they want to develop perseverance; they want to become mature and complete. Who we are and what we value distinguish us, and enable us to face hardship with the right attitude and benefit from the suffering.

Job said regarding his ordeal, "When he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). This is appropriate in a time of famine, for gold is what people lack in the first place. Job was in a destitute condition, but he recognized a higher treasure. What a blessing it is to have our faith refined and purified. What a blessing it is to have our weaknesses exposed and removed. What a blessing it is to know where we stand with God, and that we stand with God. What a blessing it is to gain self-understanding, to perceive where we have deluded ourselves about the greatness of our faith, if we have indeed deluded ourselves, but also to obtain the assurance that there is a genuine foundation, that God has indeed performed a work in our hearts, so that even though we struggle, we endure, and become stronger because of it.

~ 5 ~

And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:19)

We are confident that Philippians 4:19 applies to us because we know the same God and the same Christ Jesus that the Philippians knew. We have a common faith, and therefore common promises and blessings. Thus it is only right that we are to find consolation and encouragement from it, and it has been used for just this purpose by countless believers as they faced financial hardship and various worries. However, as we embrace this verse as God's word to us in a time of famine, we should be aware that Paul mentions two things before this verse that provide context to his statement.

First, Paul indicates that he has attained the beautiful quality of contentment: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (v. 11-13).

Verse 13 is taken out of context even more often than verse 19. When Paul says, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength," he is not talking about self-serving things such as professional exploits or something petty like athletic achievements. This is how many people use the verse. Of course, God can give you strength to achieve these things, but Paul refers to something much more precious. He is saying that, by the strength of Christ, he can remain content whether he is well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. In other words, he has learned to endure hunger and poverty, and to do this with an attitude of contentment. He has the power to suffer with grace and gratitude. Thus Paul writes verse 19 as a person who values the virtue of contentment and realizes the spiritual power it requires to remain in such a state of mind.

Second, the Philippians have repeatedly sent financial support to Paul: "Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need" (v. 15-16). Paul is writing to a group of Christians who faithfully supported him by sending him money "again and again."

Let these two points temper your sense of entitlement to verse 19. If you are a whiny and ungrateful weakling, you must learn to depend on God's strength to endure suffering, even hunger and poverty. If you are unable to suffer, you should probably not prosper. And if you only think about your own needs, and have no concern about the condition of your church or other ministries that publish the gospel, laying claim to verse 19 would be an act of presumption rather than of faith. These two items do not nullify the verse – it

says what it says – but they remind us that it is written within a broader context of a vital Christian life, and life that is alive to God, a life in which God is at work to develop strength, contentment, and sacrifice.

There are two things to note regarding verse 19. It tells us that God will meet all our needs, but it also tells us about the basis and source of his provision.

The basis for God's supply is "Christ Jesus." God blesses us not because of any merit that we have on our own, but because of his sovereign love, so that he sent his Son Jesus Christ to secure for us an everlasting salvation. Paul wrote, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Commentators suppose that the statement refers to spiritual wealth, that Jesus suffered the humiliation of his ministry on earth in order to obtain an inheritance for us. However, it would be a mistake to spiritualize the entire inheritance, as if God would grant us material provisions and blessings on a basis other than the work of Christ.

Rather, our inheritance includes the redemption of the body, and not just the soul. And even our present corruptible flesh has become the temple of the Holy Spirit. So the effect of redemption extends to the corporeal realm, and carries ramifications for the present. Jesus taught his disciples to ask for their "daily bread," and instructed them to request the forgiveness of sins in the same prayer. It would be senseless to suppose that forgiveness is granted to us because of Christ, while our daily bread, or material provision, is granted on some other basis. No, all blessings come to us on the basis of Jesus Christ, and we receive these from God because of our affiliation with our Lord. Jesus became poor, so that through his poverty we might become rich in every way.

This in turn provides a foundation for unshakable faith in God's provision. I have no confidence in myself, but I can have absolute confidence that God is pleased with his Son, Jesus Christ, and that he has regard for the work of redemption that he performed. To the extent that I think God favors the Lord Jesus, that is also the measure of my confidence in his provision for me, since that has been secured for all his people in the work of redemption.

Then, the source of God's supply is his "glorious riches." The state of the economy has nothing to do with it. God is neither helped nor hindered by the condition of the world, because he does not depend on it. Here is where faith or unbelief makes all the difference. How is the provision going to come? Will God rain money from above? Perhaps he will, but that is none of your concern. He did not supply for the Israelites out of an abundance of resources in the wilderness, for resources were scarce, which led to much grumbling and rebellion. Rather, he was able to provide because of his command over all of creation. And if the earth does not have what is needed, he can always make it.

Christians are accustomed to the idea that God works through ordinary providence, and indeed God works in such a manner. However, this does not mean that he is limited by a situation that he himself has created. That is, when the economy is poor, it is because

God has willed and caused it. But this does not mean that he is now unable to provide for whom he wishes until he reverses the entire scenario.

An implicit deism has poisoned the thinking and the theology of so many believers that it is difficult for them to conceive of God's power as active and present. The doctrine of ordinary providence is an affirmation of God's active and present control over all things in a regular and consistent manner. It is not meant to be a cover for unbelief. Jesus said that God had never stopped working (John 5:17). God can and God does prosper his people regardless of the state of the economy. He will meet the needs of his people according to his glorious riches that is in Christ Jesus.

~ 6 ~

"For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." (Genesis 18:19)

A time of crisis provides the head of the house a golden opportunity to teach his family about faith in God. This does not mean that day to day instructions are less important. Indeed, a man who consistently speaks well of the Lord, who faithfully passes on his doctrines, and who persists in obedience to his precepts exhibits beauty and strength that is bound to make a positive impression on the elect members of his family. Nevertheless, how he responds to a crisis situation provides a different kind of opportunity for him to honor the Lord in his word and deed.

There are those who appear pious for long periods. They are able to handle the pressure of time, and can persist in the same type of belief and behavior. But unless they can maintain the same trust in the Lord in a time of great hardship, all it means is that they are talented at being hypocrites for great lengths of time. Thus a worthy legacy of faith is one that has been tested not only by time, but also by the heat of urgent troubles.

Abraham instructed Isaac both by word and by example. Even as he brought Isaac before the alter to be offered to God as a burnt sacrifice, he told him, "God himself will provide." This foreshadowed God's provision of Jesus Christ as a sacrificial lamb to atone for the sins of his people. In any case, the entire experience, which was verbally interpreted by the Lord as he commended Abraham's obedience, must have impressed Isaac with the way that a man should and could place God above all else, even his most beloved son, in order to follow his commands and instructions.

It was an informed and intelligent trust. Abraham knew this God. He knew of his great wisdom, limitless power, and unbreakable promises, so that in order for this God to fulfill his promises, he would have had to raise Isaac from the ashes. Thus he marched toward the alter with Isaac, fully intending to offer him up, and fully expecting to receive him alive again, so that although the Lord stopped him at the last moment, the Scripture states that Abraham indeed symbolically received his son from the dead. In this sense, it made no difference that Isaac was not slain – to Abraham, he was as good as dead, and it was as if God raised him from the ashes and returned his son to him. How Abraham honored God with his faith! And what a gift it was to Isaac, who was able to learn that this kind of faith was right, beautiful, and possible.

Now it is our turn to show our families that we are the children of Abraham, and to honor God before them by an exposition and demonstration of intelligent faith. You have been telling your wife and children that God is faithful, that a man cannot serve both God and Mammon, that the progress of the gospel in this world is more important than our

personal comfort, and that as Jesus said, life does not consist of the abundance of possessions. Do you believe any of it? Now is the time to show them.

There are many who say that they have strayed from the faith of their parents because of the hypocrisy that they saw in them. However, only stupid people stumble over the failures of others. Just because some people claim to be Christians but fail to live up to their profession of faith does nothing to show that the Christian faith is false or that Christ is unworthy of their allegiance. In fact, the Christian faith itself insists that there are many such hypocrites. Your children's faith should rest on divine revelation and not on human example, but this does not release you from the duty to honor God before them, and to be before them a picture of what it is like to be a godly man, full of faith, love, knowledge, patience, and all kinds of spiritual graces and virtues.

Some of what you impart to your children will occur naturally in casual conversations and daily events. Of course, examples in themselves teach nothing, but they must be explicitly interpreted. They serve as illustrations and reminders to verbal instructions. In any case, it is necessary to take a more deliberate approach to educate them in the faith. Hold a family meeting and explain the financial situation (or any kind of crisis) to your children in terms that they can understand. If you are afraid that this would traumatize them, let me assure you that your weakness and unbelief, and an overall pathetic attitude, are much more likely to traumatize them than a calm explanation of a problem followed by an exhortation to trust in God.

Then, tell them about the God who controls all of creation and who controls all things for the display of his glory and the good of his people. Pass on to them the promises of God, and the greater importance of faith and integrity over financial stability and career advancement. Follow through with consistent and relentless trust in the Lord, with frequent thanksgiving and petitions. Such a legacy of faith is worth much more than any financial inheritance that you can leave to your children, for whereas earthly riches pass away, in the legacy of faith is an everlasting salvation.

18. The Context of 1 Peter 3:15

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).

Most instructors in evangelical apologetics, it seems, appeal to 1 Peter 3:15. They point out that the verse commands us to provide an "answer," defense, or *apologia* for the Christian faith. This is not our present focus. Then, they stress that the verse commands us to perform apologetics "with gentleness and respect." This is understood to mean that we are to speak with soft words and soft tones, without raising our voice, and without using insults and invectives – even biblical insults and invectives – at our opponents. It is this use of the verse that interests us.

The interpretation is *prima facie* impossible, because it would condemn the examples of the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus himself. They called the unbelieving and disobedient such things as whores, dogs, pigs, foxes, snakes, morons, hypocrites, murderers, wicked men, blind men, dead men, brutes, rubbish, dung, demons, sons of hell, and so on. Paul even told some of the Jews to castrate themselves if they were to promote circumcision against his gospel.

What, then, does this verse say? There is a definite and reliable way to determine the meaning, and this is to follow the grammatical-historical method of interpretation that these same evangelicals insist upon, but that is almost never applied when they appeal to this verse.

God speaks to us in the Bible. It is divinely inspired literature, but it is literature. Although the message applies to all men for all times, God used the words of human language, and he revealed these words at specific periods in human history. This means that the Bible is interpreted in accordance with some of the same principles that govern the interpretation of all works of literature. And one of the chief principles is that the meanings of the words and sentences are determined by the textual and cultural background against which they appear.

First, the textual context. The verse appears in a letter intended to encourage and instruct Christians who are facing persecution from authority figures, such as government officials (2:13-14), masters (2:18), and husbands (3:1). Therefore, although a broader application is possible, the verse mainly refers to offering a defense for the Christian faith in the face of interrogation, and in the face of people who have the authority and intention to inflict suffering (3:14).

Christians are urged to answer "with gentleness and respect" because, as the context indicates, they are addressing authority figures. As Peter writes, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men" (2:13). This is the same

principle that Paul asserts in his letter to the Romans: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (13:1). This is illustrated in the Acts of the Apostles:

Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day." At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!"

Those who were standing near Paul said, "You dare to insult God's high priest?" Paul replied, "Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.'" (Acts 23:1-5)

Paul did more than insult the high priest with an invective – he cursed the high priest and said that God would strike him. Contemporary evangelicals, given their interpretation of 1 Peter 3:15 and other verses, would never find this acceptable in any situation. What Paul said can never fit into their idea of how Christians ought to answer people. This in itself ought to produce suspicion against the typical evangelical interpretation. Once Paul was informed that he was addressing the high priest, he cited a biblical teaching and implied that he would not have cursed him if he had known that he was speaking to an authority figure. This is exactly what we would expect given Romans 13:1, 1 Peter 2:13, and 1 Peter 3:15. Nevertheless, Paul did not retract his remark, or Luke did not see fit to record it.

As for the cultural context, the Bible's historical accounts are sufficient, and there is no need for extra-biblical information. Given the culture of that day, and especially in the way the people handled religious controversies, what did "gentleness and respect" mean *to Peter*? And, *to Peter*, what did it mean to handle religious controversies *without* gentleness and respect? What did *he* have in mind?

Herod beheaded John the Baptist. The Jews opposed Jesus, slandered him, and attempted to trick him, to put him at odds with the people and the government. When they failed, they conspired to murder him, and brought false witnesses and accusations against him. This continued on to the ministry of the apostles. The non-Christians whipped them, imprisoned them, threatened them to stop preaching the name of Christ, incited violent mobs against them, and even stoned some of them.

Peter taught his readers to answer with gentleness and respect against *this* background. At the time there were also religious zealots who, for one ideology or another, took up arms against the government. It is against *this* background that he wrote, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men." Christians do not answer religious opposition with trickery, slander, and violence, and Christians do not respond to

government oppression by attempting to overturn it. This is as far as we can go with the "gentleness and respect," because the teachings and the examples of the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus continue to affirm the use of extremely harsh language against unbelief, heresy, and immorality.

In societies where the Christian faith has exerted influence, today's cultural context has become vastly different. The impact has been so extensive that even non-Christians generally behave in a peaceful manner. Yet we must continue to read 1 Peter 3:15 with Peter's culture in mind. When Christians read 1 Peter 3:15 against a cultural background that has already been somewhat christianized, they come up with a grossly perverted understanding of gentleness and respect that is far from what Peter had in mind when he wrote the verse, and that would even contradict the apostle's own practice.

With this in mind, consider Titus 1:13: "Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith." This was also written within the cultural context of the first century, where religious controversies led to conspiracy, mob violence, and murder. It is against *this* background that Paul commanded Titus to rebuke the people sharply. Just imagine what *Paul* meant by "sharply"! If there is no room in the contemporary church for this kind of ministry, then our verdict must be that the contemporary church is so unfaithful to the word of God that it has no room for apostolic faith and practice.

This is not to say that we should always scream out our apologetics with insults and invectives, but that all the rhetorical options demonstrated in the Bible remain available to us. The irony is that those who teach apologetics insist on the grammatical-historical method of interpretation when they answer non-Christian misrepresentations of biblical passages, but they ignore the method when they appeal to 1 Peter 3:15 as a basis for the practice of apologetics. The result is that they are requiring Christians to answer their opponents in a manner that is in fact different from the one taught in the Bible, and legitimate rhetorical options are taken away. This abuse of Scripture is a serious offense, and Christians should no longer put up with it.

19. The Apologetics of Stephen

All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. (Acts 6:15)

In 1 Peter 3:15, the Bible teaches that we should always be ready to answer someone who asks us to explain the reason for the hope that we have in Christ. The verse is often used as a general charter for apologetics, and instructors on the subject almost universally insist that it is to be done with "gentleness and respect," not as defined by the internal context of Scripture, such as other biblical passages and examples from biblical characters, but as defined by contemporary non-Christian norms and cultures. The context of the verse, even the immediate context of 1 Peter 1-2, is seldom mentioned or applied to its interpretation.

It is often said that we can defend the faith without being defensive. This is one of the most idiotic and cliché statements in Christian writings, and it appears in so many places, whether in Evangelical, Reformed, Arminian, or Charismatic literature. But it is not a biblical teaching. A person who teaches with cliché statements is a lazy thinker, powerless expositor, and a useless believer. Still, I admit, an occasional cliché is not unforgivable. But a person who uses them too often is just a cliché person, unintelligent and uninteresting.

As anyone who actually reads Peter's letter should perceive, the context of 3:15 is interrogation by authority figures. Depending on a person's circumstances, such interrogation may very rarely happen, even if we include questioning by parents, teachers, and the like. The Christian does not have to answer his friend or a stranger on the street the same way that he answers a federal agent, a judge, or a king. Still less is a God-ordained preacher of the gospel required to always speak with soft words and tones to the general audience. In fact, if he does, he is most likely a weak and disobedient preacher, since the Bible says that some people ought to be rebuked sharply, so that they may be sound in the faith.

Whereas our encounters rarely fit the exact context of 1 Peter 3:15, Stephen's situation fits very well. Those who teach that apologetics is to be done with non-Christian gentleness and respect are afraid of biblical examples, because so many of them contradict their interpretation of apostolic teaching. That is, if these teachers of apologetics are correct, then it must mean that the prophets and apostles all practiced the opposite behavior that they set forth for us to follow. Were they hypocrites? No, our apologetic professors say, they were exceptions. I assume that believers from other traditions say this too, but I hear this most often from Reformed apologists – shame, shame, shame. The Reformed mantras are "This is a mystery" and "That is an exception," or as in many cases, "All of these are exceptions." And this is why some Pentecostals wonder if the Evangelical and the Reformed even affirm biblical inerrancy. Let me tell

you something: they think that *you* are the liberal theologians. Dutch Reformed? No, they say, you are Much Deformed.

But Stephen was not an apostle, and not a prophet. He was not even called an evangelist, or a pastor, or a teacher. The Bible says that he had the Holy Spirit, faith, grace, and power (Acts 6:5, 8). Thus anyone who calls him an exception also confesses that he lacks these things. And ironically, in this Stephen was indeed an exception. Our apologists may have a few good arguments, but the Spirit? Faith? Power? When it is put this way, I must accept the explanation. Stephen was a remarkable exception. Nevertheless, for those of us who possess Stephen's spiritual inheritance, or at least who despise the sorry excuse, let us examine his answer, his apologetic.

His whole answer is interesting, but the culmination is most applicable to our topic. He recites the history of Abraham and Moses, then briefly, Joshua and David, and this builds up to verses 51-53: "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him – you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it." Stephen answered this way under official interrogation. It cannot possibly be reconciled with the common interpretation of 1 Peter 3:15. If their interpretation of 1 Peter 3:15 can accommodate this, then my disagreement with them ends. However, if I actually do it, let them not complain, but sit down and shut up.

Many positive reviews and endorsements for books on Christian apologetics share a common theme, that these books manage to provide sound arguments for the faith without becoming offensive, confrontational, or just plain rude. And debates about the existence of God and the truth of Christianity are often praised because the two sides remained cordial – that is, polite and academic – throughout the exchange. "How refreshing!" Christians would say. These people would not have approved of Stephen. They would have condemned the prophets and the apostles, and even Jesus Christ himself. After all, the Lord got physical and turned over tables. Will Christians now call him a terrorist? The truth is that these Christians are not brave enough, and they do not care enough. But they want to hide this, so they make behaviors that resemble those exhibited by the biblical characters into the *wrong* behaviors. It is now *unbiblical* to act like the prophet, the apostles, and Jesus Christ. Once again, those Pentecostals scratch their heads: Are these folks even Christians? Are these the liberal theologians that we hear so much about? Are these the anti-christs that John mentioned, who would lead people astray?

But I will follow Stephen. There might be an indirect way to say this, but this is meant to be brief: I have too little respect for these Christians to care what they think. I respect Stephen, because he received the Lord's approval: "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'" (v. 55-56). I want *that*. Would Stephen have coveted a silly endorsement that says,

"Stephen teaches us that we can disagree without being disagreeable"? Or, picking up a book on my floor to find another example, I read, "The author proves we don't have to be abrasive to be persuasive." Is that a jab at Stephen?

Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit, full of faith, grace, and power. When non-Christians argued with him, "they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake" (6:10, KJV). If you still insist that he was an exception, then I will have to agree with you. I can see that you are right. You are nothing like him. And I hope that I will never be anything like you.

20. Boldness: A Spiritual Power

Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. (Acts 4:29)

Many achievements are great only in the eyes of those who care about the things of men, and not the things of God, whose thoughts concern only the lower things, and whose dreams are only childish fantasies. When men's minds languish, their heroes are athletes, scientists, and politicians. But when their spirits soar, they aspire to become like the prophets.

Many things are not worth doing, and the courage to do them is equally worthless. A person may say that he climbs Mount Everest "for the glory of God," but that is probably an excuse to make a name for himself. It is his own flag that he plants at the top. The slogan is used to attribute worth to whatever men wish to do, whether or not they care anything about the glory of God. The expression has turned from a doxology to a justification to pursue selfish ambitions and amusements. *Even if* all things are permissible, not all things are expedient.

The boldness that we should covet is the boldness to speak the message of Jesus Christ. There are two aspects to this. First, it is a boldness to defy tradition. This includes all the things that men already believe and practice, but that are contrary to the revelation of God. There are religious traditions, which stood behind the murder of Christ, and include all non-Christian faiths and doctrines. There are scientific traditions, which are inventions of men about the nature of reality, and that seek to subvert the truth that is in Jesus. There are cultural traditions, or norms related to values and lifestyles that sinners are comfortable with. Second, it is a boldness to declare truth. We must speak what the Bible teaches about God, about creation, about man, sin, and judgment, and the redemption that is only in Jesus Christ.

If people know our message and agree with it, they would already be Christians. But our message demands repentance and conversion from non-Christians. We defy their traditions, or what they are accustomed to thinking and doing. We tell them that they are wrong, and that they need to change. And we lecture them about God, sin, judgment, righteousness, and the only way to salvation. Moreover, Christian boldness will move us not only to speak the message, but to speak it in a clear and direct manner. A half-baked boldness suggests and implies, but a full boldness proclaims, threatens, and rejoices in the message of Jesus Christ.

Because the message is unpopular, and the method unambiguous, the preaching of it incurs the wrath of men. These first disciples implored the Lord to consider the threats against them, but instead of asking for a cave to hide, they prayed for boldness to go forth and preach. Ah, if Christians have this boldness, demons would fear us, and the world

must hear us. It is a spiritual power that overwhelms opposition and advances the fame of Jesus Christ. Any other undertaking asserted to be "for the glory of God" seems like a loser's errand by comparison.

21. Attack Non-Christians: Take the Offensive

At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." (1 Kings 18:27)

The unbelievers have trained our leaders well. Most preachers and theologians have been thoroughly instructed and neutered by non-biblical principles. They are soft-spoken and non-threatening, and even when they speak the truth, they are easy to dismiss. It is even enjoyable to engage in debates with these people, just as a game of tug-of-war with a little puppy tends to lift one's spirit. It is fun and safe. Preachers talk about the Lion of Judah, but where is their roar? Theologians lament a domesticated God, but they purr like house cats themselves. No sword is unsheathed, no blood is spilled – metaphorically speaking, of course.

Elijah made trouble for the non-Christians. He was much more than a nuisance, like a fruit fly that would not leave and that refuses to die. He was their worst nightmare. And he did it to enforce the truth: The king said, "Are you the one who makes trouble for Israel?" The prophet answered, "I have not made trouble for Israel, but you have." Elijah disturbed the status quo, but the status quo was the trouble to begin with. The apostles upset the established order, but that was the problem in the first place. Jesus turned over tables, but the merchants had turned the house of prayer into a den of thieves.

The prophets and the apostles demonstrated the character that they taught. It is strange that some of those who are regarded as exemplars of their doctrine do not talk or act like them at all. There is almost no resemblance. In fact, the non-Christians who blast our religion sound more like the prophets and apostles than the Christians who defend it! How can this be? By the believers' own consent, faith has been tamed, but unbelief runs free and wild.

As for us, we will follow the examples of the prophets and the apostles. I refuse to enter into a contract of tolerance with unbelievers. I refuse to allow the current non-Christian standard of social propriety to define for me what Christian character means. As disciples of the Lord Jesus, we must make up our minds as to whether the prophets were right or wrong, and whether the apostles really commanded people to speak and behave in a way that is totally different from them.

Once it is settled that the prophets and apostles were correct in their approach, as all true Christians must, we ought to take steps to emulate them. What this means is that we must devote much more of our time, energy, creativity, and resources to mock non-Christians, and to make fun of their religions, philosophies, sciences, ethics, cultures, and lifestyles. All aspects of their lives are open to our scrutiny and assault. Preachers should preach

sermons, and churches should hold seminars, not only on how to answer unbelievers, but on how to openly jeer at them.

It is a theological and tactical error that many courses in apologetics instruct believers to answer questions and wait for more, rather than to attack non-Christian beliefs with relentless aggression. By definition, the missionary enterprise takes the offensive – we take the gospel to them, and we live the gospel before them – otherwise, there would be no objections to our religion in the first place. Of course we can answer them, and we should, but there is no reason to retreat into the defensive after we have introduced the topic. Take the offensive and remain on the offensive. Persist. Press on. Increase the pressure. The word of God is a sword – plunge it into them and twist the blade. Make it hurt. Then do it again.

22. Always Ready

Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me....Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" (Job 38:1-3, 40:2)

If God would speak this way to Job, who did not sin, how much more does his challenge apply to those who refuse to serve him? If God was angry with Job's friends, who said the wrong things about God (42:7), how much more is he displeased with those who slander the gospel? As Christians, we are to speak God's words to believers and unbelievers alike. On the basis of God's revelation, we say to them, "This is what God says. This is what God thinks." This is no exception.

Always be ready to demand an answer from anyone who has not given a reason for his unbelief. And do this with confidence and aggression. Challenge him. Put pressure on him. "Stand up, non-Christian. Answer me, you unbeliever. Where were you when God created the universe, the heaven and the earth? Prove to me your theory of cosmology. Defend your speculations! Where were you when God made the animals and plants, the man and the woman? Prove to me your theory of evolution. Defend your methodologies! Where were you when Adam sinned and plunged men into depravity? Prove to me your theories on psychology and sociology. Defend your observations! I am suspicious of you. You say that you are wise and informed. But I think you are foolish and know nothing."

When the non-Christians attempt to answer, tear them apart. Annihilate all their beliefs and arguments with your God-given ability to think and to reason. Do not be afraid of them. Confront them with divine wisdom and authority. Unbelievers have been able to advertise themselves as the intellectual elite of this world because Christians have failed to perform their duty. God demands an answer from those who accuse him, and if you are his true messenger, you will relate this demand to those who hear you. If you hold back, then you are a worthless and unprofitable servant.

As you begin to issue God's demand to his accusers, you will find that the non-Christians have nothing, and they know nothing. They are completely naked and wretched. Keep up the attack. Be relentless. Refuse to stop. When you have pursued them to the end of the cliff, as they hold on to the edge with their bloodied and weakening hands, and as you step on their fingers and they cry out in agony, you say, "You atheists, you agnostics, you Catholics, you Buddhists, you Muslims, or whatever you are, you have been saying the wrong things about God, and he is very angry with you. Why would you die a miserable, pathetic death? Come now, I will pray for you, so that perhaps he will have pity on you and cause you to see the truth, and save you by Jesus Christ."

23. Religious Diversity

"It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed....Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:10, 12)

Religious diversity is often portrayed as a feature of modern life, and it is regarded as a sign of progress in knowledge and character to enjoy the variety. Somehow it is thought that the more a person is exposed to multiple opinions, the more he should be regarded as ignorant and arrogant if he continues to assert his own as the only truth. But one does not follow from the other. Everything depends on the nature of these opinions. It may be that the more a person is exposed to them, the more he perceives the wisdom of his own position and the folly of alternatives.

In any case, religious diversity is not new. The apostles did not have to travel to China, India, or the New World to be exposed to other religions and philosophies. They lived at a time when Greek and Roman cultures were prominent, and the history of their own people was marked by idolatry. People have been exposed to many opinions and cultures since Genesis. The prophets and apostles understood religious diversity, but they rejected it.

This must be one of the things that define an authentic Christianity. There is no true Christian faith, no true commitment to Christ, without a rejection of religious diversity. A woman cannot say, "I swear to remain faithful to my husband, but I plan to be with many men." No, if she remains faithful to one, she must reject all others. A monotheist cannot say, "I believe that there is one God, but I appreciate the viewpoint of those who believe that there are many gods." No, if he believes that there is one God, then he must declare that all polytheists are wrong. Likewise, a Christian must be against all non-Christian religions, or he cannot be a true Christian. He must deny that religious diversity is an ideal, and he must deny that religious tolerance is a virtue.

God has defined true religion in a specific and narrow manner. Peter says that the way to salvation is in Jesus, who is called Christ, the prophesied Messiah. He refers to the one from Nazareth, the one whom the Jews crucified, who died, but whom God raised from the dead. Salvation comes through *this* person, and no one else, because there is no other name given to men by which they must be saved. All this is said in our very short text, and reinforced throughout the Old and New Testaments, with the prophets as forerunners who denounced all non-biblical religions.

This matter is of such seriousness that, I would insist, all those who show the slightest sympathy for non-Christian religions must be tried before church courts and shamed before the covenant community. This is especially urgent if they are leaders and

professors. They must be immediately expelled from church and seminary premises, and cut off from all association with believers. Now, this is stated only as a matter of principle, since I have no expectation that it will be carried out in the near future. I have no confidence that Christians have the courage and zealotry to enforce the word of God. Christians are not strong enough, not faithful enough, and they do not care about the Lord Jesus enough. They do not even like him very much.

So religious diversity flourishes, along with tolerance and disobedience. Nevertheless, while religious diversity is not a good thing in itself, in God's providence it could serve to benefit an unfaithful church. Religious diversity flourishes because the church is weak, because it is unsound in doctrine and practice. These are the same flaws that allow false believers to remain in our congregations. But because religious diversity flourishes, and because tolerance is considered a virtue, this same cultural trend that has been enabled by the church's disobedience also helps to expose and draw away some of the false believers in our congregations.

In my judgment, and I am not alone in this, false believers constitute a majority of church members today, most likely a very large majority. For this same reason, non-Christians are in control of church assets, creeds, policies, and programs. This is vividly illustrated by the number of denominations that have now voted to permit homosexuals to become ordained ministers. Those who contributed to this are non-Christians, including those who campaigned and voted for the change, and those who spoke for it and approved it. The church has long been a comfortable place for unbelievers due to its weak preaching and spineless policies. But now we can know who these unbelievers are – we can know many of them by name.

Religious diversity provides a distraction from truth, and a temptation to those whose hearts do not cling to the Lord. A false believer is more likely to stay where he is and go along with others around him if he sees no other option. But diversity helps to expose those who are not true in their faith. At a time when Christians are weak and unfaithful, diversity helps to slow a quiet takeover of all of Christendom by unbelievers. And it also compels true believers to remain alert, to become decisive in practice, precise in doctrine, and vigilant in prayer and ministry.

Ask a person what he thinks about religious diversity, and you will know his heart. Ask a preacher or theologian if he thinks there is anything we can learn from non-Christian religions, and you will know whether to welcome him into your home, or to throw him out on to the street. Ask a church if it insists that faith in Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the only way to salvation, the only way to escape endless pain and fire, and you will know whether it is a church of God or a synagogue of Satan. Thus in our weakness, God turns a weapon of the devil into a tool our hands, lest his chosen people be destroyed and wiped out.

24. The Non-Christian's Dilemma

Even one of their own prophets has said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." This testimony is true. (Titus 1:12-13)

The poet cited appears to be Epimenides of Crete. It is alleged that the verse poses a liar's dilemma. That is, if a Cretan makes the statement that Cretans always lie, then is he telling the truth when he says that Cretans always lie? Then, it is said that because Paul cites Epimenides, it has become his dilemma, and thus also a dilemma for those who affirm the inerrancy of Scripture.

However, there is no dilemma in the statement. Just because a group of people are all liars, or because they always lie, does not necessarily mean that every proposition that proceeds from them must be false. Many lies require some true statements to provide the context for deception. I may say to a non-Christian, "Strawberries are delicious. If you eat enough of them, it will make you less stupid." Taken as a whole, that is a lie, but there is truth in there to give it a context, or to make it more interesting. Strawberries may indeed be delicious, at least to me, but nothing except omnipotence can make a non-Christian less stupid.

Some people are so focused on the non-existent dilemma that they fail to read the rest of the verse. Cretans are said to be not only liars, but gluttons. They serve their own bellies. If they are all gluttons, or always gluttons, then does this mean that they eat continuously and never go to sleep? In any case, if they are always eating, then it is at least possible that they would tell the truth about what they want to eat when they order their food. And perhaps they may even stop talking – and telling lies – while they chew.

The truth is that there is no dilemma here, and no difficulty arises from Paul's usage of the poet. Rather, the inordinate interest in forcing a dilemma illustrates the silly and desperate nature of non-Christian criticisms of the biblical religion. If anything, it is another indication that unbelievers are always stupid, evil brutes, lazy thinkers. And this testimony is true.

The non-Christian's dilemma is that he is too unintelligent to refute the wisdom of Christ, but to become intelligent, he must first accept the wisdom of Christ, the very wisdom that he wishes to become intelligent enough to refute. He must choose: either remain stupid, or abandon this futile project and embrace the gospel. But this introduces another dilemma: the non-Christian is too stupid to choose to become not stupid. He is stuck on stupid. Who will rescue him? The only way out is for God to act, to convert his thinking, to inject wisdom into his stupid mind, and to add humility to his wicked soul.

25. Some Questions for Empiricists

INTRODUCTION

The following are some questions that I posed to an atheist several years ago in the course of a written exchange. These questions and others like them are unanswerable by any belief system that places any dependence on the reliability of sensations, rendering them untenable.

The questions do not apply only to non-Christian systems, but almost all of them also apply to any system of so-called Christian theology, philosophy, or apologetics that affirms the reliability of sensations, including the one that claims that the reliability of sensations is "properly basic" so that it requires no rational justification, and that school of pseudo-presuppositionalism that claims that biblical presuppositions "account for" the reliability of sensations, induction, and science.

Even if it is "properly basic" to be able to see a mirage, it is also properly useless to do so unless we can know by sensation that it is a mirage. Therefore, properly basic reliability is not enough; the empiricist needs properly basic infallibility. But does he even have properly basic reliability?

Then, it is sheer blasphemy to claim that biblical principles can "account for," in a sense that approves or justifies, something that is inherently illogical or impossible, such as empiricism, induction, and science, whose method of experimentation adds the fallacy of affirming the consequent to the fallacies of empiricism and induction. Thus this philosophy, which claims to be a method of apologetics, makes God and Scripture accomplices to irrationality and falsehood. Nevertheless, it is true that Scripture can account for this foolish and wicked blasphemy by its doctrine of human depravity.

Pseudo-presuppositionalism claims to begin from biblical principles as its foundation, but when pressed on the matter, it affirms, even insists, that the reliability of sensations is the necessary epistemological starting point, that it is even the precondition by which the biblical principles are known. Thus unless this system can justify the reliability of sensations, it is shut out from the Scripture – from Christianity – itself. Since it indeed fails to justify the reliability of sensations whether with or without biblical presuppositions, it has by logical necessity made itself a heathen philosophy.

Of course, there are many additional questions and challenges that we can pose to empiricists, whether they are of the "Christian" or non-Christian variety. These are provided in my other writings.

QUESTIONS FOR EMPIRICISTS

Since sensation is so important to your view, I would like to understand what you are talking about.

What is a sensation? How did you learn the meaning of a sensation? How do you know when you are having a sensation? Do you sense the sensation to know that you have a sensation? If you sense a sensation, then how do you know that? Do you sense the sensation that senses the sensation? Then, do you sense the sensation that senses the sensation that senses the sensation? If this is not your view, then please explain. That is, if information comes from sensation, then how do you know when you are having a sensation?

Do you ever not have a sensation? How do you know that? Is a lack of sensation itself a sensation? Then, do you sense that you are not having a sensation?

Can you have a sensation and not be conscious of it? How do you know that? Have you ever sensed that you are not conscious of a particular sensation? If so, then are you not in fact conscious of it? Does this not return us to the original question, that is, can you have a sensation and not be conscious of it?

Or, are you conscious of all the sensations that you are having? How do you know that? Do you sense that you are sensing all? But then, do you sense that you sense that you are sensing all? How do you know? By sensation again?

Do you always sense everything around you? If not, how do you know that you are not sensing everything around you if you are not sensing everything in order to know what there is to sense and to know what is there but not being sensed?

How about radio waves? Are there radio waves? If so, do you sense radio waves? If you use a radio device to pick up these waves, then what are you sensing? The sound from the radio, or the radio waves? Do you hear words and music from the radio? If so, then are radio waves words and music? You might say that these are the "effects" of the radio waves. But then, you are only sensing the effects and not the cause. If so, how do you know the cause? If you infer from the effects to the cause, then how do you know that the inference is valid? By sensation again? What do you sense that would confirm this?

Also, how do you know that you do not know certain things? By sensation? Again, is the lack of sensation a sensation? How do you know this? Do you sense that a lack of sensation is a sensation?

Then, if you know that you do not know certain things, what are these "certain things"? If you know what they are, then you must know what they are by sensation, but then, this means that you have sensed them – if so, in what sense do you not know them?

Do you believe that the earth is flat, or that it is a sphere? If you believe that it is a sphere, then how do you know this? By sensation? How? Have you seen the earth from space?

Or do you trust the experts and the scientists? But then you did not sense what you claim to know, but you sensed only the testimony of these "experts." Maybe you have seen a picture of the earth? But a picture is not the earth, so at best you sensed a picture. How do you know that the picture was not "doctored"? By sensation? How do you sense "not doctored"? Also, a picture is flat, so how is the earth a sphere?

The sun looks pretty flat to me. Now suppose that I look at the sun from space and see that it is spherical, then what am I suppose to believe? If we assert that the sun and the earth are spheres and that they rotate, then the rotation is not really sensed, but calculated. Even then, how do you confirm that no errors in calculation were made? Again by sensation? What do you sense to know this?

Also, do you believe in atoms? Have you sensed an atom? Even if you have, how do you know that there are atoms other than the one that you have sensed? Or are we just supposed to trust the scientists? Are they your pope? If you do not believe all that they say, then why do you accept some of what they say and not others when you have sensed neither (except for their testimonies, if even that)? Have they seen atoms? Have they seen the effects of atoms? If so, how do they know that those effects were produced by atoms? And still, maybe they sensed the effects (if even that), and not the atoms.

How did you learn your name? Did you accept a word as your name, just because people called you something enough times? I can think of a number of things to call you other than your name, but will you accept one or more of those words as your name or names if I call you those things often enough? Why or why not? If I call you "Ralph" twice, would you accept that as your new name? How about six hundred times? Why or why not? How often is "often enough"? How did you know that it was enough when you first accepted your name? Did you sense "enough"? Or the effects of "enough"? How? Are you Pavlov's dog? But there is not always food after the sensation of the bell's ring, is there? Or did you somehow make an inference from what you heard? If so, did you sense the inference? Please write out the process of inference in syllogistic form so you can exhibit its logical validity.

Do you like logic? Do you want to be rational? Then how did you learn the law of contradiction? If you learn all things by sensation, then how did you sense the law of contradiction? If you sensed it used or applied and then inferred this law, then is your knowledge still from sensation? Or is it from sensation plus logical inference? But then, how come you used logical inference before you learned the law of contradiction? Also, before you learned the law of contradiction, did you have sensations? If so, did you apply the law of contradiction to those sensations, so that a sensation could not mean one thing and its contradictory at the same time? If you did not apply the law, then how come all sensations were not nonsense? If you did apply the law, how could you do it before you learned it?

How did you learn the word "God"? If all knowledge comes from sensation, then have you sensed God? If you have sensed God, then why are you an atheist? If you have not sensed God, then maybe you heard the word and inferred the meaning of the word, but then by sensation you only learned the sound and not the meaning, since you inferred the meaning. But then, did you and I infer the same thing out of the sound? Do we mean the same thing when we say "God"? If we do not mean the same thing, then all the arguments you have against "God" do not apply to me.

As for the question of personal identity, how do you know that you are the same person today as you were yesterday? Do you sense that you are the same person? But cannot two different things give you the same sensation? If so, then the problem remains. If not, then how do you know? That is, how or what have you sensed that no two things in this universe can give you the same sensation, so that you can always distinguish between different things?

26. A Gang of Pandas¹

~ 1 ~

I am a Christian, novice philosopher/logician, and scientist in molecular biology. I have been reading *Ultimate Questions* and *Presuppositional Confrontations*. In the latter you state the following about the reliability of science:

If what is said about scientific experiments is difficult for some people to understand, the problem of "affirming the consequent" may be more easily grasped. Consider the following form of argument:

1. If X, then Y
2. Y
3. Therefore, X

This form of reasoning, called "affirming the consequent," is always a formal fallacy in logic; that is, the structure of the argument is invalid. Just because Y is true does not mean that X is true, since there can be an infinite number of things that may substitute for X so that we will still have Y. Correlation is not the same as causation – but can science even discover correlation? Thus if the hypothesis is, "If X, then Y," the fact that Y turns up does nothing to confirm the hypothesis.

If what you say about science is true, that does not anger me or deter me from doing what I do; however, I want to understand what you are saying. From my point of view, when I am in the lab the argument goes like this:

1. If this solution turns green (X), then chemical Y is present (Y).
2. The solution turned green (X).
3. Therefore, chemical Y is present (Y).

Is this not valid? How am I misunderstanding what you have said?

Your example is valid, but it is something that occurs *after* the criticism against the scientific method. That is, the scientific method leads to false conclusions, and then these false conclusions are applied.

¹ Adapted from email correspondence.

Consider the following:

Argument A

A1. If I punch Tom in the face (X), then Tom will be injured (Y).

A2. Tom is injured (Y)

A3. Therefore, I have punched Tom in the face (X).

Argument B

B1. If Tom is injured (P), then I have punched Tom in the face (Q).

B2. Tom is injured (P).

B3. Therefore, I have punched Tom in the face (Q).

Argument B is valid, but Premise B1 depends on Argument A, and Argument A is invalid, since it commits the fallacy of affirming the consequent.

Premise B1 depends on Argument A, because by itself, it does not eliminate an infinite number of alternatives. If Tom is injured, it does not necessarily mean that I have punched him in the face. Maybe he walked into a wall. Maybe he fell down some stairs. Or, maybe Harry, Mary, Jones, or an infinite number of other possible persons or objects, in an infinite number of possible combinations, beat him in the face (e.g. an alien with a hammer, a monkey with a wrench, or a gang of pandas).

So Argument B is valid, but unsound, because Argument A is invalid. Argument A represents scientific experimentation (the attempt to discover cause-and-effect relationships by positing hypotheses and testing them). Argument B represents an *application* of the conclusions of scientific experimentation (an application of a supposedly true cause-and-effect relationship).

Therefore, although Argument B is valid, it is also completely worthless.

To make this even more clear with an illustration:

If water is wet (X), then Vincent Cheung is president (Y).

Water is wet (X).

Therefore, Vincent Cheung is president (Y).

Valid, but untrue and worthless.

Returning to your example, your Premise 1 is like Premise B1 above. By itself it does not exclude an infinite number of alternatives. Thus:

If this solution turns green (X), then an alien spat in it (Y).

This solution turned green (X).

Therefore, an alien spat in it (Y).

This is what the entire scientific enterprise amounts to: first, it is a systematic repetition of the fallacy of affirming the consequent, and second, it is a systematic application of the false conclusions so obtained.

This is not to insult scientists, but to remind them to remain humble before God, and acknowledge their ignorance, for God has made foolish the wisdom of this world. As long as man puts himself at the center of knowledge, thinking that by his own power he can discover all things, he shall discover nothing.

~ 2 ~

I completely agree with your last paragraph. I think the scientific community is rather arrogant, and thinks that it is the end-all-be-all of truth. Of course, it is probably because the community is run for the most part by secular humanists who hardly believe in objective truth.

Anyway, in all honesty I am still having trouble with something. You mention this in *Presuppositional Confrontations*, and that is the notion of controls. You address this by saying that there could be an infinite number of parameters needing to be "controlled" in an experiment (i.e., some undetected component in a solution). However, if the controls are constructed properly will we not end up compensating for those variables anyway?

The scientific method suggests that you must identify variables and perform controlled experiments. But the problem of infinite alternatives remain the same.

Suppose a scientist swings a pendulum, makes some objects bump into one another, or perform some kind of experiment like this. He identifies certain variables such as altitude, weight, temperature, and so on. However, he can never say that he has identified all variables, such as an alien messing with his experiment from space, or an unruly and invisible spirit tempering with his project for its own amusement.

These latter possibilities may seem absurd, but according to what standard are they absurd? Only according to the scientist's own assumptions. Also, even if we admit that these are absurd, there are still an infinite number of variables that may or may not be present. The scientist may be missing an entire category of variables. For example, what if the scientist has no concept of temperature? He cannot then possibly measure and control it in an experiment. Yet it might be a decisive factor. If he does not know about it, he cannot even say that he does not know about it. Neither can he say that he *knows* this category of variables does not exist. There is an infinite number of possible categories of variables that he is missing. Therefore, a scientist can never say that he has accounted for all relevant variables, and he can never claim to have "constructed properly" any experiment.

The scientist simply does not know – he assumes without argument, without evidence, and without proof. He can do what he wishes, but if he claims that this whole thing is *rational*, then he is just arbitrarily calling it so. In fact, from even a simple analysis of science, there is no way that a scientist can claim to have any rational contact with reality at all. And certainly, he would have no right to call the Christian irrational.

The idea is simple. To know that any experiment is "constructed properly" the scientist's knowledge must be "bigger" than the experiment. But if his knowledge is already "bigger" than the experiment, then he hardly needs to perform the experiment to gain

knowledge that is limited by the experiment. The only way to be sure that one has identified and controlled all variables that may affect the experiment is to possess omniscience. The conclusion is that only God can tell us about the universe.

~ 3 ~

After thinking about what you wrote for a bit, the question that lingers is this: Can I, first as a Christian and second a scientist, be consistent in trusting my results in the lab as far as pursuing truth? Granted, I as a Christian have the mind of Christ and recognize His Lordship over all creation, but does merely admitting that I know nothing and that God knows everything and trusting Him in my work of exploring His creation therefore give me the ability to describe my findings as truth? Or is the real truth the realization that my findings are true only inside the box that is "scientific study" as described by fallible humans rather than truth in the sense that Christ is Truth? If it is only true in a box, is it true at all?

I guess, now that what you have said about science makes sense to me I am wondering about my work and how I can worship and give God glory in my work if the work itself does not purpose to find truth outside the box of science.

There is no rational justification for saying that there is any truth at all in science. The inherent irrationality and even epistemological impossibility are built into its assumptions and method. There is no way to justify empiricism, induction, and the scientific method.

There is a school of thought that claims that if we will use the Bible as the first principle of our thinking, then the Bible can justify or at least "account for" these things that are unjustifiable when considered in themselves (sensation, induction, science, etc.). However, this just makes it worse. It is one thing to say that these things could be somehow rational in themselves, and that the only problem is that there is no rational foundation to place them on, although this to say this is perhaps nonsense in the first place. But it is much worse to realize that these things are irrational in themselves, so that no epistemological foundation can ever justify them, and then to insist that God and the Bible could justify them. This position makes God an accomplice to irrationality and falsehood. It is blasphemy. Even if we begin with God, we still cannot justify things that are false in themselves like " $1 + 1 = 83629473.9273$ " or "The devil is a golden retriever named Skip." A true first principle destroys falsehood; it does not justify or support it.

As for science, it can remain as long as it does not claim too much for itself. Please see "A Career in Science" in my *Doctrine and Obedience*.

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What about the results that science has yielded? Technology, medicine, the computers that we are currently using to communicate, the microwave that I used this morning, the ultrasound machine used to see my unborn son? If we take any type of medication, then are we relinquishing our health to the irrationality of science? Whether or not we can accurately describe truth may be another issue, but it can hardly be denied that science has yielded results that are of use to us.

You said that science can remain as long as it does not claim too much for itself, and again I agree. Does it not have its place, its role to play in our existence?

I have answered this question in "In God We Trust," in my *Blasphemy and Mystery*. But I will make some remarks about it here as well.

Think about what you are saying. It is as if you say, "I know that it is not true, but...." Well, if we have the first part, do we need to hear the second part?

To appeal to the effect of science (medicine, microwave, etc.), is only an appeal to the fallacy of affirming the consequent again. Affirming the consequent is just another way of saying an appeal to the result or effect. The assumption is that if you seem to be getting the result that you want or predict, then there must be some truth behind the assumption that yields this result. Again, that is a logical fallacy. Correlation does not indicate causation. But my contention is that science cannot even detect or establish correlation.

Of course science has a role. It is an irrational feeling in the dark. It can never claim to have the truth, and not just when it comes to religion. In this conversation with you, I have suppressed the problems with sensation and induction, but have focused on the method of science (the process of reasoning after the reliability of sensation and induction have been *assumed without proof, and even assumed despite proof to the contrary*). Once we introduce them back into the conversation, we would not even be able to get so far as to discuss method. That is, it is not that the scientist is feeling in front of him in the dark. He does not even have arms.

You might wish we could say more for science, but how? There is no rational basis to say more for it. Science touts itself as a rational enterprise, but here I am, giving arguments that even elementary school children can grasp and apply to completely destroy it. Science is essentially, pervasively, undeniably, incurably, and often arrogantly, irrational. To believe that it can discover truth is nothing other than superstition.

27. The Incomprehensibility of Dad

Or, the Henry-Peter Controversy.

Dad: "Henry, please empty the trash and take it out."

Henry: "Oh, you are so wise, so strong, and so great. I am just your worthless, stupid son. Your thoughts are not my thoughts. I can never understand what you are saying. Emp...tee... the tra...ashhh? This is a great mystery..."

Peter: "What's the matter with you? Dad just told you his thoughts. And he is making perfect sense. He is telling you to throw out the garbage. There is the bag. There is the door. Fill that bag with trash and walk outside with it."

Henry: "Blasphemy! Do you think that the greatness of our father can be explained? I don't care what you say. For that matter, I don't even care what he says. He cannot be understood. How dare you bring him down to your level? If I hear you say that Dad makes sense again, I am going to see to it that this family disowns you. You got that? (Screams) I will destroy you! I will kick...you...out!"

Dad: "Son, are you all right? Why don't you just accept what I say and do what I tell you?"

Henry: "(Screams) Shut up! I am just trying to show you some respect. Don't worry, Dad. Peter insults you, but I'll get him. (Sings) Hooowww greeeaaaat thooou arrrrt!"

So Peter takes out the trash. And Dad takes out Henry and puts him in a mental institution.

Henry fits right in, because there nothing makes sense, everything seems to contradict everything else, and everybody is just as confused as he is. Surrounded by contradictions, paradoxes, and antinomies, the thoroughly insane Henry is happy at last.

28. Sarcasm and Sovereignty²

If God is sovereign over all things, and everything including the Fall came about by his will, then why should I care about anything?

I never had a choice whether or not I existed – he created me a sinner, why should I care? And, if God is sovereign why should he care either way? He is only getting what he wants.

I am very confused, and I need to repent of this – but God is not willing repentance in my life right now.

Your question assumes that you should care about something only if it is not determined or only if it is not controlled by God. This premise is necessary for your question to be rational or to make any sense. Therefore, unless it is established, your question is arbitrary, random sounds in the air with no logical connection. Why should anyone care to answer it?

It is important to establish the assumption not only to make someone like me care about it, but also to make sense of any alternative. That is, even if your thoughts and actions are not determined, and not controlled by God, why should you care? Even if God had not determined or even caused the Fall, why should you care? Even if he did not create you a sinner, why should you care? If he created you neutral, why should you care to choose to become righteous or unrighteous? Why should you care? If he created you righteous, why should you care to remain righteous? Why should you care? What, you would not want to become a sinner and suffer the consequences? But why? Why should you care?

If your thoughts and actions are not determined and caused by God, but are rather entirely produced by your own control and sovereignty over yourself, so that your thoughts and actions are free, and produce effects entirely attributed to your metaphysical power, so what? Unless you demonstrate why and how meaning, significance, and the reason for caring is established on the basis of indeterminism or human freedom, you still have not found any reason to care.

What kind of person does not care about God, and life, about truth, and worship, and loving others, even though God has issued many commandments about these things? What kind of person would spurn the divine commands because God is sovereign and man is not free, and because divine sovereignty is incompatible with human freedom? A wicked and worthless person.

² Adapted from email correspondence.

Then, you say, "If God is sovereign why should he care either way? He is only getting what he wants." Why should he care, because he gets what he wants?! How is this different from saying, "Why should God care? He is getting what he cares about"? Or, "Why should he want anything? He is getting what he wants." Do you mean he should care only if he does not get what he cares about? Do you mean he should want something only if he does not get what he wants? Do you mean that to care and to want are by definition meaningless unless the care and the want are frustrated? If this is not what you mean, then what do you mean? Do you even know? If this is indeed what you mean, then why should I accept this premise? Or, is that just a careless and useless statement, and I am making too much out of it?

You are correct in saying that you are confused and that you need to repent. And I hope you are not being sarcastic about God granting repentance, because it is indeed he who grants or withholds it. Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). Paul writes, "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden," and that we instruct people, "in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 2:25), implying that it is up to him to grant repentance, but that he might not grant it.

You will have to excuse me for being blunt, but I do care when people question the truth and appear to be sarcastic about it. If God has not granted you repentance to believe the gospel, or if you think he has but subsequent obstinacy against God's word reveals that he in fact has not granted you repentance, then it means that you are still in your sin, and you will burn in hell when you die. But even if this is the case, you can take comfort in the fact that, since this has been determined by God, then although you will suffer extreme conscious torment for an endless duration in hell, you probably will not care.

29. What is the Point?³

If as you insist that men and women are either chosen by God for eternal life or eternal death, then there is absolutely no point at all in evangelism.

As with all challenges against the doctrines of divine sovereignty and divine election, this popular objection is easy to answer. It is also very sad, because the objection reveals the sinister attitude that is in this person's heart, something that he would probably refuse to state in explicit terms.

Anyone who raises this objection tells me that he is far from God and has no respect for him. It betrays an attitude that says, "Unless my role is at least as important and determinative as God's role, I find absolutely no point at all in doing what he tells me to do. Unless my disobedience will directly and necessarily contribute to someone's everlasting damnation – to cause him to burn in hell forever – there is no point in obedience toward God, none at all." I had more fear of God than this even before I became a Christian. I would have been too terrified to align myself with something like this.

In any case, this objection is used by many, if not most, of those who call themselves Christians but who resist the doctrines of divine sovereignty and divine election, and it tells us what they truly think about God. They come together every week to worship a God whose commands they would find pointless the moment they discover that he has more control than they thought, and that he is in fact not dependent on them to accomplish his plans. As they say, with friends like these...

May God have mercy on his people.

³ Adapted from email correspondence.

30. WCF, secondary causes, etc.⁴

Why do you think the Westminster Divines stated that God ordained whatsoever comes to pass and then also stated that God is not thereby the author of sin?

It seems that, like most theologians, they assumed that to cause evil is to commit evil; therefore, they had to distance God from evil. However, the assumption that to metaphysically cause evil is to morally commit evil is false, and rarely even mentioned or defended. It is taken for granted, but these are two separate issues. One deals with how something can happen at all, and the other deals with what moral laws God has declared to define what is good and what is evil. If he has not declared that it is evil for himself to metaphysically cause evil, then how dare men say that it is evil for him to do so?

To say that God is not the author of sin necessarily means that his sovereignty cannot be direct and exhaustive. That God is totally sovereign is something that the Bible clearly teaches. On the other hand, that God is not the author of sin is something that men wish to maintain against the Bible. Therefore, they affirm both, and most theologians attempt to work around it with permissive decrees (but the concept makes no sense), secondary causes (but does God directly cause and control these "secondary" causes or not?), and compatibilism (but this is irrelevant, since if God controls all things, then the fact that men make choices and what choices they make are also controlled by God, so that this means only that God is compatible with himself; thus the idea is a red herring that does not address the question).

When you refuse to accept nonsense and press the issue, they throw up their hands and call it a mystery, and call you a heretic if you insist that the biblical doctrine is clear. But if this is permitted, then anyone can hold any position on any issue, and just call it a mystery.

...the Westminster Confession on secondary causes and the author of sin: "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."

I believe that if a person is a Christian and somewhat intelligent, then if we were to repeat, "If God is not the direct metaphysical cause of something, then something else is," to his face over and over again, eventually he would realize what this really means and

⁴ Adapted from email correspondence.

would become just as alarmed and repulsed at the notion as we are. But perhaps both faith and intelligence are rare, and the combination even less likely.

As for secondary causation, I have addressed this a number of times. If all else fails, I can say that I did not write the books, but my computer did. The fact that I was typing on it when the books appeared does not nullify the authorship of the computer or its moral responsibility, but only establishes it. If the reply is that the computer is not an intelligent mind but a dead object, I would insist that Dual Core is superior to a lump of clay (Romans 9). In any case, if God's authorship is only so distant (I did not make the computer, the software, nor did I make or control the electricity), he might not be so clearly the author of sin.

...in the Westminster Confession it is stated: "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."

Arthur W. Pink wrote in a book about the sovereignty of God: Once more, it needs to be carefully borne in mind that God did not decree that Adam should sin and then inject into Adam an inclination to evil, in order that His decree might be carried out. No; "God cannot be tempted, neither tempteth He any man" (James 1:13). Instead, when the Serpent came to tempt Eve, God caused her to remember His command forbidding to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and of the penalty attached to disobedience! Thus, though God had decreed the Fall, in no sense was He the Author of Adam's sin, and at no point was Adam's responsibility impaired. Thus may we admire and adore the "manifold wisdom of God", in devising a way whereby His eternal decree should be accomplished, and yet the responsibility of His creatures be preserved intact.

If I am right, then they must be wrong. The question is, how can they be right without self-contradiction – that God controls all things, but he really doesn't, that God causes all things, but he really doesn't? The Reformed is fond of appealing to "mystery," "paradox," and "antinomy," which are nothing but more dignified and deceptive terms for saying, "Clearly, I contradict myself, but I don't care." Instead, it seems to me that divine sovereignty is an altogether clear and coherent doctrine. It is so easy to understand. I have also answered the almost universal abuse of James 1:13. Temptation and causation are two different things, and the topic is causation, not temptation.

We must submit to the direct teachings of Scripture and its necessary implications, and not the traditions and good intentions of men.

31. Lead Us Not Into Temptation⁵

In the Lord's Prayer, what does Christ have in mind when he says, "lead us not into temptation"?

He has in mind exactly what the words say – he is telling us to petition God to not lead us into temptation. The contrast immediately follows: "but deliver us from evil" or the evil one. Temptations are completely under God's control, and of course he leads people to temptations, as the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. As James 1:13 says, he does not tempt, neither can he be tempted; however, he initiates, sustains, and directs temptations through Satan and other created "things" (such as our lusts). The distinction is clear: God is not Satan, and God is not our lusts, but he causes and controls both in order to tempt people to sin.

Just as we know that God decrees many negatives things, such as sicknesses and disasters, and God's precepts teach us to face the negative things that he decrees (to pray to be healed, to endure, to comfort others, etc.), God also leads people into temptation, but his precept is for us to desire not to be tempted, and when tempted, to fight the temptation. This is analogous to the fact that it is God who decrees persecution against Christians, but it does not follow that we should surrender or compromise because of persecution. Rather, it is God's precept that we stand firm under it.

Is God the author of sin? Yes. Is God the tempter to sin? No. These are two different roles, but the Bible clearly makes him the leader-into-temptation. This does not really distance God from temptation, so if this is what someone is looking for, he will not find it. However, it is still a distinction that the Bible makes, but it is not an attempt to metaphysically distance God from evil.

What does it take for God himself to be the tempter? He could say to a person, "Go kill that person." What would be the problem with this? If he says that to a person, it would not be a temptation, but it would be a precept or a command, so that by definition it would be morally right and even obligatory for the person to perform it. Consider the command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. If God tells one person to kill another, it would not be murder.

So the distinction between the leader-into-temptation and the tempter is not intended to distance God from evil – we are not interested in that at all. It is a necessary distinction because whatever God tells a person to do is, by definition, right and obligatory. Therefore, he cannot be the tempter, since temptation is persuasion or enticement to deviate from or transgress something that God has said. If God himself does it, it would not be temptation, but a moral precept and command.

⁵ Adapted from email correspondence.

32. There is No Real Synergism⁶

In your *Systematic Theology*, you say that sanctification is synergistic, because we cooperate with God, even though he is the cause of our deeds, the cause of our good works. But, in this sense, couldn't we say that the conversion is synergistic as well? I'm not talking about regeneration or justification, but about the act of believing. Because, even though God is the author and the cause of our faith, we exercise the faith, like in sanctification. Wouldn't it be better to say that even our sanctification is monergistic?

Let us use chess as an analogy. All analogies have their limitations, but as long as we focus on what an analogy is meant to illustrate, it can be useful.

There are two "levels" of reality in a chess game: [1] The actions of the players, and [2] The relationships between the chess pieces. If we are talking about #2, then "knight takes pawn" makes sense. But when we say this, of course we do not mean that the knight moves itself and removes the pawn from the chessboard. We assume that the knight has no inherent power to move itself, but we assume that a player caused the movement. However, as long as we are speaking on level #2, we do not need to mention the player, even though he is a necessary part of the whole picture. But when the topic switches over to a discussion of cause, to level #1, then "knight takes pawn" makes no sense as a description of cause, since it is not a description of cause. We must talk about the player.

Now, to bridge this analogy over to our topic, let us add a few things to the chess game: [A] Suppose the chess pieces are in fact sentient – intelligent beings with awareness, thought processes, and feelings. [B] Suppose any event on the chessboard, any action associated with the chess pieces, must be entirely caused by a player. This includes the thoughts and feelings in the chess pieces. [C] Suppose that some actions taken by the player on the chess pieces involve an awareness in the chess pieces, and some actions do not.

Given B, it is conceivable that we might have no interest in distinguishing the two kinds of actions in C. But suppose we are interested in making a distinction, then we can call the first kind C1, and the second kind C2.

We are now ready to apply this to the topic of divine sovereignty and salvation.

If the topic is metaphysics, or causation, then terms like "synergism" and "secondary cause" make no sense. They are meaningless and useless. When the main topic is divine sovereignty, we are indeed talking about metaphysics, about causation. This means that I

⁶ Adapted from email correspondence.

oppose the traditional doctrine on the matter. It is absurd to say that God's sovereignty does not take away but rather establishes "the liberty or contingency of secondary causes." Of course liberty and contingency are taken away. They, along with the very idea of secondary causes, are entirely destroyed and rendered meaningless.

If the topic is the relationships between created objects, then the term "secondary cause" still makes no sense, since if the discussion is limited on this level, then the "cause" is in fact not "secondary," and what is "secondary" is not really the "cause." I sometimes, but rarely, use the term to accommodate tradition (so that people know what I am talking about, although, since the term itself is nonsense, I wonder if anyone knows what we are talking about!), which I try not to completely overturn, although one can hardly blame me if I were to do so. In any case, I usually make some qualifications to avoid too much confusion.

My use of the term "synergism" is also to accommodate tradition. There should be some way to distinguish between C1 and C2. All things are caused by God, but things like election and justification are not associated with any awareness or feeling in man, whereas sanctification – such as resisting temptation, or even moving your lips to pray – involves some conscious effort, some awareness and feeling in man. (Note that in my *Systematic Theology*, I also use consciousness of effort as the reason to make a distinction for sanctification.) In C2, even the effort and the awareness are directly caused by God, so that metaphysically speaking, man does not in fact contribute or cooperate – creatures never contribute or cooperate in the metaphysical sense, but only in a relational sense.

Thus some distinction between justification and sanctification is warranted. Nevertheless, your question raises the issue as to whether synergism is the best term to describe this distinction, since the idea of "energy" is involved, and man does not in fact contribute any inherent energy from within himself to cooperate with God. Even any "energy" that is placed in man must be moved by God to function. In sanctification, God causes man to cooperate with the divine precepts while causing an awareness of effort in man.

As for whether there should be a distinction between conversion and sanctification, I see your point, but a distinction could be warranted. This is because, at sanctification (e.g. when one resists temptation), a person already has faith, but when a person is converted, he receives faith – there is no spiritually good effort to receive faith. In terms of causation, it could be argued that there is no difference – all things are caused directly and solely by God. But in terms of relation between created things, there is a difference. In sanctification, God has already installed a godly disposition in man, and causes him to be aware of his efforts.

The bottom line is that there is no real synergism in any action taken by creatures, but if we need a word to signal a distinction between two kinds of events caused by God – one without man's awareness, the other with man's awareness – then "synergism" is one option, although it is arguably an imperfect and misleading one.

33. The Lord's Supper: Mysticized and Miniaturized

Three sets of verses are considered in connection with the Lord's Supper. The first comes from the Synoptic Gospels: Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, and Luke 22:14-20. The second is 1 Corinthians 11:20-34. And the third is John 6:53-57.

This third passage is usually included in an exposition of the doctrine; however, it is unlikely that it refers to the Lord's Supper, and thus should be excluded. Robert Reymond offers four reasons.⁷ First, the context does not fit. Jesus was addressing people who would not have understood a reference to an ordinance that he had not yet instituted. Second, "flesh" is not the word he later used when he instituted the ordinance. Third, his words are absolute and pertain to salvation. It is impossible that, to attain salvation, Jesus required participation in an ordinance that he had not yet instituted. And in fact, the biblical teaching is that a person attains salvation before he participates. Fourth, the context stresses hearing and believing his words (v. 63), so that the eating of his flesh and the drinking of his blood are best understood as metaphors for the acceptance of his teachings.

To illustrate the fourth point, Jesus called himself the bread from heaven, or manna (John 6:30-40), but that referred to spiritual nourishment through faith in him, and not the work of atonement symbolized by broken bread. He makes this very point in that context: "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life" (v. 40). Thus it would be an equivocation to identify this bread of nourishment with the bread of communion.

Therefore, the New Testament doctrine of the Lord's Supper mainly rests on the Synoptic and Pauline verses.

The Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper is without doubt superior to the abomination of Catholicism. That said, it has its own problems. Although less severe, these problems continue to maintain human tradition and superstition above the plain teaching of Scripture. Of course, not all of them are unique to the Reformed tradition. Here I will list two of them.

First, the Lord's Supper has been mysticized. This is seen in two aspects of the Reformed doctrine, and these are the "real" presence and the spiritual nourishment associated with the elements. Calvin's formulation was indefinite and unintelligible, even absurd. As Reymond points out, Charles Hodge regarded it as "peculiar," and William Cunningham said that it was "about as unintelligible as Luther's consubstantiation" and "perhaps, the greatest blot in the history of Calvin's labours as a public instructor." Robert Dabney

⁷ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 963-964.

denounced it as "strange" and "not only incomprehensible, but impossible."⁸ Perhaps Calvin himself perceived the difficulties, and finally resorted to an appeal to mystery – a favorite excuse of Reformed theologians to affirm something that they cannot defend, or that they cannot even state intelligibly.⁹

In any case, the definitive hurdle is that the Synoptic and Pauline verses do not mention, associate, or even hint at any sort of presence or nourishment when it comes to the Lord's Supper. There is no biblical basis for them. They appear to be completely made up in order to romanticize the ordinance, and to infuse it with mystical piety. Thus Calvin's formulation cannot be rescued, and to the extent Reformed variations maintain these two aspects of the formulation, they perpetuate the absurdity.

Second, the Lord's Supper has been miniaturized. The Synoptic verses indicate that the ordinance was instituted in the context of a full meal. The Pauline verses assume that the Supper was substantial enough to satisfy hunger and for someone to get drunk. The apostle commanded the believers to wait for each other before they eat, or if they were too hungry, to eat at home (1 Corinthians 11:20-21, 33). This would make no sense if the ordinance consisted of tiny cups and crackers that were consumed in a few seconds.

The Lord's Supper is a figure for feasting at the Master's table. In oriental cultures, and in a weaker form also in Western cultures, it is a sign of friendship to dine with another person, and it is a sign of rejection to refuse to eat with him (1 Corinthians 5:11). To sit at the king's table was a tremendous honor (2 Samuel 9:7), and those who eat together are the dearest friends and comrades. In the Lord's Supper, Christians sit together at the King's table – regardless of race, status, or gender – to eat and drink to his honor, in remembrance of his sacrifice for us, and in anticipation of his return. This bond by virtue of our common allegiance to the King of Kings is stronger than blood relation, and the Table provides the context for this bond to manifest and develop.

All of this is obscured when the ordinance is reduced to tiny cups and crackers. The full meaning of the Table, the deep fellowship, the joy and laughter, the comfort and encouragement, the full remembrance of what the Lord has done over hours of conversation, are all lost. All debates concerning the elements are limited in significance as long as we are arguing about tiny cups and crackers, because all this time there is in fact no actual *supper* to speak of, and the whole practice has been much more unbiblical, ritualistic, and meaningless than people realize.

⁸ Reymond, p. 961.

⁹ Vincent Cheung, *Blasphemy and Mystery*.

34. Civil Marriage

Marriage is an ordinance of creation, and not an ordinance of cult (the word refers to a form of worship, not necessarily negative). It is fundamentally different from something like baptism and communion.

Baptism and communion were established in the context of cult, and therefore must be associated with the proper cult. For this reason, Catholic baptism and communion do not count. If I remember correctly, Calvin suggested that a person who has been baptized under Catholicism does not need to be baptized again. I disagree. That person has never been baptized. A Mormon or a Buddhist can throw a bucket of water on me, but that does not amount to Christian baptism. I deny that Catholics are Christians, and therefore I deny that Catholic baptism is Christian baptism. So I oppose many Reformed and other Christians on this matter.

It is said that the legitimacy and efficacy of the rite are associated with the faith of the recipient. I agree, but if the person considers non-Christian baptism legitimate, then his faith is defective. Thus Catholic or Mormon baptism is never Christian baptism, because the person who willingly receives this baptism cannot be a Christian, so that both the cult and the faith are false. As for infant baptism, the issue of the recipient's faith may be irrelevant at the time of baptism; however, if the Church of Satan can baptize an infant, and the baptism is considered legitimate when the recipient matures and looks back with the proper faith, then is it necessary to be baptized in any church at all? The parents can perform the rite well enough at their own kitchen sink. In any case, baptism by the Church of Satan is not Christian baptism and can never become Christian baptism.

In some of their confessions, the Reformed has codified the policy that only duly ordained ministers can perform baptism or serve communion. This is utter nonsense. There is zero biblical basis for this. Rather, the Bible says that all Christians are priests in Christ, and since we are priests, and since there is no explicit exception stated, then at least in principle even a Christian woman or child can perform baptism and serve communion, just like any priest has the authority to declare and dispense the graces of the deity he serves. It seems that the only thing forbidden to women is official or governmental authority in the church. Big difference. For the sake of church order, some individuals, most probably the ministers, are designated to perform baptism and serve communion, but this does not mean only they have the authority to do it.

The Reformed are rather inconsistent and hypocritical about this. They strongly assert the priesthood of all believers, and on this basis they declare that all vocations are holy, even as holy as the gospel ministry. This is rubbish, since no priest can make prostitution holy. And if plumbing is just as holy as preaching, then why is it that both the plumber and the preacher must preach the word of God to the world? Why not just do more plumbing? But the preacher is not remiss if he does no plumbing at all.

Rather, the proper application is that since all believers are priests, all believers possess the authority of priests and can perform the functions of priests. Entirely independent from the church and other believers, Christians have direct access to God through Jesus Christ, and they can administer – yes, even women – the gifts of God under Jesus Christ. It is a denial of the priesthood of all believers to limit priestly functions to so-called "ordained" ministers – as if there is an elite class of believers, which is precisely the thing that the Reformers claimed they opposed. There is no super-priesthood within or above the believer's priesthood.

Marriage is different, because it is not associated with any cult. Rather, what "makes" a marriage is the agreement between a man and a woman that they will form such a relationship. God is the only necessary witness, and he is the witness to every marriage, whether or not he is acknowledged. The first marriage had no third human witness. There was no state and no church, unless we use the word "church" so loosely that Adam and Eve counted as the church. Even then, we perceive a difference, since there was no formal cult.

Thus no state and no church can create or destroy a marriage – the relationship has no necessary relationship with them, but it is formed only between the man and the woman before God. The state and the church can only acknowledge the agreement between the man and the woman, and the agreement still stands even if the state and the church refuse to acknowledge it. The church must be especially careful to remember this – it has no mystical power to form a union, so it must not claim to have such power.

The implication is consistent with what (I hope!) most people already acknowledge. We acknowledge that non-Christian couples are indeed married, no matter how the marriage occurred. If they say they are married, then we believe that they are, and we expect them to behave as if they are married, so that all biblical principles concerning marriage apply, including male leadership, female submission, prohibitions against adultery, and so on.

If the man runs off with another woman and marries her, we would not shrug and say, "Well, he was unmarried in the first place, so he did nothing wrong." No, we would say that he was already married, and thus he has committed adultery, and polygamy. In other words, it does not matter whether a couple marries under a state, church, or even a voodoo ceremony – if they agree that they are married, they are married. The ceremony is just a formality added on to the actual marriage agreement. Thus a man and a woman married under Catholicism do not need to be married again, because they were not married by Catholicism, but by their own agreement. Of course the Bible includes records of marriage ceremonies, but as history, not as a doctrine teaching that those ceremonies are necessary to make a marriage. What *God* has put together, let no man pull asunder – man has no power to do either.

Christians regard marriage as special and spiritual. I agree. However, this does not permit the church to make it into something that it is not. It is not a sacrament. It is an agreement instituted in creation, not cult. To reserve some special power to the church to "make" a

marriage union is Catholic thinking. It would be very hypocritical for Protestants, and especially the Reformed, to disagree with what I am saying here.

No human ceremony is strictly necessary beyond the agreement of the man and the woman. Nevertheless, when we live in a society, there are often ceremonies and procedures added on top of that basic marriage agreement so that the relationship can be recognized in that society, and so that the couple can function as a married unit. This is why we register with the government. Thus state marriage is acceptable, because no state or church really makes the marriage.

Some Christians might be uncomfortable with this, but the unease is due to human traditions. The position asserted does not loosen the standard of marriage, but makes it strict, honorable, and universal. It affirms that God holds all marriages accountable, not only those that were performed in a church. He holds all non-Christian marriages to biblical standards, and of course, they can never live up to it.

Any person considering civil marriage should settle this on the basis of the word of God, defying human tradition, so that his conscience may line up with the truth, and then he will be free to act boldly and unashamed.

35. Homosexuality and the Wrath of God

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion....Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:26-27, 32)

As Paul makes the case that every person has sinned and that every person falls short of the glory of God, he cites homosexuality as a prime example of wickedness. This judgment is offensive to non-Christians, and even a significant part of the contemporary Church rejects it. They offer a number of powerless arguments.

There is the "love is always right" argument. They say, "How can it be wrong for two people to love each other, even if they are of the same gender? If they love each other, then it is right and good." Love is never wrong, that is true. But what is love? The Bible says that love is a summary of God's law. It is a summary of what God tells us about how we are to treat people. Since God forbids homosexuality, homosexuality never comes from love, and love never leads to or coexists with homosexuality.

In fact, to entertain or even act on a homosexual attraction to another person is to treat that person in a way that is forbidden by God's law, and to invite that other person to also think and behave in a way that is forbidden. Therefore, homosexuality comes from hate, and not love. Love is often mixed into the equation because the homosexual experiences physical and/or psychological attraction, dependence, and affinity to another person of the same gender. But the proper word is lust, not love.

This way of thinking is contrary to the philosophy of man. To illustrate, the Bible says that if you do not discipline your child with the rod – if you do not hit him for the purpose of instruction – then you hate him. But people who refuse to use physical punishment appeal to precisely the opposite reason – they say it is because they love their children. So we return to the definition of love. The Bible says that love is obedience to God's law in the way we treat people. If you love your child, you will use physical punishment whenever it is needed. If you do not, you hate your child.

Likewise, homosexuals do not love one another. They hate one another. They want to use one another to satisfy their own lust, and they want their partners to cooperate in continuing a lifestyle that incurs God's punishment. How is that love? If I love you, even if I am unable to resist temptation, I would urge you to flee this thing that has ensnared me: "Run! Save yourself! Do not be like me! Do not be punished as I surely will be!" If, like Eve, you disobey God, and then invite another to disobey God along with you, there

can be hardly a more vivid depiction of hate. If I decide to rob a bank and ask my wife to help me, it can only mean that I do not love her as much as I say I do.

There is the "no harm done" argument. They say, "As long as we are not hurting anybody, it is none of your business." The standard is arbitrary. On what basis do they say that right and wrong is determined by whether it hurts someone? Without a basis that they can defend against me, I have no reason to accept this as a standard of ethical judgment. Certainly, they cannot appeal to the Christian worldview to support this principle, since it is the Christian worldview that condemns homosexuality, and it is the Christian worldview that they oppose.

Also, what is their definition of harm? Even if their lifestyle does not directly and obviously harm me in the physical sense, is harm limited to the physical? What if their lifestyle affects me psychologically? That is, what if homosexuality offends and repulses me? If that does not count, then do they give blanket permission to the whole world to harm them psychologically? Thus as long as we do not directly and obviously harm them in the physical sense, we can say anything we want about homosexuality, and it is none of their business. Perhaps this is unacceptable to them, but in any case, it is necessary to define harm. Otherwise, the argument is arbitrary and meaningless, and can be dismissed without further consideration.

There is the "mutual consent" argument. They say, "As long as the relationship is consensual, it is no one else's business what two people do with each other." This is just as arbitrary as the "no harm done" argument. Who established this standard, and why must I accept it? And it is like one argument for abortion: "Does a woman not have the right to do what she wants with her body?" Of course not. We are God's creation, and only he has the right to decide what we should do with our bodies. Similarly, mutual consent between two people is irrelevant. They need God's consent to proceed. But he does not consent. He forbids what they consent to do with each other.

There is the "animals do it" argument. Some animals seem to exhibit homosexual behavior. This is irrelevant. Just because animals do something does not make it right even for them, let alone for us. Just as homosexuality has arisen in humans because of sin, the Fall of Adam has also brought down a curse on the rest of creation. If animal behavior is used as a standard for human behavior, then maybe the reverse is also true. Since I oppose homosexuality, perhaps chimpanzees should speak up too. In any case, some animals are cannibals, and some eat their own excrements. If you are going to appeal to animal behavior, at least be consistent about it.

There is the "born this way" argument. Some people, they say, are born homosexuals. They cannot help it. It is in their genes. But genetics is irrelevant. First, science cannot provide rational support for a genetic argument, because science itself is irrational. Science depends on sensation, induction, and experimentation. But sensation is unreliable, and an empirical epistemology is easily refuted. Induction is a formal fallacy, and the conclusion is never a necessary inference from the premises. As for experimentation, it involves a repeated use of sensation and induction, propelled by a

method that is characterized by the fallacy of asserting the consequent, so that the whole thing spirals into one arbitrary and impossible conclusion after another. They call these scientific theories.

But for a moment let us pretend that science can discover truth. Let us pretend that there are such things as genes. Let us pretend that genes are what science says they are. Let us pretend that science has discovered a gene that is associated with homosexuality. Then let us pretend that man cannot change his genes. After all this pretending and supposing, the whole argument still suffers from irrelevance. So what if some people are born homosexuals? So what if they cannot help it? This does not make homosexuality right, and for that matter, it does not make homosexuality wrong. It is entirely irrelevant. Does not even science say that some people are born more violent or more susceptible to alcohol addiction? Ah, I will not press this point, since science may change its verdict tomorrow, next week, or ten years from now. They call this scientific progress.

The Bible says that all men born after Adam are sinful at conception. We are all born sinners. Whether something is sin has nothing to do with birth, with choice, or with freedom. The Christian's definition of sin has to do with God's command. If God says something is wrong, then it is wrong to do it, regardless of the context or choice, and regardless of freedom. In fact, the Bible says that the non-Christian is unable to obey God's law. If sin presupposes the freedom or ability to obey God's command, or to not sin, then all non-Christians are already sinless, since all of them are unable to obey God, and they would require no salvation. However, it is precisely because they are sinful and unable to change that they need Jesus Christ to save them.

If homosexuality is inseparably tied to a person's genes, then this means that even if he becomes a Christian, he might still experience temptations in that area. He might still experience temptations even if it is not tied to his genes. If he is tempted after conversion, is homosexuality still a sin? Sure. Is this person saved from his sin? Certainly, if he trusts in Christ to save him, and in the Holy Spirit to help him overcome his temptations. What is unacceptable is for this person to deny that homosexuality is a sin at all. Nevertheless, our thinking does not need to stop at this point. If homosexuality is inseparably tied to a person's genes, then this only means that, if God wills, he will change the genes after conversion. Why not? God can deliver a person from homosexuality even without changing his genes. There is nothing impossible with God. But if God does not see fit to manifest entire deliverance at this time, then the person must honor God by his suffering and perseverance.

There is the "there are other sins" argument. Is this a defense, or an admission? Certainly there are other sins. Perhaps the point is that Christians should not focus so much on homosexuality. My first answer is that we do not. We also talk about unbelief, envy, greed, murder, theft, and many other sins. If they think that we only talk about homosexuality, it is because they pay attention only when we talk about homosexuality. And my second answer is that, if they want us to talk even less about homosexuality, and give other sins a greater share of our attention, then they should not spend so much time rubbing it in everybody's face, and trying to legitimize it and glorify it.

There is the "it's the idolatry" argument. Some smart alecks who call themselves scholars assert that, in a text like Romans 1, the Bible is really condemning idolatry, as pagan worship was commonly accompanied by homosexual acts. Now, I have the suspicion that those who would excuse homosexuality this way will likely find some other excuse for pagan religions if that were the topic. In any case, the argument fails because the Bible refers to the lust of the homosexuals and calls their relations unnatural. These factors stand independent of idolatry. The association with idolatry is significant, but it is incidental and unnecessary. Homosexuality can occur apart from idolatry, and when it does, the lust is still there and the relation is still unnatural, contrary to what God regards as natural. This argument makes things even worse for the homosexuals, because it draws our attention to the fact that God does not condemn only the overt act, but also the very desire of the homosexuals.

This brings us to the "none of your business" argument, which is attached to many of the other arguments: "If there is love, it is none of your business. If there is no harm, it is none of your business. If there is consent, it is none of your business." So, they say, "What gives you the right to interfere with our affairs?" My answer shall remind us that our disagreement is really an effect of a prior and broader disagreement – it is a result of the clash between the Christian worldview and the non-Christian worldview, the Christian basis of thinking and judgment and the non-Christian basis of thinking and judgment.

The Christian faith addresses people's lives all the time, and when it does, it speaks to people's very thoughts, desires, and motives. Thus when Jesus talked about adultery, he did not mean only the overt sexual act, but the lust itself counts as sin. The Bible certainly regards theft and fraud as sins, but covetousness is also condemned. As a Christian, I preach the Bible's message. So of course your life is my business, and not only your actions, but your very thoughts. Now, you do not need to tell me your actions, and I have no power to see your thoughts. You are not accountable to me – I am not the one who will send you to hell. You are accountable to God, but he wants me to tell you that.

And this also answers the "who are you to judge" argument. This is the same argument that the people of Sodom used when they were trying to break down Lot's door so that they could have sex with the handsome angels (Genesis 19). If God had not said a word about homosexuality, I would be perfectly happy to let you eat your own feces like the animals do. As it is, I am not the judge, but there is one who judges, and I am telling you about him, and what he will do to you if you do not repent.

So what will God do to the homosexual? The Bible is clear about this, but non-Christians do not want to hear it. Many of those who call themselves Christians refuse to accept it. So Paul says, "Do not be deceived." Do not let someone lie to you, and do not lie to yourself about this. "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor

slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). If you are a homosexual, God puts you together with idolaters, adulterers, prostitutes, thieves, and such. He says that if you are a homosexual, you will go to hell. There is a great temptation to disagree with this, or to explain this away, but any other opinion is deception.

There is hope. The Bible continues, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (v. 11). The Corinthians *were* some of these things. They were idolaters, thieves, adulterers, homosexuals, heading toward everlasting punishment, pain, misery, and madness that continue forever. Jesus Christ saved them and changed them, so they were no longer idolaters, no longer thieves, no longer adulterers, and no longer homosexuals.

Consider someone who has spent all his life practicing witchcraft. The Bible teaches that God would damn this spiritual rebel to hell. After this person is converted to the Christian faith, and before he has become skillful in the things of God, there may remain a strong temptation to go back to the things that he is familiar with. He had depended on them for a sense of security, control, power, for relief from worries about the future, and for assurance as he faced difficulties in life. The temptation itself does not mean that his conversion has failed, but it means that he must remind himself that these things that he used to believe in were untrue and unreliable, and that he must press on in faith and grow in it. He must learn to trust in Jesus Christ both for this life and the life to come. The worst thing that he can do is to convince himself that witchcraft is not forbidden after all.

It is possible for the homosexual to change, even if temptations remain. The convert must abandon his sinful past, his false love and evil desires, and learn to trust Jesus Christ, and develop the right kind of love and the right kind of relationships. When temptations come, resist. When temptations overcome, repent. Keep learning. Keep trying. Do not give up. Do not yield to spiritual fatigue. Do not escape guilt by excusing sin. The worst thing that a person can do is to convince himself that homosexuality is not a sin after all. That would be like a return to witchcraft, to murder, to adultery, and to idolatry. This person is deceived if he thinks that he is saved from hell.

Because a significant part of the Church now condones homosexuality, we must also consider the status of the people. The same passage that says God pours out his wrath upon the homosexuals also condemns those who approve of them: "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them" (Romans 1:32). Their status is the same as the homosexuals, and the status of homosexuals is the same as idolaters, murderers, thieves, and adulterers.

What are we to do with a non-Christian murderer? We preach Christ to him, calling him to repent and believe the gospel. What are we to do with a person who calls himself a Christian, but who preaches that murder is acceptable to God, or who endorses murderers for the ministry? We excommunicate him, and then treats him as a non-Christian,

because that is what he is. The same policy must apply to homosexuals and those who support them. We preach repentance to non-Christian homosexuals, we excommunicate professing Christians who condone homosexuality, and we also excommunicate those who refuse to excommunicate them.

By excommunication, I mean that we must declare them as non-Christians, that we must decidedly declare that God will send them to hell, that we must shun them in all social and business transactions whenever possible, and that we must physically remove them from church and seminary premises. The only way for them to regain fellowship with believers is to renounce their former opinion and to declare that homosexuality is indeed a sin, and that to condone it is also a sin, and to offer an informed and sincere profession in Christ, that righteousness is as God defines it, and that though all have fallen short, Christ brings us into the kingdom of heaven by giving us faith in him.

36. Conversation on Racism

(Based on an actual conversation.)

Samuel: What a bunch of ignorant people!

Vincent: What are you so upset about?

S: Ugh. I am referring to this news article reporting on a case of blatant racial discrimination. It disgusts me to think that, in this day and age, there are still those who treat people according to their skin color.

V: I see. You said that these racists are ignorant people.

S: Yeah!

V: What exactly are they ignorant of?

S: Sorry?

V: You said that racists are ignorant people. If I understand you correctly, and if your words mean anything, then by associating racism with ignorance, you are asserting that racists lack certain information, and that if they were to learn this information, they would not be racists. What is this information that they lack?

S: Um...they are ignorant of the fact that all human beings are really the same.

V: I see. Racism treats people as if they are different, but the truth is that they are really the same. Therefore, racism is wrong.

S: Yeah.

V: How do you know that people are really the same? On what basis do you think this?

S: Science has provided us with so much knowledge about human beings, and it has shown that, whether black or white, we are all the same.

V: I do not share your confidence in science. In fact, I think that science is an irrational enterprise that cannot discover or prove anything. This is because science relies on sensation, induction, and experimentation. However, let us put that aside for the moment, and assume that it can discover truth. Your claim is that science proves that all human beings are the same, but it seems that it has done the opposite. Is it not a scientific

opinion that some people, because of their race or their gender, are more susceptible to certain diseases?

S: That is true. But this is not an essential difference.

V: So there are differences between the races. To maintain your position, you have to say that these are non-essential differences. This only adds to your problem, since now you must define and defend a standard for determining essential and non-essential differences. Even if this specific difference of the susceptibility to diseases is not true, there are indeed differences between the races. At the least, we can say that their skin colors are different! Unless you are able to define and defend a standard, how can you say that skin color itself is not the essential difference? Maybe skin color is precisely the factor that makes a race superior and another inferior. Perhaps it is the most important difference.

S: We ought to judge people according to their character, and not their color.

V: But why do you believe this? And what gives you the right to impose this standard on everyone else? Also, what is good character, and what is bad character? How does science tell you any of this? Why not judge people by their physical beauty or strength, education, or wealth? Why not judge people by their ability to juggle or to win at poker? As it is, I can just as easily assert that we ought to judge people according to their color, and not according to their character.

S: Are you a racist?

V: I would be happy to tell you what I think about race, discrimination, and so on, but that is not immediately relevant to this part of our discussion. What matters now is this: You said that racists are ignorant people, but you are unable to define and defend what it is that you think they are ignorant of. You said that all people are the same, but when questioned, even you agreed that all people are not the same. Then, you said that the differences between them are non-essential, but you are unable to define and defend a standard to judge between essential and non-essential differences, and to do it in a way that everyone must accept.

S: So where does this leave us?

V: Your claim is that racists are ignorant people. They do not realize that all people are really the same, but you are not a racist because you realize that all people are the same. It seems that your position on racism is important to you, since you were so disgusted with the racists. But it turns out that your position cannot withstand the slightest scrutiny, and you really have no justification for it. You assume a position of knowledge and enlightenment, but you are just as ignorant as the racists.

You are careless. You are unintelligent. You are ignorant. You present yourself as someone who possesses knowledge, but you have not really thought through the things

that you believe, even those things that are important to you. Thus you are also dishonest and hypocritical. You are usually able to get away with it because other people are also like you, and they agree with you. But now that I have exposed you, where are you going to run?

You are a non-Christian. What is your basis for denying God and Jesus Christ? You say that Christians are irrational, but have you thought through your own position? Or is it just as careless, foolish, and dishonest as your reason for affirming racial equality? You see, you think that you are intellectually competent, informed, and honest. But you are none of these things. You are stupid, ignorant, and dishonest. And your rejection of the Christian faith is also stupid, ignorant, and dishonest.

The Bible tells me that you know about the Christian God, and if we continue this conversation, I will show you more and more that this is the case. But you are too stupid and wicked to admit it. You are dishonest, so you try to suppress what you know. But God's reality and precepts are so evident that you cannot consistently deny him. Perhaps your attitude toward racism is a distorted effect of this knowledge that is built into your very being.

You think I am harsh in speaking to you like this. But I am the best friend that you could have. Think about it: I can take apart everything that you believe in a matter of seconds, and this means that intellectually and spiritually, you are in a lot of trouble. Your whole life is a lie. And if you cannot even fool me, do you think that you can fool God? The Bible says that his wrath is poured out against people who suppress their knowledge about him – people like you. You are in a lot of danger right now. Your only hope is to abandon your pride, and admit your foolishness and wickedness, and call out to Jesus Christ – he is the only one who can save you. Let us discuss this further, for if God has mercy on you, this is what you will do.

37. Teaching Children

There are two popular false assumptions when it comes to teaching children about the Christian faith. The first is that they are not interested, and the second is that they do not understand. They think that children are shallow and stupid.

Of course many children are not interested in the things of God – even adult reprobates are uninterested in them. But there are elect children, and they are very interested. Then, adults are out of touch with reality if they think that children cannot understand concepts like God, sin, man, redemption, atonement, marriage, divorce, sex, adultery, homosexuality, abortion, war, death, heaven, hell, and so on. Children can have some understanding of all of these by the time they are 3 or 4. If Christians assume that they are too young to understand, then the children will probably get their information from non-Christians.

All the children books that I have come across (of course, I have not read them all, and I hope there are many exceptions) either assert or assume the above two errors. And so they often either use teaching methods like stories and games, or they are very diluted. If they manage to avoid too much frivolity and dilution, they nevertheless tell the children that they should not understand what is being discussed.

One example of this is Bruce Ware's *Big Truths for Young Hearts* (Crossway, 2009), a recent bestseller. The book is a systematic theology for young people that is neither frivolous nor diluted. However, the reader is repeatedly told that the topics discussed are hard to understand, although this is often preceded or followed by a clear exposition of Ware's position. That is, even when the matter is obviously easy to understand and to explain, Ware insists that we are not supposed to find it straightforward.

On page 31, when Ware begins a discussion on God's eternity and independence, he says, "This is a very difficult idea for us to understand, since we do not know of anything like this – and that's because there is nothing in all of creation that is like God." First, even as a child, I find the idea very easy to understand, and I think that I am not alone in this. Second, Ware's reason for why it should be difficult is ridiculous. If God's nature is difficult to understand because he is unique, then the first time a person encounters any object at all, he should find it equally as difficult to understand as God's nature. Now, if learning does not come by experience, and it is my view that it does not, then every object will forever remain just as difficult to understand as God's nature – that is, unless uniqueness is irrelevant to whether something is difficult to understand. Or, if Ware thinks that the more we encounter certain objects, or the more similar objects there are for us to encounter, then the easier it is to understand these objects, then this should also mean that the more we encounter God or information about God, or the more we think about him, the easier it becomes for us to understand him. Either way, his reason for why God is difficult to understand is arbitrary and false.

On page 35, he says, "God is all-good. Even though we are very glad that God is completely good, this is another truth about God that is sometimes hard to believe. After all, we do not know anyone who is completely and perfectly good." First, it is not up to Ware to tell children whether it is easy to believe that God is all-good. Perhaps some children have superior faith than Ware. How dare he trample that potential? Second, if a person finds it hard to believe that God is all-good, then it is his own fault. If Scripture reveals a God that is all-good, and a person finds that hard to believe, then it is because of that person's sinful unbelief. But Ware blames it on the situation; in fact, he even blames it on the uniqueness of God. This does not help in developing reverence in children. For all we know, children may find it very easy to believe that God is all-good, but Ware introduces his own doubts into their minds.

On page 51, he says, "When we begin to talk directly about the Holy Spirit, we face another area that is difficult to see. For on the one hand, the Bible teaches that 'God is Spirit...' But on the other hand, the Bible also teaches that the third Person in the Trinity is 'the Spirit.'" I am not sure what kind of children Ware is accustomed to dealing with, but many young people are well able to handle it when one word is used in two different ways, or even five or six different ways. It is not "difficult to see," but if we repeatedly tell them that it is difficult, eventually they might accommodate us, and we will finally have the satisfaction that we are all stupid.

On page 61, when he discusses creation, he writes, "And Hebrews tells us that we must accept this truth 'by faith.' Why is that? Simply because we cannot understand how someone could just speak and bring something into being without using any materials to do it." So he wants us to tell our children that faith and understanding are mutually exclusive. You accept something by faith because you do not understand it. If you understand it, it probably means that no faith is involved. Do not dismiss my criticism as mere nitpicking – our ability to understand God and his revelation is a foundational issue in all biblical studies. And do not assume that children will not catch on or adopt this nonsense by osmosis. They can learn by explicit statements and also inferences from them, even unconscious ones. And these accumulate to form a general way of thinking by which they process all information. In any case, this is not what the Bible means by faith, but it is the non-Christian caricature of faith.

On page 72, he writes, "To say that God rules over all things, both the good and the bad, is to say that he is completely sovereign over them. This teaching of the sovereignty of God is one of the hardest areas for all of us to understand." But unless Scripture asserts that this is difficult to understand, what gives him the right to speak for "all of us"? What gives him the right to tell my child that something is "hardest" for him to understand, when the Scripture does not say so? As it is, Ware is setting up children to stumble over the problem of evil. But I say that divine sovereignty is one of the easiest doctrines to understand. It is clear, absolute, straightforward, and amply explained and illustrated in Scripture. Doubtless some people have difficulties, but they can be helped if they will listen, because the doctrine is one of the easiest to explain and to grasp.

On page 76, he writes, "God is sovereign (he's in control), and we are responsible (we are accountable for the actions we do). The Bible helps us see that these two things must be kept together. Although we cannot understand this fully..." He does not state exactly what it is that we do not understand about this. Is he suggesting that the two appear to contradict, although they do not? Is he suggesting that responsibility presupposes freedom? Are children born with this baseless assumption, or is Ware's statement an illustration of how they learned it? But I say, "God is sovereign, and in his sovereignty, he has declared us responsible. Therefore God is sovereign and we are responsible, and we are responsible because he is sovereign. Don't let anyone tell you there is even a hint of paradox or contradiction in this." Done. It takes a theologian to mess this up, but children can understand it just fine.

On page 127, he writes, "Why God loves us is completely beyond our ability to understand. We have turned away from him, mocked him, resisted him, scorned him, and in a million other ways have slighted God." So children are supposed to understand the ideas of turning way, mocking, resisting, scorning, and a million other ways of slighting God, and also, as implied, the idea of judgment, but they are not supposed to understand forgiveness or love in the face of sin? Is this suggestion even within the scope of acceptable Christian teaching? I think we should consider it heresy.

Then, on page 140, he writes, "Then we hear Jesus of Nazareth proclaim words almost too good to believe." It is best to avoid using imprecise expressions and cliches when teaching doctrine, lest the child says, "Too good to believe? OK, then I won't believe it." Anyway, what is it that Ware thinks is "almost too good to believe"? It is when Jesus said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." So...it is too good to believe that God is faithful to his own promises? Instead, teach the children, "Then we hear Jesus of Nazareth say what stubborn unbelievers refuse to accept, but exactly what we should expect, something that is very good and easy to believe."

I have not mentioned all the doctrinal problems in the book, since our focus is on the assumption that children cannot understand. Consider the possibility that the reason some of them seem unable to understand is because we tell them that they are not supposed to. As it is, Ware's book inflicts tremendous damage upon young minds. Yet it is already one of the better ones. Therefore, I cannot recommend any children's books. Instead, I would gather the best teaching materials I can find – preferably not intended for children – and adapt them myself. This does not have to take a lot of effort, and much of this can be done "on the fly." Or, if one decides to use Ware's book, he should teach his child to challenge the assumption: "Mr. Ware wants to tell you that this is hard to understand. But do you understand it? So Mr. Ware is wrong? Why do you think he keeps telling you that something is hard to understand when it seems so clear and simple to you? What is wrong with him?" Teach children to detect the assumption. They do not have to accept it.

1 Corinthians 2:9-10 says that, although no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him, he has revealed it to us by his Spirit. In Romans 11, Paul exclaims that God's judgments are unsearchable and his paths beyond tracing out, but he

says this *after* he has conclusively answered all the questions that he raised in the previous chapters, including matters concerning divine sovereignty, man's responsibility, election, and reprobation. Thus it is in fact one of the strongest passages showing that we can understand all these allegedly difficult doctrines. His point is that there is always more to know about God, and not that we cannot know what he has just explained.

Many Christians have the idea that piety entails a stubborn and indiscriminate insistence on human finitude, and this is vigorously applied in defiance of Scripture, reason, and examples to the contrary. It seems that to emphasize our smallness is to magnify God's greatness. But this kind of piety is false and lazy. It is even used as an excuse to reject the plain teachings of Scripture. Those who insist that God's revelation is clear and consistent are condemned as heretics, as rationalists, and as those who deny their doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God. Their tradition has been challenged, and they are made to look foolish. True piety entails faith, understanding, and obedience. Do not teach your children a counterfeit. Tell them, "You are made in the image of God. You are made to understand him. You can understand all that God tells you in the Bible. And you are to believe and obey all that he says. There is no excuse."

38. Back to School

**Oh, how I love your law!
I meditate on it all day long.
Your commands make me wiser than my enemies,
for they are ever with me.
I have more insight than all my teachers,
for I meditate on your statutes.
I have more understanding than the elders,
for I obey your precepts.
I have kept my feet from every evil path
so that I might obey your word.
I have not departed from your laws,
for you yourself have taught me.
How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
I gain understanding from your precepts;
therefore I hate every wrong path.
(Psalm 119:97-104)**

I have some thoughts for students. Since they are based on broad principles, others can also derive some benefit. Now, if you attend a Christian school, your situation is so dangerous, and your soul is in such peril, that a brief word will not do. Beg the Lord to spare you from heresies, subtle deceptions, and a gradual deadening of your spirit. Here I will focus on those who go to non-Christian schools, where they also teach lies but do not disguise them with Christian vernacular.

You have been told, by Christians no less, that although non-Christian teachers blaspheme your God and hold your dearest beliefs in contempt, you should nevertheless respect them for their scholarship and experience, and to learn all the truths that you can from them. They tell you that these men, even though they are unbelievers, and even though they despise your faith, are brilliant men who have labored long and achieved much in their fields. Humility demands that you listen to them.

But I tell you, that is complete rubbish. It is the worst advice that can be offered to a student. You say, "But my parents told me this." Your parents lied to you. And you say, "But my pastor told me this." Your pastor was a fool. He did not know what he was talking about, and if he knew what damage his advice could cause, he must have been a demon in the flesh to have told you to open your mind to non-Christian teachers.

Whatever the reason, it seems that many Christians think that this is what they are supposed to say to students. But this advice, if accepted, dulls your spiritual aggression, reduces your inward power to resist unbelief, and compels you to become vulnerable to

deception. It divides your heart and generates a contradiction in you. The non-Christians do not hesitate to consistently deride your beliefs, and thus the bad advice puts you at a great disadvantage. To bow before the devil is not humility, but idolatry. It is sinful and foolish. On the other hand, it is not arrogant to despise falsehood, and to spit on idols.

Non-Christians are educated and accomplished only according to their own standards, and those standards are according to wickedness and foolishness, not according to holiness and truth. Just because non-Christians tell you that they are intelligent and successful according to their own standards, this does not mean that you have to accept their standards and accept their claims. To do so would be to *become* a non-Christian.

Rather, whether educated or uneducated, whether rich or poor, whether accomplished or unaccomplished, according to God's standards, non-Christians are bad people, just like you were a bad person before Christ changed you and rescued you. Non-Christians, as long as they remain non-Christians, are at least as bad as you were before you were converted. So either you admit that non-Christians are sinful and stupid, or you deny that you were sinful and stupid before Christ saved you, in which case you would insult the grace of Christ, and cast doubt upon the genuineness of your own faith.

If you are a Christian, you have inherited the most intelligent and powerful system of thought in existence. It is the only true religion, the only sound philosophy. If you are a Christian, then you believe the Bible, the verbal revelation of God. For this reason, you are in a position of knowledge, and just as God himself is intellectually superior to all non-Christians, because you have accepted God's wisdom, it is not arrogant for you to think that you are superior to all non-Christians in your intellect and knowledge. You are not superior in yourself or because of yourself, but God is superior, and you have received from him.

Do you not know about the foundation of all reality, which is God? Non-Christians do not know him. Do you not know the way of salvation, about which unbelievers are entirely ignorant? Do you not know about the creation of the world, the doctrines of moral excellence, or righteousness, or ethical judgment? Do you not know, or at least have access to, the universal and enduring principles concerning religion, psychology, politics, economics, history, family, sexuality, and all pivotal topics, and how all these fit together? Non-Christians know none of these things. If you have learned and believed any portion of Scripture at all, then to deny that you are superior to all non-Christians in wisdom and knowledge is also to deny that God is superior to them in these things.

To affirm that you have received good gifts from God is not arrogance, but the very definition of humility. Arrogance supposes that you possess good things when you have nothing, or to boast about something that you have received as a gift, as if you have not received it, and as if it was not given to you as a gift. It is not arrogant to say that you know more and that you know better than the non-Christians, if it is because you have learned the words of the Bible, and that God has, as a gift, given you faith to believe in these words.

Non-Christians know no truth and can teach no truth. Even their opinions in a field like mathematics must be thoroughly reinterpreted and reconstructed in order to arrive at something that is in touch with reality. But if this is the case, what is the reason for attending a non-Christian school?

First, there is the practical benefit of earning a diploma that allows you to circulate more freely in society. Even from a Christian institution, a diploma is nothing more than a symbol of human approval. It is no proof of intellectual competence or proficiency in anything important. A Christian who seeks God's approval should place no pride in it. But men, since they have no approval from God, seek approval from one another. And the diploma is a document that shows you have been included in men's pathetic exercise in self-approval. Convenience is its sole benefit.

Second, non-Christians can show you what it means to be non-Christians. I do not mean that they can teach you the truth about themselves. No, they do not understand themselves, and they cannot teach you anything. Rather, since they are non-Christians, they will talk and behave as non-Christians, and by living among them, you can perhaps gain some familiarity about their thinking and lifestyle. This will enable to you infiltrate circles that are mainly infested by non-Christians, and to build a life in this world, so that you may more effectively promote God's agenda among them, as well as to undermine their own.

Therefore, attend the schools which divine providence assigns to you, whether Christian or non-Christian. Both kinds of schools are dangerous, since so few are faithful to the Lord, but you will find safety not in men, but in the words of the Bible. Cling close to the Book, and you will be invincible in spiritual conflict. Submit to Potiphar in his household, but resist the seduction of that whore of a wife, and endure the vexation of spirit under his idolatrous culture. Do this not to gain Potiphar's approval, but so that one day you may rule over him.

39. The Burning of Books

When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. (Acts 19:17-20)

No matter how we twist it with some "history of redemption" approach, and no matter how hard we try to "preach Christ from all of Scripture," the passage exists in a definite context that we cannot escape from. If the conditions surrounding the text are absent in our day, then a direct application is hardly reasonable, and can amount to only empty talk and unfulfilled expectations.

When it comes to the modern church, things do not look good. Except for some sects that appear problematic in theology and that are vilified by other traditions, almost all the conditions that come before our passage have been rendered irrelevant. Christians usually do not lay hands on people (v. 6a). Although the Acts of the Apostles records a number of examples in which the Holy Spirit is received as a second experience subsequent to conversion (v. 6b), they say that all those instances were exceptions, and except for all the exceptions, the Holy Spirit is received at conversion. This way of reasoning is the foundation of several major traditional doctrines, and it is an awfully convenient way of doing theology. Except for all the instances where I am wrong, I am always right. Except for all the instances where the Bible says something different, the Bible always agrees with me. Wonderful.

Here I have no intention to discuss this topic of the Holy Spirit. At this moment, for all I care, you can even believe that conversion is a second experience subsequent to the endowment of the Spirit. However and whenever they obtain it, Christians are supposed to have the power of the Holy Spirit. Do we? Tell me! Do we? Modern Christians exhibit almost none of the signs of power, faith, wisdom, and grace that the early disciples possessed. They have no tongues and no prophecy (v. 6c). They do not speak boldly (v. 8a). They do not argue persuasively (v. 8b). They perform no miracles, let alone extraordinary ones (v. 11). They depend almost exclusively on medical science to cure sicknesses (v. 12), and some of them think that all evil spirits have disappeared (v. 12). Before people were possessed, now they are just crazy.

So it is difficult to teach from this passage how the same effect can be produced in this generation, how to cause the unbelievers to be "seized with fear" (v. 17b), and for the name of the Lord Jesus to be "held in high honor" (v. 17c), and to compel those who believe to openly confess their evil deeds (v. 17d). In fact, it is easy to teach it, to tell

what it says. Even a child can understand it. But it is hard to make Christians believe it. Instead, we have the opposite effect on the world: non-Christians are seized with disdain for us, and even Christians do not hold the name of Christ in high honor.

The result is that it is difficult to make any application at all except to show how modern Christians are weak, faithless, and impotent. I am sure that dishonest and imaginative preachers can extract some historical-redemptive principle from this, not that the approach is always a problem, but the text itself is plain – miraculous power, in a frightening measure, accompanied the testimony of the early Christians, so much so that the people were terrified and held the name of Christ in high esteem. This is what the text says.

Nevertheless, since this power is now denied, I will do the best I can. Let me think about this. Aha! At least we still know how to make fire to burn some books (v. 19). We still believe in fire, do we not? Fire did not die with the apostles. Alas, now we have powerful shredders and an advanced system of trash disposal. Still, consider the advantages of burning non-Christian books:

First, it reflects God's disapproval of non-Christian religions, occult teachings and practices, and all kinds of magic, divination, and esoteric doctrines. These ancient evils have persisted to this day, and it is disappointing to see the number of professing Christians who dabble, or more than dabble, in astrology, witchcraft, necromancy, and all kinds of forbidden arts, even if only in the form of milder derivatives. If you are a pastor, ask how many in your congregation have consulted with psychics after their profession of faith. Do not ask for a show of hands – unless you have the power of Acts 19:4-16, do not expect the honesty of Acts 19:18. But if you will pay attention, perhaps you will see some of them squirm in their seats.

Second, it depicts God's punishment for those who study and practice the forbidden materials. Revelation 21:8 says that, along with unbelievers and idolaters and murderers, those who practice magical arts will be thrown into a lake of fire. A ceremony where non-Christian materials are burned with fire provides an image of what God will do to those who do not relinquish these into the flames. Either they give up their books to be burned with earthly fire, or they give up their souls to be burned with endless hellfire.

Third, it testifies to our agreement with God on this matter, that there is no goodness and no salvation, but only evil, deception, and blasphemy, in non-Christian teachings, especially in their spiritual and occult materials, and that those who believe and practice them deserve to be punished by the fire of hell, which never weakens and never relents.

Although many of us reject the ancient power of the apostles, and thus do not share in it, all the ancient sins and manifestations have remained with us. We deny that occult powers are real, and if things get out of control, we ask non-Christians to save us by locking the people up in mental institutions. When it comes to the really scary stuff, we will let the Pentecostals handle them. We will let our crazies deal with their crazies. The apostles demonstrated a better way.

Due to the mighty displays of divine power, the word of the Lord "spread widely and grew in power" (v. 20). For those who call themselves Christians, but who reject this power, or at least this extent of power, my advice is to pray for as much of it as you dare, and then stretch your thinking to accept a little more. If you cannot throw off the religious tradition that forbids you to obey Christ, who through Paul commanded you to covet spiritual gifts and powers, then for the sake of the church, covet as much as you can get away with before they call you a heretic. And as you petition the Lord for greater power and effectiveness in the ministry of the gospel, it might be that he will also grant you the humility to say, perhaps at the privacy of your home, when no one is listening, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!"

40. Cessationism and Speaking in Tongues

~ 1 ~

Some people call me a Reformed Charismatic.¹⁰ I remember one person who criticized me on the basis that the term is a misnomer and an oxymoron. He thought that a Reformed person could not at the same time be a Charismatic, and a Charismatic could not possibly deserve to be called Reformed.

While I agree that much of my theology agrees with those who are Reformed, I do not call myself Reformed. And although I affirm the continuation of the supernatural endowments of the Spirit, I do not call myself a Charismatic. This person had a certain concept of the Reformed, and a certain concept of a Charismatic, and the two were incompatible. But why must I be either one or both of these things? The way he thinks of these two groups make them incompatible, or maybe they are indeed incompatible, but what does that have to do with me?

A person might think that a Christian must either be Baptist or Presbyterian, and if a person affirms Baptist sacraments but Presbyterian government – or any one thing that is supposedly Baptist and another that is supposedly Presbyterian – then he must be wrong, simply on the basis that, according to him, these two categories are incompatible. But this is a poor argument, and does nothing to address whether this person's doctrine is right or wrong. It does, however, tell us that the critic's understanding of the Christian world is limited to a narrow conception of Baptists and Presbyterians. He is like a frog trapped at the bottom of a well, and his idea of the heavens is as small as the opening through which he views the sky.

The Christian world is very broad. Just because a person believes in the biblical doctrine of predestination does not mean that he learned it from Calvin. Maybe he learned it from Augustine. Maybe he learned it from Hodge, or Shedd, or Berkhof. Maybe he learned it from Vincent Cheung, or you, or your pastor. How about this – maybe he read the Bible himself and learned it there! But...is it possible? Is it possible that a person can read biblical passages and actually learn biblical doctrines? Who has ever heard of such a thing? And even if it is possible, is he a Calvinist or not? Maybe he learned it from someone that you have never heard of. Now it would be most foolish of you to apply

¹⁰ Here I capitalize the word "Charismatic," because it is used in a sense that refers to a kind or group of people commonly associated with the belief in the continuation of the supernatural gifts of the Spirit. It is more than a very broad term that refers to anyone who believes in the continuation of the gifts without other assumptions attributed to such a person. Although I recognize the differences between Pentecostals and Charismatics, since this article does not address these differences, I will use the two terms as if they are interchangeable, focusing only on their similarity in affirming the continuation of the supernatural gifts of the Spirit.

your criticisms of Calvin to this person, as if he is some devoted disciple of his, but who may have never heard of Calvin.

So, although labels and categories can make conversation more convenient, it can also make the person who uses them lazy and careless. You cannot press an argument with labels and categories that your target has no obligation to satisfy. When you do this, you are only showing that the way you understand the terms somehow generates some conflict and confusion. You are not saying much more than this. Certainly, you cannot defend any doctrine or refute anyone on this basis alone.

Thus I would caution against simplistic categorizations that result in misrepresentations. There are those who think that if a person believes in the continuation of the supernatural manifestations of the Spirit, then they must be like the Pentecostals – that is, those crazy Pentecostals that they know about. It does not occur to him that this person might not be like the Pentecostals at all, that even his doctrine on the spiritual gifts might be vastly different. And it might not occur to him that there might be Pentecostals somewhere that are not crazy. It is unfair for a cessationist to use Pentecostals as the standard, so that it is as if a person is either like the Pentecostals *that he has seen*, or he must be a cessationist like him.

~ 2 ~

When it comes to the continuation of miracles, whether they occur to a person or through a person, the doctrine of the sovereignty of God settles the issue. God can do anything he wishes, and if he wishes, he can work a miracle today. It can be a miracle that is done to a person, or a miracle that appears to be effected through a human instrument. God can do anything he wishes, including miracles. If a person questions this, he has a much greater problem than whether he affirms cessationism. His belief about the most basic aspects about God is flawed.

Cessationists do not object to the above. They readily agree that God can do anything that he wishes. If this is true, then it is conceivable that I can pray for a cancer patient, and if God wishes, he would heal the person, and the person would be freed of cancer. Here I am not saying that it happens every time, but only that it is conceivable given the doctrine of God's sovereignty.

This is agreed by all who believe in God. However, in practice very few believe it. They say that they believe in God's sovereignty, but they deny it by their works, having a form of sound doctrine and godliness, but denying the power thereof. How often do cessationists pray for God to heal the sick? No, I am not referring to prayers that ask God to guide the physicians. I am referring to petitions that ask God to heal the sick person. How often do cessationists even attempt this? If their doctrine allows for the possibility that God might heal if he wishes, then why not ask him to heal? Is God the savior of the soul, but not of the body? Is the arm of the Lord too short, or his ears dull of hearing?

You say, it is true that God can heal if he wishes, but perhaps he never wishes to heal anymore. How do you know this? It is one thing to say that he might not wish to heal in some instances, but another to claim that he no longer wishes to heal. No one *knows* that he does not wish to heal, and there is no biblical or any other kind of evidence to show that God no longer wishes to perform miracles.

Cessationists claim that they want to protect the doctrines of the sufficiency and the completion of Scripture. I believe this, that this might be one of the reasons they consider it necessary to affirm cessationism. However, I do not believe that this is the only reason. There are ulterior motives behind this doctrine, such as unbelief, and the fear that this unbelief would be exposed if they venture out and sink like Peter did when the Lord called to him to walk on the water. Seasoned theologians do not like to be embarrassed. Some of them would rather crucify Christ with their pens, just to shut him up, than to admit that they struggle with unbelief. In any case, it has been shown that the continuation of the supernatural manifestations of the Spirit does not compromise the sufficiency and the completion of Scripture.¹¹

¹¹ See Don Codling, *Sola Scriptura and the Revelatory Gifts*.

The affirmation of God's sovereignty means this: If God wishes to make a person speak in a language that he has never learned, he can and he will. It is as simple as that. Whether he does this is one thing, but there should be no question that it is possible, even today.

Nevertheless, we must recognize that the issue is not settled by affirming the bare doctrine of God's sovereignty, since it has to do with how he uses this sovereignty relative to the spiritual gifts, and what he has revealed in Scripture about this. Also, when it comes to spiritual gifts, we are referring to a particular mode of the manifestation of God's power, namely, through human instruments as spiritual endowments. So it is acknowledged that the matter is complex, although it remains that the foundation for the discussion must be God's sovereignty, that he can and will do whatever he wishes. And in connection with the spiritual gifts, I will say again that, although there are many verses in Scripture commanding us to operate in spiritual gifts, there is no biblical or any other kind of evidence that even comes close to suggesting that these have ceased.

~ 3 ~

Let me first apply my simple argument against cessationism to speaking in tongues. Paul writes, "Do not forbid speaking in tongues" (1 Corinthians 14:39). But if all supernatural gifts have ceased, then tongues have ceased. And if tongues have ceased, then all claims to speaking in tongues today are false. If all claims to speaking in tongues today are false, then we *must* forbid speaking in tongues. In other words, if cessationism is correct, then we are obligated to do exactly the opposite of what Paul commands in this verse on the basis that the situation has changed, so that the same apostolic concern would require us to forbid all speaking in tongues.

However, to turn "*Do not* forbid speaking in tongues" to "*Always* forbid speaking in tongues" would require a biblical argument that is either equally explicit, or if it must come by deduction or inference, one whose reasoning is perfect, infallible, without any possibility for error or room for criticism. Otherwise, no one has the authority to say that speaking in tongues has ceased, and still less to forbid speaking in tongues.

Jesus says, "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19). God commanded me, "You shall not commit murder." If you wish to advance a doctrine that requires me to change this to, "You shall always commit murder," then before I go on a killing spree, I am going to demand that you produce either a direct biblical command that replaces the former one, or a biblical argument supporting the new command or obligation that is clear and perfect, without any possibility of error or room for criticism. If I perceive even the slightest flaw or weakness, I am going to remain with what is clear and direct, that is, "You shall not commit murder."

Likewise, if I teach "Do not forbid speaking in tongues" and you teach "Always forbid speaking in tongues" (or a doctrine that leads to this), then one of us must be wrong. To show me that I am the one in the wrong, I would demand that you produce a biblical argument that is as clear, as forceful, as perfect, and as infallible as the one that says, "Do not forbid speaking in tongues."

Frankly, against this consideration, I would be too afraid to teach cessationism. And I wonder how we can justify the decision to allow anyone to remain in the ministry who would continue teaching cessationism after hearing this simple argument. If he cannot answer it – if he cannot produce an infallible argument for cessationism – but continues to teach the doctrine, this can only mean that he consciously promotes rebellion against the Lord. What right do we have, then, to refrain from throwing him out of the ministry? Do I have the authority to protect such a person from church discipline? But I am not stronger than the Lord. As it is, cessationism is not a doctrine to be argued about, but a sin to be repented of. Christians should not only avoid cessationism, but they should be afraid, deathly afraid, to affirm it, since as it stands, it entails a direct and deliberate defiance of God's commands.

You may say, "It is fine to say that we must not forbid speaking in tongues, but we must forbid the counterfeit." How is this relevant at this point? If in the attempt to oppose the counterfeit, you oppose all claims to speaking in tongues as a matter of principle, then you are back to defying Paul's command again. If you admit that we must not forbid speaking in tongues, but must judge each instance on its own merit, I would agree with you, but then you are no longer a cessationist.

Now that we have mentioned the possibility of counterfeit, the discussion has finally come to the nature of tongues. Acts 2 tells us that the Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to speak in languages that they had never learned. These were human languages known and recognized by the foreigners who were present. It is sometimes supposed that it was a miracle of hearing, but the foreigners heard the disciples speak in their languages because the disciples *were* speaking in their languages. The Scripture states that they spoke what the Spirit gave them. It does not say that the Spirit altered the audience's hearing. The speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is the same kind of manifestation as the one in Acts 2. There is no reason to think otherwise.

Since the utterances consist of human languages, as demonstrated in Acts 2 and also indicated in 1 Corinthians 13:1, there are certain characteristics that we should expect. A human language includes a substantial vocabulary, or words, which form sentences. In ordinary speech, sentences are marked by pauses and inflections, which often determine the precise meaning of these sentences. For example, an inflection might change what could be understood as a statement of fact into a question. Thus, "You are going to church today," changes to "You are going to church today?" An inflection might also turn an ordinary statement into an exclamation, or even an accusation. There are many other things that we can mention about the characteristics of human languages, but the point is that they exhibit discernable complex traits and patterns.

I mention the above to say this: Judging from my admittedly limited experience, most of the people who speak in tongues probably do not speak in real languages. Of course, my experience does not reflect the total number of those who claim to speak in tongues. The claim is that most of those that *I have heard* probably do not speak in real languages, and that there are probably many others like them. When they supposedly speak in tongues, their sounds do not exhibit the variety and complexity expected in actual human languages. They very often repeat only one, sometimes two or three syllables in rapid succession, like "da-da-da-da-da-da-da", or "wa-ka-la-ka-wa-ka-la-ka-wa-ka-la-ka-wa-ka-la-ka," or "moshimoshimoshimoshi."

There are three possible explanations for this:

First, they could be speaking in Morse code, or something like it. However, even Morse code must differentiate its signals by patterns and pauses. But when a person repeats the same syllable sixty times without any pause at all, and after taking a quick breath, repeats the same syllable another forty times, it is difficult to believe that he is communicating any meaningful message. One may also object that speaking in tongues is supposed to

refer to an ordinary human language, but this cannot settle the question, since Morse code or something like it can conceivably qualify as a human language.

Second, it is alleged that some of them might be speaking in the language of angels, which might not exhibit the same characteristics as the languages of men. However, even if 1 Corinthians 13:1 indeed grants the possibility that one might speak in the language of angels, the same concerns regarding Morse code applies. There must be discernable patterns to differentiate between signals for there to be a language, at least when it is spoken through men. And if the language of angels cannot be spoken through men *in a way* that there are discernable patterns, then they are not in fact speaking in the language of angels, since apparently this language cannot be spoken through men at all.

Third, and it seems the most likely one, those who speak without any discernable pattern are not speaking in human languages, and they are not speaking in tongues at all. I am not saying that there is no genuine speaking in tongues today. I have very forcefully affirmed that the manifestation continues according to God's will. But if those who speak in tongues wish to exercise the genuine gift, and if they wish to be taken seriously, they must raise the standard. Anything less than Morse code is unacceptable, because it would not be a language at all. And are we to believe that all or most of the people who speak in tongues do so in code? No, genuine tongues will be human languages, and will sound like human languages. We should be suspicious of any alleged manifestation of speaking in tongues that lack any discernable pattern or complexity.

One factor that has contributed to the pervasive instances of false tongues is the neglect of the fact that speaking in tongues is a *manifestation* of the Spirit – it is something that the Spirit pushes out into the open. Therefore, it is not something that one man can teach another to do. Pentecostals sometimes teach the newcomer, "Just start speaking. Say, 'da-da-da-ka-ka-sha-la-la....there, that's it! You've got it!'" No, neither of them has anything. It is a manifestation of the Spirit, and when it happens, there is a heavenly quality, a noticeable intelligence behind it. It is not something that can be taught, practiced, or enforced by the flesh.

~ 4 ~

Recently, I heard a sermon on the biblical approach to church growth by John MacArthur. He insisted that church growth methods that are based on business theories and marketing gimmicks are unfaithful and destructive. Rather, he proposed that Christians should return to the Acts of the Apostles, since in there the divine method modeled by the first disciples is set forth. He did not refer to some New Testament model in a general sense, but he was adamant that we must follow *the Book of Acts*.

Then, in the course of the sermon, he offered five principles that he had derived: The early church had 1) A transcendent message, 2) A regenerate congregation, 3) A valiant perseverance, 4) An evident purity, and 5) A qualified leadership. However, any honest expositor should have added, 6) A tongue-speaking, cripple-healing, dead-raising, demon-expelling, liar-slaying, prison-breaking, house-shaking, sorcerer-cursing, vision-seeing, future-predicting, miracle ministry. All these things are recorded in the Book of Acts, are they not?

Of course, I did not expect MacArthur to embarrass himself with the truth. Knowing that he was a raging cessationist, I waited for a mention of this item before it would be dismissed, but it never came. He did not even mention it. But I thought we were to return to the pattern in the Book of Acts? Which Book of Acts was he reading? Is this the champion of expository preaching that so many Christians adore? But I thought expository preaching was supposed to compel the preacher to address topics that he is uncomfortable with, and to set forth what he might find difficult to accept? What happened to that?

I will tell you what the pattern in the Book of Acts is – there is the pattern of not allowing dishonesty and prejudice to obscure the plain teachings of the word of God. If we were to force ourselves to be unreasonably charitable, we might say that MacArthur skipped the issue to save himself time from mentioning something that he did not believe in the first place. But at least on the surface, he violated his own standard of preaching the word of God as it is written. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to excuse someone for not mentioning miracles when he himself, with so much zeal and indignation, reprimands churches for failing to follow the pattern in the Book of Acts.

Jesus said that we would receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon us. So where is the power? You who do not believe in the continuation of the supernatural gifts: You say that you have the Spirit, that all believers do, so where is the power? You hypocrite – you pretend to have it by redefining it. And you who believe in the continuation of the supernatural gifts: You claim that you have the Spirit, but where is the power? You hypocrite – you insult the Spirit by implementing a low standard, so that the false and the excesses are numbered with the genuine, if there are indeed genuine manifestations among you. When Elijah challenged the false prophets, he did not make it easy for himself or for the Lord. He did not pour gasoline on the sacrifices, but he poured much

water. He was of the mind that if God would not do it, then let it not be done, but if God would do it, then let there be no question that the miracle was of the Lord, and not of the scheming and trickery of men.

Both of you say that you have the Spirit, but when the disciples were filled with the Spirit in the Book of Acts, there were such manifestations of power that it caused the unbelievers to quake. Where is the power? It is true that a demonstration of divine power does not always entail miracles, but are there any manifestation of power among you? Any at all? Where is the divine authority in your speech? Where is the divine wisdom in your counsel? Where is the divine boldness in your action? You have your expository methods, your seminary degrees, your ordination papers, and the books by this or that theologian on your shelves. But you do not have the power.

There are those who think that my ministry is worthless. I will not address them right now. But if you see any faith, any wisdom, any power, any life, any zeal, any boldness, any other-worldly authority in me, then let it be known that it comes from the Spirit of God. He saved me, and gave me a holy calling, even the work of the ministry. And he gave me his Holy Spirit, so that I may be enabled to live this new life, in truth and holiness, and to perform the works that he has foreordained for me to do. I am not saying all of this just because I think I should, but I am consciously aware of the power of the Spirit by which I think and labor, and the difference that he makes. I can tell you what he does for me, and what I am unable to do without him.

This is the inheritance of every Christian, and the necessary equipment of every minister of the gospel. God has not given us a spirit of weakness, but a spirit of power – power to perceive, power to believe, power to declare, power to endure, and power to defeat cynicism and unbelief.