

COMMENTARY ON
1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

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PREFACE

As in all my commentaries, this exposition of 1 and 2 Thessalonians serves as a reading aid to Scripture that leads the reader to attain a basic grasp of the text, and to relate it to Christian doctrine and practice.

The two Pauline letters provide opportunities to cover a wide range of topics. They include the following:

- the doctrine of Scripture
- the doctrine of election
- the doctrine of the second coming of Christ
- the resurrection of the dead
- the "catching up" of believers
- the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple, and the slaughter and dispersion of the Jews in AD 70
- persecution and providence
- the Great Commission
- "seeker-hostile" ministry
- the relation of metaphysics and ethics in apologetics
- justice, revenge, and atonement
- the sin of slander
- the minister's right to financial support
- the sin of idleness, and the correct policy toward idlers
- cessationism and prophecy
- observations on hermeneutics.

In addition, an outstanding feature of this book is an extended exposition and argument on the matter of whether the Jews murdered Jesus.

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

Paul's second missionary journey began from Antioch (Acts 15:30-35). His disagreement with Barnabas over Mark resulted in the dissolution of their original partnership (15:37-39), so that this time he chose Silas to go with him instead (15:40). They passed through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches (15:40b). When they arrived at Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium, Paul inducted Timothy into their missionary team (16:1-3). The relationship between these two would turn out to be productive both on a personal and a ministerial level.

Paul and the others traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, but were kept from preaching in the province of Asia (16:6). When they reached the border of Mysia, they were about to continue into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them (16:7). So they passed by Mysia and went to Troas (16:8). There Paul had a vision that convinced the group that God had called them to enter Macedonia (16:9-10).

From Troas they sailed to Samothrace and then to Neapolis, and then traveled to Philippi (16:11-12). Their work there receives major coverage in the Acts of the Apostles. The initial preaching was met with some success (16:13-15), but then they were confronted with demonic harassment that led to a city riot and their imprisonment (16:16-24). God's miraculous deliverance, in conjunction with their joyful and steadfast faith, reversed their predicament and gave them the upper hand. This resulted in the conversion of the jailer and his whole family (16:25-34). Nevertheless, they were asked to leave and so they departed from the city (16:35-40).¹

After passing through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they reached Thessalonica (17:1). Their ministry was successful, since they not only persuaded some of the Jews, but "a large number" of Greeks and prominent women were also converted (17:2-4). But some Jews became jealous, so that they incited some bad characters, formed a mob, and started a riot in the city against the believers (17:5-9). And so the Christians sent Paul and Silas away during the night (17:10).

Although the present work is an exposition of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, in order to grasp some of the observations that I will make in this chapter and a later chapter, we

¹ Vincent Cheung, *Commentary on Philippians*.

will need to go beyond Thessalonica in our survey of Paul's second missionary journey. So we will continue a little further.

The Thessalonian Christians sent Paul to Berea (17:10). His work there was again successful, and "many" people believed, both Jews and Greeks, men and women (Acts 17:12). It is said of them, "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (17:11). Luke's emphasis in this verse is often misrepresented. He is not commending the Bereans for their healthy skepticism or discernment, but he is making a contrast between the receptiveness of the Bereans and the stubbornness and resistance that many of the Thessalonians exhibited. So to first stress even a healthy sort of skepticism or discernment in the Bereans would be to teach almost the opposite of what the verse says. The attitude commended is a receptiveness and openness to the gospel. It is not a "we will not believe unless we have to" attitude, but a "we will believe in accordance to what has been revealed" attitude.² In any case, when the Jews in Thessalonica learned of Paul's work at Berea, they went there also, "agitating the crowds and stirring them up" (17:13). So the believers escorted Paul away to Athens (17:14-15).

Luke covers in detail Paul's work in Athens. The apostle preached in the synagogue and in the marketplace, and his disputation with some philosophers brought him before the Areopagus (17:16-21). A large section is then devoted to transcribe or summarize Paul's speech, a significant discourse that resembles a presentation in Christian systematic theology or philosophy (17:22-31).³ This effort was met with some success – "a few men" and "a number of others" became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus (17:34). There was some opposition, albeit more in the form of mockery than the violent riots stirred up by the Jews in other places (17:18, 32).

The most dangerous persecution will often come from those who consider themselves the people of God. Jesus said, "They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God" (John 16:2). Likewise, a minister of the gospel will often find that his greatest enemies consist of professing believers, those who say they are Christians, but who uphold human traditions and personalities rather than God's commands and teachings.

Then Paul left Athens and entered Corinth (18:1). His preaching there was effective, as a synagogue ruler and his entire household, along with many of the other Corinthians who heard the gospel, believed in the Lord. But the Jews again opposed the gospel and "became abusive" (18:6). They attempted to manipulate Gallio the proconsul, but he dismissed them, since Paul committed no crime (18:12-17). So Paul remained in Corinth for a while longer (18:18).

After that, Paul set sail for Syria, and stopped by Ephesus on the way (18:18-19). He went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews, but when they asked him to remain, he

² Vincent Cheung, "The Noble Bereans."

³ Vincent Cheung, *Presuppositional Confrontations*.

declined, but said that he might return (18:19-21). Then, he went to Caesarea, and finally back to Antioch (18:22).

There is a recurring pattern in this narration of Paul's second missionary journey. Whenever he entered a new location, he would first enter the local synagogue and reason with the Jews, showing from the Scripture that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, that he had to suffer and die, and be raised from the dead. This does not mean that his ministry was limited to the synagogues, only that he would attempt to persuade the local Jews first concerning the truth of the gospel. Then, persecution would erupt, usually incited by the Jews who were resistant to the truth and jealous of Paul's success, so that the apostle and his companions had to leave that location and continue with their journey.

From this we may make some observations about the functions and effects of persecution in relation to the progress of the gospel.

First, persecution constantly propelled Paul and his companions forward in their mission. They proceeded from place to place rather rapidly, always remaining long enough to get the job done, but seldom staying longer than necessary. When persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem in Acts 8, the Christians scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, and "those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went" (v. 4). Thus persecution is one manifestation of divine providence that facilitates the spread of the gospel.

Second, persecution prevented the infant church from beginning with the burden of false believers who would profess the Christian religion because of curiosity or excitement. Of course, such a profession does not come from genuine faith, and does not result in transformed thinking and behavior, nor does it lead to salvation of the soul. A congregation that is burdened with a large percentage of false believers will have problems affirming the proper doctrines and governing itself aright, and it will have difficulties in relating to outsiders in a way that honors the doctrine of Christ and the power of the Spirit, and in a way that rightly distinguishes itself from the kingdom of darkness.

On the other hand, a church that is born in the midst of persecution is more likely to comprise of individuals that are compelled to profess the gospel due to the force of its truth and the work of the Spirit within their hearts. They do not have illusions about what Christianity will offer to them and require from them. Concerning one who has no genuine faith, Jesus explains, "But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away" (Matthew 13:21). Genuine disciples are those who would forsake all to follow Christ (Luke 14:26-27, 33), who would put their hands to the plow and not look back (Luke 9:62). Therefore, persecution is also one manifestation of divine providence that serves to maintain the purity of the church.

Christians pray, worry, scheme, conspire, compromise, beg, plead, threaten, entice, and become exercised over how to gather more people into their churches. This is a legitimate desire if we mean that we wish to preach the gospel so that people would believe it and become faithful members in our congregations. But a matter that is almost as urgent as this

other is how we can expel from our churches the overwhelming number of false believers that we have collected over the years. As one preacher said, "Unregenerate men make lousy Christians." Among other things, biblical preaching and strong persecution will drive out those who refuse to believe but still wish to maintain their reputation as Christians.

Now, anything that can be done by persecution can be done by the word of God alone. For example, a person who becomes aware of the harsh treatment that he would experience as a believer could have learned about this from the Scripture prior to and apart from any persecution. A person whose false faith has been exposed due to his inability to endure hardship could have discovered this through self-examination by the word of God. Nevertheless, not all men are honest, and persecution often forces them to become at least a little more candid with themselves and with the world.

The third point follows from the first two, and that is, persecution does not indicate God's disapproval of a ministry. It is a mistake to assume that if a ministry is saying and doing what God has commanded, then it would perform its mission without oppositions (persecution), hindrances (delays, limitations, etc.), and apparent setbacks. These things are often the tools of providence by which God would produce the exact effects desired through the ministry. They serve to maintain a level of efficiency, purity, and honesty among the ministers and the converts.

The fourth point follows from the third, and provides another reason as to why a legitimate ministry may face opposition, even persecution that often appears to hinder its mission and progress. And that is, Christians are called not only to gather and educate the elect – this is only one specific aspect of their calling. Rather, Christians are called to be witnesses for the Lord Jesus. In other words, Christians represent and evidence God's truth, power, and grace to the world, and the purpose for doing this is not only to attract those whom God has chosen for salvation, but also to incite the negative reactions of the reprobates so as to draw out in their words and deeds that which is in their hearts, that is, the wickedness and rebellion in them.

Men are tested and exposed by their response to a ministry that proclaims the word of the Lord by the power of his Spirit. The elect are awakened, converted, and edified, but reprobates will persecute such a ministry. Thus non-Christians testify against themselves before God by the way they deride and oppose believers and preachers of the gospel. Each instance of persecution is another example by which God demonstrates to the world the wickedness and obstinacy of those who reject the Christ. Each instance of persecution is another affirmation of God's justice in his condemnation against all sinners. John 3:19 says, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." And so, Paul writes, "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life" (2 Corinthians 2:15-16; also 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16).

This understanding enables us to maintain a joyful attitude in the face of persecution, and to combat doubt and discouragement. Men's endorsement does not validate a ministry, just

as men's rejection does not disqualify it. Only the word of God, the standard that has been revealed and established by divine revelation, is the true and final judge. But even though we speak with this note of triumph, the pain of persecution is actual and intense in those who must bear it. Therefore, let us be mindful of the suffering of our fellow believers, and pray for those who must endure hardship for the sake of the gospel.

Our present study deals with the two letters that Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica. This commercial and political center was a seaport situated at the junction of a major Roman road. It is easy to understand why it would have been a strategic location for the furtherance of the gospel. And indeed, news concerning the Thessalonian Christians quickly spread throughout Macedonia, Achaia, and "everywhere" (1 Thessalonians 1:7-8), partly because of the easy access and heavy traffic to and from the place.

Acts 17 states that Paul went into the synagogue and preached "on three Sabbath days" (v. 2). The text then quickly proceeds to describe the persecution from the Jews (v. 5-9) and Paul's exit from the city (v. 10). Because of this, some commentators have the impression that his stay in Thessalonica lasted only three weeks. However, there are reasons, some stronger than others, to believe that Paul remained in the city for a longer period.⁴

It has been pointed out that by the time Paul departed from Thessalonica, the church already included believers who were converted from idolatry, that is, Gentile Christians (1 Thessalonians 1:9). From this the likely inference is drawn that Paul's ministry there was not limited to preaching in the synagogue. He did not preach only to the Jews, but also to Gentiles. Nevertheless, this is inconclusive as an argument attempting to show that Paul remained at that place for more than three weeks. This is because the text says that he preached in the synagogue for three Sabbaths, but it does not say that he refrained from preaching between the Sabbaths.

Another argument is that Paul and his companions "worked night and day" to support themselves while they were there (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:8). Their example was strong enough that it demonstrated a pattern of living so obvious that Paul could cite it as a basis for instruction, and perhaps also for defending his integrity against slander.⁵ A more reliable argument is that Paul had received at least two gifts from the Philippian Christians while he was in Thessalonica (Philippians 4:16). It is possible for all of these things to have occurred within three weeks, but it is also possible, and some would think more likely, that they happened over a longer period of time. In any case, whether Paul stayed in Thessalonica for more than three weeks makes no decisive difference in our interpretation of any portion of the two letters.

⁴ Robert L. Thomas, *1 Thessalonians*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 11 (Zondervan, 1978), p. 230.

⁵ I say "perhaps," because when a person makes a denial of something, it does not necessarily mean that he is responding to enemies who are asserting the opposite. One may defend his own integrity even when it is not under question or scrutiny. There are reasons for a person to deny wrongdoing other than that he is being accused of wrongdoing. Perhaps he wishes to highlight his virtuous behavior in order to encourage others to follow his example or to reinforce his credibility as he makes a point. See Vincent Cheung, *Commentary on Colossians*.

It is important, on the other hand, to acknowledge that this church was birthed in persecution and remained in persecution. The account in Acts describes only one instance of this (17:5-9). Because Paul's stay in Thessalonica was probably short, even if it could have been longer than three weeks, and because the church there was birthed in persecution and remained in it, he was concerned as to whether his labor there would take root and endure. For this reason, Timothy was sent back to Thessalonica. As Paul explains, "we sent Timothy...to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials....I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless" (1 Thessalonians 2-3, 5). An essential aspect of gospel ministry is to "strengthen and encourage" Christians, both old and new.

His first letter to the Thessalonians was written in response to Timothy's generally positive report about their condition (1 Thessalonians 3:6). It was probably sent from Corinth in AD 50-51. He wrote a second letter to them not long afterward. We will consider the specific issues that may have moved Paul to write these letters as we come to the relevant verses.

1 THESSALONIANS 1:2

We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.

In their attempts to curb selfishness in prayer, preachers sometimes urge believers to reduce the time spent making petitions for their own needs, but to increase the time spent in making petitions for others, that is, to devote more attention to intercessory prayer. Then, in their attempts to curb imbalance or a "taking" attitude with God, they sometimes urge believers to reduce the time spent making petitions altogether, but to increase the time spent in other aspects or forms of prayer, such as adoration, thanksgiving, confession, and so on. Both of these recommendations are misguided and destructive. This is because although the problems perceived are real, and present actual dangers, the solutions proposed are unbiblical, and go against the teachings and emphases of Scripture.

Throughout the Bible, God's people are encouraged to make direct petitions to God, to make requests to him. The Father tells us to ask (Jeremiah 29:12), the Son tells us to ask (Matthew 7:7), Paul tells us to ask (Philippians 4:6), and James tells us to ask (James 4:2). The Bible does not tell us to stop making petitions or to make petitions for others as a prescription to cure selfishness in ourselves. We should address the selfishness itself, and not the legitimate practice of making petitions to God. There is in fact no necessary relationship between the two. A person who makes constant petitions might not be selfish at all, but his behavior might very well be an expression of his faith in God, that is, his confidence in divine power (that God is capable), and his dependence on divine grace (that God is willing). A reverent petition toward God does not spring from a wicked and fearful motive, but it is an acknowledgement of God's sovereignty and goodness, that he is in control, and that he is merciful to bless, to help, and to deliver.

It is difficult to perceive a person's motive merely by his external conduct. Some inferences are possible, especially if his words and actions reveal specific thoughts and dispositions of the heart. But the bare fact of constant petition does not imply a spiritual imbalance. It is what we should expect from someone who believes and follows God's instructions.

We might not know the motive of someone who makes constant petitions to God, but we know for certain that there is something wrong with the person who does not do it, because he defies the teachings of Scripture. In addition, the nature of petition suggests several possible motives for the person who does not do it. Perhaps he is full of pride, or a self-sufficient attitude, and thinks that he can supply for his needs and solve his problems in his own way and by his own power. Perhaps he is full of unbelief, so that he does not believe that God answers prayer, and that making petitions to God is an unproductive use of his time and energy. Perhaps, for whatever reason, he is full of bitterness against God, so that he is reluctant to humble himself and submit his requests to God. If he prays for others and not for himself, this does not indicate selflessness, but the implication is that he thinks other people need God but he does not.

Likewise, it is legitimate to entertain a degree of suspicion regarding those who teach that we should de-emphasize petition for ourselves or that we should focus on making petitions for others instead of for ourselves. If this is what they teach, then this is probably their own attitude toward the prayer of petition. Unless they teach against an emphasis on petition but still do very much of it in private, in which case they are hypocrites, then they do not perceive the need and legitimacy of constant petition, and this is a failure to acknowledge biblical instructions on the subject.

Christians should be encouraged, even commanded, to make more petitions. If we are to take seriously biblical instructions on the subject, each individual should make more petitions for himself, and to be consistent and persistent in doing so. If motive is a problem, the solution is not to turn away from God or from what he commands, but look to him. So the solution to wrong motives and attitudes is not to discourage petitions in prayer, but to teach about these wrong motives and attitudes, and to petition for right motives and attitudes. The solution to the problems associated with petition is to make petition about these problems. That is, the problems with petitions are solved by making more petitions. It is God who grants the insight to perceive our own defects, then the desire to change, and the internal movement that produces the petition for a pure heart.

Then, there is a tendency to discourage prayer for material things, for things that pertain to our circumstances, our finances, our health, and so on, but to focus our effort on asking for spiritual blessings and advancements. The previous criticisms apply to this view as well, for it is as if the person acknowledges his need for God to supply his spiritual needs but not his material needs. Jesus, on the other hand, instructs his disciples to ask for their daily bread. He also says, "Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete" (John 16:24). Therefore, my attitude is that I need God, now and every moment, and for everything. So I ask, and he hears, and he answers and blesses. His supply is not restricted by my petitions, or I would have very little. He gives more than I ask, since I am limited in what I can perceive, think, remember, and express even about my own needs and desires. But I should bring to him all the requests that come to mind, and all the needs and desires that I can recognize in my life.

Nevertheless, it is true that for many people prayer is equated with making petitions to God, often to the exclusion of other aspects of prayer, and this needs to be corrected. To make this correction, or to urge "balance" in prayer, several items or categories are sometimes introduced. They include adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and petition. Insofar as these are taught in Scripture, it is also appropriate for us to teach them. However, we should avoid prescribing rigid rules as to the order that these are to be performed and the proportion that each item is to occupy.

For example, there is the teaching that one must always come to God first by adoration. We can list at least three problems with this. First, the Bible itself does not teach this. There is no explicit teaching prescribing this, and just because some prayers in the Bible begin with adoration does not mean that all prayers in the Bible begin in such a manner, nor does it mean that ours should begin in this way. Second, there is the practical problem of

deciding where one prayer ends and the next one begins. That is, if after spending some time in adoration during morning prayer I leave the room to get a glass of water, when I return to the room to pray, is it the same prayer session or a new one? If it is a new one, then I will have to start from adoration again. And if thirty seconds of absence does not break a prayer session, how about thirty minutes? If I wish to pray in the afternoon, do I need to begin from adoration again? Who decides? Where is this in the Bible? Third, this teaching that requires one to begin with adoration would eliminate a legitimate prayer like, "Lord, save me!" If the teaching is that prayers should usually begin with adoration, this is better, but short of an explicit statement from Scripture or a statistical tabulation from biblical examples plus a principle that permits us to make an enforceable inference from it, such a teaching would amount to nothing more than a suggestion.

Legalistic pronouncements, even when devised to counteract a genuine problem, causes bondage and destruction. Rather, let us just say that we should include adoration (or confession, or thanksgiving) in our prayers. But what will make us do it if we do not follow a prescribed order and schedule each time we pray? We will do it if we will develop inner qualities that would naturally express themselves in adoration, confession, and thanksgiving. These are produced by sound scriptural teachings and the continual work of the Spirit in our hearts.

So we may say that prayer should not consist of petitions alone. Perhaps it is better to say this from a positive angle, that is, there are reasons and purposes for prayer other than to make petitions. Rather than adding by force or in an artificial manner the things that are lacking, we can remind ourselves of various things about God and our great salvation that will naturally move us to pursue other forms and expressions of prayer. Rather than holding up an empty concept of adoration in prayer and then trying to conjure up things about God for which to adore him, we can remind ourselves of things about God that will naturally move us to voice our adoration to him. This is another way of saying that, if our lips draw close to God but our hearts are far from him, then our prayers are empty even if we think we have covered all the required items, in the correct order, and in the right proportions.

Thanksgiving is one other aspect of prayer. Paul does not begin his letter by saying that he makes requests to God for the Thessalonians. Surely they have their needs and problems, but these do not provide the only reason for Paul to talk to God about these believers. Rather, he first thanks God for them, for what they are already doing well, for the good things that God has already worked in them. Whatever good that is found in them, it is a work of God, so that Paul does not ask God to thank the Thessalonians for their much coveted endorsement of the gospel, but he thanks God for causing faith and holiness in them. A doctrine of human autonomy leaves room for only half-hearted thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving necessitates remembrance of divine grace, a calling to mind God's faithfulness and generosity toward us. It requires single-minded gratitude, because it is difficult to sincerely and unreservedly thank God for things that you have, while you resent God for things that you do not have. Of course, a person's motive is seldom perfect, and the act of thanksgiving could focus his thoughts upon the goodness of God even more, driving out any hidden unbelief and bitterness toward God.

Thanksgiving is an expression of a believing and regenerate heart. Reprobates do not give thanks to God (Romans 1:21). Although non-Christians sometimes exhibit gratitude, it is never directed to God, since by definition they do not believe in the true God, but they direct it toward either human beings or false gods, which consist of demons or imagined entities. So when a non-Christian thinks that something good has happened, if he exhibits gratitude about it, it is directed to a human, a demon, or a delusion *instead* of the true God.

This means that whenever a non-Christian exhibits gratitude, he gives the credit for something good (or that he perceives as good) to a creature – at times even to the devil – rather than to the Creator. This in turn means that whenever a non-Christian exhibits gratitude, he is demonstrating his *lack of* gratitude toward the true source of all goodness and the one who deserves all gratitude. Every time he shows gratitude to another, he is rubbing his lack of gratitude in God's face.

Therefore, whenever a non-Christian expresses gratitude (he never thanks the true God, or he would not be a non-Christian), he mocks and spites God, and thus sins against him. In non-Christians, gratitude is deliberate exclusion and derision of the Creator as sinful creatures show appreciation for one another instead. Non-Christian gratitude is a manifestation of rebellion. It is pure evil in demonstration. Of course, not giving thanks to anyone at all is also sinful, since it remains that no gratitude is expressed to the true God. Non-Christians can do nothing good. All their thoughts, words, and actions are wicked all the time.

1 THESSALONIANS 1:3

We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul thanks God that the Thessalonians are exhibiting signs of faith, love, and hope. These are three paramount virtues of genuine and growing Christians.

Faith produces works that correspond to it. Faith is assent, a genuine assent birthed and sustained by the Spirit in a person, to a system of belief that has been revealed by God. This system or worldview is the Christian religion. We may say it in different ways to stress different aspects of it, but faith is genuine assent to the gospel, the Bible, Christianity, and Jesus Christ, that is, the truth *about* him or what has been revealed *about* him.

Because the Christian religion insists on certain inner qualities and outward actions, genuine assent to it will necessarily be accompanied by these qualities and actions. Because faith affirms the divinity and lordship of Jesus Christ, then it necessarily produces obedience to his teachings and commands. And because faith presupposes a work of God in the heart by which he transforms the individual and grants him godly dispositions, then these will of course be found in the individual who has faith. The works of faith, then, will include obedience toward biblical commands, compassion for the sick and needy, eagerness to suffer for righteous reasons, boldness in speech and action, and enterprising efforts to advance the gospel.

Now, there are various wrong motives for spiritual labor. Some perform ministry work for vainglory, to impress other men and to be admired by them. Some are taken up by a sense of ambition – the same kind of ambition that men have for secular careers and achievements, but applied to ministry work. Others are driven by competition. Whether there is any need or reason for it, they want to be better than everyone else, or at least better than some specific individuals that they have in mind, because the thought of being less successful than they are is unbearable. In connection with this, there is the motive of spite. It is possible to pursue what appears to be worthy spiritual projects for no other reason than malice and revenge. Of course, these wrong motives, and many others not mentioned, tend to overlap. They are against the spirit of Christ and must be exorcised from the heart.

Love is the only motive for spiritual labor that is worthy of the gospel. Contrary to the world's opinion and even most Christian teachings, this love is mainly not an emotion or a feeling, but a disposition that cares about the things of God, to honor his name and obey his commands, and that cares about the welfare of other people, regardless of any emotion or feeling. A person who loves may consistently experience certain emotions or feelings that seem to accord with such a disposition, but he thinks and behaves with love – that is, a sacrificial obedience to God's law concerning how to relate to God and to people –

whether or not he is experiencing these emotions and feelings. Christian love drives emotions and feelings, while non-Christian love, which is not love at all, defines love itself by their emotions and feelings, and then allow love to fluctuate along with these emotions and feelings. Christians who define love as an emotion or feeling endorse a non-Christian characteristic as the supreme virtue, and contribute to the spiritual and ethical decline in the church and in the world. True love is biblical, intelligent, sacrificial, consistent, and persistent.

Hope produces endurance. If we are to grasp the connection between the two, we need to first understand the meaning of hope. Unlike some popular usage, in Scripture hope is not the same as wish. It is not something that we wish to have, but might or might not obtain. It is not something that we wish to happen, but might or might not happen. And it is not something that we will produce or attain by ourselves, our own ability and cleverness. Rather, Christian hope refers to something that God has conceived, ordained, and promised, and it is something that will surely happen. For the Christian to have hope is for him to look forward to something that God has promised, and he can participate in and benefit from this hope because of his union with Jesus Christ.

This hope is in Jesus Christ, so that although it refers to some things that will happen in the future, in a sense it is for us a present reality and a present certainty. This is because he has already revealed himself to us. We know this person now, and our hearts are full now. The fulfillment of the promise is not entirely in the future, but he has saved us already, and we have received from him already. Our hope is not wishful thinking, a baseless expectation, or an empty delusion, but it is a future certainty based on present reality.

We have from him knowledge, faith, power, love, virtues, his Spirit, and "every spiritual blessing" (Ephesians 1:3). We have salvation now. We have the knowledge of God now – that is, we know him now. We have a filial relationship with God now. And even though many believers would renounce their birthright to protect a tradition or a false humility, we have rational, coherent, and extensive answers to all ultimate issues now. God has given us all these things through the Scriptures and by his Spirit. Yet all these things, he says, only amount to a deposit for the greater things that he will lavish upon us in the age to come. This is what a Christian ought to mean by hope.

No wonder that those who grasp this shout and leap for joy. And no wonder those who have this hope possess great endurance. It is not a passive quality, but an active virtue. It energizes us to pursue that which God has ordained for us to do. As Jesus, "who for the joy set before him endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2), so we will consider "that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). And again, this endurance is not a strength produced by a delusion or deception, for we have already received a deposit, and we are already enriched by it. The future hope refers to our full inheritance, but those who believe have already experienced its reality. So we perceive that even those things that seem to harm and oppose us are only steps that will take us closer to the glorious end that the Father has promised.

In contrast, non-Christians have no hope. They have nothing. They do not have the answers to anything about anything. They cannot prove any of the things that they claim they know. They cannot demonstrate that their worldviews contain anything true or reliable in them. And they have no basis to think that they will gain knowledge or salvation, or that anything positive will happen to them in the future. For them to expect anything good would be delusional and wishful thinking.

Our knowledge of God in the present forms the basis of our hope for the future, and this hope in turn enhances our comprehension about the present. We are not only able to interpret any event in the past and present in relation to Christ's anticipated and then accomplished redemption, but we are also able to interpret any past and present event in the light of what we know God has in store in the future. Unbelievers cannot do this. Because they do not know Christ, the light of men and the light of the world, they are completely in the dark, about any thing, about any time. They have no understanding of the past, no wisdom for the present, and no hope for the future. They are lost, ignorant, and miserable.

1 THESSALONIANS 1:4⁶

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you...

The sovereignty of God is foundational to Christian theology. This is because "God" is not an empty word or sound, but it refers to a person with definite characteristics, and one of these is the unique quality of absolute and exhaustive sovereignty over all things, including every event in creation, and even every thought and decision of the human mind. This characteristic of sovereignty defines him, and since it is what it is – an absolute and exhaustive quality – it excludes all other possible referents, so that the word "God" can refer to only one being, that is, one who possesses this quality of complete sovereignty.

By extension, the doctrine of election is foundation to Christian soteriology, since it is an application of God's sovereignty to the salvation of individuals. The doctrine maintains that in eternity, before the universe was made, God had selected an unchangeable number of specific individuals for salvation in Christ, and he did so without basing his decision on the faith and works, or any other condition, in the individuals so selected. Rather than choosing an individual because of any foreseen faith, the elect individual receives faith because God has first chosen him.

Arminianism opposes this biblical doctrine. Its proponents turn divine election into God's reaction to what we choose, so that our choosing Christ is logically prior to God's choosing us, so that mere human beings determine the will of God in salvation. Against this heresy, Paul declares, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you." It is God who sovereignly chooses the elect, so that Paul says, "He has chosen you," and not "He has approved of your choice." If God merely accepts our choice, then he does not choose us in any real sense of the term. But Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). Therefore, Arminianism is false.

The corollary of election is reprobation. Just as God has chosen those individuals who would be saved, he has also deliberately and individually (that is, "by name") decreed the damnation of all others. Many of those who affirm the doctrine of election nevertheless reject the doctrine of reprobation. However, just as election is a necessary conclusion from the sovereignty of God, reprobation is also true if by nothing else other than logical necessity, although it is also supported by direct biblical teaching. Those who reject the doctrine do so on the basis of their irrational prejudice instead of on biblical argument or logical inference.

One common objection is that this biblical doctrine of divine sovereignty removes or contradicts the moral responsibility of man. That is, if God controls everything, including human beliefs, thoughts, decisions, and actions, then it seems to some people that man

⁶ The chapters covering 1:4-10 are adaptations from my *Ultimate Questions*.

would not be morally responsible for anything. However, man is responsible precisely because God is sovereign, since for a person to be responsible means that he will be held accountable to his actions, that he will be rewarded or punished according to a certain standard of right and wrong. So moral responsibility has to do with whether God has decreed a final judgment, and whether he has the power to enforce this decree. It does not depend on any "free will" in man. In fact, since human responsibility depends on divine sovereignty, and since divine sovereignty indeed contradicts human freedom (not human responsibility), this means that man is responsible precisely because he is not free.

Man is responsible because God will reward obedience and punish rebellion, but this does not mean that man is free to obey or rebel. Autonomy is an illusion. Romans 8:7 explains, "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." The Bible never teaches that man is responsible for his sins because he is free. That is, man is responsible for his sins not because he is free to do otherwise – this verse says that he is not free, but he is still counted as sinful. Whether man is responsible has nothing to do with whether he is free, but whether God decides to hold him accountable. And man is responsible because God has decided to judge him for his sins. Therefore, the doctrine of human responsibility does not depend on the unbiblical teaching of free will, but on the absolute sovereignty of God.

The issue then becomes one of justice, or whether it is just for God to punish those whom he has predestined to damnation. Paul anticipates this question in Romans 9:19, and writes, "One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?'" He replies, "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?'" (v. 20). God rules by absolute authority; no one can halt his plans, and no one has the right to question him. This is true because God is the creator of all things, and he has the right to do whatever he wishes with his creation: "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?" (v. 21).

Paul continues, "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..." (v. 22-23). He is still answering the question cited in verse 19: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" He denies that man has the right to question God in the first place, but then he proceeds to answer the objection anyway. And he writes that, since God is sovereign, he can do whatever he wishes, and this includes creating some vessels destined for glory, and some destined for destruction. Peter says regarding those who reject Christ: "They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for" (1 Peter 2:8). Whereas the elect rejoice in this doctrine, the non-elect detest it, but either way, this is the way it is and there is nothing that anyone can do about it.

It is because of poor reasoning that the issue of justice is even brought up against the doctrine of reprobation. In its various forms, the objection amounts to the following:

1. The Bible teaches that God is just.
2. The doctrine of reprobation is unjust.
3. Therefore, the Bible does not teach the doctrine of reprobation.

However, the second premise is assumed without warrant. By what standard of justice does a person judge whether the doctrine of reprobation is just or unjust? In contrast to the above, the Christian reasons as follows:

1. The Bible teaches that God is just.
2. The Bible teaches the doctrine of reprobation.
3. Therefore, the doctrine of reprobation is just.

The pivotal point is whether the Bible affirms the doctrine, and one must not assume whether the doctrine is just or unjust beforehand. Since God is the sole standard of justice, and since the Bible affirms the doctrine of reprobation, this means that the doctrine of reprobation is just by definition. As Calvin says:

For God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous. When, therefore, one asks why God has so done, we must reply: because he has willed it. But if you proceed further to ask why he so willed, you are seeking something greater and higher than God's will, which cannot be found. Let men's rashness, then, restrain itself, and not seek what does not exist, lest perhaps it fail to find what does exist.⁷

Just as the elect comes to Christ by an irresistible summon, and "it is God who works in [him] to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13), the reprobate is by no means autonomous – not even in his sins. God directs a person's thoughts "like a watercourse wherever he pleases" (Proverbs 21:1), and there is no free will.

It is futile to repeat the silly objection that God permits some actions but does not will them, for as Calvin says, "Why shall we say 'permission' unless it is because God so wills?"⁸ Since God controls and sustains all things, what does it mean for him to permit something except to say that he wills and causes it? That is, to say that God "permits" something is nothing more than an ambiguous way of saying that God "permits" himself to cause something. There is no distinction between causation and permission with God; unless he wills an event, it can never happen (Matthew 10:29).

The election and reprobation of individuals belong to God's secret decree, so that the members of either group are not listed for public examination. So on what basis does Paul say, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you" (1 Thessalonians 1:4)? Paul lists the indications that his readers were chosen by God for salvation in the next several verses.

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; Edited by John T. McNeill; Translated by Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960; p. 949, (III, xxiii, 2).

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*; p. 956, (III, xxiii, 8).

1 THESSALONIANS 1:5a

...because our gospel came to you not simply with words...

The pervasive influence of secular philosophy has infected many professing believers with an anti-intellectual bias. Thus it has become unacceptable to present the gospel with "just a sermon"; rather, great emphasis is given to performance, entertainment, socializing, and mystical experience. Such a disposition tends to distort Paul's "not simply with words" into an endorsement to this type of thinking, so that the expression could be seen even as a deprecation of plain preaching.

Even some of the more reliable commentators stumble over the phrase. For example, Leon Morris writes, "Words alone are empty rhetoric, and more than that is required if people's souls are to be saved."⁹ But just because it is true that "more than that is required if people's souls are to be saved," it does not follow that "words alone are empty rhetoric."

Morris is unclear in the first place. If by rhetoric he means, "the art of speaking or writing effectively," "skill in the effective use of speech," or "verbal communication,"¹⁰ then what he says almost amounts to, "Words are words," which is a mere tautology. However, Morris probably has in mind the meaning, "artificial eloquence; language that is showy and elaborate but largely empty of clear ideas."¹¹ But if Paul's preaching had been stripped of the power of the Spirit, it still does not follow that his words would have been "artificial eloquence" or "language that is showy and elaborate but largely empty of clear ideas." Paul preached the gospel, and Morris' statement is equivalent to saying that the gospel by itself is nothing more than showy language void of substance and clear ideas. But the gospel is what it is whether or not it is accompanied by the power of the Spirit – the same words and ideas are conveyed.

Morris betrays his confusion when he continues, "The gospel is power...whenever the gospel is faithfully proclaimed, there is power."¹² But if "the gospel is power," then it is never empty rhetoric. It is fashionable to repeat anti-intellectual phrases such as, "Words alone are empty rhetoric," but words are always rhetorical, and rhetoric always deals with words. Whether a presentation is *empty* rhetoric depends on the content of the speech. The proposition, "Jesus is Lord," consists of words alone, and no one will acknowledge its truth unless by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3), but whether one believes it or not, it is not empty rhetoric.

⁹ Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, Revised Edition*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991; p. 46.

¹⁰ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition.*

¹¹ *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition.*

¹² Morris, *Thessalonians*; p. 46.

Any interpretation of Scripture that deprecates the role of words or of preaching cannot be true. The entire Bible consists of words without a single picture or musical note; it uses words to convey intellectual information. Paul says, "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" (Acts 20:32). We inherit the blessings of the gospel and grow in the spiritual life by means of the *words* of God.

Again, the verse says, "For our gospel did not come to you in word only" (NASB). There are two ways to understand the word "only," as the following examples illustrate:

1. The Godhead does not consist of *only* God the Father, but also Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit.
2. His wealth does not consist of *only* this broken bicycle, but also five cars and two houses.

In the first statement, the word "only" does not belittle God the Father, but merely indicates that he is not the sole member of the Godhead. So the word can simply mean that there are additional items in the list without implying anything negative. But in the second statement the same word suggests that one's wealth would indeed be meager if it consists of nothing more than a broken bicycle.

Since the Scripture emphasizes the importance of words in many places, the word "only" (or "simply") in verse 5 cannot be understood in the second sense. Paul has no intention of belittling words or preaching when he says that his gospel did not come "in word only," but he desires to indicate that other things besides his verbal presentation had happened, and these things suggest to him that his converts are among God's elect.

Misconceptions in this area are common. Robert Thomas begins well his explanation of verse 5, saying, "Words are basic to intelligent communication. But the gospel's coming was not 'simply' in word; speaking was only a part of the whole picture."¹³ But then he stumbles over the same point as Morris and writes, "Their preaching was not mere hollow rhetoric but contained three other ingredients essential to the outworking of God's elective purpose."¹⁴ However, Galatians 1:11-12 eliminates the possibility that the content of Paul's preaching is *ever* "mere hollow rhetoric."¹⁵

What Thomas writes amounts to saying that if the Spirit does not accompany your reading of the Bible, then the Bible is mere rhetoric. Many unthinking people would agree with Thomas, but I call this blasphemy. As God's verbal revelation, the Bible is never mere rhetoric. That the Spirit does not act powerfully when you read only means that you may not be affected by what you read, but the content of the Bible, being the mind of God, is not therefore hollow.

¹³ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 11*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978; p. 244.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

¹⁵ "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."

Morris and Thomas do not seem to know what the word "rhetoric" means. Paul says he knows that God has chosen the Thessalonians *because* his preaching came "with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction." This implies that his preaching was not always accompanied by the power of the Spirit, in the sense that God did not always make his preaching effective; otherwise, all who heard Paul preach would have been converted. Now, at those times when God did not make his preaching effective with great power and conviction, did the content of the gospel become empty rhetoric, or did the content of the gospel remain the same – that is, the power and wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24)? If Paul preached the same thing, then whether or not the Spirit came with power to produce faith in the hearers, the gospel was still the power and wisdom of God.

Against the anti-intellectual interpretations of Scripture, we must maintain that words can be meaningful by themselves, and whether a presentation consists of empty rhetoric depends on the content of the speech. Since the gospel consists of truth, it is never empty rhetoric. It is true that besides the words that we preach, God must exercise his power to convert the sinner, but it is often on the occasions of our preaching that he exercises this power. Paul came to know that some of the Thessalonians were among God's elect because of the effects accompanying his preaching that he could not have produced as a man. But in trying to affirm the necessity of God's power to convert the sinner, we must not belittle words or preaching, lest we blaspheme the gospel of Jesus Christ.

1 THESSALONIANS 1:5b

...but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

Paul is aware that God has chosen the Thessalonians for salvation because of his consciousness of divine power when he preached, and because of their deep conviction about and genuine reception of the gospel (v. 4-6).

Preaching is the means by which God summons to himself the elect, that is, those whom he has chosen for salvation. His power regenerates the elect who come under the preaching of the gospel, and gives them faith in Christ. Because not all who hear the gospel are among the elect, God's power might not operate in a saving manner every time the gospel is preached, or it might not operate in a saving manner toward everyone in an audience.

The gospel is never void of power, since "it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16), but only the chosen ones will receive a change of mind, so that they will recognize Christ as the power and wisdom of God. Paul explains, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:22-24).

The "power" in verse 5 refers to the Holy Spirit's influence at work through the apostle's preaching to effect change in the minds of the hearers. Miracles is an integral part of evangelism (Romans 15:18-19; Hebrews 2:3-4), but by "power," the New Testament writers sometimes have in mind the influence of the Holy Spirit, as in his divine power to convert sinners.

Since 1 Corinthians 2:4 parallels 1 Thessalonians 1:5, we should study it to better understand both verses.

The entire chapter of 1 Corinthians 2 has been distorted by many anti-intellectual commentators. For example, Paul says in verse 2, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." From this, some make the ludicrous assertion that Paul decided to suppress his knowledge of theology and skill in argumentation in his preaching.

First, the expression, "Jesus Christ and him crucified," does not restrict the content of Paul's preaching to Christ's crucifixion. Indeed, it refers to a central theme of the gospel message, that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3). But as 1 Corinthians 15 indicates, Paul also told the Corinthians about Christ's resurrection when he preached the gospel to them. The truth is that "Jesus Christ and him crucified," "the message of the cross," and other such phrases are designations for the whole biblical gospel

and worldview. Several aspects of Christianity may receive emphasis at the beginning, but Paul did not preach only a simple message with little regard for the comprehensive set of doctrines forming the Christian faith. Rather, he says that he preached "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27) to his hearers.

Throughout 1 Corinthians 1 and 2, Paul does not say that the Christian message is less intellectual or rational, or that the gospel has no claim to intellectual respectability, but his concern is to emphasize that the *content* of revelation differs from non-Christians philosophy and that the *method* of delivery differs from non-Christian speakers. The content of the gospel is superior to the product of human speculation, since the gospel comes from God's wisdom. And the method of delivery is also superior, in that it consists of plain speech, accompanied by the power of the Spirit to convince and to convert people, rather than mere sophistry that relies on confusion and deception to persuade.

Our purpose for coming to 1 Corinthians 2 requires us to focus on verses 4 and 5: "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."

The Greeks had tremendous admiration for oratory eloquence, so much so that at times it caused them to ignore the substance of what was said. The "wisdom" (1 Corinthians 1:22) they so respected "often degenerated into meaningless sophistries."¹⁶ The sophists, scorned by Plato, were those who would argue for whatever position the situation demanded. Their blatant disregard for truth allowed them to become debaters for hire, that is, to argue for whatever position that they were paid to defend. Some compare them with present-day lawyers.

The sophists did not offer sound reasoning, but their arguments were fallacious and deceptive. Their philosophical discourses were based on dubious human speculation. Thus as Paul defends his apostleship, he writes, "I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way" (2 Corinthians 11:6). The Christian faith is not based on speculative philosophy, but divine revelation, on knowledge taught by God.

The "wisdom" of the Greeks led them to despise the message of the cross, since it appeared to them a message of defeat, so that Paul writes, "We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23), but there is salvation in no other message. The statement, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2), refers to the gospel's contrast against non-Christian thinking, and not an anti-intellectual strategy of evangelism. Paul is noting that he preached a message that was contrary to the people's cultural and spiritual disposition, and since the message was not founded on human speculation in the first place, he did not speak as the sophists did, but instead relied on God's power to convince the hearers.

¹⁶ Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 1 Corinthians*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999 (original: 1958); p. 45.

Paul deliberately slips into philosophical terms in verse 4, asserting that his preaching was shown true, not by speculative and fallacious arguments, but by the "demonstration" of the Spirit. The word indicates a logical proof, as in philosophy and geometry. The English translation is appropriate, since "demonstration" denotes a "logical proof in which a certain conclusion is shown to follow from certain premises."¹⁷ His point is that he insisted on presenting a message that was based on divine revelation instead of one that was based on human speculation.

Bullinger writes, "Here, it denotes the powerful gift of divine wisdom, in contrast with the weakness of human wisdom."¹⁸ This is the issue at hand. Paul's preaching differs from the orators both in method and content, but his arguments are nevertheless logical and persuasive. Unlike the fallacious "proof" of the sophists, the apostle provides sound "proof" for his message that is powerful to effect conversion in his hearers.

One part of Vine's definition on the word "demonstration" is problematic. It says, "a 'showing' or demonstrating by argument, [*apodeixis*] is found in 1 Cor. 2:4, where the apostle speaks of a proof, a 'showing' forth or display, by the operation of the Spirit of God in him, as affecting the hearts and lives of his hearers, in contrast to the attempted methods of proof by rhetorical arts and philosophic arguments."¹⁹

It is correct that *apodeixis* means "demonstrating by argument," and that it is the operation of the Spirit's power "as affecting the hearts and lives of his hearers." It is also true that Paul contrasts his approach against "the attempted methods of proof by rhetorical arts." In this case, rhetoric indeed denotes, "artificial eloquence; language that is showy and elaborate but largely empty of clear ideas."²⁰ Any speech is rhetoric in the sense that it is verbal communication or discourse, and as such Paul engages in it, but unlike the philosophers, his arguments are free from sophism.²¹ The definition is acceptable to this point. Paul's approach differs from those who employed "mere rhetoric," since he preaches a message with true and coherent content without using fallacious arguments to deceive his hearers into agreeing with him.

However, Vine then contrasts Paul's speech against "philosophic arguments," and this can be misleading. If "philosophy" is the "theory or logical analysis of the principles underlying conduct, thought, knowledge, and the nature of the universe,"²² then Christianity is certainly a philosophy. Scriptural teachings indeed produce a worldview, or "a comprehensive...philosophy or conception of the world and of human life."²³ Unless Vine

¹⁷ *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition.*

¹⁸ E. W. Bullinger, *Word Studies on the Holy Spirit*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1979; p. 120.

¹⁹ *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc., 1985; New Testament section, "demonstration," p. 158.

²⁰ *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition.*

²¹ "A clever and plausible but fallacious argument or form of reasoning, whether or not intended to deceive," *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

means "sophistic" when he says "philosophic," his contrast between Paul's demonstrations and "philosophic" arguments is false. That is, Scripture indeed addresses "philosophic" issues, using sound "philosophic" arguments, but unlike human philosophy, these arguments are not fallacious or "sophistic." We should contrast Christianity against sophistry, and not against philosophy as such.

Paul tells the Corinthians that he preached the way he did "so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 2:5). As with 1 Thessalonians 1:5, "The main point is that the whole is God's work. The Corinthians were made Christians by divine power."²⁴ Since the power in both places refer to "the powerful operation of the Spirit, bearing witness with and by the truth in our hearts,"²⁵ "men's wisdom" and "God's power" do not necessarily refer to the object of faith – that which the person believes – but rather the means by which faith is generated. We may understand the verse to say, "with the result that your faith should not *exist by* the wisdom of men, but by the power of God."²⁶

Some commentators assert that 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 indicates a change in Paul's missionary strategy. They say that Paul was at first a failure as a missionary, because he would enter one place after another to preach at and argue with the people there, and invariably he would encounter resistance and persecution, so much so that before he could make many converts or before the gospel could take root, he would have to leave for another place, where the same thing would happen again. As he entered Corinth, he finally resolved to cease relying on his own intellect and education, but to depend on the power of the Spirit instead, that is, the power to work miracles. Therefore, the lesson is that we should not argue with people, but we should depend on the Holy Spirit, and practice evangelism through the use of signs and wonders.

Recall the summary of Paul's second missionary journey in the first chapter of this commentary. There I emphasized several points about Paul's method and its effects in preparation for answering this false interpretation of 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. I will make several observations here on the basis of the summary provided earlier. First, Paul's method of preaching and argumentation was effective, as indicated by significant conversions and established churches. Second, the false interpretation assumes that success in ministry means the absence of persecution, or even that a miracle ministry might prevent persecution. But this contradicts the teachings and examples of Jesus and the apostles. If it is acknowledged that a ministry that is accompanied by signs and wonders can nevertheless be persecuted and expelled from a place, then one cannot cite this as evidence that Paul's method was a failure because he was persecuted and expelled. Third, Paul worked miracles even before he reached Corinth. Fourth, contrary to the false interpretation, he continued his method of preaching and argumentation in Corinth (Acts 18:4).

It would seem that the false interpretation is motivated by an anti-intellectual bias, and asserted in the face of biblical passages that stand in direct contradiction to it. A ministry

²⁴ Gordon H. Clark, *First Corinthians*; The Trinity Foundation, 1991 (original: 1975); p. 34.

²⁵ Charles Hodge, *1 & 2 Corinthians*; Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000 (original: 1857); p. 32.

²⁶ Clark, *First Corinthians*, p. 34.

of signs and wonders is indeed important, and the apostles exercised such a ministry, but this does not mean that argumentation is excluded. The two do not contradict or exclude each other.

1 THESSALONIANS 1:5c-10

You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Paul is confident that his hearers have been chosen for salvation because he was conscious of God's power when he preached to them, and it produced deep conviction in the Thessalonians, that is, an assurance and persuasion that the gospel was true. However, anybody can pretend to agree with the gospel, but only genuine believers will exhibit consistent indications of faith and regeneration. As Jesus says, "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them" (Matthew 7:18-20; see also v. 21-27).

Regeneration is a radical reconstruction of the intellect and personality of the individual, and therefore the true convert would exhibit in his outward speech and conduct the changes that correspond to such a drastic inward transformation. From the transformation that has taken place in the Thessalonians, Paul infers that they are truly born again, and that their faith in Christ is real.

For example, Paul says, "In spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit." Now, Jesus explains in the parable of the sower that not everyone who appears to receive the word of God with joy is truly saved: "The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away" (Matthew 13:20-21). But the joy of the Thessalonians was "given by the Holy Spirit."

The Spirit regenerates only the chosen ones. Jesus says, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). The doctrine of free will cannot make sense of this verse, but the biblical doctrine of salvation affirms that, as "the wind blows wherever it pleases," so the Spirit of God regenerates only those who have been selected for salvation by God. Scripture says, "All who were appointed for eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). A person believes in Christ because he has been chosen. God did not choose us because he had foreseen our faith, but we have faith because God has chosen us without

regard to any condition that would be found in us. Since it was the Holy Spirit who gave Paul's converts such joy in receiving the gospel, it means that God has performed a work in their minds because of his own sovereign decision, and since God does not in this manner change the heart of those whom he has not chosen, Paul infers that the Thessalonians are among the elect.

Jesus says that a false convert falls away "when trouble or persecution comes because of the word." In contrast, the Thessalonians had joy from the Holy Spirit "in spite of severe suffering," thus showing the genuineness of their conversion. Many professing Christians live in countries where persecution is relatively light, even though believers indeed often receive unjust treatment. Under this relatively comfortable atmosphere, false converts that have been gathered by unbiblical preaching are not sifted out of the church. Contributing nothing but costing much, they continue to be a vexing but often unacknowledged problem in the church. Nevertheless, the solution is not to hope for severe persecution, but a return to preaching the biblical gospel and enforcing church discipline, such as reprimand and excommunication.

Some writers are alarmed at the rate at which professing Christians are converting to other religions – Islam, Mormonism, Buddhism, Catholicism, and other non-Christian groups and cults. But the unceasing influx of false converts is even more disturbing. By God's providence, non-Christian religions and philosophies in fact serve to remove some of the false converts from the church, lest we become overwhelmed by them. Many reprobates, destined for destruction, join themselves to Christian churches because they have heard and affirmed a false gospel, and non-Christian religions and philosophies sometimes attract these reprobates away from the church.

On the other hand, true Christians belong to Christ forever, so that "no one can snatch them out of [his] hand" (John 10:28). It is better for a kingdom to have many easily marked enemies than to have many foreign spies within its own domain, wrecking havoc, causing dissension and confusion, and draining its resources from within. Add to this the fact that many false converts have even become ministers, wielding authority over the doctrines, agendas, and finances, clearly it is better for them to leave the church than to remain in it.

Since there are many false converts in our churches, there is a great need to evangelize our own congregations – let the gospel either convert them or drive them away. In John 6, Jesus gives his followers a "hard teaching" (John 6:60) after which "many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (v. 66). But even this did not remove Judas, who being "doomed to destruction," was not lost until later, "so that Scripture would be fulfilled" (John 17:12). He betrayed Christ as predicted (v. 70-71), and afterward committed suicide. On the other hand, Peter denied Christ three times, but recovered to become a great apostle. What was the difference? Jesus had prayed for Peter so that his "faith may not fail" (Luke 22:32). He also prayed for the rest of his elect, but not for the reprobates: "I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours" (John 17:9; also Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 7:25). The truth is that "no one can come to [Christ] unless the Father has enabled him" (John 6:65). Peter was enabled; Judas was not.

Faith embraces the gospel in spite of the dangers and consequences. The Thessalonians demonstrated the genuineness of their conversion by their joy in the face of severe suffering. Paul would certainly denounce those who compromise the faith that they claim to affirm because of financial losses, political threats, or pressures from relatives and friends. On the other hand, "No one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life" (Luke 18:29-30).

Perseverance in suffering and persecution is one indication of genuine faith, the presence of which implies that God has chosen the person for salvation, and sovereignly changed his heart. God does not preserve us as a reaction to our enduring faith; rather, our faith endures because God preserves it and causes it to endure. Hebrews 12:2 calls Jesus both "the author and perfecter of our faith." Faith does not come from our own wills, but it is a gift from God. And faith does not endure by our own power, but "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). Salvation depends on God's sovereign will and mercy from the beginning to the end. Therefore, it is by his immutable decree in election and not by human free will (which we do not really have) that all "those he justified, he also glorified" (Romans 8:30). Those who fail to persevere until their glorification, have never received justification.

Genuine faith does not only endure, but it is active and growing (v. 7-9). Peter writes, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Peter 2:2). A person who shows no interest in studying theology is perhaps temporarily ill in spirit, but a persistent indifference indicates that he has never received faith and life from God. By feeding on spiritual milk, the believer grows up in his faith, although one who "lives on milk" is still a spiritual infant, and "is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness" (Hebrews 5:13). There is much to learn, and much room to grow through learning. Anti-intellectualism, which disparages even spiritual milk, has prevented generations of Christians from growing up in the faith.

Spiritual growth has to do with an intellectual understanding of God's word and not mystical experiences. And spiritual maturity has to do with how one speaks and reasons: "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me" (1 Corinthians 13:11). The writer of Hebrews reprimands his readers, saying, "In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!" (Hebrews 5:12). But how many Christians understand the letter to the Hebrews itself? Many consider it material rather advanced, but the letter was directed to those who were "slow to learn" (v. 11), and those who still "need milk, not solid food" (v. 12). Anti-intellectuals reject the biblical standard of measuring spiritual growth and maturity, and instead make the Christian faith a matter of feeling and experience. But Scripture's teaching is that Christians are to increase in knowledge and character, through an intellectual understanding of the things of God, so that they can think and speak as spiritual adults.

Bearing fruit is another metaphorical way of indicating spiritual life and growth. Jesus teaches, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The Bible contradicts the notion that the mere profession of faith guarantees salvation.²⁷ A person who makes a profession of faith but fails to bear fruit afterward has no warrant for claiming that he has ever been a believer. Verse 8 says that one shows that he is a true disciple by producing spiritual fruit: "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

The Thessalonians have passed this test. Their faith have been enduring and increasing such that they have become models for other believers to emulate. As Paul instructs Timothy, "Set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). Other Christians readily recognize the powerful effect the Holy Spirit produced in the Thessalonian converts, so that wherever Paul travels, he has no need to tell others about them. Believers everywhere already know how the Thessalonians have "turned to God from idols" (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

True conversion results from a drastic and permanent transformation at the deepest level of one's intellect and personality. God changes the individual's most basic commitments, so that he denounces the abominable objects he once served, and turns to offer true worship to God. This change in a person's first principle of thought and conduct generates a rippling effect that transforms the entire spectrum of his worldview and lifestyle. Thus conversion produces not only a negative change, in which one turns from idols, but Paul states that they have also turned "to serve the living and true God" (v. 9). Moreover, a biblical system of thought replaces the former unbiblical philosophy. This new worldview is one in which we "wait for [God's] Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (v. 10).

Salvation does not come by turning to a generic "God," as if there is such a thing, but a true convert explicitly affirms the biblical system of thought. Verse 10 is of course not exhaustive, but at least it includes the resurrection and return of Jesus Christ, the coming wrath of God against the unsaved, and it carries a partial reference to the Trinity, since Paul distinguishes between the Father and the Son. The Christian worldview offers a teleology that ties together the whole of human history. Turning from idols to serve the true and living God, the believer now looks forward to the culmination of the ages in the return of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, our biblical passage assumes the apostle's soteriology from election to glorification. God has chosen those who would be saved through Christ by an immutable decree in eternity. In due time, he regenerates them and produces faith in their minds by means of preaching. Genuine faith then perseveres and grows into maturity. This enlightenment of the mind and transformation of the personality result in a glorious hope, through which the believer yearns for and expects the return of Jesus Christ and the consummation of his salvation.

²⁷ That is, a *false* profession, since a profession energized by the Spirit indicates sincere faith, through which we are saved.

1 THESSALONIANS 2:1

You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure.

Slander is a favorite tactic against the gospel. It refers to false criticisms, accusations, and representations, and can be directed against our doctrine, motive, behavior, and history. It is designed to undermine the credibility of the Christian faith, and in many cases, to inflict pain and loss on the ministers of the gospel. Jesus taught his disciples about those who would "insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me" (Matthew 5:11). This reflects the kind of people that non-Christians are, and these are the things that they do when they cannot withstand the influence and intelligence of Christianity. Slander can also come from professing believers who disagree with our theological peculiarities. When that happens, of course, they are operating in dishonesty and hypocrisy.

Jesus faced constant slander during his ministry. His opponents branded him a deceiver (Matthew 27:63; John 7:12, 47), and said that he worked miracles by "the prince of demons" (Matthew 9:34). At his trial, "many testified falsely against him" (Mark 14:56), although their statements did not agree. He faced slander even after his death and resurrection, since his opponents spread false theories about what happened to him (Matthew 28:12-15). He remains the most slandered person today, as unbelievers malign him, and professing believers misrepresent him. "If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!" (Matthew 10:25). We worship and preach the one whom evil men slander, and because of this we have become their targets as well. As Jesus said, they will "*falsely* say all kinds of evil against you *because of me.*" Instances in Scripture abound. The Jews, for example, "produced false witnesses" (Acts 6:13) against Stephen and murdered him (7:57-58).

Paul faced slander throughout his ministry. During his second missionary journey, he was slandered in Philippi (Acts 16:20-21), Thessalonica (17:6), Athens (17:18), and Corinth (18:12-13). Since the Jews from Thessalonica who encouraged slander against him were the ones who incited persecution in Berea, it is probable that he was slandered in Berea as well (17:13). Thus he was slandered in every major location in his second missionary journey. When we also take into account all the other instances of slander against him recorded by Luke in Acts and indicated (although sometimes only by implication) by Paul in his own letters, we should become acutely aware that slander plays a large part in the opposition against the gospel and its ministers. Therefore, adequate ministry training must include instructions on how to handle slander, and believers in general must also be taught how to respond to slander against themselves and against their ministers, "in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes" (2 Corinthians 2:11).

It is widely held that 2:1 begins a section in which Paul refutes the slander that has been leveled against him. Although this is possible, the assumption is unnecessary for an

accurate interpretation of the passage, since what Paul says is true and intelligible regardless of whether it is something that he asserts for his own purpose, such as to reinforce the credibility of his person and message, and to enhance his relationship with his converts, or whether it is something that he asserts in defense of his person and message. The meaning of what he says is the same. Indeed, it would not surprise us that those who are so eager to slander him to his face would be much more ready to slander him in his absence. Still, an accurate interpretation of the letter does not depend on this assumption. There is nothing in the passage or in the entire letter that could be distorted or misunderstood apart from such an unverified background.

The hermeneutical tendency insisting that extra-biblical conjectures regarding the historical context are necessary in even gaining a basically reliable understanding of Paul's words is false, incompetent, and dishonest. The nature of these statements is such that their meaning remain essentially unchanged regardless of the historical context as to whether there is any slander involved. It is common for hermeneutic-happy individuals to require more (any?) extra-biblical information than we need in blatant disregard to the clarity and richness of the passages examined. This error in hermeneutics occurs because exegetes are sometimes more interested in preserving a sense of importance for their specialized discipline than in promoting Scripture's sufficiency and perspicuity, and in principle the right and ability of every believer to understand it.

If Paul is answering slander, then we can infer that at least some of his statements correspond to the false criticisms against him, so that at least some of these statements would represent the opposite of what the slander entails. We will discuss what he says in the next chapter of this commentary. However, to correct another common hermeneutical tendency, even if Paul is answering slander, it would be illegitimate to assume that every detail is written in answer to a corresponding false criticism or accusation made against him. That is, if a person responds to a slander by saying, "I came to you without any greed or ulterior motive," it does not follow that the slander has stated that he came with "greed" *and* "ulterior motive." It could be that the slander only accused the man of greed, but it is natural or desirable for the person so falsely maligned to complete the declaration of innocence or to make a general disclaimer against other possible accusations regarding his motive. Whatever the nature of the slander may be, or whether there is any slander at all, notice that "I came to you without any greed or ulterior motive" would carry the same meaning.

As with everything else, we desire to learn God's perspective on this form of persecution, for in divine wisdom is the response of confidence and holiness. Slander is not reserved for great apostles, but Jesus assumes that it could happen to any person who represents him. If you stand for the truth of the gospel before the church and the world, then it is likely that at some point people will misunderstand you, misrepresent you, and spread lies about you. Jesus calls those of us targeted by slander for his sake blessed. In enduring slander because of our allegiance to Christ, we are identified with the prophets, since they were also likewise persecuted, and our rewards will be great in heaven (Matthew 5:11-12). May the Spirit grant illumination and sincere faith, so that this admonition takes root in us; otherwise, it will not persist in our minds when actual slander occurs against us. But if by

God's power we truly believe that our rewards will be great for enduring slander for his sake and for joining the company of the prophets, we will indeed rejoice in the face of slander, and the stigma, inconvenience, and persecution that it generates.

Our response is characterized by faith, rejoicing in our participation of the kingdom and looking toward God for justice and vindication. So we do not resort to dishonorable methods, such as repaying slander with slander, or to physical violence. Rather, we will entreat and intercede for their sake, so that perhaps God may save some of them. And if they do not repent, there is no need for us to punish them ourselves. God is just, and he will punish those who slander the gospel and its ministers, even throwing them into the lake of fire that burns forever. As for those who claim to be Christians and yet slander other believers, they should examine themselves to see if they are in the faith.

This does not mean that we may never answer slander and attempt to correct false criticisms, accusations, and representations against us, especially when the credibility of the Christian faith is at stake. If 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 is indeed a response to false allegations against Paul, then it serves as another example in handling slander. But even if not, we know from other places that he indeed addresses slander at times. In any case, even as he defends himself, he could not address every charge at length and he could not constantly maintain his defense. And certainly no one can actively defend himself after death. Much is left for God's providence to sort out apart from the labor of the slandered minister or believer. God calls us to serve him, not to replace him. Therefore, whether or not we defend ourselves, and whether or not we take much time to do it, we must look to God for the vindication of his name, and if it is his will, ours as well. But let no one suppose that the effect of our work will be in exact proportion to our effort; rather, by God's providence and blessing the effect will be greater than what our effort appears to be able to produce.

If we preach and practice the gospel, it is likely that we will be slandered. The proper response is to rejoice, defend, and believe. Then, the awareness that we as individual believers might be slandered alerts us to the possibility that other believers, Christians other than ourselves, might also be falsely maligned at times. This realization is significant because it reminds us that many criticisms and accusations against other Christians are untrue, and just as we would not want people to slander us, we should not slander others, spread slander about others, or to believe slander about others.

It is especially important to keep this in mind when allegations are made against our theological opponents, such as Christians with whom we disagree. In fact, we should not believe slander or unjustified accusations even against unbelievers. Christians have no business inventing or encouraging slander against anyone, not even the devil himself. There are professing Christians who invent and promote slander against their theological rivals. This is of Satan and of the spirit of the Pharisees, who murdered the Lord Jesus and thought that they did God a favor. But God will judge such men. A lie is a lie, and we should not endorse it. For the sake of truth and justice, at times we may need to defend the victims of slander, even if we must then turn around to make some accurate criticisms against them instead.

Some Christians, it seems, will believe any accusation against their ministers. It is true that ministers of the gospel can betray their commitment to Christ and sin grievously – failing in doctrinal purity, in sexual morality, in financial accountability, and so on – and at least in the current spiritual climate, many of them are not believers at all, so "Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning" (1 Timothy 5:20). But let us always keep in mind that slander is a weapon of the enemy, to introduce suspicion, strife, and chaos into the church; therefore, Paul instructs, "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses" (5:19).

Christians are likely to agree with what I say here, that we should not endorse or promote slander, whether it is directed against Christians or non-Christians, or whether against those whom we support or oppose. But unless they jealously hold themselves to a strict standard of truth and justice, the temptation to take advantage of slander in order to advance their own agenda at times takes control of them. Slander capitalizes on the thrill that many professing Christians experience upon hearing a negative report about someone they disapprove, and their eagerness to see this person destroyed. So they gloat when they hear accusations against those that they dislike or oppose, and they add fuel to the fire, so to speak, by building additional criticisms on top of the current fury. This behavior is of the evil one. It does not become the children of light. Any hearsay can also be slander, and to encourage it makes one a tool in the devil's hand.

There was a church that appeared promising for a time. There were numerous problems with it, but at least it had maintained some semblance of loyalty to the biblical faith until it began to increasingly deviate from the spirit and doctrine of Christianity. I would not consider myself an insider, and I had no authority in that church, but I did have minimal access to the leadership's attention. So I vehemently complained about the direction that the church was heading, but my effort was of no avail.

The church's teaching became so outrageous and so endangered the congregation, that it caught the media's attention. Reports about the church soon appeared on television, magazines, and newspapers. However, I noticed that these media reports carried very little accurate information about the church, its practices, and its teachings. The errors did not consist of differences in biblical or religious interpretation, but numerous factual errors concerning what the church taught, what certain leaders had said and done, and so on. Regardless of the reason for these inaccuracies – perhaps the reporters had defective sources, misunderstandings, or outright disregard for the truth, etc. – most of the criticisms were in effect invented. The church had many problems, so many and so serious that I no longer considered it a Christian church, but they were not the ones reported.

Here is what I wish to say by the illustration: For a Christian leader to then warn his congregation about this church on the basis of media reports would be to endorse and preach slander, that is, if he had spoken as if these reports were true. Now consider how often Christian polemics issued by pastors and anti-cult ministries depend on media reports about those that they wish to annihilate, and the seriousness of the situation becomes apparent. The church is a culture of slanderers.

If the world does not offer accurate reports on our Master, why would you expect it to offer accurate reports about you? And if the world does not hesitate to slander you, why would you expect it to tell the truth about another believer? If the world is unjust toward you, why would you expect it to be blameless when it tells about another Christian, even if you do not think that person is much of a Christian? Why make Satan your ally just because you consider the person a threat? Handle it with truth or not at all.

False teachers can always be exposed by an examination of their own statements. Media reports about their numerous extravagant purchases and torrid sexual affairs are unusable unless you can verify these allegations apart from the media reports. But all this is unnecessary ammunition. If it can be shown from their own publications that they promote heresy and perverse behavior, this is all that is necessary to expose them and to warn believers against them.

1 THESSALONIANS 2:2-12

We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed – God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else.

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

If Paul is indeed answering slander in this passage, then at least some (not necessarily all) of the statements would correspond to the accusations leveled against him. And we can infer that these accusations allege the opposite of the statements that he makes here. However, contrary to a common hermeneutical error, even if we assume that Paul is answering slander (an assumption that cannot be established), we have no right to assume that every item that he mentions is said in reply to a corresponding accusation made against him. Therefore, there is no way to know the exact content of the slander. And if he is not answering slander, then the passage is simply something that Paul wishes to say. All of this has no effect on the meaning of the passage.

The text highlights several characteristics of a genuine gospel ministry. Preaching the same message in place after place even in the face of persecution makes it more credible that the apostle has a sincere belief in the veracity and urgency of his doctrine, and that he speaks out of obedience to God and compassion for his hearers. He is not after comfort or popularity, since he does not flatter his audience, and almost everywhere he goes he has to suffer mistreatment and endure insults. He is not after some financial reward, since he worked to earn his own living. I will say more about this last point in a moment.

He makes a number of denials as well as several claims. His preaching, he says, does not spring from error, does not spring from impure motives, and does not spring from trickery. He is not trying to please men or seek the praise of men. He does not use flattery or put on a mask as if to cover up evil intentions. Perhaps these items correspond to accusations made against him, but we cannot be sure, and he could make these denials whether or not he is

answering slander. On the contrary, he adds, he speaks as one approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so that both his character and his message have received the divine seal of authenticity. He makes these claims with the awareness that God "tests our hearts" and that he is "our witness." In addition, while he was with the Thessalonians, he treated them with the care of a mother and the comfort of a father.

Here is where consistent doctrine and lifestyle can pay off: Paul appeals to what the Thessalonians have learned about him from the time that he stayed with them. In order to answer slander or to reinforce his credibility, he only has to remind them of what they already know about him, and so he writes, "You know" (v. 5), "Surely you remember" (v. 9), "You are witnesses" (v. 10), and "For you know" (v. 11). This is a powerful method for defending one's integrity, but needless to say, it is effective only if one has displayed exemplary conduct before his audience. This observation impresses us with Paul's holiness and dedication, but it becomes even more beneficial if we will follow his pattern.

As for the matter of financial support, Paul writes that while he and his companions were preaching the gospel to the Thessalonians, they "worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone" (v. 9). It is essential to truth, justice, and the health of the church and its people to know what Paul is saying, what he has done, and his reason for doing it. Some have concluded that ministers of the gospel should never accept payment for their work as preachers, but should always earn their livelihood by laboring in something other than the work of the ministry. This position represents not only a misunderstanding and even a rejection of Scripture, but it is abusive, unjust, and wicked, and it will incur the Lord's punishment if not righted.

There is the matter of motive. Christians often complain that preachers only want to take their money. But not many preachers are wealthy, and with stingy and rebellious Christians like these, it is unlikely that many of them will become wealthy. Preachers enter into the ministry knowing this, and those who do not are probably not very intelligent. The fact is that most professing believers who complain about greedy preachers do so to hide their own covetousness. It is not that preachers only want to *take* their money, but that these so-called believers only want to *keep* their money. The issue of stingy believers is a much greater problem than greedy preachers.

Then, although 1 Thessalonians 2:6-9 includes all the information that we need to grasp the basics of Paul's view on the matter, he offers more details in 1 Corinthians 9:3-14:

This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. Don't we have the right to food and drink? Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?

Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle

an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?

But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.

Paul's thinking spills into verses 15-18, but there he is already proceeding to the next point in his argument, and so we will stop at verse 14. As we consider this topic, we will keep both the 1 Thessalonians and the 1 Corinthians passages in mind.

In both places, Paul insists that he has the right to obtain financial support from his hearers. He uses various expressions and analogies to describe this right. He says that he has the right "to be a burden" (1 Thessalonians 2:6, 9). The context is that he "worked night and day," so the burden refers to the financial support that the Thessalonians would have had to provide for Paul if he had not worked to provide for himself. He says that he has "the right to food and drink" (1 Corinthians 9:4). He mentions that Peter, the Lord's brothers, and the other apostles would take their wives along with them (v. 5). This is mentioned together with "the right to food and drink," implying that the provision must also extend to the companions of the apostles. Then, he asks the rhetorical question, "Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?" (v. 6). This implies that Paul and Barnabas have the same right as the other apostles, and that this right entails *not* having to "work for a living" – work that is something other than the work of the ministry.

He drives his point across in verses 7-14 with many analogies, one after another: "Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk?...Doesn't the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.' ...when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest....If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?...Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar?"

The principle common in all these analogies is that the worker should benefit from and should live on his work. So the soldier should receive payment for being a soldier – it would be an injustice to require him to serve as a soldier and at the same time to labor in something else to earn his livelihood. No, if he works as a soldier, then that is where his

livelihood should come from. The farmer eats of his own produce. The temple worker gets his food from the temple. How much more should one who sows "spiritual seed" receive a "material harvest" from those that he serves (v. 11)?

Both the analogies and the explicit statements insist that this right belongs to every preacher of the gospel, and not only to the apostles. The universal principle applies to he who serves as a soldier, he who plants, he who tends a flock, the plowman, the thresher, and even an ox. And it is directly applied to those who sow "spiritual seed" (v. 11) and "those who preach the gospel" (v. 14). The principle applies to all workers, even animals, and no less to those who preach the gospel. He concludes, "In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (v. 14).

This is the Lord's ordinance, and places a moral obligation on every person. Therefore, those who hear the gospel are expected to render payments to the preachers, and those who preach the gospel are to exercise this right and accept their payments, to make their living by preaching the gospel. In fact, Paul himself accepted financial support from the Philippians (see Philippians 4:15-19). He refers to the transaction as a "matter of giving and receiving" (v. 15), and that which was received as "aid" (v. 16), "a gift" (v. 17), and by implication a "payment" (v. 18). And he says that the Philippians sent gifts to him "again and again" (v. 16).

Thus it is not true that Paul never accepted payment for his preaching and ministry work. But he did not demand payment from the Thessalonians and the Corinthians. So although he had the right, he did not exercise his right to demand payment for his spiritual labor in these instances. He says as much in 1 Corinthians 9:12 and 15: "We did not use this right... I have not used any of these rights." Again, the fact that he did not use his right means that he had it to use. He made himself an *exception*, and this means that in all other situations, preachers may exercise the right to receive payment for their work of preaching.

Why did Paul make himself an exception? Why did he not exercise his right? He explains, "We put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ" (v. 12). He would earn his own living while he preaches the gospel in situations where this would prevent or remove hindrances to the gospel. In these instances, he is approaching unbelievers with the gospel as a missionary, and he distinguishes himself in this manner from the itinerant charlatans who swindle people by their fanciful philosophies. Even then, notice that whereas the right of preachers to receive payment from their hearers remains a universal principle, his decision to not accept payment from unbelievers (for when he first preached to them, they were still unbelievers) stands as a personal policy that Scripture never made into a universal principle. That is, preachers might follow his example at times, but they are never required to do so, as there is no indication that even the other apostles gave up their rights in this manner.²⁸

As he defends his ministry in his second letter to the Corinthians (see 2 Corinthians 11:5-23), he again mentions the fact that he preached the gospel to them "free of charge" (v. 7).

²⁸ It is possible that they did this at times, although we have no evidence of it. And we know for certain that they usually exercised their rights, as indicated in 1 Corinthians 9:5.

He brings this up to make a contrast between himself and the "false apostles" (v. 13) that were exploiting them, and that apparently have deceived some of the Corinthians, turning them against Paul and his teachings. As with the Thessalonians, he reminds them of what they ought to know already, that unlike those with dubious doctrines and motives, he preached to them as an ambassador of Christ, under authority and under command, and instead of exercising his right to receive payment from them, he earned his own living while he preached to them.

But it was not that Paul earned all of his income by himself, or that he never accepted financial support, since in this same passage he writes, "I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so" (v. 8-9). So it was not that he always refused payment, but that he refused payment *from them*. Did Paul do that because they were special? Yes, as it turned out, they were especially fickle.

So why did Paul make himself an exception? Why did he not exercise his right? Because he was preaching to people who were either unfamiliar with the gospel, unstable in the faith, or not known to be established. Sometimes, as with the Philippians, Christian virtues quickly take root and bear fruit, and the believers soon become partners in the gospel (Philippians 1:5), so that they send aid again and again (Philippians 4:16). Sometimes, as with the Corinthians, they remain suspicious, disloyal, covetous, gullible, and always teetering on the edge of apostasy. This is when a preacher rejoices that he has not accepted anything from them.

For a preacher to exercise his right to accept payment implies nothing negative about the preacher, since it is a right. But for a preacher to *not* exercise his right to accept payment is, in fact, very unflattering to those who hear him. He probably regards the audience as unbelievers, as false believers, as immature believers, or no matter what they are, he perceives some deficiency in them or even hostility in them against the gospel, or he foresees some danger on the horizon that he could address from a superior position if he would refuse payment from the people at this time. He, in any case, does not consider the audience a group of genuine and mature Christians who are able and eager to become his partners in the gospel.

When a preacher accepts or even requests financial support from a group of people, he honors them by indicating that he trusts them as genuine and mature believers who are secure in the faith, and who would not stumble over this command of Christ in the matter of giving and receiving. Accordingly, those professing believers who complain about preachers who exercise their right in accepting payment for their service condemn themselves before the Lord. And those who even insist that all sincere preachers should earn their own living apart from preaching the gospel proclaim themselves to be unbelievers or immature believers who might stumble over the smallest sacrifice or act of obedience.

Concerning the matter of payment toward church elders, Paul writes, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages'" (1 Timothy 5:17-18). He does not say, "Do not pay the elders anything! They must work outside of the church to provide for themselves and their families."

That they are "worthy of double honor" refers to the nature and amount of their compensation, as indicated by the context. Verse 18 first mentions again the ox that grazes while it treads the field, that is, the principle that the worker should receive payment from the work that he does. Then, it makes the statement, "The worker deserves his wages," which echoes the Lord's own words (see Luke 10:7) – they are worthy of "double." In other words, Paul's instruction is to pay the church elders, and pay them well. Nevertheless, he refers to those who do well, and especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. Any board or church that disregards this principle operates in opposition against God's command. The Lord will judge.

The preacher's power to receive payment is called a "right" (1 Corinthians 9:12, 15), and the money rendered to him is called a "wage" (1 Timothy 5:18, Luke 10:7). This means that the payment toward the preacher is *owed* to him. And this in turn means that when believers²⁹ provide proper financial compensation to a preacher, this is considered a salary, and not an act of charity or compassion. But if they fail to pay, they are rightly considered cheaters and robbers.

When you withhold money from a preacher, you are withholding money that belongs to him, that he has a right to receive. The Bible calls the money that he deserves his "wages" or salary. So those who fail to pay fall under the curse of James, who writes, "Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty" (James 5:4).

The money that you withhold from preachers who proclaim the word of God to you, who teach you sound doctrine, who defend you against assaults and deceptions, and who pray for you, so that your faith would not fail, now testifies against you before the Lord. It will stand as a witness against you in the day of judgment, as evidence of your injustice and cruelty. God will hold you responsible for every lack that they endure. He will charge to your account every occasion that their wives worry about the future. He will punish you for every night that their children go to sleep hungry. And what about those who have to do without the ministry of preachers who lack the resources to reach them? Surely their blood is on your hands.

²⁹ The principle is that the preacher has the right to receive payment from those who hear him, and therefore this includes the unbelievers also. That is, unbelievers have the moral obligation to offer money to those who preach the gospel to them, since the preachers indeed provide them with a valuable service. It is irrelevant that the hearers are not already believers or if they reject the gospel upon hearing it. The principle applies when a service has been rendered. Of course, we do not expect unbelievers to offer financial compensation to preachers, but the principle indeed applies, and the failure to comply is a sinful act of disobedience that is added to the wrongs for which God will punish them.

We reap what we sow. Elsewhere, Paul writes, "Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor. Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life" (Galatians 6:6-8). To say this another way, our investments will produce the corresponding returns. The things that we put our time, effort, and money in, are the kinds of things that we will receive.

Consider a military illustration. Suppose a nation neglects to finance its military because it chooses to invest in other more interesting agendas. Its defense will not fall overnight, but it will begin to weaken, corrode, and become outdated. It will be unable to recruit, train, and maintain its troops, or to research and invest in new technologies. In fact, it will become increasingly difficult to keep up a continual supply of the basic equipment that every unit requires. And thus the nation becomes vulnerable to threats.

Likewise, a poorly financed police force becomes ineffective in recruiting, training, and maintaining its officers, or to supply them with the latest equipment and technologies. As a result, crimes increase and citizens are endangered. On the other hand, if the state or nation invests in its police force, its officers become well-trained and well-equipped, contributing to the general welfare and ordered operation of the society.

We are familiar with the effects of investments in many other fields: medicine, education, computer science, architecture, music, environmental preservation, and so on. Indeed, the same argument can be made concerning every area of human life and culture. People acknowledge the problems that can occur when we underpay doctors, teachers, soldiers, and police officers, but they consider God so irrelevant to society that they think nothing of underpaying or even not paying the preachers of the gospel.

We reap what we sow. If you have refused to sow to the spirit but have sown instead to the indulgence of the flesh – that is, if you have invested in the pleasures of your flesh instead of the things of God – then, you will reap a whirlwind of sin and carnality, violence and destruction, unbelief and defiance. Christians often complain that they live in a country characterized by such things, but the fact is that many of them have contributed to the current condition by investing in the things of the flesh, spurning the things of God and withholding funds from his ministers. What if we invest everything we have in preachers and theologians who are faithful to communicate the Christian faith with clarity and courage? The church will be strengthened, God's name will be honored, and the nation as a whole will become prosperous. In the face of an ever worsening crisis, even Christians are accustomed to take away their support from the things of God and to invest in unspiritual solutions. But this only adds to the harvest of destruction.

So the question to Christians is, are you willing to, often without sacrificing any comfort at all, part with some of your surplus so that you will exhibit at least a pretense of respect for God and for those whom he has called and sent to preach for the salvation of your very souls? Invest your time, effort, and money in spiritual things – in preachers, churches, and

ministries that publish sound doctrine and enforce church discipline – and you will reap a harvest of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Finally, a word to the preachers. The biblical principle and standard is that "those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:14). We must preach it to the people because this is what God commands, even if they might regard such a message as self-serving when coming from us. We must not be embarrassed by it, but as with other biblical doctrines, we must preach it with boldness and shamelessness, so that those who desire to obey the truth will know and comply, and to remove any excuse from those who disobey out of ignorance and rebellion, so that they may be judged. We can tell them that they should invest in ministers – in us! – but we cannot force them, and they will not comply unless the Holy Spirit regenerates them and stimulates them to joyful obedience.

Love does not always insist on rights. Even if we suffer because of the people's callousness, we must still perform the work that God has called us to do, looking to him for our deliverance and sustenance, instead of to those whom we call brothers and sisters. So the question to preachers is, are you willing, if necessary, to sacrifice personal comfort and security to minister to an often covetous, selfish, ungrateful, unbelieving, demanding, and critical people?

1 THESSALONIANS 2:13

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

For our purpose, we may divide Paul's preaching ministry into the two aspects of revelation and publication. Revelation – that is, the reception of revelation – refers to the source of his ideas, and the way in which he received them, whereas publication refers to the expression of these ideas through spoken and written proclamation, argumentation, exposition, and so on. Regarding the source of his teachings, he writes, "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11-12). As for the manner of publication, he says, "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words" (1 Corinthians 2:13).

Thus Paul is consciously aware that his message originates from divine revelation and not human invention, and that it is the Spirit who chooses the words by which he conveys the message. He deliberately asserts this in several places. Whenever he does so, he does not describe it as a negotiable theological position or a mere scholar's opinion. And he does not describe those who agree with him on this as having achieved some special breakthrough in faith that other people, who are also believers, have yet to attain. He does not portray the belief that his message is the very word of God as belonging to a higher spiritual plane or level of development among Christians. Rather, he notes that when a person receives the message of the apostles as the very word of God, he is simply receiving the message for what it is – it *is* the word of God. In our verse, he is referring to Thessalonians' reception of his preaching *at their conversion*. He is not describing a superior reception among many acceptable options, but the only acceptable reception of the gospel is to receive the word of God as the word of God.

But this also means that when a person regards the message of the apostles as something less than or other than the word of God, he is not receiving the message for what it is, which necessarily means that he does not receive the message, since by definition, if something is received as something that it is not, then it is not truly received. If the gospel is the word of God, and a person regards it as the word of mere men and thus receives it as the word of mere men, then this person does not in fact receive the gospel. And since the gospel is the only message that saves a person through faith, it is biblically impossible to reach any other conclusion than that a person who does not perceive and receive the gospel – the gospel preached by the apostles and recorded in the Bible – as the very word of God is not a Christian at all.

There is no justification for welcoming him as a brother or thinking that he is a believer of Jesus Christ. Rather, by irresistible logic, Scripture compels us to regard him as an unbeliever, still in his sin, coming short of repentance and true belief in the gospel, doomed to endless torture in hellfire. To regard the word of God as the word of mere men is not faith, not even weak faith, but non-faith, unbelief, and blasphemy. The difference is not a matter of "more or less," but one of "either-or," not a matter of degree, but of truth and reality. Thus to regard the doctrine of the apostles as the word of men is to deny that it is the word of God – it is to reject the gospel, the only message that saves.

Whether we are dealing with the teachings of the apostles in their preaching, or with the same ideas in their writing, the divine inspiration that governs their thinking and propels their preaching is such that to receive their word as God's word is to receive it as what it really is, the word of God. Since the words that they speak and write are the words of God because of divine inspiration, the same principle by which the words spoken and written by men are identified as the words of God applies to the prophets as well, since they were also divinely inspired, and without question, also to the Lord Jesus, for he spoke as one who had the Spirit without measure and who was himself God incarnate, the express image of his person.

This is why in a number of places "God" and "Scripture" are interchangeable in the Bible. For example, Galatians 3:8 says, "the Scripture...foresaw...and announced," when in the Genesis record, it is God who did these things. Sometimes it is said that God or the Holy Spirit speaks "through" this man or another. That is, the divine person is the speaker, but he communicates "through" a human instrument, so that all the ideas and words that come forth from the human instrument in fact originate from the divine speaker (see Acts 1:16, 28:25; Hebrews 4:7).

God and Scripture are so identified, that for many purposes, it causes no confusion to regard them as the same. Between the two, there is no difference in thought, no difference in expression, and often no difference even in identity. It necessarily follows that between the two, there is no difference in authority. And since there is no difference in authority between God and Scripture, there can be no difference in the responsibility that each imposes on men. Because God has absolute authority to legislate everything about human thought and behavior, it follows that Scripture has this authority as well, since there is no difference. And to speak against Scripture, to blaspheme it, is to blaspheme God. There is no difference. Man is accountable to Scripture in the same way and to the same degree as he is accountable to God. Unless this is what we believe, we have no doctrine of actual revelation or inspiration, and in fact, no gospel at all.

Some objections against this principle of equivalence, that there is no difference between the word of Scripture and the word of God (and all the implications that this entails), hinge on the means or the agents by which the message is delivered. There are those who find it inconceivable that a message delivered by men could be the very word of God – the exact

verbal expression of the mind of God – as if men err on a constant basis,³⁰ as if men can never receive communication from God, as if even an Almighty God can never reveal the ideas and words that he wills to be proclaimed and recorded in writing, as if one person can never deliver a message for another with precision and accuracy, as if an Almighty God can never create some men whose background, disposition, character, and other qualities make them fitting instruments for the reception of revelation, and as if an Almighty God can never control these men that he has created to speak and to write the exact words that he wishes to be proclaimed and recorded.

To the extent that these objections focus solely on the means, they neglect to examine the content of the revelation itself, and ignore its inherent beauty and perfection, its undeniable coherence, its undefeatable rationality. Those who decide that the biblical documents were written by men, and therefore could be nothing more than the fallible and errant word of men, think that they know about men apart from these biblical documents. So they are imposing by pure assumption on the biblical writers flaws that they find in themselves, and not flaws that they are able to demonstrate from the biblical documents. The epistemological hurdle here is insurmountable – these criticisms against Scripture amount only to self-criticisms.

But if they are compelled to refute the infallibility of Scripture by examining the actual content of Scripture, then they must admit that they cannot refute the Scripture solely by imposing the assumption that men always err, that there is no such thing as divine inspiration, or if there is, that it cannot even momentarily overcome men's fallibility. Again, if men are so constantly errant that even divine inspiration cannot overcome it, then we have every reason to dismiss these men's objections, since they are necessarily errant. To repeat, at this time, we are considering only those objections that hinge on finding fault with the means or agents by which God conveys his ideas and words to humanity. And it is determined that these objections cannot succeed. The implication is that to argue against the infallibility of Scripture, one must deal with the actual content of Scripture.

It would be instructive to consider some possible alternatives in the means or agents by which the word of God was delivered. Some might think that the Bible would be infallible if it was delivered by angels, but the assumption is unjustified. What makes an angel infallible without God's infallible control? The word of an angel is still not the word of God, even if it contains no error. But if God creates and controls an angel to deliver his message, then why could he not do the same with a man, that is, to create and control a man to deliver a divine message?

There are some who scoff, and say that if God were to directly speak from heaven, or appear on earth and speak to them, then they would believe that the message comes from God. And they issue a challenge based on the assumption that if there is a God and he speaks to men, then this is the way he would do it. Of course, this assumption is without justification and requires no further response. The actual effect of this challenge is that it

³⁰ Is it inconceivable that I can say "1 + 1 = 2" a thousand times without error? How about "2 + 2 = 4"? If the opponent protests that the content of the Bible is considerably more complex, then he has already abandoned the idea that the Bible is errant *just because* it was penned by human instruments.

yields insight into the level of intelligence of those who think like this. Have they thought about what God would sound like? As the Gospel of John records, God had indeed spoken from heaven, but some thought it thundered. And what would God look like? What do they expect to see? If a bright light appears and speaks to them, does it follow that it is God speaking? How do they know?

In one way or another, objections that complain about the means by which divine revelation was delivered – namely, by human agents – ignore the content of the message, but target the credibility of the means of the message's delivery as judged by their sensations, apart from the ability of the source of the message to secure an infallible delivery. Thus objections that target the means apart from the content or the source are sensual rather than intellectual. Those who advance these objections not only do not think, but they do not want to think, and so they do not deal with the content of the message. This accords with what we understand about the disposition of the reprobates. They are sensual, empirical, non-intellectual, non-thinking people – they are as animals, who depend on seeing, hearing, touching, smelling...but not thinking.

Unbelievers cannot perceive the word of God for what it is because it is spiritually perceived. They lack the disposition and competence to perceive it for what it is with their minds. They think that men wrote the Bible, and therefore it must be the word of men. They make this judgment without regard to the heavenliness of the content. Yet some claim that they would believe if the same message were delivered to them in conjunction with some spectacular display of divine presence. But this just shows that they are sensual and irrational, and not intellectual.

This is part of the reason Jesus could say, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31). If they are irrational and non-intellectual, then what would a shock to the senses do? They would still lack the intellectual disposition and competence to recognize the true nature and source of an intellectual message. But if they possess the intellectual disposition and competence to recognize intellectual truth, then they would not need a shock to the senses. This intellectual enlightenment is what is granted to the elect in conversion. Reprobates remain in darkness and a mentally disabled condition.

A cat becomes excited if you wave a feather back and forth in front of it, but if you recite an intellectual discourse to the cat, it will probably turn its back on you and take a nap. It does not appreciate it. Why? Because compared to humans, cats are stupid. And compared to Christians, non-Christians are stupid. Oh, I admit that many Christians are stupid, and that is because they are either false believers, or because they have not continued to renew their minds by the word of God after conversion. But non-Christians are always worse.

Although we no longer have Paul among us in the flesh, we have in the Bible the same message that he preached to the Thessalonians, a message that both he and the Thessalonians recognized as "the word of God." As in his day, it is also the case today, that those who are unenlightened and inferior in intelligence, who therefore focus only on the means, would perceive this word of God as the mere word of men. But the message has

not changed – it remains the word of God. In fact, even the means and the agents are the same, since it is still the same man, Paul, who delivers the same message, the faith of Jesus Christ, to the church and to the world. And just as he published his message through both speaking and writing, and the writing would record what he preached in his speaking, in the Bible we now possess the same message that he published to his generation.

Therefore, in the Bible we have the same "word of God" that he delivered in his day. The crucial issue for us is whether we will receive it as what it is, that is, the word of God, or as what it is not, that is, the mere word of men. Because it is the same word of God, it carries the same authenticity and authority as when Paul delivered it – it carries the same authenticity and authority as Almighty God himself, for there is no difference. And because the Bible carries the same authenticity and authority as God himself, it imposes the same accountability upon all men as when Paul preached it to his hearers. In other words, anyone who rejects the word of God, in the sense that he refuses to believe what it says, or that he refuses to perceive it as what it is, the word of God, defies Almighty God himself, and will suffer the appropriate punishment of everlasting hellfire. Those who received it as the word of men and disobeyed it will be punished as if they had disobeyed the word of God, because it is indeed the word of God.

If we are concerned that hearers should receive the word of God as the word of God, what should we think of preachers who regard the word of God as the mere word of men, and who propagate this falsehood? We must publicly expose and expel them from the ministry and the church. We must condemn them in much stronger terms than we do even murderers, adulterers, and kidnappers. If this seems harsh or offensive to you, it is only because your thinking has fallen far from the biblical standard. Your mind has been captured by the devil, and desensitized to wickedness and rebellion. We can place part of the blame on these preachers who regard the word of God as the mere word of men for the prevalence of all kinds of sins, and we can also blame you for tolerating and encouraging these false preachers. It is your fault, since you do not do your part to throw them out of positions of influence. You are responsible. You share in their guilt.

To receive the message of the apostles as the word of God, which is what it really is, is not a spiritual height to be attained or a theological conclusion to be reached after prolonged deliberation, but Paul assumes that it is the starting point of the Christian life, an event that occurs at conversion, and in fact, an indication of conversion. If you do not receive the message of the apostles as the word of God, then on what basis do you say that you are a Christian according to God? On what basis do you say that you have faith toward God or a positive relation to God, as defined by God? Should we not, by your own standard, regard you as a non-Christian? If any part of the gospel is an invention of men, then by what message are you saved? You are still in your sin. And those preachers who deny that the Bible is the word of God, on what basis do they instruct us, or exercise any authority over us? Rather, must we not regard them as deceivers, as anti-christs, as demons from hell? We have no authority to think or behave otherwise.³¹

³¹ See my *The Sermon on the Mount* for a criticism of The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy on this issue.

If you are under a church or seminary leader who does not believe that the Bible is the word of God, that it is the perfect verbal revelation and communication from God, then it is your Christian duty and your moral obligation to overthrow him. Take him down from the pulpit. Expel him from the church. Throw him out of the seminary. Do this, and do it today, lest you share in his guilt and also his punishment. There is no need to become overly suspicious or critical. In our day, thousands of preachers and professors condemn themselves on this issue by their explicit testimony.

Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). If the Bible is his message and thus his voice, and you do not recognize it, then what does that make you? How can you be his sheep? Ah, I hear his voice in the Scripture – it is the word of God. There is no difference between the voice of the Bible and the voice of the Almighty. When you read the Bible, what do you perceive? When you listen to the Scripture, what do you hear?

1 THESSALONIANS 2:14-16

For you, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

The New Testament is clear in teaching that the Jews murdered Jesus. It states this explicitly and repeatedly, in different settings, and in various ways. It states that the Jews intended to kill Jesus, that they plotted to kill Jesus, that they tried to kill Jesus, that they would kill Jesus, and that they did kill Jesus. Here Paul writes, "the Jews...killed the Lord Jesus" (v. 15) – a direct, concise, and explicit statement that the Jews murdered Jesus. This fact receives repeated emphasis in the preaching of the apostles, whether they are addressing Jews, or whether they are addressing Gentiles, as in this letter to the Thessalonians.

This testimony so pervades Scripture that it is impervious to the efforts of those who would revise or obscure history. In fact, the biblical passages stating that the Jews murdered Jesus are so numerous that a full exposition of them could make up a whole book. Thus we shall cite only a limited number of passages with brief comments, and in the process we will address some common attempts at neutralizing this scriptural record.

First, many passages establish the Jews' intention and a number of actual attempts to murder Jesus. The case to convict the Jews for the murder of Jesus does not require these passages that show their long-held intention to commit murder, but it contributes to the overall picture. Although they do not refer to the crucifixion, which came later, morally speaking the intention to murder and the attempt at murder are equal to actual murder (Matthew 6:21-22). A person who intends to commit murder has already performed it in the moral sense, so that even if he transgresses no law of the state, he has still committed murder in his heart and in the sight of God. This is especially true if he makes actual attempts at committing murder, even if he fails at it. From a moral perspective, his failure does not make him less guilty.

In addition, once it is established that there has been a persistent intention to murder and multiple attempts at carrying it out, then when the victim is killed by his active and necessary involvement, without which the murder could not have happened, it cannot be said that he is in any way free from blame, as if he has been reluctant or that his contribution was unnecessary or even accidental.

Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. But the

Pharisees went out and *plotted how they might kill Jesus*. (Matthew 12:13-14).

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and *they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him*. (Matthew 26:3-4)

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus *so that they could put him to death*. (Matthew 26:59)

Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision *to put Jesus to death*. (Matthew 27:1)

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. (Mark 11:18)

Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way *to arrest Jesus and kill him*. (Mark 14:1)

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus *so that they could put him to death*, but they did not find any. Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree. (Mark 14:55-56)

All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, *in order to throw him down the cliff*. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. (Luke 4:28-30)

Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were *trying to kill him*. (Luke 19:47)

Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." For this reason *the Jews tried all the harder to kill him*. (John 5:17-18)

Jesus answered, "...Has not Moses given you the law? Yet not one of you keeps the law. *Why are you trying to kill me?*" ...At that point some of the people of Jerusalem began to ask, "Isn't this the man *they are trying to kill?*" (John 7:16, 19, 25)

"Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "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. You are doing the things your own father does." You belong to your father, the devil, and *you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer* from the beginning, not holding to the truth. (John 8:39-41, 44)

"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" At this, *they picked up stones to stone him*, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds. (John 8:58-59)

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." *Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him*. (John 10:29-31)

"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago *the Jews tried to stone you*, and yet you are going back there?" (John 11:8)

So from that day on *they plotted to take his life*. (John 11:53)

Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So *the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well*, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him. (John 12:9-11)

Luke 4:28-30 shows that the Jews had tried to kill Jesus since the inception of his ministry. There they were about to throw him down a cliff. The only reason that the murder did not occur was because Jesus escaped from them. Then, the other passages show that the Jews wanted to kill him throughout his ministry, and even made multiple attempts at it. More than once they picked up rocks to stone him – they had the rocks in their hands, ready to throw them at him to murder him.

Contrary to popular assumption, some of the passages indicate that the intention to murder and the attempts at murder were not limited to the religious leaders, but many Jews who were not religious leaders wanted and attempted to kill Jesus, as illustrated in the incident in Nazareth recorded in Luke 4, where murderous intent and action are attributed to "all the people in the synagogue." The tendency to restrict responsibility for the murder of Jesus to the religious leaders cannot stand up to scrutiny. Rather, the Jews in general were guilty for the murder of Jesus. This will become even more obvious when we examine the record of the trial.

Then, John 12:9-11 shows that the Jews wanted to kill *both* Jesus and Lazarus, since Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, so that Lazarus became a living testimony to the Lord's ministry of divine power. The Jews acknowledged that Jesus performed genuine miracles, even "many miraculous signs" (John 11:47), that he was not a mere trickster or a magician.

This is a significant point against the claim that the Jews acted out of ignorance. In what sense were they ignorant? What was the nature of this ignorance, and did it in any way reduce their guilt in the murder of Jesus? We will explore this question further in a moment. For now, the fact that they wanted to kill Lazarus also brings up an often neglected issue, namely, that the Jews did not murder Jesus only, but they also persecuted and murdered many, many, many of his followers, or Christians. We will also pursue this further in what follows.

In any case, now we have a reliable picture of the Jews as murderers that is not based on some isolated incidents or passages, but it is the pervasive testimony of Scripture, in fact, in both the Old and New Testaments, for the Jews were also fond of murdering the prophets that God sent to them. So Jesus says in John 8:44 that the Jews belonged to their father, the devil, that they wanted to carry out the devil's desires, and the devil was "a murderer from the beginning." Thus he means that the Jews were murderers like the devil. Murder was in their nature. They had a strong disposition to kill people, innocent and righteous people.

Coming now to the events leading up to the crucifixion, we will cite from Luke's record, since it includes more details that are relevant to our topic, but we will also draw from the others.

Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king."

So Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no basis for a charge against this man."

But they insisted, "He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here."

On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.

When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. That day Herod and Pilate became friends – before this they had been enemies.

Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him."

With one voice they cried out, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!" (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.)

Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

For the third time he spoke to them: "Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him."

But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will. (Luke 23:1-25)

Before Jesus was brought before Pilate, he was arrested by the authority of "the chief priests and the elders" (Matthew 26:47), and was tried before Caiaphas, the high priest (Matthew 26:57). There the Jews failed to present any evidence against him (Matthew 26:59-60), and when they brought false testimonies against him, their statements contradicted themselves (Mark 14:56, 59). Thus the Jews committed perjury, and the purpose was to find an excuse to murder Jesus.

They brought Jesus to Pilate, and after questioning him, he declared, "I find no basis for a charge against this man" (Luke 23:4). Then, he sent Jesus to Herod for examination, but finding no basis to charge Jesus with any crime, he sent him back (Luke 23:8-12, 15). And Pilate again said to the Jews, "I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him" (Luke 23:14). Thus both Herod and Pilate confronted the Jews with Jesus' innocence. Even Pilate's wife knew that Jesus was innocent, and made a special effort to tell her husband to leave him alone (Matthew 27:19). It was made clear to the Jews that to press for the death penalty would be to kill an innocent man. It would be murder.

Pilate realized that "it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him" (Matthew 27:18). Again, it is partly true that the Jews murdered Jesus out of ignorance, and we will say more about this later. But we must deny that they murdered him out of ignorance in a sense that almost makes the whole thing seem accidental, since it was not accidental. In

any case, Matthew 27:18 alone is enough to show us that they did not murder him only out of ignorance.

Seeing that Jesus was an innocent man and had committed no crime, and that the Jews had brought him there to be murdered because of their private and unjust agenda, Pilate told the Jews that he would release him (Luke 23:16). But the Jews refused "with one voice" (Luke 23:18). So, "wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again" (Luke 23:20a). But the Jews kept shouting for Jesus to be murdered (Luke 23:20b). Pilate confronted them a third time, saying, "Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him" (Luke 23:22). Over and over again, Pilate challenged the Jews with Jesus' innocence, and for them to provide evidence or testimony for his guilt, and finding none, over and over again, he declared that he would release Jesus. But the Jews insisted with "loud shouts" (Luke 23:23). They were determined to murder this innocent man. Later, this fact was featured in Peter's preaching, as he blamed the Jews for the death of Jesus: "You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go" (Acts 3:13).

All this time, Pilate was addressing "the chief priests, the rulers *and the people*" (Luke 23:13), and as noted, the Jews called for the murder of Jesus "with one voice" (Luke 23:18). This refutes the suggestion that only a small number of Jewish religious leaders were responsible for the murder of Jesus. It is true that "the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd" (Matthew 27:20), but *why* were they persuaded? Pilate repeatedly declared Jesus' innocence and his desire to release him, but the crowd was unaffected. What if someone argues that all the Nazis were persuaded by Hitler? Should they still be considered murderers? Excusing the Jews for the murder of Jesus because they were persuaded by the religious leaders would at the same time excuse the Nazis for the massacre of the Jews. In any case, the crowd was confronted with Jesus' innocence and with Pilate's decision to release him, but they insisted on murdering him. Pilate was "wanting to release Jesus" (Luke 23:20), but finally succumbed to "their will" (Luke 23:25). We should, of course, fault Pilate for it, but it remains that he did not agree with this. It was "their will" to murder Jesus. They knew what they were doing and they were eager to do it.

Pilate, knowing that they were sending an innocent man to his death, attempted to repudiate all responsibility to this murder: "When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!'" (Matthew 27:24). There was an extended struggle between Pilate and the Jews on the issue. The Jews could have relented at any time, but their fierce insistence prevailed. And then, "*All the people* answered, 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!'" (Matthew 27:25). Again, the murder was not carried from start to finish by only a small number of religious leaders, but it involved "all the people" – numerous Jews from all levels of the populace. When Pilate warned that "this man's blood" would be their responsibility (Matthew 27:24), rather than shrinking back in fear to reconsider their action, they declared that the responsibility for murdering this man, "his blood," would fall on them and their descendents. As we will

discuss later, this was predicted by Jesus himself and was soon fulfilled in history when thousands of Jews were slaughtered.

The Jews had a choice when Pilate confronted them with Jesus' innocence and made them assume responsibility for murdering him. And they had another choice when Pilate offered to release either Jesus, the innocent man, or Barabbas, "who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder" (Luke 23:25). They pressed for the murder of Jesus, and then decided that the murderer called Barabbas should be released. Murder had filled their hearts. At that point, they signed their murder pack with the devil, and sealed their own destruction, which would come not many years later. What if Hitler and an innocent Jew were both in prison, awaiting the death penalty, and someone, knowing who and what they were, chose to secure the release of Hitler over the release of the innocent Jew? What kind of monster would make any effort to defend the person who made this choice? And who would deny that this person had, by his choice, made himself complicit in the massacre of the Jews that was blamed on Hitler? The Jews made a choice before Pilate. They chose to murder and to release a murderer. Peter would later emphasize this in his preaching: "You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you" (Acts 3:14).

The active and direct role that the Jews played in the murder of Jesus was prominently featured in the preaching of the apostles since the beginning of their post-ascension ministry. Because the doctrine of the apostles defines the very meaning of the Christian faith, their interpretation of the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion must be regarded as authoritative, even the final word on the attitude that any Christian must affirm on the matter.

"This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and *you*, with the help of wicked men, *put him to death by nailing him to the cross.*" (Acts 2:23)

The verse acknowledges that the crucifixion of Christ occurred by God's foreordination, and it also recognizes that the Jews had "the help of wicked men" in putting Jesus to death. These two factors are often used in diverting attention from the Jews for the murder of Jesus. But by mentioning them, this verse frustrates this diversion. This is because, despite the recognition of these two factors, the verse still makes the Jews the subject that performed the crucifixion, that is, it says, "*you*...put him to death by nailing him to the cross." Peter does not even say, "You pressed the Romans to crucify him," but rather, "You crucified him (by the Romans)." The crucifixion itself, and not just the murder in general, was blamed on the Jews. So by acknowledging these factors that are often used as excuses for the Jews, the verse neutralizes these same excuses.

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, "'The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your

feet.' Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this *Jesus, whom you crucified*, both Lord and Christ." (Acts 2:32-36)

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. *You handed him over to be killed*, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. *You killed the author of life*, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. (Acts 3:13-15)

If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of *Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified* but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. (Acts 4:9-10)

Although Jesus was crucified by the hands of the Romans, Peter puts the blame on the Jews, saying, "Jesus, whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). He repeats this a little later, saying, "Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified" (Acts 4:10). He does not say, "Jesus, whom the Romans crucified." No, he says "you" did it – the Jews crucified him. Acts 3:13 acknowledges that Jesus was handed over to Pilate, showing that Peter places the blame on the Jews not because he is unable to make intelligent distinctions, but he blames the Jews because they insisted on murdering Jesus when Pilate "had decided to let him go." Instead, they "asked that a murderer be released," that is, Barabbas. Therefore, Peter declares to the Jews, "You killed the author of life." The Jews killed Jesus. They murdered him.

"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and *are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.*"

Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead – *whom you had killed* by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

When they heard this, they were furious and *wanted to put them to death.* (Acts 5:28-33).

Acts 5:28 shows how the Jews understood the preaching of the apostles: "You...are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." So, from both the explicit statements in the preaching of the apostles and the Jews' interpretation of the preaching of the apostles, there is no doubt that the Christians accused and blamed the Jews for the murder of Jesus. (If our preaching does not give people the impression that we make the Jews guilty of the blood of Jesus, are we preaching the same thing that the apostles preached?) And in Acts

5:30, "*Peter and the other apostles*" (the apostles were agreed on this issue) says it again: "Jesus...whom *you had killed* by hanging him on a tree." The apostles declared that the Jews were guilty not only for murdering Jesus, but also for the manner in which he was murdered, that is, by crucifixion. As if to help prove their accusation by example, now the Jews wanted to kill the apostles also (Acts 5:33).

Again, although the murder of Jesus receives special focus in a discussion like this, to kill his disciples, the Christians, when they have not committed any crime worthy of the death penalty constitutes murder just as much as when they killed Jesus. Once we open the discussion to how the Jews also murdered the disciples of Jesus, we are greeted with another avalanche of biblical passages citing their eagerness to murder Christians, only a small portion of which can be listed here, lest we be buried by them.

"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet *your fathers* did not persecute? They *even killed those who predicted* the coming of the Righteous One. And now *you have betrayed and murdered him* – you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it." (Acts 7:51-53)

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:57-60)

Stephen is speaking to the Jews. The content here is consistent with the preaching of the apostles. He states that the Jews before murdered those who predicted the one who was to come, and then the Jews now murdered him who had come as predicted. Again, the language directly accuses and blames the Jews: "Your fathers...killed... You have betrayed and murdered him." Notice that Stephen also grasps the distinction between "betrayed" and "murdered," but he still attributes the murder to the Jews. As we have seen from the Jews' behavior before Pilate, this thinking is thoroughly justified, since as the apostles point out, Pilate had decided to release Jesus. How did the Jews respond to this accusation of murder? They murdered Stephen as well (Acts 7:57-60).

Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. After many days had gone by, *the Jews conspired to kill him*, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. (Acts 9:22-25)

Saul, the apostle Paul, was converted and proceeded to preach the same Jesus whom the Jews murdered, and whom he had persecuted through entrapping, arresting, and murdering his disciples. He was able to prove "that Jesus is the Christ," in a manner that his enemies could not refute. So, "the Jews conspired to kill him."

Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. (Acts 14:19-20)

Now in Antioch and Iconium, a different group of Jews tried to murder Paul. In fact, they apparently succeeded. Considering that they were eager and enraged, that they were very proficient and well-practiced at killing people by stoning them, that a person can survive only so many heavy rocks forcefully hurled at the head and various parts of the body with the intent to kill, and that they had a period of physical contact with him when they dragged his body out of the city (thus they had time to notice signs of life), there is a possibility that Paul had indeed died, and that God raised him from the dead.³² But whether or not Paul had died, from the Jews' perspective, they had committed the murder, since they intended to kill him and then thought that they had succeeded.

The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. While *they were trying to kill him*, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped *beating Paul*. (Acts 21:30-32)

And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of *those who were killing him*. Then the Lord said to me, "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles." The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! *He's not fit to live!*" (Acts 22:20-22)

The next morning the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink *until they had killed Paul*. More than *forty men were involved* in this plot. They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything *until we have*

³² Conrad Gempf writes, "If this were a resurrection, we would expect Luke to have made more of it" (*New Bible Commentary, 21st Century Edition*, Inter-Varsity Press, 2000, p. 1088). However, this is an argument from silence and carries no force. Thousands of miracles occur through the apostles, so that even "extraordinary miracles" receive only a mention that would apparently disappoint Gempf's expectation. (Acts 19:11-12). That is, if this were a resurrection, we would expect Gempf to make more of it, but we cannot be sure that Luke would have done the same.

killed Paul. Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. *We are ready to kill him* before he gets here." (Acts 23:12-15)

He wrote a letter as follows: Claudius Lysias, To His Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings. This man was seized by the Jews and *they were about to kill him*, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen. I wanted to know why they were accusing him, so I brought him to their Sanhedrin. I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but *there was no charge against him that deserved death* or imprisonment. When I was informed of a plot to be carried out against the man, I sent him to you at once. I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case against him. (Acts 23:25-30)

Three days after arriving in the province, Festus went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem, where the chief priests and Jewish leaders appeared before him and presented the charges against Paul. They urgently requested Festus, as a favor to them, to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for *they were preparing an ambush to kill him* along the way. (Acts 25:1-3)

First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. That is why *the Jews* seized me in the temple courts and *tried to kill me*. (Acts 26:20-21)

When discussing the murder of Jesus, the fact that the Jews also murdered many, many, many Christians is often ignored – the issue does not even come to mind. It is as if the lives of the early disciples were worthless and that slaughtering hundreds of them should not be considered murder, or even something important enough to discuss. But for some reason, Hitler's massacre of the Jews was so catastrophic and shocking that all races and all peoples from that time forward owe the Jews special charity and sensitivity.

In any case, mortality prevents us from taking the amount of time needed to display and comment on every passage that shows how the Jews were guilty of the murder of Jesus and numerous Christians. So we will proceed to examine some of the popular objections against the New Testament's direct accusation and constant insistence that the Jews murdered Jesus.

Michael Brown deplores "the ocean of Jewish blood shed in Jesus' name,"³³ and writes, "What was it that provoked such 'Christian' hostility toward the Jews? Above all, it was the belief that the Jews killed Jesus."³⁴ Since he thinks that this is the reason for hostility against the Jews, we would expect him to dismantle this belief in his attempt to neutralize the

³³ Michael L. Brown, *What Do Jewish People Think about Jesus?* (Chosen Books, 2007), p. 196.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

hostility. This is indeed what he does, as he continues, "But did the Jews really kill Jesus? What does the New Testament say?"³⁵ Thus his arguments would aim to show that the Jews did not really kill Jesus, and that the New Testament would support this contention. The large list of biblical passages that we have examined render this impossible, but let us see what Brown has to say.

(1) The primary message of the New Testament is that God gave His Son for the salvation of the world, and therefore the death of Jesus was the explicit, foreordained will of God (see 1 Peter 1:18-20). True Christians, therefore, do not blame anyone for killing Jesus, rather, they thank God for sending His Son.³⁶

Contrary to Brown, Acts 2:23 records that Peter first acknowledges the death of Christ as "God's set purpose," but then he still says to the Jews, "you...put him to death by nailing him to the cross." So the New Testament contradicts Brown's use of the idea that the death of Christ was foreordained. It was indeed foreordained, but the apostles still blamed the Jews. Moral blame has to do with whether a thought or action transgresses the commandment of God, and not whether the event is foreordained.

In fact, the whole Bible teaches that *all* thoughts and actions are foreordained. Even Hitler's massacre of the Jews was foreordained, but this says nothing about whether he was guilty of mass murder. The question of murder, of moral responsibility, has to do with whether he violated divine commandments relating to murder – divine foreordination does not generate or nullify moral responsibility. Whether an event or action is foreordained, the person is morally guilty of sin if he violates the divine commandments. This is so by definition.

This use of the doctrine of foreordination – that because the death of Christ was foreordained, the Jews did not really kill him – also contradicts the teaching of Jesus, including what he specifically said about the relation of divine foreordination and human responsibility when it comes to his betrayal and murder:

"Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!" (Matthew 18:7)

"The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "Yes, it is you." (Matthew 26:24-25)

"The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him." (Luke 22:22)

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

As these verses demonstrate, the fact that an event or action is foreordained does not affect the moral responsibility of the person who brings about the event or performs the action. Foreordination has to do with the certainty that the event or action will occur, moral responsibility has to do with whether the event or action follows or violate the commandments of God, without regard to whether it has been foreordained.³⁷

It is true that Christ was sent to die for the salvation of God's chosen ones, but again this does not affect the moral responsibility of those who murdered him. In fact, the mention of the divine decree (that Christ should die) and the purpose for the divine decree (for the salvation of the elect) does not even address the topic, which is whether the Jews killed Jesus. The divine decree guarantees that they would do it, and that the death would be for redemption explains the purpose of the divine decree, but these two things do not touch on whether the Jews killed Jesus. It is logically a related but distinguishable matter. To answer with the mention of the decree and its purpose is to employ a tactic of misdirection, that is, to appear to answer the question in a way that believers would not wish to deny, but in fact avoid the question altogether.

However, it is in fact worse than misdirection. Was Jesus actually *murdered* or not? Yes or no? Was he unjustly killed by the hand of some man or men? If so, then he was murdered. If he was murdered, then someone did it. And by exalting the sacrificial reason behind it when that is not the issue in question, Brown in fact trivializes the murder aspect of the incident. But to trivialize the murder of an innocent man just because he is so good that he would sacrifice himself is to punish this man for his goodness. What kind of monster would do such a thing?

He writes, "True Christians, therefore, do not blame anyone for killing Jesus, rather, they thank God for sending His Son."³⁸ Again, this does not address the issue in question. Of course we should be thankful that God sent his Son, but our topic has to do with something else, and this answer is a mere smokescreen. It is another distraction that gives the appearance of a response, misdirecting our thoughts to something that seems related, but that does not in fact address the original question.

There is also an alarming implication in Brown's statement. The apostles explicitly and repeatedly blamed the Jews for the murder of Jesus, but Brown says that true Christians do not blame anyone. So by implication, Brown disowns the apostles and thinks that they could not be true Christians. And if they were not true Christians, then all the apostles were sent to hell when they died, and there is no salvation in their message, since their message blames the Jews for murder.

³⁷ There is no apparent contradiction here, since moral responsibility never has anything to do with divine foreordination of an event, but only its relation to the divine commandments – that is, whether it obeys them or transgresses them. And that this obedience or transgression has been foreordained does not affect the person's responsibility, since relative to the commandment, obedience is still what it is, and transgression is still what it is.

³⁸ Brown, *Jewish People*, p. 196.

I am unsure if Brown wishes to commit his soul to this position, but then the dilemma remains: either he agrees with the apostles that the Jews murdered Jesus, or he renounces the apostles, and thus also Jesus Christ and the Christian faith. If the apostles were not true Christians, then what is a Christian? And on what basis does Brown propose this alternative Christianity as authentic? Contrary to Brown, I say that true Christians believe the biblical and apostolic testimony, which says that the Jews murdered Jesus, and after that pursued and murdered many of his disciples.

(2) Jesus Himself testified that no one took His life; He laid it down willingly.

This is how we know what love is: Jesus [the Messiah]³⁹ laid down his life for us. (1 John 3:16)

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father. (John 10:11, 17-18)⁴⁰

This is Brown's second response to the questions "But did the Jews really kill Jesus? What does the New Testament say?" Here he points out that Jesus himself testified to two things relating to his death: (1) No one took his life, and (2) He laid it down willingly. These two points are derived from and asserted as relevant to the topic under discussion on the basis of 1 John 3:16 and John 10:11, 17-18. And on the basis of this response, the answers to the two questions are presumably, "No, the Jews did not really kill Jesus" and "The New Testament says that the Jews did not really kill Jesus." This should be a fair summary of Brown's second argument.

This is again a clear example of misdirection. In fact, to accuse Brown for misdirection is to do him a favor. This is because of the frightening implication that results when we pretend that there is no misdirection and simply turn the argument against itself, as I will now demonstrate.

Brown depends on the idea that Jesus laid down his own life to acquit the Jews from the charge of homicide. If there is no misdirection, so this indeed addresses the issue under discussion rather than distract us from it by throwing up a smokescreen, then it means that Jesus' laying down his life corresponds to or takes the place of the Jews' homicide as the cause – the culprit, if you will – of his death. The two are said in the same sense, as different explanations to the same event. In other words, *instead* of saying that Jesus died because this was a case of homicide by the Jews, Jesus died because he laid down his own life, and the latter is stated in the same sense as the former. But this necessarily means that Brown has made this into a case of suicide.

³⁹ Brown is the one who, for some reason, changes the word "Christ" to "the Messiah" here. He does this in other places as well, but not everywhere.

⁴⁰ Brown, *Jewish People*, p. 197.

Unless Brown is willing to assert that Jesus committed suicide, which is contradicted by all the biblical passages already presented and many others not displayed here, and in which case he has become a type of blasphemer that requires immediate excommunication from all Christian churches, seminaries, and organizations, he must admit the failure of this response to the question of whether the Jews murdered Jesus, retract the argument, and repent before God for this sacrilege. It is astounding how low and how far someone will go in order to defend murderers.

As for the biblical verses he cites in support for this second response, we should address them as well. We should begin from the assumption that these verses cannot say that Jesus laid down his life in a sense that is useful to Brown's argument. As we noted, the only sense that would support his point is if the verses state that Jesus committed suicide, so that the Jews did not commit homicide against him. But again, such a suggestion is contradicted by a host of biblical passages, some of which we have already examined. So even before examining the two passages Brown uses, we understand that his interpretation must be just another case of misdirection. He uses the passages to address the issue in question when they at best address the issue on another level. That is, he makes a statement that is relevant only to X as if he is giving an answer to Y.

He cites half of 1 John 3:16, which says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us." But it says more than this. The entire verse reads, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. *And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.*" Just as Jesus sacrificed his life for Christians, John exhorts the Christians to sacrifice their lives for one another. The juxtaposition of the two indicates that, at least in this context and in the sense that John is speaking of it, Christians can sacrifice their lives to save other believers in a manner analogous to the way Jesus sacrificed his life for God's chosen ones.

Since this is the case, then it means that if the sacrificial nature of Christ's death removes murder from the equation ("no one" killed him), then the sacrificial nature of the Christians' death for one another also removes murder from the equation. And if this were the case, then consider the following scenario. Suppose some Jews were about to stone some of my Christian brothers to death, and I stand between the two groups in order to shield the Christians, offering my life so that perhaps my brothers would have several more seconds to escape such a painful and bloody demise. The Jews look at one another, shrug, and proceed to hurl their rocks at me with practiced force and accuracy. My soul rises to meet the Lord Jesus, who welcomes me to his bosom, and assures me that my sacrifice has honored him and has saved the lives of several believers. This scenario, by the way, would have been a realistic one, even a familiar one, around the time 1 John 3:16 was written.

Now, according to Brown, because my death was of a sacrificial nature, because I laid down my life willingly in order to save my brothers in Christ, what the Jews did should not be considered murder – "no one" murdered me, even if the rocks and the bloody corpse scream the opposite. If his application of the sacrificial nature of Christ is applied to my sacrificial death, then this is the necessary implication. If it is objected that Christ's death

is unique, I have no problem with that in general, except my sacrifice would be analogous in the context in which 1 John 3:16 associates Christ's sacrifice and a Christian's sacrifice, and it is Brown who uses this verse to show that Christ's death was sacrificial *such that* the Jews did not really murder him.

Of course, if the principle applies to sacrificial death in general, this would also mean that all those Jews who sacrificed their lives to save other Jews from the Nazis were not in fact murdered. They willingly laid their lives down, and therefore "no one" killed them. However, whether a death constitutes murder depends on whether a person has unjustly inflicted fatal injuries to the victim, not whether the victim willingly laid his life down, perhaps to protect another person from the homicidal maniac. This standard would be applied against the Nazis for the death of the Jews, against any murderer for the death of any victim of murder, willing or not. But when it comes to Jesus, somehow it was not a murder, and no one killed him. When we apply the same standard – that is, the very definition of murder – then the answer of whether the Jews murdered Jesus does not rest in what Jesus did, but what the Jews did. And they indeed murdered him.

What is it then? To use the sacrificial nature of a death to define murder out of the picture is to make a mockery of the sacrifice. It is to punish the hero for his valor. Rather, sacrifice should generate a stark contrast to the selfish and hateful disposition of the murderers, those who are given to taking life instead of giving life. To honor the sacrificial death of Christ, instead of saying that "no one" killed him, we should stress that the Jews murdered him, an innocent man, their messiah, even God himself, the author of life.

His quotation from John 10 is likewise incomplete. Out of the omitted portion (v. 12-16), verse 12 is especially relevant: "The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it." This verse determines the sense in which the shepherd is said to lay down his life for the sheep, namely, he sacrifices his life in order to protect the sheep from "the wolf." That is, there is an attacker in this scenario that Brown hides from us by omitting verse 12.

Therefore, when Jesus says, "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (v. 18a), the "no one" cannot mean what Brown wants it to mean, since Jesus has referred to a "wolf" that attacks and kills the shepherd. For this "no one" to help Brown's argument, Jesus would have had to simply drop dead on the streets of Jerusalem with no apparent human involvement. But he did not drop dead – he was murdered. Rather, the statement, "no one takes it from me," has to do with what he says next: "I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father" (v. 18b). The emphasis is on the Father's command and Jesus' decision to follow that command. That is, Jesus laid down his life in accordance with God's will and for the purpose of saving his sheep.

It is not that no one attacked him, but that no one could have successfully murdered him if he had not decided to sacrifice himself. The issue has to do with metaphysical power and not moral responsibility. The Jews would have been responsible for murder, morally

speaking, even if they had failed, since they wanted to and tried to kill Jesus. The passage merely explains why they would succeed. Indeed, Jesus could have called on his Father to send "twelve legions of angels" to rescue him from the Jews, but in accordance to John 10, he decided to sacrifice himself to save his sheep. But how does this absolve the Jews? As Jesus said to Pilate, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above" (John 19:11a). And then he adds, "Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin" (v. 11b). This is an explicit and undeniable statement from the mouth of Jesus himself that the Jews were even more guilty than the Romans. Then, "Pilate tried to set Jesus free," but the Jews threatened him (John 19:12).

Jesus was murdered. Who did it? The New Testament screams that the Jews murdered him, and Jesus himself said that the Jews were more guilty than the Romans (John 19:11). That he laid down his life means only that the murderers were able to do it. It does not mean that they did not kill him, or that they were not to blame for doing it. Judas betrayed Jesus – Jesus did not turn himself in. Although the betrayal was foreordained, and although Jesus said to Judas, "What you are about to do, do quickly" (John 13:27), it does not mean that the betrayal did not happen, or that he was not to blame for it. Rather, Jesus said, "The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him" (Luke 22:22). The Jews offered false testimonies against Jesus – he did not produce false testimonies against himself. The Jews shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" – he did not say, "Crucify me! Crucify me!" And afterward the apostles explained that the Jews murdered him. Brown's argument distorts and contradicts Jesus' own statement, the apostolic record of what happened, and the apostolic interpretation of what happened.

(3) Jesus died as the payment for our sins, and therefore it was our sins that nailed Him to the cross.⁴¹

Brown is answering the questions, "But did the Jews really kill Jesus? What does the New Testament say?" This popular response is extremely deceptive and shameless, but for many Christians, it is also the most persuasive. This is because all Christians acknowledge that Christ died as an atonement for the sins of the elect,⁴² and this response implies that one must almost deny the atonement in order to attribute the death of Christ to some factor other than sin, such as to say that the Jews murdered him. In fact, Brown follows up with just such a threat: "It has sometimes been said that a person has not truly repented until he realizes that it is his own sins that nailed Jesus to the cross."⁴³

However, this response is perhaps the most blatant example of misdirection. Whether the Jews murdered Jesus has to do with the concrete and tangible factors at the time, but the answer that Brown gives pertains to the abstract and spiritual factors that were behind the atonement. Jesus' death occurred at a definite time in history, and our question pertains to the historical factors operating in that very narrow period that led to the event. We are asking about *that*, and that *only*.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 197.

⁴² Those who deny the atonement are not Christians at all.

⁴³ Brown, *Jewish People*, p. 198.

Brown's answer, perhaps the most popular one offered, makes a true statement that relates to something else, but ignores the question altogether. That is, it answers a question about M (as in murder) with a statement about A (as in atonement). But since what it says about A is essential to the Christian faith, it prevents less perceptive believers from rejecting it as an answer to M as well, lest they be accused of undermining A. More than a deception and a smokescreen, it is also a strong-arm tactic. In any case, since it does not address the question, it fails as a response. Otherwise, Brown might as well say that the nails killed Jesus, or that he was killed by excessive bleeding, so that no person is responsible. These statements would be true in themselves, but they again fail to address our question.

Our sins made the atonement necessary, if we were to be saved, but this does not address the question of who murdered Jesus. We have already established that the Jews murdered him, and referring to the atonement merely points out the reason that God has ordained this murder, but it does not absolve the Jews of murder. Again, Jesus taught that the evil that God has decreed must come, but woe to the man through whom it comes! Thus the atonement, which was ordained by God, had to occur, but woe to those who murdered him!

If we refuse to address the question concerning the murder of Jesus, or if we provide irrelevant answers concerning it, then we trivialize the murder aspect of his death. And to trivialize the murder of our Lord would make us unfaithful servants, even human scum. If we take the death of Christ seriously and have respect for what he has done for us, then this must be our estimation of those who deny that he was murdered by the Jews, or those who attempt to distract us from the topic with deceptive and irrelevant answers. They are human scum, and traitors to Christ and all Christians.

Rather, we must specify and accuse those responsible for the murder, and then address them in the manner commanded by our Lord. We must not shrug off the issue as unimportant, or by saying that we all killed him. No, we did not – we did not all kill him, not in the sense in which the question is asked. If we disallow the question to define and thus restrict the context of our response, then we illegitimately regard the question itself as unimportant, even meaningless, so that any limitation of context is self-imposed and arbitrary. However, the question indeed can be and has been meaningfully posed, so that if the context of the answer does not correspond with the context defined by the question, then the question has not been answered. Brown fails to prove his case by his misdirection, since he does not even address the issue.

As for his threat, it is instead more fair to say that a person has not truly repented until he submits to the biblical testimony, to Christ and to the apostles, so that he agrees with them that the Jews murdered Jesus, and that the Jews were even more guilty than the Gentiles. In fact, the testimony of Scripture is so pervasive and overwhelming that it is difficult to see how we can avoid making this a test for orthodoxy, and to install it as a necessary part of all Christian creeds. The Apostle's Creed includes the affirmation that Christ "suffered under Pontius Pilate," but considering the amount of attention Scripture devotes to recording the part that the Jews played in his murder, and Jesus' own statement that the Jews were "guilty of a greater sin" (John 19:11), the Creed would be vastly improved if it were to add "murdered by the Jews."

Once the biblical evidence is shown to a professing believer, to reject the idea that the Jews murdered Jesus is to reject the inspiration of Scripture, the authority of Christ, and the authenticity of apostolic ministry. In other words, once a person has been informed of the biblical data, then for him to deny that the Jews murdered Jesus would be at least an indirect repudiation of the Christian faith. The unanswered question is how probable it is for Brown to have been unaware all the biblical passages I cited proving that the Jews murdered Jesus, but I have my suspicions.

(4) There is Jewish responsibility for rejecting the Messiah and giving Him over to the Romans to be executed, but when the Jewish people are confronted with this in the New Testament, the Jews are told either that they acted in ignorance, or that Jesus' death was ordained by God or that Jesus rose from the dead and that there is hope for redemption if they would repent. The message is even called "Good News"! (Note also that Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus primarily fell on a limited number of Jewish people as opposed to the nation as a whole.)⁴⁴

Then Brown adds, "Listen to the testimony of the Word,"⁴⁵ and cites Acts 2:22-23, 36-39,⁴⁶ and Acts 3:13-15, 17, and also Acts 13:26-33.⁴⁷ Thus he makes four points: (1) The Jews acted in ignorance; (2) Jesus' death was ordained by God; (3) There is hope for redemption if they would repent; and (4) Jewish responsibility fell on a limited number of Jewish people. The verses of Scripture he cites are supposed to support these four contentions.

Recall that this fourth response is supposed to answer the questions, "But did the Jews really kill Jesus? What does the New Testament say?" Brown obviously asserts the negative by this answer, that is, that the Jews did not "really kill Jesus" and that the New Testament says that the Jews did not "really kill Jesus." All his previous attempts have backfired. They have made Brown appear incompetent and dishonest in dealing with the relevant arguments and biblical passages, and they have made the case against the Jews even stronger by highlighting the New Testament insistence that the Jews murdered Jesus. We will see that this fourth attempt is also futile.

Again, this fourth response itself includes four points. Since the first point is new and so demands the most attention, we will address it last.

The second point appeals to foreordination to excuse the Jews. This repeats his first answer, which I refuted a number of pages earlier. We noted that it is misdirection, that moral responsibility relates only to divine commandments, and so on. The third point, that the apostle preached hope to the Jews, has to do with the Christian reaction toward the fact that

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 198-199.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Adding, "see also Acts 4:25-28."

⁴⁷ I will not take the space to cite these passages, but feel free to look them up in the Bible before continuing on to my response.

the Jews murdered Jesus, and in itself has no direct relevance to whether the Jews murdered him in the first place.

This third point becomes relevant only when we ask, "In light of the fact that the Jews murdered Jesus, how should Christians react?" We will indeed address this later. Brown follows his fourth answer with a condemnation of violent reaction against the Jews: "What a contrast between the historic 'Christian' message, which condemned and hated Jews for killing Jesus, calling them 'Christ killers' and often going on violent rampages against Jewish people after Easter services."⁴⁸ There is no need to doubt that some of those who claimed to be Christians indeed preached and practiced such a reaction to the murder of Jesus, but whether the Jews were guilty of murder and whether the Christians should react in kind are two separate issues. What the Jews did and what Christians ought to do are distinguishable topics, but Brown consistently mixes the two in the several pages of his book that are now under examination. This is also misdirection, and betrays a lack of fairness, honesty, or competence and intelligence.

As for the fourth point, that only a limited number of Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus, we have also demonstrated the error of this claim earlier in this chapter when we performed a survey of relevant biblical verses. Here, to show how outrageous and inexcusable it is to assert that only a limited number of Jews were responsible, I will refute Brown's claim for a second time using the very verses that he cites for this fourth response.

In Acts 2:22, Peter addresses the "Men of Israel," the Jewish crowd that gathered around him on the day of Pentecost. He is not addressing the Jewish leaders or the limited number of Jews that Brown has in mind. In fact, "there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from *every nation under heaven*" (2:5). And in Acts 2:23, he says, "You...put him to death by nailing him to the cross." So Peter blames the Jews for the murder of Jesus, for nailing him to the cross, and he places the blame to the "Men of Israel." Contrary to Brown, who claims that the responsibility did not fall on "the nation as a whole," Peter blames the Jews "from every nation under heaven."

While we are at it, note again that verse 23 mentions that the death was foreordained and that the Jews had "the help of wicked men." Yet the blame for murder still falls on the Jews. Therefore, Peter recognizes the factors of God's foreordination and Gentile involvement – things that Brown uses to direct the murder charge away from the Jews – but still accuses the Jews as the ones responsible for the murder of Jesus.

In Acts 3:13-15, Peter addresses "all the people" (see 3:9, 11) who were present at the temple, and he declares, "You handed him over... You disowned him... [You] asked that a murderer be released... You killed the author of life." In Acts 3:17, he says, "I know that you acted... as did your leaders." So Peter makes a distinction between "you" (the Jewish people in general) and "your leaders," and declares that both groups "acted" in the murder of Jesus.

⁴⁸ Brown, *Jewish People*, p. 200.

Then, in Acts 13:27, Paul says, "The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath." He blames the murder of Jesus on both "the people of Jerusalem" as well as "their rulers," and not only the rulers. Thus the verses Brown cites to support his case contradict his own assertion, but instead reinforce the idea that the Jews murdered Jesus, and that the culprits were not limited to a small group.⁴⁹

Returning to Brown's first point, Acts 3:17 says that the Jews "acted in ignorance." Brown does not tell us what we are supposed to infer from this, but if we assume that he stays on topic, then we should think that he mentions this to answer, in the negative, the questions, "But did the Jews really kill Jesus? What does the New Testament say?" From Brown's perspective, the only meaningful use of Acts 3:17 would be to remove or reduce the Jews' responsibility for the murder of Jesus based on their ignorance. If this is not the connection that he attempts to make, then the point is irrelevant, and requires no answer at all. So we will assume that this is what he intends to imply. Ambiguity exists due to his inferior scholarship, in that he fails to establish relevance or even fails to perceive the need to do so. But to continue this interaction, we must assume his intention for now.

The meaning and implication of this ignorance must be explicated. Just because a person is ignorant of *something* does not mean that he is never guilty of *anything*. In fact, the biblical ethic is such that even if a person is ignorant in a sense that is relevant to the situation – he is ignorant of what is right and wrong in that situation – he is still guilty of sin and will be punished if he transgresses God's commands.

To illustrate this principle, Jesus says, "That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:47-48).

The one who is ignorant in the sense that he lacks information regarding right and wrong, if he transgresses, will be punished with less severity, but he will still be punished. He is still guilty. This is because moral responsibility has to do with the degree of compliance that one's thoughts, words, and actions demonstrate toward God's commandments. To know what is right and still do wrong (or to know what is wrong and still do it) deserves more severe punishment only because it is God's stated precept that to know what is right and still do wrong is in itself another sin (James 4:17). It does not mean that the person who transgresses his commands out of ignorance is innocent or will not be punished.

In what sense were the Jews ignorant? What exactly were they ignorant of? If their ignorance refers to a lack of knowledge or information, exactly what knowledge or information did they not have? And how does this affect our understanding of the question, that is, of whether the Jews murdered Jesus? When we consider the issue this way, the most relevant piece of information was whether they knew that they were insisting on killing an innocent man.

⁴⁹ For additional refutations, see the list of biblical passages presented earlier in the chapter.

Many people fail to recognize this point – when the question is whether the Jews committed murder, it is *completely irrelevant* as to whether they knew that he was the Messiah, since by definition, to murder is to intentionally kill any innocent man. And we can be certain that the Jews knew that they were killing an innocent man. Jesus repeatedly challenged the Jews to charge him with sin, asking them for what reason they wanted to stone him, but they failed to answer this challenge. At the trial of Jesus, they could not even make their own false testimonies agree with one another. Then, Pilate repeatedly confronted them with Jesus' innocence, declaring that he had committed no crime. And on the same occasion, the Jews demanded that Pilate release Barabbas, whom they knew was a murderer, instead of Jesus, whom they knew was innocent.

In fact, they could not rightly claim ignorance even concerning the fact that Jesus was the Messiah, and that they would be killing the Messiah. Jesus explicitly told them who he was at the trial:

The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Matthew 26:63-64; see also Mark 14:61-62, Luke 22:67-70)

In addition, he told Pilate that he was the King of the Jews, and Pilate repeated this to the Jews as well (Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2, 9, 12; Luke 23:3; John 18:37, 19:14-15). Ignorance due to a stubborn rejection of the truth is different from ignorance due to a lack of opportunity to learn the truth, and if the latter could not grant moral exemption (Luke 12:47-48), then still less can the former. If the Jews did not know he was the Messiah, it was only because they refused to believe him. The truth was not concealed.

Therefore, on the basis of the numerous biblical passages that we have examined that directly incriminate the Jews for the murder of Jesus, it is impossible that the Jews killed Jesus out of "ignorance" in any sense that absolves or excuses them from the charge of murder. The ignorance refers to something else that is relevant to Peter's preaching in Acts 3 – and we will say what this is when we conclude this section – but that is irrelevant and unhelpful to Brown's position regarding the Jews. They knew what they were doing, that they were killing an innocent man. They were ignorant in a different sense.

Although there is no need to say more in order to maintain our position, that the Jews murdered Jesus, we can indeed say more. To begin, we shall further demolish Brown's case by showing that the very biblical passages he cites for this section once again contradict his own position.

Acts 3:17 says, "Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders." This verse indeed says that the Jews acted in ignorance, but it does say that they *acted*. So,

although the Jews killed Jesus out of their ignorance, whatever this means, it cannot mean that it was an accident or that they were completely oblivious. Also, when Peter adds, "as did your leaders," he makes a distinction between the Jewish leaders and the general Jewish population, so that when he says "you acted" – that "you" murdered Jesus – he has in mind all the Jews in general, only that the leaders *also* acted.

Brown also cites from Acts 13. But there Paul says that in killing Jesus the Jews "fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath" (v. 27). So the Jews could not have been ignorant of the words of the prophet, and Paul notes that these words were about Jesus, even predicting the manner in which he would die. Although Brown stops at verse 17 when he quotes from Acts 3, Peter utters a similar statement in the very next verse: "But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer" (v. 18). So, again, the Jews were not ignorant about what the prophets predicted, including the manner of death that Christ would suffer.

Paul continues in Acts 13: "Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed" (v. 28). Keep in mind that this verse is included in Brown's scriptural quotations. It is highly significant because it demonstrates that the Jews pressed for the execution of Jesus without proper ground for a death sentence. That is, they killed him without justification. Justification in this case would have meant proof of some crime that provided ground for the death sentence. They knew they did not have this proof or warrant, even though they tried to provide false testimonies against him. And Pilate repeatedly confronted them with Jesus' innocence. The Jews were not ignorant of these things.

The biblical verses that Brown uses do not support his position, but rather argues for the opposite, that the Jews murdered Jesus, that they did it with full knowledge, premeditation, carried out their objective with persistence, and that the entire biblical testimony blames the Jews for this. It was the most obvious and indefensible case of murder in all of history. Whatever they were ignorant of, they were not ignorant of the fact that Jesus was an innocent man, that he was found without guilt by both Jews and Gentiles. They were not ignorant of their own action and intention, that they were killing him. Thus the Jews were not ignorant of the fact that they were killing an innocent man, but still they insisted on killing him. By definition, this means that the Jews murdered Jesus, and they knew it.

Brown's misleading appeal to the Jews' ignorance is further exposed and refuted when we go beyond the biblical verses that he uses. For example, Paul writes:

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his

unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. (1 Timothy 1:13-16)

We are not sure exactly what to say about the irrelevance of ignorance to counter Brown, since he never specified the relevance between the ignorance of the Jews and the topic under discussion. As we noted, he never explained what this ignorance means, its significance and implication, and even what the Jews were ignorant of. That is, according to Brown, how does the ignorance of the Jews affect the argument, or the question concerning the Jews' role in the murder of Jesus? Any ambiguity on our end is necessitated by Brown's careless and incompetent scholarship.

Nevertheless, an examination of Paul's statement concerning his ignorance, and his own statement here and other biblical verses about the nature of who he was and what he did, will be more than sufficient to provide a broad refutation of whatever Brown intends to prove by asserting the Jews' ignorance. The New Testament is in fact clear about this ignorance of the Jews and its significance. Brown misuses it.

Paul states that when he persecuted the church before his conversion, he "acted in ignorance and unbelief." But he does not then say that, because of his ignorance, he was therefore not a blasphemer, not a persecutor, and not a violent man. Ignorance did not absolve him, excuse him, or permit him to portray himself as less wicked than he was. In fact, he goes on to say that he was even "the worst of sinners" (v. 16), and that was for persecuting the Christians, and not for murdering Christ, although morally speaking there is no difference (Acts 9:5).

As for the nature of his ignorance, he did not lack any knowledge or information that would overturn his own admission to being a blasphemer, persecutor, and a violent man. He was not ignorant that the Jews were stoning Stephen when he did nothing to deserve the death sentence, and he was not ignorant of approving the murder (Acts 8:1). Then, Acts 9:1 says that he was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (NASB). Note the word "murder," or "slaughter" (KJV). He was not ignorant of doing that. Later he said that he "persecuted the followers of this Way *to their death*" (Acts 22:4). To persecute people "to their death" when they have done nothing to deserve punishment by death is, by definition, mass murder. He was not ignorant that he was doing this.

Therefore, when Paul writes that he "acted in ignorance," he could not be referring to a lack of knowledge or information that renders his actions morally good or neutral, or even accidental. If the objection is that Paul thought he was doing right at the time, we can say the same thing about Hitler, that he also thought he was doing the right thing when he slaughtered the Jews. Would any Jew or Christian accept this as an excuse, or a reason not to blame Hitler? In any case, we can answer this objection from Paul's testimony. He says, "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 26:9). Yet, the New Testament still calls his action "murder," as he himself also admits. And if what he did in his "ignorance" was murder, then what the Jews did to Jesus in their "ignorance" was also murder.

Both Peter and Paul relate ignorance with the possibility of repentance and forgiveness, and not to diminish the severity of previous sin. In Acts 3, Peter says, "Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance...Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out" (v. 17, 19). And in 1 Timothy 1, Paul writes, "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly" (v. 13-14). Again, they do not say that because they acted in ignorance, therefore the Jews were not murderers, or that therefore Paul was not a persecutor or a violent man. They *were* murderers, and so was Paul, but they could be forgiven and he was forgiven because they acted in ignorance.

So if the ignorance is thus connected with the possibility of repentance and forgiveness, to go beyond this ignorance and sin as the Jews and Paul did would be to go beyond the point where the possibility remains for repentance and forgiveness. Again, if they could repent and be forgiven *because* they acted in ignorance, this means that if they had gone beyond this ignorance and acted in a similar manner, repentance and forgiveness would have been impossible.

What is implied in Peter and Paul, therefore, is the doctrine that is stated in Hebrews 6: "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace" (v. 4-6; see also Hebrews 10:26-31 and 2 Peter 2:20-22). All that Peter and Paul mean is that the Jews and Paul himself had not reached that stage where repentance was no longer possible. But this does not help Brown when our focus is on the questions, "But did the Jews really kill Jesus? What does the New Testament say?"

As Brown concludes his fourth response, now refuted, he writes, "And note carefully that there is not a single time in the entire New Testament that the charge of deicide is ever raised, either explicitly or implicitly."⁵⁰ He brings this up because at the beginning of his chapter he claims that some Christians accuse the Jews of committing deicide (killing God). Of course, we are not interested in proving that the Jews committed deicide, since God as such could not be murdered. Nevertheless, Brown's statement that "there is not a single time that the charge of deicide is ever raised" is inaccurate. In Acts 3:15, Peter says, "You killed the author of life" or "the prince of life" (KJV). Unless Brown believes that there is an author or prince of life other than God, this is a direct accusation of, in Brown's term, deicide. And in Acts 20:28, Paul says, "Be shepherds of the church of *God*, which he bought with *his own blood*." Since the Jews were the ones who made him shed his own blood, this is another mention of deicide. Contrary to Brown, who asserts that the New Testament does not mention deicide "either explicitly or implicitly," it in fact mentions deicide *both* explicitly and implicitly.

Again, God as such could not be killed. But God in the person of his Son took upon himself human flesh, and *that* could be killed. The truth that Jesus was both fully divine and fully

⁵⁰ Brown, *Jewish People*, p. 200.

human was so ingrained in the minds of the biblical writers that at times we find them refer to Jesus' divine side while speaking of things that pertain to his human nature, and at times to his human side while speaking of things that pertain to his divine nature. Although the divine nature and human nature were never mingled or confused, the one person possesses both so that it is acceptable to use a term that seems to designate one nature while describing activities that could only be done with the other nature. Again, this is acceptable because although there are two natures involved, we are referring to only one person, Jesus Christ. So, although no one could kill God as such, that is, the divine nature of Christ, Brown's statement that deicide is never mentioned remains inaccurate and misleading.

This fourth response insists that the message to the Jews is called "good news." This is true enough, but it has nothing to do with whether Christians should blame the Jews for the murder of Jesus. The good news to the Jews is not that they did not murder Jesus, but that although they did murder him, they could still repent and receive forgiveness. To mention this point, that the message of the apostles was good news to the Jews, without explanation as to how it is good, and as if it supports Brown's position on the issue in question, is another instance of misdirection, which displays either incompetence or dishonesty, or both.

(5) The Romans made a legal decision and committed the physical act of crucifying the Son of God, but this only highlights the point I have been making, since no one would ever think of hating the Italians today because some of their ancestors crucified Jesus. Of course not!

This is Brown's fifth and final answer to the questions, "But did the Jews really kill Jesus? What does the New Testament say?" Assuming that he is keeping these questions in mind as he writes this, the answer therefore intends to say, "No, the Jews did not really kill Jesus, but the Romans did. And the New Testament says so." Since there are so many things wrong with his answer, I must divide my response into two sections. The first deals with the statement that the Romans killed Jesus, and the second deals with the latter part about "hating the Italians." Of course, he relates these two things, and so I will address the connection as well.

It is true that the Romans "made a legal decision and committed the physical act" of killing Jesus. Unlike Brown, we do not desire to obscure or distort the New Testament record. Yes, the Romans played an important role. And unlike Brown, who covers up the murder of the one he calls Lord, we would not say that even though they did this, they were not to blame. Of course the Romans were to blame. Of course! Of course they committed murder. It would be sinful and unjust to say that the Romans did not "really" murder Jesus as Brown says that the Jews did not "really" kill him. We are unafraid to mention Acts 4:27, which says, "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed." Nevertheless, even this verse says that "the people of Israel" were involved.

However, it would be wrong to say that the Romans must therefore assume most or all of the blame. In fact, both Jesus and the apostles recognized the role that the Romans played

in the murder, and never absolved them, but both almost exclusively blamed the Jews for the murder, for their part in it. We have already provided all the evidence needed to prove this point, and any reader should be able to acknowledge this by now. So we will only review some of the biblical data without a thorough repetition of what we have already presented.

There is the incontrovertible statement from Jesus, who said to Pilate, "Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin" (John 19:11). This is sufficient to establish the case so that no matter how much the Romans were involved in the murder of Jesus, the Lord himself insisted that the Jews were more guilty. On the basis of this statement, the more someone blames the Romans, the more he bolsters the case against the Jews. Brown does not mention this verse in his answers to the topic. Either he has not come across it in his supposedly thorough and expert research, or he has covered it up.

Then, as we also noted, Pilate confronted the Jews with the innocence of Jesus at least three times, but the Jews threatened him, shouting the name of Caesar (John 19:12). Pilate washed his hands before the Jews, disclaiming any guilt for the murder of this innocent man. Such a ceremonial gesture does nothing to repudiate actual guilt, since unlike Brown, we would insist that murder is murder, and Pilate was indeed guilty. But the Jews were even more guilty, having no respect for divine command, human law, or innocent life, they shouted, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25). They were willing to damn themselves if they could only murder Jesus. As a final attempt to make the Jews choose what was right, Pilate presented them with Jesus and Barabbas, a known murderer. The Jews chose Barabbas.

When the apostles preached the gospel to the Jews, they acknowledged the role that the Romans played in the murder of Jesus, but the blame was placed squarely on the Jews: "You, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross" (Acts 2:23). There is recognition of "the help of wicked men," but the subject that performed the action was said to be "You," the Jews – "You...put him to death."

Acts 2:36 says, "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." The verse addresses Israel, the Jews, and says, "Jesus, whom *you crucified*." The Jews were so entirely responsible for the murder of Jesus that the apostles, although they knew the distinction, said that the Jews crucified Jesus. In other words, although one could recognize the distinction, the Jews were so guilty of the murder that there was no need to even mention the Romans, so that the apostles simply said that the Jews crucified Jesus. Another example is Acts 10:39, where Peter says, "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree." That is, "the Jews...killed him by hanging him on a tree." Again, although Acts 2:23 shows us that Peter knew the details of the events and understood the distinction between the roles that the Jews and the Romans played, here the crucifixion is directly blamed on the Jews without mention of the Romans.

Thus the apostles blamed the Jews for the murder of Jesus not because they lacked information about the proceedings or lacked the ability to make intelligent distinctions, but

because when the details of the events were considered, including Pilate's testimony of Jesus' innocence and the Jews' insistence to kill him anyway, it was clear that the Jews were the main instigator and enforcer of the murder of Jesus. It was carried out by prolonged premeditation, multiple attempts, false testimonies, political threats against Roman officials, and a concerted effort of a large group of Jews. Since we have already examined this point and considered the relevant verses several times, we will not press this further. It is sufficient to say that in bringing up the Romans, Brown has helped us to stress one more time, on the basis of overwhelming New Testament evidence, that the Jews were guilty of the murder of Jesus, and that this was also the interpretation of the events given by the Lord and the apostles.

The latter part of Brown's argument reads, "This only highlights the point I have been making, since no one would ever think of hating the Italians today because some of their ancestors crucified Jesus." The reasoning is that since the Romans were the ones who crucified Jesus, if we are not "hating" the Romans or their descendents for this, then still less should we hate the Jews. This argument fails on many levels. We will examine only three of them.

First, the argument commits an "is-ought" fallacy. That is, it argues from what *is* done to what *ought* to be done. Or, it implies that what is right is what we are already doing. Let us agree with Brown that we do not hate the Romans or their descendents (hereafter only "Romans") for the crucifixion of Jesus. This does not mean that we ought not to hate them. Perhaps we should hate them for the crucifixion of Jesus, and the fact that we do not hate them is a case of sinful negligence or indifference on our part. Perhaps we should repent of this and begin to hate the Romans.

To equate "is" with "ought" eliminates all instances of moral transgressions, since what is done is always what ought to be done, and what ought to be done is defined by what is already being done. Therefore, there are no current moral transgressions. The only way to commit a moral transgression would be to deviate from current practice. But once this new practice becomes the norm, thus the "is," it has also become the "ought." In fact, on the basis of the is-ought fallacy, if hatred for the Jews is universal, then it would be the right thing to do. The more widespread it is, the more morally established it is. The more applicable the "is," the stronger the "ought" becomes.

Brown uses the is-ought fallacy to argue against hatred toward the Jews on the basis that there is no hatred toward the Romans. But if there are two current states of affairs, then the is-ought fallacy can be turned around against Brown. That is, if there is current hatred toward the Jews, then one can use the is-ought fallacy to say that then there ought also be hatred against the Romans also. Thus on a similar basis, one can argue for the opposite position, so that to people who hate the Jews, one can say, "The Romans made the legal decision and committed the physical acts of crucifying the Lord Jesus. Since no one would think of *not* hating the Jews today, we should therefore hate the Romans also." In this case, the is-ought fallacy works both ways, and self-destructs. Of course, we are not advocating hatred against either the Romans or the Jews, but we are refuting an invalid argument.

Second, we cannot say that we should not hate the Jews *because* we do not already hate the Romans, since Jesus declared that the Jews were "guilty of greater sin" (John 19:11), and the apostles designated the Jews as the ones who crucified Jesus, sometimes excluding mention of the Romans altogether, so that *even if* we equate "is" and "ought," that there is no hate toward the Romans says nothing about whether there ought to be hate toward the Jews. In other words, since the Jews incurred greater guilt, the fact that we do not hate the one with the lesser guilt does not give us guidance as to whether we ought to hate the one with the greater guilt.

Brown's argument assumes that if we ought to hate anyone at all, we ought to hate the Romans. Since we do not hate the Romans, then still less should we hate the Jews. If this type of argument works at all, it would work only if the Romans had incurred equal or greater guilt than the Jews in the murder of Jesus. But since the Jews incurred greater guilt than the Romans in the murder of Jesus, lenience toward the Romans in our attitude and practice provides no guidance regarding what ought to be our attitude and practice toward the Jews. Brown's assumption is that, if there is guilt at all, the Romans had incurred the greater guilt, but this is the opposite of the position asserted by the Lord Jesus and the apostles.

Third, Brown's argument fails because he commits the fallacy of equivocation, not only when it comes to this fifth answer, but also throughout the chapter in which these arguments appear. Specially, he seems to use the words (or ideas of) "blame," "hate," and "persecute" as if they are interchangeable, and uses the three words together in a sentence near the end of the chapter.

However, these words are not interchangeable. To "blame" is to assign responsibility for a negative action, effect, or some such thing, to a personal or non-personal agent. It has no necessary connection with an attitude or response toward the agent blamed. I can blame a person for doing something wrong without having a negative attitude toward him and without doing anything to punish him for it. To "hate" is to harbor a hostile attitude toward someone or something. Again, it has no necessary relationship with to "blame" or to "persecute." It is possible to hate someone without cause. It would be irrational and immoral to do so, but it is possible. And just because a person hates someone does not mean that he will "persecute" him, or do something to harm him. The person has a hostile policy toward him, so that he might indeed persecute, but the two are distinguishable and not interchangeable. Then, to "persecute" refers to the act of harming or punishing a target. And again, it has no necessary relationship with "blame" and "hate," although some kind of relationship is possible.

Brown poses the questions at the beginning of his chapter that are supposed to frame the entire discussion: "But did the Jews really kill Jesus? What does the New Testament say?" These questions refer to blame, and blame alone. Thus when he uses words like "hate" and "persecute" in other places, unless he successfully relates them to the issue of blame, he is failing to address the questions that he himself poses. If by the fifth argument he implies, "Because there is no *hate* toward the Romans, there ought to be no *blame* toward the Jews," then we must complain that he equivocates, and raises an irrelevant point. But if he implies,

"Because there is no *hate* toward the Romans, there ought to be no *hate* toward the Jews," then in addition to the fact that he still commits the is-ought fallacy, we must complain that he does not even address the questions he raises at the beginning, which have to do with blame instead of hatred or persecution.

Indeed, Brown's concern about persecution against the Jews is clear from the start, but he states that persecution against the Jews occurs because Christians *blame* the Jews for the murder of Jesus. So, to remove this basis for persecution, he sets out to eliminate the basis for blame. And thus he asks, "But did the Jews really kill Jesus?" instead of "But should we persecute the Jews even though they really killed Jesus?" His cause would be better served by pressing the latter question, but he picks the first and thus fights a losing battle, since the Jews indeed murdered Jesus.

After all the inaccurate statements, misleading arguments, fallacious inferences, and deceptive assertions that Brown has made us suffer, he concludes his chapter on whether the Jews murdered Jesus with this disappointing paragraph:

We can safely say, then, that to blame anyone for Jesus' death is to obscure the greatness of His self-sacrifice and to diminish the depth of His love, and if He died for any reason other than His willful atonement for our sins, we have no Gospel, no New Testament, no hope.⁵¹

However, this is the one thing that we cannot safely say, because we have established that the New Testament itself blames the Jews for the murder of Jesus. It does this explicitly, emphatically, and repeatedly.

He claims that if Jesus died for any other "reason" than to make atonement, then we would have no gospel. This is another instance of misdirection, based on a fallacy of equivocation. He uses the word "reason" in a soteriological sense rather than a strictly historical sense, but when we ask, "Did the Jews really kill Jesus?" we are inquiring of the historical factors that led to Jesus' death, which he willingly submitted under in order to make atonement for our sins. These are two related but distinguishable issues, but Brown raises the soteriological reason to suppress the historical reason, and adds to it a veiled threat that if the historical reason is acknowledged, it would destroy the soteriological effect of the entire event. This sophisticated strong-arm tactic is spiritual manipulation. I condemn it by the authority of Christ.

On the other hand, compelled by the biblical testimony, we must turn the threat against Brown himself, although this time the basis is truth and the danger is real. Since we have established beyond any doubt that the New Testament blames the Jews for the murder of Jesus, the acceptance or rejection of this proposition has now become a matter of biblical inerrancy. Once biblical inerrancy has become the issue, the entire basis of one's faith is now at stake.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 201.

This study, if presented to Brown, would place him in a position where he is confronted with biblical evidence that is directly opposite to what he affirms. If he does not then recant, repent, and acknowledge that the Jews murdered Jesus, then in effect he would be rejecting a significant portion of the New Testament, including the testimonies of the Lord and the apostles. This would in turn amount to a rejection of biblical inerrancy. And since biblical inerrancy is the foundation of the entire faith, his persistent refusal to acknowledge that the Jews murdered Jesus would amount to a rejection of Christ and the Christian faith. Therefore, once confronted with the biblical evidence, if Brown still refuses to repent and admit that the Jews murdered Jesus, then the only biblical response would be to excommunicate him from all Christian churches, seminaries, and organizations, since he will have declared himself an unbeliever.

The truth is the exact opposite of what Brown claims. That is, if we refuse to affirm that the Jews murdered Jesus even in the light of the above biblical evidence, then in effect we would be rejecting the doctrines of biblical inerrancy, inspiration, and revelation. And thus we would be repudiating the gospel, the New Testament, and our hope. In other words, once you have examined the biblical evidence on this subject, if you are a Christian, you must and you will affirm that the Jews murdered Jesus. Otherwise, you will have no basis on which to claim that you believe the Scripture, and therefore no basis on which to claim that you believe the gospel, and no basis on which to claim that you are a Christian or that you possess salvation through faith in Christ.

As for his claim that "to blame anyone for Jesus' death is to obscure the greatness of His self-sacrifice and to diminish the depth of His love," the New Testament again suggests the exact opposite. Once we acknowledge that the Jews could still repent and receive forgiveness through Jesus Christ, the fact that they murdered him in the first place generates a contrast between sin and grace that clarifies rather than obscures "the greatness of His self-sacrifice and to diminish the depth of His love." Rather than saying that no one murdered him, we say that Christ would save even the ones who murdered him, if they would only repent and believe. But if they would not repent, then they would suffer the full measure of the wrath of God. Thus by upholding the biblical testimony that the Jews murdered Jesus, we bear witness to both the "kindness and sternness of God" (Romans 11:22).

On the other hand, if we falsely absolve the Jews for the murder of Jesus, we also reduce this contrast between sin and grace, and diminish the revelation of the greatness of Christ's self-sacrifice and the depth of his love. Of course, we must not invent a contrast to produce this effect, but we have no right to hide or deny the contrast that is already there. But this is what Brown does, and he has the gall to say that those who differ on this diminish the atonement. Now, we read in Luke:

"Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said....

"Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little" (Luke 7:42-43, 47).

As Paul writes, "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (Romans 5:20). So by denying or even just de-emphasizing the fact that the Jews murdered Jesus, Brown not only diminishes the greatness of the atonement, but he robs the Jews of a greater appreciation of the grace of Christ and a greater love for him. And by robbing the Jews of this, he also robs all others of an example of grace and forgiveness, and thus greater potential for love toward Christ. Whereas Jesus teaches that he who has been forgiven much, loves much, Brown tries to tell us that there is not as much to forgive as we thought or as the biblical evidence suggests.

Returning to 1 Timothy 1:12-16, Paul offers the same interpretation of his own conversion:

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

Notice the repeated contrast between his sin and Christ's grace. It is because he fully acknowledges his wickedness that he is able to properly magnify Christ's forgiveness. And note that the contrast between sin and grace in his life is intended as an example for others. But a similar example also exists with the Jews, if we would only agree with the biblical testimony that they murdered Jesus! To deny that the Jews murdered Jesus is to annihilate a biblical example of grace – that even those who murdered Jesus *could* be saved, if they would repent and believe.

Nevertheless, we should consider Brown's primary concern, and that is the persecution of the Jews, sometimes by those who claim to be Christians. Before he presents his five fallacious and misleading arguments, now refuted, attempting to show that the Jews did not "really" kill Jesus, he writes, "Of course, even if the broad statement that 'the Jews killed Jesus' was totally true, it would not justify Christian hatred or persecution of the Jewish people."⁵² This statement is correct, and it is a sufficient answer to those professing

⁵² Ibid., p. 196.

Christians who think that they should persecute the Jews to avenge the murder of Jesus. Nothing more than this is needed.

The way the early Christians reacted to the murder of Jesus was to place almost all the blame on the Jews, with scarcely any mention of the role that the Romans played, and to say directly that the Jews murdered Jesus. But against this background, they preached to these same Jews the need for repentance and the hope of forgiveness in Jesus Christ, the very one whom they murdered without mercy. True Christians, therefore, do not excuse the Jews, but they blame the Jews for the murder of Jesus as a matter of upholding truth, justice, and history.

The Christian response is not revenge, or to return violence with violence, but to preach truth and mercy – the truth that the Jews murdered an innocent man, their own Messiah, and the mercy that is to be found in this same person whom they murdered. Unlike Brown and many others, the apostles and disciples did not revise history and say that the Jews did not kill Jesus, that the Romans killed Jesus, or that no one killed Jesus. No, the Jews murdered Jesus, but they could repent and receive forgiveness for this and all their many, many other sins.

Moreover, the fact that the Jews murdered Jesus is declared not only to the Jews themselves, but also proclaimed to all nations, as Paul does in our passage (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16). In fact, Paul does not say only that the Jews murdered Jesus, but also that the Jews murdered the prophets, and that even as he writes, the Jews are persecuting Christians in every place and in every way.

Again, the apostles made this a part of the preaching of the gospel not so that those who are converted would then exact revenge on the Jews for the murder of Jesus, the murder of the prophets, and the murder and persecution of countless Christians. Rather, they stated this in their preaching as a matter of truth and justice, and as part of the historical background of the ministry and atonement of Christ, and then the propagation of the Christian faith.

On the other hand, the despicable practice of trivializing or covering up the murder of an innocent man, no less the God-man that is Jesus our Lord, should have no place in Christian preaching, and should be thrown out of the church wherever it is found. Anyone who distorts history and obscures the truth about how the Jews murdered Jesus, the prophets, and countless Christians should be harshly reprimanded, and if he does not repent, he should be expelled from all Christian fellowship.

We are not doing the Jews a favor by telling them that their predecessors did not really commit all those murders. Doing this would only encourage hard-heartedness, defiance, and self-righteousness in a people that is already characterized by these evil qualities. The Bible teaches that they are a rebellious culture accustomed to persecuting and murdering God's messengers. Their repentance and salvation will involve a break with this tradition. And how do we give them an opportunity to do this, unless we inform or remind them of all the atrocities that they committed? If we do not insist that they committed all these

murders, then our message is not faithful to even the Old Testament, which records how the Jews resisted and murdered the prophets. Unless we insist that the Jews committed all these murders, we have not preached the whole Christian faith to them, since this is a prominent aspect of both Jewish and Christian history.

The Christians who have the moral courage to tell the truth about these atrocities committed by the Jews will be accused of anti-Semitism. But this is a most absurd and dishonest reaction, since even if the Jews wish to deny that they murdered Jesus and countless Christians, it remains that the Old Testament testifies that they persecuted and murdered the prophets. And since the record that the Jews also murdered Jesus and his disciples is an integral part of Christian history and doctrine, we respond that to accuse us of anti-Semitism is to be anti-Christian. Are the Jews allowed to make accusations against us, but we are not allowed to make accusations against them? People are all about tolerance when it is their religion, their race, or their culture that is on the line. How about my religion, my race, my culture? Their so-called tolerance is sustained by a much stronger hypocrisy.

Modern Jews want us to sympathize with them about what they suffered under Hitler, and demand us to acknowledge past aggression that Christians showed toward the Jews. And they use threats and accusations based on past suffering to manipulate others and to stifle criticisms. But this represents the height of injustice and hypocrisy unless they also acknowledge that they murdered Jesus and countless Christians. Some of them are proficient at bringing up the past violence and oppression performed by others, but they show no remorse and no repentance about their own past actions. The Jews who repented in Acts 2 were "cut to the heart" and said, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (v. 37). But some of the Jews today want us Christians to be cut to the heart so that they can tell us what to do.

The real issue should be whether this is the truth, that the Jews really murdered Jesus, the prophets, and the disciples. If the Jews deny this, then they must defeat us in argumentation – complaining of anti-Semitism is useless. From a rational perspective, it is only a whiny noise and is irrelevant to the truth. But if it is indeed the truth that the Jews committed all these murders, then to complain of anti-Semitism only means that the truth is anti-Semitic. And if the truth is anti-Semitic, then the Jews really have a problem, do they not? If the truth testifies against them, then it is futile to complain against us. Christians did not create the problem of anti-Semitism. If the truth is anti-Semitic, it is because the Jews killed all these people.

We must not allow those who have been victims to unjust treatment to intimidate and manipulate Christian doctrine, practice, and preaching, to revise history, and to distort the truth. People who fear the accusation of anti-Semitism and therefore suppress the truth do not love the Jews. They hate the Jews and love themselves. Plus, the Jews should not be defended in the murder of Jesus. They were completely wrong, and to defend them is to betray the Lord Jesus all over again, and to share in their guilt for his murder. Just because Jesus is a savior does not mean that we can punish him for his goodness by trivializing the murder aspect of his death.

It remains that anyone who tells the truth like this would be accused of anti-Semitism. And so the question becomes whether a so-called Christian is willing to be called insensitive, intolerant, a racist, an anti-Semite, all for the sake of Christ, truth, and justice. If you will not, it is because you are a man-pleaser. You love yourself more than you love Christ. But Jesus says, "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" (Matthew 10:32-33). Are you ashamed to affirm the truth about what happened to him? It does not count if you acknowledge him on your own terms, or if you affirm a distorted version of what he did and what he went through. To truly acknowledge Christ, you must agree with the biblical account concerning his life and work.

Finally, a version of the Christian message in which the Jews did not really murder Jesus will backfire on us. This is because, no matter what someone like Brown says, once the Jews begin to read the New Testament for themselves, they will see that the Christian faith is one that explicitly and repeatedly insists that the Jews murdered Jesus. To offer an alternative explanation will only discredit ourselves, and make ourselves appear as dishonest and incompetent people. Some Jews might correctly take it as an insult that we would hide the truth from them like this. So we might as well tell the truth from the start. Yes, the Jews murdered Jesus, as well as many other people, but if they will repent and believe in the gospel, they also will be saved by the power and grace of Christ. This and nothing else is the gospel to both the Jews and the Gentiles.

Returning to our passage in 1 Thessalonians 2, Paul continues, "They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last" (v. 15-16). He describes the ongoing effort of the Jews to frustrate the works of God on the earth. They killed the prophets and the Lord Jesus (v. 15a), and now they pursue the Christians. Some they drive out. Others they imprison. And the rest they kill.

They do not only refuse the gospel, preferring the fires of hell to the glories of heaven, but they also attempt to prevent the gospel from reaching the Gentiles, often by any means necessary, including murder. Whereas there is much talk about anti-Semitism today, Paul writes that they are the ones who are "hostile to all men," and this is seen in their efforts to impede the progress of the Christian faith, which is the only hope of salvation for mankind. Determined to destroy the Christian faith, in effect they have assigned themselves the task of mass damnation, the instigators of spiritual holocaust. But they could not succeed, for Jesus declared, "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). They murdered Jesus, and the Christians multiplied (Acts 2:41). They murdered Stephen and began "a great persecution" against the church at Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), but then the Christians scattered and preached the gospel everywhere (Acts 8:4), even to the Gentiles.

Although the Christians do not exact revenge on the Jews for the murder of Jesus, this does not mean that there would be no recompense. We mean only that it is not up to the Christians to punish the Jews – justice demands revenge, but it is up to God to carry it out.

As Paul writes, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). Or, as he writes in our passage, "In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last." The NLT renders the last part, "But the anger of God has caught up with them at last."

As to what Paul is referring to, several suggestions have been offered. Some of these refer to events that had already occurred as Paul writes this letter. Agabus predicted a famine, but it was one that would "spread over the entire Roman world," and did not specifically target the Jews (Acts 11:28). But this does not necessarily mean that it could not fit with what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2. Then, Josephus recorded a massacre of the Jews in the temple area. And Acts 18:2 says that Claudius had expelled all the Jews from Rome. Although Paul is possibly referring to these events, they appear rather mild as an expression of "the wrath of God" that is meant to punish a group of people who has heaped up "their sins to the limit." Also, these events carry no clear connection to Paul's context in 1 Thessalonians 2. Thus they should give way if a better option is available.

The most obvious candidate is Jesus' prediction regarding the destruction of Jerusalem and the slaughter of the Jews.

"So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!

"You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." (Matthew 23:31-39, 24:1-2)

"So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. Because of this, God in his

wisdom said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.' Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all.

"The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down." (Luke 11:48-51, 19:43-44, 21:5-6)

"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

"The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.

"But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"

"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. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed." (Matthew 21:33-44)

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

"Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.'

"But they paid no attention and went off – one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city." (Matthew 22:1-7)

He then began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.

"He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.'

"But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

"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?'" (Mark 12:1-11)

Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!' For if men do these

things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Luke 23:28-31)

Compare the above to what Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 2. He says (1) that the Jews murdered the prophets, (2) that the Jews murdered Jesus, and (3) that the Jews even now persecute the apostles of Christ. Persisting in such murderous rebellion, (4) they have heaped up their sins to the limit, so that (5) the wrath of God has finally come upon them. There are five items here, and they correspond to Jesus' prediction as well as his explanation in the above passages about the destruction of Jerusalem.

First, Jesus says that the Jews "killed the prophets." Second, they would kill the son of the vineyard. Third, they would kill the "prophets and apostles" that would be sent to them. Fourth, he says, "Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!" And fifth, he says that the judgment he pronounces would come upon "this generation" – including the very people that he faces as he speaks this, and the very people who would kill the apostles. He says, "Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets...Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all." The punishment that would visit them also corresponds to the self-curse that they inflicted on themselves as they pressured Pilate to crucify Jesus, saying, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25). Thus "this generation" applies to the people who lived at the time that Jesus made the prediction, and also to their children.

The nature of the judgment consists of the slaughter of the Jews and the destruction of Jerusalem, including the temple and their form of worship. As the parable says, "The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city." History tells us that this – exactly this – occurred in AD 70. The date, however, is unimportant for our purpose. Jesus said that it would happen, and that it would happen within one generation, even the same generation that murdered him, and that would murder his disciples. It was a prediction with a specific timeframe for its fulfillment. Because he said that it would happen, we know that it did happen. And the reason for it was to punish the Jews for the murder of the prophets, the Lord Jesus, and his apostles.

These items correspond exactly to what Paul is talking about in 1 Thessalonians 2. Therefore, it is likely that he is referring to this same incident that would happen, and did happen according to history in AD 70. That it has not occurred as he writes is irrelevant. He is saying that "at last" God will act. The Jews has sinned up to the limit, so that the verdict is passed, and their fate is sealed. Judgment is forthcoming. The language in the statement, "The wrath of God has come upon them at last," is very natural and consistent with this line of thinking. When the time came, God massacred the Jews for killing the prophets, killing the Lord Jesus, killing the apostles, and killing many other Christians. Now, will the Jews accuse the Christians for this? The Christians did not slaughter the Jews, but we can say, "The Romans did it," and this time we would be right.

There are some who insist that the wrath here refers to the future punishment of those who resist the gospel and impede its progress, namely, the judgment of God against them in hell. Although non-Christian Jews and Gentiles will certainly be sent to hell, I am

unconvinced that Paul is referring to this in 1 Thessalonians 2. Nevertheless, if he is indeed referring to hell, then he would be stressing the point that the Jews deserve even greater punishment and more intense suffering than what they would endure in AD 70, and so he points to this final aspect of their fate.

1 THESSALONIANS 2:17-3:13

But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, did, again and again – but Satan stopped us. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.

But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Statistics can be misleading – not the numbers as such, but the way they are gathered, presented, and interpreted. Even if the methods are honest and the numbers are accurate, there are some important questions that we must ask before accepting the interpretations offered about the statistics. When it comes to quantifying our obedience and effectiveness in evangelism, it is important to consider what we are counting. Many reports of evangelistic programs are characterized by ambiguity. The problem is most pronounced in ministries that spurn doctrinal precision but that at the same time practice mass evangelism. The relevance of doctrine to accuracy in reporting will become apparent in a moment. Of course, we are not against ministry statistics and mass evangelism themselves, but right now we have in mind a particular kind of ministry outreach and mentality.

What are we counting? Many ministries report the number of professions, that is, the number of people who *say* in one way or another that they have become Christians as a result of the evangelistic outreaches. The soteriology that is assumed by a ministry determines what counts as a credible profession of faith. In many cases, it is considered sufficient for a person to repeat a prayer in order for him to be pronounced a believer in Christ, after which all questions regarding the genuineness of his profession are discouraged. The prayer often lack any doctrinal substance or biblical basis, such as the common practice of asking Jesus to come into one's heart, whatever that means. The message that persuades the person to repeat such a prayer is often equally indefinite and non-biblical.

One female evangelist of international reputation, who ministers together with her husband, once addressed an audience that mostly consisted of professing believers. The gathering was for some sort of ministry training. Near the beginning of her presentation, she asked those in the audience to repeat a prayer, which turned out to be a prayer for salvation, asking Jesus to come into their hearts or something to that effect. Then, she said, "Notice that I did not ask them if they wanted to get saved. I just said, 'Repeat this prayer after me,' and they did it."

As expected, this couple claims large number of conversions as a result of their outreaches. But what are they counting? The numbers represent not people who have come to faith in Christ, but those who have been tricked into saying the words that she would tell them to repeat. Their statistics might accurately report the number of people that have been manipulated and added to their tally, but they are irrelevant as indicators of success in evangelism, since very little evangelism has been done. So the numbers discredit the ministry rather than endorse it.

To prevent invalid interpretations, statistics must be placed in their contexts. Counting converts is an acceptable practice that the first Christians also found useful, although unnecessary, since the numbers were not emphasized in every outreach. Perhaps numbers were not even gathered every time. Acts 2:41 reports that "about three thousand were added to their number that day." This figure is useful for measuring the impact of an outreach because it is placed in the context of a genuine presentation of the Christian faith.

The preceding passages describe the signs accompanying the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. When the people wonder at the sights and sounds, Peter stands up to preach. He confronts the Jews with the person and work of Jesus Christ, his miracles, his death, and his resurrection, reminding them that they were the ones who murdered him, their own Messiah. He tells them that the coming and the resurrection of Jesus occurred to fulfill prophecy, and that the outpouring of the Spirit that they presently witness is a fulfillment of Joel's prediction. Hearing this, the Jews are "cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37) and asked the apostles what they should do. They are told to repent and turn to Jesus Christ.

So the Jews are confronted with the truth, much of which the natural and sinful man would oppose (1 Corinthians 1:18). They are even told that they murdered Jesus, so that to affirm the gospel in this context would entail an admission that they committed this murder.

Against this background, the report of three thousand converts is indeed meaningful and significant. In the face of challenge and offense to their sinful nature, they are able to undergo *informed* conversions to the Christian faith. There is no trickery, gimmick, or evangelistic sleight of hand.

Compare this to the numbers we would be presented by the evangelist couple mentioned earlier. Even if the numbers are accurate in the sense that they offer a true report of the number of people who repeated the words they were told to say, they carry no meaning and no significance where the impact of an outreach is concerned. At best the numbers indicate the number of people that they have tricked into saying words that they might not mean or even understand, and if the message and the prayer fail to convey the essential content of the gospel, then no known conversion is indicated by the numbers at all. Numbers, then, are useless unless we know the context. And if the context indicates that no true gospel ministry has been offered, then no matter how large the numbers, they cannot demonstrate that an outreach has achieved any measure of success.

In what we refer to as the Great Commission, Jesus instructs Christians to "make disciples...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). This is the biblical standard by which we should measure our obedience and effectiveness in our ministry outreaches. And this is what Paul sets out to do in his ministry by the power of God: "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ" (Colossians 1:28). His method involves preaching, admonishing, and teaching. And he does these things so that "we may present everyone perfect in Christ," and not so that "we may trick everyone to make a profession of Christ."

A biblical ministry should have as its explicit purpose throughout its agendas and methods the perfection of those people it reaches and not mere profession. This is why a "hit and run" method of evangelism does not even begin to obey the Great Commission, especially when what we "hit" people with is not even the gospel. This approach does not even attempt to teach people "everything," or as Paul puts it elsewhere, "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27, ESV). And it does not aim to produce lifelong disciples that constantly strive for perfection in Christ. A true gospel outreach expounds and enforces the complete revelation of Jesus Christ – all the doctrines of the Christian faith – and thus propel those under its influence and authority toward perfection.

Therefore, to carry out the Great Commission requires ministers (or teams of ministers) who possess extensive, even a "complete," knowledge of the Christian faith as set forth in the Bible. Another way to describe this is that it requires competence in systematic theology, biblical exposition, and the ethical application that follows from these first two items. This disqualifies most of the evangelists in the field today. Those who boast that they care nothing for doctrine but that they only preach a simple gospel represent a departure from the Lord's command and the apostles' practice. The requirement to "teach everything" can often be satisfied, or partially satisfied, through the distribution of publications. We will mention this again later.

The comprehensive nature of the Great Commission in turn requires the minister of the gospel to devote a substantial amount of time to those who hear him. Take Paul as an example. Instead of preaching for only a few hours, he stayed in Corinth for more than a year and a half (Acts 18:11, 18). And instead of teaching for only several days or weeks, he held *daily* discussions in Ephesus for two years (Acts 19:10). He was unable to remain in Thessalonica for more than several weeks, because the Jews stirred up a violent mob and forced him to leave (Acts 17:2-10; 1 Thessalonians 2:15). Thus he considered his work there incomplete (1 Thessalonians 3:10), and became concerned about the spiritual welfare of the new converts (1 Thessalonians 3:5).

We may regard this as an issue of "follow-up." This stresses that evangelism should involve more than an initial contact with the target audience. However, it would be unbiblical and counterproductive to make an overly clean distinction between first contact and follow-up. Rather, throughout all stages of planning and execution, the evangelistic enterprise should be considered a long-term process. It is indeed possible to preach the gospel and make genuine converts even in an hour, and some people see "evangelism" from this perspective, and regard all subsequent contact with the audience as "follow-up." But as we have noted, this conception departs from the scriptural perspective because the Great Commission commands us to make disciples by teaching them everything about the Christian faith. Therefore, what is often considered follow-up should, in fact, be in the forefront of our thinking at the beginning of our evangelistic effort. It should not be relegated to an inferior, less intense, or even optional position in a gospel ministry.

The Great Commission commands Christians to teach "everything." Paul says to the elders of Ephesus, "I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you" (Acts 20:20). One pastor used this statement as an excuse to advocate and distribute homeopathic cures to his congregation, but the next verse narrows the context to Christian doctrines. The point is that Paul shares our understanding of the Great Commission, and attempts to fulfill it everywhere he goes. He continues in verses 26 and 27, "Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Acts 20:26-27). His declaration of innocence is based on his comprehensive teaching ministry. This implies that a person who refrains from teaching everything about the Christian faith even when he has the opportunity shares the moral responsibility for the failures of those that he is supposed to instruct as disciples and bring to maturity.

Paul is anxious about the condition of his converts in Thessalonica. He was unable to communicate a full body of Christian knowledge to them before the Jews chased him out of the city through the aggressive use of slander and violence. However, he managed to emphasize an important point to them, namely, that they would be persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ, that they should expect harsh treatment from some of the unbelievers. He writes, "In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know" (1 Thessalonians 3:4). The apostle gave it more than an isolated and obscure mention. He stressed and repeated this to them during his time there.

Paul's message is not what we would call "seeker-friendly." Although he takes care to remove unnecessary offenses that might hinder people from considering the Christian faith, he makes no effort to make his message palatable to the sinful man. The sinful man is possessed by evil dispositions that render him naturally antagonistic to truth, repentance, and holiness. From this perspective, there is nothing that the preacher can do to make the Christian faith attractive or "friendly" to the sinner without compromising the truth about what this religion teaches and produces. Will the Christian obtain great wealth? Perhaps, but to be a Christian under certain circumstances might mean the loss of freedom and property (Hebrews 10:34). Will the Christian attain a better marriage? Perhaps, but a Christian who is married to an unbelieving spouse,⁵³ might become a victim of desertion (1 Corinthians 7:15). Will the Christian achieve harmony in his family? Perhaps, but a Christian who has unbelieving family members might be betrayed to his death (Matthew 10:21-22).

The gospel is "good news" in the sense that it proclaims God's gift in Jesus Christ, through whom forgiveness, restoration, eternal life and bliss, the knowledge of the true God, and many other blessings, are extended to the chosen ones. But these things are "good" only from the perspective of divine knowledge and righteousness, and not from the perspective of rebellious and disbelieving sinners. It is good from the perspective of truth and wisdom, but sinners are ignorant and foolish. For essential aspects of the gospel to become "friendly" to sinners, the preacher must either change the gospel so that it becomes as ignorant and foolish as the sinners, in which case the message has turned into a private philosophy and no longer a revealed message that God honors with his saving power, or, God must change the sinners so that they could perceive truth and wisdom, and thus find the things of God attractive.

In other words, some offenses are necessary and unavoidable. They occur not because of the personal offensive nature of the preacher, but because the truth of righteousness naturally and necessarily offends the sinful man whose heart has not been opened by God, so that his intellectual and ethical dispositions are always contrary to wisdom and holiness. A sound exposition of the Christian faith will include mention of certain aspects of confessing Jesus Christ that might be difficult to hear – so difficult, in fact, that they will tend to repulse unbelievers and pretenders.

Paul does not preach, "The Christian faith is all about fun. Our church has it all – good songs, comfortable seats, delicious snacks, and conversations without all the confrontations. Come one, come all!" Such a message would indeed be seeker-friendly, but it is powerless to save anyone, and it would attract the wrong people, namely, those who would continue to indulge in their unregenerate thoughts and practices, but who simply desire a change in environment. Instead, Paul declares, "What I say to you about Jesus Christ is the truth, and the only way to salvation, to eternal life, and to escape the wrath of God. However – and I will keep telling you this – if you believe in this gospel that I am preaching, if you become one of us, then you will be persecuted by those who remain in

⁵³ This should happen only because the person becomes a Christian after he is already married, and not that he has married a non-Christian after his conversion, since a Christian must marry only another Christian (1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14-15).

unbelief. They will make life difficult for you, make fun of you, lie about you, and even imprison or kill some of you."

The only sense in which the preaching of the gospel should be "seeker-friendly" is that it should welcome all kinds of people to repentance toward God and faith toward Christ. It does not turn away anyone based on their race, gender, and social or economic background. It does, however, condemn all those who remain unrepentant, unbelieving, and who are unwilling to renounce their non-Christian religions, philosophies, and lifestyles. This is not an attractive message to those whose heart has not been softened and enlightened by God. But to those whom God has chosen for salvation, it is irresistible, for they are the ones who hear the voice of the shepherd therein.

The preaching of the gospel, therefore, should stress truth and not comfort. If God does not perform the work of regeneration in the heart, a person would never believe the gospel in the first place – it is against his wicked and foolish nature. But when God regenerates and transforms a person's heart, his work is characterized by excellence and endurance. It cannot be destroyed by offense or suffering, still less by some minor discomfort, but it is rather refined by testing and strengthened by pressure. In fact, the work that God performs in the heart is so pure and robust that it becomes all the more accentuated when confronted by those Christian doctrines and demands that would offend the unregenerate and the pretenders.

When Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John to become his disciples, he said to them, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." At this, they left their vocation, their lifestyle, their family, and what sense of psychological attachment and security associated with these, and followed Christ (Matthew 4:18-22). The demand was straightforward, and even severe by some standards, but they complied and their lives became entwined with their master's forever.

Later, Jesus said to a young man, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21). This dismayed him, and he went away. The young man was indeed a "seeker," and came to ask a question that appeared to demonstrate a willingness to follow Christ. The Lord's response was outright seeker-hostile. It was blunt and extreme, demanding total abandonment of the young man's previous lifestyle. It would have been more seeker-friendly to let him follow at his convenience, so that perhaps he might pick up some truths along the way. Instead, Christ said perhaps the most demanding and disheartening thing to this seemingly sincere seeker.⁵⁴ This is contrary to all the principles and methods of seeker-friendly evangelism.

We acknowledge that the young man possessed great riches, but it remains that Peter and the others left what they had, their income, routine, security, family, to follow Christ. The same passage confirms the significance of their action. When Peter mentioned that they had left everything to follow him, Jesus did not belittle this just because what they left

⁵⁴ I say "seemingly" because a person is never sincere in seeking God unless God has already worked in his heart. And if God has worked in his heart, then he would be sincere, and would not reject Christ.

behind, in terms of wealth, was less than what this young man possessed. Rather, he said, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first" (Matthew 19:28-30).

In other words, the disciples provide a meaningful contrast to the young man – the difference in wealth does not void the comparison. In principle, the same seeker-hostile demand was placed on both – in fact, the young man appeared more eager than the disciples, and initiated contact with Jesus – but the disciples complied and the young man refused. A seeker-hostile approach cuts through mere appearance to test the heart. If God is at work to convert the person, a harsh (but righteous) demand or offensive (but true) comment will not repulse him, but if God is not at work to convert, then it will bypass the mask of the eager seeker and expose the true condition of his heart.

Another example of Jesus' seeker-hostile method is taken from the case of the Gentile woman who comes to request healing for her daughter:

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."

Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

"Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour. (Matthew 15:21-28)

The woman is in great need, and she comes crying out to Jesus in eagerness and reverence. Contrary to a common misrepresentation of Jesus and of the Christian faith, Jesus repeatedly responds in a seeker-hostile manner. Although the woman calls him Lord, recognizes him as the Son of David, cries out for mercy, and requests help for her daughter

who is "suffering terribly," Jesus ignores her. He does not speak to encourage her. He does not reach out to comfort her. Whereas the seeker-friendly approach aims to entice seekers, this woman needs no gimmick to attract her. She comes willingly, actively, eagerly, and it seems she could hardly be any more open to Jesus' message and ministry, but he pays her no attention.

Then, when the woman continues her cries, and it appears that Jesus is not going to help her, the disciples persuade Jesus to send her way. And it seems that he proceeds to do this, for he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." In effect, he tells her, "I am sent to minister to some other group of people. I am not sent to help you." This is his response to the woman's cries, and there is nothing in his statement that would encourage her to pursue the issue further. The statement itself leaves very few options for the woman. He even gives the reason for his apparent rejection of her request, and the reason is such that there is nothing she can do to alter it.

She persists: "Lord, help me!" By this time, many people would expect Jesus to break down and weep, and rush right to her daughter to cure her. Instead, he suggests that it is "not right" to help her, and even insults her by calling her a dog. If not for the fact that it is Jesus doing this and that this is recorded in Scripture, many Christians would call such behavior cruel and heartless. Perhaps they would even say regarding this kind of treatment, "It is not Christ-like"! This reaction arises because they have a false conception of what Jesus is like and how Christian ministry should operate. At this point it seems that the only way for Jesus to be even less seeker-friendly is to punch her in the stomach and kick her down a hill so that he could be rid of her.

Sometimes it is noted that the Jews are accustomed to referring to Gentiles as dogs, as if this makes Jesus' use of the term less offensive. But does this make it better or worse? What if I were to select one of the culturally popular racial slurs to address someone in church? Some Christians would prefer that I commit blasphemy or adultery than to make a statement that would sound racist or sexist. Even Christians are prone to identify with their race, gender, or nationality more than their identity as believers. What a disgrace. So this so-called explanation does not reduce the offensiveness of Jesus' use of the term, but rather highlights and accentuates it.

The way that Jesus deals with this woman is not even slightly encouraging, and not remotely close to what we would call seeker-friendly. And those who would claim that Jesus is an exception are hypocrites. To them, Jesus is a model to follow on those things that they approve, and an exception to admire (or simply puzzle over) but not to imitate on those things that they disapprove or wish to forbid in others.

The woman remains undeterred, and answers, "But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." This could be taken as an admission that Gentiles are but dogs, although not necessarily so, but it is not a denial. At least for the sake of argument, but perhaps also in reality, she accepts the derogatory designation and employs it to reissue her request. The way that she manipulates the image of children at the table is significant, since it expresses a high level of faith. She implies that God is her master, and that even the

"crumbs" of Jesus' power would be sufficient to cure her daughter. She believes so much in his authority that she thinks performing a miracle for her daughter would not at all take away from Jesus' mission or the share of God's blessings that he is sent to provide for Israel. In terms of the analogy, she believes that even an unconscious and accidental release of Jesus' power would satisfy her urgent need.⁵⁵

As it turns out, Jesus' harsh and offensive approach to the woman compels her faith and resolve to surface. The work of God in the woman is robust, and thrives under testing and pressure. It is possible that Jesus intends to induce this effect in the woman, but this does not change the fact that he indeed uses a seeker-hostile approach, so that to be unfriendly in this sense cannot be wrong in principle. And recall that the same seeker-hostile approach did not draw out faith from the rich young man, but turned him away. Thus even if Jesus intends to draw out faith in some people by a tougher approach toward them, this does not mean that he would necessarily use a softer approach when dealing with someone who could not endure this kind of treatment. The seeker-hostile method stimulates the faith of the elect, and exposes the pretense of the non-elect. Although Jesus does not always treat people this way, the examples that we have refute those who insist on a seeker-friendly or a gentle and welcoming approach as a matter of principle.

Our final example from the ministry of Jesus is taken from the Gospel of John, where the Lord declares that it is necessary for a person to eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have life:

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever." He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to

⁵⁵ This is what the woman implies if she is playing along with the analogy of the children at the table. Of course, from God's perspective, divine power is never released unconsciously or accidentally, since he always acts with awareness and purpose.

say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him."

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Then Jesus replied, "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!" (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.) (John 6:53-71)

The teaching is bizarre and repulsive to those present. Of course Jesus knows this, but he gives the teaching anyway, and it is as if he chooses to state it in a way that maximizes its offensive effect. When some in the audience become alarmed at what he says, he presses on and offends them even more. He realizes that some of those who have been following him do not really believe. He tells them this directly, and without any effort to remain subtle or polite, or to provide any hope for improvement or any incentive to remain loyal to him.

Then, when some of them turn away and no longer follow him, he does not chase after them to explain himself or to somehow attract their attention again. Instead, he turns to the Twelve and asks if they would like to leave also. There is no trace of desperation in him. He feels no pressure to attract and retain a crowd. He believes his own statement, "No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him." If the Father does not cause a person to believe, then there is no use in trying to attract him with seeker-friendly gimmicks. But if the Father does cause a person to believe, then all gimmicks are unnecessary – the person will come, believe, and remain. No demanding doctrine can drive him away, even if it sounds unusual and extreme to unspiritual ears. This person recognizes and follows the voice of the shepherd (John 10:25-30).

We again discern a contrast between the elect and the non-elect from the disciples' response. Both groups hear the same teaching. The sinners who have not been changed by God become offended and abandon the Lord. As John writes, "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). But when he asks if the Twelve would also like to leave, Peter answers, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Jesus' seeker-hostile approach drives away false disciples, cleansing the community of his followers.

At the same time, the proper reasons for following him come into sharp focus in his true disciples, and they are compelled to articulate these reasons, that Jesus has the words of life, and he is the Holy One of God. Peter's rhetorical question, "Lord, to whom shall we go?" signals his awareness that there is no alternative, that Jesus is the only one with the words of life and that he is the only "Holy One of God." Therefore, Jesus' seeker-hostile approach is both efficient and effective in forcing both the elect and the non-elect to clarify and articulate their motives, reasons, and options. In contrast, the seeker-friendly approach dulls spiritual awareness and enables spiritual motives and reasons to remain hidden. The crowd might look bigger, but the ministry is far less faithful and effective in pursuing the mandate of evangelism and discipleship.

Seeker-friendly ministry is unbiblical, because the Bible teaches an almost opposite approach. It is unfaithful, because it fails to preach the true gospel. It is unbelieving, because it does not depend on the Spirit of God to draw and to convert sinners. It is unproductive, because it does not produce genuine and lasting faith in the people it reaches. And it is unnecessary, because the gospel will compel the elect to come to Christ in repentance and faith even if we say and do things that would offend the sinful dispositions of the unregenerate.

On the other hand, a biblical, elect-friendly, and seeker-hostile approach that declares the Christian faith in a straightforward manner will keep away those who would otherwise enter the church, not as believers but as pretenders, and it will repel those spiritual imposters – intellectual and ethical garbage – that have already infiltrated our community. If this offends you, is it because I am out of line, or is it because I might be talking about you – perhaps you are this spiritual garbage? If this offends you, it is an indication that there is something wrong with you. Examine yourself, and see if you are in the faith.

The biblical method of evangelism and discipleship is seeker-hostile. This term is selected to provide a contrast against the seeker-friendly approach, but it is accurate if understood correctly, and we have already defined it earlier. That is, relative to what is usually meant by a "seeker-friendly" approach, the biblical way to ministry is outright seeker-hostile. It is not that the biblical approach is to be obnoxious, although Christ himself was considered irksome and offensive by the reprobates. So you should not try to be obnoxious in order to be biblical, but if you try to be biblical, reprobates will find you most obnoxious. If you set out to preach the gospel without attempting to please the sinful dispositions and demands of the unregenerate, even though some of them present themselves as interested "seekers" that desire to investigate the Christian faith, then you will appear obnoxious and hostile to the reprobates. If the content and manner of your presentation attract and retain a substantial number of reprobates, including those who pretend but do not in fact believe, then it can only mean that there is no truth and power in your message.

Paul reminded the Thessalonians over and over again that they would be persecuted as Christians. Trials could cause some people's faith to become "unsettled." This effect can follow for a number of reasons. Perhaps after suffering a period of mistreatment, some simply do not wish to suffer anymore, and would consider abandoning whatever it is that invited the persecution in the first place.

Another reason for becoming unsettled may be false expectations associated with the Christian faith. Some people might expect an increase in wealth, popularity, respect, and all kinds of natural blessings once they come to believe in Christ. After all, they have now come to the side of truth. Why would not everyone like them? If they suffer persecution, does this mean that there is something wrong with what they believe? Paul tried to eliminate the surprise and bewilderment that could come from suffering persecution by reminding them that this would be part of their experience as Christians: "In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know" (1 Thessalonians 3:4). Once educated by sound doctrine, Christians are less likely to assume that there is something wrong with their faith or religion when persecution comes.

Although persecution comes from non-Christians and false Christians, who are hostile to the truth and opposed to holiness, as with everything else, it happens by God's sovereign and immutable decree. He decides what would happen and he causes them to happen. Our firm grasp on the goodness of God toward us as revealed in the gift of Jesus Christ provides us with a principle of interpretation by which we may understand at least the broad meaning and purpose of all things, including persecution. When we hold fast to both the sovereignty and the goodness of God, then we understand that the persecution we suffer is ordained by God, and because it is ordained by God, because it is not something that happens outside of his control or agenda, we also know that he ordains it for our good and not for our destruction.

God ordains persecution for believers, among other things, for their training and education, for his own honor, and to increase the punishment against unbelievers, who persecute his people. Thus when rightly perceived, the idea that we are "destined" (1 Thessalonians 3:3) for persecution generates in us, not bitterness or despair, but great peace, strength, and consolation.

The Christian's perseverance under persecution deserves some attention. All of us would like to think that we will remain faithful under persecution. In our prideful and careless moments, we might even imagine that our commitment to the Lord is unique – so strong and special that it is in a class of its own. And we become more vulnerable when this confidence is founded on and expressed in terms of our superiority over other disciples. But a faith that is measured by perceived superiority turns religion into a competition among men, when it should be about worship toward God. This kind of faith is an illusion and will not persevere under persecution.

Our perception of our own faithfulness, for various reasons, can be inaccurate, as when Peter said, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (Matthew 26:33). But Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times" (v. 34). Yet Peter did not finally fall away, for even before his empty outburst of confidence, Jesus had prayed for him. And he does not say to Peter, "I have prayed to God about you, to assure God that your faith will not fail." Rather, he tells Peter,

"I have prayed for you (asking God to uphold you and to thwart Satan's assault against you), so that your faith will not fail" (see Luke 22:31-32).

There is one point about this that has received scant emphasis, and that dramatically increases the importance of this subject. That is, faithfulness under persecution is obligatory, not optional. It is not as if God expects it from only a few whom he has endowed with special power and courage. The Bible does not say that we are to "hold firmly to the faith we profess" (Hebrews 4:14) only when it is convenient. As Jesus says, "All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved." It has to do with one's salvation, and the genuineness of his faith. The stakes cannot get any higher than this.

At this point, many people might find it a frightening prospect that they might not be able to persevere when the time comes, when intense persecution indeed happens to them. Here the difference between confidence in ourselves and confidence in the Lord becomes clear. When our confidence rests on our own ability to withstand persecution, then this confidence can rise only as high as this perception, and even then it may be a delusion, since we sometimes think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. Therefore, this confidence is limited, and in fact useless and ineffectual.

How much easier it is, and how much more realistic it is, to believe in God's ability to preserve us when we face persecution. Our proper perception of God's greatness and God's grace becomes the extent of our confidence when we face persecution. As long as we are not distracted from this way of thinking, our confidence becomes and remains limitless, just as we perceive that God is limitless. Thus we read:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. 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. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need....Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. (Hebrews 4:14-16, 10:23)

We must not look within ourselves for the strength to remain faithful in persecution, as if to impress God with what we can develop apart from him and in distinction from others. Rather, to remain faithful to God, we must look outside of ourselves and to him, trusting in his grace and power, that he is both willing and capable to complete the work that he has started in us.

Proper confidence is produced when we direct our mental focus away from ourselves and toward God instead. We persevere because God preserves; therefore, a genuine and effectual confidence that we would persevere is derived from the knowledge that God would indeed preserve us. And since his grace and power is greater than any suffering that man can inflict, there is the basis for the confidence that we would remain faithful to him

under persecution – not that we are faithful in ourselves, but that he is willing and powerful to keep us faithful.

Paul discovers that the Thessalonians are indeed "standing firm in the Lord" (3:8). This must refer to both doctrine and behavior. People who are polite, honest, diligent, and charitable, but who do not insist on any particular *belief*, probably will not suffer much persecution, if any at all. But regardless of character and behavior, those who promote teachings that are widely hated will be persecuted. So to stand firm in the Lord is first a matter of affirming the right doctrines even in the face of opposition. But it also means to adopt practices that are consistent with these doctrines, and to persist in these practices in the face of opposition.

Although we may distinguish doctrine and practice for the sake of discussion, they cannot be entirely separated. This is because Christian doctrines claim divine inspiration and authority, and therefore demand complete obedience. And some of the actions demanded by Christian doctrines are distinctively Christian, so that they cannot be performed without reflecting, some more clearly than others, the beliefs that stand behind them. Examples that illustrate this include prayer, preaching, church attendance, breaking bread in remembrance of the Lord, and so on.

This in turn means that one cannot claim that he is standing firm in the Lord if he compromises Christian doctrine or practice as a result of opposing pressure or persuasion. Now a clear and extreme example would be a person who loses his faith in the very existence of God and becomes an atheist, and still calls himself a faithful Christian. He is, of course, not "standing firm" in the Lord at all. This is only to illustrate again that doctrine matters – it is the defining factor in whether a person is remaining steadfast in the faith. Likewise, a person who becomes convinced of the theory of evolution or who comes to reject biblical inerrancy, cannot be called a faithful Christian, if a Christian at all. He is, rather, a traitor to the Lord and to all Christians, and must be addressed and dealt with as such.

Another indication that the Thessalonians are standing firm in the Lord is their "pleasant memories" (3:6) of those who brought them the gospel.

Christians usually agree with the idea that we should not exalt men, who are only servants and instruments by which God delivers his word to us. However, the reality is that Christian circles are often characterized by a sectarian spirit, so that each group defines itself according to the person that it follows – that it idolizes and worships. Addressing this problem in the Corinthian church, Paul writes:

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly – mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul,"

and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men? (1 Corinthians 3:1-4)

Likewise, in our churches we hear people say, "I am of this theologian," or "I follow that philosopher." They are so accustomed to categorizing people in terms of the person that they follow (since this is how they must think of themselves), that if a person refuses to raise a banner other than that of Jesus Christ, they will associate him with a person of their choosing by force: "Now, surely *you* are of that professor!"

Once everyone is neatly placed under a Christian idol, the factions are now defined, and war ensues. Although the arguments are often about doctrines, and anyone should notice that I regard doctrines as occupying the highest place, this is not the way to define ourselves or to handle disagreements. Paul writes that these people are but spiritual infants, and they are not ready for spiritual meat. It is more urgent for them to repent and to learn in silence, rather than to present themselves as great defenders of the faith, crushing all others in the name of their favorite theologian, philosopher, or apologist. They are not qualified to engage controversy. They are spiritual children, and should be treated as such.

That said, there is a place for a proper kind and a proper degree of respect for the messengers of the gospel. Just because we are to glorify God and not men does not mean that we are to treat those men as rubbish. Indeed, it is our attitude toward God that matters, but our attitude toward his servants is one indication of our attitude toward God. By preaching the gospel to them, the apostles brought turmoil and suffering to the Thessalonians, not that the gospel itself would do this, but it incited violent reactions from those who remained in unbelief. Nevertheless, Timothy finds that these converts harbor fond memories of these preachers who altered their lives forever in the name of the Lord Jesus.

This attitude is appropriate. It does not sinfully glorify mere men when it is acknowledged that God is the one who has sent his Son to atone for our sins and that God is the one who has sent messengers to tell us about it. The men are mere instruments, but it is right to honor even the instruments that God has chosen, not as saviors but as servants. As it is written, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" (Isaiah 52:7). Or, as Paul writes to Timothy, "So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner" (2 Timothy 1:8). Therefore, we are to hold in high regard those who minister the word of God, and this is an indication that we hold him who sent them in high regard as well (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

Contrast this against the attitude of the Israelites who were brought out of Egypt by Moses. Rather than rejoicing in their freedom from slavery and their freedom to worship their God, they beautified their past bondage and complained about their present: "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death" (Exodus 16:3). They were angry against the Lord and were bitter because his servant Moses had convinced them to take this new direction.

They were like those professing believers who have forgotten how miserable they were before they were brought out of their previous lifestyle and environment by the gospel. They have forgotten that they were slaves, abused and in bondage. They conjure in their minds a romanticized version of their old life, and complain about the unmet expectations about this new life, as if the Lord Jesus and his servants have deceived them. Are these actual Christians? Is their faith real? Doubtless they are nothing like the Thessalonians, who retain fond memories of Paul and his companions even as they face severe persecution for their faith.

Paul says that so far Satan has stopped him from returning to the Thessalonians. The Bible refers to Satan as an evil spirit who is capable of thinking, communicating, and producing various natural and mental effects. There are those theologians and preachers who minimize the role of Satan in human events. But the writers of Scripture do not think it strange to attribute even some seemingly routine occurrences to the devil. Any tendency to phase out Satan in our theology and preaching does not come from Scripture, but most likely from private prejudices and phobias, or the influence of non-Christians who consider it a superstition to believe that there is a personal devil (that there is a devil, and that he is a person). Now if the non-Christians can also convince us that belief in God is also a superstition, the destruction of Christianity would be complete. But Satan exists just as God exists, and it is God who tells us through the Scripture that Satan exists. It is not optional for Christians to affirm that there is a devil, that he is a person, and that he is active in the world.

Then, some excuse themselves with the idea that Christ's resurrection signals such an overwhelming victory over Satan that, even if the devil remains active, it is unnecessary to be conscious of him, and still less should we speak of him as if he has a hand in the routine troubles that occur in our lives and ministries. Our passage is evidence that their thinking is contrary to Scripture. Unless Satan had appeared in person and physically restrained Paul and his companions, the apostle could perhaps specify the way that they had been hindered instead of making a direct reference to the devil. The reason could be hostile weather, dangerous political climate, severe religious opposition, insufficient funds, or ministry emergencies. But even if Satan had hindered them by such things, as it was possibly the case, Paul decides to explain his absence by the statement, "Satan stopped us." There might be a reason for this choice,⁵⁶ but the point is that a direct reference to a personal devil is not the last resort, but rather the proper explanation. If we never perceive events in this manner, it is either because the devil has retired, or because we have, in a departure from Scripture, de-supernaturalized and de-spiritualized our theology.

⁵⁶ For example, it is possible that Paul wishes to remind them that they are in a spiritual struggle against forces hostile to the Christian agenda. Along with this is a reminder that Christians stand for truth and righteousness, unlike Satan and the non-Christians, who persecute God's people. Or, again in line with this, it might be a reminder that the apostle and his companions are also engaged in this conflict, that they and the Thessalonians are both enduring persecution for the sake of the gospel, and all that is good and right, in contrast to the devil and the unbelievers. On the other hand, this might be a simple rhetorical strategy that, by stressing the evil nature of the opposition, reinforces the truth and sincerity of the assertion that the apostle has indeed wished to return to his converts, but has been unable to do so.

God is all-powerful and all-knowing, and this means that he is stronger than Satan, and that he always knows what Satan is doing. This in turn means that whatever Satan does is allowed by God, since God knows about it but does not stop him. I will soon remind you that God's role in the occurrence of evil is in fact much more active and direct than mere permission, but at this point I wish to relate Satan's activity to God's purpose. That is, God's purpose is behind Satan's activity, so it is not the case that Satan designs and causes his evil plans all on his own, and that God can do nothing more than to react against them. Rather, since God is an intelligent being, since he knows what Satan would do before he does it, and since he is able to stop Satan but does not, this must mean that he has a purpose in not stopping him. There is a reason for it. Thus it would be true that God has a purpose in Satan's evil works even if we have just regarded him as rather passive toward them, as in merely to allow them or not stop them.

However, it is impossible for God to be passive in anything that happens, since nothing other than deity has the power of deity, so that no created object has the power within itself to sustain itself (including its own mind) or the power within itself to produce any effect in another object. If it has the power within itself to sustain itself, then by definition it would not require God to continue to exist – it would have the power of self-existence, and thus an independent existence from God. This would by definition make this object deity in itself. Among other reasons that would render this impossible, biblical revelation cannot harmonize with this, since it declares that God sustains all things by his power. A similar denial is made against the idea that a created object can have power within itself to influence another object. Rather, only God has this power. In other words, when existence and causation are considered on this ultimate or metaphysical level, God is the only power that sustains all things and that causes all things. In the absolute sense, God is the only cause of anything.⁵⁷

That said, when created objects serve as the reference points for a discussion, and when we are speaking about the relationships between created objects without reference to the metaphysical power that has absolute and immediate control over them, and that sustains them and causes their motions and effects, then it is legitimate to refer to created objects as causes. We are then, strictly speaking, not referring to causes as such (since God is the only real cause), but relationships between created objects. These relationships, of course, are also determined by God, the real cause. But again, it is unnecessary to mention this when the discussion remains on a relative level, a level where only the relationships between created objects are considered.

⁵⁷ This necessarily means that God is the author of sin – not a sinner, not a tempter, not a moral approver, but the metaphysical cause, or author, of all evil. However, this is not a refutation of my view, but since I have stated the reason that necessarily makes God the author of sin, it is a refutation of the traditional view that God cannot be the author of sin. The truth is that if there is an all-encompassing metaphysical power and if there is any evil, then this power must be the author of that evil. It is impossible to affirm both a God who is absolutely sovereign, and that this God is not the author of sin. If he is passive regarding sin, then he is not an all-encompassing metaphysical power, and thus not God by the Christian definition. In principle, the Christian must either affirm that God is the author of sin, or renounce the Christian faith. It is blasphemy to say that God is not the author of sin. It is the equivalent of saying that he is not sovereign, or that he is not God. There is no mystery here. The only problem is unbiblical religious tradition.

For example, once absolute divine sovereignty is assumed, when object X moves and strikes object Y, and object Y in turn moves, we understand that object X has no power within itself to move itself or to cause object Y to move. Rather, God causes X to move toward Y, and causes Y to move when X touches it. The movement of Y, therefore, is in itself independent of the fact that X strikes it. The correlation is there only because God causes the respective movements, thus establishes a relationship between the two created objects. Any mention of physical laws, kinetic energy, and such things, are irrelevant. Even if we ignore the fallacies inherent in all scientific explanations for now, God would still be actively and directly sovereign over anything that is mentioned as natural forces and causes, in the way that his control over X and Y is described above.

The point here is that, although this is the metaphysical explanation, it is entirely acceptable in everyday speech to speak of X and Y as causes, as long as it is understood that we are speaking in a relative sense, that is, about the relationships between created objects. In this case, we would indeed say that object X moves object Y.

An analogy might be helpful. When Jesus commissions his disciples, he says to them, "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). The command is that *they* heal the sick, *they* raise the dead, *they* drive out demons, and so on. But we understand that it is in fact God's will and power that perform each miracle. The disciples do not have power in themselves to produce these effects, as Peter acknowledges later: "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?" (Acts 3:12). In terms of metaphysical power, the disciples have no ability to heal, but in terms of the relationships between creatures, and when properly understood, it is acceptable to say that the disciples "heal the sick, raise the dead," and so on.

When we refer to a created object as if it has any power at all, we are speaking on this relative level. And it is in this sense that we acknowledge Satan's efficacy in hindering the apostle and his companions. Again, the reason that God's sovereign control over Satan's activity is mentioned is to suggest that there is a divine purpose for this demonic hindrance to the apostolic ministry. Our ignorance of God's purpose, although considerable, is nevertheless often exaggerated. Each event in God's providence is so calculated and so interconnected with other events that it would be impossible for any human person to grasp all the reasons for any single event. However, we can often understand at least a few broad reasons for an event, because God has revealed to us in the Bible a substantial amount of information about his overall purposes and priorities.

We can suggest several reasons within God's purpose for Satan's hindrance of the apostolic ministry. Some of these are certainties, since they are universally applicable. Although others seem to be mere possibilities, no correlation can be considered accidental, since God knows and causes all things, so that even what seems to be a correlation must be considered intentional in the mind of God. It is unnecessary to delineate all the actual or possible reasons, as our present purpose is to show that there are reasons in the purpose of God for evil to occur, that they work out for the glory of God and the good of the elect, that we know at least some of these reasons, and so that there is no need to puzzle over evil or to

agonize over the fact that we would often encounter opposition even as we strive to obey God's command to penetrate the nations with the gospel.

With this in mind, one reason for Satan's hindrance that might not be so obvious, but that stands right before us, is that this letter to the Thessalonians could be written. The Thessalonian Christians and all the Christians thereafter are the beneficiaries. It provides the occasion so that a letter would be written, and it provides the context so that Paul would write what he writes in it. As the second letter to the Thessalonians share the identical background as the first, this reason applies to both letters. Both letters contain major doctrines that would not have been delivered to us in their present form if Paul had returned to the Thessalonians. Of course, God would have delivered them in another form if he had wished to deliver them in another form, but he wanted to record these doctrines in the form that we have now.

Another reason for Satan's hindrance is that, since Paul has been unable to reach the Thessalonians, it gives an opportunity for these new converts to be "taught by God" (4:9). Of course, God has ordained that his word would be delivered by human teachers, but this does not mean that he is inactive in the Christians' conversion and maturation. He has reserved the most pivotal role for himself: "So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:7). Some things are impossible for man to achieve, or not up to him to even try, so that God alone may receive the glory.

Although he uses human teachers, the extent of their contribution can vary in each instance as determined by God's providence. In this case, the situation compels the apostle to openly appeal to God, so that he may cause the Thessalonians to increase in love, and so that he may strengthen their hearts and keep them blameless to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ (3:12-13). The apostle, of course, is ever willing to acknowledge God's grace and power in preserving the chosen ones, but sometimes God's providence helps make evident what faithful men always emphasize, that they are but agents entrusted with God's word and empowered by God's Spirit. It is God "who makes things grow," or who causes their effort to become effective.

Sometimes people misapply the doctrine of divine sovereignty with the result that they are confused about their moral responsibility, or the basis and extent of their responsibility. For example, some might think that if it is God who controls Satan, it would imply that we should not resist Satan's evil activities. Or, if it is established that we should resist Satan's evil activities, then this would imply that God is not the one who controls Satan. In other words, if God controls evil, then we should not resist evil, but since it is the more popular premise that we should resist evil, it is thus commonly assumed that God does not control evil.

Many of those who affirm the doctrine of divine sovereignty are also infected with this way of thinking, so that even as they say that God is sovereign over evil, they would still distance him from an active, direct, and immediate manipulation of evil. The result is a blatant contradiction in their theology: Is God sovereign over all things or not? Any

position that makes God's control over evil passive or indirect is in fact a denial of his absolute and exhaustive sovereignty, and thus a denial of God – in effect, to them the God of the Bible cannot exist.

However, this difficulty with divine sovereignty and moral responsibility is a false dilemma that is based on the arbitrary and unbiblical assumption that wherever divine sovereignty intrudes it destroys moral responsibility. There is no biblical or rational reason to suggest this. The Christian faith affirms that God is sovereign in every sphere of life, so that his moral commands define for us that which is good and evil, right and wrong. So if God tells us to resist Satan, then we ought to resist Satan. It has nothing to do with who controls Satan. Our moral responsibility is defined by God's commands about what we ought to do, and not God's decrees about what he would do or what he would cause to occur.

At this point, the question is posed, if Satan is under God's control, then why would God cause Satan to perform evil acts, and then command us to resist Satan? It is disappointing that many believers ask this question. First, the question arises from rebellion, for who are you to question God (Romans 9:19-21)? And second, the question arises from foolishness, since the Bible answers it over and over again. It does not occur to them that God might not cause Satan to perform evil for its own sake, so that evil might triumph, but that among other reasons, it is to produce situations for the elect to resist evil. Thus there is no mystery or paradox between God's ordaining Satan to perform evil and God's commanding Christians to resist evil, since it could be that the point is to educate the elect through resisting evil in the first place.

Since evil is not an end in itself and since evil itself is not the termination point of God's plan, but since God's purpose is the perfection of the saints, it is perfectly sensible for God to ordain evil and then tell the elect to resist it. James writes, "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). God's plan is not that evil might prosper, but that his own people would "be mature and complete, not lacking anything." There are other reasons for God to ordain evil, but for now this explanation alone is sufficient to show that it is unnecessary to appeal to mystery or paradox. God uses Satan and non-Christians for his own glory and for our benefit, testing and refining our faith. When they have served their purpose, they will be thrown into the lake of hellfire to be punished and tortured forever.

Therefore, it is appropriate for Paul to persist in fighting the works of Satan, and to keep trying to return to the Thessalonians. It is reasonable to assume that his attempts would include natural means where applicable. (This includes simple things like getting up and walking toward the direction of Thessalonica!) Other than that, it is significant that although he is aware that it is Satan who hinders him, and although he is aware of his authority over demonic forces (not as an apostle, but as a Christian), he appeals to God the Father to "clear the way" for his return to the Thessalonians. He makes petitions to God about it.

This is contrary to the practice of some believers, who would assert that one ought to deal with Satan directly once aware of his involvement in a situation. The more extreme of these suggest that Christ has no authority to police demonic activities on the earth, since he has delegated it to the Christians. However, an authority that is not retained by the original wielder once it is delegated is not delegated authority, but abdicated authority.

For delegated authority to have any meaning at all, it is assumed that whatever the one who authorizes another to perform, he could perform himself. The one who wields delegated authority represents the one who confers such authority upon him. Thus if the Christian possesses delegated authority from Christ to police demonic activities, this necessarily means that Christ himself has retained this authority, and that he could perform the very task that he has sent his representative to perform.

Scripture speaks of two kinds of situations in which it is appropriate to directly address evil spirits. First, one may address Satan in the face of temptations to sin, as Jesus does in Luke 4. This is also acceptable even when Satan is working through a human person in the attempt to dissuade us from performing God's will. Thus Jesus rebukes Satan in Matthew 16:23, although Peter is used for the temptation. That said, to directly address Satan when resisting temptation is acceptable, but not necessary, and it is probably not to be done most of the time. Second, one may address Satan, or an evil spirit, when it is evident that he has taken over a human person's mind and body, even speaking and acting through him. When this happens, the biblical practice is for a Christian to command the demon to leave in the name of Jesus Christ.

Although it is true that Satan's influence is pervasive in the non-Christians even when they are not screaming obscenities, cutting themselves, running naked, and foaming at the mouth, as long as this demonic influence is not overtly demonstrated, there is no biblical evidence for directly addressing Satan and to command him to depart. Rather, regular means such as preaching and counseling are used. Even if a person is under severe demonic bondage, the Spirit of God can deliver him through the consistent preaching of the word of God. It is often unnecessary to have special discernment about the particular kind of demonic activity involved and to formulate a tailored approach to counteract it. And even if one is dealing with a case of overt demonization, in which case it is appropriate to cast it out of the person, there is no biblical evidence suggesting that it is outright wrong for the Christian to pray to God, so that God may liberate the victim from demonic bondage.

Luke 22:31-32 provides another example: "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail." He is aware that Satan would orchestrate an attack against Peter, but rather than rebuking Satan, so that Peter's faith would not be tested or that it would not fail, it is implied that Jesus prays to God to preserve Peter or to repel Satan. And of course, all this time Jesus possesses the authority to police Satan's activities, but still this is what he does to help Peter through the demonic assault. In most situations, therefore, there is no reason to directly address Satan. Even when we become conscious of Satan's involvement, it is usually the case that we should still speak to God about it, rather than to directly address the demonic forces.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-12

Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.

Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

A Christian ministry that is faithful to perform its function installs a new system of doctrines in the minds of converts. On this foundation, the ministry then installs a new system of ethics. The revealed doctrinal principles necessarily produce the authoritative ethical principles. Strictly speaking, ethical principles may be categorized under doctrinal principles, since they are still doctrines, only that they are doctrines *about* thought and behavior. For example, the divine command, "You shall not murder," is a doctrine about the preserving and the taking of human life.

Ethical doctrines are logically preceded by and dependent on epistemological and metaphysical doctrines, that is, doctrines that closely relate to the first principles of the biblical worldview. These include the necessity of Scripture, the reality of God, the depravity of man, the divinity of Christ, and so on. Continuing with the above example, the authority of the command, "You shall not murder," is derived from the sovereignty of God, his identity as the Creator, the nature of man as his creation and subordinate, our innate knowledge of the moral law, the reality, authority, and perspicuity of written revelation, and other relevant metaphysical and epistemological doctrines.

Nevertheless, the distinction between doctrines and ethics is merely a practical one, made for the sake of convenience in discussion. In reality, we mean doctrines about the metaphysical aspects of the Christian worldview, or the epistemological aspects, or the ethical aspects, and so on. These doctrines are interrelated, and some are more foundational

than others. This means that the doctrines can be logically prioritized, but they are equally authoritative. In other words, the existence of God is more foundational and logically prior to the divine command, "You shall not murder," but the doctrine of the existence of God and the divine command that forbids murder proceed from the same absolute authority, and are therefore equal in truth and power, compelling agreement and obedience.

It is a common occurrence in religious discussions to evaluate metaphysics on the foundation of ethics, or to use ethics to evaluate metaphysics. The logical priority of metaphysics alerts us as to the error of this approach. This fallacy has influenced the way some Christians present the gospel and challenge unbelievers, and as a result has obscured the rational superiority of the Christian faith.

To illustrate, suppose a non-Christian affirms that it is morally acceptable or even commendable to murder all those who disagree with him. It is often suggested that such a principle is morally repugnant, and on this basis, any view of truth and reality that produced this principle must be false. But the principle is determined to be morally repugnant only by a different view of truth and reality in the first place. This unbeliever finds the principle acceptable or commendable because of his own view of truth and reality. In fact, in his view such killings would not be considered murder. It would not be the unjust killings of innocent people.

This approach assumes agreement on an ethical principle and argues for the metaphysical propositions that best account for the ethical principle. Suppose that the unbeliever opposes mass murder. The believer then demonstrates that the unbeliever's metaphysical assumptions cannot produce such an ethical principle, but that only the biblical worldview can account for it. The believer seems to think that the ethical principle is nonnegotiable, and assumes (hopes?) that the unbeliever thinks the same way. But if the unbeliever is more faithful to his metaphysics – his "god" – than the believer is to the Christian God (the believer should not place ethics before God in the first place), then the unbeliever would maintain his metaphysical assumptions and abandon the ethical principle on which the believer bases his argument.

The Christian, of course, is correct in both his metaphysics and his ethics. He is right in thinking that mass murder is wrong, and he is right in thinking that only biblical metaphysics can account for this judgment. But although he is correct in terms of his knowledge of truth and reality, his approach fails to demonstrate this because it does not maintain the logical priority of metaphysics over ethics. In other words, what is good depends on what is true and what is real. What kind of universe is this, in which mass murder is wrong? Is there a God who reigns supreme, and who has created all living and nonliving things, and thus carries absolute authority to define right and wrong, and has indeed defined right and wrong for us?

Appeal to agreed ethical principles is often legitimate, but it depends on the purpose for which such an appeal is made and the role given to it in one's system of thought. If it is to determine the correct view of reality, then it is a fallacy, since the ethical principle is not fixed unless the metaphysical assumption is first fixed, so that the unbeliever may abandon

the former in order to save the latter. Now if the unbeliever abandons his metaphysics to save his ethics, then in terms of intellectual ability he is even more foolish than the believer first assumes. But the unbeliever might react this way because he somehow finds that in this case the ethical principle is nonnegotiable, whereas his view of metaphysics is not.

The biblical explanation is that this ethical principle is part of the innate knowledge of God's moral laws that he has written into the hearts of all men, so that they can find no excuse for their many sins. The unbeliever instinctively knows that the ethical principle is nonnegotiable, because he instinctively knows that it is a divine law, founded on the authority of the Christian God, a view of metaphysics that is also nonnegotiable. Yet he suppresses this instinctive knowledge, and is therefore unable to articulate it, and is seemingly unaware of it.

In any case, in speaking to the unbeliever, we must not base metaphysics on ethics, but sooner or later, we must make it clear that our ethics is based on our metaphysics. Sooner is better. Because ethics is not fixed without metaphysics, ethics must never be the point on which the whole discussion turns, especially if the debate is ultimately about metaphysics, as in the existence and character of God.

Nevertheless, although logical priority belongs to metaphysics, to begin an apologetic encounter with ethics is legitimate when the purpose is to draw attention to metaphysics, or to draw attention to fixed innate and revealed moral principles, which again draw attention to metaphysics. The point is not that we must never begin a discussion with ethics, but that we should never give the impression that metaphysical principles can be judged by seemingly shared ethical principles. The worst that can happen is for us to give non-Christian the impression that our God is merely a heuristic assumption.

The logical priority of metaphysics must also be maintained when teaching those already converted to the Christian faith. The doctrines of Scripture, God, Christ, and so on, must be given logical priority, if not always chronological priority in teaching, before the ethical principles that dictate the believer's thought and behavior. It is an error to give the impression that we believe what we do about God because we believe what we do about right and wrong. Instead, we believe what we do about right and wrong because we believe what we do about God, because we believe about God what he has revealed to us about himself.

Only when this logical priority is maintained – only when God precedes ethics – does it make sense to say that to reject *this* system of ethics, the biblical system of ethics, is not to reject mere man, but to reject God himself (v. 8). And only when there is a system of ethics the rejection of which is not to reject mere man but to reject God himself does that system of ethics carry authority to compel agreement and obedience. That is, a system of ethics carries authority only when the rejection of which amounts to the rejection of God, and not the rejection of mere man. It can be said on behalf of such an ethical system, "Agree, or else..." and "Obey, or else..." – only such a system can define merits, carry threats, and promise rewards.

To put all of the above in simple words, because God says so, *this* is right, and because God says so, *that* is wrong. God commands such and such, and therefore you must do it. God forbids such and such, and therefore you must not do it. You are to believe *this* because God says it is true. You must renounce *that* because God says it is false. You must think *this* way because God tells you to think this way. You must not think *that* way because God tells you not to think that way. This is the essence of biblical ethics.

Christian ethics is based on the divine command system. This stands in contrast to ethics that are based on naturalistic determinism, subjective intuition, cultural norm, relative judgment or preference, projected utility, projected effect, universal obligation and applicability, and other principles. All non-Christian ethical systems are failures in that they lack coherence and justification, and in many cases, it is impossible to carry them out in thought and practice.

For example, the idea that the right or good course of action to follow in a given situation is the one that yields the highest good for the greatest number of people is impossible in practice. First, the calculation requires omniscience to accomplish. Second, what is "good" for people requires either a definition that does not come from this principle, or another calculation that requires another calculation before that, thus generating an infinite regress for every moral decision. Third, it must be decided whether the calculation is done concerning the short-term or long-term effects of the action, that is, if the calculation can be made in the first place. The only way to salvage this theory is to uproot the whole thing and place it on the foundation of the divine command system, since only God can define what is good and make the relevant calculations. But placing this theory on the divine command system destroys the theory itself. Moreover, only God has the right to say that this is the right principle in the first place, but he does not say this.

On the other hand, the divine command system supplies specific content for moral reasoning and decision-making. Another point of superiority is that it can be taught. There is no need to advance the proposition, "You shall not murder," as an intuitive ethical principle – many people might not share this intuition, even if they should. Rather, we can expect them to learn, "You shall not murder," because we *tell* them, "You shall not murder," as a command from God. It follows from this that it is possible under the divine command system to resolve disagreements and to expose rebellion by appealing to a common, public, and absolute authority.

Against some objections, the divine commands are always clear and they never contradict one another, and it is possible to show this. Objections are raised not because people can discover rational or practical difficulties with the system, but because people wish to disobey the divine commands, or since it requires obedience to God in all facets of life, to dispense with the system altogether. Thus the divine command system of ethics is the most – the *only* – rational, authoritative, and perfect system, but it is also the most hated one.

Sometimes even professing believers find fault with it, as if it is inadequate to provide guidance, but this only exposes their foolishness and rebellion. It is not that the system cannot guide, but that people do not want to follow its guidance. There is a God who speaks

and commands, but people do not want to hear and obey. Those who profess the faith but protest this system do not lend credibility to the objections, but rather weaken the credibility of their profession.

In any case, the main reason that the divine command system of ethics is the only legitimate system is that it proceeds necessarily from the only true system of metaphysics and epistemology. There really is an all-sovereign God (metaphysics) who has really revealed his mind in verbal propositions recorded in the written text of Scripture (epistemology), and this text includes an entire system of ethical commands that is sufficient to provide morally binding guidance to all of life. The person who heeds and obeys these instructions is "equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:17).

Paul is aware that he delivers instructions "by the authority of the Lord Jesus" (v. 2), and he reminds the Thessalonians of it. Since the instructions come from God, to reject these instructions is to reject not mere man, but to reject God himself (v. 8). No terrible consequence might come about for rejecting a mere man's opinion, but to reject God's command is to invite punishment, if not damnation (v. 6). The implication of a knowing and persistent defiance is that the person is not a child of God, and is doomed to suffer the everlasting torture of hellfire. This is the absolute authority and serious implication of the Christian system of ethics.

When we are reading or preaching from the Bible, we are reading or preaching a message recorded by the same Paul that delivered instructions to the people of his day "by the authority of the Lord Jesus." And we are reading or preaching from the inspired documents produced by the same prophets and apostles who spoke by the authority of God. Since God the Father and the Lord Jesus still possess the same authority today, the doctrines and precepts that we find in the Bible also carry the same authority today. Because the doctrines and precepts in the Bible are revealed and delivered by the authority of God, those who reject the Bible do not reject mere men or a mere book, but they reject God himself. God will punish them for this defiance. The positive aspect of this is that to follow God's precepts for living is to adopt a lifestyle that pleases him (v. 1). This is the ongoing authority and relevance of the Christian system of ethics.

Paul makes particular mention of sexual immorality (v. 3). It is possible that the Thessalonians still struggle to shake themselves from the perversions associated with pagan culture and worship, but the admonition is applicable in general. Christians ought to control their bodies, and to adopt a lifestyle that is "holy and honorable" (v. 4). This is said in contrast to "the heathen, who do not know God" (v. 5).

In Christian writing and exposition, it is appropriate to regularly draw attention to the depraved mindset and lifestyle of the non-Christians, and in contrast, the superior condition of the Christians. Paul makes the point: "The non-Christians do not know God, but now you are Christians, and you do know God. They are inferior, and you are superior, so act like it." Sometimes Christians hesitate to assert that they are better than the non-Christians, thinking that it is humble to avoid the claim of superiority or to practice self-deprecation even in contrast to the non-Christians.

However, when we refer to aspects of our intelligence, personality, and lifestyle that have been addressed in redemption, self-deprecation soon crosses the line from admissions of personal shortcomings to blasphemies against the work of Christ. It is one thing to claim superiority on the basis of something inherent in ourselves – that comes from a prideful and self-righteous attitude. But it is another thing to declare that we are superior in intelligence and in character because of what Christ has done for us and in us – that comes from true faith and humility. God makes Christians superior to non-Christians by his sovereign grace through Jesus Christ and by his Holy Spirit.

The alternative is to declare that Christ's work is futile, and that the Spirit's power is ineffective. This is not humility, but a self-serving pretense to humility that denigrates the grace of God and the work of Christ. If you were just like other non-Christians before your conversion, but Christ has made you better than before through conversion, this means that you are now better than the non-Christians. The logic is unavoidable; false humility is self-defeating. As Christians, if we are not already better in some aspects, and potentially better in many other aspects, then redemption has no meaning and no effect, and we believe and preach the gospel in vain.

I am a Christian, and therefore in intelligence, in character, and also in many other aspects I am superior to the non-Christians. This is not because I am inherently superior to them, or that I had always been superior to them. I was as foolish, immoral, and depraved in every way as they are before conversion, except for the divine decree for my conversion, still secret before it was carried out. I am superior because I am a Christian, but there is no room for boasting since I did not make myself a Christian, but I am what I am because of God's sovereign choice. He sent Christ to save me, and he gave me his Holy Spirit. Therefore, although I cannot boast about anything in myself, I will boast about what he has done, including what he has done in me (1 Corinthians 1:31; Galatians 6:14). True faith relies on something outside of and other than oneself – namely, Jesus Christ – so that its confidence becomes as great as the object on which it relies.

This application of redemption also renders Paul's ethical admonition reasonable, for it follows from the superior condition of the Christians, effected by the power of God at conversion. In light of the contrast between the believers and the unbelievers, how can we continue to indulge in sexual immorality, as if we are unintelligent beasts (Psalm 32:9), which are without understanding, and without the knowledge of God? The duty to excel has been placed upon us, and there is nothing to excuse us from it.

Sexual immorality is the norm for non-Christians. Paul calls us to think differently, to live differently, and to distinguish ourselves from the unbelievers, who do not know God. We must mention this over and over again because the devil is like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. It is vital to spiritual survival and progress for us to remain alert and vigilant. Failing this, many Christian families and congregations have been infiltrated by non-Christian beliefs and practices. And failing to remain aware of God's unchanging standard and the Spirit's conviction, some have lost sensitivity to the gross immorality

among them and around them. Then, when one of them awakens to the divine command and voices dissent, he is ironically criticized and persecuted.

It should be unnecessary to point out that just because a sin is common does not mean that it is not a sin. The more common it is the more alarmed we should be about the situation. When we consider what Scripture says on this issue, and how often it goes unheeded, it becomes obvious that we have not been diligent and fierce enough in proclaiming God's commandments. If the typical admonition is rare and weak, to outright condemn sexual immorality with threats of punishment is considered socially and even ecclesiastically unacceptable. No coward is qualified to proclaim the word of God, and alas, so few are qualified that the rest of us must take up the slack with a seemingly inhuman severity in our preaching. Such preaching is good and necessary, and Paul confers to us the authority we need.

It makes a difference if a person is an adulterer, a fornicator, a homosexual, or some other perverted person. Paul writes, "The Lord will punish men for all such sins" (v. 6b), and adds, "as we have already told you and warned you" (v. 6c). The topic assumes a prominent place in the apostle's ethical teachings, and he considers it worthy of repetition, accompanied with threats. Verse 6 is better rendered, "the Lord is *an avenger* in all these things" (ESV). This is said in the context of the previous statement, "in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him" (v. 6a). In other words, God will take it upon himself to avenge not only his own honor, that his command has been disregarded (v. 8), but he will also avenge the party that has been wronged.

Therefore, it is nothing short of a gross dereliction of duty when a Christian minister fails to declare God's command on this issue, and to do so accompanied by threats. Scripture compels us to preach, "If you commit adultery, God will punish you. If you are a homosexual, God will make you suffer." God is the avenger – he will destroy your life for cheating on your spouse, for defiling a person's husband or wife, and he will torture you in hell forever after he is done with you in this life. Anyone who thinks that this is false or at least too harsh for Christian preaching should start reading the Bible. Anything weaker than this is not the whole truth. This is Christianity – take it and obey it, or leave it and suffer.

It is fashionable to preach about compassion, understanding, reconciliation, second chances, and so on, toward adulterers and homosexuals. Scripture does not talk about sexual immorality in this manner. It defines and upholds God's strict standard on the issue and condemns all those who transgress. There is indeed forgiveness in Jesus Christ, but notice that Paul issues his warning of God's vengeance even to Christians. So no one should think that he can make a mockery of divine pardon.

If we are to reflect the scriptural emphasis on this issue, then it is necessary for us to multiply the accusations and condemnations in our preaching, instead of to avoid or reduce them. Preachers who refuse to hold out the inflexible standard of the word of God in this crooked and depraved generation (Philippians 2:15-16) should admit that they are unfit for the ministry and resign. If they wish to be positive in every way, they ought to become

motivational speakers, and motivate their hearers straight to hell. They should stop pretending to be pastors and prophets to God's people.

Verse 9 illustrates that not every admonition corresponds to an existing shortcoming among Paul's readers. He says that there is no need to tell the Thessalonians to walk in love, since they already exemplify this godly characteristic. The admonition is that they should do so "more and more" (v. 10), but it is not as if they are not doing it at all. The reason that they have flourished in this area of their faith is attributed to God's guidance, that they have been "taught by God." We may be certain that, in his initial interactions with these converts, Paul had mentioned the virtue of love and how it flows from genuine faith in Christ. But as he says elsewhere, "So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:7). He may say it, and indeed this is a necessary part, but only God can make them do it. This principle inspires both humility and confidence in ministers of the gospel. Humility, because the success cannot be credited to us. Confidence, because the effect is not limited by us.

No matter how talented and resourceful, a minister can never produce the result that he desires by his own power, bringing his hearers from conversion to perfection by his own words and efforts. We are dealing in matters of the spirit, and after some distance the power of man reaches an end, and only God can bridge the gap and cause the process to bear fruit. And even the things man seems to be able to do are caused and energized by God. There is a vast difference between one who is sent with nothing but human credentials, and one who is sent by God's sovereign ordination, and who goes forth with invincible confidence, accompanied by divine power.

The application of this truth extends beyond ministry to others. The more personal and immediate question is whether we ourselves have been taught by God. Many believers take a deistic approach to their Christian life, but the Scripture indicates that healthy disciples should be conscious of God's illumination and endowment. The Thessalonians have been "taught by God." Then, it is said that God works in the Philippians "to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). And God would "make clear" to them some aspects of Paul's teachings (Philippians 3:15). Also, Paul writes to Timothy, "Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this" (2 Timothy 2:7).

Verse 11 might not seem severe, but its content would trouble some people. Against a culture that entices one to crave adventure and greatness, to achieve and to become the extraordinary, it is as if Paul writes, "Be ambitious to be unambitious," "Make it your ambition to have no ambition," or "Strive hard to be ordinary." It is not that there is a paradox within the verse, but when non-Christian standards are used to define worthy ambitions, then the verse shows that the Christian faith contradicts these non-Christian ideals. The verse stands against the non-Christian philosophy of life, and it is a corrective for the believers who have adopted an ungodly way of thinking. God indeed calls some people to lead unusual lives, but even then he defines greatness and excitement differently, and in a way that does not contradict verse 11.

The admonition is associated with a teaching against meddlesomeness and idleness, and indeed this modifies the sense of the "quiet life" advocated, although the above usage is not excluded. Sometimes it is assumed that a number of the Thessalonian Christians have misapplied that teaching of Christ's second coming, using it as an excuse to escape the normal routines and stations of life. Although the admonition is broad in application, and thus is certainly relevant to such an assumption about the Thessalonians, there is in fact no clear indication of a connection between the two, that is, between the doctrine of the second coming and the unproductive lifestyle. It might be that these converts avoid labor for some other reason.

That said, eschatological frenzy has produced precisely this problem among many professing Christians in our own day, so that the assumed imminence of Christ's return is used as an excuse to forsake normal routines and stations, and this often translates into meddlesomeness, idleness, and dependence on the charity of others, all the time casting themselves as eschatological heroes who have been called "for such a time as this." These individuals fail to "win the respect of outsiders" (v. 12), but giving reason for unbelievers to consider us bums and fools, they dishonor the name of Christ and bring shame upon us all. To them, Paul's instruction is most appropriate: "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you." This directive comes from a chosen apostle by divine authority, so anyone who disobeys it cannot at the same time present himself as a devout Christian, faithfully awaiting the Lord's return.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

When Jesus was taken up into heaven, the disciples continued to look intently up into the sky as he ascended. Suddenly "two men dressed in white" appeared, which we understand to be angels, and said to them, "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

This "second coming" of Christ is prominent in the teaching of the apostles (see 1 Corinthians 15; Philippians 3:20-21; 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 1 Timothy 6:14-15; Titus 2:11-14; Hebrews 9:27-28), although some passages about a "coming" that are often taken as references to this second coming in fact refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. In any case, the doctrine is essential, and is necessary to a wholesome understanding of the Christian faith.

Paul introduced this doctrine to the Thessalonians when he first preached the gospel to them, and he refers to it in the letter. For example, he states that the Thessalonian Christians would be his crown and glory "in the presence of the Lord Jesus when he comes" (2:19), and he wishes that they would be blameless "when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones" (3:13). The Thessalonians have learned the doctrine, and they understand these references to it.

All evidence suggests that Paul not only imparts a comprehensive system of theology to his converts, but he also strives to expound each doctrine in some detail, even when the time is short and the setting inconvenient. Still, Paul did not have all the time he needed with these converts (2:17), and it seems that he lacked opportunity to complete their understanding of the Christian faith (3:10), including the doctrine of the second coming. Or, perhaps certain questions did not arise when he was with them, but now have become relevant. Here he supplements his teaching with additional information (4:13-18), and provides a reminder and application (5:1-11) of what they have learned.

The doctrine is that Jesus Christ will come again, and when he comes, he will receive his people to be with him forever (4:17). As for how this will happen, we should begin with

the concern that gives occasion for this passage in the first place. That is, what will happen to those believers who die before Christ returns? Is their fate unknown to us? Or, will they perish forever, as vapor disbursed into thin air? And even if not, will they somehow be at a disadvantage compared to those who are living when Christ comes? It is easy to understand the importance and relevance of the question, since numerous believers have died and will die before the return of Christ. And if he tarries, those of us who now live will also die as those who believed before us.

The answer is the resurrection. Paul does not refer immediately to the resurrection of the believers, but first to the resurrection of Christ. The Lord was killed and buried, but then he was raised from the dead. And Paul depicts Christ as the archetype of all those who die as Christians, as believers in him. The resurrection of Christ, therefore, is both a promise and a proof for the glorious future of the saints. When a person makes a promise, and then defies religious and political authorities, demonic powers, as well as death itself to authenticate and to enforce it, no doubt can be cast upon the integrity and ability of this person, and therefore no doubt can be cast upon the promise that he makes. The matter is settled – there is nothing that anyone can say against such a person as this, or against any promise that he makes. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, he will also raise from the dead those who believe in him (4:14-16). The dead in Christ will not be shortchanged or forgotten.

As for those believers who are still alive when Christ returns, the Lord will take them up to be with him forever (v. 17). We also note that the dead in Christ will be raised with a new kind of body. The new body will bare some relation with the old, but it will be vastly superior. Paul likens it to a seed that is sown into the ground and that produces according to its own kind. For example, wheat comes from wheat seed, not some other kind of seed. Those believers who are alive when Christ returns will also receive this new body, but they will not be raised from the dead as such, since they would not be dead, but their bodies will be "changed" into the same kind that the dead in Christ will receive at their resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:35-57).

Christians are to encourage one another with this doctrine. Encouragement is here not given by grieving with the bereaved or being an attentive and sympathetic listener. Although these can be legitimate, they are in themselves powerless to comfort. And it is wicked to identify with someone who rails against the kindness and justice of God on the occasion of the death of some friend or relative. We must not allow anyone to attack the honor of God as an exercise of emotional release. When this occurs, both the bereaved and those who mourn with them in like manner should be harshly reprimanded, and commanded to repent and then shut their mouths. Proper encouragement is offered not by listening, but by teaching. And to encourage the bereaved, we are to teach or remind them of the return of Christ and the resurrection of the saints.

Paul writes to Christians, and he says that he does not want them to grieve like "the rest of men," that is, like all the non-Christians. In other words, Christians are permitted to mourn the deaths of fellow believers, but they are not to mourn as the non-Christians. Rather than allowing grief to plunge them into utter despair, or waiting for it to subside with time,

Christians can lament the temporary separation from their brothers and sisters in Christ, but then find encouragement in the doctrines of the return of Christ and the resurrection of the saints.

The passage is often read at funerals, with the intent to encourage. However, Paul forbids universal application, since he contrasts the way that Christians should grieve against the way that all others grieve, since the rest of humankind have "no hope." He is writing to Christians about Christians. If the audience includes non-Christians, or if non-Christians are among the dead, then the doctrine is not nearly as comforting. The doctrine should not comfort the non-Christians who mourn, since they will not share in the glory of the return of Christ, or in the resurrection of Christians. And the doctrine should not encourage anyone about the deceased non-Christians, since death spells the commencement of a kind of suffering for them that strains our ability to fathom, although we applaud the justice of it.

Even as Paul addresses those who might be in mourning, and even as he writes to the Christian living about the Christian dead, he makes an attack on the unbelievers. Unless a minister has warrant to assume that he is speaking to Christians about Christians, he is a liar if he applies the doctrine of the glorious resurrection of the saints as if it applies to all in the audience, and at a funeral, as if it applies to the one in the coffin. If the minister is aware that his audience includes non-Christians, and if he is aware that the deceased was an unbeliever, then what excuse does he have to say anything other than, "Look! God is punishing this man – your father, your husband, your son, your friend, this relative of yours – even now...God is punishing him, torturing him, burning him up even now! Your wife, your mother, your sister, your daughter...she is now screaming out in pain and agony! She is crying for help, but there is only endless suffering before her, forever. And if you do not repent, you will likewise perish! Repent, for soon it will be your time to face the Lord!"

Perhaps we do not always need to preach in this way, but there is nothing wrong with this manner of speaking, and indeed we should often speak like this. It is explicit, forceful, uncompromising, and convincing to those whose hearts God has made receptive to the truth. But even when we do not speak this way, we must make the doctrine clear: "If you have a non-Christian friend or relative who died, he is now suffering in hell. And if you do not become a Christian, then you will go there too." Let social propriety burn in hell along with the unbelievers, but let boldness and wisdom be our guide. If we follow the rules of the world, we will never preach the gospel as it ought to be preached, if we are allowed to preach it at all.

The passage illustrates the use of contrast by the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus. Even when Paul's purpose is to encourage Christians, he makes an attack on the non-Christians. This is not due to vindictiveness, but the contrast is a teaching device that serves to make the information conveyed explicit and to increase the effect that this information has on the audience. Since a contrast does not invent falsehood, but only draws attention to both sides of an issue and takes note of the distance between them, it helps to bring forth the whole truth of the matter. Thus the information conveyed is accurate, and the effect produced on the audience is based on truth and not deception.

In this case, although the purpose is to encourage, so that the main focus rests on the positive doctrines of the return of Christ and the resurrection of the saints, a contrast is made against the hopelessness of the non-Christians. Paul stresses the fact that unbelievers lack the glorious prospect of the believers – non-Christians are without hope. This stands in contrast with the hope of the believers, that their dead will be raised, and that their living will be changed and received by the Lord to be with him forever. Of course, when we take into account what Scripture teaches in other places, then the unbeliever does not merely face a lack of hope, but he is outright condemned. When a non-Christian dies, God seizes his soul and plunges him into the depth of hell, where he must endure extreme torment forever.

A survey of the writings and discourses of the prophet, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus would expose the alarming deficiency of much of what passes as Christian preaching and literature, and even Christian apologetics, in their reluctance to make contrasts between the Christian faith and non-Christian beliefs, and between Christians and non-Christians. Now, to assert sharp contrasts between what we believe and what others believe, and between what we are and what others are, and in a way that reveals our superiority and their inferiority, could be seen as uncharitable and arrogant. So it is understandable that many professing believers shy away from this biblical practice. I mean that I understand them to be worthless cowards and spiritual traitors.

The remedy is simple, but only those faithful to the Lord will implement it. Traitors will revile those who do – they know that courageous believers are in fact filled with mercy, but unbelievers will not spare them! – and make excuses for themselves. In any case, to follow the biblical pattern would mean that we must make explicit contrasts, to draw attention to the difference between Christian belief and non-Christian belief, and to the distance between Christian expectation and experience versus non-Christian expectation and experience. And we must point out that Christian and non-Christian systems are incompatible. In other words, a person cannot affirm non-Christian ideas and possess Christian expectations and experiences.

The principle seems harmless enough, but weaklings are too horrified to declare the actual contrasts. For preaching, it would mean that when we speak about the glories of heaven for the Christians, we should also describe the agonies of hell for all non-Christians. And when we mention the complete forgiveness that God provides for his chosen ones through Jesus Christ, we should also affirm the damnation that God reserves for those whom he has created for hell. Preaching entails telling not only how wonderful it is to be a Christian, but also how hopeless, asinine, and despicable it is to remain a non-Christian.

For our everyday conversation, it means that we must not testify only concerning the faithfulness of the Lord to comfort and rescue, but we should mention to friends, relatives, and strangers, that if they do not repent and believe the gospel, then God has already marked them for damnation, for endless suffering in hellfire. These comments about preaching and conversation, of course, must apply also to the education of children. We

must tell children not only about the goodness of God and the sanctification of the saints, but also the severity of God and the wickedness of the unbelievers.

Children, just as much as others, can and must grasp the difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, and the distance between them in terms of their beliefs, intelligence, character, prospects, and destinies. For example, children must understand that their non-Christian relatives and friends are sent to hell if they die as unbelievers. This includes their little demonic playmates at school – for every unconverted child is as a little demon, and the children of believers ought to know this. There is no reason to keep the truth from them. It is not the case that adults can handle the idea of hell any better. The reason anyone resists the idea of hell is sin, not age.

Likewise, when it comes to apologetics, the biblical practice of making contrasts means that we must not only argue for the veracity and rationality of the Christian faith, but we should also show that all non-Christian beliefs – all of their religions, philosophies, theories, and practices – are false, wicked, and stupid. Therefore, apologetics must not remain a defensive enterprise, but it must take on an offensive energy and an aggressive nature that no adherent of any other belief system has ever known or exhibited. Even so, our weapons are spiritual and intellectual, and not the feeble instruments of blades and explosives. If the term "apologetics" and the idea of "the defense of the faith" render us too passive in our attitude and approach, then it might help to supplement our thinking with other biblical terms such as the "confirmation," "demonstration," and "vindication" of the faith. These can accommodate both the defensive and offensive aspects of our intellectual engagement with the world.

When we consider the Great Commission in terms of our spiritual conflict and disagreement with unbelievers, it is in fact a command for us to invade and conquer – again, not in a military or political sense, but in a spiritual and intellectual sense. It is a command to intrude into people's nations and regions, and into their lives, classes, and circles. We have the mandate and the authority to upset their lifestyles and upend their beliefs. Therefore, it is our duty and our right to pursue all non-Christians, to preach to them the Christian faith, and also to attack, criticize, refute, discredit, disrespect, and mock their beliefs and practices. This is grounded on the words of Christ and confirmed by the practice of the prophets and the apostles, so that anyone who disagrees with it sets himself as an enemy to the kingdom of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes people object to sound doctrine with the complaint that the Christian faith is supposed to be "good news." For example, Christians have used it to oppose the biblical doctrines of active reprobation and effective atonement, and some have used it to endorse the false doctrine of the "sincere offer" of the gospel. And no doubt some will object that to condemn, attack, and ridicule non-Christians contradict the nature of the gospel in that it does not make our message sound like good news. However, this involves a misapplication of the term and a misunderstanding of the gospel.

The idea of "good news" is specific. The term appears within the context of a Christian system of theology and a Christian history of salvation, so that its meaning is defined by

such a context. It is not good news to every person and in every sense imaginable. The reprobate who hears that a person *must* believe in Jesus Christ and renounce his own beliefs and lifestyles would not consider our gospel "good news" at all. Since he is a reprobate, it is determined that he would not believe the gospel, and therefore the message is to him a notice of inevitable condemnation.

To such a person, the only good news would be salvation without faith and repentance, without any belief, without any change. But the only gospel that God has given states that a person is saved by trusting in Jesus Christ, through a faith given to him by the power of God. This is "good news" to a person whom God has chosen for salvation, and in whose heart God has performed the work of regeneration. To those who refuse to believe and cannot believe, the gospel is a death sentence. It is a final declaration that there is no other way to be saved. As Paul writes, "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life" (2 Corinthians 2:15-16). In effect, the preacher of the gospel is the messenger of death to those ordained to destruction.

Since the Bible is God's book, of course he approves of all the contrasts used by the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus – he inspired all those words. But he does something even more drastic, and that is in fact the necessary foundation for all the verbal contrasts made between Christians and non-Christians:

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 9:21-24)

If there were no reprobates, we would not be able to say that those who do not believe have "no hope," for all would be chosen and all would be believers. If Christ has redeemed all, we would not be able to say, "Look, those are the ones on whom the wrath of God shall fall," for no one would suffer his wrath, except the Lamb of God. And if Adam had never sinned, no contrast between the two lines of humanity would be possible.⁵⁸

God takes this teaching device very seriously. He creates people's very souls and ordains their eternal destinies, lifting some to heaven and damning others to hell, to make the

⁵⁸ Some Christians have misunderstood this point. I do not concur with the unbiblical way of thinking that says, "Without hate there can be no love, without darkness there can be no light, without fear there can be no courage," and so on. Some even think that this is the answer to the problem of evil, or *my* answer to the problem of evil. But this is a gross misunderstanding. I have said or implied no such thing. It cannot be true, since there can be God (and thus love, righteousness, etc.) without Satan, and indeed it was this way before God created Satan. Rather, I mean that without the reprobates, it would be impossible for God to demonstrate his wrath for the education of the elect *in this manner*. But he has chosen to reveal his wrath, and other aspects of his nature, in this manner.

contrasts possible. To draw attention to the difference and the distance between Christians and non-Christians is only to declare what God has been doing throughout human history. It is to labor in accordance with his purpose and to speak in agreement with his explanation. He chooses to reveal his nature and educate his people in this manner. The person who preaches his works, that he saves whom he wills and damns whom he wishes, is the one who declares his glory.

The doctrine of the second coming exhibits several characteristics that should greatly affect our thinking and our preaching:

First, it is a foundational part of a comprehensive and self-consistent system of belief. It depends on other parts of the system, and is depended on by other parts of the system. For example, it is directly related to the doctrines of the resurrection and the judgment. The second coming must be mentioned together for a proper understanding of the nature, order, and relation of these events.

Second, there is much about the doctrine that is clear, definite, and not subject to speculation or misunderstanding, although even so some distort it to their own destruction. Many complicated and farfetched theories and schemes have been devised about it or around it, but the main thrust of the teaching is simple and explicit. This is the doctrine: Jesus Christ will one day return, at which time the dead in Christ will be raised, and the Christians who are alive at the time will be changed, and together they will be received to be with the Lord forever. As for non-Christians, they will be judged and thrown into a lake of fire, to be punished forever. With this simple doctrine, we admonish and encourage the saints, and we warn the reprobates and the unrepentant. To overcomplicate the doctrine dulls its force to impress itself upon the minds of men.

Third, and this follows from the first two points, the doctrine is so foundational and connected within the Christian system that it is an integral part of the teachings of the apostles. Even in some places where it does not stand apart to receive special exposition, it is often naturally mentioned as a point of reference. It is cited to produce motivation in sanctification, anchor in temptation, comfort in bereavement, and strength in persecution. It is even used to identify those who belong to Christ – those who believe in him look forward to his glorious return (1 Corinthians 1:7-8, 16:22-24; Philippians 3:20-21; Titus 2:12-15; 2 Timothy 4:1, 8; Hebrews 9:27-28; 2 Peter 3:11-12; 1 John 2:28). The doctrine does not only provide hope for us as believers, but it imposes a moral obligation on us to look forward to the Lord's return and to order our lives in a manner that is consistent with this expectation. And it is to be a natural part of our preaching and conversation.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

It is often assumed that 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 refer to the same event, that of the second coming of Christ. If this is true, then 1 Thessalonians 4 (hereafter 1T4) talks about the things that will happen at Christ's second coming, whereas 1 Thessalonians 5 (hereafter 1T5) talks about the "times and dates" of his coming, and also contrasts the readiness of the believers and the unbelievers. If we have only Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, then this would be a possible interpretation. However, what he writes in his second letter, in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 (hereafter 2T2), suggests that he probably has two events in mind, and that 1T4 and 1T5 refer to two different events, while 1T5 and 2T2 refer to the same event. Of course, it is often assumed that the three passages all refer to one event, but there are reasons to doubt this interpretation.⁵⁹

In this chapter of the commentary, we will examine several reasons for thinking that 1T4 and 1T5 refer to two different events. Since the position taken here is that 1T5 and 2T2 refer to the same event, and since 2T2 provides most of the details about this event, we will postpone our discussion about this event to the chapter on 2T2. Here we will only consider the reasons for distinguishing this event from the second coming, taught in 1T4. Then, the rest of this chapter will discuss the contrast between believers and unbelievers that Paul makes in 1T5.

Paul has been addressing various topics, moving from one subject to another. It is possible that he is responding to questions from the Thessalonians or issues that he thinks he needs to address according to Timothy's report about their condition (3:5-6), although this

⁵⁹ For this chapter and the chapter on 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, I credit Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (P & R Publishing, 1999), p. 223-233. See also Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness* (American Vision, 1999), p. 273-311.

assumption is unnecessary to understand the letter. In 4:1-8, among other things, he warns the converts about sexual immorality. In 4:9-12, among other things, he reminds them to walk in love toward one another. In 4:13-18, he discusses the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the saints, and the catching up of believers to be with the Lord forever.

Then, just as he begins a new topic in 4:9, he appears to use the same language to begin a new topic in 5:1. Moreover, judging by the language he uses, just as he concludes the section on sexual immorality in 4:8, he seems to conclude the section on the second coming in 4:18. And he seems to conclude another section in 5:11 before he moves on to something else in 5:12. In other words, the fact that he proceeds from one topic to another, and the placement of the words that mark the transitions, suggest that he regards 5:1-11 as a separate section that addresses its own topic. Since he appears to conclude his discussion on the second coming in 4:18, and since he brackets the next section with markers in 5:1 and 5:11, giving it its own beginning and conclusion, it is more than possible that he has in mind two topics, or two different events.

While it is possible that 1T4 and 1T5 refer to two different events, it seems certain that 1T5 and 2T2 refer to the same event. This is because both passages refer to "the day of the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 5:2 and 2 Thessalonians 2:2). In 2T2, Paul states the reason for mentioning the topic: "...we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come." So a false doctrine is in circulation that "the day of the Lord" has already come, and since it has not already come, Paul writes to counter the erroneous teaching.

The language in 1T5 and 2T2, including terms like "peace and safety," "labor pains," and "counterfeit miracles," and the idea that the time of the event is unknown, correspond to Jesus' prediction about the destruction of Jerusalem in places like Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. Although the exact time was unknown, Jesus said that it would happen to "this generation," that is, the same generation that he was speaking to. History tells us that Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70. Although this is a useful reference for discussion, so that we may use it for the sake of convenience, our understanding of the event does not require this extra-biblical information. Jesus said that it would happen in the same generation. In other words, he predicted that his prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem would happen within a matter of decades. And the principle of biblical inerrancy leads us to believe that Jesus was correct in his prediction, so that Jerusalem was indeed destroyed within a matter of decades of the time when the prophecy was made.

We may summarize the above analysis by the following propositions:

1T4 = the second coming of Christ, resurrection

1T5 = the day of the Lord

2T2 = the day of the Lord

Therefore, 1T5 = 2T2

1T4 ≠ 2T2

(because if 1T4 = 2T2, then 2T2 would not make sense)

Therefore, 1T4 ≠ the day of the Lord

And therefore, 1T4 ≠ 1T5

1T5 and 2T2 = Matthew 24

(because of the similarities in language and reference to judgment against the Jews)

Matthew 24 = the destruction of Jerusalem, AD 70

Therefore, 1T5 and 2T2 = the destruction of Jerusalem, AD 70

As for the contrast between believers and unbelievers, it intensifies as Paul proceeds to discuss the "times and dates" of the day of the Lord. But first let us make some observations about verses 1 and 2. He says that there is no need to write to the Thessalonians about the time of the event because they already know about it, that it is unknown. This suggests that Paul not only discusses many doctrines with his converts, thus to provide them a broad knowledge of the faith, but he also discusses these doctrines in some detail, thus to provide them a deep understanding of the Christian religion. He did this with the Thessalonians even though he was with them for only a short time, and under constant persecution, indicating that he considers it essential to offer his converts a thorough theological education, even when the opportunity is limited and the situation is difficult. In any case, this teaching is especially relevant because of the constant persecution, since the idea is that God will destroy the unbelievers.

Some implications arise from the idea that the time of this event is unknown, one of which Paul proceeds to illustrate beginning from verse 3. If Christians ought to be prepared for the event, but if no one can know when this will happen, then how are Christians supposed to prepare? It must mean that readiness does not refer to or depend on the knowledge of the time of the event, but Christians can be prepared in some other sense. Before we come to what Paul says about this in verse 4 and forward, he first picks up again the contrast between the believers and the unbelievers (v. 3).

Non-Christians operate under the deception that they have "peace and safety." They assume that they are safe from judgment for many reasons. Some of those who affirm the existence of God, or even claim to follow Christ, might hold to a distorted view of God (so that they think his standard is lax), of Christ (so that they think his atonement applies to everyone without faith and repentance), and of man and sin (so that they think they are not depraved, but righteous in themselves). Some people affirm non-Christian religions that they think will save them. Then, some of them deny God altogether, so to them there cannot be a judgment of destruction and hellfire. Perhaps they even think that human cooperation and

scientific progress will secure this "peace and safety" for them. But no human cooperation and no scientific progress can stem the wrath of God.

As for the Jews in particular, perhaps they thought that they were the chosen people of God, and that the temple would remain forever. But Jesus told them that they were a rejected people, and in his parables, told them that God would send an army to kill them and burn their city (Matthew 22:7), which happened in AD 70. Paul adds that the unbelievers would remain under this deception up until the event occurs. What will come upon them will happen "suddenly." Shattering their illusion of peace and safety, suddenly, "destruction" would come upon them. This does not mean that non-Christians will cease to exist. No, that would be too easy. God will kill them all, snatch up their souls, and throw them into a lake of fire. Paul adds, "They will not escape."

Whether we are talking about God's judgment against the non-Christian Jews in the first century, or whether we are talking about God's judgment against all non-Christians throughout history, or at the second coming of Christ, no unbeliever can escape from him. If you are a non-Christian, this is your chance to repent of your sins, and to depend on the mercy of God and the work of Jesus Christ to save your wretched soul. Otherwise, when the time comes, God will know where to find you, and you will not escape. He will get you. It is alarming that many preachers do not speak like this. Their hands are wet and crimson, dripping with the blood of non-Christians.

Then Paul turns to believers and makes the contrast: "But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled" (1 Thessalonians 5:4-6). Along with this contrast between the Christians and the non-Christians, Paul gives an explanation about the kind of readiness that the Christians possess. We will first examine the contrast, and then the readiness, which is in fact the main purpose of these verses.

Paul writes that although the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, it should not surprise Christians as a thief (v. 4). This contrasts with what he says about the unbelievers, who will still expect peace and safety when sudden destruction comes upon them. Christians will not be surprised, but this does not mean that they know the time of the event. They are prepared in another sense. Then, another contrast emerges, in which Christians are "sons of the light" and "sons of the day," whereas non-Christians are "in darkness," and they "belong to the night" or "to the darkness."

Scripture uses light and darkness, and day and night, as both intellectual and moral metaphors. When the intellectual aspect of our differences is emphasized, the metaphors refer to the enlightenment and knowledge of the Christians, in contrast to the irrationality and ignorance of the non-Christians. When the moral aspect is stressed, then they refer to the righteousness and transparency of the Christians, in contrast to the wickedness and shamefulness of the non-Christians. There is indeed an intellectual difference when it comes to God's judgment – Christians are enlightened about it, while non-Christians are

"in the dark," so to speak. But in this passage, the context concerns the moral difference between believers and unbelievers.

Verse 6 continues the contrast, as Paul tells the Thessalonians, "let us not be like others," who are asleep, but "let us be alert and self-controlled." He does not merely note the difference, but he makes a point of telling his converts not to be like the unbelievers. Again, many preachers fail to follow this pattern of instruction in their sermons. How often do we hear, "Non-Christians are evil. Do not be like them! Be holy, your Father in heaven is holy"? How many times have we heard, "Unbelievers are stupid. Do not be like them! Be wise, for you have the mind of Christ"? Non-Christians are asleep, but Christians ought to be alert. The mention of self-control, and such virtues as faith and love, draws attention to the moral aspect of living.

By now, the nature of the readiness should be clear. Christians are prepared for the time of God's judgment, whether in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 or whether against all non-Christians at the second coming of Christ, not because we know the exact times and dates of these events. But we are not taken by surprise because we are spiritually and morally ready for God to come and act in judgment. This is a superior kind of readiness. If we do not become spiritually prepared to meet him, it would still be useless to know the time. His coming would only bring judgment upon us. But if we remain in a constant state of moral readiness, then we do not need to know the time of judgment – he will find us steadfast in our faith and labor when he comes.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-28

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

As Paul brings his letter to a close, he offers a number of short instructions. Whether long or short, these are divine precepts, and a serious consideration of the letter would forbid us from quickly passing over them, or to make a general statement about them that ignore the particulars. So when Paul writes, "Give thanks," we are not to regard this as just something good to say, but we are to pause, consider the meaning and significance of this precept, repent of our ingratitude, and give thanks to God in all things. Each item in the passage could generate a full discussion, and although we will not do this in our commentary, some initial effort is better than nothing.

Verses 12-15 provide instructions that are necessary to maintain the strength of a congregation's internal stability as well as its testimony before the world. Paul here refers to the church leaders, the believers, and "everyone else."

Of course church leaders are also believers, but as Paul writes, they are "over you in the Lord." They consist of a small company of individuals among the believers that exercise oversight in the congregation. Christians are to "hold them in the highest regard." In a culture that despises authority, and in which ignorant and incompetent people harbor the delusion that they are equally qualified as everyone else to make pronouncements in

matters of religion and morality, this instruction is especially important to maintain proper order in the church, and to prevent it from appearing foolish before the world.

On the other hand, respect for church leaders must be placed upon the proper basis. Some believers hold their leaders in the highest regard not "because of their work," but because of their reputation, appearance, eloquence, or other factors that render their adoration a form of idolatry rather than a healthy respect. They are more tolerant toward those who blaspheme God than those who criticize their favored theologians and preachers. They are as the carnal Corinthians, who would say, "I am of Paul!" or "I am of Peter!" This is sinful, and it is destructive to the cause of Christ.

If believers are to respect their leaders, even hold them in the highest regard because of their work, then these leaders better be faithful in this work. Paul writes that the Christians should "respect those who work hard among you...who admonish you." Church officers who do not work hard, or who do not work hard in the right things and in the right way, should not receive the respect that Paul urges in this passage. Among other things, those who are to be respected work hard to "admonish." They are those who labor to remind and rebuke the believers to follow sound doctrine and pursue holy living.

Some commentators believe that Paul mentions this because there is tension between the leadership and the congregation. Again, the popular hermeneutical assumption that the apostle would bring up a subject only when there is a corresponding problem in the audience is most unwarranted and foolish. One could push the assumption further and assert that whenever Paul calls Jesus the "Lord Jesus Christ," it is because his readers doubt that Jesus is Lord and Christ, or even that whenever Paul mentions God, it is because his readers are atheists. But for some reason, commentators do not say this. The assumption is a stupid invention, and must be discarded and purged from the practice of biblical interpretation. We can be certain that a writer is addressing an existing issue with the readers only when there is actual evidence for it.

Christians are to "live in peace with each other." Believers consist of individuals from different nations, races, genders, and social, financial, and educational backgrounds. When they come together, these differences are not obliterated. When unbelievers are able to maintain unity among themselves, it is because they celebrate their differences and practice tolerance. The basis for this unity is common humanity. In contrast, when believers come together in unity, they practice reconciliation. The basis for this true unity is common faith in Christ.

Unlike the non-Christians, believers should not celebrate their human differences, but they must become secondary. Sometimes Christians adopt an attitude that comes from the world, and that is anti-biblical. They would say that they are proud to be Americans, but that they are united to Christians from other nations through Christ. But why should nationality be emphasized in the first place? Or, others will say that they are proud to be black, but they are united to their white brothers in Christ. But when race rather than faith is in the forefront of your thinking, are you not still carnal? These human differences among believers remain, and it is sometimes helpful to consider them, but they are not celebrated

in comparison to our common adoration of Christ. And if anyone boasts, let him not boast in his race or gender, as if a "black" Christian or a "woman" Christian is anything special. But let him who boasts boast in the Lord, for it is he who has chosen and redeemed us.

Our peace is not one that tolerates incompatible principles and practices, but it is one that confronts them and demands their conformity to Christ. Paul tells his converts to "warn those who are idle." We are to disapprove, entreat, reprimand, and even threaten those who do wrong. The basis for this is not the inherent superiority, the strong opinion, or even the mere assertiveness of some believers over others, but it is the authority of Christ, to whom all are accountable. On this same basis, we are to "encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone."

Again, although only brief mention is given to these items that are listed in quick succession, they proceed from divine wisdom and authority, and must be regarded with deliberate attention and obedience. Christians must actually encourage those who are timid, help those who are weak, and so on. They are not intended to be pretty sayings, but believers must act on them. If there is someone idle in your church – if he is able to work but unwilling to work, but sit idle to collect welfare or to receive charity from church members – then warn him. Tell him that he is living in sin, and that he must repent and change. He must find work. Likewise, if there is someone timid among you, go and speak to him. Encourage him, be an example to him, and help him become firm in the faith and bold in his witness for the Lord. These instructions, including "warn those who are idle," are directed to all believers, and not just to the leaders. So the broader principle here is that all believers are to be mobilized in ministry under competent leadership.

The Bible disapproves of one who "pays back wrong for wrong." This is stated variously in a number of places. For example, Paul writes in Romans 12, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (v. 17-19). The principle is related to living in peace with everyone. In other words, when Paul tells the believers to live in peace with others, this instruction demands that we do not take revenge on those who wrong us. Peace is destroyed by perpetual retaliation.

However, the principle is not against revenge as such. He says that the reason for believers to refrain from revenge is to "leave room for God's wrath," because God himself said that he wanted to reserve this privilege for himself: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay." Every wrong incurs a debt, and someone must pay. The principle is not that sin incurs no debt, which would be an anti-biblical rejection of the very idea of sin, but the principle is that it is not up to a man to make another man pay. Nevertheless, payment must be rendered, and God says, "It is not up to you to be the debt collector – I will do it." He will either make the sinner pay forever in hell, or he will reckon his debt paid by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He is the substitute for the chosen ones.

Paul insists on the justice of revenge in his second letter to the Thessalonians, saying, "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are

troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (1:6-8). Because Christians have been misinformed on this matter of revenge, we must stress this over and over again. The Bible never teaches against revenge itself, but it teaches that it is not up to us to do it, that it is up to God to do it. In fact, to oppose the idea of revenge is to oppose the idea of justice, the idea that sin incurs debt. Therefore, a person who insists that revenge itself is wrong opposes the atonement, and thus the whole gospel. The minister of the true gospel must affirm and preach that justice demands revenge, that revenge is good and right, and God will be the person who carries it out. He will either make the sinner pay forever, or he will reckon his debt paid by Jesus Christ.

Verse 16-18 tell Christians to rejoice, to pray, and to offer thanks. These items are stated not as attitudes, but as things to do. It is common to suggest that "pray continually" refers to a "prayerful attitude," but this ignores the apostle's teaching. It is understood that the verse does not command us to do these things constantly, in the sense that we must not even pause to eat or sleep, so it is unnecessary to distort them into attitudes in order to make it possible to practice them. They refer to actions. "Be joyful always." Do it – rejoice, and do it all the time. "Pray continually." Do it – do not just have a "prayerful attitude," but engage in prayer. And since he says to do it "continually," he means that we must do a lot of it. Attitude cannot replace action in this verse. "Give thanks in all circumstances." Do it. When something good happens, give thanks. When something bad happens, give thanks. It is good to have a thankful attitude. Turn it into action, and show it by giving thanks. There is no excuse not to do it in a biblical commentary: Thanks be to God, for the gift of Jesus Christ!

Verses 19-22 discuss the apostolic policy toward prophecy. Paul writes, "Do not treat prophecies with contempt," but he tells the Christians to "test everything."

Cessationism is the false doctrine that the manifestations of miraculous endowments such as those listed in 1 Corinthians 12 have ceased since the days of the apostles and the completion of the Bible. Although there is no biblical evidence for this position, a main motive for this invention is to secure the sufficiency of Scripture and the finality (completion) of Scripture. However, it has been shown that the continuation of miraculous manifestations does not in fact contradict these two doctrines or put them at risk.⁶⁰ Thus cessationism is both unbiblical and unnecessary.

More than that, cessationism is also evil and dangerous. This is because if cessationism is false, then those who advocate this doctrine are preaching rebellion against the Lord.

The Bible commands Christians, "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy" (1 Corinthians 14:1). If cessationism is correct but we do not know it, then we could still safely obey this instruction, although we will not receive what we desire. That is, if prophecy has ceased but I think that it continues, then I could

⁶⁰ See Don Codling, *Sola Scriptura and the Revelatory Gifts* (Sentinel Press, 2005).

still desire the gift of prophecy in accordance with this command, but I will not receive the gift of prophecy. No harm is done.⁶¹

On the other hand, since the cessationist teaches that prophecy has ceased, then although the Bible says "desire spiritual gifts," he will not desire spiritual gifts, since the spiritual gifts are no longer in operation, and what gifts people think they have are necessarily false. This also applies to prophecy in particular. So although Paul says, "Do not treat prophecies with contempt," the cessationist *must* treat all prophecies with contempt, since he believes that prophecy has ceased, so that all prophecies today are false. His view toward prophecy must be "reject everything" instead of "test everything." But again, if cessationism is false, then this person would be preaching rebellion against the biblical commands to desire and test spiritual manifestations.

Since the commands "desire spiritual gifts," "do not treat prophecies with contempt," and "test everything" are revealed by divine and infallible authority, the cessationist must present an infallible argument to render them inapplicable for today. If he cannot provide this but he still advocates cessationism in the face of these explicit biblical commands, then is it not obvious that he has condemned himself before God, *even if* this person is right that the gifts have ceased? No Christian should dare follow such a person or believe his doctrine. If a person preaches cessationism but cannot prove it – if he cannot provide an infallible argument for it (since the command to desire spiritual manifestations is clear and infallible), then this means that he consciously preaches rebellion against some of the Bible's straightforward commands. Why then, should he not be removed from the ministry or even excommunicated from the church?

Since the arguments for cessationism are forced and feeble, and since the doctrine presents so great a danger, it is best to believe the Bible as it is written, and obey its commands as they are stated – that is, "desire spiritual gifts" and "test everything." This position is faithful to the direct statements of Scripture, but it requires courageous resistance to fallacious arguments, academic bullying, and church traditions.

Inherent in this biblical approach is protection against fanatics and false miracles. The Bible instructs us to "test everything," and since it is sufficient, it is able to expose counterfeit miracles and false prophecies. The answer is not to assert that the gifts have ceased, but to follow the instructions that the Bible has already given on the subject. This position, that we should follow what Scripture says, would offer us perfect protection even if cessationism is correct. If prophecy has indeed ceased, then any prophecy today is false. Since the Bible is a sufficient revelation, the information in it will enable us to "test everything," so that any alleged prophecy today will either be tested, and finding it false, it will be condemned, or if the content is such that it is untestable, it will be ignored.

⁶¹ If prophecy has ceased but I think that it continues, I will desire it and fail to receive it, and then it is possible that I think that I have received it (and this is possible because I falsely think that it continues) and proceed to prophesy. This would be a false prophecy. There is indeed harm in this, but the problem is not in thinking that prophecy continues, but in thinking that I have the gift when I do not. So it is a related but separate issue, and it is addressed by Paul's instruction, that is, in testing the alleged prophecy, and not in imposing the unbiblical doctrine of cessationism.

Cessationism teaches us to abandon some divine commands without divine warrant, and thus preaches rebellion, but the position that we should obey both "desire spiritual gifts" and "test everything" preaches obedience to the Lord, and it is at the same time able to protect itself against all deception. There is no danger in desiring spiritual gifts as long as we also test everything – if all spiritual manifestations are false, then we will expose all of them as false when we test them, and so we will regard all of them as false. A person who does this is safe from judgment.

Although Paul offers so many instructions on so many things, he believes that it is not the saints who sanctify themselves, but it is "God himself" who sanctifies them. Three things receive emphasis in verses 23 and 24. First, God sanctifies his people in a thorough manner, even "through and through." Paul's reference to the human person as "spirit, soul and body" does not mean he thinks that man is a trichotomy, just as Jesus is not suggesting that there are four basic parts in man when he says, "Love the Lord your God with all your *heart* and with all your *soul* and with all your *mind* and with all your *strength*" (Mark 12:30).⁶² The emphasis is in completeness, and Paul is drawing attention to the pervasive nature of God's work in the Christian. Second, Paul emphasizes that God is the one who sanctifies, and makes his people blameless. Third, he says that God is not only able to do this, but he is faithful to do it.

Christians are at times driven to discouragement, and sometimes almost to despair, when they perceive that they fall short of perfection. Paul's doctrine of sanctification reminds us to place our confidence in God, and not in ourselves. This does not excuse us from our responsibilities, since Paul has just finished listing a number of them. It is not that we may become passive in the pursuit of holiness, but that even our efforts are inspired and energized by God, and that we may have confidence in him to do this for us. As Paul writes elsewhere, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13).

⁶² See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*.

2 THESSALONIANS 1:1-2

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul writes this second letter to the Thessalonians soon after the first. It is almost identical in background, audience, and purpose. In it the apostle repeats and expands on what he has said in the previous correspondence, so that it can be considered an extension of 1 Thessalonians.

Since the exposition on 1 Thessalonians has been extensive, and this second letter is similar in context and content, the commentary on 2 Thessalonians will be brief.

2 THESSALONIANS 1:3-12

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Commentators assume that one major reason for this second letter is to encourage the believers as the persecution against them has become more severe. However, the text does not in fact say that persecution has increased, and it is invalid to infer that it has because Paul is writing a letter to them about it. But whether or not the persecution has become increasingly severe, we can say that it has been ongoing, and that it has not been mild.

What Paul says is that their "faith is growing more and more" and that their "love...is increasing." This growth occurs with "perseverance" and in the face of "persecution and trials." Endurance under persecution implies that Christian belief, profession, and action are preserved. If the Thessalonians no longer believe what they first believed, or if they no longer make the same profession before the world or perform the same actions that are consistent with this profession, then the persecution would have ceased, or would have been reduced.

As Paul writes to the Galatians, "Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished" (Galatians 5:11). If our message and our practice offend unbelievers and incite their outrage, then compromise ought to appease them, rendering endurance unnecessary. But if the offense continues, the persecution also continues. The Thessalonians' perseverance implies that

they have not compromised their faith, whether in doctrine or in practice. Paul says that they are "worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering" (v. 5).

Paul continues, "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you" (v. 6). The Christians will inherit the kingdom of God, but their persecutors will reap the whirlwind. Revenge is an offensive idea to misinformed believers. As mentioned in connection with 1 Thessalonians 5:15, revenge itself is not wrong, and in fact justice requires revenge, or as Paul puts it, justice means "pay back." The Bible does not teach against revenge, but rather insists that revenge is necessary. However, it forbids us to take it upon ourselves to exact revenge on those who wrong us, for God reserves that right for himself. It is important to correct the misunderstanding on revenge.

If we are against the very idea of "pay back," then although we would refrain from taking revenge, we would be doing this for the wrong reason. Moreover, this can also misdirect our thinking when it comes to the legal system, as in the punishment of criminals, as well as our understanding of the everlasting punishment of unbelievers in hell. So to summarize, God makes justice necessary, and justice makes revenge necessary, but God should be the one who carries it out.⁶³ Therefore, Christians ought to endure persecution without compromise, while looking to God for justice, to "pay back" trouble to those who trouble us (v. 6).

Christians often discourage one another from thinking this way, that God would "pay back" those who trouble them. However, the apostle regards this as the proper perspective to offer those suffering persecution, so if a Christian finds this offensive, it is only an indication that his understanding is defective, and not in accord with divine justice. A person who refuses the principle of retribution, of "pay back," cannot at the same time grasp and accept the biblical doctrines on sin, and on redemption and atonement. Sin incurs a debt that man cannot pay, and through the atonement, Jesus Christ sacrificed himself to pay this debt. For those who look to him and call upon him in faith, this payment is credited to their account. The principle of retribution is a necessary presupposition behind the ideas of justice, sin, and redemption.

If some unbelievers who persecute Christians finally repent and convert to the faith, then of course their sins are forgiven. They will not suffer a "pay back," especially the kind that entails hellfire, since their debt has been paid by Christ. It would mean that Jesus has already endured the pay back that is meant for them. We have no objection to this, since our own debt has been paid by Christ as well, and we cannot dictate to God as to how he must dispense his mercy. He has said that he will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and he will harden whom he wishes to harden.

Since the "pay back" principle is derived from God's justice, it is applicable to any period in history, and to believers in any setting. God will exact revenge on those who persecute Christians today. He will avenge even us. The ultimate manifestation of retribution will occur when God throws all non-Christians into the lake of fire, in which they will suffer

⁶³ This refers to personal revenge. God commands the government to make criminals pay for their misdeeds in this present life.

constant conscious extreme torture forever. But God may at times also deal out temporal punishments against the unbelievers. Whether these occur or how they occur is up to him. The principle of retribution, or "pay back," is in force in all cases.

Earlier, we observed that Paul has introduced two major future events to the Thessalonians:

The first is the coming of Christ in temporal judgment that would result in the destruction of Jerusalem, and the slaughter and dispersion of the Jews (1T5 and 2T2). History tells us that this occurred in AD 70, but as we noted, our belief of this event and interpretation of the passages concerning it do not require the confirmation of historians. Jesus said that the event would happen to the same generation to which he ministered, so that even without the testimony of history, we would know that the event occurred within a matter of decades since the ministry of Jesus. Of course, this would have been a future event to the Thessalonians, but a past event to us.

Then, the second major event is the coming of Christ to receive his people (1T4). Those who are dead will be resurrected, and those who are alive will be caught up to be with him forever. This event is also accompanied by a final judgment against non-Christians, although 1T4 does not emphasize this, since the purpose of that passage is to encourage bereaved Christians. This event is what we usually call the "second coming" of Christ, and it remains in our future.

Some have offered reasons to believe that Paul is referring to the first event (AD 70) in our passage. First, the text focuses on the punishment that would come upon those who are persecuting the Thessalonians at the time of the writing of this letter. These persecutors mainly consist of Jews, and the punishment in view here seems to correspond to what Paul means in the first letter when he writes concerning them, "The wrath of God has come upon them at last" (1 Thessalonians 2:16). Second, the language in our passage parallels that of Daniel 7:9-12 and Joel 2-3, which include prophecies that are now understood to have occurred in the first century. Third, the language in our passage parallels that of Matthew 16:27-28, where Jesus says that "some who are standing here will not taste death" before they witness the event. Thus it is more than possible that the punishment in our passage refers to God's coming in judgment to slaughter the Jews and destroy their temple in AD 70.

The apostle stresses punishment in our passage, saying, "He will *punish* those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be *punished* with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" (v. 8-9). The words denote retribution and recompense. Our God is a God who punishes. We must become accustomed to this, but more than that, we must come to like it. To dislike the idea that God punishes is to dislike God himself, since he acts out of his nature of justice. That God would punish them with "everlasting destruction" does not mean that they would cease to exist, since then they could not also be "shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power." Paul means that God would kill them and then send them to hell. They will have no share in the joy and glory that the faithful Thessalonian Christians are destined to receive.

Although it is likely that the passage refers to God's coming in judgment in AD 70, the principles that determine the persecutors' punishment and the believers' inheritance remain applicable, since they are stated as universal principles.⁶⁴

Paul does not say, "God will punish these very Jews who persecute you and no one else." But he writes, "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (v. 8). Those who "do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" make up a very large but well-defined group, namely, all non-Christians. God is coming to punish all non-Christians, if not in AD 70, then at some other time, and if not by a temporal punishment followed by hellfire, then immediately by hellfire at their death or at the second coming of Christ. There will be no escape.

As for the Thessalonians, Paul says that they are numbered among Christ's own people, not because they are Thessalonian Christians, but "because you believed our testimony to you" (v. 10). We have believed on the same apostolic testimony, and therefore we are also numbered among Christ's own people, and will share in the same glorious inheritance.

⁶⁴ If our passage in fact refers to the second coming of Christ and the final judgment on the wicked, then the application is even more straightforward, although Paul would then be saying that God will avenge the Thessalonians at a much later time.

2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

In an earlier chapter of this commentary, we noted that this passage is not referring to the second coming of Christ in our future, but the judgment against the Jews in AD 70.⁶⁵ The matter concerns "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." In itself, this does not indicate whether the topic is the judgment against the Jews in AD 70 or the second coming of Christ for final judgment and resurrection, since the idea of "coming" can refer to either. The matter also concerns "our being gathered to him." This is easily confused with our being "caught up...to meet the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17), but the terms are not the same. Rather, it resembles the language used in Matthew 24, where Jesus says that his angels will "gather his elect from the four winds" (v. 31). But the prophecy there concerns the destruction of Jerusalem (see Matthew 23:35, 24:2), which would happen in "this generation" (Matthew 23:36, 24:34), that is, within his own generation in the first century.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Again, the extra-biblical date of AD 70 is relatively unimportant, and unnecessary for interpreting the relevant passages. The point is that there is one "coming" of Christ in judgment within one generation of his ministry, and then there is another "coming" of Christ for a final and universal judgment, for the resurrection of the saints, and for the catching up of those believers who will be living at that time. The latter event is commonly called the "second coming."

⁶⁶ Mathison notes the following parallels between 2 Thessalonians 2 and Matthew 24: "a. a coming of the Lord (2 Thess. 2:1; cf. Matt. 24:27, 30), b. a gathering together to Him (2 Thess. 2:1; cf. Matt. 24:31), c. apostasy (2 Thess. 2:3; cf. Matt. 24:5, 10-12), d. the mystery of lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:7; Matt. 24:12), e. satanic signs and wonders (2 Thess. 2:9-10; cf. Matt. 24:24), f. a deluding influence on unbelievers (2 Thess. 2:11; cf. Matt. 24:5, 24)" (*Postmillennialism*, p. 230).

Verse 2 indicates that the Thessalonians might have been disturbed by "some prophecy, report or letter" supposed to have come from Paul, "saying that the day of the Lord has already come." Paul now counters this by reminding them of what he taught them when he was with them (v. 5). Specifically, he draws attention to some of the signs that must precede the event.

First, the day of the Lord will not come "until the rebellion occurs." The word is *apostasia*, and can refer to either religious or political rebellion. Here it probably refers to the Jewish uprising against the Romans that precipitated the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Second, "the man of lawlessness" must be revealed. He must first become public and active. He would set himself up in the temple and proclaim himself to be God (v. 4). His coming will occur in accordance with a display of "counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders" (v. 9). He is kept from revealing himself, or becoming public and active, at the time of the writing of this passage, but would emerge when the restraining factor is removed (v. 5-7). And after he has been revealed and active for a time, the Lord Jesus would come in power to destroy him (v. 8).

This man's identity is a subject of debate, but I tend to agree with some commentators that Paul refers to Nero.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, this extra-biblical information is unimportant, and it is unnecessary to an accurate interpretation of the passage. There is no need to specify the man by name in order to grasp and accept all that the passage says. Since we know that the passage refers to the destruction of Jerusalem within one generation of the ministry of Jesus, we know that this man, some time after the writing of this letter and some time before the destruction of Jerusalem, emerged to become public and active, and fulfilled all that this passage says about him. And after some time, he was destroyed.

The event receives much attention in the New Testament. The slaughter of the Jews and the destruction of the temple indeed marked the end of an age. Jesus said to the Jews, "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). And also, "What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others" (Mark 12:9). Jesus told them that he would *come* and *kill* them, and he did in the "coming" of judgment against Jerusalem. The event proved the lengths to which the God would go to avenge the death of the Son, the suffering of his people, to overthrow apostate religion, and to advance his agenda for human history, for his own glory and the perfection of his chosen ones.

Since this prophecy refers to our distant past and not to our future, it is not meant to provide a list of signs that precede the second coming of Christ. This does not mean that we should regard the destruction of Jerusalem only as a matter of historical interest with no relevance for today. The event serves as a revelation of divine judgment, and foreshadows the final judgment that will commence at the second coming of Christ, at which time God will punish all non-Christians throughout the history of humankind. He will not target only the

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 232.

Jews, but on that day, no unbeliever will escape. He will slaughter all non-Christians without mercy. The event will be a demonstration of terror the likes of which has never been witnessed in all of history.

Moreover, just as the destruction of Jerusalem vindicated the early preaching of the apostles, the second coming of Christ will vindicate all the preaching of the prophets and the apostles, as well as all those who have faithfully believed and proclaimed the same message and sound doctrine. On that day, all persecution will cease, and all argument will end, but so will the opportunity for repentance. Christians will inherit unspeakable joy and glory, and non-Christians will inherit endless torment and hellfire.

2 THESSALONIANS 2:13-3:5

But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.

At the end of the previous passage, Paul writes that it is God who "sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie." He does this so that "all will be condemned" who are non-Christians, "who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness." Their delusion, unbelief, and condemnation are all authored by God's deliberate choice and action. Then, Paul begins this next passage by contrasting the believers against the unbelievers. Christians are those whom God has "chosen" for salvation, and he saves them "through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth."

Gordon Clark writes, "The Arminians usually hold that God does not cause people to despise the truth nor does he purpose to condemn them for doing so. But this verse says, note carefully, that God plunges them into error in order that they shall be condemned. Non-calvinists will say that God permits, but does not cause, unbelief."⁶⁸ The last sentence implies that Calvinists would say that God does not merely permit, but that he causes unbelief. In other words, he implies that Calvinists affirm the biblical position. He is correct about the Arminians, of course, but he is too charitable toward the Calvinists, unless he means that those who call themselves Calvinists but who do not believe that God causes unbelief, are not really Calvinists, in which case he would be right.

The truth is that one can rarely find a Calvinist who would say that God actively causes unbelief, delusion, or the like. In agreement with Scripture, "Calvin denounces the idea of a permissive will,"⁶⁹ but many (most?) who call themselves Calvinists insist that God decrees sin and evil only in a permissive sense, rather than in an active sense, as in to decide

⁶⁸ Gordon H. Clark, *First and Second Thessalonians* (The Trinity Foundation, 1986), p. 98-99.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

that it should happen and then to cause it to happen. This is inconsistent with Calvin's view, and more importantly, it defies the teachings of Scripture and assaults the nature of God. Any so-called Calvinist who affirms that God does anything in a permissive sense disagrees with Scripture, and less importantly, also disagrees with Calvin.

There are also those who agree that God actively decrees and causes evil, but then insist he is not the author of sin. This is self-contradictory and impossible. So there is Arminianism and there is inconsistent Calvinism, the popular form of Calvinism. Both are hopelessly unbiblical. Inconsistent Calvinists share two false assumptions with the Arminians, and with non-Christians, that moral responsibility presupposes some kind of freedom, and that to (metaphysically) cause evil is to (personally) commit evil. The Arminians and non-Christians use these two assumptions to form thoroughly anti-biblical systems, but the inconsistent Calvinists are ensnared by these stupid inventions.

On the other hand, consistent Calvinism, or the Bible's own teaching, would say that God actively decrees and causes all things, including evil, so that he is indeed the sovereign and righteous author of sin. And because consistent Calvinists affirm the sovereignty of God not only as lipservice, as the inconsistent Calvinists do, they submit under God's own definition of good and evil. Since God regards it consistent with his own holiness to exercise active control over all things, including evil, then the consistent Calvinist – or what is more appropriate, the consistent *Christian* – is happy to affirm this as well. Thus God is the author of sin, and there is nothing wrong with that.⁷⁰

So, the difference is that Christians believe in the truth, while non-Christians believe in the lie. And the cause for this difference is God's decree and power. He chooses to save some, and causes them to believe the truth. He chooses to condemn others, and causes them to believe the lie.

Paul stresses two factors that sum up the spiritual life of man. They provide a reliable structure to guide our thinking about our own development and also the way we conduct ministry:

The first is man's steadfast belief in the truth. In this passage, the words "truth" (v. 13), "gospel" (v. 14), and "teachings" (v. 15) are interchangeable.

The word translated "teachings" (NIV) is literally "traditions" (KJV, ESV). "Traditions" may carry a negative connotation in our minds, because it is often associated with human customs that keep men in bondage to difficult and unnecessary rules of behavior, and that even subvert the commands of God. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees, and said, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!" (Mark 7:9).

However, this is not the necessary meaning of traditions. They can simply refer to beliefs and practices that are preserved and passed on, from one person to another, and from one generation to another. Whether the traditions are good or bad depends on their source. Are

⁷⁰ See Vincent Cheung, *The Author of Sin*.

these traditions invented by men, or traditions revealed by God, and transmitted through his faithful servants? Are these Catholic traditions, superstitious traditions, cultural traditions, which are either evil or at least without authority, or are they apostolic and biblical traditions, which are authoritative, and convey God's saving wisdom and power? Paul writes, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2). He is talking about divine traditions.

Paul refers to the traditions that he passed on to the Thessalonians. As much as he values godly examples (3:9), he does not mention them here; rather, these traditions are transmitted "by mouth or by letter" – they are taught, not caught. And as noted, the term is interchangeable with "truth" and "gospel" in our context. Therefore, Paul is talking about intellectual traditions, or what we call doctrines or dogmas. The NIV has the correct meaning with "teachings." He instructs them to "stand firm and hold to" these doctrines. This is what the Christian life is about – believe these doctrines, practice these doctrines, keep on believing and practicing these doctrines, and promote these doctrines "whether by mouth or by letter." An evaluation of a person's faith or ministry, therefore, entails asking whether there is an adequate emphasis on, belief in, obedience to, and promotion of, sound doctrine.

The second factor is God's divine action in the soul. Doctrines make the difference between heaven and hell, but it is God who causes those whom he has chosen for salvation to believe the right doctrines. The gospel is made effective in the soul of man by a divine inward action, a power that God applies directly to the mind as he controls the thoughts and dispositions of man. Paul credits to this work of God the initial belief in the gospel, the sanctification of the believer, encouragement in the heart, and strength "in every good deed and word."

We relate to God's action in the soul through faith and prayer. We ask God to make his word effective in us and in those who hear us. We ask God to sanctify us by his Spirit and through the truth. We ask God to help us stand firm and hold to the doctrines that have been passed on to us in the apostolic and biblical traditions. To strengthen our brothers, we remind them of the promises and the faithfulness of Christ, and then we ask God to encourage their hearts by a direct action in the soul through these doctrines. Thus Christian life and ministry place all the emphasis on intellectual doctrines, but place all the expectation on gracious divine action to render these doctrines effective in us and in others.⁷¹

⁷¹ See Vincent Cheung, "The Bible, the Preacher, and the Spirit."

2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-15

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right.

If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

This is a rather self-explanatory passage. The challenge is to make Christians take it seriously, and to obey it. Paul had said, "warn those who are idle" in his first letter (1 Thessalonians 5:14), but apparently that did not eradicate the problem. So when he receives report that some of them remain idle (2 Thessalonians 3:11), he brings up the matter again in this second letter. This time he takes on a more urgent tone, first appealing to "the name of the Lord Jesus Christ," and then issuing a "command" to compel the brothers to take decisive action against those who persist in idleness. Rather than earning their own food, they live on the charity of others – they are loafers and freeloaders. And not being busy with meaningful labor, they meddle in other people's business.

It is common to assume that the problem of idleness among the Thessalonians is related to their misunderstanding or misapplication of the doctrine of the second coming. The assumption is that, in light of the second coming of Christ, some begin to think that there is no point to maintaining a regular occupation, and so have stopped working in order to wait for the event. However, Paul does not suggest such a connection, and it is unconfirmed in the text. At the most the theory should be considered a mere possibility. Interpretation does not depend on it, and in fact might be distorted by it, especially if the assumption is false. In any case, the passage is applicable to idleness for any reason.

In the name of Christ, Paul commands the Christians to take decisive action against those who are idle. His instructions are not at first directed to those who are idle, but to those who are not. So those who are faithful in productive labor are not exempt from considering this topic, or from what Paul commands them to do. It is precisely to those who are not among the idle that the apostle directs most of his statements on the subject. So no one

should take what Paul says only as a matter of exegetical interest, but this is something that Christians must do, that all churches must implement as official policy, as a matter of obedience to the Lord Jesus.

The decisive action that Christians are to take against those who are idle is to "keep away" from them – that is, to literally, really, shun them. What? Should we just let them starve? Is that the Christian way? Yes, it is. Paul adds, "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat'" (v. 10). In the name of Christ, Paul commands all Christians to let idlers starve to death. It would be a sin to feed them. Then, the apostle proceeds to "command and urge" those who are idle to "settle down and earn the bread they eat." Verse 14 repeats the command to those who are *not* idle: "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed." Mark this person. Know him by name and by face. And then avoid any association with him. There must be a concerted effort of the entire Christian community to shun and to shame this person.

The command has obvious implications for policies on welfare and charity. Those who are able to work, but are unwilling to work, are to be shunned and shamed. They are not to receive any financial or material aid. If they do not work, they do not eat. If they starve to death, then so be it.

Of course, housewives and children do not work for money, but the principle can still apply in the sense that they must not be idle. They have their own work that contributes to their families, churches, and societies. Ministers who labor in preaching, writing, visiting, counseling, and other such tasks are not idle, but as noted earlier, they have a right to financial support, including a steady salary. Paul had a right to this kind of support, although he did not accept it, but rather worked for his own food, in order to provide an example for his converts to imitate. However, even as he refers to his example, he reasserts his right to financial support (v. 7-9).

In any case, we acknowledge that there are cases of genuine need – those who are orphaned or widowed without any source of support, those who are disabled, and those who are willing to work but cannot find work at the moment. The Bible makes provisions for such individuals.⁷²

⁷² See Vincent Cheung, "Policy on Charity."

2 THESSALONIANS 3:16-18

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Since the Thessalonians might have received a letter that falsely claimed to have come from Paul, he directs their attention to his signature. This would help the believers detect future forgeries.