

# INVINCIBLE FAITH

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## **1. THE INVINCIBLE CHURCH**

**When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"**

**They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."**

**"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"**

**Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."**

**Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." (Matthew 16:13-18)**

When a prophet speaks, it is often difficult for people to place him into a category. Is he preaching or teaching? What is he doing? He seems to be preaching, but what kind of preacher says such things? He seems to be teaching, but what kind of teacher instructs in this fashion? At times he is too direct for comfort, and even very harsh, but it seems overly simplistic to relegate this to a character flaw or a lack of compassion. It is not the typical directness of a Christian zealot or the harshness of a non-Christian. It is not the cynicism of the traditionalist, who upholds a human creed more than a divine revelation, or the bitter sarcasm of the idolater, who would sacrifice his own brother on the altar of his preferred theologian. There seems to be more to this person.

The offense that arises from hearing or reading his words, if one is to be honest about it, comes about because he is righteous and accurate in all that he says. He is so right that it leaves no room for dialogue or discussion, crushing man's pride and exposing his shame. The prophet is so righteous and accurate that the hearer's attempt to suppress the erupting guilt turns into anger, and anger turns into hatred and murder. If the call to repentance is rejected and the heart hardens against the message, then religious tradition is donned as a cloak to disguise the evil within, and Christ's righteousness is replaced by human endorsement. Putting off the armor of God and putting on the armor of the devil, one who has heard and refused the prophetic word sets out to destroy God's messenger, for he must be silenced to preserve their peace and sanity.

There is something about the prophet that sets him apart from other speakers. At times it might be difficult to specify the differences, but it seems that he has a different spirit, a greater power, a special boldness, a deeper insight, and a divine mission in what he speaks and writes. He is, to say this one way, as one who speaks with authority. And this is the

impression that the people have of the Lord Jesus. They are perplexed about him – What kind of preaching is this? What kind of man is he?

He does not speak like the scribes, who depend on the sheer number of footnotes in their discourses to assert their conclusions. In every tradition, there are Christians who, boasting of a scholar's mentality, judge what they read and hear by this standard. This tells us more about them than those that they criticize. May revelation and reason be damned. May God himself be beat down and silenced. They respect only human approval and agreement. They would condemn the Lord Jesus himself as uneducated and amateurish, although they are forced to respect him for the sake of appearance. But the people know better – this person's authority goes beyond footnotes. He is certainly no ordinary rabbi.

Does anyone speak with authority today, as one who has received a word from another world, or are we back to making footnotes? Jesus promised to his disciples the power of the Holy Spirit, by which they would become his witnesses. But because of a cessation of faith, the Holy Spirit himself has been excommunicated as a heretic. "Oh, no," they say, "we do not deny it. In fact, everyone already has it!" Well, if all believers already have it, where is it? Since when is the power of the Holy Spirit not associated with miraculous demonstrations? Since when is it reduced to a mere boldness of speech? Wait, do we even have that? Since when is the work of the Spirit reduced to the development of virtues? And do we have that in our churches? Really? Where? What do we attribute to the Spirit of God that cannot be easily imitated by any non-Christian? In Scripture, the power of the Spirit impresses and intimidates the unbelievers. How often does that happen today? No, most Christians do not have this power, but it makes them feel better, and it relieves them of their responsibility, if their doctrine says that they already possess it.

According to the prophet Joel, "God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams....I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18). The theology that encourages a cessation of faith in spiritual manifestations cannot make sense of such a declaration. For example, John MacArthur has to push its fulfillment to the Tribulation period in his false dispensational eschatology.<sup>1</sup> Yet is it true that the Canon kills the visions, and the Tribulation kills the Canon? If the Tribulation does not kill the Canon but resurrects the visions, then the Canon has never killed the visions in the first place, so that the former does not necessarily exclude the latter.<sup>2</sup> Anyway, Joel also says in the same passage, "And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (v. 21). For some reason, no one questions that this always applies. The truth is that they do not have the Spirit's power. They are lying about it. They do not enter themselves, and also forbid others to enter.

There are different maneuvers, but the tactic is the same – things that they do not wish to deal with can always be relegated to a time other than their own. It does not really matter when they had happened or when they will happen again, as long as they do not happen now. They are like Martha, who whines with all the piety she could muster, "I know he

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2005), p. 1437.

<sup>2</sup> Don Codling, *Sola Scriptura and the Revelatory Gifts* (Sentinel Press, 2005).

will rise again in the resurrection *at the last day*" (John 11:24). But Jesus replies, "*I am* the resurrection and the life," and asks, "Do you believe this?" (v. 25-26). Many Christians answer emphatically, "No."

It is futile to cloud the matter with an avalanche of footnotes as to why it cannot be true, with artificial schemes of dispensations as to why it cannot be now, or with a shameless hermeneutic that labels all biblical examples "exceptions," because the Lord Jesus says, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you" (Acts 1:8). They must submit to Scripture's own definition of this power, as to its purposes and effects. If this power, as explained and illustrated by Scripture, does not manifest in their experience (when Scripture assumes that it ought to), then we must conclude that they do not possess it, and that it is still to be sought and attained. Any other conclusion is of human tradition, concerned with protecting its own pride about its self-proclaimed orthodoxy and its authority over the lives of men, rather than with truth, humility, and obedience.

In any case, the people tend to identify Christ with one of the prophets in the past. Some say that he is John the Baptist, perhaps because he also comes preaching faith and repentance. Some say that he is Elijah, perhaps because of the amount and magnitude of the miracles that are associated with his ministry, and that he has come to turn the hearts of the people back to God. And some say that he is Jeremiah, perhaps because he stands alone against the religious institutions and traditions of the day, declaring the futility of an external piety that does not arise from an internal reality. As in Jeremiah's day, the people derive their security from temple rituals and human traditions, and with these have rejected God's demands for faith, mercy, and justice.

As positive as these opinions may be, they fall far short of the truth about the person of Jesus Christ. An ordinary preacher could hardly receive greater flattery than to be called an Elijah or a Jeremiah, but to the Lord these would be more like insults than compliments. The truth is, as Peter will declare in a moment, that this is "the Christ, the Son of the living God." He is greater than all the prophets, and the fulfillment of all their prophecies. He stands in a class by himself, and failing to see this, the people lack an existing category with which they could classify him. So it is supposed that they see in Christ something of the spirits of the prophets, but what they fail to grasp and express is that they see in each of the prophets something of the spirit of Christ, who spoke through them concerning himself. Therefore, anyone who says that Christ is nothing more than a prophet, even if the greatest of all prophets, dishonors and slanders the Son of God. There is no salvation and no promise in such a confession. By this standard we judge the peoples and religions of the world.

Jesus does not assume that his disciples share the positive but inadequate opinions of the people, so that he asks, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." To this Jesus responds, "Blessed are you, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven." Cutting through the traditions propagated by society, the confusions amidst the people, the oppositions from religious leaders, and the questions within the disciples themselves, God the Father sovereignly revealed his Son to the apostles, and here specifically to Peter.

He says that Peter's confession arises from a revelation that comes from God and not from man, one that comes from the spirit and not the flesh. This could mean that Jesus thus far has never claimed to be the Christ, or has never given any indication that he is the Christ, and now the Father has revealed the needed information to Peter apart from any natural means, as well as caused him to assent to this revealed information. Taken by itself, the Lord's statement does not exclude this interpretation. It is certainly possible for God to reveal Christ to an individual apart from a man's preaching. This is not to say that Christ is revealed apart from the "word," only that God would be revealing (or even preaching) his word directly to the man's spirit. Scripture never indicates that this is impossible, even if it would be unusual.

Nevertheless, we see that this is an unlikely interpretation of the verse when we consider what has transpired in the Gospel of Matthew. By Matthew 2, John the Baptist has already pointed out Jesus as the Christ, the one who would baptize his people with the Holy Spirit, and the one whose perfect righteousness is such that he requires no repentance or baptism in water. And a voice from heaven announced, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (v. 17). In Matthew 7, it is supposed by some that they could call him "Lord, Lord," and enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus implies that some would, but only those who also do the will of the Father (v. 21). Thus he acknowledges that he is the confessional key to salvation, only that he requires a true confession that results in obedience (Luke 6:46). It is also possible to prophesy, cast out demons, and work miracles in his name (Matthew 7:22-23), implying that he is no mere prophet. Verse 29 indicates that he is different from the teachers of the law, but he is "as one who had authority."

In Matthew 8, Jesus calms the storm with a word, so that the disciples exclaim, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!" (v. 27). When the demons see him, they cry out, "What do you want with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?" (v. 29). He states in Matthew 10, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven" (v. 32-33). And even more significantly for our context, he says in Matthew 11, "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (v. 27). Then, in Matthew 12, he calls himself "the Lord of the Sabbath," who is "greater than the temple" (v. 6, 8).

It is unnecessary to multiply examples. It is not that Christ has never taught about himself, or that he has never given any indication as to his nature and identity. The people fail to recognize him for who he is not because there has been no explanation, and not because there has been no demonstration. On the contrary, there have been multiple explicit explanations and numerous spectacular demonstrations. In Matthew 13, Jesus tells us why people do not recognize him, saying, "In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving'" (v. 14). Or, as Paul puts it, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come

from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14).

So it is not that Christ has not explained his nature and demonstrated his power, but that spiritual perception has not been granted to the people. He says in John 6, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me" (v. 44-45). Therefore, whether with or without explanations, and whether with or without demonstrations, a person comes to Christ when the Father performs a direct work in his heart, causing him to perceive and believe the truth about Christ, that he is the Son of God, and the one who redeems his people through an atoning sacrifice.

This is the basic reason as to why one person believes in Christ and another does not. I can walk up to a person and say, "Repent, and believe the gospel!" And if God enables him to perceive the truth and generates faith in him, then this person will be converted and confess Christ as Lord. It may even be the case that this person has heard the gospel numerous times before, but not until now does God reveal Christ directly to his heart. If so, the person might exclaim, "Why, of course this is so! Of course this Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, who took upon himself human flesh to die for the sins of his people. I thought I was wise – rational, scientific, and all that – but I have been the world's greatest fool until this day. I now see that only an imbecile would deny the truth of the Christian religion." So a person can come to faith through a simple message that contains little explanation or argument.

On the other hand, I can sit for many hours with another person, and set forth the whole of the Christian faith to him in a systematic fashion, providing rational justification for every claim and every premise, now defending this assertion, now refuting that objection, until I have seized total victory over his obstinacy, and until his mind and body come to a point of exhaustion. And still, he could fail to perceive the truth about Christ, and thus fail to believe and confess him. The defect is not in God, in me, in the message, or in the presentation, but in the unbeliever. I can put Christ before his face, and he would fail to perceive him. I can put the gospel in his ears, and he would fail to grasp it. Oh, stupid non-Christian! Who will deliver you from your mental retardation? The unbeliever is a broken, defective, stupid person.

That said, we must not conclude that all our preaching and argumentation are worthless. Human responsibility is determined by divine command, and not by the anticipated effect of our action. Paul writes, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). He does not conclude from this that he should stop planting and that Apollos should stop watering. No, we are directed by the command and not by the effect. And God commands us to preach the word, to defend sound doctrine, and to refute those who oppose. Whatever their effect may be in a particular instance, sound preaching and argumentation honor God, and he often uses them to effect his purpose, or as means by which he changes the heart of man.



So preaching and argumentation are most necessary, but it is God who determines the effect. Although Peter has been presented with explanations and demonstrations concerning the truth about Christ, he has not always perceived and confessed this truth. It is not until the Father directly reveals Christ to him that the truth finally dawns in his heart like the sunrise dispels the darkness of the night. "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Peter does not make his confession apart from explanation and evidence. In fact, there has been plenty of explanation and evidence, and they logically necessitate the confession. However, although the confession is rational, man is not always rational. Before God's revelation causes the realization to dawn in his heart, Peter has been unable to perceive the truth even when the explanation and evidence about Christ are presented to him over and over again.

Therefore, although truth and reason are on our side, because God hardens the foolish and irrational reprobate, no argument can convince him. And because God preserves the elect, whose mind has been enlightened to perceive and believe the truth, no objection can dissuade him. It is not that man's efforts are meaningless, but that man's efforts in themselves do not produce the effect, whether faith or unbelief. Rather, God often uses man's efforts to bring about his purpose, whether to convert or to harden, although he is able to produce the same effect apart from such efforts. This is crucial for our understanding and application of verse 18. We shall see that this truth should not lead to a feeling of futility and despondency, but a sense of confidence and invincibility.

But before we proceed to verse 18, we should return to examine Peter's confession in verse 16: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Whereas Jesus explains the metaphysical and epistemological aspects of the confession in verse 17, verse 16 addresses the intellectual aspect of the confession, that is, its doctrinal content. This doctrinal content is crucial to what Jesus is about to say regarding the church, because it is verse 16 that provides a basis for verse 18. Also, because of its extensive doctrinal content, the confession (v. 16) limits the applicability of the prediction (v. 18), and thus offers us a specific idea as to the kind of church that Jesus promises to construct and perpetuate. So, we will make four observations about the confession.

First, Peter directs the confession to "you" – that is, Jesus, who asks the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" The entire confession hangs on this, since it identifies the person about whom the confession is made. The "you" that Peter is speaking to is the Jesus of Nazareth that Matthew has been writing about since the beginning of his Gospel. He was born of a woman, has a physical body and a human nature. He has been teaching, healing, and making contact with men and women. In other words, the "you" that Peter speaks about, and that he calls the Christ, is not a cosmic Christ, or some abstract idea of Christ, but a historical person. The word stresses the historicity and humanity of Christ.

As we will see in a moment, the confession indicates that he is more than a human person, but whatever else he might be, it does not take away from or contradict the fact that he possesses a human nature. Because the confession is directed toward a definite historical "you," it applies to only the Jesus of the Gospels. Anyone else who claims to be the Christ is an imposter, and any doctrine about Jesus of Nazareth that contradicts the Gospels is a falsehood.

Second, Peter's confession says that this person, Jesus, is the "Christ." By that time, the Jews have burdened the idea of the Messiah with a number of false expectations and human traditions (Matthew 16:23). Nevertheless, it is understood that all Old Testament predictions concerning a Messiah would converge on this person. Therefore, when Peter calls his master the Christ, he acknowledges that everything that is written in the Old Testament about the Messiah is fulfilled in this Jesus of Nazareth (Luke 24:27, 44). Among other things, this means that he would be the supreme King and Prophet, and the Savior of God's people. A fuller study of the Messiah comes under the doctrine of christology. Here we are only pointing out the substantial doctrinal content of Peter's confession.

Third, Peter's confession says that the Christ is "*the Son* of the living God." He does not mean that Jesus is God's son in an ordinary sense, or in the sense that any believer could be considered God's child, or in the sense that any creature of God could be considered his offspring. Rather, Peter calls Jesus "the Son" in relation to his unique identity as "the Christ." And Matthew uses the term to designate the second member of the Trinity, as in "the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (28:19; also see 3:17). As the Gospel of John says it, Jesus is "God the One and Only...who came from the Father...who is at the Father's side" (John 1:14, 18).

Although it is probable that Peter does not understand the full meaning of his confession at this point, it is not an anachronism to understand "the Son" in this confession as first, an acknowledgement of the deity of Christ, and second, an acknowledgement of the doctrine of the Trinity. This is because, although Peter might have an imperfect understanding of the confession – or, more precisely, his understanding might fall short of the full meaning properly given to the words of the confession – this limitation does not apply to Matthew. By the time Matthew pens 16:16, he already understands the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity, and he sees no need to adjust the term here, or to harmonize 16:16 with 28:19, since "the Son" refers to the same thing in both places.

When we put together the fact that Peter is making the confession to the historical and human person of Jesus, the fact that he at the same time confesses the deity of Jesus ("the Son"), and the fact that this person is "the Christ," this must mean that the Christ predicted by the prophets is to be an incarnation of deity. And such is the nature of Jesus of Nazareth – he is the Christ, both God and man. There is no doubt that it is Matthew's intention to convey this doctrine, because even at the beginning of his Gospel, in connection with the human birth of Jesus, Matthew records that he would be called "Immanuel," which means "God with us" (1:23).

Fourth, Peter confesses the Christ as something that is consistent and inseparable with his existing belief in "the living God." This is an Old Testament designation for the God of the Jews, that is, the Christian God.

For the sake of both convenience and accuracy, unless the context of a discussion somehow requires the distinction, we should not refer to the God of the Old Testament as the God of the Jews rather than the God of the Christians. This is because God, whether in the Old or the New Testament, has always been a Christian God, and only a Christian God. He revealed and preached the Christ no later than Genesis 3:15. Since this Christ is the Jesus of Nazareth of the New Testament, God has been a Christian God, and has revealed himself as such, and the Bible has been a Christian Bible, and has revealed itself as such, since the very beginning – and that was even before the Jewish people came into existence.

Moreover, those Jews who were saved received their salvation not because of their natural heritage, but because they believed in the promise concerning a redeemer, who would make atonement for sin. This is the promise that was made in Genesis 3:15, and that had been added to and expanded upon throughout the history of revelation. Therefore, all redeemed Jews are Christians. The Jewish part is irrelevant, just as a Chinese Christian is saved only because he is a Christian, and a Chinese non-Christian is damned only because he is a non-Christian. We do not even need to mention the Chinese part, just as we do not even need to mention the Jewish part when we mention a Jewish person who is saved through faith in Christ. Only Christians are saved, whether Jewish or non-Jewish.

That is, although historically believers were first called "Christians" in Acts 11:26, theologically they have been Christians since Genesis 3:15. For this reason, at least when we are speaking theologically, it is not an anachronism to call Old Testament believers Christians. Thus Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, David, Elijah, Jeremiah, and such men, were all Christians. And for all we know, a man like Cain was a non-Christian. It is not an anachronism for the writer of Hebrews to say, "[Moses] regarded the disgrace *for the sake of Christ* as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt" (Hebrews 11:26). Moses was a Christian. His faith was not in a generic deity, or even a Jewish God, but an explicitly and exclusively Christian God, a Christian Messiah, and a Christian revelation and religion.

Therefore, when Peter confesses "the living God," he confesses the Christian God. The Christian God is the only God, or in other words, only Christians have the correct understanding of the one true God. Thus this part of the confession excludes and condemns all non-Christian religions, including Judaism, that is, any so-called Jewish faith that is not in fact Christian, and that does not affirm what Peter now confesses about Jesus of Nazareth. One can claim to believe in the promised Christ, but when the fulfillment of the promise has arrived and this person rejects him, it shows that he does not in fact believe in the promise. Whatever he thinks he believes, he has in mind something else, something other than the true content of the promise. Such a confession has no corresponding saving promise, so that its end is damnation, and this is the downfall of the Jewish faith.

It is irrational and inaccurate to accuse this position of anti-Semitism. First, truth is truth, regardless of whether it seems to be "anti" anything. It is foolish to cite racial or cultural

prejudice as an argument against a theological doctrine when we are considering its veracity and not the motive for supporting it. Second, since God made the Christian covenant with Abraham, so that it might be propagated through the Jewish people to the whole world, in this sense the Christian faith is "of the Jews" (John 4:22). Therefore, there is a stronger warrant to accuse non-Christian Jews of anti-Semitism than they have to accuse Christians of anti-Semitism.

If they are against Christianity, or if they are against the idea that only Christianity can save and that any "Jewish" faith cannot, then *they* are in fact the true anti-Semites. *They* are against the Jewish faith and the Jewish people. *They* are against Abraham, his God, and his Christ. As Jesus says, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). He was a Christian, so that for a Jew to be a non-Christian is to reject the faith of Abraham. If they are disturbed that Christianity seems to be anti-Jewish, then let them first cease their hypocrisy in being anti-Christian. What, are the Jews a people, and we Christians are not? We are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, an people belonging to God" (1 Peter 2:9).

We mentioned the issue of Peter's imperfect understanding. Verses 21-23 show that, at this point, Peter has not grasped the full meaning and implication of the confession. If Jesus is the Christ, the fulfillment of all messianic prophecies, then it follows that he would also fulfill the mission of the Christ as foretold in the Old Testament. Jesus apparently thinks so, so that once the revelation that he is the Christ has been given to the disciples, he "began to explain...that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (v. 21). Jesus considers the confession inclusive of or the basis for the doctrine of the atonement.

Peter becomes alarmed and rebukes Jesus for saying something like this, but Jesus responds that Peter has in mind the things of men rather than the things of God. That is, at that moment he considers the messianic mission from the perspective of men's priorities and traditions rather than what the messianic prophecies in fact describe. Peter may have in mind the promise that the Christ would save his people. This is true as far as it goes, and even with only this broad promise in mind, he perceives that Jesus of Nazareth is the one who would fill the role. However, it is another matter as to the exact nature and method of this salvation, and what the process of deliverance entails. Although the Old Testament is clear and specific, the people do not always understand: "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47).

A minimalist interpretation of Peter's confession would be erroneous. Again, Jesus considers it inclusive of or the basis for the atonement. Moreover, the placement of verses 21-23 implies that it is Matthew's understanding that the confession of "the Christ" ought to include a proper understanding of his mission as well, and that is to make atonement for those whom God has chosen to save. Matthew intends for the work of atonement to be included in and applied to Peter's confession of the Christ.

Therefore, Peter's confession in verse 16 refers to a faith that affirms at least these major doctrines: the God of Christian Theism, including the Trinity of God, a Christ who would

lead and save God's people (according to the biblical messianic prophecies), the deity of this Christ (the Son of the Trinity), the humanity of this Christ (the incarnation of the Son as a historical person), the work of atonement that this Christ would perform to deliver his people through his death and resurrection, and that this Christ is the Jesus of Nazareth of the Gospel of Matthew.

When we come to verse 18, there is the temptation to bypass the controversy surrounding the first half of the verse and straightway proceed to the second half, since the main purpose of our discussion is Jesus' promise regarding the construction and perpetuation of the church, and an overemphasis on the debate on the first portion of verse 18 is likely to detract from it. Nevertheless, to not deal with the first part at all might permit doubt as to the proper application of the second part. Therefore, we will now direct our attention to the first part of verse 18, not to answer all questions regarding it, but only to establish a sufficient basis for the second part.

So, Jesus says, "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." The general meaning is in fact clear enough, and the promise regarding the church is not obscured by the various interpretations given to the statement. The debate regarding the exact meaning of this verse would not have such significance attached to it if not for the abomination of Catholicism, which abuses the passage so as to attribute a supreme authority to Peter, and which invents the idea of an apostolic succession so that this authority might pass on, and which then claims for its pope the role of successor to the seat of Peter.

Protestants sometimes prefer to think that the "rock" refers to the confession that Peter has made, and that any believer should and would make, so that the foundation of the church is not Peter, but a true confession regarding Christ. In this view, the "rock" is a doctrine and not a person; or, even if it is a person, it is Christ and not Peter. This is an attractive interpretation, and it is true in the sense that it is supported by other portions of Scripture. However, our present concern has to do with the meaning of this passage in Matthew, and not just a general doctrine about the foundation of the church.

It is true that in this verse the Greek uses one word for "Peter" (*petros*) and another for "rock" (*petra*), and on this basis, some contend that Jesus distinguishes the two, so that in fact he does not say that he would build his church on Peter. This argument is convenient but inconclusive. This is because there are plausible reasons as to why the Greek words could differ even if Jesus is referring to the person in both instances. It is sometimes pointed out that, although Matthew writes in Greek, if Jesus is making the statement in Aramaic, then he would be using the same word for both "Peter" and "rock." But this is irrelevant since Matthew indeed writes in Greek, and we must derive our doctrine from the actual written revelation rather than our own speculation.

The common word for "stone" or "rock" is *petra*, and is in the feminine. As it must be changed to the masculine when applied as a name to the male person, Peter, this could explain why *petros* is used instead. Moreover, *petros* and *petra* do not always differ in meaning, but *petra* could also refer to a stone or rock, so we cannot conclude that two

different words are used in the text because Jesus intends to distinguish between "Peter" and "this rock." And whether or not "Peter" and "rock" mean the same thing, it seems unnatural to distinguish the two when Jesus says, "You are Peter, and on *this* rock I will build."<sup>3</sup> In addition, the fact that Jesus uses the second person singular pronoun "you" throughout verses 17-19 reinforces the interpretation that he is addressing Peter in the entire passage, including his reference to "*this* rock."

That said, it remains that this passage does not provide any support to Catholicism. In the first place, it does not provide Peter with supreme or unique authority. Although Jesus employs the second person singular pronoun in verse 19 when he speaks of the keys of the kingdom and the power to bind and to loose, when he repeats the authorization in 18:18, there he speaks to a number of disciples (18:1) and employs the plural pronoun. There the authority to bind and to loose is not even limited to the apostles, but is granted to "the church" (18:17). Also note John 20:23, where Jesus speaks to a group of disciples, and not just to Peter or any single apostle.

When Peter's behavior is challenged by believers in the Book of Acts, he does not appeal to apostolic infallibility, but provides a sound explanation (Acts 11:1-18). There he is in the right, and the matter is settled in peace. Does the pope defend his claims and his actions? And does his explanation prove him right? Then, when Peter plays the hypocrite among the Galatians and behaves in a manner contrary to the gospel, Paul rebukes him to his face and in public (Galatians 2:11-14). If the pope is only as good as Peter, then when he makes claims and performs actions that are contrary to the gospel, do we not have the right to rebuke him to his face and in public according to Paul's example? And if we consider the pope part of the church in the first place (although we do not), when he fails to repent, do we not have the right to excommunicate him in the name of Christ (Matthew 18:15-20)?

Even if "this rock" refers to Peter, the person cannot be considered apart from his confession. It is to the Peter who makes the confession of verse 16 that Jesus makes his statement. So when it comes to apostolic succession, what is there to succeed, and who is the successor? As we have shown, Peter never had a supreme and unique authority for the pope to receive and wield. And even if he had such an authority, does it properly belong to the pope?

To begin with, Scripture does not teach the Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession. Even if it does, the entire New Testament stresses an inheritance that is transmitted and identified through common faith, and not through geography, ethnicity, heredity, or any natural or human connection. But the Catholic doctrine contradicts Peter in his teachings on the nature and makeup of the priesthood (1 Peter 2), the nature, extent, and effect of the atonement (1 Peter 2), the tasks and powers of elders (1 Peter 3), and the possibility and means to the attainment of assurance (2 Peter 1). Moreover, Peter's doctrine includes an endorsement of Paul's letters as well as the rest of Scripture (2 Peter 3:14-16), and this permits us to point out that Catholic theology contradicts Paul's doctrines on the atonement, justification, sanctification, glorification, the sacraments, marriage, and an almost endless list of other biblical doctrines.

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<sup>3</sup> William Hendriksen, *Matthew* (Baker, 2002), p. 645-647.

No wonder many biblical commentators conclude that the pope is the anti-Christ, as he is also anti-Peter and anti-Paul. For this reason, although we deny the Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession, even if there is such a thing, we deny that the pope is the proper and rightful successor to the seat of Peter, since he contradicts Peter's teachings, and contradicts the teachings of those whom Peter endorses. On the other hand, since my doctrine agrees with Peter and those whom he endorses, if anyone now fills Peter's seat and office, I do, and not the pope. Let all Catholics, then, bow their knees to me – or any believer who affirms Peter's faith – and not the pope. But unlike the pope, I would say with Peter, as would any Christian, "Stand up, I am only a man myself" (Acts 10:26). As it is, by their own standard, all Catholics are subject to us so-called Protestants, for we are the true heirs of Peter's confession and authority.

In any case, this verse is in the Bible not to fuel a debate on Catholicism, but it provides a positive contribution to our understanding of the faith. It is easy to see in what sense Christ builds his church on Peter. As the early chapters of Acts indicate, after the ascension of Christ, Peter assumes a leadership role in gaining a foothold for the Christian faith in the world and in breaking through to both the Jews and Gentiles with the gospel (Acts 2, 10, etc.). In this manner, what Jesus says to him in our passage – "on this rock I will build my church" and "I will give you the keys of the kingdom" – have been fulfilled.

We can safely regard Peter as the foundation of the church in this sense. But when speaking from a broader perspective, Paul writes that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20). The statement hardly needs explanation, but it is devastating to Catholic doctrine. Jesus is the cornerstone, the point on which and from which the foundation is built. The apostles and prophets form the rest of the foundation because they have been sent to do his bidding, to establish the church through their words and deeds.<sup>4</sup> As important as he is, Peter is considered only a part of the foundation along with the other apostles and prophets.

Again, even if the church is built on Peter in a sense, it is not built on just any Peter, but a Peter who makes the confession in verse 16, so that the confession is necessary for the promise that Jesus makes in verse 18. Of course Peter is also necessary, since he is one of the chosen instruments by which Jesus would build the church. And as Jesus builds the church, he perpetuates the fruit of Peter's labor. That is, he continues to establish and develop a worldwide community of believers who affirm the same thing as expressed by Peter's confession in verse 16 – but also by all other apostles and disciples in the rest of the New Testament – that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Therefore, even if we concede that "the rock" of verse 18 refers to Peter, the foundation of the church is still Christ, or the right confession about Christ (Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:7). And as Paul writes, "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11). This is a sufficient basis for us to proceed.

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<sup>4</sup> Vincent Cheung, *Commentary on Ephesians*.

One tragic consequence of the controversy is that it has caused some believers to focus on the first part of verse 18 to the neglect of the second part. Winning the debate against false interpretations of the verse is a pitiful achievement compared to grasping the true significance of Christ's promise concerning the church. For this reason, now that we have laid the foundation, we will direct our attention to the second part of verse 18, where Christ says, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." Or, as the KJV and ESV read, "*the gates of hell* shall not prevail against it." The expression represents the forces of Satan, including the power of death.

The statement in itself could be considered an unconditional declaration of intent. It is not a proposal to be approved, a possibility to be realized, or a reward to be earned. He says, "I will do this. It will happen." There is no chance that it would fail to occur. He declares it to his disciples as something for them to believe and recall, so that he also intends for it to be a promise, and it is entirely appropriate to think of it as such. The fact that it is unconditional means that it will happen for sure; nevertheless, it does not mean that its fulfillment will benefit every individual no matter what. The promise concerns the "church," and not to every person who claims to be a part of it. We will say more about this important point later.

There are three major points that we can derive from Jesus' statement. After that, to properly grasp and apply these points, we will have to keep in mind all that we have said in connection with verses 16 and 17, chiefly, the doctrinal content of Peter's confession, and the sovereignty of God in the matter of faith and unbelief, that is, in causing a man to affirm or reject such a confession.

First, Christ makes a promise regarding the construction of the church. He says "I" will build – he will do it, not men. The construction of the church will not depend on human ability or come under human authority, but Christ will build his church by his own power and wisdom. He will use human instruments as he sees fit, but the effects of these human instruments are still produced by divine power. And he calls it "my" church. He takes ownership of it. He assumes personal responsibility and takes a personal interest in it. He takes personal offense at any unruly conduct within the church, as well as any persecution directed against it. As for the "church" itself, it is a worldwide community of believers who affirm that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God," and who suffered death to atone for the sins of his people. He promises to establish a community of people who are united and governed by such a confession.

Second, in connection with the next point, there is the assumption that there would be opposition from the enemy. The forces of Satan will attempt to destroy the church. In fact, Scripture does not say that the demonic spirits have anything to do other than to usurp the purposes of God and to spread rebellion against him. And they usually attempt to achieve this by attacking and tempting his people. So, how much of the forces of hell are dedicated to the destruction of the church? "The combined strength and cunning of all the powers of hell" is the likely answer. And, what tactics and methods will they use to achieve their purpose? "Everything they can without any mercy, hesitation, or integrity" is the simple reply. If it seems that the powers of hell have been restrained throughout the centuries, that



is a testimony to Christ's faithfulness to his promise. And as we will discuss, even the attacks that occur serve the purpose of the promise.

Third, Christ promises the perpetuation of the church – "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The "gates of hell," of course, represent not only direct attacks from demonic spirits, but also all the forces that fall under their category and their control, and this includes all non-Christians. As John writes, "We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). He makes a sharp distinction between Christians and the rest of the world. Christians are the children of God, but non-Christians work for the devil.

This is a "we" against "them" situation (Matthew 12:30). Unbelievers ridicule such an attitude as unenlightened and counterproductive, but tout tolerance, dialogue, and cooperation. I say, rubbish! It is a tactic of the enemy to undermine our vigilance. But the very suggestion is in fact implicit surrender – if the non-Christians could snuff us out, would they really offer peace? Rather than detecting this sign of weakness for what it is and pursuing our enemy to the ends of the earth, it is astounding how many Christians have accepted this indoctrination – it is spiritual castration. And then, as the men of Judah betrayed Samson to the Philistines (Judges 15:12), these traitors turn around and persecute those who refuse to make covenant with the enemy. But whether we are facing demons, or unbelievers, or professing believers who betray the cause of the gospel, Christ promises that all the powers of hell will not overcome the church.

God's people have always been opposed by Satan's forces. It began with the temptation that led to the fall of Adam and Eve, soon after followed by the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. And even then, God had said to the serpent, "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). This is not entirely unlike how Jesus promised his disciples, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Indeed, the latter is the fulfillment of the former. The promise is that we will face opposition and persecution, but we will never be defeated. The promise is absolute and unconditional. It is simple – exegetically, there is nothing more that I must say – but the implications are far-reaching.

The Book of Acts records a variety of attacks that Satan and non-Christians launch against the church. For the sake of convenience and learning, we may place them under several categories. Although these categories partially overlap, so that an example of opposition may come under two or more categories, it is helpful to list them to bring awareness to the different kinds of attacks that Christians have faced since the first century.

There are at least three reasons to increase awareness of persecution. First, becoming conscious of the great variety and number of attacks against the church helps Christians realize the extent of the wickedness of Satan and non-Christians. Second, it helps Christians gain appreciation for the necessity and the power of Christ's promise for the construction and perpetuation of his church. Third, it helps Christians to detect these attacks, so they may confront and address them. The third point is just as important as the first two, since some of these attacks are subtle, and since some attacks occur with such frequency and

constancy that believers have become accustomed to them, so that perhaps they are no longer recognized as satanic assaults against the faith.

Theological opposition attacks Christian doctrines. Although all attacks are in fact attacks against Christian doctrines, theological attacks are more based on religious disagreements than anything else, as when the Jews opposed the Christian faith by saying, "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). Whether directly or indirectly, obviously or subtly, opposition against the Christian faith comes from all non-Christian religions, such as Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, as well as all lesser known religions that are against the doctrines of Christ.

Philosophical opposition comes from an allegedly rational viewpoint. We recognize an overlap with the theological, since some philosophies are inseparably integrated with religions. One example may be the opposition to the resurrection of Christ by the people of Athens. Christianity replies, "Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?" (Acts 26:8). The opposition is indeed puzzling. There is no rational argument against the resurrection. We may subsume scientific opposition under the category of philosophy. All the theories of science, and not only the theory of evolution, are based on irrational thinking, since its method entails the triple fallacy of empiricism, induction, and experimentation.

Historical opposition is the attempt to distort history in order to discredit the gospel. The attacks that come under this category would include baseless and unreasonable claims concerning who Jesus really was, what he really did, and what he really said. This occurred immediately after Jesus' resurrection, when the Jews bribed the Roman soldiers to lie about what happened to the body. Textual opposition might also be included under this category, and that is when the attempt is made to distort the text of Scripture in order to discredit the faith or undermine people's confidence in it.

Cultural opposition refers to the attacks against Christianity that stem from a difference in the ethical climate between the church and the world. Ethical opposition, then, maybe included under this category, although it could also belong to the theological and philosophical. Coming under the cultural and ethical might include attacks relating to how we view our work, the place of entertainment, our standards regarding language, etiquette, religious differences, friendship, marriage, sexuality, and also things like art and music. That is, when the world produces works of art and music that are against the standards and the teachings of Christianity, that should be considered opposition against the existence and commission of the church.

Again, it is not our aim to place every kind of opposition in a category so well-defined that it does not overlap with other categories. Rather, the purpose is to alert ourselves to the fact that the forces of hell are constantly attacking the church from many sides, and that these attacks assume many different forms. This awareness increases our vigilance in confronting these attacks, and our confidence in the promise that the church will never fall, as we perceive that Christ has been preserving his own against all the forces of hell since

the beginning. It is not that we have not been attacked, or that so far there has been no strong opposition, but that Christ has been true to his promise all along.

Then, in connection with the different categories of attack against our faith, we may enumerate the different manifestations of satanic opposition. We will distinguish between two major types of manifestations, and divide the second type into several categories.

The first type may be called supernatural manifestations, since demonic involvement is more obvious with them. One example comes from Acts 16 in which a woman with a spirit of divination harassed Paul and his companions. The biblical and apostolic method for dealing with an obvious manifestation of demonic power is to confront it as such and seize authority over it by force. And thus Paul said, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" (Acts 16:18).

The other method for dealing with demonic manifestations is apparently to convince ourselves that they no longer occur, naturalize the manifestations and rename them as neurological disturbances, and hand them off to non-Christian psychiatrists, perhaps to drug them or to lock them up in mental institutions. Bravo! What a way to fulfill the Great Commission. Oh, would to God that we could also lock up those who think that these manifestations still occur today. Then this ostrich policy, this theology of denial, this defiance against Christ, this cessation of faith, would not look so bad.

The second type may be called natural manifestations, where demonic involvement is less obvious. These may be further divided into several categories. Again, they are not exact, but the distinctions are made to increase awareness.

Political persecution occurs when the civil authority of a people ratify and enforce legislations that hinder or even criminalize the affirmation, propagation, and application of the Christian faith. This kind of persecution occurs even when it is claimed that there is religious freedom for the people, because there is often some legislations that threaten believers against preaching and practicing their faith truly and fully. Perhaps there is nowhere in the whole world where Christians are completely free from political persecution.

Ecclesiastical persecution is similar to political persecution, only that it is carried out by the religious authority of a people rather than the civil authority. Religious leaders would sometimes use the means available to them to silence or punish dissenters. When biblically authorized leaders exercise their power to discipline individuals in biblically approved manners for the sake of the doctrinal and moral purity of the church, the honor of God, and the salvation of the offender, then it is the proper use of church discipline, and does not amount to ecclesiastical persecution. But we are referring to a use of authority by unauthorized individuals or for unauthorized reasons, such as to protect their own control over the people or to preserve unbiblical doctrines and traditions. This kind of persecution can take the form of an official rebuke, a "blackballing" or defrocking of a minister, or even a conspiracy to murder the troublemaker.

Social persecution can occur in many settings, including the workplace, the school, the family, or a circle of strangers or friends. The actual persecution can take the form of ostracism, slander, insult, loss of employment or expulsion from school. Note that the last two examples have similarities with political and ecclesiastical persecution. A more general manifestation of this kind of persecution is a broad disapproval and mockery of the Christian faith in society. This type of persecution occurs constantly and almost universally.

Intellectual persecution refers to any opposition against the Christian faith that appeals to the minds of believers and unbelievers. This does not mean that it is a rationally sound opposition, although it is often presented as such. In fact, elsewhere we have demonstrated that intellectual oppositions against the Christian faith are never rationally sound, but always fallacious and misleading. Among other things, these can assume the forms of assertions, arguments, and narratives. Many false assertions are made against the Christian faith, and some people believe them without question. Sometimes arguments are made against Christianity in educational institutions by professors and instructors, but they are always easy to refute.

It is important to increase awareness on the use of narratives as a weapon of attack against the Christian faith, since this method is more subtle. Although history can be distorted in the attempt to discredit the faith, I am here referring to fictional narratives. For example, a non-Christian author can produce a novel, a play, or a movie in which the Christians are hateful hypocrites and the non-Christians are self-sacrificing heroes. One can make anyone say and do anything in a work of fiction. This is often an effective method to influence careless individuals, who as long as they are engaged and amused, tend to forget the fictional nature of the work they are viewing, and the relative omnipotence of the author in designing the characters and the plots. Fiction thus effectively bypasses their ordinary defenses to instill in them unbelief and contempt against the Christian faith.

Physical or corporeal persecution is often an extension or result of the previous manifestations of natural opposition against the Christian faith. It will assume different forms depending on the culture of the day. In the first century it included jailing, whipping, stoning, burning, and crucifying the Christians. Today we will have to add shooting to the list, at least for some parts of the world. But not every instance of physical persecution is so extreme. For example, it is not unheard of for a parent to strike his child for converting to the Christian faith.

The church does not face only external attacks, that is, those that come from outside of the community of believers, from those who call themselves non-Christians. Rather, the church also faces internal attacks, partly through the infiltration of non-Christians (who claim to be or falsely consider themselves to be Christians), and partly through the manifestation of remaining sin in believers, at times acting all on its own, and at times stirred up by the infiltration of non-Christian ideas into the church. These attacks materialize in the doctrines and practices of professing Christians, attempting to erode from within the covenant community of Christ.

There is much doctrinal confusion among believers. There are those who claim to be Christians, but who deny the infallibility of Scripture, the blood atonement of Christ, the Trinity of God, and so on. Church divisions seem undesirable, but under certain circumstances they are necessary, and increasing fragmentation occurs if we deal with doctrinal problems only when the yeast has already taken over the whole dough. In terms of practice, adultery, divorce, abortion, and homosexuality run rampant, and because the community has been infiltrated by a staggering number of false converts who in fact favor non-Christian beliefs and values, these things do not disturb them, but the people love to have it so, such that in many cases the acceptance of divorce, abortion, and homosexuality is even regarded as a badge of true Christ-like compassion.

What shall we say to these things? "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). Jesus promises that he will build his church, and that all the powers of hell will not overcome it. Although resistance against the gospel has been constant, and although persecution against the church has been unrelenting, we can be confident that just as the Christian faith has survived in the past, it will continue to survive in the future. There is no need to worry and think, "Will Christianity be snuffed out eventually?" There is no need to fret and say, "Will the church lose its influence some time in the future?" And there is no need to entertain the possibility that the so-called progress in science and culture will ever strip the Bible of its relevance.

All the powers of hell will not overcome the church. The Christian faith is here to stay forever. It will never be destroyed. It will never be forgotten. It will never be replaced. It will never lose its influence. It will never lose its relevance. In fact, the Christian faith will not only survive, but it will prosper in whatever purpose Christ has for it. This is because Christ promises us more than survival – he promises that he will *build* the church. It is first a promise of progress. Thus the church will continue to mature, increase, and advance in accordance with the will of God. Nothing can stop us. Nothing can hinder us. We will fulfill all the good works that God has foreordained for us before the creation of the world.

Now, even an immortal man might fear defeat and death if he does not realize that he cannot perish. But once he understands and believes it, he enters into rest, and from within him rises an unquenchable boldness that delivers him from all the threats of his enemies. Likewise, a church that takes hold of Christ's promise moves from a religion of fear, of effort, of striving and self-preservation, into a religion of rest, of faith, and of great power and courage.

However, the "church" is not an abstract entity or idea, but it consists of the individuals that comprise it. Therefore, when we say that the church must take hold of Christ's promise, we are in fact saying that individual believers must take hold of it. In other words, they must learn to think this way about the church – that Christ will continue to build his church, and that the church will never fade or perish even though all the powers of hell come against it.

Instead of allowing their minds to be taken by their own perception of the current condition of the church and the strength of the threats against it, they must place the burden for

Christianity's survival and progress back where it belongs, that is, on the promise of Christ. The Christian faith will survive and prosper not because we are wise enough, holy enough, or strong enough, but because God has promised to uphold it, and he is faithful to perform his promise. In order to instill this confidence in individual believers, so that the church as a whole may enter into a realm of faith and rest, we must proclaim and expound on this promise in our congregations, and Christians must take time to study, think, and talk about it.

It is a certainty that the Christian faith, or the church, can never be destroyed but will endure forever. But personalizing this confidence is what grants an individual believer liberation and effectiveness. Ironically, one of the greatest hindrances for a Christian to attain this personal confidence is the opposition from other people who claim to be Christians.

Some people are confident only to the extent that they are arrogant, and so when they see confidence in another, they do not know what to call it other than arrogance, because arrogance is all they know in themselves. If they are confident in their religion only as far as they are confident in their human ability, then their faith has never been in God's word in the first place. So blinded are they by their own tradition and prejudice regarding how a Christian ought to think and speak, that they would accuse someone like me as arrogant when I state that I am invincible because God's word is invincible. Unless they can show that I am in fact a non-Christian, so that my confidence is without foundation, their judgment toward me is in fact their attitude toward God's word.

My statement, therefore, stands as a witness against them, exposing their lying faith and false humility – *these* are the things that cannot stand against the powers of the enemy. Their judgment concerning me is correct only concerning themselves. Some of them even claim to believe that God's word is invincible, but their negative reaction to someone who personalizes this truth shows that they are liars. They can say that they have faith in God's word, but if they stumble when someone applies it, and if they are offended when someone personalizes it, then it shows that they are liars. They do not believe God's word. They react because one word from me disturbs their hold upon the minds of men, and throws their system into disarray. But they treasure tradition rather than Christ, and so they would even raise their hand to slay their own brother.

I mention this to illustrate a point. Whether it comes from non-Christians or professing Christians, I must not allow opposition to dictate my ministry agenda, or to derail me from what I know I must do. I will be held accountable for my decisions by the standard of the divine commission, and not by the standard of human reactions and criticisms. In all of this, I remain in perfect faith and rest, because I am confident in the promise of Christ and the call of God. There is nothing that anyone can do to hinder me apart from divine providence, or to destroy my flesh before the task is finished. My work will increase in strength and influence according to the will of God, and there is nothing that anyone can do about it, to diminish it or to undermine it. What is of God will stand, and what is not of God, I am more eager to see demolished than those who oppose me.

Although I am persecuted for expressing a personal confidence in God's word, I will gladly endure the opposition in order to remain an example to others, who may be inspired to likewise embrace and apply the divine promise in a personal way. Pharisaical religionists forbid them. They neither enter into rest themselves, nor permit others to enter. But the promise of Christ stands against them, and they cannot overcome it. They are powerless against me. They are powerless against us.

If they think they can make a difference, let them try it. Let them conspire and combine all their might. Their efforts shall not harm me, but shall turn out to further our cause. Long ago, God's word has given me knowledge and assurance of this. And as the years pass, experience has given us many illustrations of the same. They seethe and scheme, while I sleep soundly in faith and rest. They scream and strive and strike! But we pass through the mob and go on our way. Therefore, let us cast aside a lying faith and move beyond a false humility, and recognize God's word for what it is, and then boldly personalize it. And we can be even more confident about the fate of the church as a whole.

In addition to confidence, Christ's promise gives us the correct perspective regarding the attacks of Satan and their effects on the church. Events and numbers alone are meaningless if there is no interpretive principle by which we can understand the truth about them. For example, just because there appears to be many new converts flowing into a congregation does not mean that the message and method that attract them are sound, and it does not mean that all of them are true converts. There are certain principles in Scripture by which we may ascertain the genuineness of their faith to a high degree of accuracy. Likewise, when the onslaughts of Satan appear to have certain effects, what appears to be happening might not be what is in fact happening.

We need reliable interpretive principles. One central principle must be Christ's promise that he would build his church, and that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. This means that whatever happens, we must not say, "Look, the church is about to be destroyed. The Christian faith is about to become irrelevant. All men shall despise our religion, and soon it will be forgotten. Perhaps the original gospel has expired in its power, so that we must change if we are to survive." Because of Christ's promise, this is always the false interpretation of events and numbers, and other indicators of religious trends.

In fact, because of the promise, we should always assume the opposite interpretation to the above when things seem to be going against us. We should rather say, "Unbelief appears to be rampant. Heresy seems to proliferate. Immorality is the norm. It appears difficult to make new converts. And it seems hard to retain some who have professed the faith. All these things, then, must have their place in what Christ is doing as he builds his church, and all these things will not result in the destruction of the church, but rather the edification of the elect. The forces of hell will not annihilate the Christian faith." The divine promise is sure and fixed, but the individual events and their interpretations are not. So it is the promise that makes sense of the circumstances, and not the other way around.

We can be even more specific in our understanding of these circumstances, because Scripture provides us with many more interpretive principles. For example, Romans 8:30

says, "And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified." A person comes to faith in Christ because God has chosen him, predestined him to be saved, and at his appointed time, gives him faith in Christ to believe the gospel. This verse tells us that this person will without fail proceed all the way from justification to glorification. In other words, a person who has been predestined for justification is equally predestined for glorification. Predestination does not apply only to faith and conversion, but it applies to the completion of salvation in the person. Therefore, any person who has been predestined for salvation will surely be saved. There is no chance that he would finally forsake the faith and be condemned with the unbelievers.<sup>5</sup>

The same doctrine is taught in John 10. There Jesus explains why some people disbelieve the gospel, and why some believe it:

The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one." (John 10:24-30)

Those who are not already Christ's sheep will never become Christ's sheep. The Jews demand, "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly," to which Jesus answers, "I did tell you." So Jesus affirms that he has been explicit enough with the Jews concerning the fact that he is the Christ. Their unbelief cannot be attributed to any deficiency in the content or presentation of the message, since it is Christ himself who is speaking, and we can assume that he testifies about himself in a complete and perfect manner. Still, these Jews refuse to believe, and Christ explains that it is because they are not his sheep.

On the other hand, those who are Christ's sheep are already Christ's sheep even before they believe. In fact, the reason they believe is because they are already Christ's sheep when they hear the gospel, the voice of Christ. The time that a person is "born again" and believes the gospel is not when he becomes Christ's sheep. But it is because he is already Christ's sheep that he becomes born again and believes the gospel. Conversion happens when Christ's sheep hears his voice and begins to follow him. Again, for this to happen, a person has to be Christ's sheep already, before he hears the voice of the shepherd.

Then, concerning the sheep, Jesus says no one can snatch them out of his hand or the Father's hand. In other words, only his sheep will believe the gospel, all of his sheep will believe the gospel, and none of his sheep will turn to disbelieve the gospel. In Paul's language, we could say, only the chosen or predestined will be saved, all those who have been chosen or predestined will be saved, and none of those who have been chosen or

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<sup>5</sup> Vincent Cheung, "The Preservation of the Saints."



predestined will turn away from the gospel and be condemned. Paul also teaches, as John and Jesus do here, that those who have not been chosen for salvation but rather created for damnation, will be hardened so that they will not and cannot believe the gospel and be saved.

This doctrine constitutes a sure and fixed interpretive principle by which we can understand some of the things that occur in the world and in the church concerning people's attitude toward the Christian faith. For example, an application of this doctrine would naturally yield John's statement, "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (1 John 2:19). The general principle is that if a person who professes to be a Christian really and finally renounces the Christian faith, then he has never been a Christian in the first place.

Any person can speak the words, "I believe in Christ. I am a Christian," and join a church, but doing this does not guarantee that he is truly a believer in Christ or a Christian. Under the right conditions and in the right contexts, a false convert will very likely react in a manner that exposes his true self, that he is in fact a non-Christian. In connection with this, we need to ask ourselves three questions. First, how did this unbeliever manage to infiltrate the church and position himself as a Christian undetected? Perhaps the preaching has been flawed, and the church's standard sub-biblical. Second, does the church in fact generate those conditions and contexts that would naturally expose this unbeliever? Perhaps the doctrine and the culture of this church makes the environment habitable even for non-Christians. Third, when this false believer speaks or behaves in a manner that exposes his true nature, what does the church do about it? Perhaps it is reluctant to practice confrontation and exercise discipline. Thus the false convert remains in the church.

Such negligence and disobedience in our churches have resulted in an almost overwhelming number of false believers in our congregations. They in turn resist our doctrines, affect our policies, pressure our leaders, confuse our missions, tarnish our reputations, corrupt our flocks, control our finances, and drain our resources. So severe is the problem that many churches of God are in fact synagogues of Satan. If we were to suddenly obey biblical teachings on church discipline – and we should – tens of thousands, thousands upon thousands, and even millions of church members would be excommunicated *today*. With all those professing believers in our churches who deny biblical inspiration, who practice witchcraft, who commit adultery, who endorse homosexuality, doctrinal tolerance, interreligious dialogue, and such things, this number is by no means an exaggeration. But this mass excommunication is unlikely to occur, because many churches are negligent and disobedient when it comes to maintaining the purity of the faith or the community.

However, even when we are unfaithful to his commands, Christ is faithful to his promise. He is still building his church, and he is still ensuring that the gates of hell will not overcome it. And when the forces of hell begin to gain multiple footholds in the churches themselves, Christ will do something about it. So perhaps one reason that Christ ordains the attacks of the enemy is to do exactly what he promises us – that he will build his church,

and that the forces of hell will not overcome it. But he also says that no one can snatch away from him true believers. Therefore, the net effect of an exodus from our churches as a result of the attacks of the enemy is a purging of false believers from the church. Christ does for us what we are too cowardly and unfaithful to do.

The attacks bring shame and suffering upon the believers, but the church in fact becomes healthier for it. As the letter to the Hebrews says, "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?...No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees" (12:7, 11-12). The world's mockery against the church spurs true believers toward greater faith and excellence. It wakes up slumbering Christians from their spiritual stupor. It encourages self-examination, resulting in biblical and genuine assurance of faith, instead of a mere assumption of salvation. Through their constant assaults, God trains our intellectual muscles and tests our spiritual character.

In fact, for those believers who are able to exercise accurate perception, all the attacks of the enemy serve to confirm the excellence and superiority of their religion. Christians who have been well-taught marvel at the irrational nature of the non-Christians' arguments and maneuvers against the church, and they further marvel that their fellow non-Christians (both within and without the church) are convinced and moved to action by them. Every hostile campaign of the enemy is a public testimony to the stupidity and wickedness of the non-Christians, and in contrast, the perfect coherence and righteousness of God, so that in every instance God confirms to the elect his own wisdom and derives glory for himself out of the situation.

Meanwhile, *not one* true Christian is lost. All those who turn away are non-Christians to begin with, or are unbelievers posing as believers in the church. The attacks of the enemy only help to divide the righteous from the unrighteous in a more distinct manner than our own half-hearted effort has been able to do. Neither is our influence on culture or our campaign against the world diminished by the forces of hell. Just as God reduced Gideon's army from about thirty-two thousand men to only three hundred, he will do more with a small number of true believers than with a large congregation burdened with an overwhelming number of unbelievers, who are nothing more than spiritual and social liabilities as long as they are identified with us. Their departure poses no loss to the church, but rather a cleansing and a deliverance for us. All things serve the promise of Christ, the edification of the elect, and the condemnation of the reprobate.

Although Christ is active and determined in building his church, and although this means that the forces of hell are unable to diminish or destroy it, this should not encourage complacency in us, and it does not follow that we have no responsibilities or that our actions as individuals are meaningless. And confidence should not lead to indolence or negligence.

Sometimes people think that they are responsible or that their actions are meaningful only when the entire enterprise stands or falls with them. If the outcome is not directly,

necessarily, and proportionately related to their effort, then they throw up their hands and conclude that it is pointless for them to do anything. This attitude is foolish and wicked, because it implies that unless the outcome ultimately depends on the human person – unless that person replaces God – then he finds no reason to do the right thing, or to obey God's commands.

Incidentally, this evil attitude is a controlling premise in many arguments for human freedom, including some arguments in favor of compatibilism and the doctrine of secondary causes.<sup>6</sup> Their assumption is that the meaningfulness of an action and the responsibility of a person necessarily depend on some kind of human freedom. Few perceive the arbitrariness of this premise because of its wide acceptance. But there is no justification for it. Nevertheless, our present concern is not with human freedom, but with the relation between action and effect, and how that relates to responsibility.

The biblical and rational position is that it does not undermine moral responsibility to say that a person's action has no direct, necessary, or proportionate effect on anything, but that, when we must speak on the metaphysical level or speak relative to the ultimate reference point, God is the direct and necessary cause of all things. There is no necessary connection between our responsibility and the effect or outcome of our actions. The assumption that there is a relation between the two is based on a misguided existential desire for meaning rather than a biblical or rational demonstration of a relationship between the two. Rather, our responsibility relates only to God's commands and judgments.

All this is to say that we are morally responsible to do the things that his commands tell us to do, and not to produce the effects that we think his commands are intended to produce. There is a big difference between the two – God wants us to obey him, not to replace him. Of course, God will often relate the effects that he produces with the efforts that we exert into following his commands, but the two are not related thus by necessity, but only by God's sovereign arrangement. The point is that although the survival of the church does not depend on our actions, we are still responsible and our actions are still meaningful because responsibility and meaning should be measured relative to God's commands and not relative to the effects that we can produce.

So we say that Christ will build his church and that the church will stand and succeed "no matter what," but this is not a doctrine of fatalism, which teaches that events are determined

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<sup>6</sup> Compatibilists have at times challenged my understanding of their position. After engaging them on this issue, my perception is that at least some of them realize that I am correct in my doctrine, but rather than abandoning a cherished tradition, which is admittedly difficult to do, they prefer to say that their position does not in fact commit the errors that I mention. However, to take one respected compatibilist as an example, John Frame writes, "I believe that compatibilist freedom is the main kind of freedom necessary to moral responsibility. There are other kinds of freedom, however, which are also important theologically and ethically" ("Free Will and Moral Responsibility, IJIM Magazine Online, Volume 1, Number 12, May 17 to May 23, 1999). Notice that he not only calls compatibilism a kind of "freedom" and relates it to moral responsibility, but he also believes that there are other kinds of freedom that are "important theologically and ethically." Some expositions of compatibilism are not as clear and concise, but they assert the same thing. So it would seem that my understanding of compatibilism is in fact more accurate than some of the defenders of this doctrine.

by an impersonal force, and that effects will come about regardless of means. Contrary to fatalism, we insist that a rational and personal God determines all events, and that he often uses means, including human instruments, to produce the effects that he intends.

Against some who hold to an incoherent and incomplete doctrine of divine sovereignty, we also affirm that God has direct and total control over human instruments, so that these have no freedom. But again, this doctrine does not thus become fatalism, since our God is still personal, and his means are still effective. By definition, it cannot be identified as fatalism. This doctrine is not only different from fatalism, but it is a stronger form of determinism than fatalism. In fact, this biblical, rational, and coherent formulation is the strongest form of determinism possible. Where the state of the church is concerned, as a general principle we can say that God will fulfill his decrees by his sovereign direction of human instruments as they relate to his divine commands. However, God is not required to employ human instruments to produce every effect. It is an error to assume that he does or that he must always use means.

Therefore, although the church does not stand or fall with us, and although we can have unshakable confidence when it comes to the construction and perpetuation of the church, we still carry many responsibilities since we have received commands from God about what we should believe, how we should live, how we must treat people, and what we must say to them. In our context, we must consider the proper reaction toward the attacks of the enemy against the Christian faith. What are our responsibilities when all the forces of hell are unleashed against us, as if to destroy us? What should we do when we come face to face with skepticism, immorality, persecution from without, and dissension and heresy from within?

First, we must maintain the confession. As Hebrews 10:23 says, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful" (ESV; also 4:14). Jesus promises to construct and to continue his church. The fulfillment of this promise depends only on himself, and not on human desire or ability. He is faithful to fulfill his promise even when we are unfaithful. And even when we are weak, he is strong. In fact, whenever he chooses to accomplish his will through willing human instruments, he would create the needed desire and ability in those vessels that he uses.<sup>7</sup>

That said, his promise in Matthew 16:18 is made about a church that he will build upon the confession that Jesus of Nazareth is "the Christ, the Son of the living God." His promise guarantees that there will always be a community of people who affirm this confession. In other words, there will always be Christians in this world, and the Christian faith will remain forever regardless of what the forces of hell do to attack it.

However, it does not mean that every individual who claims to be a Christian is among this group of people. Or, to say this another way, the promise is made concerning the church,

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<sup>7</sup> He can accomplish his will through unwilling and unbelieving instruments, and even through the devil himself. That is, a person might perform an action with a negative intention, but the effect will be what God ordains. Note that this is not compatibilism, since even the negative intention here is not free, but caused by divine power. God is indeed compatible with himself in all his actions, but this is not what compatibilism intends to assert.

and the church consists of individuals, but not every individual who claims to be a part of the church is indeed a part of the church.

There will always be individuals who are Christians, who are a part of the church that Christ builds, but whether a particular person is a Christian is another question. Paul writes, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves" (2 Corinthians 13:5). In the context of Matthew 16, everything depends on the confession. Jesus promises nothing other than damnation to a community or an individual that is placed on any other foundation. He does not promise to build or to protect it, or to give it victory. He will always preserve a church that maintains this confession, and again, since the church consists of individuals, this means that he will always preserve a group of people that hold fast to the confession. And whether a particular individual belongs to this church that Christ is building is determined by whether he maintains this same confession.

There is a bishop who said, "Christianity must change or die," referring to some of our central theological and ethical teachings. The moment he said that, he had become an agent of hell. Only someone who has in mind the things of man and not the things of God can make such a statement (Matthew 16:23). He does not have in mind the promise, but he has in mind what he thinks it will take for the "Christianity" to survive apart from any divine power to preserve it. His solution is to preserve the name but to destroy the substance. But then Christianity would already be dead. No, Jesus makes no promise to build or to protect a "Christianity" that has some other foundation. If Christianity changes, then it will die, if for no other reason than that the change is the death.

Any individual who makes a confession that is different from or contrary to Peter's confession becomes an enemy of the church. Christ's promise is then not for him but against him. In fact, Christ promises that this person will not succeed in his opposition to or disagreement with the confession. He could call himself a Christian, but if his confession differs, Christ does not promise to protect this person, but rather to protect his church from this person.

Jesus makes the promise about a church that is well-defined in its faith and doctrine. This is why I did not begin with verse 18, with the promise itself, to make the point that the church is invincible. I had to first define the church toward which the promise is made. And the church is defined by Peter's confession, which as we have noted, asserts and implies several major and nonnegotiable doctrines, including the Christian God, the Trinity, a fully divine and fully human Christ, who is no other than the Jesus of Nazareth of the Gospel of Matthew.

Anyone who compromises this confession removes himself from the guarantee of Christ's promise. Of course this confession, along with all its theological and ethical implications, is offensive and unpopular. But according to Christ, this is also the most protected place, or the place of promise. What appears to be the most dangerous position is in fact the place of safety and of power. And what appears to man as the safest position, the position of peace and of no conflict, is in fact the most dangerous position. As Hebrews 10:38-39 says, "But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with

him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved."

Of course, it is wrong to offend over something that is only a matter of preference, but when the issue pertains to a doctrine or a principle, then that which is most offensive to human rebellion is also that which is most subject to divine deliverance. On the other hand, when a person tries to deliver himself from human rejection through compromise, then he will become a common thing, so that there is really no point in hearing him or agreeing with him over any other person. Or, since divine deliverance no longer accompanies him, he will crumble under any human persecution that remains. And the even more pressing question is, who will deliver him from the divine judgment to come?

Let us, therefore, first maintain our confession of faith. Let us pray, study, and build up one another through mutual instruction and encouragement, so that we may become convinced and established in the faith, and thus remain under the invincible promise of Christ.

Second, we must proclaim the confession. Christ promises to build his church, and that the gates of hell will not overcome it. The second part of this promise is based on the first part, bridged by the assumption that Christ will succeed in building the church, since he succeeds in whatever he does, so that all opposition against it shall fail. The second part, then, is a necessary inference from the first, and would be true even if unstated. This observation helps us to perceive that the promise's negative application (that hell shall not overcome) is dependent on its positive thrust. The essence of the promise is positive, and is captured by the words "I will build my church." The church will be as large, prosperous, and influential as Christ wishes to make it.

In other words, the promise implies not only that the church will be able to withstand the gates of hell, but also that the gates of hell will be unable to withstand the advance of the church. Christ indeed defends the church against Satan according to the promise, but this negative aspect of the promise is based on the positive thrust, that he will build his church. This positive thrust necessarily yields a positive implication as well, that the church will continue to be constructed, or to advance, that Satan will be unable to stop Christ from building his church – that is, Satan will be unable to stop the church that maintains and proclaims the confession.

We have orders to not only maintain the confession, but to proclaim it to every part of the world, and we have the promise that Christ will be with us as we do so (Matthew 28:18-20). Therefore, we have the authority and the obligation to be active, aggressive, and even militant in advancing the Christian faith. Of course, I am not referring to the use of physical or military forces to spread our religion. But as with Paul's military metaphors, I am pointing out the fact that we are involved in a conflict with the forces of hell, which consist of Satan, demons, and non-Christians. This conflict is spiritual and intellectual in nature, and it is on this level that our aggression applies. Our weapons include earnest petitions toward God and proclamations toward men, and not the superficial and inferior tactics of terrorism, which might cause the flesh to submit but can never change the heart.

Make no mistake about it: We are indeed out to advance our faith and destroy all others. Christ commands us to do this, so that we must call into question the Christian commitment of anyone who denies or disobeys such a formulation of our mission. To convert people to our faith is to convert them away from theirs. To say that we are right is to say that they are wrong. There is no middle ground. But we employ weapons that are far more devastating, effective, and permanent than the physical weapons of any military. According to God's will we wield the very powers of the world to come. We are endued with power by the Spirit of God, conquering nations and peoples by the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. The promise of Christ is to us a safe refuge, but it is a death curse upon all the non-Christian beliefs and efforts of this world.

So we are to be vigilant in our attitude and approach, in our proclamation of the confession of our faith. And just as content is essential when we maintain our confession, it is also necessary that the content of our proclamation be the same as the confession that we maintain for ourselves, and that our presentation be uncompromising, aggressive, and often in effect, offensive (1 Corinthians 1:23). We must speak the truth to all men in love, and that is to say, boldly and plainly, so that they may hear us. We must tell them what the Bible says, that non-Christians are sinful and stupid, and that to change this they require the righteousness and enlightenment that comes only through faith in Jesus Christ.

There are some who distort Scripture to attack those who would speak the truth in this manner, in order to hide their own inadequacies. They are a disgrace to the kingdom of God. It is as if they have made a peace treaty with the devil in their hearts, and they would even tear down their own brothers in order to remain in favor with the realm of darkness. But we must not compromise with the devil in the attitude or in the content of our proclamation of the Christian confession.

We must never permit a synthesis with non-Christian thinking, but many have done this in the name of peace, dialogue, tolerance, discovering common ground, or mutual respect and understanding. Then, there are those who boast that they "press the antithesis," when the truth is that they merely pretend the antithesis by building a different structure upon the common ground of an anti-biblical foundation. They indeed teach people to bow to Christ, but not before they make Christ bow to Satan.

They speak peace to the false intellectual methods and premises of unbelievers, but claim that we cannot account for or make sense of them apart from biblical presuppositions. As if this is not bad enough, they then make these false methods and premises the precondition to knowing the very biblical presuppositions that they claim are necessary to account for these same methods and premises.<sup>8</sup> This is to betray the entire Christian faith to the enemy,

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<sup>8</sup> The arguments that we formulate concerning various topics are founded upon more foundational premises that should be examined. The arguments could seem sound once these premises are assumed, but the question is whether they should be assumed in the first place. Among other things, the presuppositional approach to apologetics brings awareness to these premises and scrutinizes them. It is the practice of presuppositional apologetics to demonstrate that biblical revelation is the precondition for any argument and any proposition. However, not all who advocate presuppositionalism agree. There is a school of thought that claims to acknowledge biblical revelation as the precondition for all propositions, but then it claims that once this is assumed, it provides an account for even things that are inherently irrational (in the

and in doing so they reinforce the hold of non-Christian thinking in the minds of men, so that they have joined the very forces of hell that seek to undermine our confession of faith. As for us, we have Christ's promise of survival and victory. Let us be bold to make a clear stand for the Christian faith and confession.

Just as God made the footsteps of four lepers into the sound of a great army in order to fulfill his decree to turn back Israel's enemy (2 Kings 7:1-7), he can devastate the enemy and convert the sinner by making powerful and effective even the most pitiful human effort. Even the most sophisticated philosopher has no defense against the most uneducated and untrained Christian whose plain assertion of the gospel is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Although it is far better to be properly equipped, not by worldly professionalism but by a sound understanding and application of the faith, our overall success and progress is guaranteed by the divine promise. The effect will not always be in proportion to our ability or faithfulness, but to Christ's promise and decree.

The Christian who is not thoroughly taught and trained is at a disadvantage, and he should be diligent and prepare himself in order to show himself approved as a workman for the faith. That said, meanwhile he is far from helpless, because God is on his side, and by his Spirit his testimony for the faith can be as a hammer or a blazing fire to the heart of men. There are indeed sound arguments in favor of the Christian faith, and God sometimes uses them as occasions to humiliate and harden the reprobate, to confirm the elect, and to bring his chosen ones to faith. But he does not have to use these arguments. He can break the enemy and reach the elect with a simple word. He can break through the irrational and immoral defenses of unbelievers with or without arguments. We are obligated to learn and improve, but we do not need to attain perfection before God can work through us to accomplish his will.<sup>9</sup>

The Christian faith is indestructible because our Father is greater than all. The church is invincible because Christ promises to build his church and that the forces of hell will not overcome it. Christianity is a permanent religion, and Christ's church a permanent institution. For this reason, our work is not a matter of survival, but a matter of responsibility imposed by God's command to maintain and proclaim the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. In the light of Christ's promise, the forces of the devil and the unbelievers are pathetic and impotent. They are defenseless against us, for greater is he who is in us than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4). Therefore, resting on the divine promise of an invincible church, we warn all men with great sincerity and confidence: Join him, or be crushed by him (Matthew 21:44).

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sense that even they can yield truth and knowledge when in fact they cannot), such as induction, empiricism, and the fallacy of asserting the consequent that characterizes the scientific method. Then, it turns around and makes these irrational items the precondition for knowing the biblical revelation. Thus in effect it denies the Bible, and all of the Christian faith. See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, Apologetics in Conversation, and Captive to Reason*.

<sup>9</sup> Vincent Cheung, "The Bible, the Preacher, and the Spirit."



## 2. THE BIBLE, THE PREACHER, AND THE SPIRIT

God has given the Bible a most prominent place in both the history of mankind in general, and in the history of redemption in particular. In fact, if we will think about it, this is just another way of saying that he has given himself this prominence. This is because, since the Bible is his own Word, or a revealed portion of his divine mind, and to separate a person's mind from the person makes nonsense of the whole idea of what it means to be a person, we can never separate the Bible from God himself as if it is possible to deal with one without also dealing with the other.

When we speak this way, we are not mainly referring to the Bible as a physical book, of which there are many printed copies, but we are referring to the incorporeal "Word" of God. We are referring to that portion of his divine mind that he has disclosed to us, which is in itself not physical. However, in what follows I will refer to the "Bible" instead of the "Word" in order to emphasize that God has disclosed his mind to us and recorded its contents in the form of a verbal and written revelation.

God rules by the Bible. By this book, he declares that he is the creator and that man is the creature. As the potter has the right to mold anything that he pleases out of clay, God has the right as creator to make any creature his wishes, and to make the creature for any purpose he wishes. By this book, God tells man his place as creature in the universe and in history. He tells man the standard by which he must conduct himself in this world, and he demands man to obey it.

By this book, he defines for man truth and error, and right and wrong. A false religion like the Baha'i Faith claims to encourage the "independent investigation for truth," that is, until your investigation suggests that the Baha'i Faith is false. You can investigate as much as you like – yes, even "independently" – as long as you finally agree with the Baha'i Faith.

Members of the scientific community are not above this hypocrisy. They encourage you to think for yourself, but when you in fact do so, breaking free from the irrationality of empiricism and scientism, they are outraged. They call religion irrational, and it is irrational because it is unscientific. However, what is it to practice the scientific method, but to first assume without justification the reliability of sensation and induction, and then to commit the logical fallacy of asserting the consequent over and over again? The method amounts to nothing more than a systematic irrationalism. Logic has never been the forte of science. It has its uses, but to discover the truth about reality is not one of them.<sup>10</sup>

God, the Bible, and thus Christianity, are free from the hypocrisy of science and false religions. This book comes right out and tell you that if you attempt an independent investigation for truth, independent from divine revelation, then you will be misled and

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<sup>10</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions and Presuppositional Confrontations*.

arrive at a false conclusion. The reason for this is that one can never conduct an investigation for truth independently from any principles. Since Christianity is the truth, to perform an investigation for truth independently of it necessarily means that the investigation must adopt a false starting point. In other words, if you attempt an investigation *for truth* that is independent *from truth*, then your investigation departs from truth at the very beginning, and there is no way that you will arrive at truth when you start out by running away from it. In bringing them to faith in Christ, God saves his elect from their initial intellectual waywardness.

The Bible is bold and honest. It tells you that if you disagree with anything in it, then you are wrong, and God will hold you accountable for your false belief and the false conduct that follows from it. It does not pretend to grant you the right to oppose or debate it. You must agree with it, believe it, and obey it. It does not respect private values and private opinions, as if we are each our own god. It ignores those things that we would consider our rights when we are dealing with our fellow human beings. This is because when we are dealing with the Bible, we are not dealing with other human beings, but with God himself. Even the rights that we have when dealing with other human beings must come from the Bible itself, since God is the ruler of us all, and he is the one who defines the proper relationship between his creatures.

By this book, God dictates to every aspect of human life. It tells us about earning, saving, and spending our money. It tells us how and what to teach our children. It tells us what kind of people we may befriend, trust, and marry. It assigns social roles, including those that pertain to age, rank, gender, and spiritual knowledge and maturity. It regulates what some consider the most private matters, such as human sexuality. Many people think that sexuality is their own business, but the Bible prescribes exact instructions and precepts on the subject, now exhorting and commanding, now forbidding and condemning. It announces principles concerning alcohol consumption, and it makes a sin out of gluttony. Then, it contains commandments even regarding our thoughts and motives, so that not only is it sinful to steal, but it is also sinful to covet. Because this book contains the whole will of God for mankind, it also represents everything that spiritual rebels hate.

Human government must also bow to the Bible's authority. Although I agree with those who affirm that the United States Constitution is meant to protect the church from the state, rather than to require the state to isolate and discriminate against the church, this is not our present concern. In discussing the proper function and authority of government, we must remember that what is American is not necessarily Christian, and that there are many other countries in the world and throughout history whose laws are different from those of the United States.

So our first concern should not be the proper interpretation of American law, or even the views of the nation's founders, as if we should follow them even if they had been atheists, deists, or even Muslims and Buddhists! No, when it comes to thinking about human government, our first concern should be the proper understanding of Scripture on the topic. What we come up with from this perspective would apply to every country in every period of human history.

To begin, any human government should be established "by God's authority, for God's glory," and not "by the people, for the people." This is not to overturn the foundation of American government or the philosophy of democracy. Let me say two things about this to clarify.

First, the ideal human government is not democracy, but divine dictatorship – that is, to have Jesus Christ as the king of all. Dictatorship is in principle the most efficient form of government, but its success depends on the worth, ability, and character of the dictator. Only Jesus Christ deserves this level of exaltation, and only he can wield such power justly and wisely. His government would require no advisors, no inefficient political procedures, and no balance of power. And there would be no corruption, no injustice, no mistakes, and no failure.

Of course, God has always ruled the universe, and all things proceed according to his will. But our present discussion relates not to the ultimate reference point, but to a subordinate one, for we are considering *human* government only. And on this level, God has not given us divine dictatorship as a system of human government. Until heaven, there will be no government in which those who hold power are completely sinless and selfless, and in which all the precepts of God are perfectly followed. So to admit that ours is not an ideal system of government does not necessarily mean that it deserves to be overturned, and still less does it mean that we should adopt another form of government, such as *human* dictatorship.

Second, the principle of "by the people, for the people" is indeed acceptable and perhaps even preferable, but only when considered in a relative sense, that is, not relative to divine rule, but to a subordinate reference point. In other words, here we temporarily exclude the creator-creature relationship from our thinking, and instead consider only the relationships between men.

But what is relative is subordinate, so that it cannot be the *ultimate* foundation for government. Rather, since God is the ultimate reference point for all of reality, we cannot truly and finally exclude him from any aspect of our thinking, and thus he must also be the ultimate reference point for human government. Therefore, "by God's authority, for God's glory" must be the Christian philosophy of human government. Temporary compromises aside, divine authority and revealed precepts must make up the starting point of our thinking.

In the United States, the argument is often over the so-called "separation of church and state." The legitimacy of the phrase itself is in question, as the Constitution does not in fact include or assert it. But as mentioned, the Constitution is not the Bible. It has no necessary place in a discussion on the Bible's teaching on the government, unless the discussion has to do with whether the Constitution is biblical. Right now we are thinking about human government – *all* human government, and not just the United States.

We do need to consider the right relationship between the church and the state, and whether there should be a "separation" between them in any sense. On this we can say that the church and the state are two distinct institutions established by God to serve different functions. They are "separate" in the sense that the authority given to one is not to be exercised by the other. For example, the church is not to perform executions, and the state is not to excommunicate people from the church.

Here is the point where some people's thinking become confused. They seem to think that just because the state is "separate" from the church in the sense specified above, it is therefore to set itself up as altogether secular, but this is incorrect. Although the state is to be distinguished from the church, we must remember that the church is not God, and the church is not the Bible. The proper view is that even in situations where the church is not under the state, and where the state is not under the church, both institutions remain under God and the Bible.

God is the ruler over every person and every institution, not just the believer and the church. And since the Bible is his revelation, it carries the same authority over every person and every institution. Therefore, every human government must submit and operate under the Bible, and any deviation from it constitutes sinful rebellion against divine authority. The state is not the church, but it is not morally permitted to be secular, either. We must remember that the government is not an empty or impersonal entity, but it is made up of people, whether they are kings, judges, law enforcement officers, or elected representatives. And as people, each one of them is required to believe the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and to obey all his teachings *at all times*, including the times when they are enacting laws and performing their public functions.

This is the only rational and defensible foundation for formulating and enforcing the laws that regulate society. On this foundation, for example, we can affirm that the state is permitted to condemn and execute murderers. On the other hand, if the state is not under the Bible's immediate authority, then there is no final argument forbidding it to ignore murderers, or even to pass laws that *encourage* murder. The same applies to things like rape, theft, perjury, and so on.

But if the Bible is the immediate authority directly governing the state's laws and decisions, then the state must also condemn things like blasphemy, adultery, and homosexuality, rather than to pride itself in granting its citizens the freedom to commit these abominations. However, because human society has not been operating under this principle, it has passed laws that open the floodgate to mass murder (as in abortion), that endorse rampant sodomy, that consider adultery as a private affair between consenting adults, and that grant divorce as a right to be freely exercised.

And those places that have blasphemy laws now consider them archaic and no longer enforce them. But as Calvin writes, the office of the magistrates must attend to "both Tables of the Law," and it is "folly" to "neglect the concern for God and...give attention only to rendering justice among men. As if God appointed rulers in his name to decide earthly

controversies but overlooked what was of far greater importance – that he himself should be purely worshiped according to the prescription of his law."<sup>11</sup>

Some Christians have no problem thinking that a nation should be founded on the so-called second table of the Law, but somehow think that the first table should be left out. But the first table is the foundation for the second, that is to say, the fear of God is the only proper foundation for right relationships among men. To leave out the first is to destroy the second, or perhaps worse, it is to place the second table of divine commands on a humanistic foundation. Such a monster of a legal system cannot stand, and will inevitably slide into greater and greater injustice and moral laxity.

Some Christians separate the state from religion altogether, but at the same time attempt to argue that the state should adopt their biblical values. From what they have learned from Scripture, they realize what the law should be in order for it to be just and righteous, but then they try to argue for it after they have already detached the debate from the very reason why they knew what the law should be in the first place. So not only has their thinking become confused, their argument weak, and their task impossible, but they in fact end up with a position that is less than biblical.

Can you imagine Jesus Christ mandating that both creation and evolution should be taught in public schools? The fact that the Bible is not *the* textbook by which all others are judged, and that an explicit and exclusive Christianity is not taught in public schools is a crime against God, and that evolution is not outright refuted and condemned represents blatant national rebellion and apostasy. To urge that creation should be taught in public schools *in addition* to evolution is already a compromise.<sup>12</sup> It might be a necessary one given our present situation, if we can even obtain this, but it would be wrong to affirm it in principle as well, for in principle, evolution should be banned altogether on the grounds that it constitutes a conspiracy to deceive the public.

Remember that I am not talking about what is actually possible and legitimate on the basis of American law, but I am talking about what things should be from the Bible's perspective, that is, the ideal situation. Meanwhile, we must work with the existing laws in each society to achieve results that are most in accord with biblical precepts, while praying that the laws will change for the better in time. This will come only as a result of a fundamental shift in the spiritual climate of the nation, as the Spirit makes our preaching effective and fruitful. In any case, in working with what is possible at the present, we must not forget the ideal, which is that, even if one does not come under the other's jurisdiction, both institutions should function directly under the Bible's divine authority.

This returns us to the point that I am making, as my focus is not in fact on political theory. Rather, our discussion concerns the Bible's relationship with mankind, and the point is that since the Bible is the revealed portion of God's mind, and no person is separate from his own mind, the Bible therefore carries God's very authority, so that when it comes to knowing the will of God, the two are to be identified. God has ordained this book to rule

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<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.20.9.

<sup>12</sup> I am referring to teaching creation directly from the Bible, not creation "science."

over mankind. It follows that no person and no institution can remain guiltless that deviates from the Bible's teachings.

Indeed, every institution consists of *people* whom God holds accountable, so whether we are talking about individuals, the church, or the state, we are still talking about people who are required to believe and obey all of God's precepts all the time, and in whatever capacity they are functioning. You cannot preach like a Christian and then vote like an atheist. If you do, you are probably just an atheist. You cannot rally against abortion, and then support a law that grants unbiblical rights to homosexuals, regardless of whether you think it is the American thing to do. God will not hold you guiltless just because you are dealing with matters of the state. He might just "separate" you from the church altogether and send you to hell. There you can sort out your politics.

So God judges by the Bible. Because the Bible maintains the above relationship with mankind, and because it is the revelation of divine commands and precepts, it is the reference point by which God will judge every person. To think through this clearly, we must again emphasize that because the Bible (or the incorporeal Word of God) is the revelation of a portion of God's mind, and the mind of a person *is* the person, there is no difference between the authority of the Bible and the authority of God, and in our present context, there is no difference between the Bible as the reference point and God as the reference point.

It is God who sets the standard. To disbelieve and disobey God is sin, and to believe and obey him is righteousness. Since there is no difference between the Bible (the incorporeal Word of God) and God, it follows that a person's attitude and reaction toward the Bible is to be taken as his exact attitude and reaction toward God. This means that no one can obey God and disobey the Bible. And no one can claim to love God more than he loves the Bible. Anyone who disbelieves any part of the Bible calls God a liar.

Whatever the Bible says is what God says. If not for unbelief, this statement would be unnecessary and redundant, for all it means is that what God says is what God says. Now, God is the one who judges and the one who damns. Therefore, it necessarily follows that it is the Bible that judges and the Bible that damns. God damns to hell whomever the Bible damns to hell. There is no difference.

Thus we should never hesitate to take a decisive position regarding the nature and fate of a type of person, a belief, or an action that the Bible has addressed. We should never use the excuse, "Only God knows." No, *we* know as well, because God has revealed his thinking on the subject to us. Non-Christians will go to hell. Homosexuals will suffer everlasting hellfire. Feminism is of the devil. Greed leads to perdition. Liars will be exposed and punished. Oppressors will be destroyed by divine wrath. We *know* all of these things.

To play humble and non-judgmental when God has already revealed to us his verdict is to defy him to his face. One professing Christian was unwilling to say that Mormons will go to hell because "only God could make such a decision." What an insult to God! Suppose I

tell you that I enjoy beef but that I detest pork, and then you turn around and tell someone, "I do not know what to bring Vincent. Only he can tell us what he likes." Right, and I just told you, but you had so little respect for me that it is as if you either paid no attention to me, or you ignored what I said. And it is as if this professing believer never read the Bible, or else she disregarded what she read. As for me, I *know* that true Mormons, Muslims, Catholics, Hindus, Buddhists, and all who reject Jesus Christ will go to hell. God has spoken, and I dare not pretend that nothing happened.

Then, God saves by the Bible. We know that he judges by the Bible, and by it all men are found to be sinners and rebels against God, and so the Bible condemns all men to an everlasting fiery hell. But it also reveals the only way to salvation, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ.

John 5:39-40 says, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life." These verses have been misinterpreted by some people, especially the anti-intellectual and anti-doctrinal type, to teach the opposite of what they assert. It is alleged that here Jesus refutes the error of looking to a book rather than to a person. According to this view, the Bible is not to be our direct object of belief, but it is only a pointer to the person of Christ, who is to be the true object of faith. The Pharisees err in holding the Bible in such high esteem that they embrace the book but reject the person.

However, this is not what Jesus says at all. He states that the people think that they could possess eternal life by a diligent study of Scripture, but that they reject the very thing that the Scripture testifies about. In other words, it is not that the people esteem the Bible too much, but the very opposite is true – they have no respect for what the Bible teaches. Their reverence for Scripture is a mere pretense. In fact, Jesus repeatedly accuses them for doing this. As he says elsewhere, "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men" (Mark 7:8). The Pharisees err in studying the Bible *but* at the same time refusing to take it seriously, or to believe and obey it. This is their damnation, and this is what damns many people today.

So although it may sound pious to some people, it is at least misleading to say, "We are not saved by believing a book, but by believing a person." To say this about the Bible would be like saying, "We are not saved by believing the words of Christ, but by believing the person of Christ," as if the words of Christ can be separated from the person of Christ in such a manner, and as if we can know the person without the words. If you believe the words, you believe the person, and vice versa. But without the words, or without the contents about the person to go with the person, there is really no "person" for you to believe.

So we are indeed saved by faith in Christ, but it is only through the Bible that we receive an infallible revelation from and about Christ. Therefore, in this sense, we are indeed saved by believing a book, *this* book, for there is no difference between believing the book and believing the person. As long as we do not separate the revelation of Christ from the person

of Christ, since these cannot really be separated, then we are indeed saved by the Bible, and in it we find eternal life.

It follows that just as a person's eternal destiny is determined by his attitude and reaction to Christ, his eternal destiny is determined by his attitude and reaction to the Bible. No one who rejects the Bible can accept Christ at the same time, since it is the Bible that shows us Christ. Therefore, no one who rejects the Bible can be a Christian, or can be saved, so that everyone who rejects the Bible also rejects Christ, making his damnation sure.

Paul writes, "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21). Man cannot know God by his own wisdom and power, but only by God's self-disclosure, which he delivered through the prophets and the apostles. There is no salvation outside of the Bible because there is no way to know God or his way to salvation outside of the writings of the prophets and the apostles.

Thus God rules, judges, and saves by the Bible, or by a book. Unbelievers think that this is foolishness. They think so not because the ways of God are in fact foolish, but because these unbelievers themselves are foolish. Their minds are so feeble and blinded that they cannot perceive or understand true wisdom. As Paul writes, "Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a 'fool' so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: 'He catches the wise in their craftiness'; and again, 'The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile'" (1 Corinthians 3:18-20).

Unbelievers are experts at self-approval. They invent their own standards, and then they use these standards to judge themselves wise. But to be found wise in this manner is a meaningless honor. Let such a person become what he would consider a "fool" by these false standards. Paul says, "The wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight." When we examine the unbelievers and their philosophies from the perspective of the divine mind, we perceive that they are foolishness. To put it simply, the unbelievers consider themselves smart only because they have invented their own standards, and then they use these standards to measure themselves. By this method, even a dwarf can look like a giant. Non-Christians are just a bunch of very stupid people calling one another smart, but when we examine them according to true wisdom, we immediately see them for the fools that they are.

They ridicule us for taking orders from a book that was written thousands of years ago, as if truth changes with time. Of course, for one to suggest that a book produced so long ago must therefore contain numerous errors is to condemn all that he claims to know now. He is telling us that, even by his own standard, we should not take anything that he says seriously, since in a few years or more, even some of his central beliefs and most tightly held convictions will be disproved. But whereas the unbelievers have yet to refute anything that the Bible says, we can refute everything that they believe in even now. Knowledge never progresses, that is, if knowledge is what you start with. But empty speculation



"advances" every day, and this is the essence of the history of all the natural sciences, human philosophies, and non-Christian religions.

So the Bible is a book, but it is not like any other book. It is God's mind, God's word, God's voice, and therefore it possesses supreme value and ultimate authority. In light of this, we are amazed that God has entrusted this book to us, both to learn from it and to preach from it. He could have chosen to declare his word to mankind by himself, or he could have ordered the angels to perform the task. Instead, he allows us to handle this sacred book, pours out his Spirit upon us, and makes mere men his "fellow workers" (1 Corinthians 3:9).

Having laid the foundation concerning the Bible's relationship to us and its rightful place in society, now we turn to consider how God uses it to speak to men through men as instruments. Needless to say, this is a large subject on which many books have been written, but I have a specific purpose, and with it, several basic points that I would like to cover. I will convey only these and no more in what follows.

In Nehemiah 8, there is a description of what amounts to a spiritual revival or awakening among God's people. I urge you to read at least the entire chapter on your own. Right now we have time to read only those statements that are especially relevant to our discussion:

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion....Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

The Levites...instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

These people were turning back from years of spiritual neglect and apostasy. Something about them had changed, and it was as if they were turning from one extreme to another. Whereas they used to be neglectful, licentious, self-centered, now they were eager to hear from God. Ezra read "from daybreak till noon," and they paid attention the entire time. Later in 9:3, it is said that the Law was read "for a quarter of the day," and then the people spent "*another* quarter in confession and in worshipping the LORD their God." Today people consider themselves dedicated Christians if they would spend an hour a week at church. The same people would probably think that only fanatics would spend several hours in hearing, in confession, and in worship.

It is true that not every church gathering must last for half a day. These people had long neglected the Law, and they were especially eager to learn all that they had missed. They were trying to do a thorough job of returning to God in their beliefs and practices, and thus it was natural for these initial meetings to last for so long. However, this certainly did not mean that subsequent gatherings ought to have been much shorter, or that they could not spend the whole day afterward in the Law and in worship as the need and desire arose.

When I first started preaching, I used to speak for forty-five minutes to two hours each time, and I would use up to forty texts in each message. Once I preached on "Trinity vs. Oneness" and used more than eighty passages. This approach is occasionally appropriate, and sometimes even necessary. Some congregations require a complete overhaul in their belief systems and a general knowledge of many biblical passages. This is one way to meet such a need.

However, it has its problems, as people often cannot sustain their attention for such a long duration without interruption, and using so many passages means that almost all of them would fail to receive detailed treatment. In my case, I did it partly because I believed the people needed it, but also partly because I did not know better, and tried to fit everything I knew on the subject into one session. Looking back, I realize that it was too much for them – they could not endure it, especially when there were small children in the audience!

Whether this is the right approach depends on several factors, such as the nature of the listeners and the amount of time (in terms of weeks, months, and years) that the minister has to work with them. This probably should not be the primary approach for a preacher who has access to the same group of listeners for long periods of time. Even if he were to preach for two hours, he should structure the presentation clearly, and usually select fewer number of passages, but expound them in some detail.

Strict rules are unhelpful, but if a preacher would spend thirty minutes to an hour expounding on one to three passages every Sunday, a healthy congregation can be developed over the long run. Anything less than twenty-five minutes is probably too short for most Sunday sermons, unless the preaching is at the same time concise, deep, and explosive, or unless the church holds several meetings a week with good attendance from the people. A pivotal factor, of course, is in how skillfully the preacher expounds and applies the biblical passages.

Nevertheless, if a shorter approach is taken, the members should consume supplemental materials throughout the week. This is true even if the Sunday sermons are much longer and detailed, but it is especially needed when they are rather short and simple. The church can help supply these in various ways, perhaps through suggested readings, prayer meetings, and Bible classes. The leadership should realize that some congregations take "church" very seriously, making it an integral aspect of their lives, so that they even have daily meetings. I think all congregations should strive toward this, but the least they can do is to have two or three meetings a week.

At any rate, it is good for believers to develop greater interest in preaching and zeal in worship. Endurance will naturally increase. Where it has been established as a matter of habit and culture, as with many congregations in times past, extended gatherings are the norm. And where there is revival and awakening, the people even yearn to have them daily.

Here we find the basic model of the ministry of the word, or the two elements of biblical preaching. First, the preacher reads from the Bible. Then, he gives the exposition and application of the verses that he has read, just as the Levites were "making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read." Likewise, Paul instructs Timothy, "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching" (1 Timothy 4:13).

Whether the preaching lasts for five minutes or five hours, this is to be the basic and usual pattern. There are a number of examples from the Bible to illustrate this. We will select one from the ministry of Jesus:

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-21)

We are to build all our ministry efforts on this model of Scripture reading and exposition. This applies not only to the Sunday sermons, but to all aspects of Christian outreach such as discipleship, evangelism, and even parenting.

In cases where the formal structure of a sermon is either unnatural or undesirable, these two elements of Scripture reading and exposition are still usually present. We may illustrate this from Philip's encounter with the eunuch:

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. (Acts 8:30-35)

The incident involves a conversation and not a formal sermon, which would be a monologue. It is the eunuch who provides the text for the occasion, and it is Philip who then offers the exposition and application. But note that the two elements of Scripture reading and exposition are still present. Thus this is also the model for individual or small-scale outreach.

Incidentally, the passage also illustrates the need for exposition. As our reading of Nehemiah 8 also shows, many people will not understand what a biblical passage means without someone explaining it to them. Of course, as they sit under the ministry of an expositor, they will most likely grow in their ability to understand the Bible for themselves. Even in this instance, we can be certain that as a byproduct of Philip's exposition on Isaiah, many other passages have opened up for the eunuch that were previously ambiguous to him.

The so-called "expository" method is often an excellent way to present the teaching of Scripture. However, the "read and expound" approach should not be identified with or restricted to the expository method in its approach to the text or the structure of its presentation. With all its potential pitfalls, topical sermons can easily adopt the "read and expound" approach, and even the hated "proof-texting" method is used in Scripture more frequently than many homileticians care to admit. But of course, it should go without saying that when you give a proof-text for something, the text better be a proof for whatever you are asserting.

The sermons and discourses that we find in the Bible often do not conform to what is called the expository method. Some principles are never violated, but some of the things that

preaching textbooks prescribe, in terms how best to employ a biblical passage or to structure a sermon, are often not followed by Scripture itself.

For this reason, there are at least two dangers in adopting and approving the expository method *alone*. First, a preacher who does this has, without good reason, limited himself to use only one approach when there might be several others that will help him better communicate his points when it comes to certain texts and topics. Second, it induces the listeners to despise sermons and discourses that are not strictly expository, but that are nevertheless totally scriptural and legitimate in both their contents and methods. Even worse, some who have been taught that only the expository method is acceptable may become confused over those portions of Scripture where it is clearly using some other method to handle biblical passages, and this in turn might cast doubt in their minds regarding the reliability and competence of the biblical characters themselves.

Just so there is no misunderstanding, I affirm that every sermon must be biblical in its contents – it must completely agree with the Bible, and every biblical passage must be interpreted in context. In my own preaching and writing, I have – sometimes strictly, sometimes loosely – employed the expository method perhaps more than any other. But I disagree that to be biblical necessarily implies that one must always employ what is called the expository method. We must be careful lest an excellent option becomes a requirement without biblical warrant. There is to be absolute rigidity in faithfulness to Scripture, but some flexibility when it comes to presentation.

Then, let us say a word about the proper reaction to biblical preaching. Ministers will appreciate what I am about to say. Some people would come up to me after a sermon and say, "That was wonderful" or "I really enjoyed that." When I hear this I would always think to myself, and on occasions I have said aloud, "But did you hear what I said? Do you understand it? Are you going to do it?"

One of the most disappointing responses that a sincere preacher can get is for a listener to say nothing more than that he "enjoyed" that "wonderful" sermon he has just heard. I could not care less about whether the sermon was wonderful or whether he enjoyed it. I would much prefer a response appropriate to the message, whether it is prayerful silence, tearful repentance, joyful celebration, rekindled love, or renewed determination.

The people were weeping who heard Ezra read from the Law of God. They could perceive the difference between God's requirements and their actual practice. Unlike many churchgoers today, they were not there as sermon connoisseurs, to critique and to rate what was being said. They were not saying, "That was too long," "He did not fully develop the second point," "An illustration would have helped!" or even, "I give that a four out of five." No, they were pricked to the heart by what they heard, and repented with tears, confessing their sins. This was followed by actual obedience and a change in lifestyle.

God's people ought to be humbled, encouraged, and stirred up by biblical preaching. As the disciples said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). If this never occurs in our listeners,

then it is either because our preaching is seriously deficient, almost completely void of anything biblical, or it is because there is no spiritual life in the people, so that there is nothing to stir up and nothing to awaken. Nevertheless, as the Spirit wills, biblical preaching can give life even to dead bones and put new flesh upon them. And this brings us to the next section of our discussion.

The decisive factor in the effectiveness of preaching is the sovereign action of the Holy Spirit. Although God uses men as instruments to proclaim his word, they lack the ability to directly transform the hearts of the listeners. On the other hand, the Spirit exercises active and direct control over the minds of all men, causing thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and motives in them according to his own will. The Bible is the usual instrument – the intellectual content that he works with as he controls men's hearts – that he uses to convert and to sanctify, but also to harden, the hearts of men. And men are the usual instruments by which he propagates the contents of the Bible.

Paul realized that men were "only servants, through whom you came to believe" (1 Corinthians 3:5). Paul planted, Apollos watered – they could not do more than that – but "God made it grow" (v. 6). This knowledge was a controlling factor in Paul's preaching ministry. It caused him to depend on the Spirit for effectiveness, and he rejoiced when the Spirit came in power as he preached: "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5).

In a way, all that I have said so far is to lead to this point, which is often acknowledged on paper but far too often neglected in practice. That is, the mature minister or believer is marked by his ability to handle the Bible with wisdom and skill, but this must include a genuine dependence on the Holy Spirit to work with the Scripture to render it effective. He knows his role. He knows what he must do, but he also realizes that there are some things he must not even try to do – instead, he must count on God's Spirit to make them happen.

A non-Christian businessman once met with a preacher in a hotel lobby. The meeting was arranged by a mutual friend, which was probably the only reason he agreed to it. Even then, he gave the preacher only several minutes, perhaps fewer than ten. Throughout their short conversation, the preacher repeatedly said to him, "The way of transgressors is hard." This is half of a verse from Proverbs (13:15, KJV). As he got up to leave, the preacher said it again.

Some time after that, he ran into this preacher again at a conference of some sort. And he told the preacher, "After we spoke, I could not remember anything else that you said except, 'The way of transgressors is hard.' And it kept on coming back to me. I was tossing and turning on my bed that night. That statement was repeating itself over and over again in my mind. I woke up the next morning, and it was as if those words were standing at the end of my bed, looking straight at me and saying, 'The way of transgressors is hard.' I went to work, and it was as if that statement was speaking to me from everywhere I looked: 'The way of transgressors is hard.' I was about to do something that I knew was wrong, and that verse came to my mind: 'The way of transgressors is hard.' That verse haunted me. It almost

drove me insane. And then finally I realized...finally it hit me – the way of transgressors *is* hard! I knelt by my bed in the hotel room, repented of my sins, and received salvation through Jesus Christ."

The preacher replied, "Let me tell you my end of the story. I was disappointed that you did not give me an opportunity to say all that I wanted to say. But after you left, I prayed, 'Lord, I did not have time to say all that I wanted to this man, but still, I have preached your word to him, and you said that your word will not return to you void. Now I pray that you will use what I said to him and pursue him with it. Lord, work on his heart, even haunt him day and night, and let your will be done in him.' Evidently, God was faithful to honor his word and perform exactly what I asked of him."

Spurgeon said, "I have noticed, that if ever we have a conversion at any time, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, the conversion is rather traceable to the text, or to some Scripture quoted in the sermon, than to any trite or original saying by the preacher" (sermon no. 172). In our example, of course the preacher told the businessman about the way of salvation through Jesus Christ, but the key that turned everything around was nothing more than half a verse from Proverbs. It was *delivered* to the man by a man, but it was *driven* into his heart by the Holy Spirit.

Elsewhere Spurgeon mentioned a man who was converted by an Old Testament genealogy in which the biblical passage repeated the words, "and he died...and he died...and he died." The man suddenly realized his mortality, that one day *he* would die like the rest, and after that he would either be caught up to heaven or thrown into hell. Right away he was converted and received salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

As with the conversion of the eunuch in Acts 8, sometimes human instruments can be quite involved in the process. In that instance, Philip ran up to join the chariot and then spent some time expounding Christ to him from the Scripture. But sometimes it pleases God to reduce or even minimize the role of human instruments.

A certain young man had spent years seeking for spiritual truth and reality. He had heard hundreds of hours of sermons, and read not a small stack of books. But his spirit remained lost and dead. Then, one day he was reading a book and came across a Bible quotation: "On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him'" (John 7:37-38). Immediately he broke down and wept, and was converted. What made the difference? He wanted this living water, and he sought it daily for many years. By God's design, he had been made to seek, but what he was seeking eluded him. Then, *suddenly*, the Spirit opened his eyes, and what years of seeking could not produce was given to him in an instant.

The role of the human instruments is sometimes reduced or minimized, but this cannot be said of the Spirit, whose work is always necessary and decisive. William Barclay wrote about the story of Signor Antonio from Minas, Brazil, who bought a New Testament so that he could burn it. "He went home and found the fire was out. Deliberately he lit it. He

flung the New Testament on it. It would not burn. He opened out the pages to make it burn more easily. It opened at the Sermon on the Mount. He glanced at it as he consigned it to the flames. His mind was caught; he took it back. He read on, forgetful of time, through the hours of the night, and just as the dawn was breaking, he stood up and declared, 'I believe.'<sup>13</sup>

Paul calls the word of God "the sword of the Spirit." It is placed into the hands of Christians, and as we mentioned, this sword can be used with more or less wisdom and skill. This is why he exhorts Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). Then again, sometimes the role of the human instruments is reduced or minimized, and the Spirit of God wields the sword all by himself, breaking all resistance, and driving it deep into the hearts of men.

Again, Barclay writes, "Vincente Quiroga of Chile found a few pages of a book washed up on the seashore by a tidal wave following an earthquake. He read them and never rested until he obtained the rest of the Bible. Not only did he become a Christian; he devoted the rest of his life to the distribution of the Scriptures in the forgotten villages of northern Chile."<sup>14</sup>

In no way am I urging us to neglect our role in the ministry of the word, since we must be diligent in developing our skill in handling Scripture (2 Timothy 2:15), so that we can ably deal with whomever we encounter, "as the Lord has assigned to each his task" (1 Corinthians 3:5). What I am urging is a stronger confidence in the Bible and a genuine dependence on the Spirit to work powerfully and effectively, to produce conversion in the elect and sanctification in the believers, at times in conjunction with our exposition, and at times almost completely apart from it.

Based on what we have said about the Bible, the preacher, and the Spirit, let us now consider some applications.

God has given to the Bible a central role in human history. He rules by it. He judges by it. He saves by it. And his Spirit works with it to summon the elect to faith, to mature the saints, and to harden the reprobates. By its various effects, it even influences the fate of nations. It follows that the Bible must occupy a place in our ministry that is consistent with the authority and worth that God has ascribed to it. What is its authority? What is its worth? If we have a proper view of this book, then when we refer to "the Bible," it is only a shorthand for the revealed portion of the divine mind. From this perspective, the Bible carries the very authority of God and the very worth of God.

The negative application is that we are to allow nothing that would compromise or substitute the place of the Bible in our ministry. The Bible can shatter rocks, scatter demons, and call down fire from heaven, and yet some of us think that we need cheap

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<sup>13</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, Revised Edition* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), p. 200-201.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



gimmicks to reach people. What an insult it is to God to think that the Bible is more effective when it is presented by puppets, through cartoons, novels, and movies, or other devices produced by human creativity.

Spurgeon says to ministers, "If you are not conscious of a supernatural power and presence with the Word of the Lord, let it alone....Now, if your gospel has not the power of the Holy Ghost in it, you cannot preach it with confidence, and you are tempted to have a performance in the schoolroom to allure the people, whom Christ crucified does not draw. If you are depending on sing-song, and fiddles, and semi-theatricals, you are disgracing the religion which you pretend to honour."<sup>15</sup>

This is what I am talking about. There is power in the Word. There is power in the Spirit. And it is this divine power that I count on when I minister, whether I am preaching, writing, or counseling. It is futile for me to enforce it with the flesh. This dependence on divine power removes any pressure on me to produce that which man can never accomplish in the first place. We are to proclaim, persuade, and plead, then refute, rebuke, and remind. And that is enough. But not everyone will believe – some are foreordained by God for destruction.

Think with me how you have been using the Bible – or rather, how you have not been using it. Sometimes we have replaced the Bible with something else without being aware of it. Perhaps you have debated evolution with a friend on several occasions, trying to convince him of its error. But now that you think of it, you have dealt with him entirely on the basis of science, using scientific arguments alone. Suppose he now continues to think about his discussion with you, and even comes to the conclusion that evolution is false. Now what is he supposed to believe? You have not told him anything. You have only refuted inferior human speculation with superior human speculation.

That is the true nature of science – mere human speculation, and you have brought in something so infinitely inferior to divine revelation in an attempt to reinforce the Bible. Do we care if the idiot approves of the genius? What does it matter if the villain vouches for the saint? And so what if the irrational vindicates the rational? Even if the testimony of the former is not completely useless, let us hear more from the latter. A ministry becomes powerless if in its very attempt to vindicate Scripture, it is at the same time distracted from proclaiming it.

The Bible is sufficient to both assert and defend its own teachings. It is a mighty sword, and we must develop the skill to wield it. However, most people must first develop a confidence in it before they would even consider it their primary weapon, let alone their exclusive one. Only then will they stop depending on substitutes and alternatives, and stop looking at the Bible as something helpless that they must desperately protect by extra-biblical methods. Once they learn to respect the Bible as what it is, they will begin to see it as the divine weapon by which all oppositions are slain.

On the positive side, a proper understanding of the Bible's authority, power, and its all-important role in human history warns us not to become weary but to persist in its frequent

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<sup>15</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *An All-Round Ministry* (Banner of Truth), p. 389.

and pervasive propagation. It admonishes us to become more deliberate in our use of the Bible, and to give it the supreme place in situations where we have neglected its role and potential.

Some people tell me that they wish to do more in terms of evangelism, but they lack skill in defending the faith and so they strive to become better equipped. Their desire to improve is commendable, but if even half a verse from Proverbs can convert a worldly businessman who had previously shown no interest in religion, then certainly no believer should feel powerless, or as if he has no strong message that he can declare to the sinner. Of course, as one's skill improves, he more easily brings to the surface the force that is inherent in divine revelation, so that its truth becomes more readily obvious. But even then, it is still the Spirit who must drive it deep into the hearer. But with the Spirit, even half a verse of Scripture inadvertently overheard by an unbeliever can crush his obstinacy and convert his soul.

It would be impossible to mention every aspect of our life and ministry, but let us consider only one more. And that is, we must be more deliberate and diligent in our use of the Bible in dealing with children. We must not make rigid rules about how we are to do this, but even a verse of Scripture posted on the wall can be used by the Spirit to convict, convert, and sanctify a child. Or it might be something that the Spirit will use to bring the rebellious child back to God many years later.

One preacher mentioned that he was converted by a verse of Scripture written inside the front cover of a Bible given to him by his mother. He had put that Bible away and never read it, but he did read the note his mother wrote. The Spirit reminded him of it one day, and that was sufficient to turn this person back from many years of riotous living. But although God can use even half a verse to accomplish his will, his prescription is total immersion:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

Dependence on the Spirit entails that we stop trying to enforce the Bible with our flesh. What do I mean by this? To mention one aspect of this, some preachers use a sing-song, whiny, teary, begging voice when they speak. Some lower their voices and try to sound mysterious. Still others are very loud and exuberant for no reason. Besides being artificial and annoying, these attempts at enforcing the divine words of Scripture add nothing to the substance of the message. There is no real power, because there is no dependence on the Holy Spirit, but they are trying to make the hearers respond to the message with these silly devices.

The truth is that when we tell people, "Believe this," *they will not* – unless the Spirit gives them faith. And when we tell people, "Do this" or "Stop that," *they will not* – unless the Spirit grants them repentance and obedience. We deliver the message, but we need the Spirit to cause the proper reaction in the people, and to inject the necessary inner strength into them to perform the things required of them. This is what we are counting on. We will only make matters worse when we try to produce that which only the Spirit can generate.

Perhaps some preachers think that they are supposed to sound like they do in order to exhibit a sense of earnestness. But if this is the intent, then let there be a genuine overflow from the spirit instead of just a demonstration of poor acting. It would be better for the preacher to open up to a passage of Scripture, read it three times, and then send everyone home with a prayer for the Spirit to act, than for him to try to produce spiritual power and effect with his flesh.

Some Christians suffer under persistent doubt, and many struggle with stubborn sins. They need to know that one cannot just take the Scripture's exhortation to believe and produce faith in himself by himself. A person cannot just decide to believe something that he does not in fact believe. Just as we cannot even make our own hair white or black at will (Matthew 5:36), still less can we transform our own hearts at will, including the impossible task of changing our will at will. Likewise, a person does not progress in holiness just because he decides that it should happen. Paul writes, "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). Failing to grasp this point, many people try to manufacture what the Scripture demands by sheer willpower, and then of course they become disappointed and disillusioned.

What is the right way? We must have no confidence in the flesh, but we must expose ourselves to the Bible, immerse ourselves in its words and its teachings, and then pray for the Spirit to render it effective in our lives. The flesh is impotent and counts for nothing. The life and power are in the Scripture and the Spirit. Of course it is right to strive and to struggle, to exert effort in the Christian life. But only the Spirit can change the human heart, including your own. Even a right striving and a fruitful struggling must come from the Holy Spirit. It is he who grants us holy spiritual effort, and then it is he who blesses it in us.

### **3. STUDENTS IN THE REAL WORLD**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The following was originally produced as a single lecture to students who were returning to school for a new academic year. For this publication, I divided the text into several chapters and performed a thorough revision on them. This allowed me to properly develop the major ideas and to present them in a more usable form. Moreover, a "Questions and Exercises" section was added at the end of each chapter to prolong the reader's attention on the ideas presented, and to help him personalize them.

Although the original intent was to address college students, especially undergraduates who are entering their freshman year, many of the principles and suggestions here are easily applied to other situations. Those transitioning or returning to high school should be able to adopt what is said here without much modification. And some of the ideas presented are general biblical teachings that are relevant to believers living at any stage of life.

Since academics occupy much of a student's time, in what follows significant attention is given to a believer's intellectual engagement with non-Christian thinking in the context of school life. It is understood that school involves more than academic studies, and this is why I also touch upon other areas, although nothing exhaustive can be expected of a short text such as this. Nevertheless, I trust that what follows will provide useful instruction and encouragement to Christian students committed to advancing the kingdom of heaven on the earth through their words and deeds.

Finally, since the intended audience consists of students who closely follow this ministry, the article expects some familiarity or at least easy access to our previous materials. For this reason, it does not always bother to support claims and explain doctrines that we have discussed and established in other places.

## PART 1

Young people are often told that they must obtain an education to prepare for "the real world." This common expression is considered useful when one wants to make a point, but there are many things wrong with it, so many that it is impossible to offer a complete list here. So we must be selective as to what we will say about it, and keep the discussion relevant to our topic.

One major problem with the expression is that, in a context like ours, it is almost never used to distinguish the real world from something that is unreal. Instead, the distinction is made between one part of the world and another part of the world that is just as real. If education prepares people for the "real" world, then what world are the students living in right now? Are they living in an imaginary world? Even a dream is a *real* dream – it occurs in the "real" world. But school life is more than a dream. The expression makes a distinction that is based on perceived significance and permanence, and not the ontology of different realities. Thus it is misleading; in fact, it can contribute to a disastrous mindset.

Since it is used in various contexts, and since those who use it are careless and imprecise (otherwise they would not use it at all), the expression has a range of meanings. In any case, a person is surely mistaken if he calls a part of the world "the real world" in contrast to another part of the world that is just as real. Perhaps most people have never considered the expression, and they use it because of custom. However, besides this explanation, there is certainly also a measure of arrogance behind it – one is so centered on that tiny part of the world that he lives in or cares about that he refers to that alone as the "real" world. The truth is that if we would number all the infants, students, monks, peasants, the whole rural population of China, and all the people excluded by the expression, we will find that the "real" world is in fact so small that most people – *real* people – are not living in it.

There is an important implication for theology. It is often asserted that Christians are called to engage the culture, so that it is unbiblical to withdraw from the "real" world. If there is a sound idea behind this, it is obscured by the terrible expression. What exactly is this "real" world that we are not supposed to withdraw from? Monasteries are as real as anything, and hermits can live in real caves and shacks. Is it sinful to be a farmer where the closest neighbors are miles away? Is it necessarily unbiblical to be a researcher way out there at the South Pole? Things are not more real just because you are closer to the city or financial districts.

A thinking person would not be swayed by an admonition that rests on such an expression (or the idea implied by it), because he perceives that the one who speaks this way is self-centered, condescending, and not very intelligent. Whether he uses these words or not, he urges others to engage "the real world" when what he means is that they should enter *his* world, the very tiny area in which he functions.

To call life after school the "real" world is an insult to students. It is to minimize their significance, struggles, responsibilities, and accomplishments. School *is* the real world. By the "real" world, parents often refer to the period of life when their children have finished

school and would begin to make their own income. Thus the children discover that their parents' whole conception of reality is based on making a living – only when one has reached this stage does life *really* start to happen. Those who are able to think a little deeper then begin to despise their parents' counsel on life. Insofar as the way that these parents talk reflects how they truly think, it is hard to blame the children for losing respect for them.

As I address those of you who are students, I am not going to tell you that what you are doing has significance because you are preparing for the real world. No, you are in the real world *now* – you have been in it since you were conceived. It is true that you are preparing for the next major phase of your lives, but you are not *just* preparing – you are *living* in the real world now.

Of course, even those who do not use the expression can commit the same error as those who do, and that is to measure the significance of a period of life relative to the generation of income, or any other arbitrary or unbiblical standard. Scripture demands us to regard every phase of our lives as significant, because it is lived before the sight of God.

On the one hand, this means that we must acknowledge your accomplishments and not minimize your struggles. But on the other hand, it also means that we must insist on your responsibilities, requiring from you right thinking and right behavior *now*, and that we must call attention to the ramifications of your actions for both the present and the future. In other words, wherever you are in this world, you are *Christians* living in the real world.

### Questions and Exercises

- Reflect on your childhood and early education. Even then you were living in the "real" world. What were some of the challenges that you had to face? How did you face them? Did you deal with them as a Christian, and if not, what would you have done differently if you had been a Christian? What Christian counsel would you give to a child or someone who is just starting school?
- Reflect on the differences between this period and the previous stages of your life. Have you taken on greater responsibilities? What are they?
- Consider the changes and the additional responsibilities that you will face in the next stage of your life. What might they be? Will you be passing on from fantasy to reality, or will there be significant overlap in the issues that you must address?
- How did the previous stages of your life prepare you for this period of your life? How are you now preparing for the next stage of your life?
- To begin with, why are these stages and periods of your life defined by external factors and by society, such as childhood, school, vocation, retirement, and so on? Is there any

justification for this? Is there something that is constant in your life, or something that proceeds on a different schedule?

- Is there an overarching principle or purpose that guides and unites these different periods of your life? What is it? In what way are you governed by this overarching principle, and in what way are you governed by these stages of life (school, career, family, retirement, etc.)?
- How would a non-Christian answer these questions? And what would you think about his answers? If you conclude that an unbeliever's reply can only end in futility and despair, how does your faith make any difference? Is the difference only psychological, or is it of greater import?
- If you are not a college student, modify these questions so that they apply to your present situation, and then try to answer them.

## PART 2

Many professing Christians lose their zeal or apostatize from the faith when major transitions occur in their lives. One reason for this is that when a person enters a new situation that demands his time and attention, and in which he wishes to excel, he must reassess his priorities. New items are added to his daily routine, and some old ones are abandoned. For some, if God makes the list at all, sometimes he is relegated to an appendix at the bottom. Christians often deceive themselves into thinking that they can get everything else done first so that they can then turn to give their faith quality time without distraction.

However, the Lord admonishes us to think in the opposite direction (Matthew 6:33).<sup>16</sup> Thus one of the first principles that any believer in any phase of his life must enforce is to honor God as the center of his daily living and to make communion with God the foundation for all his other activities. You are not a student who is struggling to remain a Christian on the side, but you are a Christian who happens to be a student at this time.

This sounds cliché, but it is a true teaching that must be implemented. Just because you have heard it many times does not mean that you are doing it. We are talking about more than an attitude, since it requires you to arrange all your activities around your faith. It should affect every decision regarding how you will spend your time and energy. We are talking about a way of thinking that governs your life and produces concrete results. You actually have to do something and make changes, and it should be obvious when you are not doing it.

For example, your academic schedule should be built around your faith and make way for it. Signing up for several demanding courses might make an impressive transcript, and taking on several more might even ensure an early graduation. However, if it means that it will take time away from the things of God – such as study, prayer, fellowship, and ministry – then you must curb your academic ambitions. As long as you have the attitude that you will "make room" for your faith in your schedule, you will keep on piling up sports, clubs, parties, and so on, so that even on a good day you might have only ten minutes left at the end of the night for prayer, right before you fall fast asleep.

Speaking of sleep, how about waking up an hour early every morning for prayer? When I was in high school, I woke up at 5:30 every morning so that I could pray for forty-five to ninety minutes before breakfast. There is no more appropriate way to start a day. But there is no need to imitate someone else or to become legalistic about this – the point is that you will always have more than enough time for the things of God if you make time for them first.

As a Christian, I never crammed for an exam in high school and the university. In fact, I never lost sleep over any type of school work. I never worked past bedtime. Even when I had a paper due or an exam the following day, after spending a limited amount of time on

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<sup>16</sup> See Vincent Cheung, "Kingdom First."



it, I would stop everything and return to my biblical studies and ministry work. This is not to say that every person must follow this pattern or that it is wrong to cram for exams. Occasional exceptions that take time away from prayer and ministry might be acceptable (although I did not permit that for myself), but the believer must make sure that he does not make a habit out of it, and habits are built on repeated exceptions until they are no longer exceptions.

In any case, I did not neglect my school work and my grades. Academic performance was part of my Christian witness, not only before men, but mainly before God, since a believer must diligently labor at the tasks given to him. I maintained a high GPA all through my years in high school and university, and graduated with honors. It is always possible to put your faith first and still obtain above average grades; however, depending on various factors, such as your academic abilities, you might have to design a more manageable course load and social life than you would otherwise prefer. And if you mind your faith, it will improve your performance in other areas. God is able to grant wisdom to his people not only when it comes to spiritual things, but also in "all kinds of literature and learning" (Daniel 1:17).

Faith is not entirely a private matter. There is also the matter of church fellowship. If your school is close to home, then there is no need to change anything. But if you are a boarding student, you will have to find a new place for corporate worship and ministry. Although Christian groups and churches abound on and around many campuses, many of them are apathetic in spirit, confused in doctrine, and thus dangerous for new and untaught believers. They will not do much to sustain or further your spiritual progress. So unless you happen to find one of the better ones, the sole reason for attending is often to offer your assistance and encouragement, and as you do so God shall energize your faith and teach you his ways.

It is often said that believers require constant fellowship to even survive, let alone to thrive in the faith. Here is another cliché, but this time it is false. In his providence, God sometimes ordains that a person should stand alone. The key is in learning that a believer is never truly alone, for God is with him. Before they abandoned him, Jesus said to his disciples, "But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me" (John 16:32). Are we to pattern ourselves after Christ in every way but this?

Sometimes it is argued that even Christ surrounded himself with disciples to help him in his work. However, it is obvious from the Gospels that except for helping him with some practical chores, the disciples were more of a burden to him than anything else. He was repeatedly annoyed by them and rebuked them for their lack of faith and understanding. He gathered these disciples not because he needed them, but because they needed him to teach them, so that they could become his witnesses and enter their own ministries after his ascension.

Then, people are fond of talking about "team ministry" and the "apostolic company," using Paul as the prime example. Of course Paul preferred to work together with other faithful believers, and so should we, but he also realized that people were not always dependable.

He wrote, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth" (2 Timothy 4:16-17). Against what many teach nowadays, Paul rejected the idea that a believer will surely fall if he stands alone.

Here is the difference between a leader and a follower. It is not that a leader prefers to stand alone, but that through faith in God he *can* stand alone, and he can function very well as he does so. In fact, sometimes you are most "alone" when there are believers all around you – consider the three thousand men from Judah who betrayed Samson to the Philistines (Judges 15:11). If in God's providence you must stand alone, then also know that you are able to do it, because he is faithful to keep you from falling.

### Questions and Exercises

- As a new academic year begins, what changes are happening in your life? Are there new problems and new opportunities? What are they, and why do they matter? Are these changes internal or external? Are they spiritual, intellectual, or social? How are you responding to these changes? Is there a constant principle or a reference point that governs your decisions?
- Do you agree that you should consider yourself a Christian above all else? And is this how you truly think of yourself? Scripture teaches us to train in the faith as soldiers and athletes. Have you been doing that? Cite concrete examples – actions you performed, decisions you made – illustrating that your faith is indeed your first priority.
- Can you think of instances when you failed to put your faith first? In what ways have you compromised your faith or the time and attention that you give to spiritual things? Cite examples.
- What can you do to improve? Do not answer in general terms or in terms of feelings and resolutions, although these are helpful, but provide specific solutions tailored for your situation. Name the hours, days of the week, durations, locations, actions, and so on. The reason for this is not to become legalistic, but it is because a plan that is too vague might never be carried out.
- List the churches and fellowships that gather on and around campus. Consider their characteristics in detail. Consider their strengths and weaknesses, their faithfulness to Scripture, to the Great Commission, and available ministry opportunities. Consider how you would relate to each group. Take time to pray, think, and investigate before committing yourself to any of them.

- Is "team ministry" *always* better? When is it better, and when is it not? Does the quality of the "team" members have anything to do with it? How much of our idea of team ministry came from the secular business world? How much of it came from Scripture?
- Consider the group projects in school. Are there occasions when you prefer to work alone? And are there occasions when you prefer to work in a group? Why? And why do some professors make students work in groups anyway? Are they right?
- What are the differences between school projects, business projects, and church or ministry projects? What are the differences in beliefs, purposes, and the grounds for unity and cooperation?
- Are there other cliches, whether from the church or from the world, that you should reject, redefine, or at least reconsider? Give examples.

### PART 3

The university is supposed to be an institution for learning, research, and the exchange of ideas. However, Christians are often disappointed that many of these ideas, advanced as established knowledge, are nothing more than false claims and irrational biases that undermine and contradict the biblical faith. Because there is much opposition against Christianity in the university, it is a place where your faith will be tested.

For some people, the pressure is so insignificant that they barely notice it, while others undergo constant struggle, wrestling with questions that come from all sides. Some assume that the university teaches the truth, and they wish to hold on to their faith even when the two conflict, or they try to somehow harmonize them. Then, a number of students outright abandon their profession of faith. These are the most foolish and worthless.

Part of the pressure that believers experience in the university is produced by the false perception that the people there are intelligent. Perception is important because many Christians overestimate the unbelievers they meet, and thus fail to notice their intellectual blunders. My faith was never under any threat in the university, since I found the non-Christian students and professors rather unintelligent and irrational. Holding on to my faith was not a problem. The challenge was in limiting blatant displays of disdain for their scholarship.

Believers must derive an accurate perspective concerning the non-Christian intellect from Scripture, which teaches us that all non-Christians are foolish and wicked, and that Christians are the ones enlightened by God's Spirit and instructed by his Word. This means that, whereas the believer should be able to defend his faith, there is no way that any non-Christian can justify what he believes and how he behaves. Non-Christians are the ones who should be intimidated by us, for fear that we will expose their irrational thinking and depraved lifestyle.

Now, when entering an intellectual conflict with an unbeliever, first you need to stand on a strong foundation, and possess a firm grasp of your own position. This means that you must attain an accurate and comprehensive understanding of Christian theology. The Bible exhibits perfect truth and coherence, and to the extent that your theology is faithfully derived from it, it will exhibit the same intellectual perfection. That which is intellectually perfect is also intellectually invincible. But if your worldview is infested with humanism, pluralism, inclusivism, empiricism, scientism, or even Arminianism, inconsistent Calvinism, and other unbiblical teachings, then it is vulnerable to attack.

The content of your theology is essential, and you need more than a superficial understanding of it. It is insufficient to merely memorize the correct formulations of biblical doctrines, but you need to know their biblical warrants as well as the relationships between these doctrines.<sup>17</sup> Only then can your attack and defense become consistent and fluid at the same time, flowing naturally with the conversation without hesitation or

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<sup>17</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*.

compromise. You will not become stuck to reciting theological formulas, and you will not be confounded just because the opponent alters the language of some old arguments and objections.

Then, you need an approach for intellectual engagement that is both flexible and invincible, that can adapt to any situation and that will always win.<sup>18</sup> For our purpose, we will group the major approaches to apologetics into two general categories.

The first kind of apologetics is evidentialism, a misleading but accepted name. We will include both classical and evidential apologetics under this category. These two methods share enough similarities so that we may discuss them together, but there are also significant differences between them. Since at this time we prefer convenience over precision, we will use the term "evidentialism" to represent both schools of apologetics.

Evidentialism has three major weaknesses.

First, biblically speaking, it is unfaithful. Its assumptions, reasonings, and interactions do not reflect what Scripture says about God, man, truth, and sin. But since we are doing apologetics to defend the faith of the Scripture, this approach undermines its own professed purpose from the start. And if the Bible is a revelation of truth, then anything that contradicts it must be false.

Second, rationally speaking, it is impossible. It begins and proceeds with the same first principles – the same irrational basis – that the unbelievers affirm. The non-Christian trusts his own sensation, but he cannot provide a justification for empiricism. He appeals to his intuition, but he cannot show that it reflects anything other than his subjective bias. He relies on inductive reasoning, but he cannot demonstrate its rational validity. He practices the scientific method, which besides being formally fallacious, rests on induction, sensation, and often also intuition.

In connection with this, notice that our three criticisms against evidentialism are in fact directed at the non-Christian method of reasoning. It just happens that evidentialism has adopted the same non-Christian approach. This being the case, these three criticisms against evidentialism will also destroy the arguments that unbelievers employ against the Christian faith.

Third, practically speaking, it is unusable. Even if we ignore the first and second sets of problems with evidentialism, in practice its effectiveness depends on the opponent's gullibility. This approach can make assertions and claims about the "evidences" that support these assertions, but it cannot present these evidences at the moment of debate. The relevant scientific data, manuscript fragments, ancient artifacts, and so on are not so readily available or portable that one can show them to the opponent as arguments are made on the basis of these evidences.

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<sup>18</sup> For more on apologetics, see Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, Apologetics in Conversation*, and *Captive to Reason*.

Moreover, due to the numerous premises of evidential arguments, and the complexity involved in establishing each premise, it might take anywhere from several minutes to several decades just to move past the first premise in almost any argument used in evidentialism. Of course, in almost every case, there are many premises that the unbeliever will never agree on. And since these premises depend on irrational methods to establish (sensation, intuition, induction, science, etc.), evidentialism will allow the stubborn unbeliever to indefinitely maintain his resistance.

Therefore, unless the opponent blindly believes the Christian concerning these evidences, or unless from previous exposure he has already been convinced of them (with just as little justification as the believer now uses them), the best that the evidentialist can hope for against a truly skeptical unbeliever is a stalemate. That said, there are indeed more than enough irrational and gullible unbelievers so that evidentialism tends to achieve greater success than it deserves.

The second kind of apologetics is presuppositionalism. This approach refuses to assume unbiblical first principles as the starting point and make the case for the faith on that basis. Instead, presuppositionalism debates these first principles as well as the very idea of first principles, and commends divine revelation as the necessary foundation for all thought and knowledge, showing how it authenticates itself and destroys all opposing views.

This approach is vastly superior to evidentialism. It engages the unbeliever on a whole other level. Since evidentialism stands on an irrational foundation, the best that the Christian can do with it is to show that he is less irrational and that the non-Christian is more irrational. But it cannot provide positive information about anything or justification for any claim. If it is used at all, its function is negative and its result is partial. On the other hand, presuppositionalism reaches the very foundation of rationality and knowledge, and the principles and contents of necessary truths.

However, before we continue, we must make the distinction between pseudo-presuppositionalism and biblical presuppositionalism. This is because there is a school of thought that calls itself presuppositional apologetics, but in reality it begins from non-biblical presuppositions, so that it possesses none of the advantages that apply to true presuppositional apologetics.

Pseudo-presuppositionalism affirms that many of the intellectual tools that the unbelievers use are indeed rationally sound, including sensation, intuition, induction, and science. However, two problems arise when they use them. First, although these intellectual tools reliably perform their expected function, the unbelievers cannot account for them, and cannot provide rational justification for them. Second, without divine revelation to provide the controlling intellectual principles or presuppositions, the unbelievers will misuse these tools, so that they will permit and produce false conclusions.

There are in turn two fatal problems with pseudo-presuppositionalism.

First, its adherents embrace intellectual tools and ideas that are inherently irrational, so that even if they first hold to divine revelation as their foundation, they still cannot justify or account for them. Thus it remains that these tools and ideas will permit and produce false conclusion no matter what. And it follows that to introduce them into their worldview is to poison the entire system.

For example, while confronting the unbelievers and even the evidentialists, they marshal all kinds of arguments against the certainty of empirical investigations. Although they do not say that sensations cannot provide knowledge at all, they do insist that the unbelievers cannot account for their reliance on their sensations, and that their sensations at least sometimes deceive them.

But after they have asserted divine revelation as the necessary precondition for all knowledge, they never proceed to offer a precise demonstration on how it accounts for a reliance on sensations or the belief that our sensations provide a basically reliable way to obtain knowledge. They simply assert that it is so, and at times they would even throw around several biblical passages that they claim to support their view without actually showing their relevance or showing that they indeed prove what they claim that they prove. They likewise fail to account for or justify intuition, induction, and science, among other things.

Second, not only do they fail just as miserably as the unbelievers in justifying or accounting for their reliance on sensation, intuition, induction, and science, they even admit that these irrational ways of knowing and reasoning are necessary in order to discover the contents of divine revelation. In other words, although they claim that it is revelation that accounts for, say, our sensations, our sensations are what allow us to access revelation in the first place.

The result is not just one vicious circle disintegrating into a mess of confusion and nonsense, but worse than that, they have placed themselves in the exact position of the unbelievers – they make themselves and their own human investigation the center and precondition of all knowledge. They explicitly place revelation under sensation, intuition, induction, and science. And in many ways, this is even worse than even an explicitly anti-Christian philosophy that has enough sense to question irrational epistemologies.

It is futile to assert that this system of thought consists of a web of beliefs rather than a self-destructive circle. The idea is only plausible if sensation can indeed access revelation, and if at the same time revelation indeed affirms the reliability of sensation. Since they cannot demonstrate the latter, the former remains unaccounted for and unjustified. Thus there is no self-sustaining or self-justifying "web" at all, since the various points within this so-called web is in fact hostile to one another.

Therefore, pseudo-presuppositionalism presents a mere smokescreen against the unbelievers – its confusion is its only strength. And it leaves as its legacy one of the greatest embarrassments in the history of Christian thought. To our disappointment, this is also the predominant school of presuppositionalism. It makes strong claims and it has numerous

followers, but in reality it makes the Christian faith no less vulnerable than any other irrational worldview, since its very foundation is anti-Christian irrationalism.

It makes a presuppositional critique of evidentialism, but in the end it makes the very principles of evidentialism its own epistemological starting point. It thrives on the willingness of believers to think that they are submitting all their thoughts to Christ without truly having to question their commitment to anti-biblical principles. Like evidentialism, it is unbiblical, irrational, impractical, and also hypocritical. However, as with evidentialism, there are indeed more than enough irrational and gullible unbelievers in this world for it to attain some measure of success. In addition, the great confusion that it generates can often cause unbelievers to hesitate before realizing that the whole approach is nothing more than self-contradictory nonsense.

So we reject not only evidentialism, but also counterfeit presuppositionalism. Instead, we turn to embrace a biblical presuppositionalism – the approach that truly affirms revelation as the only foundation for rationality and knowledge. This approach can be aptly designated by several terms, each emphasizing a different aspect of it. To distinguish it from pseudo-presuppositionalism, names such as biblical foundationalism and biblical rationalism are preferred.

Christians tend to recoil from anything that comes under the label "rationalism," but here we are using the word in a literal sense and not its historical or popular sense. Some forms of rationalism claim to grasp truth by "reason" alone, and reject revelation from the beginning. This is, of course, not what we mean by rationalism in this context. Both Christians and non-Christians have invested the word with so much extra meaning that it seldom stands for mere rationality, but it is usually burdened with false assumptions about epistemology.

Thus by "reason" alone, some people include the idea of using intuition to obtain the needed premises, but they have no justification for doing this. It is also popular to identify reason with the use of sensation and science. This is why some people complain that I abandon reason when I reject science as a rational way of knowing anything about reality, although I do so precisely because science fails to stand up under the simplest logical analysis. It is because Christians have also accepted this loaded concept of reason that they avoid putting too much emphasis on it, for fear that they would exalt man's powers over divine revelation. However, this concern is unnecessary once we unload the extra baggage that has been attached to reason.

Now, the first definition in *Merriam-Webster* for "rationalism" reads, "reliance on reason as the basis for establishment of religious truth." And its second definition for "reason" says, "the power of comprehending, inferring, or thinking especially in orderly rational ways." There is nothing in either of these definitions that requires us to reject revelation from the start.

Then, since God's mind is perfectly rational, and since his revelation is perfectly rational, this means anything that contradicts divine revelation is irrational. From this perspective,



there is nothing wrong with outright identifying revelation with reason – that is, revelation is reason with content. In fact, instead of adopting one of the traditional positions – faith *against* reason, faith *and* reason, faith *above* reason, and so on – we take the biblical position that faith *is* reason. To avoid confusion, "reason" can refer to logically valid thinking without referring to content, and "Reason" can refer to reason with content, that is, the self-disclosure of the mind of God, or Christ the Logos.

The confusion over the word "reason" partly comes from the fact that reason or logic itself is without content. By itself, logic cannot proceed anywhere or reach any conclusion, but one must feed it with premises to begin the thinking process. And this in turn requires an epistemology, a way of knowing these premises. Perhaps because of this, people have come to identify their favored epistemological principle with reason itself. However, if the epistemology is itself faulty – that is, if it supplies false premises, or has no way of justifying its premises – then logic will only lead the thinker from one error to another.

On the one hand, biblical rationalism places a greater emphasis on reason than any other system of thought. And on the other hand, its sole reliance on Scripture as its source for true premises means that no stronger emphasis on revelation is possible. Beginning from God's infallible revelation, it proceeds to deduce one's entire belief system, to defend this belief system, and to refute all non-Christian religions and philosophies. It refuses to rely on intuition and sensation in its epistemology, because they cannot yield true premises needed for rational thought. And it refuses to accept conclusions reached by inductive and scientific reasoning, because these are logically invalid methods of processing information.

Since biblical rationalism merely processes and applies divine revelation, it remains simple and flexible, in that it is at the same time a system of theology, philosophy, and apologetics. Unlike pseudo-presuppositionalism, because it practices a true reliance on divine revelation, and revelation is infallible, biblical rationalism itself is true, coherent, and invincible in intellectual conflicts. And because it pays attention to its own basic principles and those of others, it deals a death blow to the unbeliever's system of thought in every argument it advances and every answer it supplies. At every turn, it strikes hard at the foundation of the non-Christian's thinking. Again and again, it exposes his intellectual futility and moral depravity. And at any point in the conversation, it is able to present the light of God's revelation through Jesus Christ.

The non-Christian appeals to his own way of knowing, claiming that he has information that gives him a way out. Instead of saying that the unbeliever merely cannot account for this information, or that although his way of knowing might be reliable, the information is somehow wrong, biblical apologetics destroys all of this nonsense and destroys all that he depends on, all at the same time, leaving him without help and without excuse, and holding out the gospel of Jesus Christ as his only hope.

Moreover, although it is always appropriate to prepare as much as possible, because its sole dependence is on revelation and rationality, the biblical apologist can enter into any debate against any person fully assured of his own victory, even without first knowing what

kind of person he is debating, or what kind of arguments and objections will be brought up.

That said, because the biblical apologist understands the true nature of false epistemology and invalid reasoning, he can freely select from the whole range of classical and evidential arguments in the course of debate. He does not rely on them to prove his own case, but only to show that the unbeliever is defeated even if his non-biblical principles are allowed. In other words, he shows that the unbeliever cannot wield even his own weapons, although these weapons are powerless in the first place. And since the biblical apologist makes it clear that he employs these classical and evidential arguments to perform a negative function, they can never backfire against him.

Now, there are other schools of apologetics besides what we have considered above. For example, one may demonstrate the superiority of the Christian faith by examining history, culture, and literature. We may call them historical apologetics, cultural apologetics, and literary apologetics. Our materials often do not mention them when comparing the different approaches because these methods do not even attempt to set forth a rational case, but rather focus on the effects and the feelings generated by Christian ideas versus non-Christian ideas.

Practical and existential arguments are not compelling, and from a strictly rational perspective, they often contribute nothing to one's case. Just because non-Christian ideas have proved destructive to society does not mean that they are wrong. Making this point does nothing to refute the non-Christians, unless we can somehow prove that what is destructive is also untrue.<sup>19</sup> And even if we make the case that the Christian ideas have contributed to the progress of science, education, and government, so what? It does not automatically mean that Christianity is right or even good.

In fact, we must take care lest in making the case that Christianity is practically and existentially superior, we reduce it in the minds of others into something that is merely practical and existential, or that we believe it only for the practical and existential benefits. If it is reduced to such a level, then it is also easy to think of it as replaceable, just as soon as something is invented that is also practically effective and existentially satisfying. If this is the basis for faith, then even the possibility that a similar belief system could be invented is sufficient to neutralize any claim to exclusivity. Non-Christian views must be excluded by logical necessity, and not just on the practical or existential level.

Our claim is that Christianity should be affirmed because it is true and rationally necessary. Only biblical presuppositionalism successfully argues for this, and therefore this is our main approach, and the only necessary one to use when engaging unbelievers. The arguments from other methods may be employed as optional add-ons to make our presentation subjectively more compelling to the unbelievers, while making it clear that we do not regard Christianity as true on the basis of these optional, inferior, and even

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<sup>19</sup> The definition of what is destructive is also a problem, since it requires an absolute standard of measurement, so that once we manage to defend a definition of it, we will have already established the Christian faith.

rationally irrelevant arguments. The only logical value that they provide is to expose self-contradiction within the non-Christian systems.

In fact, because classical and evidential apologetics cannot self-sustain, and because pseudo-presuppositionalism self-destructs, biblical apologetics is the only approach that gives a safe platform for these classical, evidential, practical, and existential arguments. Precisely because we do not depend on them and do not claim too much for them, they can now be fully unleashed without destroying our case or compromising our intellectual integrity.

### **Questions and Exercises**

- When defending the faith against unbelievers, do they manage to give you any trouble? What sorts of people are they – students, teachers, parents? In what contexts do you converse with them about the gospel? What kinds of arguments do they use to challenge your faith?
- Why do you find some these objections difficult to answer? Is it because you either consciously or unconsciously sympathize with some of the anti-biblical assumptions behind these objections, so that you cannot see through their fallacious nature? What are these anti-biblical assumptions? Why do you sympathize with them? What can you do about this sinful sympathy for anti-biblical thinking?
- How do you perceive these unbelievers? Do you regard them as intelligent, upright, and compassionate, only that they have not yet accepted the gospel? Is this what Scripture says about unbelievers? What does it really say about them? And why is it that you have been holding to an unbiblical estimation of non-Christians? If Scripture does not teach it, who taught it to you?
- Upon examining what Scripture really says about the unbelievers, how does this information influence your perception of them? And how does this in turn influence the way that you interact with them and whether you are intimidated by them?
- What are the differences between classical apologetics and evidential apologetics? We mentioned that there are insoluble problems with both approaches, but of the two, which approach is superior? Why?
- Examine several versions of the cosmological argument. Do they employ different starting points? Why? What problems are the apologists attempting to avoid with the selection of these starting points? And what peculiarities in these premises are they trying to exploit? Are they successful?
- Obtain at least two complete presentations of pseudo-presuppositionalism. Use only the best examples from its leading and most trusted proponents. Read them, and then

refute them. In the process, consider what they say about sensation, intuition, induction, and science both before and after they assert presuppositionalism as the solution. Is their so-called presuppositionalism able to answer the very arguments that they use against evidentialism? Or does it crumble under the same criticisms? Explain and demonstrate your conclusions.

- Locate either a written debate or the transcript of an oral debate between an atheist and a pseudo-presuppositionalist. Preferably, both of them should be the most highly regarded and established representatives in their fields.

You will find that the atheist loses the debate. At the same time, since his opponent is a *pseudo*-presuppositionalist, you will find that his defeat is not as decisive as you might prefer or expect. You might find that the believer allows his opponent to get away with many false assumptions. This is because, being a *pseudo*-presuppositionalist, he also shares many of these anti-biblical assumptions. In fact, in some contexts, such as when he attempts to refute biblical rationalism, he might admit that these anti-biblical assumptions even epistemologically precede his own Christian presuppositions, that he requires them to know about Christianity in the first place.

Since atheism is so easy to defeat, the Christian can always have the upper hand, but the weakness and inconsistency that you perceive come from the internal contradictions of pseudo-presuppositionalism. With this understanding, go through the debate again and devise better arguments and refutations than those offered by pseudo-presuppositionalism.

Then, turn your attention to the pseudo-presuppositionalist and refute him. If he is truly a pseudo-presuppositionalist, you should be able to refute him just as quickly and thoroughly as you do the atheist. However, the atheist is not able to perform such a refutation since he is bound by his own anti-biblical presuppositions, the same ones that the pseudo-presuppositionalist affirms. Once you abandon these false principles, you are able to refute both sides with equal ease. That said, an unbeliever who is willing to sacrifice his own claim to rationality can push toward mutual destruction when debating a pseudo-presuppositionalist who shares the same anti-biblical assumptions.

- How do you use the word "reason"? What do you mean by it? Consider how you use the word in theological and philosophical discussions. Do you find any unbiblical baggage and unnecessary assumptions in how you use it? Some people assume a full-blown theory of epistemology with the word. Do you think they are aware of this? And do you think they can justify this? What are the problems with it?
- What is biblical apologetics, biblical presuppositionalism, biblical foundationalism, or biblical rationalism? Explain its theological and biblical basis. And explain how it proceeds in practice, in an actual debate. Note whether your understanding of this approach is too mechanical, and if you are reducing it to a mere formula, to be memorized and recited. This is a common flaw that hinders the effective use of biblical apologetics.

- Initiate informal debates against at least two unbelievers. Attempt to keep your side of the debate friendly and without any rhetorical flair. The rhetorical aspect of debate is a legitimate study, but at this time we are concerned with the strictly rational side of apologetics. If you debate only two unbelievers for this exercise, it is preferable to choose one atheist, and one follower of a non-Christian religion. Then, rate your performance. If you fail to attain overwhelming victory without any strain or effort, if it requires more than 3 to 10 seconds to devise a refutation to each of an opponent's arguments, no matter how complex, or if you hesitate on even one of the objections from an unbeliever, it is highly recommended that you review our materials on biblical apologetics.<sup>20</sup>
- Cite or find examples of arguments that are rooted in other approaches to apologetics, from arguments that concern history, culture, literature, and other areas. Refute them. You should find that they cannot withstand the simplest rational analysis as to their validity or even relevance. As a defense of or proof for the Christian faith, you should be able to annihilate each of these arguments in under 3 to 5 seconds.
- Consider what happens when an apologist engages an unbeliever by mainly using one of these methods. How would a debate between them proceed? Also, consider what happens when a pseudo-presuppositionalist adopts these arguments. What happens in terms of the rationality and the consistency of his system? What could happen to him in debate? Now consider how a biblical apologist looks at these arguments. Does he consider them necessary? If not, does he find any use for them? How would he use them? What effect can he produce with them? Will they backfire on him? Explain your answer.

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<sup>20</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, Apologetics in Conversation, and Captive to Reason*.

## PART 4

Our approach to apologetics ought to be biblical and rational, and biblical rationalism is the only option. The previous chapter, however, does not include an explanation of biblical apologetics or practical instructions on how to apply it, and neither will we go into detail about that now. This is because these have been extensively discussed in our other publications, and you are advised to study and review them.<sup>21</sup>

Without repeating what I have said in other places, I will add something here that should prove immensely helpful to the budding biblical apologist. I am referring to the deficiencies of a mechanical understanding and practice of apologetics, including the use of formula in conversation and debate.

Sometimes people ask me if I could summarize for them everything they need to know about biblical apologetics in two or three paragraphs, or to reduce my entire approach into a short list of bullet points. Indeed, the approach can be meaningfully described in a few paragraphs, but it is obvious that these individuals do not want a summary because they wish to reduce what they understand into a convenient form, but they wish to study a summary so that they can understand and learn to use it in the first place. However, a short summary leaves out so many details, including the arguments that support the asserted premises, that it will offer limited help to someone who does not already understand this approach to apologetics. It cannot enable a person who is confused about it to understand it and implement it.

To draw an example from another system of apologetics, consider the cosmological argument. Even with something like this, it will not do just to memorize the steps. A person must understand the principles behind that argument, and how to defend each premise. Each opponent is different, and might have different objections to each step, or might present these objections in different ways. A person who merely memorizes the steps and the words can easily become lost in a conversation or debate.

Some people submit their own summaries and paraphrases for my approval. Although the effort is commendable, they suffer from significant inaccuracies, and usually they are too mechanical. Most of the time, their attempts betray their failure to grasp the essence of this approach. As I have always insisted, it does not consist of a formula or a series of steps, but a combination of a body of knowledge and a way of thinking – that is, biblical knowledge and rational thinking.

This body of knowledge is that which we defend, and with which we attack. This way of thinking is what governs our application of this body of knowledge in our interaction with unbiblical ideas. Since what is biblical is also rational, we can simply say that the essence of biblical apologetics is the biblical way of thinking. What appear to be recognizable "steps" in my presentation of this approach are its manifestations and not its essence. In

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<sup>21</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, Apologetics in Conversation, and Captive to Reason*.

other words, how it is presented can vary depending on the context, such as what kinds of ideas we are seeking to counteract.

This is why biblical rationalism carries unlimited power and flexibility in debate when it is correctly understood and practiced. It does not matter whether it is a written dialogue or an oral debate. It does not matter how the conversation starts or where it strays. It does not matter if the opponent is a child or an adult, a novice or an expert in a field. It does not matter even if the opponent's belief system is foreign, unknown, or randomly invented – the biblical apologist adapts as the debate proceeds. He can use whatever he has available to him for various purposes. He can bring into the conversation what he understands from other fields to construct secondary or ad hominem arguments, or he can know nothing but Christ crucified. In every case, he is assured of victory.

Sometimes a person would study our materials and begin to practice biblical apologetics with great success, but then stumble over a particular argument or objection from an unbeliever. He suddenly does not know how to proceed, as if biblical apologetics does not apply to *this* challenge. In every case, and for whatever reason, the trouble is that the person has stopped applying the biblical way of thinking.

Let us construct an illustration from an unbeliever's perspective. Consider the morality of a relativist, who says that there is no absolute standard of good and evil, but that everything is "relative." A typical challenge might be, "Then, murder might also be good, and rape might not be evil." In itself this response presents no logical refutation of relativism, but only one of its implications. The relativist only has to say, "That's right," and move on. Yet, some relativists are stumped – not because relativism has been refuted, but because he has stopped thinking like a relativist. Of course, relativism is false and can be refuted, but the point is that the relativist does not have to lose the debate *right at this point*, that is, if he will just continue to think like a relativist.

Apply this to biblical apologetics. Some objections cause beginning biblical apologists to stumble, not because they refute the biblical worldview, but because they temporarily derail these Christians from thinking consistently with it. The difference is that, whereas relativism is false and will therefore crumble under rational analysis, the biblical worldview is perfect, and exhibits greater and greater brilliance the more it is scrutinized. This can be demonstrated, however, only if the apologist persists in a biblical way of thinking no matter what questions and objections are brought up.

Perhaps some of those who are too rigid with biblical apologetics make the mistake of thinking that the arguments themselves are a body of knowledge. They should be asking, "What should inform my thinking? And what should direct my thinking?" – it is revelation that informs (or provides correct content for thinking), and reason that directs (or ensures validity in thinking). But instead, they tend to ask, "What should I say to answer *this* question, *that* objection?"

They tend to memorize answers when they should learn the body of knowledge and way of thinking from which all answers arise. And this is why they would ask what to say to a

particular challenge, but when they encounter even a slight variation of the same thing, they must return to inquire again. Maybe memorized responses and convenient formulas provide a sense of security, but this is deceptive, because if they depend on these things, they in fact become more prone to failure in debate.

After the above warning and explanation, it might appear ironic that I am now going to present a formula for limited use in apologetics. However, it is precisely because I am about to present this formula that the preceding comments are necessary, since many people are already too prone to become mechanical in conversation and debate about the faith.

Although formulas should never be necessary, there are at least two acceptable uses for them.

First, formulas can help the beginner and the less accomplished apologist. The formula that I am about to give you will help to begin and sustain a logical analysis of your opponent in debate. It will give you something reliable to fall back on, and thus boost your confidence. But keep in mind that in the long run, dependence on any formula will hinder a person's development, and so it is best to be weaned from its use.

Second, the deliberate use of a formula in debate can serve to humiliate an opponent. That is, one way to expose the foolishness of a non-Christian's philosophy and the ease with which a Christian can refute it is to defeat him through the obvious and repeated use of a simple formula. It demonstrates that his beliefs cannot withstand any rational analysis, and that he cannot answer even the most basic questions, things that even a toddler can ask. This practice also makes it easy for observers to perceive the inferiority of the unbeliever's position.

Then, another reason why I wish to present a formula here is to show you what a good one should look like. Given that it is often already a mistake to use formulas in debate, the problem is further aggravated when these formulas are lengthy, complicated, and inflexible. There are arguments that require a perfect setup – an attentive opponent who does not interrupt, an appropriate starting point for the conversation, and a step-by-step procession from one item to another in the prescribed order. If the argument has any punch at all, it is neutralized when the opponent objects to a premise in the middle of the presentation, so that the whole debate becomes sidetracked.

In contrast, the formula that I will introduce below is simple, flexible, and robust. In fact, it can function in the midst of total chaos. Moreover, except for the formula itself, there is no information to memorize. That said, it has major limitations, but we will discuss them later.

And here is the formula: "So? Why? Really?" This is it. This is the entire formula. It is simple but powerful. Although there are only three words in it, using nothing but these three words, any believer of any aptitude can crush any student, any professor, and any variety or combination of non-Christians.



The word "So?" refers to *relevance*. If you would stop to consider all the objections against Christianity that you have encountered, you might be surprised to find that many of them are irrelevant to the debate. And even when the topic could be relevant, the unbelievers often fail to show this relevance. The same problem of irrelevance occurs when they present the case for their own positions. Therefore, one way to neutralize their arguments and objections is to question the relevance of what is said, and to demand the opponent to show this relevance.

The word "Why?" refers to *justification*. Many statements presented as arguments are in fact only assertions. You must ask the opponent why his assertions are true. In response, it is likely that he will give you another set of unjustified assertions, so that you will need to ask "why" again. But notice that the other two words are also available to you. You can ask "So?" – that is, you can question the relevance between the two assertions or sets of assertions, and demand your opponent to show this relevance. With only these two words, you can expose the fact that the opponent's position lacks any kind of justification, and that not only are his objections irrelevant, but even the propositions within his own worldview are irrelevant to one another.

The word "Really?" refers to *validity*. In this context, validity does not refer to the truth of a position, but to the correct form of an argument. A "valid" argument is one in which the conclusion follows from the premises by necessary inference – that is, the premises *must* logically produce that conclusion, and it is the only possible conclusion given the premises. The question "Really?" is therefore posed against the relationship between premises and conclusions. So when you ask for justification for an assertion made by an unbeliever, and he provides you with an argument to support this assertion, then besides questioning the relevance of the argument, you should also question whether it is logically valid. Reasoning from intuition, sensation, induction, and the scientific method are all invalid, since they all proceed in logical leaps, and none of their conclusions are reached by logical necessity.

These three words apply to all non-Christians arguments, whether those that attack the Christian faith or those that defend non-Christian positions. As such, the formula can serve both offensive and defensive purposes in apologetics. Since the arguments and objections from non-Christians are never consistently relevant, justified, and valid, anything that they say in conversation or debate will quickly crumble under these three words. In fact, even one of these three words can destroy all non-Christian belief systems. None of them can continue to withstand a persistent pressure to show relevance, justification, or validity.

Now, with all that I have said against formulas, if this one can defeat all non-Christian arguments and objections, then is it not a good formula? Should we not make it a regular part of our apologetics? The answer is that almost anything can defeat non-Christian arguments and objections, and the fact that something works does not make it a good or complete solution. Instead of aiming for the minimum, we must strive to be thorough in our refutation of non-Christian belief systems, completely destroying everything that they believe in, and then we must faithfully present the total biblical worldview.

The three words in this simple formula remind us of the questions that we should ask during a conversation or debate. Sometimes when Christians come across anti-biblical arguments, they tend to go by whether they "feel" right to them. If they can sense nothing wrong, then they do not know how to respond. This happens frequently with those believers whose minds have not been renewed by sound theology. The formula reminds them to be deliberate in examining the arguments for relevance, justification, and validity.

On the other hand, the skilled biblical apologist possesses superior intellectual reflex. Since his thinking has been trained to follow deeply ingrained biblical and rational paths, his perception is quicker and clearer, and he naturally comes up with stronger arguments and counter moves. He does as if by instinct that which the beginner must deliberate upon. This is why rather than be satisfied with a decent formula, the biblical apologist must strive to make his craft into a natural reflex.

Moreover, the formula given in this chapter does not include any actual information, such as the biblical view of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, soteriology, or any other doctrine. It is possible to devise a more complex one that includes some of this information, but it is certain that the full scope and depth of biblical rationalism can never be reduced to a manageable formula. The one in this chapter is nothing more than a convenient way to remember one small aspect of biblical apologetics.

Of course, even when using this formula, the believer should usually vary his expressions. He could keep on saying, "So? So? So?" But unless he is trying to humiliate his opponent by the obvious use of a rigid line of questioning, he should demand proof of relevance in other ways. For example, he could say, "How is this relevant to the debate?" Or, "Even if this point is correct, how does it refute Christianity?" Or, with the question of validity, he can say, "I asked you to justify your assertion and you gave me an argument, but your conclusion does not really follow from your premises. Just because A and B are true does not mean that C is true."

I cannot stress enough the need to be weaned from the use of formulas and rigid tactics in apologetics. The strength and beauty of the biblical approach are unleashed only when we move on from bullet points and memorized answers to where we can maintain natural interaction with unbelievers using a biblical way of thinking. What we call biblical rationalism is just another name for the mind of Christ, and when we interact with the unbelievers from the mind of Christ, our encounters with them will have less to do with methods and techniques, but for them it will become more and more like having actual conversations with the Risen Lord. The biblical apologist is one who thinks like Christ, not just one who has memorized tactics and answers.

## **Questions and Exercises**

- Do you have the desire to reduce biblical apologetics to a simplistic form? Why? Do you desire this because of the convenience, for a sense of security, or for some other reason? What are the advantages of such a summary? What are the disadvantages and

potential pitfalls? Is any summary sufficient? In what ways can oversimplification be misleading and self-defeating?

- Have you ever been stumped by a non-Christian argument or objection? What was the nature of the difficulty? Did you have trouble because of a lack of information? Could you have responded and defeated the non-Christian anyway, even without this information? How? If it was for some other reason, what was it?
- The simple formula presented in this chapter is able to refute every page of every non-Christian textbook in your entire curriculum. To put it another way, whereas biblical revelation can withstand the analysis, the formula can destroy all human claims to knowledge in all of history. There are several exercise you can perform to demonstrate and apply this.

Open one of your textbooks to a section where it presents a claim of some sort, preferably one that is widely endorsed and supported by arguments. Make sure you read as much about it as is necessary to understand the context. Using only the three words in the formula, refute it. If you are a beginner, you should be able to do this within 3 to 10 seconds. Any biblical apologist with a normal level of competence should be able to refute it by the time he finishes reading it, if not way before.

Now, open any textbook found anywhere on university campus to any page. Make sure you read the page or the section within the proper context so as not to misrepresent what it is claiming. Using only the three words in the formula, refute it. Repeat this as many times as you wish with as many textbooks, papers, and journals that you can find. Locate something at random, or attempt to find the best of the best. Refute them. Again, nothing should take longer than 10 seconds to refute.

- Assuming that you are successful, what does this say about human methods of investigation and non-Christian claims to knowledge? Are non-Christians intelligent? Do they know anything – anything – at all? Remember that you have been restricted to use only the three words in the formula. You have not been using the full resources of biblical apologetics.
- If non-Christians are so thoroughly ignorant and irrational, then why attend a secular university at all? One proper perspective might be to think that a secular university is not a place to learn rational truth, but to learn about what non-Christians believe, and by understanding what they believe, we are able to function in a non-Christian society. If we desire to learn truth, we must learn it from God himself, who has revealed it in the Bible. Are there other reasons to attend a secular institution?
- Teach the formula to a child, preferably one who is under ten-years-old. Ask him to refute, using only the three words, the non-Christian claims and arguments that you have just refuted in the above exercises. The child might have much more trouble understanding the non-Christian ideas than the formula. If so, explain them to him, and make sure he does not take the non-Christian claims and arguments out of context.

If possible, arrange for the child to speak with a professor in your university. There is no need to call it a debate, but have the child ask questions about the professor's field of expertise and to politely refute everything – *everything* – that the professor says using only the three words. Make sure that you train the child to persistently think in terms of the three words and what they represent, since it will be improper to coach him during his conversation with the professor. The point is to illustrate that even a child can refute any non-Christian professor of any field using this simple formula alone.

- Arrange to debate five to twenty non-Christians *at the same time*. Preferably they will take different positions on various issues so that there will be some variety. Do not invite only atheists, but also adherents of non-Christian religions. Using the three words of the formula, debate and refute all of them at the same time. The precise format is up to you and the unbelievers. They can take turns, or speak whenever there is something to say. You can debate each one individually, or encourage them to collaborate. Find ways to make things difficult for yourself. Be creative. Now, since this might be a rare opportunity, after a short while you might wish to stop limiting yourself to the three words and proceed to employ all your skills and resources as a biblical apologist. Keep track of the debate and make sure you achieve decisive and overwhelming victory against every person.

Note: I strongly oppose the idea of practicing or testing apologetics. "Practice makes perfect" is false. It is possible to practice all the time and not improve, but if you understand the biblical principles of apologetics, it is possible to do it very well even on the first attempt. When we are doing apologetics, we are dealing with people's souls, and we should not practice at their expense. So when I prescribe these exercises where other people are involved, I am not at all encouraging you to try apologetics or to play apologetics, but to do apologetics. These exercises are designed to display the power and flexibility of biblical rationalism, as well as to expose the foolishness and impotence of non-Christian thinking. As with ordinary situations, our goal is still to promote the gospel and God's honor.

- Obtain written presentations of non-biblical approaches to apologetics – classical, evidential, pseudo-presuppositional, cultural, literary, and so on. Using only the three words of our formula, refute all of them. Although the Christian contents attached to these presentations might generate some confusion for you, none of them should take you much longer to refute than any non-Christian belief system. Allow yourself 20 to 30 seconds at the most for each.
- Consider your own understanding of the Christian faith. Take time to think through your understanding of every major topic in theology and philosophy – this is your belief system. Now attempt to refute it with the three words in our formula. Be thorough – do not hurry through this. If you have never done it before, a complete theological and philosophical self-examination should take days, weeks, and months, not minutes or hours.

A consistently biblical theology should be immune to such an attack. Note the areas where you are vulnerable, then spend as much time and effort as necessary to fix them. In some cases, you will find that the problem is only a matter of proper articulation. But in other cases, you might find that your present position is unbiblical and irrational, and must be abandoned for a biblical and rational view.

## PART 5

When it comes to engaging anti-Christian ideas, the two major groups of people that you must deal with in the university are the students and the professors. From the spiritual standpoint, they fall under the same category – they are unbelievers – so that we take the same philosophical stance toward both groups. But from a social perspective, there are marked differences in the positions that they occupy in our lives, and these differences carry practical ramifications as to how we must relate to them when preaching the gospel, defending the faith, or just standing our ground. Therefore, for our purpose, it will be helpful to consider the two groups separately.

Then, let us not forget the anti-Christian ideas coming from those who call themselves believers. When you strive to articulate your faith with biblical faithfulness and precision, sometimes the strongest opposition will come from Christians, or those who claim to be Christians. But there is no need to give them special attention here, since it remains that most of them will be either students or professors, so that our discussion will apply to them as well.

Now, we will not spend much time on the students, since they are your peers, and there are no special restrictions when it comes to how you must relate to them.

Perhaps the first thing you should know is that just because a person is a college student does not make him intelligent or rational. In fact, his pride and what little he thinks he knows might make him even more careless. The two implications for apologetics is that there is no need to be intimidated and that it is a mistake to assume that your opponent will readily understand anything about the ultimate questions or the rules for valid argumentation. It is impossible to underestimate unbelievers – most Christians make the mistake of overestimating them, and this generates a mental block in their own minds that prevents them from optimal performance in debate.

As for the practical aspect of dealing with students, I recommend for most cases the use of informal and extended conversations when discussing matters of faith. By "extended" conversations, I refer to repeated discussions that can last from days to months.

Some Christians are used to packaging the entire gospel and its defense in a ten-minute presentation. But this hit-and-run approach is often less than ideal. It takes time to say all the things that you need to say, to dismantle your listener's beliefs, and to fully present your own. Therefore, it is best to take the long-term approach, and maintain communication with the unbelievers. Of course, sometimes this is impossible, God will often do a quick work of conversion through a five-minute presentation of the gospel. But this should not be the norm. There is no reason to hurry with people that you will see over and over again.

How a conversation on faith begins is also important. Some teachings on evangelism assert that there is something defective with your faith unless you inform someone that you are a believer or preach the gospel to him within the first several hours or days of meeting him.

And there is certainly no trace of the Spirit of Christ in you if he still does not know that you are a believer after a whole week! Why, you must be quite ashamed of the gospel.

However, there is no requirement in Scripture as to how soon you must let someone know that you are a believer or preach the gospel to the person upon meeting him. Binding the conscience with man-made rules on this matter is a problem at least as severe as the one that it is trying to fix. Of course, if for some reason you think that you should be the one who preaches the gospel to a certain person, and if you have no expectation of meeting that person again, then by all means initiate a conversation on the subject. There is no need to hesitate.

But if it is likely that you will meet the person again and again, then it is often best to wait for an appropriate opportunity. Perhaps this person will bring up a topic that can naturally transition into a discussion about the gospel. This way the person is committed to carry the conversation to a natural conclusion.

Of course, you can just walk up to someone and say, "Do you know Jesus?" And he will say, "No," and walk away. This is fine when you are using a machine gun tactic in street evangelism, and you will get some people's attention this way. But with people you know, and whom you will meet over and over again, a natural entry into the topic is far superior. In fact, you can spend weeks with a gentle application of the "So? Why? Really?" formula to undermine the person's confidence in his own intelligence and belief system before transitioning into an explicit discussion about the ultimate questions and the biblical worldview. So this is not a call to be passive, but to be patient and strategic.

Things are different when dealing with professors. Students have no authority over you, and they do not give exams and grades. Professors, however, are supposed to teach knowledge, and they expect you to demonstrate understanding in that which they teach. This is fine in principle, but problems occur when they teach anti-biblical ideas as if they are truth, and then expect you to accept them.

Biology courses offer some of the most explicit examples of this. At the beginning of one of the many biology courses I took, the professor stated that when it comes to evolution, "we need not see any conflict with the Genesis account as long as we do not take it literally." Well, of course! All conflicts of ideas can be neutralized as long as you do not take one side literally. But the question is why we should take science seriously rather than the Bible.

We have shown elsewhere that science is not only unreliable, but that it has no rational contact with reality at all, and that all its conclusions are false. Its method precludes discovery of any true information about anything. So here we will not repeat an analysis of science, but given these facts about science, we must consider how to deal with professors who affirm anti-Christian ideas on the basis of science.

There are at least three reasons to avoid making the actual scientific evidences and arguments the primary battleground.

First, since your professor is an expert in his field, it is less likely that you will beat him at his own game, that is, if you completely adhere to his terms and the context he constructs. This is not to say that your professor is correct given his methods – no, I am saying that he can bluff better than you can when you play his game by his rules. He knows far more about the jargons, names, dates, theories, experiments, publications, and other information related to his field. If he wishes, he could even make things up as he goes along, and you would not know when he is telling the truth and when he is not.

Second, not all scientific alternatives to anti-biblical science are correct. For example, you could attempt a scientific refutation of evolution with intelligent design, but some of the things asserted in intelligent design publications might be wrong. You must be able to tell the difference, and there is no guarantee that you will always be able to discuss intelligent design better than your professor. Worse, if you happen to endorse some details in the intelligent design arguments that turn out to be false, then your opponent can seize on this as a demonstration of your lack of information and judgment.

Third, since the scientific method itself is irrational and can never attain any knowledge, any information about reality, to defend truth based on scientific arguments is ultimately futile. If you are able to gain the upper hand at all, the best that you can do is to show that you are less wrong, and not that Christianity is necessarily correct. If the point is to refute false ideas and promote the biblical faith, then it is necessary to lay aside false methods of discovery and have a truly rational discussion on the ultimate questions concerning knowledge and reality.

Therefore, from the perspective of winning the debate, the most effective strategy is not to challenge one scientific theory with another, but to challenge science itself, and show that it is impossible to know anything by science in the first place. The arguments needed to do this are numerous and irrefutable, and have been presented elsewhere in our publications. In essence, we challenge the assumptions behind science, such as the unity and the stability of the universe, the reliability of sensation and induction, the formal logical validity of scientific reasoning, and so on. The upshot of this is the total humiliation of human speculation. Whereas the scientist can say, "From the perspective of science, which cannot find truth, here are the conclusions," he cannot claim that these conclusions have anything to do with the truth about reality.

That said, the most rational approach is not always practical or even possible in some situations. It is unlikely that a professor will allow you to hijack a class on biology to discuss the finer details of epistemology and the philosophy of science. And you must remember that a professor is still a person – he can be sinful, unfair, and wicked. If he is a non-Christian, then no matter what he says, he is not a seeker after truth. He does not care that science is false, as long as there is no one to challenge him on that. This is why you must exercise caution, or else you might find yourself suffering unnecessary persecution at his hands.



Here we can make only some brief suggestions about how to behave during class and exams.

With even minimal competence in biblical apologetics, you can easily humiliate your professors before all the students in the classroom. However, it is almost never appropriate to do this, although there are biblically sanctioned exceptions. One of the most abused verses in apologetics is 1 Peter 3:15, which says that we must answer for our faith "with gentleness and respect" when dealing with those in authority. It is often taken out of context and given universal application, but the verse indeed applies to how you deal with your professors, since they are in authority over you. You might find their comments just as irrational and irreverent as those that come from the students, but with them you must exercise special patience and restraint.

Besides the biblical restrictions, there is also a practical backlash to inappropriate outbursts in the classroom. One of my high school English courses had us read Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and during a discussions on the early part of the work, I spoke up and corrected the teacher on something she said about the Bible, and then I corrected Milton as well.

My comments were indeed accurate, and my teacher and Milton were mistaken. But the way I spoke was so sudden and blunt that the teacher went into a mild shock and the students appeared afraid of me for the rest of the semester. So, although it was probably appropriate to speak up against the misrepresentation of Scripture by my teacher and Milton, it would have been better if I had done it in a way that furthered the Christian faith.

To correct the overbearing impression that I generated, I began to show patience and restraint when it came to biblical and religious matters, although I still spoke up without compromise. Meanwhile, I made sure that I remained a regular contributor to class discussions and faithfully worked on all the assignments. The result was that, although some damaged had been done by my initial error, I was looked to as the class's authority when it came to Scripture and Christianity, and thus was granted opportunities to correct misrepresentations and to briefly expound on biblical doctrines as a natural part of class discussions.

In most cases, the worst that one can do is to take over the class and preach a full-length sermon. Even if the professor can tolerate it, which is unlikely, the students will not. They do not pay expensive tuitions to listen to you.

Yet sometimes you must say something when the honor of God is at stake and when silence seems to signal agreement. Unbelievers must be challenged regarding their beliefs. Also, there might be other Christians in the class less capable than you in discerning truth from error, and in resisting the onslaughts of unbelief – they are quietly suffocating under the abuse. A comment from you, or even an innocent-sounding question that serves to undermine an anti-biblical statement, might serve to bring hope and refreshment to their weary souls.

One thing you can do is to take the long-term approach, to plant seeds in the form of simple statements and questions – here a little, there a little – as you find opportunities to instill doubt against the non-Christian view and to incite interest in the Christian faith. Without saying too much about it, you might even mention the name of an author or a book that addresses the topic from a Christian perspective. But do this sparingly. The temperaments of the students and professors vary, so wisdom must dictate what you should say in each situation. Be patient, and persist in prayer, and it might be that one day you will have the opportunity to speak in greater detail on the matter in class, or more likely, you will have an audience with the students and even the professors outside of the classroom.

Assignments and examinations present another difficulty to a Christian student. Depending on the professor, although some materials are up for debate, others are affirmed as well-established facts. They are assumed to be true when assignments and examinations are given, and the student is expected to affirm and apply them.

For assignments and examinations, a biology professor is unlikely to ask questions that permit doubt regarding the theory of evolution, but he is going to ask questions whose answers depend on the assumption that evolution is true. Similarly, a physics professor will ask questions that assume his own view of the origin and operation of the universe. Both of these professors, of course, will assume the rational validity of the scientific method and scientific reasoning.

Therefore, the challenge for the Christian is to maximize his performance in such a setting while standing firm in the faith and refusing to compromise. He must demonstrate that he understands the course materials without even hinting at the idea that he agrees with any of it.

Part of the solution includes the careful and deliberate use of language. When you know what answer the professor expects in an exam question, but the correct answer is contrary to your faith, you must not state it as fact. But you can show that you understand what the professor is looking for by attributing the answer to the appropriate source in the context of the course.

So, instead of just stating the expected answer, say, "According to Darwin," or "According to the textbook (or the author of the textbook)," or state your professor's name. If appropriate, you might mention that not every expert in the field agrees with this expected answer. This makes it even more clear that you are not necessarily in agreement with what has been taught. However, there is no need to write a full-length rebuttal unless this is what the question asks from you or allows you to do.

It will require some skill to prevent the prose from becoming too predictable, but when this is done properly, a Christian student can demonstrate competence with the course materials and at the same time avoid compromising his faith. As long as your language refuses to embrace the anti-Christian teachings, you are leaving room for further disagreement and discussion.

In all my years in school, there was only one course in which my answers affected my grade in a negative way. Greatly vexed by shoddy anti-Christian scholarship throughout the semester, I was more blatant than usual, and in an exam question even used several biblical invectives against one of the professor's heroes. Anyway, the lower grade had no effect on my future, and I can look back and affirm that I did not betray the Lord, although there was a small price to pay.

This advice would not solve all your problems. For example, it is harder to get around multiple choice questions. College courses tend to use fewer of them, but otherwise, your general speech and behavior in class and how you answer essay questions become much more important. You must make it clear that you do not necessarily agree with what is being taught. Nevertheless, what I have said about the use of language can help you begin thinking about how best to handle your own circumstances.

Again, keep in mind that you are not in fact dealing with assignments and examinations but people – your work will be graded by professors and their teaching assistants. These people regard their own expertise with great esteem, and if you insult their work or even their entire field of study, there might be a price to pay. Therefore, do your best to avoid unnecessary persecution, but never compromise.

We have been using science to illustrate how you will encounter anti-Christian ideas in the university and how you might deal with them, but anti-Christian ideas can come in connection with any subject in the curriculum. Many of them are less obvious, but they exist even in courses in mathematics and foreign languages. After all, we are dealing with not only numbers and sounds, but with depraved people. How about classes in philosophy, religion, politics, and economics?

It is impossible to provide illustrations and suggestions for the whole curriculum, so we will conclude the chapter by making a brief note about literature, or fiction in particular. Keep in mind that at this time we are interested in only those texts that contain anti-Christian ideas.

Assuming that the author has at least a minimal level of competence, when he presents an argument in non-fiction prose, his purpose and position will tend to be relatively clear. First, the reader will realize that he is reading an argument, and he will find it easy to locate and understand the conclusion that the author is asserting. Then, the premises that support and lead to such a conclusion should be obvious also.

Now, since the asserted conclusion is so clear, right away the reader notices whether it is something that he accepts or rejects. And if it is something that he rejects, he puts up a resistance against it. But because the premises are clear as well, the soundness of the argument and the validity of the reasoning process are easily examined. The reader must either be persuaded by the argument, or he must point out its flaws. Since the argument is so plain and direct, to reject its conclusion without finding any fault with it would expose one's irrational prejudice. In other words, when presented in this fashion, the substance of an argument resembles its appearance.

Things are not so clear when an opinion or argument is presented through fiction. This is because the conclusion is often unstated, and if there are supporting premises at all, they are also hidden, or described rather than explicitly stated. A person might not get the impression that the author is arguing for anything at all, but he might notice either an approving or unsettling feeling after reading the story. The author is indeed making a point, although he is doing this indirectly, in a way that bypasses the analysis and resistance of careless readers.

This is not to say that the author is always trying to deceive, or that his conclusion is necessarily false, but it is to point out that only gullible individuals are directly affected by fictional stories, when they communicate their points indirectly. Instead of speaking to our beliefs first, they attempt to generate certain feelings in us, which in turn might influence our beliefs.

What readers often forget is that the author possesses omnipotence in the context of his story – he can make anyone do or say whatever he wants. If he desires to make a character appear heroic, he can make him perform heroic deeds. And if he wishes to generate hatred toward a character, he can make this character do all kinds of despicable things. The readers must never lose sight of the fact that all details in a fictional story are given by the author – he made up everything – and as he does this he is not necessarily reflecting reality, but only how he perceives the world.

Therefore, when dealing with a piece of fiction, you must become a more active reader and thinker, taking an extra step to translate it into an argument. You must find the conclusion that the author is trying to assert and the premises that he uses to support it. If you confuse fiction with non-fiction, then you will tend to apply what happens in the fictional story to the world outside of the story. The author wants you to ask, "Given this is what happens in the story, what should I think about the world outside of the story?" But instead you should ask, "Why does the author make this happen in the story? Why does he make this character do such a thing? What is the author's agenda?" Once you have made the story into something direct and explicit, you have also made it something that you can confront and refute.

With stories that advance anti-Christian ideas, you might read of preachers and believers that act as despicable hypocrites, committing murder, theft, and adultery behind the scenes, while presenting a holy front for all to see. Of course it is true that many professing believers are hypocrites, but here we are also dealing with fictional stories, in which the author can make anything happen.

And what does this say about Christianity anyway? Does the Bible deny that some professing believers are not believers at all? And does the Bible say that true believers are perfect and sinless? A story about Christian hypocrites produces ill feelings toward Christians, and that is all there is to it. In any case, for every preacher who commits adultery in fiction, I can make an atheist pillage fifty villages, murder two hundred thousand

children, and rape five million women. One story is just as easy to write as the other, and neither one proves anything.

### Questions and Exercises

- Besides the students and professors, what other groups of people do you have to deal with as a Christian? How do you preach and defend the gospel to them? How does your presentation or strategy differ? Why?
- From the standpoint of intellectual competence, it is impossible to underestimate non-Christians, since no estimation can be lower than the one that Scripture gives them. But is it possible to overestimate ourselves? If so, in what ways, and why? What are some of the problems that may arise from thus overestimating ourselves? And what can we do to regain a proper estimation of ourselves?
- What does it mean to have "informal and extended" conversations with our peers about Christ? What are the advantages to this approach? Are there disadvantages? Have you ever had one such conversation or series of conversations with anyone? If so, how did you perform? Did you maintain the right tone, intensity, and depth throughout the discussion?
- Many conversations in the Bible can be read in several seconds, but did any of them really last only several seconds, or did they last much longer? Consider John 4. How long did Jesus speak with the Samaritan woman? One can read from verse 7 to 26 in two minutes, but were the disciples away for only a hundred and twenty seconds (see v. 8 and 27)? Then, the woman went back to town, told the people about the conversation, and the people went out of town to see Jesus (v. 28-30), who then stayed another two days (v. 40).
- Provide biblical examples in which the characters involved spent hours or even days discussing the Christian faith. Consider Luke 24:13-35 and Acts 24:25-27, among many other examples. What implications can you derive from the realization that many biblical conversations lasted from hours to even years? I would suggest the principle that if you have the time, then take the time. Be slow and thorough. Do you agree?
- What is meant by the "hit-and-run" approach to evangelism or apologetics? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach? Have you ever successfully deployed such a method? Cite biblical examples that demonstrate this approach, but make sure that they indeed describe encounters that lasted no more than several minutes. Note the details described. Just because you can read a passage in several seconds does not mean that the actual conversation did not take several hours.
- Have you ever initiated a conversation about the Christian faith without a natural lead-in to the topic? Cite examples from your experience in street evangelism or from your

personal relationships. What did you say to bring up the topic? What did you do when the other person showed no interest, or tried to end the discussion? What did you do to continue? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this "brute force" approach? Are you good at it?

- Initiate a conversation about the Christian faith with any person you choose using the brute force approach. Preach the gospel, refute arguments, answer objections. Note everything that is significant about the process and outcome. Prepare to use this approach whenever necessary in the future.
- What does it mean to pray for and anticipate "natural opportunities" to begin conversations about the Christian faith? Are these opportunities rare, or do you fail to take advantage of them because they are not always obvious? But whenever you managed to recognize these opportunities and started conversations with them, did you notice any difference in the length, depth, and intensity of the discussions as compared to conversations that you initiated by brute force?
- Begin to watch for natural opportunities to begin conversations about the Christian faith in your daily interactions with people, especially with your peers. Choose several of these opportunities and redirect the conversations to the Christian faith. Note everything that is significant about the process and outcome. Prepare to use this approach again in the future.
- Without mentioning that you are a Christian, and without making the conversation about Christianity (at least at first), find a number of non-Christians who claim to base their own beliefs and their rejection of religion on science.

Then, without helping them, (1) ask them to list the assumptions behind the scientific method, (2) ask them to list every step in the scientific method, (3) ask them to show how one step leads to the next step in the scientific method, and (4) ask them to defend the idea that this method can discover anything about reality at all. You may find that, among those who adamantly insist on their reliance on science, very few if any of them can answer even the first or the second question. And none of them can answer the third and fourth.

Now it is obvious that they cannot defend their reliance on science, or even show that they understand science, ask them if they are going to doubt their beliefs or change their beliefs about anything. What do they say? Do they behave in a rational manner? Are these intelligent people?

- If possible, initiate a conversation with a professor who specializes in a scientific subject, preferably biology or physics. Repeat the above exercise. You will find that his answers are more convoluted than those that the students gave you, and he might be able to answer questions (1) and (2). But you will find that he is also unable to answer questions (3) and (4). Again, are these rational people? Are they intelligent?

- From any college text book, look up an explanation of the scientific method. Refute it. It should take no longer than 3 to 10 seconds.
- From any college textbook, look up a description of an experiment performed using the scientific method. Refute it. It should take no longer than 3 to 10 seconds.
- From any college textbook, look up the explanation and proof of a scientific theory. This can be any recorded scientific theory from any period of human history, but preferably one that is considered well-established. Refute it. It should take no longer than 3 to 10 seconds. Repeat this exercise as many times as you wish. What does this demonstrate about science? And what does this say about the people who rely on it as the way to understand reality?
- Pick any undergraduate student and ask him to tell you his position about an issue that he cares about. It can be his opinion on religion, politics, science, history, or anything at all. Then, ask him to give you an argument to support his opinion. But make him show his work – ask him to prove his conclusion step-by-step, showing how each premise is true and how it leads to the next, and then finally to the conclusion.

For example, if he contends that a certain scientific theory is true, do not let him get away with saying, "Because the evidence supports it." Ask him to cite one piece of evidence from which he could validly infer the conclusion. If he refers to an experiment that allegedly proves the theory, without even mentioning the problems with the scientific method, ask him to specify each step of the experiment, including the assumptions behind the experiment, the reasons for choosing each variable, and so on, and describe how the experiment proves the conclusion.

Unless you chance upon an especially conscientious young man or woman, my guess is that you might have to ask several hundred students before one can even come close to doing what I have just described. In many cases, you will find that they cannot tell you how the evidences and experiments that they cite are even relevant to the conclusions that they wish to assert. Yet they appear confident, and consider themselves intelligent. This will only make their failure so much more obvious when confronted by a skillful biblical apologist.

- Besides the disadvantages of evidentialism mentioned in a previous chapter, what are the additional disadvantages of evidentialism when dealing with a professor?
- Have you ever argued with a professor in class because he made anti-Christian assertions? Did the debate become hostile? What was the students' attitude toward you? Were they intrigued, irritated, or what? In any case, did you win? Sometimes people say that they do not want to "win the argument, but lose the convert." Why is this a stupid statement? What might be the true reason why these people do not want to argue for the faith? What is wrong with them?

- What is the correct interpretation and application of 1 Peter 3:15? How is this verse usually misused? Cite at least one example from a book on Christian apologetics. Besides the spiritual crime of distorting Scripture, what damage does an abuse of this verse do to the practice of apologetics? Why is the verse relevant to the relationship between student and professor? How can you apply this verse to your situation? In other words, how does this affect how you argue for the faith before a professor?
- Have you silently endured while a professor attacked the Christian faith in class? If so, did your conscience rebuke you for not speaking up? What could you have done? What would it mean to be "wise as a serpent" in such a situation? In other words, how can you stand up for the faith without being foolish about it or inciting unnecessary persecution?
- Discuss with other Christian students on how they handle attacks against the Christian faith in class. Do they have a method? Do they consider it a problem at all? Do they endure silently, retort recklessly, or what? Are their approaches biblical? And what outcomes do their methods produce?
- When it comes to assignments and examinations, how do you show that you understand the course materials without expressing agreement to the anti-Christian ideas? Do you have a biblical and consistent approach? Share it with other Christian students.
- Find an example in which an author uses non-fiction to advance an argument. Identify his agenda and the conclusion that he asserts. Locate the premises that supposedly lead to his conclusion. Refute every part of the argument. Repeat the exercise as many times as desired.
- Find an example in which an author uses fiction to advance an argument. Identify his agenda and the conclusion that he asserts. Locate the premises that supposedly lead to his conclusion. Refute every part of the argument. Repeat the exercise as many times as desired.



## PART 6

Although a large part of college life has to do with academics, the student has other concerns as well. Accordingly, a Christian in an university lives his life before God and bears witness not only in his intellectual integrity and defense of the faith, but also in other ways.

But before we proceed to that, we must complete our discussion on apologetics by addressing one of the most common errors promoted by Christian leaders. This is the teaching that a believer's holy life is a necessary part of his apologetic, and that it is even the most prominent and effective aspect of defending the faith. Thus in materials on written on the subject, we frequently find statements like, "Love is the most powerful apologetic," and "The greatest argument for the gospel is a holy life." These are often asserted under the broad principle that "actions speak louder than words."

However, love or holiness is not a more powerful apologetic than rational discourse. In fact, since an apologetic is *by definition* a verbal rational discourse to advance one's cause or to answer opposition, strictly speaking, love and holiness are not any part of an apologetic at all. They do, as we will point out, provide materials for an apologetic. As for actions, not only do they not speak louder than words, but they do not speak at all. Actions require words to speak for them, explaining their origins and implications, or else they remain silent.

Paul said to the elders at Ephesus:

"You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus...."

"Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Acts 20:18-21, 32-35)

If love or holiness is the most powerful apologetic, then why did Paul need to describe his attitude and behavior in such a coherent manner in order to make his point? His love or holiness should have already made the point for him. And if actions speak louder than words, then why did Paul need to say anything about them? Why did he use a weaker

means to draw attention to his actions? He himself reminded the elders that they already knew about his actions.

Likewise, when Jesus said, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" (John 8:46), it would have been an unnecessary and even inferior means of drawing attention to his own holiness and integrity if his actions were indeed louder than his words. But it was the other way around – he needed words to draw attention to his actions, which remained totally silent by themselves.<sup>22</sup>

An apologetic is an argument or explanation that you verbally advance. It should not require unbelievers to infer your defense for you from your actions! Indeed, you may appeal to your actions in your verbal discourse to show that your lifestyle is consistent with your message, but it is not an apologetic to close your mouth and expect the unbelievers to convince themselves that the gospel is true because of your love and holy lifestyle.

And without establishing a proper moral standard by verbal argument, why would they infer what you want from your actions? You can exhibit compassion, and they will infer nosiness. You can demonstrate humility, and they will infer weakness. You can value truth, and they will infer bigotry. The problem with non-Christians is not only that they lack compassion, humility, truth, and so on, but that they do not even know how to think about these things. Their minds are so thoroughly corrupt and feeble that if there is any significance in your holy actions, you must explain it to them. Therefore, although our actions can be related to our apologetic, in themselves they do not constitute any part of an apologetic.

The above carries two implications for evangelism and apologetics.

First, there is no such thing as evangelism or apologetics without a verbal rational discourse, or without the use of language. There are Christians who say, "I do not preach or argue – I bear witness about Christ by my life." Those who say this often do not have very impressive lives in the first place, but more relevant is the fact that such an approach cannot bear witness about Christ at all.

Even if unbelievers notice them, perhaps they will think that these people were born this way, predisposed to pure and holy living, and thus their lives produce nothing but praise for themselves. Maybe some unbelievers will think that these Christians are in fact Buddhists or adherents of some other system of thought, and so their holy actions will end up inciting others to seek out some religion or philosophy that might or might not have anything to do with Christianity.

Second, the above implies that non-Christians are not excused from believing the gospel just because there are many professing believers who turn out to be hypocrites, or who

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<sup>22</sup> Biblical passages like Matthew 5:13-16, John 13:34-35, James 2:18, and 1 Peter 3:1-6 cannot be used to say that holy actions convey information apart from the preaching of the word of God. Still less do they assert that love and holiness provide a more powerful apologetic than rational argument. See Vincent Cheung, *The Sermon on the Mount*, *Commentary on First Peter*, and *The Light of Our Minds*.

behave in ways that are inconsistent with biblical teachings. The truth is in the message and not in the lifestyle. Although the imperfection and the hypocrisy of Christians indeed cause many to stumble, those who stumble are not excused, since there is no direct rational relationship between whether the gospel of Christ is true and whether believers behave consistently with it.

In fact, whether we are talking about believers or unbelievers, those who stumble over other people's moral failures must be incredibly stupid people. Why is the gospel discredited when a believer steals from his employer? And when a pastor commits adultery, what does it have anything to do with the truth concerning Jesus Christ? The gospel never claims to produce perfect people in this life, and these individuals might or might not be genuine believers in the first place. Then, so what if Catholics priests sexually molest hundreds of children? What does that have to do with us? We do not even acknowledge that Catholicism is Christianity, or that Catholics are Christians, and so this is what we expect of them. We would be surprised if they do not molest the children.

So what is the problem? The only explanation is that those who stumble like this are stupid. We might say that it is a moral issue, that they are trying to find any reason to escape from the claims of the gospel. But still, the fact that they think they can get away with such a poor excuse must mean that these people are astonishingly stupid.

They are not only stupid, but spineless as well. A renowned Christian leader falls into sin, and they stop going to their own churches, when their pastors have done nothing wrong. A church scandal breaks out in another part of the world far away, and these people stop giving to their own churches, when these churches have nothing to do with the scandal. Rather than clinging close to the Lord, and resolve by the grace and power of God to do better than those who have fallen, and even to help restore them, they will use anything as an excuse to stop serving God and doing what he requires of them.

Preachers often say, "If you do not practice what you preach, then no one would believe you when you talk about the gospel." But statements like this amount to an attack against the inherent intellectual perfection of the gospel as well as the work of the Holy Spirit. The truth is that if you *never* practice *anything* that you preach, or if you *always* do the *opposite*, as long as the content of your preaching is biblical, everyone *should* still believe you, and many will. You are not excused from your sins, but God's truth and power, and his entire plan of redemption, do not hinge on your holiness.

Hypocrisy among Christians must be harshly condemned, but it provides no excuse for others to fall from their profession of faith or to remain in unbelief. If no one believes the gospel, you believe the gospel! If no one practices holiness, you practice holiness! What feeble intellect and character a person must have, to turn from Christ just because someone else does! Rather than laboring to counteract the problem, with his eyes wide opened he becomes a part of the problem. One is almost tempted to have more sympathy with the one who causes the stumbling than the one who stumbles.

In summary, it is wrong to say that actions speak louder than words, or that love or holiness is the most powerful apologetic, for the reason that actions do not speak, and love or holiness is not an apologetic. The hypocrisy and moral failure of some Christians are irrelevant to God's claim upon every person, and therefore provide no excuse for unbelievers and professing believers to stumble, to reject the faith, or to turn away from it. We emphasize this in order to neutralize some of the problems caused by the false view, which gives our performance before the world a place that it should not possess, and that only God's word possesses.

That said, there are reasons to insist that love, holiness, virtue, good works, and performing actions consistent with our profession are of the utmost importance. First, although in themselves they are excluded from apologetics, they provide materials for some of what we might say when defending the faith. Second, although they excuse no one, it is true that our moral failure, hypocrisy, and inconsistency often become stumbling blocks to others. Instead of providing occasions for them to stumble, we must do all that we can by the grace of God to contribute to their conversion and progress. Third, the most important reason, we practice love and holiness because this is God's command, and this is our true nature as regenerated people. We live our lives before God's presence, and therefore holiness is essential even if our failures would never lead anyone to stumble, or even when no one would know about them.

As we mentioned at the beginning, the university *is* the real world, that is, a part of it. And as part of the real world, it fosters temptations that are common to adults in other circumstances, although they might present themselves in different forms. Spiritual failures and tragedies can happen here just as readily as in a working environment, at the church, or in the home. And the consequences can be just as dire. But then, spiritual triumphs are just as possible and meaningful. Therefore, even without further comment, you can apply all that you have learned from Scripture about our spiritual resources and responsibilities, and the enemies and trials that we face in this world.

At this time, many of you have no need to concern yourself about raising a family or even making a living, but even so, now is the time to practice what Scripture teaches about covetousness, worry, diligence, labor, overspending, saving, and for some, even investment. As an unmarried person, the sin of adultery is not possible for you in the fullest sense, but sexual temptations are very strong at this age and in this setting. Now is the time to learn about the biblical view on sex, to maintain sexual purity, and to prepare your thinking and your character for marriage.

Other common temptations are easy to name.

Even if there are no future applications, academic integrity is important now – again, you are in the real world already, and what you do matters. But there are indeed future applications. We often hear about plagiarism in novels, in non-fiction works, in scientific reports, and so on. Questionable business practices are common, and sometimes become major corporate scandals. People are people – they get more complicated, but they do not

always get better or smarter. Sin plagues all of humanity, and thus the need for the power of Christ is universal.

Cases of drug and alcohol abuse are of course widespread in the university environment. You would think that college material would have better sense, but as I stated, college students are not intelligent, and the fact that they think they are just makes them even more stupid. It would seem that anyone who has enough going on in his mind would do anything to avoid intoxication, or any unnecessary suspension of clear thinking and sober judgment. But when there is nothing much going on in there, self-destruction becomes a form of entertainment.

These are the typical issues that people mention, but it seems that some sins never quite get the attention that they deserve. For example, the Bible stresses speech that is clean, sober, and honest. Read through the Book of Proverbs, and you will see that this is one of the most important lessons Scripture wishes to teach the youngster. Yet the opposite is modeled by parents, friends, television and movies, and popular music. How you talk matters. In fact, even if you are not confronted with other temptations every day, you still need to talk to people, so that holiness in the area of speech should be your constant concern.

Let no dishonesty, vulgarity, and malice come from your mouth. And let a holy terror prevent you from saying anything that implies irreverence toward God, or that can be construed as irreverent. How about gossip? It is also a sin. And it is better to be silent or humorless than to tell coarse jokes, or to be entertained by them. Jokes about God, biblical doctrines, and moral principles are to be avoided.

Some Christians go to great lengths to avoid appearing prudish to unbelievers. To truly accomplish this, however, the Christians must show that they can live just like unbelievers, or that they can have what even unbelievers would call "fun." But this would destroy our own faith and witness rather than contribute to the conversion of others. The truth is that some believers simply wish to indulge in their old lusts, and they use this excuse to appear spiritual and even self-sacrificial at the same time.

Christianity will never be acceptable or interesting to the unregenerate man, and we might as well confront unbelief from this standpoint. That is, instead of trying to show that Christianity is not prudish, it is more productive just to condemn the unbelievers for their licentiousness. In the university, and among young unbelievers, this will mean that Christian students ought to display such moral distinction and superiority that they will at times be mocked and ostracized, if not something more severe. But in exchange, you will be able to speak with a spiritual authority that comes from another world, and that is worthy of the people's attention.

## Questions and Exercises

- What is the definition of apologetics? By definition, what must apologetics include? What does it exclude? Why do we say that holiness is not a part of apologetics *as such*?
- Why do the unbelievers say that actions speak louder than words, and why are they wrong about this? But why do so many believers accept this absurd idea?
- Preacher frequently say, "If you do not practice what you preach, then no one will believe you when you preach the gospel?" Why is this statement false? Why does it even amount to an attack on God, his Spirit, and the gospel? How does this teaching grant unbiblical warrant to the non-Christians to blaspheme the Lord and remain in their unbelief?
- Then, some Christians assert, "We should not argue with people. We should just preach the gospel and then let our actions bear witness to its truth." But if someone is allegedly prevented from faith because of his belief in evolution, how is our holy conduct going to overcome this? Is it even relevant, or is the relevance clear?
- List some of the biblical passages that have been construed to support the idea that actions speak louder than words, or that they speak at all. What are the popular interpretations and applications of these passages, and why are they mistaken? Read them in context. They certainly teach that holy living is important. But do they teach that our holy living *replaces* proclamation – if holiness speaks and speaks *louder*, then it should render preaching unnecessary – or is proclamation so necessary that it is always assumed? The content of proclamation is what defines and judges our actions in the first place.
- If holiness is not an integral or necessary part of apologetics, does it have anything to do with apologetics at all? If so, what is its role? How does holiness contribute to evangelism and apologetics?
- Are hypocrites always wrong in what they affirm? If a person affirms " $1 + 1 = 2$ " but does not act like this is true, then are we to reject the math? Likewise, if hypocrites affirm and preach the gospel, do they discredit the gospel? How are the two things even relevant to each other? Or is the truth of the gospel dependent on man instead of on God?
- It is likely that some people will misunderstand and think that we are undermining the importance of walking in holiness, or ignoring the biblical teaching on providing a model of godly example before Christians and non-Christians. But is this what we are doing? How does this accusation miss the point? And what is our point?
- When you hear of a church scandal, or news that a church leader has fallen into sin, what thoughts and feelings arise from within you? Are these thoughts and feelings biblical and rational? Does the Bible teach that these things will never happen, so that

when they do, they undermine Christianity? But if the Bible says that we should expect these things, then why is it a problem when they happen?

- Sometimes the blame is even more irrelevant, or at least irrelevant in other ways. Catholic priests are exposed, and the revenue in Baptist churches would fall. A scandal breaks out with a Charismatic leader, and Presbyterian churches suffer in attendance. A problem occurs with a church down the street, and members of another congregation stops giving to their own church. Why does this happen? What is wrong with the people? Should we work on eliminating hypocrisy, or condemning irrational and sinful reactions against hypocrisy? I suggest that we should do both. Do you agree?
- But just because our moral failures give no excuse to the unbelievers does not mean that we are in turn excused when we cause others to stumble. We acknowledge what the Bible teaches on the subject, but stop short of making unwarranted inferences from it. Have you ever contributed to another person's spiritual stumbling? What does the Bible say about that?
- What temptations do you face as a student? List some of the most prominent ones. How do you deal with them? Do you frequently succumb? Why? What can you do about them? How do your Christian friends deal with them? Do you put yourself in situations where these temptations occur?
- What are some of the neglected sins that frequently occur? The chapter mentions sinful speech. Do you often sin in how you speak and what you say? Give examples, and consider ways to overcome sinful patterns.
- What about sexual integrity and dating in the university? Is dating biblical? What is dating? Do you only date someone you plan to marry? If not, you are deliberately pursuing a temporary romantic relationship with someone else's future spouse. Does this change how you approach the situation?
- Much of the inefficiencies in the office environment are caused by slothful and incompetent people, who have carried over these characteristics from their lives as students. Note the poor work ethic and incompetence of your peers, especially as you work on group projects. How do you deal with problem partners now? Consider what it means to have a godly work ethic. List details and examples.
- Do you think that Christianity is prudish, or can it be fun? Fun according to what standard? And is this how the Bible describe Christianity? Is it more biblical to make our faith appear consistent with the non-Christian standard of fun, or to condemn the non-Christian standard of fun? What does the Bible do in this regard? What do Christians tend to do today? Why do they do it?

## CONCLUSION

We began by noting that, although the university is a place of preparation for what comes after, it is not only a place of preparation. What students do there can have immediate, significant, and sometimes permanent ramifications. This also means that the university is not a place for spiritual experimentation, or trial and error. It is a place not only for learning, but for doing. You must not only practice, but you must perform. It is not just a place where you learn to do things right, but where you must actually do things right. This is "real" life. A conversion is just as real when it happens in the university as when it happens elsewhere. And the same can be said of apostasy. Positively, this imparts significance and meaning to all that you do even though you are still a student. Negatively, it means that there is no excuse for failure, and that when it happens, there is a price to pay.

We also mentioned that major transitions in our lives force us to reevaluate our priorities. Those who are short-sighted and earthly-minded give preeminence to the new challenges that come into their lives when these transitions occur. Old habits, even good ones, are sometimes abandoned for new ones that we consider expedient. This is one reason why professing believers sometimes backslide from the faith when they enter college, the workforce, or new relationships. However, if our faith is the one constant that we maintain at the center of our lives, then whatever changes occur around it will not affect our priorities, but we will immediately evaluate them in relation to our faith, and consider how our faith can advance in the midst of these new circumstances.

This brings us to another important point. We should not focus on merely maintaining our faith in the university, or in any other situation in which God places us. Our purpose must be to glorify God, to grow in faith, and to advance the kingdom. It is not enough to resist the negative influences of the university, but we must seek to influence it by the wisdom and power of Christ. To do this, we must take aggressive measures to undermine its anti-Christian foundation and introduce to it the light of the gospel. Like many other institutions, the university has a well-established social and political structure, but that is its only strength. It possesses no spiritual or intellectual power by which it can resist Christian ideas.

The same can be said about any other environment. A Christian in the workplace is not just an employee trying to stay a Christian. No, he is a Christian assigned to infiltrate the workplace both to promote his own spiritual growth and to advance the cause of Christ. This is no less true for the Christian housewife. After all, the housewife is in the "real" world, and what she does matters.

Finally, although we have focused on only a few things, the changes that occur for a student include more than the obvious points concerning spirituality and academics. He must also consider his relationships, finances, health, diet, sleep, and so on. As we cannot cover every area here, we must refer the reader to our other materials, encourage his own study and reflection, and commend him to the grace of God.



## **4. HUMAN STRUGGLE AND DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY**

This article is my answer to a Christian who wrote to me about some struggles he has been experiencing in association with his belief in the doctrine of divine sovereignty. The precise nature of his problem will become evident once you begin reading, so I will not take time to summarize or explain it here.

I begin by presenting an altered version of what he wrote to me. The changes include the following:

1. I have combined paragraphs from three messages into one. Only eight sentences were taken from the first and the third, and attached to the beginning and the end of the second message.
2. I have excluded several small sections. These consist of comments and details that do not affect the meaning and the thrust of his message, and my reply does not refer to them directly.
3. I have changed the personal information included in the original messages, such as the names of this person and his wife. This is done to protect their privacy. Since this person's spiritual struggles and the events in his life are not unique, it seems unnecessary to alter other aspects of his message.

One other relevant piece of information is that this person had already received competent counsel from a pastor on this matter, but he would say at every point, "Yes, but God determines everything," "If God wills, then I will do this thing that I ought to do," or "If God wills, then he will change this in my life, so why doesn't he?" It is with this kind of mentality that he wrote to me.

Vincent,

I need to talk to someone who will understand what I am going through presently. In short, I am overwhelmed by the reality of God's sovereignty. Now, let me try and explain what that means.

First of all, I completely embrace the truth that God is sovereign over all things, everywhere, at all times. He controls the thoughts of men, the actions of men, and every single thing that happens in this world since before time ever was as we know it. He is all in all. This, as a theological reality, is something I have no problem acknowledging and embracing as a truth.

My wife cannot have children. I say this knowing that God is sovereign over the womb. So if He has so foreordained that Jill has children, then she will do so. But from a medical perspective, the reality is that she cannot have children. She has the strongest of desires for a big family. She weeps at night. I lay awake at night holding my wife as she cries over the fact that she cannot have children. And as I lay there I consider the countless little girls, teenage girls, and women who have abortions, throw babies into dumpsters, or simply neglect their children and I think...how can this be?

Now, someone will say, "Jack, God works all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose." I can acknowledge this as a theological reality. But it doesn't help when you feel your wife shaking with grief and pain. Someone will say, "Jack, you just need to trust the Lord and be obedient to Him regardless of emotion." I can agree with this as well. It still does not help alleviate the intense frustration, pain, and sorrow. And at the end of the day I think to myself, "God is sovereign. He could cause Jill to bear children. All of this could stop."

In addition to this, I cannot escape patterns of sin in my life. Brother, I know that with God all things are possible. And I also know that we are exhorted in the Scriptures to flee from sin and cling to the precepts of our Lord. And yet I find myself falling back into old patterns of sin at times in my life. So I fight for freedom. I tell someone whatever it is that is going on, i.e. thinking about my past, dealing with the lust of the eyes, and so forth. I have someone hold me accountable. I put forth extra effort to meditate upon the things of the Lord. And yet the inward battle never subsides. It is day in and day out, it seems. Once again I think to myself, "God is sovereign – totally and completely. Why does He not remove this pathetic sickness from me once and for all!"

Yes, positionally I am in Christ, and Christ is in me. I am washed clean by the blood of the spotless Lamb. And I can also acknowledge that even the foreordination of my sinfulness glorifies God in His grand plan. But Vincent, I absolutely detest sin in myself. I do not want sin in my life

any longer. So the reality of what God could do, but does not do, is hard for me to deal with.

A third thing that plagues my thoughts is the Church. It breaks my heart to see the things that I see within the Body. I read in the Scriptures what the Body is supposed to be, how She is supposed to act, and what the will of the Lord is for His precious Bride. Yet I look around me, see the things I see on television, and glance through the racks of books on the shelves of the local Christian bookstore and I think, "Father, why?" And so again I find myself wondering why all of this has been ordained (not allowed) to happen.

I don't deem myself so grand that God would owe me an answer. He does not owe me anything. I do not think myself so wise as to assume I should have an answer. Quite honestly I do not assume or think anything at all. I just find myself in a very bad place because of the nonstop roller-coaster of thinking that goes on. It is relentless.

Brother, I am tired. I am so very tired. I no longer want to pray. I think, why do it? Yes, I may be praying concurrently with the will of God, but in the grand scheme of things what does this really matter? Does my prayer change anything? I cannot believe that it does. What God has ordained IS going to happen, regardless of whether or not I pray. And if I do not pray, isn't that non prayer ordained? If I pray, isn't that ordained?

I agree also that my need right now is the ability to simply apply the truth rather than just having a knowledge of it. The irony of it is that the ability to simply apply the truth is under the control of the sovereignty of our Lord. So if He wills it, then I will do it.

Jack

Jack,

As I mentioned, since your difficulty requires not only informing you of the right doctrines, but leading you to believe and apply them aright, my usual prescription would entail a program of extensive sessions of counseling for spiritual assessment and for radical realignment of the mind to conform to biblical teachings.

However, since this is not possible at this time, a written response will have to suffice. That said, given your condition, a very short answer might be only a little better than none at all. Therefore, although I intended to provide a simple reply at first, I have since decided that a full-length article is needed.

### **Introduction**

I must begin with an explanation of my approach. This will help you understand my concerns and motives as I write my answer to you. This section is indispensable, since it will prepare you to understand and perhaps even accept what I will say to you in the body of my reply. So please give it the same attention that you will to the rest of the article. In fact, if you have ears to hear, this introductory section would be sufficient to deliver you, but I will give you more.

Although I cannot agree with your thinking, I initially resolved to construct an answer so characterized with gentleness that you would be moved to the truth by the show of compassion. However, because of your current pattern of thinking, I soon realized that anything other than a head-on confrontation with it would only be met with more of the same: "Yes, you are right, and I will do it if God causes me to," "Yes, I agree, and it is now up to God to make me this way," and similar statements. Because you claim to be familiar with some of my writings on the subject of divine sovereignty, I cannot assume that a gentle reminder of the same would make a difference, especially since it seems that others have already tried to do this. Our correspondence would then be a waste of my time and effort, and more importantly, it would reinforce your desperation and hopelessness, as well as your unbelief and rebellion.

As I pondered this matter, the Lord abolished my resolve to hold back a full display of your error for the sake of comfort and amiability; instead, "his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay" (Jeremiah 20:9, KJV). He is against the false prophets who lead people astray, who proclaim "peace" to one who feeds them, and wage war against one who does not. The Scripture says concerning them, "They will all cover their faces because there is no answer from God" – they do not have the answer that you seek. "But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin" (Micah 3:5-8).

Scripture instructs us to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). Under the tutelage of Satan, many Christians have reduced this love to mean the use of nonabrasive words spoken in an effeminate tone, although in their hypocrisy, they would lash out at anyone who thinks that love means something else. The verse is telling us to speak the truth to people because we love them, and not that we should do it in such a feeble manner that we might as well not say anything. Indeed, in helping people to become "sound in the faith," sometimes we must "rebuke them sharply" (Titus 1:13). The false interpretation of Ephesians 4:15 would render it unacceptable to practice Titus 1:13 on any occasion – it would make the Bible contradict itself. Thus biblical inerrancy itself is compromised when Christians adopt the world's idea of love and hold it as a nonnegotiable definition in exegesis.

"Better is open rebuke than hidden love" (Proverbs 27:5). Love is bold to speak the truth in open rebuke for the benefit of someone who needs the correction. Each time I speak this way to a person, I risk losing his respect and support, but I will do it because I love him. "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18), so if I withhold correction from someone because I fear what he will think about me, then my love toward him is imperfect. But if my love toward this person is pure and strong, then I will speak the correction that he needs regardless of the possibility that his perception of me might change for the worse when he hears it.

We may take an analogy from Proverbs 13:24, which says, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him." Love requires even the use of physical violence when it comes to parenting. If we are ashamed of God, he will be ashamed of us (Mark 8:38). So let us not make some artificial distinction between discipline and violence in this context. It is discipline by the use of controlled violence against the body. God says that if you refuse to do this, then it is evidence that you hate your child.

Likewise, those who reduce love to something akin to social courtesy in fact hate those that they claim to love and to help. Their definition permits them to replace love with mere politeness so that they can feel like they are good and compassionate people without possessing the genuine spiritual virtue, and without risking the loss of resource, respect, and reputation that comes with the exercise of self-sacrificial love. These people love only themselves. Their false definition of love produces a façade that covers up their hatred against God and other people. This devious method generates a confusion that allows them to live in hate but boast of love.

I have never wrestled with the problems that you struggle with. Until I witnessed it in Christians, it never occurred to me that anyone would take the attitude with God that you currently hold. I knew better even before I was converted. And I thank God that he has never allowed me to blaspheme him whether in thought or in speech, and whether by assertion or implication, the way that you blaspheme him now.

However, just because I have never experienced your oppressed mental condition does not mean that I am unable to help you. In fact, I am in a very good position to deliver God's

answer to you. You might find much of what I say harsh, offensive, and insulting. I will say that you are wrong in your attitude, that you are mistaken in your understanding. But this should be good news to you, since if your problem is due to your error, then there is something you can do about it. And given that there is a solution in God's word for every spiritual error, the fact you are in error is a basis for hope. If you are already perfect in every way, then there would be nothing that I can say to you. So my word of rebuke and correction should not incite anger or desperation in you, but expectation for positive change.

Human compassion is deceptive and impotent. When we set that up as the standard of judgment, even God will appear to lack sympathy. People cry, "The love of God! The love of God!" and resist my message because I refuse to submit to their humanistic idea of love, a definition that they have imposed on the Christian faith. But it is God who says to Jeremiah, "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). This prophet was undergoing trials and confronting dangers that were much more serious than yours, but this was God's answer to him: "If you cannot even take this, what will happen to you when it gets worse?" Where is the compassion? If the Lord has any compassion, it is certainly not of the humanistic sort.

Likewise, Jesus expected his disciples to trust God even in the face of a life-threatening storm, so that when they were fearful, he rebuked them, saying, "Where is your faith?" (Luke 8:25). Where is the sympathy? Where is the gentleness? But Jesus is nothing like the effeminate preacher that many believers proclaim. They worship an idol of their own creation, an offspring of a marriage between biblical and heathen thought. Of course I will not submit to such a thing, but I will condemn it with confidence and authority, in the name and spirit of Christ, with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me (Colossians 1:29). Contemporary Christians disapprove because they have been taught by the traditions of man and not by the doctrines of God. They do not know him, and they judge his methods and his servants by the evil standards of this world.

Even if I were to stop here, I would have already answered all the points that you raised. That is, Jeremiah 12:5 and Luke 8:25 should be more than sufficient, and many people would not get more than this from the Lord. Indeed, this would be enough to satisfy some people, those who submit and respond to even the smallest revelation from heaven as their most prized treasure. These are they who do not say, "Why doesn't God do it this way? Why do I have to put up with this? Why does he cause this or that? I know he can change this if he wants to, so why doesn't he?" All this comes from the spirit of unbelief and rebellion.

Perhaps you will say to me, "But you do not understand what I am going through." Well! You do not understand what Jeremiah was going through, either, and his problems were much worse than yours. Yet God reprimanded him, and called him to a stronger faith. And you are not facing, as the disciples were, a fierce storm that threatens to take you life in a few minutes time. Yet Jesus rebuked them for their lack of faith. So guess what God's attitude is toward you right now?

In any case, I do not need to understand what you are going through, because Jesus understands what you are going through, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). You are the one who will have to live with the consequences of making more excuses. I am happy and satisfied in the Lord, and I can show you how to attain the same thing, if you will listen. Rather than making excuses and putting up resistance, it is better to pray for ears to hear, and accept what truth there is in what I now bring to you.

I admit that I lack a complete perspective on your situation. I am aware of my lack of information. But I am not ignorant of God's word, and I am not ignorant of what you said to me, although I assume you told me only a little about what is on your mind and what is happening in your life. So, if you can believe me, I am less judgmental of you than I appear, but I am responding to what you said, the way you said it, and the implications of these two. And just as Paul writes, "I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus be cursed'" (1 Corinthians 12:3), one who is speaking by the Holy Spirit will not dare speak or imply some of the things that you have said. Accordingly, one who is speaking by the Spirit of God can never condone them.

There is one who judges you, but I am not the one. So even if it seems that I have misunderstood you in what follows, even if you insist that you are not as bad as I make you appear, there is no need to defend yourself to me. I am certain that I am essentially correct in my assessment, since it takes a certain kind of sinful mentality to entertain some of the thoughts that you revealed to me. It is not that your faults are unique, but just because they are common does not make them any less evil. It is rather alarming that more than a few professing believers think like you do, and this either results in their rejection of the biblical doctrine of divine sovereignty, or as in your case, in their turning the doctrine into an unbearable burden and a basis for blasphemy once they claim to have accepted it.

I will address the effects of your current way of thinking, and point out the assumptions behind the things that you said as well as their implications. You may deny that you intended these assumptions and implications, but you cannot deny their effects, since you are the one who shared them with me, and you cannot deny the assumptions and implications associated with them if the logical relationship is demonstrated. You might not be aware of all your intentions, but once their effects are made obvious, perhaps you will be moved to examine and admit to them.

I believe I am correct, or I would not be saying what I say to you. And I must describe the situation as severely as I perceive it; otherwise, I would not be telling you what I really think, and I would not be offering you the help that you asked for. In any case, whether you consider my assessment correct or incorrect, in the end you are the one who has to live with the consequences of accepting or rejecting what I say.

Proceeding to the content of what you said to me, one notable characteristic common to the issues you raised is that I have already answered them in my writings. Our previous

interactions had given me the impression that you had read and agreed with much of them, if not all. But if you had accepted them, you would have never raised these issues with me, or at least not in the way and in the form in which you stated them. So the possibilities are that you have never in fact read much of my works (so that you have never read the answers), that you have forgotten what you have read (so that all you need to do is to review), that you have never accepted them (although you have given no indication as to where you would disagree with me and your reason for the disagreement), and/or that you have failed to apply them when it comes to your own life and your own thinking (and it is strange and disappointing that there is no indication that you have applied my works to your problems to any extent).

As for that which disturbs you, a large part of it is nothing other than a variation of the so-called problem of evil. In its usual expression, this objection against Christianity has been answered long ago by me and at least a few others. I address it in my article, "The Problem of Evil." Among other things, I have shown that the objection itself is so incoherent that it is refuted even before we finish reading it. As an argument against the Christian faith, "If God, then why evil?" cannot be expressed in a manner that can be logically understood.

Your problem is not identical to the atheistic argument, but certain facets of it are the same. So if you will review the answer to it, you will see that all your questions make no sense. At some point an arbitrary premise is introduced, or an assumption is held without acknowledgement or justification. As with the problem, so is the solution. If the general problem is that your thinking makes no sense, then the general solution is that you should stop thinking this way. The solution is to stop your irrational thinking rather than to give you an answer that will satisfy it.

The same is true regarding your understanding and application of God's sovereignty. From our previous interactions, I know you agree that appeals to human freedom, to mystery, to apparent contradictions, or to compatibilism are all erroneous and misleading. These are false answers to the issues you raised. Nevertheless, if you had read and accepted my expositions on the subject, you would have never said the things that you said. The problem is not with God, but conflict and confusion occur because you hold some central assumptions and follow patterns of thinking that are unbiblical and irrational.

Besides having addressed the broad problem of evil, I have also given specific answers to each of the items you mentioned. Spread throughout my writings are answers to your problems with divine sovereignty and the relationship that the doctrine holds with specific issues in life. First, my expositions on divine sovereignty are more than enough to address your wife's condition, including your duty as a husband. You can be sure that the response of a loving husband – one who truly loves God and loves his wife – is not to say to God that he can change it but does not. My *Biblical Healing* is a supplement to the expositions on divine sovereignty, applying it to human infirmities. Then, in several places I have addressed the reason for the divine decree for the existence of false doctrines and practices in the church, and for false religions and cults. And I addressed the topic again recently in my article, "The Invincible Church." As for the meaningfulness of prayer given the fact of divine sovereignty, I have addressed this in my *Prayer and Revelation*, as well as in several



other places. You should review these works, as well as those writings that gives special attention to divine sovereignty, such as my *Commentary on Ephesians* and *The Author of Sin*.

In what follows I will avoid telling you, "You should already know this. You should already know this." I will say it here, and then I will not to repeat it too often. Indeed, if you had been paying attention, then all your questions should have been answered a long time ago, and you would be helping others rather than needing help yourself. There is a place to say, "I do not have the answer, but I will pray with you." But this is not for me to say, because I do have the answer – all of it. I have the answer because God's word has the answer, and in what follows I will give it to you again. You might respond as you said about a verse of Scripture, "I can acknowledge this as a theological reality. But it doesn't help when you feel your wife shaking with grief and pain." I am not deceived by this pious talk, and I will answer it in a moment. For now also note that the answer might not "help" not only because you have what you consider compassion toward your wife, but it will also fail to "help" if you have an evil heart of unbelief, refusing to combine the word of God with faith (Hebrews 4:2).

So you might not like the answer I am about to give you. This introduction alone might be more than you can take. But it is my responsibility to present the answer, not to make you like it. And I have the answer. I have it right here. This is it. It will deliver you if you will listen. You can accept it and live a joyful and productive life in God, or reject it and perish in your unbelief and despair. You might say, "I will listen if it is God's will, for he foreordains all things." I will answer even this ungodly excuse – in itself the statement is true, but you say it in a manner and in a context that it is used as an excuse for wickedness and rebellion.

Even though I speak this way, I wish you to know that I care about you. I am for you, not against you. But that I am for you means that I must give you God's word on the matter, and not what will make you feel better at the expense of God's truth and honor. I could dismiss you with a few sentences, or refer you to my writings, and I would have given you a true answer. But I have not done that, so that the length of this answer is itself a testimony to the fact that I care about you. Nevertheless, it could be even longer, since there are many things that I can say, but I cannot say them all so that I must be selective. From my perspective – that is, compared to all that I can say about each item – I will barely touch on each point before proceeding to the next one. So I urge you to think on these things, and the Lord will make up the deficiency and give you understanding (2 Timothy 2:7).

This introduction concludes with a warning. I will give you God's answer in what follows. Insofar as what I say comes from and accords with God's revelation, your response to it is also your response toward God himself. And this means that you cannot remain unaffected by it. If you harden your heart and refuse to accept the answer, your condition will take a fast turn for the worse. At the least it will expose the wickedness that is already in your heart, so that you can pretend no longer. And if you remain in your current rebellion, it will have to be much more deliberate than before. As 2 Peter 2:21 says, "It would have been

better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them."

On a personal level, my answer to you might destroy our relationship. It could be that I will become your enemy by telling you the truth (Galatians 4:16). However, my first concern is with God's honor. Your attitude and thinking dishonor the Lord, so that it is necessary for my answer to include a strong element of rebuke and correction. It is with much compassion toward you that I write the following, but I write with much more jealousy for God's honor, that his name and his doctrine be not blasphemed or made into objects of mockery and scorn. So with this in mind, I am not afraid of offending you. You can do nothing to hurt me, nothing that matters. And this is your problem, your life. I know I risk losing your respect, support, and friendship, but these things are completely worthless to me compared to the pleasure of God and the vindication of his name.

### **Human Infirmary and Divine Sovereignty**

About your wife's condition, you wrote, "My wife cannot have children. I say this knowing that God is sovereign over the womb. So if He has so foreordained that Jill has children, then she will do so." This is correct as far as it goes, or when taken by itself. But the latter part of the paragraph suggests that there is a false attitude behind it. We will deal with that directly in a moment, but since I cannot assume that your attitude behind this first part is correct, I must mention a few things.

First, does the Bible prescribe this reaction, this attitude? You have stated the metaphysical truth behind the situation, but you have also taken it as your stance toward the situation as a Christian. Are there biblical precepts telling you how to react in some other way?

You have taken God's decree – not the decree itself, since that is not known, but the principle that things occur by God's decree – as the basis and content of your reaction. But the Bible says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29). God revealed his law for you to follow, but your attitude toward the situation appeals to his secret decree. You apply the principle of divine sovereignty to every item that you mentioned to me, but the above only begins to show that your understanding of the doctrine is defective and unbiblical. You cannot trust your application of it. You either refuse to apply it correctly – I will offer some possible reasons for this – or you do not know how in the first place, although I have taught this over and over again.

One of the many precepts that apply to this situation is persistent prayer (Luke 18:1-8). Jesus 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?" (v. 7-8). The question is not God's justice, as the latter part of your paragraph indirectly alleges, but whether you have any faith at all (or as implied in verse 7, whether you are even one of his chosen ones). And according to the passage, if you have faith, you would persist in

prayer. Have you been persisting in prayer? Apparently not, or you would not speak this way about the situation.

How have you been praying for your wife? If you have been saying to God what you said to me, then the best gift he could give you is a strong rebuke – much like what I am giving you now. God answers prayer for healing. As Genesis 25:21 says, "Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant." But as it is, your soul is as barren as your wife's womb.

You continued, "I lay awake at night holding my wife as she cries over the fact that she cannot have children. And as I lay there I consider the countless little girls, teenage girls, and women who have abortions, throw babies into dumpsters, or simply neglect their children and I think...how can this be?"

Wait a minute, you present yourself as someone who makes a pervasive application of God's sovereignty over all things, but here you make a comparison between you and these other people based on God's precepts. You rightly judge their behavior as sinful, but you can only do that by using God's precepts as the reference point for your thinking. And you judge your own intention as non-sinful, if not even noble, but again, you can only do that by using God's precepts as the reference point.

Then you lament, "How can this be?" Since the comparison is based on God's moral principles, and since by this reference point these people are morally inferior to you, and since you affirm that whether someone can have children is based on God's sovereignty, it necessarily means that your frustration is based on your belief that you *deserve* better treatment from God than what you have been getting. You think that God sovereignly gives to sinners what he should give to you. You question him on the basis that you are better than these other people.

This reeks of self-righteousness. You are like the older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son. He says, "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'" (Luke 15:28-30).

The story does not correspond exactly to your situation, but it would if these sinners you talk about repent and come to Christ. And those who do will probably have a better attitude than you do about life and about God. As it is, whether these other people repent, you sound just like the self-righteous brother: "Look! I desire children and intend to raise them well, but you refuse to grant me any. But these sinners squander their ability to have children, even abandoning them and killing them, yet you bless them with fertility! How can this be?"

When I mentioned that you should apply the truth, you replied, "The irony of it is that the ability to simply apply the truth is under the control of the sovereignty of our Lord. So if He wills it, then I will do it." But you did not say that about these sinners, did you? Hey, did you? You judge them by appealing to God's precept, but excuse yourself by appealing to God's decree. Do you see it? You are a hypocrite. Now if you also judge them by God's decree, then your comparison is destroyed, and you can no longer ask, "How can this be?" And if you also judge yourself by God's precepts, as you judge these sinners, then you can no longer excuse yourself from obeying these precepts by appealing to God's sovereignty.

You complain that others have what you do not have, but are you thankful for what you already have? If you are, there is no indication of it in what you said to me. With such a bad attitude, what would you do if you had children? Would you pass on your resentful and self-righteous attitude to them? Would it be altogether unreasonable to wonder if these children are better off dead, as those born to the sinners, than to be raised by someone like you? But I will spare you this point.

What I will not spare you of, on the other hand, is the question of whether you have been a good husband, since you are already one. Do you even love your wife? Of course you think you do, but does this love result in rebellion, resentment, and disagreement against God? Or does this love result in an earnest call for your wife to follow after God's teachings? Does this love compel you to fill your wife with faith, with love, with hope? Does this love compel you to affirm God's goodness to your wife? Or have you been telling her what you said to me, and filling her heart with the same bitter hypocrisy and self-righteousness? Do you defend her against God, or do you defend God before her? If the latter, do you do it sincerely? If so, then why do you even need to talk to me, unless you do not mean what you say?

Laying aside for the moment the possibility of healing through prayer, what if God has something different or better for you and your wife? What if it is merely a matter of time? What if he wants you to abandon the desire to have your own biological children so that you can adopt those who have been abandoned, or otherwise would have been killed, or raised as sinners and criminals? What if he wants you to be part of the solution for these sinners that you have been complaining about? What if he wants you to give up having children so that you could spend more time in ministry, and in bringing up spiritual children? Or is the justice of the situation measured only by what you and your wife desire?

Can you not pass this simple test of faith? How about your attitude toward the test itself? Do you value it or despise it? Job says, "But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). Do you want that, or do you want children? Do you want that for your wife, or do you just want her to be pleased and complacent? Then, James tells us, "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). Do you want a faith that is genuine and tested? Do you want perseverance? Do you want spiritual maturity and fullness in God? Or do you want God to just hand over what you want so that you can be happy without having to undergo tests and

trials? Yes, you claim to believe in God's absolute sovereignty. Your problem is that you disagree with how he uses it. But that makes you no better than Satan (James 2:19). You claim to perceive divine sovereignty as a reality, but your complaints show that you dislike it. You want to have things your way.

Awake! Listen! Humble yourself and pay attention, and you will have your answer. Here is God's word to you (Psalm 73, emphasis added):

Surely God is good to Israel,  
to those who are pure in heart.

**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.**

They have no struggles;  
their bodies are healthy and strong.  
They are free from the burdens common to man;  
they are not plagued by human ills.  
Therefore pride is their necklace;  
they clothe themselves with violence.  
From their callous hearts comes iniquity;  
the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.  
They scoff, and speak with malice;  
in their arrogance they threaten oppression.  
Their mouths lay claim to heaven,  
and their tongues take possession of the earth.  
Therefore their people turn to them  
and drink up waters in abundance.  
They say, "How can God know?  
Does the Most High have knowledge?"

This is what the wicked are like –  
always carefree, they increase in wealth.

Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure;  
in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.  
All day long I have been plagued;  
I have been punished every morning.

If I had said, "I will speak thus,"  
I would have betrayed your children.  
**When I tried to understand all this,  
it was oppressive to me  
till I entered the sanctuary of God;**

**then I understood their final destiny.**

**Surely you place them on slippery ground;  
you cast them down to ruin.**

How suddenly are they destroyed,  
completely swept away by terrors!

As a dream when one awakes,  
so when you arise, O Lord,  
you will despise them as fantasies.

**When my heart was grieved  
and my spirit embittered,  
I was senseless and ignorant;  
I was a brute beast before you.**

Yet I am always with you;  
you hold me by my right hand.  
You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will take me into glory.

**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.**

**Those who are far from you will perish;  
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.  
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.**

You are slipping because of the prosperity of the wicked (v. 2), but the truth is that God has placed them on slippery ground so that they will be destroyed (v. 18-19). When you are grieved and embittered by how God exercises his sovereignty (v. 21), then you are being senseless and ignorant, as a brute beast (v. 22). The question is whether you are numbered among the wicked in the first place. Can you say, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you" (v. 25)? If you are far from God and unfaithful to him, you will be destroyed (v. 27), but if God is the strength of your heart (v. 26), then you will say, "I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge" – not as you now say, "if he wills it, then I will do it." This is his word to one who is in your situation, one who is oppressed by thoughts concerning the prosperity of the wicked. How will you respond? Will you accept it without making excuses?

Then, you wrote, "Now, someone will say, 'Jack, God works all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.' I can acknowledge this

as a theological reality. But it doesn't help when you feel your wife shaking with grief and pain." Why?! Why does it not help? As you should know, it is not just any "someone" who says this, but Paul wrote it down by the infallible inspiration of God.

If we turn to Romans 8 to observe the context, there is no reason why the verse should not help. Before the verse in question, Paul says, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (v. 18). So he is talking about "our present sufferings." Verse 28 gives us the statement under discussion: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Then, he says, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (v. 31), and applies this in the face of trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword, death, life, angels, demons, the present, the future, powers, height, depth, and "anything else in all creation" (v. 35, 38-39). And you have the gall to claim that you "acknowledge this" but "it doesn't help." Paul applies it to some very "present" (v. 18) problems like persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, or even the sword (v. 35). But in the face of your wife's shaking, "it doesn't help." That must be some strong tremor!

You are a liar (Romans 3:4). You do not in fact "acknowledge this as a theological reality." What you probably acknowledge is that you *ought to* "acknowledge this as a theological reality." You believe that you *ought to* believe it, but you do not in fact believe it. The other possibility is worse – it is that you do not love God, and that you are not called to his purpose. If you are an unbeliever, a non-Christian, then of course verse 28 does not help you. But this is between you and God. You claim to be a Christian, and for now I will treat you as such. Therefore, in the context of this discussion, there is no reason why verse 28 should not help you. What you say here is blasphemy against God's word, and it is pure rubbish.

Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12). Now imagine some idiot who says, "I acknowledge this as a theological reality, but it doesn't help when people actually insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you." Well, why does Jesus say it then? It ought to help, because that is why he says it. He says that in the face of insult, persecution, and slander, we should "rejoice and be glad" – we have to *do it*, actually rejoice and be glad, and not just say we believe it but that it does not help. And rather than making excuses, the apostles did it: "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:41).

Paul writes, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Now imagine some idiot who says, "I acknowledge this as a theological reality, but it doesn't help when you have done something wrong and you feel guilty about it." But it should help, because it is directly applicable to sin and guilt. If it does not help someone, then he does not in fact acknowledge it as a theological reality, or any kind of reality. Similarly, 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess

our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." He is a liar who says that he believes this but that it does not help.

When Paul pleaded with the Lord to remove from him a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan, the Lord replied, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). Now imagine if Paul had talked back to the Lord, "I acknowledge that as a theological reality, but it doesn't help when that thorn is poking at my side." He would be a moron. He would sound like you. But unlike you, he truly believed it and acted accordingly: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (v. 9-10).

Consider Joseph. He was betrayed by his own brothers and sold to a foreign land. Then he was falsely accused of a shameful crime and cast into prison. Now imagine if he had said, "I acknowledge my dream about my rise to power as a prophetic reality, but it doesn't help when you are rotting in a prison with no way out." If that had been his attitude, then in what sense did he acknowledge his dream as any kind of reality? He would have seen it as an unreality. But he was faithful and maintained a good attitude, and the Lord blessed him where he was. And all things indeed worked for his good. His brothers' betrayal sent him to the place where he would rise to power. And the false accusation against him, which sent him to prison, positioned him at the very place where he needed to be to gain Pharaoh's attention. Each tragedy was a shortcut to success and destiny.

Ah, but your problem is so great that all this does not help you. Pitiful! What has happened? You have deceived yourself: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22). You are a liar, and you have accepted your own lie.

Do I really need to deal with this other thing that you said? "Someone will say, 'Jack, you just need to trust the Lord and be obedient to Him regardless of emotion.' I can agree with this as well. It still does not help alleviate the intense frustration, pain, and sorrow. And at the end of the day I think to myself, 'God is sovereign. He could cause Jill to bear children. All of this could stop.'" Irreverent. Pathetic. No, you do not agree with it. You do not believe that you should trust the Lord and be obedient to him – or perhaps you believe that you *should*, as even the demons would, but like the demons you do not in fact trust and obey him; otherwise, it would indeed alleviate the frustration, pain, and sorrow.

You have the attitude, "God can end this suffering, but he does not." In other words, "God can obey me. God can bow to me and perform all my will, but he does not." And this frustrates you, causes you pain and sorrow. You may acknowledge it as a "theological reality" that he is God, and that he is sovereign, but you do not like it. You do not approve of what he does as God. You think he is withholding good things from you, but Jesus says, "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11). The only way that this can be a "theological reality" that "doesn't help" is if he is not your Father at all. There is not one thankful word in what you said to me about your situation.



It is all about how God has wronged you. In comparison to your blasphemy, your wife's barrenness is the least of your problems.

### **Human Depravity and Divine Sovereignty**

Then you proceeded to talk about the battle with sin in your life, and how when considered in relation to the sovereignty of God on the matter, it leads to frustration. You wrote:

I cannot escape patterns of sin in my life. Brother, I know that with God all things are possible. And I also know that we are exhorted in the Scriptures to flee from sin and cling to the precepts of our Lord. And yet I find myself "falling" back into old patterns of sin at times in my life. So I fight for freedom. I tell someone whatever it is that is going on, i.e. thinking about my past, dealing with the lust of the eyes, and so forth. I have someone hold me accountable. I put forth extra effort to meditate upon the things of the Lord. And yet the inward battle never subsides. It is day in and day out, it seems. Once again I think to myself, "God is sovereign – totally and completely. Why does He not remove this pathetic sickness from me once and for all!"

Yes, positionally I am in Christ, and Christ is in me. I am washed clean by the blood of the spotless Lamb. And I can also acknowledge that even the foreordination of my sinfulness glorifies God in His grand plan. But Vincent, I absolutely detest sin in myself. I do not want sin in my life any longer. So the reality of what God could do, but does not do, is hard for me to deal with.

The "difficulty" with this is that it is so easy for me to answer. Should I follow a logical outline that organizes my response by topic, or should I address what you say here with a chronological outline that organizes the principles and examples as they occurred throughout the history of salvation? Either arrangement could produce a book-length exposition, since there is so much about this in Scripture. I shall have to restrict myself to only a few points.

What is striking in what you wrote is that it is as if you have no understanding of God's sovereignty at all beyond the fact that he controls everything. As it is, it seems that you do not even like the doctrine – it makes your life miserable. But still you proceed to fake a comprehensive application of it – I did not say "make" but "fake," because your application is arbitrary rather than comprehensive, as demonstrated in the hypocrisy with which you judge some sinners who can bear children. One thing that you need to do is to face your pride and acknowledge that your understanding of this doctrine is in fact inferior, partial, and distorted.

You did mention that there is a "grand plan," and that even your sins and failures must be a part of it. But instead of integrating this into your application of divine sovereignty to generate a fuller perspective on the issue, you had only your tiny agenda in mind: "So the

reality of what God could do, but does not do, is hard for me to deal with." What happened to the "reality" of the "grand plan"? It is not up to you to uphold or ignore an essential aspect of a biblical doctrine just because it is convenient for you at the moment or because you want to make a point.

This is especially relevant because you are so fond of asking "why." Does it have something to do with the "grand plan"? But you gave it no opportunity. "Why?" seems to be your consistent response to divine sovereignty, and your use of it is deceptive, perhaps unintentionally so. We understand that "why" can be a morally neutral adverb in a proposition that requests information or explanation. But it can also be used to indicate disapproval and impatience toward a certain state of affair. Sometimes both can be intended, and judging by the context of each section of what you wrote, this is the sense in which you use the word. It is not just a simple request for information, but a signal of your dissatisfaction with God's decisions and operations.

This is clear from the various ways in which you keep saying, "God can do this thing that I want, but he does not." The fact that your "why" indicates not only curiosity but also strong disapproval and rebellion is consistent with the way you tend to dismiss the solutions and explanations offered to you. So Romans 8:28 is dismissed because "it doesn't help" and his "grand plan" does not survive very long in your thinking, seemingly because it is not *your* grand plan. You do not want God to just inform you about what he does – in fact, it is questionable that you are very interested about this at all – but you want God to obey you in what he does.

The above is sufficient to show that you are not thinking correctly about all of this, and that your "why" toward God is sinful and senseless. But still, we will take a look at what the Bible says on the subject, as it answers the question directly and repeatedly:

But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (Romans 9:20-24)

The question that Paul says we should not ask is precisely the one that you are asking: "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" If you are a reprobate, then the matter is simple. This passage says that God has made someone like you so that someone like me can learn about his wrath, his power, and his patience – that he would tolerate someone like you for so long – and in contrast, about his riches and

mercy toward me. So if you are a reprobate, this would be a satisfying conclusion to my response.

However, our working assumption is that you are a Christian. Even so, the passage is relevant. Notice that God reveals himself to the elect not only through the objects of wrath, whom he has prepared for destruction, but those who are saved are objects of his *mercy* – they themselves have been sinners, only that God has decided to sovereignly show them mercy. "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Romans 9:18).

We may take the story of Samson as an example of how sin can fit into God's "grand plan." I will assume that even you know the Bible enough to remember that Samson made one mistake after another, sinning against some of God's universal moral precepts, as well as against the vow that he had kept before God. His sins culminated in his capture and humiliation, which led to the celebration that attracted the rulers of the Philistines (Judges 16:23). And in his last moments, Samson demonstrated a faith in God's mercy that is seldom witnessed in most Christians – he prayed for a restoration of his strength so that he may destroy the Philistines. But contrary to what some have been led to believe, Samson did not fail to accomplish what God had called him to do, for the Scripture says, "Thus he killed many more when he died than when he lived" (16:30). For his faith, he is honored along with the likes of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and Samuel (Hebrews 11:32).

I have learned from this, and have even written a short book about him. This great lesson concerning God's mercy is just one tiny aspect of the total revelation regarding how he could make good use of sin in his "grand plan." But how your rebellion blinds your mind to this precious revelation!

How about the prophet Jonah? He sinned by disobeying God's instruction to preach to Ninevah (Jonah 1:3), but God sent a great fish to swallow him, so that he remained in it for three days and three nights (1:17). From within the great fish came a revelation and then a prayer that became a part of Scripture (2:2-9, emphasis added):

In my distress I called to the LORD,  
and he answered me.  
From the depths of the grave I called for help,  
and you listened to my cry.  
You hurled me into the deep,  
into the very heart of the seas,  
and the currents swirled about me;  
all your waves and breakers  
swept over me.  
**I said, "I have been banished  
from your sight;  
yet I will look again  
toward your holy temple."**

The engulfing waters threatened me,  
the deep surrounded me;  
seaweed was wrapped around my head.  
To the roots of the mountains I sank down;  
the earth beneath barred me in forever.  
**But you brought my life up from the pit,  
O LORD my God.**

**When my life was ebbing away,  
I remembered you, LORD,  
and my prayer rose to you,  
to your holy temple.**

**Those who cling to worthless idols  
forfeit the grace that could be theirs.  
But I, with a song of thanksgiving,  
will sacrifice to you.**  
What I have vowed I will make good.  
Salvation comes from the LORD.

What a revelation of grace! Reading the passage almost moved me to tears, and would have done so, if I had not held back so that I could continue writing. And later the Lord Jesus even cited this incident as a sign corresponding to his own death and resurrection (Matthew 12:39-40). In contrast, all you can think about is, "God could do it for me, but he does not." These are but two of the many illustrations in Scripture that "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5:20-21).

Whether a thought or action is sinful is determined by whether it transgresses God's precepts, so that even if God's decrees produce a good effect out of something evil, it does not change evil into good. Thus I do not say that these sins are not in fact wrong or evil just because God uses even the sins of men to glory himself and to fulfill his purpose. In fact, if they are not evil or if they are no longer evil once they are employed for good, then it destroys the very point that we are supposed to learn. For if the lesson consists of a revelation of God's wrath against sinners and God's mercy toward believers, then sin must remain sin; otherwise there would be no demonstration of wrath, and there would be no demonstration of mercy.

So we do not condone evil just because God makes good use of it. Rather, because he makes good use of it, we learn something about his wrath, his mercy, and the "grand plan" that you so despise. In your case, the struggle against those sins that you notice brings to the surface greater sins that you then fail to notice or refuse to acknowledge, such as resentment, rebellion, and blasphemy. You claim to detest sin in yourself. Good! Repent, purge away these wicked attitudes, and be thankful for the grace of God.

So I have told you the "why," but it is not really the "why" that you want, is it? If you cannot fool me, then still less can you fool God. It is not God's explanation that you want – if it is, I have just given it to you, although I could tell you much more – but it is his submission that you require. You say, "He could do it, but he does not. Why?" Answer me this: *Why* should he do it your way? Produce an answer and a justification for it. If you cannot say why he should do it your way, then what is the basis of your challenge? But if you can come up with a reason and defend it against him, then tell him about it, and perhaps he will admit that he has made a mistake with you and submit to your demand. As for me, I will praise his decrees and follow his precepts, for his mercy endures forever.

As for the practical aspect of how to combat sin, there are a number of books on the subject that you could acquire and study. You can read some John Owen, some J. C. Ryle, or more recent authors like Jerry Bridges, Joel Beeke, and Jay Adams. My own *Commentary on Philippians* contains a basic exposition on Paul's teaching regarding the putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new man. You also mentioned the struggle that you have with legalism, and these books should address that as well. But I would insist that for now, your main gripe is not against your own sin, but against the Lord. Perhaps this is not obvious to you, because you would not like to think of yourself this way.

I would also remind you of the words of Jesus, who says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30). If your soul finds no rest, and if your faith is hard and heavy, it is not his yoke that you are carrying, and it is not his teaching that you have learned. I am far from perfect myself, but I do not live under bondage and oppression, for the kingdom of God is "a matter...of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit," and "anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men" (Romans 14:17-18).

I will include in this section your next complaint, which concerns the deficiencies and wickedness that you perceive in the church:

A third thing that plagues my thoughts is the Church. It breaks my heart to see the things that I see within the Body. I read in the Scriptures what the Body is supposed to be, how She is supposed to act, and what the will of the Lord is for His precious Bride. Yet I look around me, see the things I see on television, and glance through the racks of books on the shelves of the local Christian bookstore and I think, "Father, why?" And so again I find myself wondering why all of this has been ordained (not allowed) to happen.

I would submit that given your dismal condition, you are in no position to judge the rest of the church, and the truth is that people like you are part of the problem. Why is the church in such a condition? It is partly because you are in it. How is your resentful attitude toward God's sovereignty better than the heretic doctrines and foolish practices that you despise in others?

Notice that your "Father, why?" implies disapproval. You think that God should arrange things one way, but he does not do it the way that seems best to you. Again, I ask, *why* should he do it your way? If you have no definite idea as to how things should be different, or if you have no definite reason as to why things should be as you conceive and desire them, then there is no basis to challenge or question God on the matter. Your "why" would be a random outburst of rebellion and dissatisfaction that has no rational basis, and thus requires no rational answer. How exactly do you think he should use his sovereignty in this situation, and why do you think so? Formulate your answer and attempt to justify it. Then bring it to God in prayer and see if he will accept your correction.

However, if it is understanding that you want, although I doubt that this is your true desire, then even this has been explained – in fact, not only by myself, but by many others. False doctrines and religions, whether outside or inside of the church, alarm the true people of God, awake them from their spiritual slumber and complacency, incite them to pursue holiness, and compel them to define the biblical doctrines and refine their theological formulations. Another reason that I taught but have not seen mentioned by others is that false doctrines and false religions produce apostasy in those who are in the church but who are not true believers, and thus relieve it of the burden that they impose upon the Christian community. My most recent statement of this appears in the article, "The Invincible Church."

The apostle John gives us another applicable teaching when he states, "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). The context of the passage refers to false prophets and the spirit of the antichrist that propagate false doctrines. In the face of false doctrines and religions, I think as the apostle teaches me – I am from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in me is greater than he who is in the world. Compare this to your pathetic, "Father, why?" If you are really so concerned about the church (I doubt it), you are certainly not doing much to help it with your bad attitude.

Then, verses 5 and 6 state in a different way what I have said above about how false doctrines and religions serve to distinguish between true and false believers: "They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood." You have complained about God's sovereignty as it relates to several aspects of life, but it is as if you have no knowledge or understanding of all these biblical passages that I have been giving you. Do you read the Bible? Do you even have one? These passages are not hard to understand. They tell you outright what you need to know in plain words and direct sentences.

### **Human Spirituality and Divine Sovereignty**

This is the third and final section in the body of my answer, and after this I will make a conclusion. The topic here is divine sovereignty in relation to prayer. You wrote:

Brother, I am tired. I am so very tired. I no longer want to pray. I think, why do it? Yes, I may be praying concurrently with the will of God, but in the grand scheme of things what does this really matter? Does my prayer change anything? I cannot believe that it does. What God has ordained IS going to happen, regardless of whether or not I pray. And if I do not pray, isn't that non prayer ordained? If I pray, isn't that ordained?

As mentioned in the introduction, I have addressed this in my book *Prayer and Revelation*. There are at least two relevant chapters in the book entitled "Prayer and Sovereignty" and "Prayer and Omniscience." Although I consider what I have written in this and other books more than sufficient, here I will supplement these other materials by writing a specific answer to what you have stated above.

To paraphrase, for you the fact that God has foreordained all things by his absolute sovereignty removes any sense of purpose or meaning in prayer. But if this problem exists when it comes to divine sovereignty or foreordination, then it applies with equal force to divine foreknowledge. Although it applies in a different manner or from a different angle, the effect is the same.

Divine sovereignty or foreordination is entirely active – God decides what will happen and then causes it to happen, so that every event is determined in advance. For the sake of the contrast – that is, to make the illustration possible – let us suppose that divine foreknowledge is entirely passive, so that God decides and causes nothing at all, but that he only knows in advance what his creatures will decide and cause. This is an unbiblical use of the concept of foreknowledge, but let us assume it for the moment.

If this divine foreknowledge is as exhaustive as divine foreordination, then even if it is entirely passive, it would still mean that every event is determined in advance. God would know for certain beforehand what a man would decide and cause, and since this knowledge is perfect and infallible, then although God would not be the one bringing about the effect, it would still be as certain as if he had decided in advance to bring about this effect.

Therefore, if divine foreordination neutralizes all sense of purpose and meaning in prayer, then even a passive divine foreknowledge would do the same. This means that as long as you affirm divine foreknowledge and divine omniscience, you would have the same problem even if you do not affirm the doctrine of divine sovereignty or foreordination.

The necessary assumption behind your attitude is that unless your prayers are not foreordained and unless these non-foreordained prayers wield the power to affect circumstances (or affect God so that he would change the circumstances), then prayer is a pointless exercise. To say this another way, you think that prayer is meaningless unless you possess sovereign freedom (so that the decision to pray has not been foreordained by God), and unless you possess a metaphysical efficacy (so that you can change circumstances directly by your prayers) or at least a spiritual efficacy with God (so that you can persuade God to change circumstances). Of course, both this freedom and efficacy would require that the outcome in question has not been immutably foreordained or infallibly foreknown.

In other words, the assumption behind your attitude requires at least a God that is as weak as the one in open theism in order to preserve meaning for your prayers. This God is not all-powerful and not all-knowing, but his limitations leave many things "open," so to speak, to be determined by or at least in conjunction with the activities of his creatures. Your assumption requires this at the least, and indeed this is the reason many people are attracted to this heresy.

However, although your problem reduces in severity under open theism, it does not disappear. This God would still be a much stronger and wiser person than you, and in times of suffering and dissatisfaction it is still possible to think that he could help you, but that it seems he would not. He could still decide whether or not to answer your prayers, and indeed he could still help you apart from your prayers. He would still know about your problems and circumstances, and he could still make a better forecast about your future than you or anyone else could. So even with open theism, there is nothing to prevent you from saying the same thing, or something very similar, that prayer does not seem to be a very meaningful thing to do.

You could mentally reduce the severity of meaninglessness by compromising the divine attributes of power and wisdom, but you cannot make it disappear. The issue will remain as long as there is any kind of God at all. Therefore, your attitude is consistent only with atheism. As long as God exists, you will never be happy, you will never see purpose in your effort, and you will never find prayer meaningful. Your complaint is not against the sovereignty of God, but against the existence of God.

In addition to divine foreordination, you stated that your prayers cannot change anything, and this is another reason for a lack of motivation to pray. Prayer does not change things, and if prayer does not change things, then you do not find it meaningful to pray. But who told you that prayer was supposed to change anything in the first place? And where did you get the idea that the meaningfulness of prayer should hinge on whether or not it changes things?

If the Bible says that prayer changes things, but you have discovered that it does not, then this means that the Bible is wrong, and it is meaningless to pray. But if the Bible is wrong, then you have a much bigger problem than the lack of motivation in prayer. In any case, for this line of thinking to hold, you must first find the places where the Bible teaches that prayer changes things in the sense required by the context of this discussion. For example, the Bible does say, "You do not have, because you do not ask God" (James 4:2), and "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16), but these verses do not contradict a God who sovereignly inspires the prayer and then sovereignly answers it. So does the Bible teach that prayer *as such* changes things? If on this point you think that the truth about prayer contradicts the Bible's teaching about it, then you must show that the Bible in fact teaches that prayer *as such* changes things, and then refute the biblical teaching.



In any case, you seem to agree that the Bible in fact does not teach that prayer *as such* changes things. But if the Bible itself does not say that prayer changes things, and you have also come to the same conclusion, so that the teaching that prayer changes things is unbiblical, then how does the recognition that an unbiblical idea about prayer is indeed wrong make the biblical idea about prayer less meaningful? What does one have to do with the other?

If the Bible teaches the truth about prayer in the first place, and does not teach the false idea, then how does the fact that the false teaching is indeed false nullify the true teaching about prayer? You have never stated what the Bible actually teaches about prayer and then show how *that* is not worthwhile or meaningful. You have discovered that the unbiblical perspective toward prayer is false. Good! But what does it have to do with Christian prayer, or the biblical teaching on prayer? Your thinking is arbitrary and irrational.

Your assumption is that, if you cannot make a difference by your own freedom and power, then it is meaningless to follow the precepts of God. If the outcome does not in some way depend on you apart from God's sovereign decision, then you have no motivation to do it. God's command does not move you. It makes no difference to you. But if prayer is meaningless because both the activity and the outcome have been foreordained, then your concern for your wife is also meaningless, since that has also been foreordained. Your love for your wife is empty and false. If so, then what are you complaining about? Why are you still so worried about her? What are you bothering me for? Your use of the doctrine is random and stupid.

Rather than finding ultimate purpose and conquering meaninglessness by knowing and obeying the precepts of God (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14), the very idea of God is what robs you of all purpose and meaning. Do you see the fearful but inevitable implication? The solution that you are looking for is atheism.

God has always been absolutely and exhaustively sovereign whether or not you knew about it. The doctrine of divine sovereignty is only a major aspect of a proper understanding and definition of God. And as such, it has a dividing and distinguishing effect. That is, as long as "God" is just a word, or just a concept that refers to a great person, many people can find common ground with it. But the more this idea is defined, and the more specific it becomes, men must begin to take sides with it or against it. In this manner, sound doctrine reveals the true nature of the heart, the true identity and destiny of each person.

As Hebrews 4:12-13 says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." The same gospel convicts some but hardens others. The same doctrine generates reverence in some but defiance in others, "Yes, Lord" in some but "Why, Lord?" in others. It uncovers every lie, and destroys every pretence.

I have dealt with some people who at first appeared to love the Lord, and to be zealous for the faith and persistent in prayer. But once I introduced to them the doctrine of divine sovereignty, they lost their grip on the whole Christian lifestyle and fell from the faith. There was nothing wrong with the doctrine, and there was nothing wrong in how I taught it. But like all biblical doctrines, this doctrine of divine sovereignty penetrates, judges, and exposes the real condition of the heart. Their faith was false all along, but they thought they could obtain some benefit from God. Once they learned that their prayers and efforts did not occupy the determinative role, and that they could not manipulate the situation in the way they desired, the masks came off and they abandoned the faith that they once professed.

## **Conclusion**

You wrote, "I am overwhelmed by the reality of God's sovereignty." This is a lie. You are overwhelmed with your own unbelief and rebellion, overwhelmed with your dissatisfaction toward how he uses his sovereignty. When God appeared to Job and confronted him with his sovereign power, Job said, "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." But this is not what you do – you just keep on complaining and asking "why."

You wrote, "I don't deem myself so grand that God would owe me an answer. He does not owe me anything." This is also a lie. It is clear from what you wrote that you do think he owes you, but you are upset because you know that *he* does not think that he owes you. If God does not owe you an answer, then why not just shut up? Why not be quiet and submit? But you keep on complaining and asking "why."

You wrote, "Quite honestly I do not assume or think anything at all." This is another lie. If you do not assume or think anything at all, then there would be no struggle and no conflict in your mind. You would not ask "why" in the face of God's sovereign decrees. The fact is that your thinking is filled with your own assumptions about how things ought to be, and the "why" appears only because in each instance God does something different from what you assume or think should be done.

You conclude each topic that you brought up with a "why" against God's sovereign decrees. You affirm his sovereignty, but you disagree with how he uses it. The "why" implies that when God does something other than what you assume he should do, you always consider your own expectation superior to what God has actually produced. In other words, you affirm God's sovereignty, but you want to be sovereign instead. You acknowledge that he is God, but you do not think that he should be or deserves to be. And it upsets you that he is more powerful than you are, so that you cannot do anything about this. It is futile to deny this, since in the previous pages I have demonstrated that this is the implication of the things that you said.

Then, when you are confronted with God's precepts and commands, by which you are to order your life and by which you will be held accountable, you answered, "The irony of it is that the ability to simply apply the truth is under the control of the sovereignty of our Lord. So if He wills it, then I will do it." You do this with every topic that you raised and

every topic that has been raised to you. You enjoy rubbing God's sovereignty back in his face in protest of how he has been using it, and how he has been treating you.

However, I have now taken this away from you, and you may no longer do this. You may no longer appeal to divine sovereignty over and over again, at every turn, and at the conclusion of every topic, in order to spite the decrees of the Lord, to dismiss the pleadings of his servants, and to postpone obedience to the divine commands. This is because I have demonstrated that your understanding of divine sovereignty is almost entirely defective. You fail to apply it correctly and consistently, so that you are not qualified to make an authoritative appeal to it.

Scripture does not teach divine sovereignty the way that you affirm it, and it does not apply the doctrine the way that you appeal to it. Therefore, when you keep on asserting the idea of divine sovereignty at every turn, that has nothing to do with the application of a biblical doctrine. You are only imposing your own false understanding of the doctrine on the conversation or situation. Of course, you can still say the words and hide behind this excuse, but from now on, each time you do this it will increase your condemnation. "For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:37).

The Bible says, "Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:8). It says, "In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work" (2 Timothy 2:20-21). And, "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).

Jesus says, "You do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:26-27). I have given you the word of God, and through it the true Shepherd has spoken to you. You want to talk about divine sovereignty? Good! You said, "If he wills, then I will do it." Right, if you are among his sheep, then you will listen to his voice and follow him. But if you harden your heart and reject what I have presented to you – if you refuse to follow the voice of the Shepherd – then we will all know what you are, or rather, what you are not. And that will be your final answer.

## **5. FAITH TO MOVE MOUNTAINS**

**The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.**

**On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts.**

**And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: "'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.**

**When evening came, they went out of the city.**

**In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"**

**"Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." (Mark 11:12-25)**

The passage has its parallel in Matthew 21:12-13, 18-22, but whereas Matthew offers a topical presentation, Mark's version is chronological and follows the order of the events as they happened. So, Mark 11:12-14, 20-25 corresponds to Matthew 21:18-22, and Mark 11:15-19 corresponds to Matthew 21:12-13.

In other words, Matthew separates what happened in Jerusalem with what happened in Bethany. He avoids confusion by leaving out time markers. On the other hand, Mark's version follows the actual order of events, and shows the chronological relations between the events by including time markers. In addition, corresponding to each event, he also indicates the Lord's direction of travel. So we read in chapter 11:

"As they approached Jerusalem..." (v. 1)

"Jesus entered Jerusalem..." (v. 11)  
"Since it was already late, he went out to Bethany..." (v. 11)  
"The next day as they were leaving Bethany..." (v. 12)  
"On reaching Jerusalem..." (v. 15)  
"When evening came, they went out of the city..." (v. 19)  
"In the morning, as they went along..." (v. 20)  
"They arrived again at Jerusalem..." (v. 27)

Both Matthew and Mark offer accurate accounts of what happened. Each approach serves the writer's purpose and makes a particular impression upon the reader. We will work with Mark's account to take advantage of how his chronological arrangement contributes to the interpretation of verse 23.

#### **v. 12-14**

Our passage begins as Jesus departs from Bethany and heads toward Jerusalem (v. 12). He sees a fig tree in the distance, but when he reaches it, he finds nothing but leaves. At this, he says to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again" (v. 14). The incident perplexes many people, since it appears to them that the tree receives overly harsh and even unjust treatment from the Lord.

Commentators typically offer two points of clarification.

The first has to do with the "complicated biology"<sup>23</sup> of the fig. There are two crops of figs gathered in this region. The earlier and smaller figs become ripe in May and June, and the later and larger ones become ripe around late August and September. New leaves begin to appear in March, and along with them would appear many tiny figs, called *taksh* in Arabic. They are eaten by people when hungry, and often gathered to be sold in the markets. These are not the true figs, but they grow only to a small size and then the majority would fall off.

This incident occurs at Passover time (14:1), about April, so it is "not the season for figs" (v. 13). However, this particular tree has leaves, and "When the young leaves are appearing in spring, every fertile fig will have some *taksh* on it, even though the season for edible figs (Mk. 11:13, AV) has not arrived. When the leaves are fully developed the fruit ought to be mature also. But if the tree with leaves has no fruit, it will be barren for the entire season."<sup>24</sup> So the abundance of leaves gives Jesus reason to expect fruit as well – that is, *taksh* – but when he reaches the tree, he finds nothing but leaves.

The second point is that the fig tree merely functions as a symbol for something else, and the way Jesus treats it is intended as a parable in action. Hendriksen writes, "It is impossible to believe that the curse which the Lord pronounced upon this tree was an act of punishing

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<sup>23</sup> *New Bible Dictionary, Third Edition* (InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 368.

<sup>24</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised Edition* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), p. 302. See the entire article on "Fig; Fig Tree" for more information.

it, as if the tree as such was responsible for not bearing fruit, and as if, for this reason, Jesus was angry with it."<sup>25</sup>

We will discuss the symbolic action later. At this time, our focus is on the typical ways that commentators attempt to provide moral justification for how Jesus treats the fig tree. When it comes to this, we find that although both points are true, they fail as moral justification for Jesus' action.

Regarding the first point, although Jesus has reason to expect fruit on the tree because of the leaves, the fact that the tree fails to meet this expectation is not a justification to curse it to death. Would the commentators say that anyone in this situation would be justified to do the same? Would they not say that one should exercise patience, gratitude, and contentment instead? We are not supposed to curse something just because it fails to meet what seems to be a reasonable expectation.

Regarding the second point, it is irrelevant whether or not the tree functions as a symbol of something else, or whether or not Jesus is acting out a parable. One action is not automatically justified just because it is symbolic. If it is wrong in itself, then it is wrong no matter what. I am not permitted to murder someone just as long as my intention is to make a point about something else. I am not permitted to steal from someone just because I am acting out a parable.

Both points fail to provide moral justification for Jesus' action. The problem is that the commentators assume a man-centered reference point as they read the passage, and so they apply to divine actions and commands a human standard – a standard that is itself subordinate to and judged by divine actions and commands. The proper reference point is God-centered – it is God's sovereign right and power. God's actions and commands are righteous by definition. He does not need a moral justification or explanation that satisfies our standard. Rather, his actions and commands constitute the standard by which our lives are judged.

God and his creation are as the potter to the clay. He has the right to make whatever he wishes, then to smash it, make it into something else, and then smash it again. He has the right to command that which is normally forbidden, as when he told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Jesus is acting out a parable, but what if he is not? What if God decides to destroy a tree just because it fails to bear fruit, although God is the one who controls whether it bears fruit in the first place? So what? Why does he need to explain this, or show that he has been fair to the tree? Who makes the rules for the ethical treatment of trees? You? Why must God kneel to your standard?

If you ask your fellow servant for a favor, you should always thank him, and you will sometimes need to repay him. But when God tells you to do something, must he say "please"? And when you have done it, must he say "thanks"? No, he does not have to "thank the servant because he did what he was told to do," but we must say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty" (Luke 17:9-10).

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<sup>25</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Baker Books, 1975), p. 442.

Confusion arises when we forget the distinction between master and servants, and judge the master as if he is one of the servants. The master sets the standard according to what he considers right and proper. There is no hypocrisy in him if he is consistent with himself. A servant is in good standing as long as the master approves of him, and the master's integrity is intact as long as he approves of himself, as long as he functions according to his own standard.

God can do whatever he wants with a tree – it is his tree. Just to think that there is a need to offer moral justification for his actions is to treat him as a mere man. It is blasphemy. Problems in biblical interpretation and theological formulation occur when people look at God as if he is a creature, so that he must be judged like one. There is no need for moral justification. The issue should have never come up. The Bible says that Jesus always performs the Father's will, and that should be sufficient for us.

Nevertheless, there is a reason Jesus curses the fig tree, and there is a reason Mark tells us about it. The correct approach is not to look for moral justification, but to look for intention or meaning.

#### **v. 15-19**

When Jesus reaches Jerusalem, he enters the temple, probably into the Court of the Gentiles. This is the outer area of the temple, and the only place where non-Jews are permitted to worship. But worship is impossible, since the place has become a busy marketplace.

There we find the money changers, those who sell doves, and those who carry merchandise through the temple courts. The money changers are there to exchange foreign money into the only currency accepted in the temple area. Many pilgrims come from far away. It would be difficult for them to bring their own sacrificial animals with them, and then risk that they would fail the temple inspection.

It seems that these merchants perform a needed service; however, their business conduct in fact hinders worship, and the way they occupy the area desecrates the temple site. It is likely that they also exploit the pilgrims, charging high prices for the animals and offering them unreasonable exchange rates. As for those who "carry merchandise through the temple courts," they are using the temple area as a shortcut as they travel between the Mount of Olives and the city. Their activities do not contribute to worship, but they obstruct worship for the sake of convenience and commerce.

Hendriksen remarks that the Lord expels not only the sellers from the temple, but also the buyers.<sup>26</sup> They may appear innocent, and even the victims of greedy and irreverent merchants, but they are not blameless in that they continue to tolerate this abomination in the temple. They have come to worship their God, and they should be zealous to preserve the honor of his name and the purity of his temple.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 452.

Some commentators become nervous again and scramble to offer moral justification for the Lord's "fit of rage." The answer is the same. There is nothing to explain, because there is nothing wrong with his behavior. Christ is the Lord of the temple, and indeed "greater than the temple" (Matthew 12:6), and this is what he thinks about what is happening at the place of worship. The culprit is the false impression that Jesus is always a mild-mannered, soft-spoken, and even an effeminate kind of person.

John writes that as Jesus drives out the merchants and cries, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" his disciples remember that the Scripture says, "Zeal for your house will consume me" (John 2:16-17). True piety is always accompanied by godly zeal. You cannot be faithful and not zealous at the same time. You cannot call yourself spiritual and stay calm when God's name is blasphemed and his worshipers misled and abused. This is why the temple episode is shocking to many readers – they have no zeal and do not understand zeal. They have a gentlemanly faith that cares more about social propriety than God's honor. To them, this is Christian character, and it surprises them when Jesus does not act as "Christian" as they do. But there is a time to be gentle, and a time to be harsh.

Jesus does not storm out of the temple and leave the scene, but he teaches the people from the Bible, and says, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" He cites Isaiah 56:7, where God designates the temple as a house of prayer *for all nations*. The Jews have not preserved the temple for its intended use, but have made it "a den of robbers." The expression comes from Jeremiah 7:11. The context has to do with a false confidence – a false sense of safety – in the temple of God:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!"

If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe" – safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become *a den of robbers* to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 7:3-11)



The people were oppressing foreigners, orphans, and widows. They were shedding innocent blood, and they were following other gods. They have made the temple "a den of robbers," but they still thought that they were safe. They appealed to the temple for protection and prosperity, but God told them that they needed to reform their ways, for only then would he allow them to remain and thrive in the land.

There is an obvious relevance to our passage in Mark's Gospel. The temple is buzzing with people and activities, but there is no real worship, no true reverence. They use the place for financial profit, for social advancement, and sometimes for mere convenience. And in the process, they are crowding out those who have come to offer sincere prayer and worship.

Jeremiah's emphasis is not that the people were using the temple to *rob*, but that they were using it as a robbers' *den* – a place of rest and safety for criminals. Likewise, although the merchants are probably "robbing" the pilgrims and worshipers with their high prices and unfair exchange rates, by alluding to this expression in Jeremiah, Jesus also condemns their false security in the edifice and the system of the temple. They behave as if nothing would happen to them because they have the temple of God, and they refuse to reform their ways. But what if God abandons his own temple? We will consider this later.

This speaks directly to our times. The commercialism in the contemporary church is no less blatant and shameless. A book may be theologically weak or even heretical, but if it becomes popular, then it is repackaged as a daily devotional. After that comes a prayer journal that reinforces its message. Then there are the study guides, greeting cards, posters, calendars, bracelets, backpacks, T-shirts, music recordings, board games, computer games, picnics, dinners, seminars, retreats, cruises, and so on, all riding on the book's popular theme.

Non-Christians laugh at the stupidity and hypocrisy, and since there is no substance to the movement, some of the followers eventually become disillusioned. Then comes another movement. This one will change everything. And the Christians are pulled into the scheme again. As in the case of the temple, both the sellers and the buyers are guilty. They enjoy the commercialism. They love to imitate the unbelievers as long as they can put a Christian label on everything.

Those who claim to be Christians often do not show more respect for God and concern for worshipers than the Jews in the day of Christ. Some of them use the church to collect business contacts or to sell their products. Others are in church to hunt for greedy and gullible people that they can swindle, people who are eager to jump on another scheme to get rich, or to save money by questionable or illegal means. Sometimes church leaders know what is happening, and although it is their responsibility to address this, they refuse to do anything about it. They are supposed to protect the sheep from the wolves, and to rebuke the sheep for being worldly, greedy, and gullible. Rather than attacking the problem, they often become a part of it.

As for favoring convenience over worship, there are many signs of this. We will not mention the extreme cases, but consider a seemingly less significant thing like answering

a mobile phone during a church gathering. Forgetting to switch off the phone is bad enough, but sometimes a person would answer it and carry a conversation. He has no respect for God or for the people who wish to focus on the things of God. If the person who calls is so important, then he should invite him to church! If it is a business call, then he must choose between God and Mammon.

The temple area could not have turned into a marketplace without permission from the priests, who are probably receiving a handsome portion of the profits from the transactions. Jesus' action and teaching greatly upset these priests, not only because he has disrupted the commercial activities, but because he has exposed their apostasy and undermined their authority. He has become a threat to their economic welfare and social standing.

Instead of being driven to self-examination and repentance, they conspire to murder Jesus. They think that they have spiritual standing with God because Abraham is their natural ancestor, but elsewhere Jesus tells them, "If you were Abraham's children, then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things" (John 8:39-40).

Although they are Abraham's natural descendants, they are nothing like him, but they are like those of their ancestors who killed the prophets that were sent to them. Jesus perceives their hypocrisy, and he says to them, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets'" (Matthew 23:29-31). They claim to be better people, but they are exploiting the temple for financial profit and plotting murder against the one who corrects them. They are exactly like the apostates in the past, whom God punished and exiled from the land.

With this mention of Israel's sins and exiles, we are ready to consider the fig tree's significance.

#### **v. 20-21**

In Mark's account, Jesus' visit to the temple (v. 15-19) is placed between the cursing of the fig tree (v. 12-14) and the withering of the fig tree (v. 20-21), or more precisely, the disciples' realization that the fig tree has withered. The order is chronological, so it does not demand an explanation; nevertheless, it naturally produces an effect that we must not ignore.

Imagine that you are watching a movie. As a new scene begins, the camera closes in on a tiny yellow flower growing out of the cracks at the edge of the pavement. Suddenly, you hear loud tire screeches...the camera backs away from the flower...a car speeds into sight and breaks hard by the pavement. Several men rushes out of the car, and at the same time, the camera focuses on the face of a young man, perhaps the protagonist. His expression exhibits fear and resolve at the same time. Someone pushes him out of the car and says, "Let's get to it."

What is happening? The young man has never known crime before, but through various circumstances and decisions, he has joined up with the wrong crowd. Now they burst into a grocery store by the road, pull out their weapons, and yell, "Give me all your money!" Seconds later, the leader emerges from the store and looks around, then runs toward the car, followed by the rest.

The camera closes in on the flower again. Have we forgotten all about it? How beautiful it is. Look at the bright color, and the shape of the petals. You marvel that it manages to thrive on such a rough terrain. Just then, one of the robbers steps on the flower as he runs toward the car. When he picks up his foot, you notice that the flower has been crushed, and its stem ripped from the base.

The flower's significance is obvious, and the more context that you have been given, the more obvious it would be to you. It represents the young man, the main character of the story. It is a symbol of his hope and innocence. By sandwiching the robbery between the life and death of the flower, the man becomes identified with the flower, and what happens to the flower is what happens to the man. In fact, in this case the flower "acts out" something that is happening in the heart of the man, something that, despite the robbery, remains less obvious on the outside.

Likewise, by placing the temple episode between the cursing and the withering of the fig tree, Mark identifies the tree with the temple – that is, the temple system of worship and the Jews' privilege of having the temple of God in their midst. What happens to the fig tree is what happens to the temple. The fact that the fig tree has been repeatedly used to represent Israel in the Bible makes the symbolism unmistakable (Hosea 9:10; Joel 1:7; Zechariah 3:10).

When Jesus approaches the fig tree on his way to Jerusalem (v. 12-14), he finds on it only leaves but no fruit. So he curses it, saying, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." This immediately generates tension in the narrative: Why does Jesus do this?

The issue is not moral justification, since no moral justification is needed. A tension that seeks moral justification for the action betrays a clash between the reader's personal standard and the perfect righteousness of Jesus, who always performs the Father's will. In other words, it is a damning indication that the reader sees himself as God over Jesus and the Father. Rather, the tension is produced by the distance between the action and the result. It seems that Jesus does not have to curse the fig tree, so why does he do it? He must have a reason. The incident must have some meaning to it. But what is it?

Without relieving this tension, Mark rushes us forward to the temple at Jerusalem. There Jesus finds a center of religion that is buzzing with activities, but even a causal inspection reveals that they do not constitute or contribute to true worship. More than that, these activities in fact make true worship impossible, and prevent any sincere seeker from using the temple for its intended purpose. In other words, like the fig tree with leaves but no fruit, there is much noise and movement at the temple, but no spiritual substance. There is an appearance of religious dedication, but there is no reality and no power to it.

The tension remains fresh in the reader's mind, since he still does not know what has happened to the fig tree. However, if he has been paying close attention, by now he probably understands why Jesus has cursed it. Just as Jesus responds with a pronouncement of final destruction to the tree with only leaves but no fruit, so he will destroy a religious system that appears active on the outside, but that is lifeless and faithless on the inside.

The juxtaposition of the fig tree and the temple, while the tension of the curse is still fresh in mind, leads the reader to perceive the two incidents as one unit. Then, when he comes to verses 20 and 21, he finds out what has happened to the fig tree. The tension is resolved, and because he has identified the tree with the temple, he cannot shake the impression that what has happened to the tree will also happen to the temple. The fact that the tree is not merely damaged but destroyed (withered from the roots) suggests that Jesus' action at the temple foreshadows something greater than a temporary cleansing or reform, but something much more drastic and final – that is, the permanent destruction of the temple and its religious system.

Mark would emphasize this again and again, and with increasing clarity. For example, there is a parable at the beginning of chapter 12, just several verses after our passage. It concludes, "What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this scripture: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'" (v. 9-11; also Matthew 21:43).<sup>27</sup> The message becomes very explicit: "Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them" (v. 12).

By the time we reach chapter 13, figurative language has been replaced by plain explanation. We are told directly that the temple would be destroyed: "As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!' 'Do you see all these great buildings?' replied Jesus. 'Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down'" (v. 1-2).

Jesus even specifies the time of the event: "I tell you the truth, *this generation* will certainly not pass away until *all these things* have happened" (v. 30). The parable in chapter 12 indicates that, because the people would kill the son of the vineyard's owner (v. 6-7), "He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others" (v. 9). Later, as the Jews were calling for Jesus to be crucified, they said, "Let his blood be *on us* and *on our children!*" (Matthew 27:25). They cursed their own generation and prophesied its doom. Thus "all these things" include the slaughter of the Jews and the destruction of the temple.

Within one generation, in AD 70, all these things happened exactly as Jesus predicted. The Romans marched into Jerusalem, and destroyed the temple along with its system of worship. Multitudes of Jews were slaughtered, but the Christians were saved, because Jesus

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<sup>27</sup> "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (Matthew 21:43).

had said, "Let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains" (13:14). The believers obeyed, and they were preserved.

#### v. 22-25

In verse 21, Peter says to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" Then, in verses 22-25, it appears that instead of giving a relevant response, Jesus suddenly changes the subject to teach about faith, prayer, and forgiveness. But these verses in fact make sense when interpreted within the context of the destruction of the temple.

When Solomon dedicates his temple back in 1 Kings 8, he prays, "May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there,' so that you will *hear the prayer* your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and *when you hear, forgive*" (v. 29-30). He associates the temple with prayer, and the temple with forgiveness.

To the Jews, this is the house of prayer, and where they offer sacrifices for their sins. However, many of them have so connected worship, prayer, and forgiveness to the place and the system that they are taken over by a false sense of piety and a false sense of security. Jeremiah would rebuke the people for oppressing the foreigners, the poor, the orphans and the widows, and for following false gods, but still think that no disaster would come upon them because they have the temple of God.

What if God abandons his temple? How then will the people's prayers be answered? And how then will they find forgiveness for their sins? Verses 12-21 tell us that theirs is a religion with only leaves but no fruit, and rather than continuing to tolerate this, God has pronounced a final curse upon it. Within one generation, the temple and its system would be destroyed, and the Jews would be either killed or scattered. Peter refers to the tree, but it is as if he exclaims, "Rabbi, look! The Jewish system you cursed has withered!" What would become of true worship? How will man find contact and favor with God?

Jesus answers, "Have faith in God." Faith has always been the basis of a right relationship with God. As Hebrews 11:6 says, "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." It does not say that one must come to God through the temple system, but as Paul explains, "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (Galatians 3:24-25).

The issue had always been faith, and that was the problem with the Jews. Although they went through the motions of prayer and sacrifice, they remained in unbelief. "Therefore," Jesus tells them, "I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (Matthew 21:43). Of course, the kingdom of God cannot be destroyed, but the administration of grace is no longer associated with the temple or the Jews, but with the church or the Christians, a temple made without hands, made up of those who are circumcised in the heart by the Spirit (see John 4:19-24). The elements of

temple worship remain, but we have them in their reality and full manifestation instead of in types and shadows. There is Jesus our mediator, Jesus our sacrifice, and the heavenly Holy of Holies, to which we have access by faith.

Although there is no temple – that is, the building – our prayers are powerful and effective through faith. By faith, we can command a mountain to move (v. 23), and by faith, we can receive "whatever" we ask from God (v. 24). As for forgiveness, although the system of animal sacrifice has disappeared, Jesus Christ has come. He is the Lamb of God, the true sacrifice who takes away our sins. Forgiveness belongs to anyone who has faith – this is not the mere appearance of piety, but a sincere heart that has been transformed by God's grace, and that freely extends forgiveness to others (v. 25; also Matthew 18:21-35).

Peter marvels that the tree has withered, even from the roots. Jesus apparently wishes to push his disciples' thinking further and tells them that if a person has faith, he can command even a mountain to be taken up and to be cast into the sea, and it will happen. From what we understand about the location, "this mountain" is the Mount of Olives and "the sea" refers to the Dead Sea. For our purpose, it does not matter which mountain or which sea Jesus is talking about. However, as we will see, the fact that Jesus points to a particular mountain carries some significance.

Commentators of all varieties and persuasions immediately scramble to assert that Jesus' statement is not to be taken in the literal sense, but that the mountain is symbolic of some difficulty or obstacle (Zechariah 4:6-7). However, although it is true that the mountain represents something more than the physical object, and to "move mountains" is indeed a common rabbinic expression, it remains that we must first take the mountain in its literal sense, and then acknowledge that it is also a symbol of other things.

It is stupid to think that if something is a symbol for something else, then the symbol itself has no literal status. For example, the Passover lamb represents Jesus Christ, the true and final sacrifice, but at the Passover Feast there is indeed a physical lamb, not an imaginary or metaphorical one. Verse 23 is couched in the context of the cursing of the fig tree. The fig tree represents something else, but there is really a fig tree, which Jesus curses, and which withers from the roots.

We cannot say that because the mountain is a symbol for difficulties and obstacles, it is therefore not literal. The same commentators would say that Jesus is pointing to the Mount of Olives as he makes the statement. So when he says "*this* mountain," does he mean *this* mountain or not? The commentators think that he means, "If you have faith, you can say to *this* mountain, but not really *any* mountain." This is ridiculous and impossible. If X is a symbol for Y, then a statement using X to make a point about Y would apply to both X and Y, not only Y.

There is the claim that the statement is a hyperbole, a deliberate exaggeration to get a point across. Although there might be nothing wrong with the idea that the Bible sometimes uses hyperbole as a literary or rhetorical device, Mark 11:23 cannot be interpreted this way. In fact, to see it as solely hyperbolic would produce blasphemous implications.

The position that it is hyperbole to say that we can command a mountain to move through faith implies that we can accomplish lesser things through faith. That is, if moving a mountain is an *exaggeration* of the power of faith, then it means that faith can still perform lesser things than moving a mountain. However, Jesus says, "Have faith in God" and not "Have faith in yourself." The feats of faith are by definition performed in utter dependence on God, through the power and energy of God. When we have faith in God for something to be accomplished, such as to move a mountain, it is in fact God who performs the task.

Therefore, to say that this statement is mere hyperbole is to say that it is an exaggeration of what God can accomplish, so that even God cannot uproot a mountain and throw it into the sea. Otherwise, it implies that anything that is accomplished by faith is in fact our own doing, so that a faith that moves a mountain is an exaggeration because *in ourselves* we cannot move a mountain. Both implications are false, but since verse 22 excludes the second option, this means that the interpretation must reject God's omnipotence, and it results in blasphemy. In any case, since both implications are wrong, the interpretation that leads to them is also wrong. Verse 23 cannot be mere hyperbole.

It is despicable for biblical scholars to regard the verse as hyperbole when miracles of similar and greater magnitudes had already happened. For example:

On the day the LORD gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the LORD in the presence of Israel: "O sun, stand still over Gibeon, O moon, over the Valley of Aijalon." So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jashar. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the LORD listened to a man. Surely the LORD was fighting for Israel! (Joshua 10:12-14)

Whether Joshua made a petition or a command, he said it before God, who answered by a miracle. In this way, our faith can destroy a tree, move a mountain, or stop a planet in the literal and physical sense. This is a faith in God and not in ourselves. It is God who does the work, and to limit the possibilities of this faith is to limit the possibilities of God's power.

Verse 14 says, "There has never been a day like it before." The miracle was greater than those that occurred before that day. Faith does not need permission from precedence. It also says, "There has never been a day like it...since." The miracle was greater than those that occurred up to the time of the writing of this account, but it does not say that there would never be a greater miracle. Faith raises the standard for future achievements.

Then, some commentators suggest that verse 23 refers to the kind of miracles that the Jews demanded from Jesus, and which he refused to perform. First, the Gospels contain no evidence that the Jews required from Jesus a miracle of this magnitude. It might have never crossed their minds to demand something like this. Second, Jesus indeed performed

tremendous signs and wonders, more than what was demanded of him. He walked on water and calmed the storm. He cursed the fig tree and caused it to wither. He raised Lazarus from the dead before many witnesses, and multiplied fish and bread before thousands of people (John 11:19, 45; 6:10). And he was willing to perform miracles before his critics. For example, he healed a man with a shriveled hand before the Pharisees and the scribes (Luke 6:7-10).

What Jesus refused to do was to perform miracles *on demand*, especially when the challenge came from hardened unbelievers, who already knew he could work miracles, and who did not look for reasons to believe, but for reasons to convict him of crime. Since Jesus performed very great miracles, and since he performed many of them in public and before hostile skeptics, the commentators slander the Lord when they claim that he refused to perform such miracles.

Then, they make the observation that spiritual miracles are greater than moving a mountain, such as the conversions of human hearts. Conversion is indeed greater, but this works against their position, for if greater miracles like conversions happen every day, then there is nothing to prevent much smaller miracles like moving mountains. Spectacular miracles of nature happen throughout the Bible. It is absurd to suggest that because there are greater miracles, therefore the much smaller miracles never happen and are never supposed to happen. The truth is that if more biblical scholars are converted, more of them would believe in Mark 11:23.

Another way that some people have challenged a literal interpretation of verse 23 is to ask, "What good is it?" Why would someone ever need to move a mountain, and to do it by a command? This is irrelevant to the discussion. We are considering whether it can happen, not whether we need it to happen. Many things that we never need to happen are nevertheless possible. Joshua's miracle also addresses this. It was very practical.

In Matthew 21, when the disciples ask, "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" (v. 20), Jesus replies, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done" (v. 21). He says, "*not only* can you do what was done to the fig tree, *but also* you can say to this mountain." Jesus cursed a literal tree, a physical tree, and he says that one who has faith can do the same thing, that is, to curse a literal tree, a physical tree, and to do something even greater, that is, to command a mountain to move.

There is no reason to soften the meaning, and there is no excuse for a symbolic interpretation. One commentator has the audacity to claim that although the fig tree that Jesus curses is literal, when he says that his followers can do the same thing in Matthew 21, both the tree and the mountain have become symbolic. He has no justification for this ridiculous interpretation. Jesus' language does not leave room for this. He outright tells the disciples that they can do "what was done to the fig tree." Instead of inventing ways to overturn what Jesus says, it would be easier for these scholars to throw away their Bibles and confess that they are non-Christians, agents of the devil who pose as experts to deceive God's people.



Mark 11:23 demands a literal interpretation. The real reason for a symbolic interpretation is unbelief. There is a strong motivation to camouflage spiritual weakness and rebellion under an appearance of sensible and refined scholarship. The theologians and interpreters condemn the very thing that the verse promotes – the idea that wonderful and miraculous things will happen when a person believes in God and relies on his power. They attempt to neutralize the teachings of Jesus, and commit the same thing that he condemned in the Jews. They are disqualified from instructing God's people.

Supposedly, many scholars and preachers undermine Mark 11:23 and similar verses because they wish to combat abuse. This is an excuse, because the worst abuse is their rejection of what Jesus teaches about faith. Their unbelief is far more sinister and dangerous than the alleged errors that they labor to extinguish.

They have in mind the teaching that if a person has faith, then whatever he says will happen, and the consistent application of this teaching could bring health and wealth. However, Jesus indeed teaches that if a person has faith, then whatever he says will happen – this is exactly what Mark 11:23 says. Then, there are indeed promises of health and wealth in the Bible, along with many other kinds of blessings.

It is true that there are errors and abuses, but the essential principles about the power of faith and the promises of blessings are undeniable. Moreover, the critics have proven themselves to be unqualified to issue corrections, since they proceed from a viewpoint of unbelief, and there is no worst error and abuse than this. Their unbelief also results in foolish arguments, as demonstrated in how they handle Mark 11:23. Their treatment of other verses, such as God's promises on health, wealth, and other blessings, are not any better. Just as they attempt to explain away Mark 11:23, they attempt to explain away God's promises. They disguise themselves as defenders of orthodoxy, but they are the real enemies of the faith.

Mark 11:23 teaches that if we have faith, we can command even a mountain to move, and it will happen. God is the source of faith, and he can infuse us with this kind of faith. This faith is not a force in itself – the power is not in belief as such – but it relies on God to perform the work. Thus even though it might be expressed as a command, it is a form of prayer toward God, looking to him to make it happen. Accordingly, verse 24 says, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

The Bible portrays faith as something that honors God and promotes his purpose, but also as something that draws on God's resources for our own welfare and success. Any hesitation to exercise faith in God for our needs and wants is self-righteous and hypocritical, as if God's resources are needed for ministry but optional for our everyday living. It is false piety, and betrays a gross arrogance, as if we are above depending on God for these things. We should look to God for everything, and ask him for everything, even our daily bread (Matthew 6:11). Faith works for our benefit and for God's purpose, and

these two are not in conflict when we place our welfare within the broader concern for his kingdom.

Faith needs persistence to fulfill its work. In the Bible, faith sometimes performs instantaneous feats of greatness, but it is sometimes a stubborn conviction that produces consistent speech and conduct over long durations. Hebrews 11 presents both facets of faith. It is through "faith and patience" that we inherit God's promises (Hebrews 6:12). This is important for those who venture out in faith for the work of the gospel. We trust in God's word, which never fails, and not in immediate or short-term results.

One man's faith can move a mountain without support from others. This does not mean that faith disregards relationships, since verse 25 teaches that faith reflects God's forgiveness toward people. We cannot love God and at the same time hate our brothers and sisters in Christ. We cannot have faith toward God and at the same time harbor resentment toward others. Faith is consistent with an environment where God's people live in love and harmony, but strife will hinder it. As 1 Peter 3:7 says, "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, *so that nothing will hinder your prayers.*"

Jesus tells us that faith can move mountains. It can receive answers from God. This teaching is not for us to explain away or to drown under a thousand qualifications. It condemns unbelief, tradition, false piety, false scholarship, and false orthodoxy. It shows us that those who claim to be defenders of the faith are often servants of the devil. It tells us to have faith! It inspires us to attempt new things, attain greater heights, and stretch our imagination. It teaches us to ask for miracles, and to expect miracles.

Lord, we believe, help our unbelief! Teach us to have faith, so that we may "encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble" (Isaiah 35:3, NASB). Grant us a faith that can move mountains. Lord, grant us this faith – now in the form of an explosive power, now in the form of a persistent trust – so that we may cast aside all obstacles and perform exploits in your name, for your glory and for the good of your people. Amen.

## **6. THE PASSOVER BLOOD**

**The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, "This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household....Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs....This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's Passover.**

**"On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn – both men and animals – and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD – a lasting ordinance."**

**At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well. Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. (Exodus 12:1-3, 7, 11-14, 29-30)**

Here we have the biblical record of the institution of the Passover. Before we deal with the Passover itself, let us first place it in the proper context by considering the events that led up to it.

About four hundred years before, God told Abraham that his descendents would be enslaved and mistreated for a time in a country not their own, but after that God would punish the nation where they serve as slaves, and would bring them out and lead them to their own land (Genesis 15:13-14). In accordance with God's plan and decree, the sons of Jacob, who were jealous of their father's special favor toward Joseph, sold their younger brother to Egypt. But God watched over Joseph, and he was elevated to the highest position in Egypt under Pharaoh to oversee the preparations for the famine to come.

When the famine came and the nations were without food, they came to Egypt to buy from them. Jacob also sent his sons to buy food, and they were reunited with Joseph. As the famine would continue for still some time, Jacob and his whole family moved to Egypt and were given a piece of land as their residence.

The Book of Exodus begins when a new Pharaoh felt threatened by Israel's growing number and prosperity. Thus he enslaved them and then even issued orders to kill their newborn males. But then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, who was faithful to his

promise to Abraham, and sent Moses to confront Pharaoh and to lead his people out of Egypt.

Even as God called Moses to this special work, he told him that Pharaoh was not going to let the people go so easily. Or, from another perspective, we can say that God was not going to let Pharaoh go so easily. He said, "But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you" (Exodus 7:3-4). He would directly control Pharaoh's heart to defy the divine command, even in the face of the miraculous disasters that God would send against the nation.

In other words, God would deliberately prolong the struggle between Pharaoh and Moses so that there would be additional opportunities to display his power at the expense of Egypt. This is so that he could glorify himself, punish the nation of Egypt, and induce confidence in the people of Israel toward God and his servant Moses.

Chapters 7 through 10 exhibit a consistent pattern. Moses would confront Pharaoh and ask him to let the people of Israel depart from Egypt to worship the Lord. Pharaoh would refuse, and so God would send a plague against the nation. Then, even when Pharaoh would appear to yield, God would control his heart and harden him again.

The Exodus account *repeatedly* states that it is God who hardened Pharaoh's heart (4:21, 7:3, 9:12, 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8). This is evidently something that the Spirit wishes to emphasize, so that no one would miss it or come to some other conclusion. There are only several instances when the language appears to suggest that Pharaoh hardened himself (8:15, 32; 9:34), but this is nothing more than relative language, since it is clear that, even in these instances, it is God who directly hardened Pharaoh.

For example, 9:34 says, "He and his officials hardened their hearts." And of course they did. But when God refers to the same instance just two verses later, he says, "I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these miraculous signs of mine among them" (10:1). Later in chapter 14, it is said that "Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds" (v. 5). Of course they did, but what changed their minds? Verse 8 explains that they changed their minds because "The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh." It is the action of the creator that explains the action of the created, the ultimate that explains the relative, and not the other way around.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> If I move object X so that it strikes and moves Y, then it is rightly said that I am the one who moves Y. It is also correct to say that it is X that moves Y if we mean this in a relative sense. But if X somehow moves itself to strike and move Y, then in no sense can it be said that I am the one who moves Y. The concept of secondary causation can only explain a relationship between two non-ultimate objects, but it cannot explain away God's direct control over all things, including evil. That is, it only explains the relationship between X and Y, and not God's relationship with X and Y. Then, the analogy would not be complete unless we also point out that there is no inherent and necessary relationship between X and Y, but God is the one who determines and regulates their interaction. When X strikes Y, the latter moves not because there is an inherent and necessary power or principle functioning apart from God, but it is because God moves X, and then he also moves Y at the time that X strikes Y. Thus God in fact exercises direct and constant control over both X and Y. See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Ultimate Questions, Commentary on Ephesians*, and *Captive to Reason*.

So Pharaoh hardened his heart in a sense, but God made it happen by directly controlling him. Likewise, when a person believes the gospel, he believes the gospel – God is not the one who believes, but he is the one who makes the person believe. And when a person prays, it is not God who prays but the person who prays, but it is God who causes the person to pray and who controls his every thought and utterance as he prays.

The Bible teaches that it is God who directly hardens someone's heart against his word so that this person would not receive mercy but would rather incur greater and greater divine wrath against himself. To illustrate, consider Joshua 11:19-20: "Except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites, who took them all in battle. For it was the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the LORD had commanded Moses." God controlled the thinking of these nations. He made them attack Israel, so that they would in turn incur the wrath of God and be destroyed by his people, "exterminating them without mercy."

Then, Isaiah 63:17 says, "Why, O LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance." God makes them wander and hardens their hearts. How will the people stop wandering and how will their hearts stop being hardened? It will happen when *the Lord* returns to the people, and not when the people return to him. Of course the people must return. Of course they must stop wandering, and of course their hearts must soften. But why would they do it? They would – they *could* – do it only when God returns to them and favors them again.

The New Testament is just as clear about this. John 12:40 says, "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn – and I would heal them." Throughout this process, God remains righteous because it is his prerogative to control his creatures in any way and for any purpose that he pleases. To even protest against this teaching betrays a sinful defiance against the Lord (Romans 9:14-24).

God was working against them. He would send them a plague, and then he would harden their hearts so that he could send them another one. Egypt was ruined in the process (Exodus 10:7). It was a giant among the nations, unrivaled in economic and military strength. The people also worshiped many gods. But nothing could save them when the true God was working against them. They could not even repent and cry out for mercy because God made them stubborn.

We can make a similar observation regarding God's relationship with nature. God actively controlled nature to produce the plagues, which devastated the land and killed multitudes of people. He did not just "allow" the water of the Nile to turn into blood. It is not as if the natural state of the liquid was blood, and that he had been sustaining it as water until the time of the plague. And it is not as if the water could turn itself into blood by its own

initiative and power. We can say the same thing with the frogs, the gnats, the flies, the boils, the hail, the locusts, and so on.

It is futile to assert that perhaps God "allowed" the devil to do it. If the devil had any choice at all, it was not in his best interest to send plagues upon Egypt, so just allowing him to do it did not guarantee that he would have done it. Also, the point of the plagues was to demonstrate God's power, not the devil's. But we need not speculate about this. The magicians, or those who represented the power of the devil, could reproduce miniature versions of the first several plagues, but after that they could not keep up, and admitted that the finger of God must have been at work. In any case, if one would only read through the several chapters and notice the language employed, it would be clear to him that the text describes each plague as planned, produced, sustained, and then removed by the active power of God.

Our passage deals with the final plague that God brought against Egypt, although he would come against them again later at the Red Sea. He declares that he would "pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn – both men and animals" (12:12). Again, we observe the active and deliberate nature of God's harsh and bloody judgment against his enemies. He does not say that he would leave Egypt in judgment and save the Israelites from the self-destruction that the Egyptians would bring upon themselves. He does not say that he would leave Egypt, and somehow their firstborns would fall dead by themselves. He does not even say that he would leave the Egyptians in the hands of Satan.<sup>29</sup>

No, he declares that he would pass through Egypt and kill every firstborn. This is his nature, his method, and his glory. What often happens is that people would construct their own standards and rules about how a righteous God ought to operate, and then they would invent all sorts of complicated arguments and distinctions to explain how God has never violated their standards and rules. It is as if they are embarrassed by the God of the Bible because he is too different from how sinful man functions and because he disregards the standards imposed upon him by spiritual rebels.

The Bible affirms active reprobation, active hardening, and active judgment. Since I have argued for this in other places,<sup>30</sup> exhaustively and time after time, I will not repeat myself

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<sup>29</sup> The "destroyer" in Exodus 12:23 is not the devil, but the Angel of the Lord that appeared to Moses (3:2). As C. F. Keil writes, "Jehovah effected the destruction of the first-born through the destroyer, or destroying angel (Heb. 11:28), i.e., not a fallen angel, but the angel of Jehovah, in whom Jehovah revealed Himself to the patriarchs and Moses" (Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 1; Hendrickson Publishers, p. 334). Since it is certain that the Angel of the Lord is a manifestation of the pre-incarnate Son of God (Keil & Delitzsch, Vol. 1, p. 118-122), the second person of the Trinity, the assertion is sustained that it was God himself who actively slaughtered the firstborns of Egypt. In fact, the verse reinforces our point and deepens its significance, showing that the Godhead is united in directly and actively slaying the wicked and causing disasters for them. See also 2 Kings 19:35. As for Psalm 78:49, there the reference is not to angels that were evil, but angels that caused evil. They were, at least in that context, "misfortune-bringing angels" (Keil & Delitzsch, Vol. 5, p. 528). See also *Barnes' Notes* on Exodus 12:29 and Psalm 78:49.

<sup>30</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Commentary on Ephesians, The Author of Sin*, and also Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*.

now. But I am stressing this point here because it will help us to fully appreciate the Passover and what it represents in Scripture.

That night, "the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well. Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead" (Exodus 12:29-30). God is nowhere said to be passive in any of this. He did not pass over Egypt to save his people, but he passed over his people to kill the most prized members of Egypt's community, so that even the animals were not spared. He was on a mission to kill, and he did a thorough job of it, so that "there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead."

We have witnessed some great disasters in our lifetime in which many perished, and there was "loud wailing." Without considering the details of these events, the nature of the victims, and the applicable biblical principles, many people rule out the very possibility that God had anything to do with these tragedies other than that he "permitted" them. Rubbish! It is true that not every tragedy or violent death is a case of God's punishment against a person, but it is unbiblical to rule it out in every case. Are we ashamed of God? Those who worship him for who he is will boldly confess – nay, even boast – that he is one who seeks out and slaughters his enemies, and those he wishes to punish. Do you hate him for this? Or do you praise him for this? Your answer reveals whether your allegiance belongs to the God of your imagination or whether it belongs to the God of the Bible.

So the Passover was not a case where God abandoned the sinners and left them in judgment while he snatched his own people away from harm. No, he passed over his own people and gave the sinners all his attention, slaughtering all of their firstborns. But through Moses, he instructed the Israelites to smear some of the blood of the Passover lamb on the doorframes of their houses. He said, "The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt" (12:13).

All of this is a picture of what Christ has done for his people. When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). And Paul writes, "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7). The Passover is only a type and shadow of salvation. The reality is found in the atoning death of Christ. Accordingly, the blood of the Passover lamb is a type and shadow of the blood of Jesus Christ. The effect of the former is a picture of the effect of the latter.

The Passover also gives us a picture of the wrath of God against unbelievers. To differing degrees, and whether they are referring to reprobation, hardening, or judgment, some people often portray this aspect of the work of God as passive. But this is contrary to the picture that Scripture paints for us. If we believe the Bible as God's revelation, then we must affirm that he does not merely leave the unbelievers in their sins, as if they would then self-destruct, or as if they could create a hell, set it on fire, and cast themselves in there. No, God himself pursues them and throws them into the lake of fire.

Among other things, the value of Christ's atoning blood is at stake. A weak view of God's wrath betrays a weak view of the atonement, since it is the blood of Jesus that saves us from divine wrath. Corresponding to the blood of the Passover lamb, the blood of Jesus does not only remove us from judgment, but the picture given to us is that it hides us from the most terrible and destructive power in all of existence – the wrath of God manifested in all of its fierceness and violence.

Even now, we hear the "loud wailing" of the non-Christians coming from the distance. No, God has not left them alone, and that is precisely why they suffer so! We shudder when we think about what God is doing to them. But we are relieved, and tears of joy and gratitude are streaming down our faces because God has graciously given us the Passover. We find refuge from the Destroyer behind the blood of the lamb, and as we partake of the Passover Feast through faith in Jesus Christ, we receive life and strength for our journey.

Suppose these other people are right. Suppose God merely passes over the unbelievers and leaves them in the place of judgment. But where is this place of judgment? Hebrews 10:31 says, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Is there a sense in which God passes over the reprobates and leaves them in the place of judgment? Yes, but only in the sense that he does not need to remove them from a place of non-judgment (as if there is a neutral place) to place them in a place of judgment, because the place of judgment is where they start out in the first place, and this place is God's own hands.

Thus there is nothing passive about reprobation, hardening, or judgment. If ever it seems as though God is less active toward the reprobates as he is toward the elect, this is only because his relationship toward the reprobates already cannot be any more active. They begin in his fists of wrath, they remain in his fists of wrath, and they will be crushed by his fists of wrath. There is no room left for him to be more active than this. Does he leave them to be tormented by the devil? But even the devil is in his hands.

Once my wife saw a small spider on the carpet at home and tried to kill it. She took a piece of tissue paper and pressed down firmly on the spider. When she lifted her hand, the spider was flattened, and appeared to be dead. But I knew a little about spiders, and so I said, "It is faking! You have to really crush it. Hurry!" Even as I was speaking, the spider straightened up itself as if it had suffered no damage and started to run for its life. My wife was quick enough and caught it under the tissue again. I said to her, "You need to press really hard on it, crush it between your fingers with the tissue, and then flush it down the toilet."

And if you are a non-Christian, this is what God is going to do to you. At a time of his choosing, he will crush you with his hands and flush you down to hell, to the cosmic sewage system, as if you are nothing more than spiritual excrement. This is by no means overly dramatic or imaginative, nor is it an exaggeration. The New Testament word for "hell" is "Gehenna," and refers to the Valley of Hinnom, located at the south of Jerusalem. By the first century, the Jews were still using it as a garbage dump, where they would keep the fire burning to destroy the waste. Jesus uses it to represent the place where God would



dispose of the reprobates. The implication is that the non-Christian is spiritual garbage. If you reject Jesus Christ, you are nothing but a piece of trash.

My point is that *this* is what the blood of Christ saves us from. To diminish the wrath of God is to diminish the blood of Christ. We insult Christ's atoning work when we say that reprobation and hardening are merely passive, or when we portray divine judgment as not as terrible than it is. That is, to underestimate the wrath of God is to underestimate the blood of Christ that saves us from it. On this basis of a correct understanding of the magnitude and terror of divine wrath, the extreme extent of human depravity, and then the corresponding saving power of the blood of Christ, we press the point: "How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" (Hebrews 2:3).

The plagues of Egypt were terrifying, but something infinitely worse is coming. When it comes, there will be no repentance, and there will be no escape. What is your refuge? Where is your salvation? Do you have a substitute for the blood of the lamb? Will you put holy water on the doorframes? Will you cover your door with creeds made by men? They cannot even save you from me, from my criticisms and refutations. How will they save you from the wrath of God? Will you fortify yourself with the might of your denomination? The Destroyer will come in and slaughter you. Will you call on your deities and prophets? He will send all of them to hell along with you. Are you going to trust in your science? Are you going to hide behind your philosophy? But God has made foolish the wisdom of the world (1 Corinthians 1:20).

If you are a non-Christian, then you are in great danger. At any moment now, the Destroyer will come and throw you into the lake of fire to be tortured forever. Even the blood of animals cannot save you this time. The type and shadow of the atonement can only save you from the type and shadow of judgment. But the ultimate judgment is coming, and the final reckoning is near. This time it is coming for more than your firstborn. Hurry! Take refuge behind the blood of Christ, and the Destroyer will pass over you. Come! Join those who are already feasting on the Lamb of God, those who have already found life in Christ, and be saved from the wrath to come.

## 7. THE GOD OF DISASTERS

**Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance. Therefore, the LORD says: "I am planning disaster against this people, from which you cannot save yourselves. You will no longer walk proudly, for it will be a time of calamity."**

**"Do not prophesy," their prophets say. "Do not prophesy about these things; disgrace will not overtake us." Should it be said, O house of Jacob: "Is the Spirit of the LORD angry? Does he do such things?" If a liar and deceiver comes and says, 'I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,' he would be just the prophet for this people!" (Micah 2:1-3, 6-7, 11)**

Small disasters happen every day. Major disasters are not as frequent, but it seems that there are still several of them every year. An accident might maim and kill several people. A forest fire might leave hundreds homeless. Natural disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis can destroy thousands. And some wars have killed many more.

Men have always been interested in relating these events to what they think they know about God and what they think they know about themselves, and to do it in a way that is consistent with their own belief systems. Many people's belief systems are not equipped to handle catastrophes, and so to them they appear random, senseless, and beyond explanation. Some people resort to pragmatism, focusing on picking up the pieces; others are driven to cynicism and despair.

But whether or not they come up with their own explanations, or whether their explanations agree with one another, they are united in condemning those who would say that these catastrophes are God's punishments against sinners – those who worship idols, blaspheme, murder, fornicate, cheat, oppress, those who are lovers of themselves rather than lovers of God, and those who would expel him from their courts and schools and families.

No, it is not that they can prove these people's innocence, or that they can prove that God does not punish, but the mere suggestion that God would visit them with judgment, and in wars, and floods, and fires that at times would kill thousands, is enough to invite their anathema. Anyone who dares to suggest that a disaster could be God's legitimate recompense upon deserving evildoers is reviled as cruel, unpatriotic, or the like. It is noteworthy that these individuals – who refuse to believe that *any* natural or "man-made" disaster is caused by God as judgment against the victims and as warning toward all others – include both non-Christians and professing Christians.

Among other things, the biblical prophets were divinely inspired forecasters and interpreters of providence. They would declare to the people what God was going to do and why he was going to do it. And after something had happened, they could offer an authoritative interpretation of how the event fit into the plan of God.

They were enabled by the Spirit to infallibly "read" providence. Without this divine inspiration, it would be dangerous for us to attempt the same. This does not mean that we can have no knowledge about God's intentions and purposes, but we must not go beyond revelation into speculation. On the other hand, this also means that as long as we stay within what is revealed in Scripture, it is possible for us to arrive at some general interpretations of what God is doing in the world and in our lives.

Scripture tells us that God does punish sinners with both natural and "man-made" disasters, from the everyday mishaps and inconveniences to things like floods, earthquakes, plagues, famines, blizzards, and so on. All these things occur by God's sovereign decree and power.

Some of these things involve human decisions and actions, and so we distinguish between natural and "man-made" disasters. This is not to attribute any freedom to humans in these events, as if they can do anything without God's direct, active, and constant power, propelling them to think and perform whatever he has decreed, but it is to emphasize that God controls both nature and man, so that even these so-called "man-made" disasters are planned and caused by God. These would include things like wars, terrorism, and genocide. The disasters are "man-made" only in a relative sense. Thus for our purpose, the distinction is not strictly necessary. The point is that God is the direct sovereign and righteous cause of all disasters of all kinds.

From this biblical teaching, we can then form general interpretations of the various acts of providence, including natural and "man-made" disasters. And we have warrant from Scripture to say that when disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, and even terrorist attacks occur, killing thousands of people, there is *almost* always an element of divine punishment. To speak plainly, God kills these people because they are sinners and they deserve to die, and the time is ripe to punish them. Is not this the scriptural teaching? If you reject this, you might as well stop calling yourself a Christian, for your faith rests in yourself and your own opinions, and it is evident that you have no regard for God and Scripture. Then, another intended effect of these disasters is to awaken the elect and to harden the reprobates.

The human element complicates the issue, although not for those who read and affirm Scripture, and who do not become so indignant over the teaching that they can no longer think clearly. What complicates the issue for some is that the very people that God uses to punish sinners are often just as wicked themselves. Scripture has addressed this in numerous places. When God uses the wicked to punish the guilty, he also plans to punish these instruments of his providence at a later time. In fact, God moves them to perform additional acts of wickedness in order to fulfill his own divine decree, which is to cause them to incur even greater wrath against themselves.

This had been demonstrated at various times in Israel's history. When God's people fell into sin and idolatry, he would send foreign nations to slaughter and enslave them. But these invaders were themselves subject to God's wrath, and it is precisely because they slaughtered and enslaved God's people (propelled by God's power) that divine judgment soon visited them as well. Consider Israel at the time of Christ. The Son of God came and the Jews murdered him, and said, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25). God held them to their word. Within a generation, the Romans sacked and burned Jerusalem, and completely devastated it. But God saw to it that the Romans themselves were soon destroyed as well. This is the pattern of providence.

Just to mention this is considered anti-Semitic by many people, but they are hypocrites. Let the Jews first answer for the murder of Christ and the thousands of Christians who perished at the beginning of the Church, and then we can talk about anti-Semitism. The truth is that these disasters were the works of God, and to adopt the mentality that the victims were always innocent is to show that they still have not learned from their own history. As in Micah's day, they are still saying, "Disgrace will not overtake us. Is the Spirit of the Lord angry? Does he do such things?" But unless they repent and believe the gospel, a thousand holocausts would not even approach the kind of suffering that they will experience after this life. Of course this is not true just for the Jews, but for all people everywhere.

So it is true that we can read providence in a general way from the information that Scripture gives us. But we must make sure that we really know what the Scripture teaches and refrain from going beyond what it says in our interpretation. To illustrate, Job's friends, who tried to comfort him, ended up confusing and even slandering his character, for they misinterpreted why disaster had befallen Job. The Bible does not say that disasters *always* occur as divine punishments or because the victims have sinned. Recall John 9, where Jesus and his disciples came across a man blind from birth. The disciples betrayed their assumption when they asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus replied, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."

That said, this does not force us back to total agnosticism regarding the meanings and purposes of God's acts of providence. The principles are there in Scripture, only that Job's friends and Jesus' disciples assumed too much and made a false application of them. Yes, we must avoid making overly specific judgments about why something happened, for even if we are partly correct, God can have a number of reasons for doing a certain thing, and not only the one that you have in mind.

On the other hand, those who insist that a certain disaster in which many have perished did not occur as God's judgment is committing the same error, only in the opposite direction. They are claiming to know the mind of God beyond what is stated in Scripture. As for those who reject the very idea that God will punish people with natural and "man-made" disasters, and kill thousands of people in the process, their problem is that they do not believe the Scripture at all, and so they must be opposed and refuted from this angle. It is one thing to debate whether a particular disaster is God's judgment, in what sense it is God's

judgment, or whether God's judgment is its main reason, but to rule it out in principle is pure prejudice.

The Bible repeatedly denounces as false prophets those who offered false comfort. These are they who preached, "Peace, peace," when there was no peace (Jeremiah 6:14). They predicted prosperity when disaster was at the door. God condemned them because "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious" (Jeremiah 6:14). On the other hand, the true prophets of God who received their messages from him understood that "There is no peace for the wicked" (Isaiah 57:21). They announced judgment to those who had sinned.

Consider the recent major natural and "man-made" disasters that happened in various parts of the globe. To put it mildly, none of the affected peoples and regions represented the very picture of Christian holiness. Without a personal revelation from God, we cannot claim to know the divine mind when it comes to the specific reasons and purposes for these events. However, we can be as specific as a deduction from scriptural principles would permit. On this basis, the least we can say is that no one should be astonished at the idea that God caused these disasters to kill some of these people as judgment against them, and as a warning against those associated with them.

Perhaps some would agree that the victims of these disasters were sinners who deserved what happened to them. They were idolaters, fornicators, cheaters, oppressors, and the lovers of self and wealth rather than lovers of God. However, it might seem to these people that to admit this about them would be to add insult to injury, and to scorn the very memory of them. While I understand this perspective, I do not sympathize, for this reaction exalts man to the point that it would honor those who oppose God, rather than to take warning from their demise.

Instead, where disaster strikes, we should say, "These people were idolatrous, covetous, riotous, and wicked to the core. Although God might have other reasons for it, this appears to be God's judgment against them, to punish them and to warn others. I fear that I am not ready to meet God at this time. If I had been one of these people who died, I might be suffering in hell by now. If disaster strikes and destroys me today, I fear that God would cast me away from his presence to be tortured by hellfire forever. I must repent. This cannot wait any longer. I must get right with God now."

It should also make us think about others in the same way, so that we would say to them, "Friend, you are not ready to meet God. Disaster might strike today, or your life might be snatched away tomorrow. Your life is but a vapor. Repent! Repent! Repent while there is still a little time. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Forsake your sins. Destroy your idols. Call upon him to save you from this perverse generation." Yes, mourn for the victims, even honor their memory on a human level, but do not make them into saints and heroes if they were sinners and criminals. Rather, be warned that "unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Reprobates do not react this way, but disasters make them even more obstinate. They assure one another that the victims were innocent and honorable, and that they were wholly undeserving of what happened to them. They consider it impossible that God would judge in such a fashion, or that God would judge *them* in such a fashion. And if these disasters indeed come from God, then he is to be denounced and cursed as an unrighteous and unworthy deity.

So that there is no misunderstanding, the biblical perspective does not prevent us from offering practical assistance to the surviving victims. That is, even if they had been the objects of God's judgment, Scripture teaches us to show practical benevolence even to our enemies. It is up to God to punish them for their sins, to the extent that he chooses, and at the time of his choosing. Our duty is to obey the relevant biblical precepts on how to treat people. And of course, it is even more important for us to preach the gospel to them, and to tell them that only Jesus Christ can deliver them from the greater wrath to come.

Those who deny the very possibility that these disasters come as God's judgment against the wicked do so based on several beliefs and assumptions that subvert a proper understanding of biblical dogmatics. Some of them seem to think that people are basically good and decent individuals, far from deserving the grisly deaths that they suffered. Then, some people speak as if God will not judge them just because they are Americans. The Israelites came under a similar delusion.

In any case, if the average man on the street is innocent and undeserving of God's harsh judgment, then the gospel is unnecessary for most people. But Scripture teaches that everyone has sinned against God and transgressed his laws, so that everyone deserves death and destruction. Once we affirm this, then there is no reason to be shocked when God pours out his wrath upon a group of people, even killing thousands of them all at once. Rather, it is to be expected.

Those who reject the very possibility that natural and "man-made" disasters can come as divine judgment against the victims not only contradict the biblical doctrine of human depravity, but they also represent God as someone who would not judge and punish in such a fashion. At times, even professing Christians are stunned by what happens, and wonder why God would "allow" such things to happen. But this shows that they have never taken seriously the historical accounts in the Bible concerning the great flood at the time of Noah, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the plagues of Egypt.

God has always judged sinners through natural and "man-made" disasters, killing thousands of them at a time. This is wholly consistent with his holy and just nature. There is no problem with this other than the fact that many people do not want to believe the truth about God and about themselves. In denying that God is the God of disasters, they assure people that he can be ignored and even mocked with impunity. But this universe is not a democracy, and you cannot democratize or Americanize the kingdom of heaven. You have no rights that would require God to treat you a certain way. With God there is no freedom of religion, no freedom of speech, no freedom of thought – if you believe the wrong thing,

say the wrong thing, or even think the wrong thing, God will take it into account and punish you for it, that is, unless you have been saved from his wrath through Jesus Christ.

"This makes God a tyrant," you say. But is God unrighteous unless he conforms to your political theory? This objection itself is evidence of human depravity, and shows that mankind deserves the harshest possible divine punishments. And who says that God cannot be a tyrant? The first definition of a tyrant does not carry the negative connotations often associated with the word, but it is simply "an absolute ruler unrestrained by law or constitution" (*Merriam-Webster*). No sinful man deserves so much power, but the true God can have no less.

Some professing Christians resist the biblical doctrine of divine sovereignty with this objection, that it makes God a tyrant. The implication is that, either they refuse to have a God who is "an absolute ruler," or they take it for granted that a God who uses his absolute power in a way that displeases them has abused his power. Either way, their reaction makes them rebels against the Most High rather than his submissive children. The more urgent problem is therefore not whether God is appropriately called a tyrant, but whether these people are Christians at all. If they are true Christians that are merely confused, then let them make the correction at once.

The truth is that God does not merely "allow" disasters, as if anything in creation has the power to initiate its own changes and motions. But according to our text, just as sinners "plan iniquity" and "plot evil on their beds," so God declares, "I am planning disaster against this people." Just as sinners actively rather than passively plan and perform evil, God actively plans and then causes disasters to arise against them.

Not only does he plan and work disasters against sinners, but he wants people to know that he is the one who performs all these things, and so he sends his prophets to announce judgment. Those who deny that God plans and works disasters against people, including those who have died in recent natural and "man-made" catastrophes, thus obscure the biblical teachings on God, man, sin, providence, judgment, and repentance. Accepting such a position, therefore, would deal a fatal blow to a proper and coherent understanding of biblical dogmatics. It blunts the sword of the Spirit, and diminishes the power and the urgency in the preaching of the gospel.

Besides compromising biblical dogmatics, and indeed *because* it compromises biblical dogmatics, this perspective that denies the very possibility that God would judge men in such a fashion – that is, with natural and "man-made" disasters – also threatens the effective practice of biblical apologetics. It speaks as if God either does not possess or does not exercise constant control over his own creation. Does nature run itself? But how? And by what power? Or, it is asserted that natural disasters happen because our sins have corrupted nature itself. This is true in a sense, but it does not answer the question. We cannot make even one hair white or black, and now our sins are causing earthquakes?

On the contrary, the biblical teaching gives a clear and certain sound, a coherent explanation, and a compelling call to faith and repentance. It is God who constantly

sustains and controls all of creation, whether nature, animals, men, or angels. Our sins have indeed corrupted the creation, but this could happen only because God had decided that these changes in creation should happen in correspondence to our sins. He is the one who sustains and enforces this relationship.

Of course, God is the one who decreed our sins in the first place, but right now we are considering the relationship between our sins and nature. God said to Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field" (Genesis 3:17-18). It is not as if Adam cursed the ground himself, for he could not have produced thorns and thistles even if he tried. But Adam's sin affected the earth not because there was a necessary or inherent relationship between the two, but because God established such a relationship in his divine mind, and then *he cursed* the ground subsequent to Adam's sin. Sin is punished only because God punishes sin, but sin does not possess omnipotence – it cannot control nature, and still less can it create hell and send itself there.

The biblical perspective is consistent and convicting. It boldly confesses that it is God who does all these things. So when we are asked, "Where was God when this happened?" (it is a shame that even professing Christians ask it, often with deep resentment), we should never say that "God had to permit it" or even "God could not prevent it." Rather, without embarrassment we will say that God planned it all along, and when it happened, he was right there causing it, performing all his pleasure, and for his own good reasons and purposes. Where was God when it happened? He was there making it happen, for the glory of his name and the good of his elect. And if he was not there, it could never have happened.

This biblical answer will doubtless provoke rage and confusion, but the difference is that it is true – it is biblical and defensible. We can then proceed to expound to our hearers the sovereignty of God, the depravity of man, and salvation through Christ. The elect will soften and turn to God in faith and reverence. The reprobates will harden and curse this God who demands obedience and who punishes wickedness. In this manner, the words and the acts of God divide humanity in two. Those whom God has chosen will accept God the way he is, and worship him for his sovereignty and righteousness. Others will prefer a God of their own imagination, and for this they will be condemned.

If you knew a non-Christian who had died in one of the great disasters of recent years – someone who was killed by warfare, by terrorism, by flood, or by fire – do not weep for him because of how he died, but weep for him because of what he is suffering now. This person might be your father or mother, your brother or sister, your son or daughter, your spouse, or a friend. At this very moment in hell, he is screaming in extreme agony, and being tortured by an unearthly pain. He curses God, but God laughs at him. He begs God to release him, but God only increases his suffering. He calls out your name, but you cannot hear him, you cannot help him. He recalls the times when the two of you made fun of the Christians and mocked their God. He thinks about the time when one of them stumped him in a debate, but he hardened his heart even more.



He remembers how he was encouraged in his unbelief when he read a certain novel that portrayed Christian history as just one great conspiracy. Now he realizes that all it contained were old theories that were refuted long ago. One of the newcomers in hell had told him that they even made it into a movie. The devil overheard and chuckled, "Could you people be any more gullible? You claimed to be so rational and so knowledgeable, so advanced...Ha! And you were fooled by a novel? Well, you will meet the author in a just a few years. You can get his autograph then!"

No matter how he died, or what kind of person you thought he was, if he died a non-Christian, then he is now in hell – burning, burning, burning! Combine all the mental distress that you have ever suffered and all the physical agony that you have ever endured, multiply its intensity by a million times, and extend its duration to endless eternity, and you will have a faint idea of what he is going through right now. But our imagination fails us, for anything that we can imagine is far weaker than what God is now doing to your friend or relative. So I will restrain myself, lest my description makes hell sound too pleasant. God does not do a half-baked job at anything – what he promises, he delivers, and when he punishes, he goes all the way.

You think that I am a harsh and insensitive man for saying all of this. Perhaps your loved one also considered the gospel and whoever preached it to him as harsh and insensitive. Now he is in hell, and it is too late for him. He is lost forever. But there is still hope for you. You can still be saved today, if God will give you the grace to say, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Flee to Jesus Christ now. Cry out to him, "Lord, save me!" He will give light to your feeble mind, and life to your wretched soul.

Finally, what about the Christians who died? Surely some of the thousands of people who perished were believers. Did God judge them, too? We cannot assert beyond what Scripture reveals, but we can be as specific as the general principles revealed in Scripture would allow. It is possible that some of the Christians were included as God's final act of fatherly discipline toward them, so that although they died with the world, they would not be condemned with the world. Or, perhaps some of them were included because God would use their death to inspire others to faith, reverence, and holiness, and at the same time to harden those whom God had wished to harden. These are just some of the possible reasons that we may deduce from Scripture, and from which we could derive many more. But it would be dangerous to speculate about why God had chosen a specific believer to die in such a manner.

What we know for sure is that these Christians are not complaining right now. They are not screaming in agony or cursing God for how their bodies perished. They are resting in God's presence, grateful, worshipful, and even jumping for joy! They will no longer suffer pain and sickness, or warfare, terrorism, floods, and fires.

If your loved one had died as a Christian, then know that he now receives abundant comfort and recompense for his labor and suffering. And there is no other place that he would rather be than where he is right now. There is no need to worry about him, or to weep about how he died. By God's grace, he has made it, he has arrived. Now is time to think about the

condition of your own soul. Do you have the faith that he had? Have you repented of your sins and believed on Jesus Christ for your salvation as your loved one had done? If so, then you shall see him again, and what a reunion it will be! But if you refuse to repent and believe, then one day God will take your life and throw you into the lake of fire. And you shall be numbered with the murderers, adulterers, homosexuals, slanderers, those who practice witchcraft, those who are the lovers of money and pleasure, and all idolaters and unbelievers.

## 8. RECALL, REPENT, RETURN

**Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. (Revelation 2:4-5)**

Today let us consider something that our Lord said to the great church in Ephesus. The apostle John writes that he was "in the Spirit" on the Lord's Day, and it was at this time that Jesus appeared to him. However, his appearance was no longer that of a lowly carpenter. Rather, we now see him in his glorified form. His eyes were like blazing fire, his feet like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters (1:14-15).

When John saw him, he fell at his feet as though dead (1:17). This is reminiscent of how the prophets were struck down when they saw the manifestation of God, as if overwhelmed by his glory and power. We are aware, then, that when Jesus speaks we are hearing from no one less than God himself. When he first came, he was sent to suffer and to die, but now he has been exalted, never to die again. Man can no longer spit on him, strike him, or crucify him, but now he can only be feared and worshiped. In his mad zeal, Saul of Tarsus persecuted and killed his disciples, but when Jesus appeared to him in a light from heaven, Saul fell to the ground and whimpered, "Who are you, Lord?" (Acts 9:3-5).

Perhaps you are one of those who have mocked him, slandered him, and even referred to the history of his redemption as myths and fables. When his servants declared to you the truth about him and demanded your repentance, you cursed them and laughed at them. You have opposed them to their faces, and you have done all that you could to hinder their work.

This Glorified One is coming after you. Do not expect a humble peasant with a sheep under his arm, who would suffer your insults and abuse. But he is GOD, full of terrifying glory and power. He has marked you even now, and he will come after you. At a time of his choosing, he will take your life, and he will throw you into a lake of fire, where he will torture you forever and ever. You will curse him, and he will laugh at you. You will beg him to annihilate you, but he will ignore your pleas. He will sustain your existence so that you will suffer all the extreme agony that he has in store for you, and that he will inflict upon you in all its intensity through eternity.

This is the fate of everyone who does not worship Jesus Christ. You exclaim, "This is cruel and unusual punishment!" But you have been cruel to his people, and now he gives you your just reward. And it is hardly unusual, as you will have millions of companions in hell, too many for you to count. But take no comfort in this, as none of them will have even a second of rest from their suffering to help alleviate yours.

Jesus introduces himself as "him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands" (v. 1). He walks among the churches, examining them, evaluating them. What a delusion it is to think that our Master is gone, so that we may rule as kings in his absence, and that we should eat, drink, and be merry, neglecting the work that he has given us. There is one who watches. There is one who judges.

He sends word through the apostle John to seven churches, and in every message he declares, "I know" (2:1, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). He is the one who knows. He is the one who sees. His knowledge is complete, and his judgment is fair. Many churches and believers today act as if he does not know. Why, do you think that you can undermine God's sovereignty and get away with it? He knows! Do you think that you can play down the doctrines of the blood atonement and an exclusive salvation, and not be held accountable? He knows! What? Do you really think that you can approve of the sodomite and not suffer judgment?

To those who joined with Jezebel, he declares, "I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead" (2:22-23). To what end? "Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds" (v. 23). No one can cheat him; no one can outsmart him. Rhetoric has no effect on him; false compassion cannot confuse him. He is one who searches hearts and minds, and he knows your infidelity.

Do you marvel at my boldness of speech? Oh, do you not understand? You are nothing. It is because I fear *him* that I speak thus, and say to you, "You vile unbelievers, you contemptible non-Christians – repent or be damned, believe or be destroyed."

He commends the believers for their "hard work and perseverance" (v. 2). He knows that they would not "tolerate wicked men," and that they "tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false" (v. 2). They were committed to maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy, and they stood firm even against opposition, for the Lord says that they "endured hardships" for his name, and they "have not grown weary" (v. 3).

But then comes a word of correction and rebuke: "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love." Wicked men and false apostles have not become extinct. Those churches that endeavor to remain true to sound doctrine even in the face of opposition must demonstrate great discernment, strength, and commitment. The danger is in making warfare rather than worship our main business. For many believers the chief end of man is not to love Christ but to hate the antichrist, not to promote truth but to denounce heresies. The thrust of their preaching is not dogmatics but apologetics. Their agenda is not worship but warfare. There are entire ministries founded upon the mission to tell the world what *not* to believe. Their work is almost entirely negative.

This is not a natural consequence of orthodoxy, or of studying biblical doctrines, since these very doctrines command us to be fervent in prayer, zealous in good works, and to be increasing in faith and love. Nevertheless, our interest right now is not in discovering why

believers forsake their first love, but in what they must do after it has happened. We summarize our Lord's instruction in three words – recall, repent, and return.

You must first *recall* your former condition and compare it to the present one. Has there been a decline in love, in zeal, in fervency? You were so glad to enter the house of the Lord, but now you are relieved to escape it. You had bellowed out his praises in hymns and spiritual songs with tears streaming down your face, but now you are afraid to look like a charismatic. "But I am faithful in attacking error," you say. Yes, but whereas it used to be that indignation for God's honor boiled up from within you and the zeal for his house consumed you, now you are more concerned to demonstrate your own intellectual superiority, and to defend the idol theologians you follow.

You used to rush home every night after work so that you could enter your closet of prayer, to read a sermon or two, or even to attend a church meeting. But now you would rather watch a football game on television, and glory in other people's silly achievements. Then, when the Spirit speaks and the conscience strikes, you retreat to the old reliable excuse, "There is to be no distinction between the sacred and the secular." Right, and you certainly practice what you preach.

Remember the height from which you have fallen!

After that, you must *repent*. Admit that you have fallen. Admit that you have sinned. Confess to the Lord your negligence, your unfaithfulness, and your arrogance. Confess that you have forsaken your first love and have called the world your friend. Oh yes, you have been unrelenting in testing false apostles, exposing false prophets, and refuting false teachers, but it is as if you have forgotten the first principles of the faith of Jesus Christ, and that someone has to teach them to you all over again.

Confess, turn around, and advance toward the opposite direction. Lay aside the heavy things that would hinder you, and get back into the race, looking toward Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith. Transform your entire thinking and attitude, and condemn your own excuses. Plead with the Lord for forgiveness and restoration. Beg him to revive your heart by his Spirit.

Then, *return* to your first love and your first works, and regain your former faith, holiness, and zeal. Return to the house of the Lord with gladness and thanksgiving. Rejoice in hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs. Let the teachings of Christ dwell in you richly. Follow the Lord into battle, but first let him teach you to worship in spirit and in truth. Obey your leaders, and pray that even the simplest truths that the Lord speaks through them will move you to contrition and to action. Be zealous, and harden not your hearts.

Jesus did not give the Ephesians a mere suggestion, but he gave them a command followed by threat. He warns, "If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." He regarded the problem as so serious that it warranted decisive action against the congregation. The Lord is building his Church, and he is active among his people. He is not waiting passively and helplessly for things to go his way – things *are*

going his way. When believers prosper and walk in truth, when they suffer persecution and hardships, and even when congregations compromise and apostatize, these all come about by his design and his power. He holds the churches in his hands, and nothing is beyond his control. He is one who knows, one who speaks, and one who acts.

Some of you have never fallen from any spiritual height. No, I am not referring to those of you who have kept your love burning and strong toward Christ. But I am talking to those of you who have never fallen because you have never attained anything! You have never even started. Jesus tells the church, "Remember the height from which you have fallen!" But when you try to remember, do you recall anything? Has there ever been a time when you affirmed sound doctrine and denounced heresies? Has there ever been a time when you could not tolerate wicked men, and tested those who claim to be apostles and found them to be liars? Some think the problem was that the Ephesians remained orthodox but became cold in their faith. But you have never attained even this!

Try to remember. Has there ever been a time when you were overwhelmed with the love of God for you, and your love for him? Through sin and neglect, some have allowed their love to grow cold, but have you loved at all?

Try to remember. Has there ever been a time when even a casual reading of a Bible passage would cause your heart to burn? Has there ever been a time when you were so anxious to visit the house of worship that it made your toes curl and your palms moist? Have you ever hungered for the word of God to a point that your heart ached with anticipation, so that you yearned for it as a deer pants for water? Have you ever experienced such an intense desire to commune with God that you would rather forgo your supper to spend just a little more time in prayer?

Try to remember. Have you ever felt mercy in your heart where there was once hatred? Peace where there was once turmoil? Love where there was once greed and lust? Humiliation where there was once self-righteousness?

Dear friends, try to remember, for if in your destitute spiritual condition you cannot recall having lost any of the things that I have described, then you have never been a believer at all. When have you ever been eager to worship, fervent in prayer, zealous for good works, and jealous for God's honor? When? Can your friends and family testify to it? You cannot just wish your way into the kingdom. You must be born into it. And if God has ever implanted into you spiritual life, this is something that can never die. Where is the fruit of it in your life?

If there is something for you to remember at all, then recall, repent, and return. You have forsaken your first love, but God has chosen you for himself and will not forsake you. Repent and return, and he will restore you. But if there is nothing for you to recall, then know that you have never been given life in the spirit. You have never forsaken your first love because you have never loved first. You are still dead in your sins, and God's wrath remains upon you. Repent now, believe the gospel, and you will be saved. For if Christ is

so firm with his church, what do you think he will do to you, if you fail to repent (1 Peter 4:17)?

Therefore, whether you are a believer who has fallen from your former spiritual height, or whether you have never been a believer at all, Christ's word to you is "repent." In this is your salvation; in this you will find compassion. May the Lord who watches and judges also grants you repentance. May God have mercy on us, so that we will not harden our hearts, but that we will forsake our sins and obey the gospel. May he show us great kindness, so that he will restore us, and make us love him even more than before.

## 9. MATTHEW 23:37

**Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.**

When the Arminians come against the biblical doctrines of divine sovereignty, election, reprobation, and so on, this is one of the verses that they frequently mention to support their position. What Jesus "wanted" was unfulfilled because the people were "unwilling." This is supposed to show that man possesses a free will that can oppose the divine will, so that God's desire can be finally frustrated, and that his grace can be successfully resisted. The following will not offer a positive exposition of the biblical system, but it will show only that this verse cannot be used to support Arminianism.

As for the scheme called Calvinism, we may distinguish between two forms. We shall call one the biblical or consistent view, and the other the popular or inconsistent view.

Consistent Calvinism affirms with Scripture that divine sovereignty is incompatible with human freedom, and since Scripture teaches that God is absolutely sovereign, this completely excludes and destroys human freedom. Man has no free will; he is not free at all. It is true that man exercises his will – he makes decisions – but his will is not free. Rather, his will – how he makes decisions and what decisions he makes – is directly and constantly controlled by God for both good and evil, both faith and unbelief. And God is righteous by definition in all the actions that he performs upon the creatures. I have offered full expositions of this biblical scheme elsewhere.

Then, there is the popular form of Calvinism. This is the inconsistent view that says divine sovereignty and human freedom are "compatible" in some sense, that moral responsibility presupposes some measure or sense of "self-determination," that God has desires that contradict one another, that God issues divine decrees to effect things *against* that which he desires, perhaps to establish that which he desires even more, that God could decree the reprobation of individuals, making it impossible for them to believe, but still "sincerely" offer them salvation as if they could believe, that God somehow rules over evil but have no direct causative relation with it, that Adam was created innocent and without evil but could somehow perform evil without God causing him to do so, that we can affirm the reality of evil but deny that God exercises any direct causative power over it and still somehow avoid lapsing into deism or dualism, that we can affirm both sides of an "apparent" contradiction, and that Scripture teaches "apparently" contradictory doctrines that are not real contradictions in the mind of God. We will make no attempt to defend this unbiblical and irrational bundle of confusion.

We should begin by noting the context in which our verse appears. You are advised to read Matthew 23 in its entirety before proceeding, but if you lack the patience, at least do it after



reading this exposition. It will help you better grasp the points that we will make. Luke 13:34 is a parallel verse. There the context, in terms of the *topic* raised by the surrounding verses, is similar enough so that it does not demand a separate treatment. And because of this, I will pay no attention to this other verse in our discussion. After we have completed our discussion on Matthew 23:37, you should have no problem with Luke 13:34.

The chapter begins, in verses 1-12, with Jesus making some remarks about the hypocrisy of the scribes and the Pharisees. He says that insofar as they teach the law, the people must obey. Then, he adds, "But do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger" (v. 3-4).

In verses 13-32, he pronounces seven woes upon them, citing the charges that he has against them along with each woe. This portion of the chapter is essential to a proper understanding of verse 37. As you read through these verses, notice how Jesus pronounces one woe after another, and notice the intensity with which he does it. Then notice *to whom* he is addressing these woes in such an unrelenting manner: "Woe **to you**, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" Note all the instances in which he directs his statements to "you" – the scribes and the Pharisees. Pay special attention to verse 13, which says, "But woe to **you**, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for **you** do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."

Then, in verses 33-36, he identifies them with those who, throughout Israel's history, had killed the prophets that God sent to the people. He says, "...so that **upon you** may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth... Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon **this generation**" (v. 35-36). Without doubt, he is referring to the impending destruction of the temple. The context bears this out, since only several verses later, we read, "Jesus came out from *the temple* and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. And He said to them, 'Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down'" (Matthew 24:1-2). This prediction was fulfilled in AD 70, that is, in the same generation to which Jesus ministered and preached, and the same generation that murdered him. The people were slaughtered and the temple was destroyed.

Jesus has not changed the subject by the time he gets to verse 37. The very next verse again refers to the destruction of the temple: "Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!" (v. 38). In fact, as we have just noted, he is still on the same subject as Matthew 24 begins. It is with *this* background in mind that we should read our verse: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling."

Here "Jerusalem" does not refer to the physical city, or to every person in the city individually considered. "Jerusalem" is said to be one that "kills the prophets," and in context, those who would kill the prophets are the leaders of the people – including the

scribes and the Pharisees. They imitate their forefathers who "murdered the prophets" (see v. 29-32). In verse 34, Jesus says that he is about to send them prophets and teachers, and these leaders will mistreat them just as their forefathers mistreated the ancient prophets: "Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city."

As for the "children" in verse 37, naturally they are the people who live under the authority and guidance of these leaders. Religious and political leaders are sometimes called "fathers" in Scripture (Acts 7:2, 22:1), and those over whom they exercise power and influence are called "sons" and "children" (Matthew 12:27; Isaiah 8:18).

We should first observe, then, that this verse cannot refer to the willingness or the faith of individuals to accept the gospel, for otherwise the verse should say, "I wanted to gather *you*...but *you* would not," or "I wanted to gather *your children*...but *your children* would not." But the verse says, "I wanted to gather *your children*...but *you* would not." It is not the "children" who resisted, but the "you" who resisted in order to prevent the "children" from being gathered. The verse, therefore, is referring to the same thing that is already mentioned in verse 13: "You do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."

The Arminians may affirm human freedom and deny that God directly controls a person to either believe or disbelieve. But having denied control to God, we suppose that even they are not foolish enough to then turn and attribute to the *human* religious and political leaders direct internal control over the minds of the people, as if the Pharisees could wield greater control than God over the people, so that they could have mercy on whom they wished to have mercy, and harden whom they wished to harden. No, it is evident that verses 13 and 37 are referring to how the religious leaders hindered the prophets on a purely human and external level, to prevent their message from getting through to the people, and to prevent the people from embracing their message. Jesus is speaking about a social and external influence, not a metaphysical and internal power.

It follows, then, that the "I wanted" in verse 37 is also referring to Jesus' relationship with these leaders and their people on a human and external level. There is no hint in this verse that the divine desire or the divine decree can be successfully resisted just because someone is "unwilling." The Bible is clear on the teaching that, if someone is unwilling, it is because God *makes* him unwilling (John 12:40; Romans 9:18, 11:7), and if someone is willing, it is because God *makes* him willing (John 6:44, 65). No one that God makes unwilling can come (John 6:44), and no one that God makes willing can stay away (John 6:37).

The objection might arise that what is attributed to the "I" here cannot possibly be performed by Jesus considered on a purely human level. But in almost any other context, perhaps in a discussion about the deity of Christ, even the Arminians would admit that as the God-man, Scripture does not always meticulously distinguish between what is attributed to his divine nature and what is attributed to his human nature. We can make the distinction when we must, but Scripture does not always make a point out of it.

For example, in John 4:10, Jesus is at the same time someone who asks for a drink of water, and someone who gives living water. But Jesus in his divine nature cannot become thirsty. In Acts 3:15, Peter says to the Jews, "You killed the author of life" (NIV). But Jesus in his divine nature could not be killed. Of course, this is not a problem for the inspiration of Scripture, for the deity of Christ, or for the doctrine of the incarnation. Rather, it is a testimony to the fact that the divine nature and the human nature are indeed intimately united in Christ, and yet they remain distinguishable, so that there is no mixture or confusion. The one is not deified, and the other is not humanized.

At any rate, it is possible to answer the objection from the verse itself. Notice that the sending of the prophets is not attributed to the "I"; rather, only the gathering of the children is so attributed. And since the gathering is referring to the ministry on a human and external level, it does not demand a divine subject. The fact that a ministry is resisted on a human level says nothing about divine sovereignty or human freedom on a metaphysical level.

Although we may bring to the surface additional details to strengthen the case, our present effort is more than sufficient. We have shown that the verse lends no support at all to the heresy of Arminianism, and we urge its adherents to abandon their humanistic thinking in order to embrace the biblical doctrine.

Neither can the false scheme of inconsistent Calvinism find refuge here, since our case applies equally against them and their misuse of this verse, for example, in their teachings on the "sincere offer" of the gospel and on the tension between contradictory desires in the mind of God. We urge the adherents of this anti-biblical theology to forsake their irrationalism, and to finally remove all traces of the Arminian heresy from their thinking.

## 10. SYMPTOMS OF RETARDATION<sup>31</sup>

I have shown in my writings that the only way to obtain reliable information about reality is by valid deduction from revelation. This position is opposed by many people, including those who claim to be Christians, but so far no intelligent argument has been offered against it. Although it is indeed tiresome to answer one lame objection after another, after some time my increasing disappointment with the intellectual incompetence of contemporary Christian scholarship has mutated into a sustained alarm regarding what appears to be a peculiar manifestation of mental retardation in these believers. When pitted against unbelievers, what they call apologetics really amounts to a struggle among idiots, that is, to see who can remain afloat longer than the opposing side while they are both drowning in a sea of stupid.

There is one critic who has expended an unusual amount of effort to criticize me, and his arguments are lauded by my other critics. One of his objections suggest that, although I insist on a system deduced from biblical revelation, I myself do not obtain some of my conclusions from this procedure. As an example, he cites one place in my writings where I appeal to Genesis 8:22 as a basis for the uniformity of nature. He points out that this is insufficient to establish the uniformity of nature, since to mention only one problem, it is impossible to deduce the uniformity of all of nature from this verse. Therefore, it would appear that I do not follow the deductive method that I advocate, and that although I reject intuition and induction as means to reliable information about reality, I in fact depend on these methods.

For the following reasons, this criticism is deviously deceptive, and demonstrates this person's incompetence:

First, I do not claim that this verse alone establishes an all-inclusive principle regarding the uniformity of nature. And I do not say that we cannot use the rest of the Bible. If the critic agrees that the uniformity of nature is deducible from Scripture, only that I fail to use all the verses needed, then the objection does not damage my philosophy, but only points out that I must list more than that single verse from the Bible to establish the conclusion. If the critic disagrees that the uniformity of nature is deducible from Scripture, then he needs to show this by examining the rest of the Bible, deduce all that he can about the uniformity of nature, and then show that the deduction does not result in an all-inclusive principle of the uniformity of nature.

If his purpose is not to argue whether the uniformity of nature is deducible from Scripture, but that I have failed to use the philosophical method that I espouse, then again I will point that I never said we cannot use the rest of the Bible. Since the context is clear that I mention the uniformity of nature merely as an illustration, only a fool would require me to list every

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<sup>31</sup> The following is based on written correspondence on the subject.

verse in the Bible where something about the uniformity of nature could be deduced. And again, I do not claim that the one verse alone establishes an all-inclusive principle of the uniformity of nature.

Moreover, even if he is correct that I fail to use my own method to assert a claim, this in itself does not refute my philosophy or my method, but only exposes a shortcoming in my practice. That is, perhaps my philosophy and my method are better than my practice, but this does not refute the philosophy or the method. Only a fool would suppose that this is an adequate refutation, and only a fraud would advertise this refutation to unsuspecting readers. But I would not even concede that my philosophy is better than my practice, since as I have shown above, the critic's charge against my practice is based on his inaptitude in reading comprehension and on an incomplete list of verses where a complete list is not required.

Second, I do not even believe in the uniformity of nature as such. I deny that there are such things as natural laws in the first place; rather, I affirm that God constantly and directly controls nature, and that he does so in regular ways from which he usually does not deviate. Therefore, nature might appear to be uniform, but it is not nature that is regular, but the way that God acts that is regular.

If we use the term at all, "natural laws" are at best descriptions of the way that God usually acts in the way that he controls his creation. Since this is a prominent aspect of my system of theology and philosophy, if this critic has been careful in reading and competent in understanding, he would know this. But since he writes as if he does not know this, we must assume that he is either a fool or a fraud, or both.

If I do not even affirm the uniformity of nature, I certainly would not claim that Genesis 8:22 alone establishes an all-inclusive principle of the uniformity of nature. In the context of my work, the topic is raised only to illustrate the failure of science, since it requires the uniformity of nature but fails to establish it through the methods that it endorses, such as sensation, induction, and experimentation.

Third, unless the critic offers an alternative to my philosophy that establishes the uniformity of nature, then he must either abandon the uniformity of nature, or his objection would backfire against his own worldview to highlight the failure of his own philosophy. In fact, since I do not even affirm the uniformity of nature, his objection calls attention to the failure of every system of thought that affirms the uniformity of nature but that cannot establish it, perhaps including his own, whereas it leaves my own position untouched.

His other criticisms against me suffer similar problems, sometimes much worse. Since he presents so many of them, and with an air of sophistication, it would appear to unthinking and impressionable readers that he makes a fair and detailed critique of my philosophy, when in fact he avoids a head-on confrontation with the main thrusts of my system and method.

In addition, since no argument can stand in a vacuum, but since every belief and every action presupposes some basic principles of thought, each refutation that the critic presents commits him to adhere to a defensible worldview of his own. That is, it is impossible to launch a refutation against someone without standing on one's own assumptions.

To illustrate, among other things, to present a logical refutation presupposes logical rules of thought. How does his worldview accommodate them? If he cannot defend the place of logic in his system, then on what basis does he attempt to refute mine? Or, if his worldview demands a place for the reliability of sensation, then he needs to defend the reliability of sensation. That is, if his worldview assumes that he must depend on his sensation of sight to read my writings so as to criticize them, then unless he can demonstrate the reliability of his sensations, his own worldview would prevent him from criticizing my writings. In fact, the requirement for him to defend the reliability of his sensations logically precedes the possibility of an attempt to refute me. Unless he can satisfy this requirement imposed upon him by his own worldview, every argument against me is intellectual suicide, and every refutation against me is a proclamation of his mental disability.

And this is true of every person who attempts to criticize or refute me without a defensible worldview of his own. If I were to waive this logical requirement and engage him in discussion before he has established the reliability of his sensations (that is, if his own worldview requires it, or if his worldview does not require it, he must present an alternate epistemology that he can defend against my criticisms), it would be by a pure act of pity on my part, since logically speaking, he has no place to stand on as he attempts a refutation.

Then, there is another critic who has invented an analogy to represent my teaching on epistemology. The analogy seems to indicate that my epistemology must be mistaken, in that it is impossible. I was told that this analogy forms a seemingly insurmountable argument against my position. But when I examined it, right away I noticed that the critic forgot to make a place for God in the analogy, although God occupies the only central and necessary place in my entire teaching on epistemology.<sup>32</sup>

As I recall this critic, whose lack of intelligence and competence is typical of all my other critics, I find myself shaking my head. Some people have criticized me for my reluctance to answer every little objection against me, no matter how small or stupid. There is a reason for this reluctance. It is because every time that I have been compelled, usually by popular demand, to examine a refutation against my writings, I experience this sinking feeling that accompanies my sorrow at the absence of any understanding or intelligence in the objection.

Of course, I am confident of my position and I would prefer to remain immune to refutation, but there is a tremendous pressure to be discouraged by the fact that even Christian critics can be so stupid. And the clamor that surrounds these objections that are supposed to devastate my position only serves to punctuate the subsequent anticlimactic letdown when I finally read them. Nevertheless, as my hope rests not in man, I encourage myself in the Lord, looking to him for intellectual challenge and stimulation. I have repeatedly shown

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<sup>32</sup> See Vincent Cheung, "Blinded by Atheism" in *Blasphemy and Mystery*.

that many of the objections against me from professing believers are often directly or indirectly applicable against God and Scripture. In reality, their complaint is not against me but against the Lord. They disagree with him, but they dare not say this in public or to even admit this to themselves. So they attack the one who makes bold claims for the Master.

Although men may disappoint, the Lord never does. He is always intelligent, stimulating, and invincible in his wisdom. Thus one can always look to the Lord Jesus for intellectual satisfaction. However, my concern persists for the critics and those who find their sophistry persuasive. Their lack of intelligence and competence is a symptom of mental sickness, and unless a cure is administered, they can never become an effective and faithful spiritual army against unbelief.

My prescription is for them to temporarily suspend their engagement with philosophical arguments or apologetic methodology, and to return to a regular study of basic biblical doctrines, basic biblical commentaries, and basic logical reasoning. I am convinced that anyone who can advance or support such dismal objections against me are not prepared for the "solid food" of the Christian faith. Anything beyond the most elementary instructions in theology, philosophy, and apologetics is too far from their present ability to grasp and apply.

The Lord has helped me understand two things from all these mindless attempts at refuting my writings:

First, they illustrate for me the deep damage that sin has inflicted on the mind of man. Some of the critics are non-Christians, but some claim to be Christians, although sometimes their incompetence and behavior cast doubt on such a claim. If at least some of these critics are genuine Christians – and I indeed hold to this assumption – then their unintelligent refutations also illustrate for me that this mental damage inflicted by sin remains evident in the regenerate. Paul calls us to the renewing of the mind, and the Christians who are slow to do so would inevitably exhibit the kind of foolishness that we would hope to find only in unbelievers.

Second, they illustrate to me the need to construct and advance a program of basic biblical education, the kind that I suggest above. As a responsible adult, you do not enter into a kickboxing death match with an infant girl, even if she thinks that she is a kung-fu master who can slaughter you in a ring. Of course you *can* fight her, and kill her, but that is not what she needs from you. No, first you teach her to tie her shoelaces, to use a fork, to ride a bicycle, or whatever is appropriate for her infantile mind and body. In fact, you would advise her to stop kickboxing, and to stop thinking that she can, because she might injure herself in the process.

Likewise, my recommendation is for my critics and their supporters to sit under a program of basic education. I make this recommendation not because they criticize me – that in itself is not the problem – but because of the confusion and incompetence that they exhibit in their arguments. In fact, I have noticed the same intellectual incompetence – a strange mental blockage or retardation – in their other writings, including their objections against

views that I also consider false. They are failures at critiquing any view. At stake is the intellectual and spiritual welfare of the church. Nevertheless, although the critics display obvious symptoms of mental retardation in their writings, if they would repent and turn their hearts to Jesus Christ, there remains hope and healing for them through the renewing of their minds.



## 11. THE STORY OF A SYSTEM<sup>33</sup>

You advocate systematic theology as the most important thing that a person can study. However, there is also biblical theology. How do these relate?

Systematic theology is topical. Biblical theology is linear, in the form of story. It seems to me that the Bible is much more than merely systematic theology. The Bible is about God gaining glory from both the salvation and damnation of men and angels. God demonstrates who he is, but by way of story.

Let me tell you a story about a bunny. His name is Roger, and he lives with his parents and siblings in a small hole. Since they treat one another with love and respect, the space does not usually feel too cramped. And whenever he needs some fresh air, he can always go for a stroll.

One Sunday morning, Roger woke up much earlier than usual. Not a church-going bunny, he would usually sleep until noon on Sundays. But this morning he was awakened when his sister, Marlene, kicked him in the face with her big foot. He was just about to give her a piece of his mind when she rolled over and mumbled something about carrots. Roger sighed, and decided that he would postpone his revenge – right now he wanted to go back to sleep.

Two hours later, Roger was still awake and his eyes were red with frustration. He was too hungry! And so he decided to venture outside to look for food.

There are many lawns in his neighborhood. As Roger trespasses into each one, he was careful to avoid detection by the dogs. He was convinced that they would be overjoyed to capture him for a special Sunday brunch. He jumped over here...sniff, sniff. He hopped over there...sniff, sniff...looking for something delicious.

Suddenly, he tripped over a rock and fell face first on the grass. He was dazed for a few seconds, but soon recovered. Boy, he was angry! He whirled around to curse at the rock – like I said, he was not a church-going bunny – but then he noticed that it was not a rock at all.

What was it? It was a thick rectangular object, shaped like a brick, but this was not like any brick that Roger ever saw. So he moved closer, and as he shoved his head forward to sniff at it, he saw that there were words written on the top of this brick-like object. Although his mother had taught him the entire alphabet and to read some simple signs, the words on the object were too advanced for him: "Institutes of the Christian Religion, by John Calvin."

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<sup>33</sup> The following is an edited correspondence, with a revised and expanded response.

Ah! It was what we humans call a book. And in this case, it was a systematic theology. But Roger did not know that. Always the curious one, he flipped through each page with his paws, scanning each line:

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[Although my illustration could be made more realistic by reproducing Calvin's *Institutes* in full here, I doubt that the reader would tolerate this. So at the risk of dulling the effect, imagine in this place the full text of Calvin's *Institutes* or any other work in systematic theology that spans at least a thousand pages.]

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Roger did not understand most of the words. And since the book was obviously not edible – well, he was not *that* hungry – he walked away from the book and moved on to the next lawn, hoping to finally find one of those carrots that Marlene was mumbling about....

A story is an account of events. According to this definition, the above would certainly count as a story. But if someone asks me to tell him a story, and I comply by relating Roger's Sunday experience to him, he would rightly observe that the story is merely an excuse to teach him systematic theology.

In a moment we will consider just how much the Bible is like Roger's story, but right now the point is that just because something is presented as a story does not mean that the whole thing is a story. As noted, broadly speaking, a story is an account of events, but it makes a difference when many speeches and letters are intertwined with the account of these events. It is premature to place the greater emphasis on the Bible as story until we consider how much of this story in fact consists of speeches, letters, and other forms of non-narrative discourses.

We should first define some terms. Both systematic and biblical theology are "biblical" in the sense that both of them are derived from and faithful to the content of the Bible. Thus the term "biblical theology" can generate some confusion unless we remember that the emphasis is in the arrangement of the content, and not the source of the content. Systematic theology is a synthesis and presentation of biblical revelation in a topical and logical arrangement. When we call it "logical," we do not imply that biblical theology is illogical, but again we refer to the arrangement, so that one item logically proceeds to the next. As for biblical theology, it is a synthesis and presentation of biblical revelation in a historical or chronological arrangement, following the order of events as they appear in the Bible.

As an account of events, a story can be historical or fictional. We may also call it a narrative. When we refer to the Bible as story, it is understood that we consider it an account of historical events – incidents that happened in specific times and locations. Some theologians contend that, as story, the Bible lends itself to biblical theology. Their views regarding systematic theology vary from thinking that it is a permissible contextualization of the biblical data to an altogether unnatural enterprise that does violence to the text in order to satisfy man's lust for systemization.

At this point, even the assumption that the Bible more readily lends itself to biblical theology than to systematic theology is premature. Just how much of this "story" consists of accounts of events? Just how much of this "story" consists of accounts of discourses, as in speeches and letters? I flipped through every portion of the Bible to make a rough estimate, which would be sufficient for our purpose.

Let us say that Genesis is a narrative, as well as a significant portion of Exodus. But after this, Exodus 20-40, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy are proclamations and expositions of the law of God, not narrative as such. Let us say that all the books from Joshua to Esther are narratives, and for the sake of simplicity, we will not count the discourses in these books. Job contains one discourse after another, and hardly any narrative material. Read through the Psalms – these are not narratives. Likewise, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are discourses. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel are mostly discourses. Daniel contains narratives, and emphasizes discourses in the form of prophecy toward the end. The twelve minor prophets, from Hosea to Malachi, are almost entirely discourses. Hosea, Haggai, and Zechariah include some narratives. The narrative element is prominent in Jonah.

Turning to the New Testament, except for Mark, more than half of each Gospel consists of discourses, and this estimate includes only the discourses of Jesus, not those made by the Gospel writers. Although Acts contains many significant discourses, most of the sections should be classified as narratives. Then, all the letters, from Romans to Jude, are classified as discourses. Revelation is apocalyptic material – I would classify it as discourse, but let us call the whole of Revelation narrative except for the letters to the seven churches.

An estimate that defines narratives and discourses in the biblical books in the above manner yields the following figures. The Old Testament consists of 63% discourses, and the New Testament consists of 67% discourses. Together, the Bible consists of 64-65% discourses. This alone would make it obvious that the simple designation of the Bible as "story" is deceptive.

There are two more factors to consider. First, recall that we have not counted the discourses in the books that we have classified as wholly narratives, such as 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, and 1 & 2 Chronicles. In other words, many discourses were ignored, so that the figures are in fact biased *against* the number of discourses in the Bible. Second, an overwhelming number of the narrative portions of Scripture provide readily usable data for theological systematization, often even apart from the narrative context itself. Discourses may remain at 65%, but passages that lend themselves to systemization (including these discourses) could be between 80-95% of the Bible.

Again, it is admitted that these figures were produced by a very rough procedure of calculation, and if one distrusts it, he should comb through the Bible to confirm this estimate. In any case, simply bringing to our awareness the fact that much of the Bible consists of discourses and not narratives as such is sufficient to make my point, that is, it is inaccurate and deceptive to say that the Bible is "story" and therefore lends itself to biblical theology more readily than to systematic theology. This claim contradicts the plain presentation of Scripture as an account of events that devotes more space to discourses than narratives.

There is no need to denigrate story. Indeed, much of the Bible consists of historical narratives, or story, but it is also true that most of it is not story, but discourses. Just as it would reflect inferior scholarship to stress the narrative aspect of Roger's story, when over a thousand pages of it consists of a systematic theology, it would be misleading to stress the narrative aspect of Scripture to the neglect and detriment of the discourses and systematic portions. However, this is what many people do. When this happens, it is likely that an intellectual bias is involved, that is, they harbor a prejudice against logical systems, and a preference for stories.

Those who insist that the Bible is primarily narrative in nature, and that this premise should dominate all of our exegesis, theology, and preaching, are not seeing the Bible for what it is. Their religious or philosophical disposition favors this false view of the Bible, but it does not reflect reality. The truth is that the Bible contains both narratives and discourses. It is both a story and a system, both historical and theological, and it is presented in a manner that intertwines both the story and the system. There is no need to denigrate either.

Sometimes it is alleged that God speaks in narratives only, and that systematic theology (even if legitimate and necessary) is a "human" product, organizing the data in the narratives into logical form. This is false. The Bible itself contains discourses of systematic theology, in logical or topical form, sometimes in similar arrangements as our own theological expositions. Paul's Areopagus speech is one example of systematic theology (Acts 17:22-31).<sup>34</sup> Then, Colossians 1:15-23 assumes, if not presents, a system of theology with christology as its central motif.<sup>35</sup> It is sometimes said, "The Bible is story or history, not a textbook in systematic theology." But in the light of these and many other biblical passages, sometimes large sections of systematic expositions of theology, this is a deceptive characterization.

And of course the Bible also contains examples of biblical theology. Consider Stephen's speech in Acts 7 – a brilliant piece of biblical theology with the Jews' resistance against the Holy Spirit as its central motif. Therefore, we must acknowledge both systematic theology and biblical theology in Scripture. They are distinguishable and they perform different purposes, but they are intimately intertwined, and they inform and serve each other.

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<sup>34</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Presuppositional Confrontations*.

<sup>35</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Commentary on Colossians*.

Finally, we turn our attention to the statements, "It seems to me that the Bible is much more than merely systematic theology. The Bible is about God gaining glory from both the salvation and damnation of men and angels. God demonstrates who he is, but by way of story." They are highly misleading. If the Bible is more than systematic theology, it is also more than biblical theology. And it is insufficient to say that God demonstrates who he is by way of story, if the story is like the account of Roger's Sunday hunt for food. If we wish to insist that God glorifies himself by way of story, then let us also admit that the story he tells contains more discourses than narratives.

## 12. THE DA VINCI CODE

*The Da Vinci Code* is a recent popular novel. Although its author admits that it is fictional, he also claims that the plot is based on historical facts. These "facts" in turn refer to a conspiracy in which the Church has hidden information concerning Jesus Christ that if uncovered would prove damaging to what has come to be orthodox Christian beliefs. As the author admits, these alleged "facts" are in fact nothing new, nor is this the first time that they have been written about. They are in reality based on a number of documents, theories, and legends that scholars and informed believers have been familiar with since...well, forever. And they have also been refuted since forever.

However, now that these theories have been interwoven into a thriller that many consider to be entertaining, they are suddenly brought to the attention of the general public. And of course, most readers have no way of discerning between fact from fiction. A story can often disarm people's critical faculty, and transmit the theories and beliefs that stand behind it into people's thinking, as if by osmosis. Whether a story is true or false, the average person is easily influenced by story because most people are irrational and undiscerning. So whether it is transmitting truth or falsehood, a theory gains influence when it is placed in the form of a narrative. This does not mean that the method of storytelling is in itself deceptive or otherwise problematic, but I am saying that a theory can gain access to an irrational person's mind more easily when it is transmitted as part of a story than if it is presented in nonfiction form.

I appreciate the work that a number of people have done in formulating specific answers to *Da Vinci*, as long as the contents of their materials are accurate and effective. These answers, of course, are not based on new research and reflection, but on what scholars and informed believers have known and affirmed all along, only that the information is now applied to the novel.

Nevertheless, there are two major problems that I find with most of the Christian responses to *Da Vinci*.

One problem that I have against these materials is not the answers that they give, for on the whole they would be correct, but the philosophy behind their arguments. For example, they might respond to a historical claim in *Da Vinci* with arguments formulated from a purely empirical epistemology. Although their arguments might still be sound relative to the established (agreed upon) methods of investigation, they might reflect too much reliance on and confidence in empiricism in establishing their conclusions, in arguing for the Christian faith, or responding to attacks. Because of this faulty foundation, their entire presentation will necessarily mix in some of the uncertainties and logical problems that are *inherent* in this approach. To use another topic as an illustration, Christians can use scientific arguments to argue against the theory of evolution. That is, they could use the scientific method to formulate scientific arguments against scientific objections. But if in

their presentation they show an epistemological reliance on science, and if science is itself uncertain, irrational, and even false (as I have argued elsewhere), then their approach would make it *appear* that Christianity is itself uncertain, even if Christianity appears *more likely* to be correct. So, this would be the first reservation that I have toward Christian answers to *Da Vinci*.

Another problem that I find in the Christian responses to *Da Vinci* is the suggestion that there is no harm for a person to read the book if he would remember that it is just a novel. A number of writers admit that they find the book rather enjoyable, only that they have a problem with the claim that the plot is based on historical facts. However, the book is not only inaccurate about history, but what it is inaccurate *about* -- what it speaks against -- has to do with the truth of Scripture, the identity and work of Jesus Christ, and even the very nature of God. Therefore, the work is not just "inaccurate" -- it is blasphemous. Since this is the case, it is sinful for a Christian to say to others, "As long as you know the facts, go ahead and read it! It's rather entertaining, really. Just remember that it is a novel and don't take it too seriously." *Even if* there are legitimate reasons to read it, *this* is certainly not one of them. Instead, I would insist that a Christian sins greatly if he reads the novel for this reason, and a Christian leader sins still more severely if he suggests that it would be fine to read it for this reason.

We should never tell people that it is fine to read or watch blasphemy just because it is *entertaining* blasphemy, just because it does not pose a real threat to our faith, or just as long as we do not take it seriously. I would insist that it is a *great* sin against the Lord to read or watch, or tell people to read or watch, for this reason. One reason that many people do not think this way is because they have a man-centered morality. We would not allow people to watch pornography just so that they could be entertained or informed, but from a God-centered perspective, blasphemy is much worse than pornography. How dare we be entertained by it? How dare we? What kind of monster would I be if I were to be entertained by a novel that insults my wife or a movie that mocks my parents? But it is fine to enjoy a novel or a movie that blasphemes our Lord, just as long as we do not take it seriously? At least from this standpoint, those who think this way are just as guilty as the author of *Da Vinci*. You better have a much better reason for reading the book or watching the movie than mere curiosity, or a lust for entertainment or controversy.

Now that *Da Vinci* is being made into a movie, it is that much more likely that some of you will encounter people who mention either the book or the movie to you. Do not be distracted by the current intensity of the hype. Your main response should still be to discuss foundational issues such as epistemology, metaphysics, to arrange a comprehensive clash between the believing and unbelieving worldviews, and so on. To do these things, you should review my *Ultimate Questions*, *Presuppositional Confrontations*, and *Apologetics in Conversation*. Any time that you spend on the details in *Da Vinci* should eventually lead the discussion back to the foundational worldview issues and the contents of the gospel.

This is not very different from when someone challenges you with the theory of evolution. Yes, you can use scientific arguments to defeat him on this issue, but then what? Even after proving that evolution is false with scientific arguments, you still have not proven that other

arguments against Christianity are false, or that Christianity is right. So eventually you must still investigate the first principles of the opposing systems of philosophy. So although it is never *necessary*, it might be useful to know several scientific arguments against evolution, if for no other reason than to use them as *ad hominem* arguments to show that you are not afraid to deal with science, or to show that your opponent is wrong *even if* you employ his irrational methods.

In any case, remember that people refuse to believe in Christianity *never* because they have some solid argument or evidence against it, but because, as the Bible says, their deeds are evil, so that they love the darkness and hate the light. The false information in *Da Vinci* just gives them the excuse to claim that they are making a *rational* rejection of Christianity, although there is nothing rational about it. So unless the Holy Spirit works in their hearts to produce repentance and faith, even if the claims in *Da Vinci* are shown to be completely inaccurate, they would still refuse to believe, but they would just find another excuse to hide behind.

Therefore, letting the unbeliever force you to devote too much time to any one type of objections -- whether it is *Da Vinci*, or evolution, etc. -- is to fall into a trap. He can always make up something to say, no matter how ridiculous, just so you must take the time to refute it. You see, whether he is consciously doing it or not, he is just trying to keep on making objections so that he does not have to be confronted with the true condition of his soul and the truth about Jesus Christ. In fact, at the right time in a conversation, you should point this out, and say, "I have pointed you to the answers against the claims made in *Da Vinci*. Now you must either refute these answers, or acknowledge that *Da Vinci* does not really pose a problem for the Christian faith. Or are you still hiding behind *Da Vinci*, not because it really gives you any rational objection against Christianity, but because you are trying to find an excuse to reject the truth?"

The unbeliever wants to stop you from talking about *him* -- that is, about the unbeliever himself. He will say anything. He will throw anything in your face just so he can delay a real confrontation with God for another moment. If it is not something from *Da Vinci*, it will be something else. So, yes, answer his objections, but always bring the conversation back to *him* -- the wretched condition of his soul, his sins against God, and his only hope for salvation in Jesus Christ. Make him defend *his* beliefs. Make him justify *his* behavior and lifestyle.

It is true that *Da Vinci* mentions issues that are good for believers to know about, only that the novel makes false claims about these issues. For example, it makes a claim about the relationship between Christianity and Constantine, emperor of Rome. But I think that the best setting to first learn about this and other topics is a general course in church history -- a positive and organized presentation on the subject -- and not in the context of a refutation of a piece of popular fiction that makes false claims about church history. And of course, a general knowledge of church history would automatically refute what is claimed in the novel, since it would include information on what really happened at the time of Constantine, and so on.