

REFLECTIONS ON SECOND TIMOTHY

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CONTENTS

1. PAUL AND HUMAN TRADITION	4
2. PAUL AND DIVINE REVELATION	7
3. GOD THE AUTHOR	10
4. THE QUESTION OF HISTORICAL CONTEXT	15
5. A GODLY HERITAGE	17
6. ORDINATION AND HUMAN TRADITION.....	19
7. A SPIRIT OF POWER	22
8. SALVATION: A NECESSARY RESCUE	25
9. NOT BY MAN'S DECISION OR EFFORT	27
10. THE NATURE AND ROLE OF FAITH.....	30
11. THE GOSPEL BRINGS GRACE TO LIGHT	32
12. PATTERN FOR PREACHING	34
13. LOYALTY TO MEN	37
14. A PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL SYSTEM	39
15. SHARE IN THE SUFFERING	42
16. REMEMBER JESUS CHRIST	45
17. A WORKMAN APPROVED BY GOD.....	50
18. ON HERETICS AND HERESIES	52
19. GOD'S SOLID FOUNDATION	54
20. FOOLISH CONTROVERSIES	56
21. TEACHING THE DEVIL'S CAPTIVES.....	58
22. BAD PEOPLE, BAD TIMES	61
23. THEOCENTRISM VS. ANTHROPOCENTRISM.....	64
24. INTELLIGENCE FOR SALVATION	68
25. BREATHED OUT BY GOD	71
26. PROCLAIM SOUND DOCTRINE.....	75
27. ALONE, BUT NEVER ALONE.....	78

1. Paul and Human Tradition

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my dear son:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. (2 Timothy 1:1-2)

As Paul writes elsewhere, he was "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews" (Philippians 3:5). He was one of the Pharisees, a very strict sect of the Jewish religion. Before he converted to the Christian faith, all this counted for something, but later he would realize that his background earned him no favor in God's sight. He had to come to God another way.

Luke introduces him in Acts 7. He was called Saul at that time, and he consented when the Jews stoned Stephen to death. From a non-Christian perspective, or from the perspective of those blinded to the truth, Saul was a proper Jewish man, an upright Pharisee, a highly credentialed scholar. However, the truth was that he was an accomplice to the murder of an innocent man. In the Acts of the Apostles, this is the first thing that we learn about him.

Saul continued in this direction, and Acts 9 reports that he was "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples." He received authority from the high priest to visit Damascus in order to capture and imprison the Christians there. It seems that a person who would pursue, imprison, and even murder others must be serious about his own convictions. Indeed, he was a zealous man. But as he would later admit, he acted in "ignorance and unbelief." His zeal was not informed by the truth, and it did not arise from an openness toward God, or faith in what God has revealed. Those who oppose and persecute Christians are, by definition, unintelligent and unrighteous people.

His religion did not make him a godly man. It made him a murderer. The problem was not in religion as such. Saul had a specific kind of religion, and either it was this religion that made him a murderer, or he became a murderer because his commitment to this religion was defective or distorted. It would appear that his devotion to his religion was rather "faultless" (Philippians 3:6). Thus even if there was a personal and subjective side to his great error, there was also a public and objective side to it.

There was something wrong with his religion. I am not referring to the religion of the Old Testament. This is the mistake that many people make – they assume that the religion of the Jews and the Pharisees was the religion of the Old Testament. No, although their religion was based on the Old Testament, overall it was vastly different and even antagonistic to it, contradicting it in spirit and in letter. Some people have the

misunderstanding that the Pharisees were hostile to Jesus because they were too adamant about following the law of Moses or the Old Testament. But they did the opposite. Jesus said that they circumvented God's commandments by their traditions (Matthew 15:6). They had invented rules and customs that were supposedly consistent with God's commands, but that in fact redefined and replaced God's commands in their lives. He said that Isaiah's prophecy applied to them: "They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Matthew 15:9).

The religion of the Jews and the Pharisees was not the religion of the Old Testament. It was a system that they made up to excuse themselves from accepting the words of the prophets. Jesus said that they did not even believe the Old Testament: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?" (John 5:46-47). Faith in Christ, and thus faith in the New Testament, naturally follows from faith in the Old Testament, because Christ fulfilled the Old Testament. The Jews and the Pharisees did not follow God's revelation, but their own human tradition. We must correct the idea that they were hostile to Christ because they were too obsessed with precision in their doctrine and obedience. No, they were hostile to Christ because they cared very much about how to avoid believing and obeying God's word while giving the appearance of religious devotion, and Christ exposed their hypocrisy.

So Paul, or Saul, was a zealous man. But this zeal for his religion drove him to hatred and murder against God's people. Some might say that this was a case of misdirected zeal. This is not entirely wrong, but the matter was not so simple. Zeal is not an ideologically neutral attitude – a person is zealous *for something*. Since a person is zealous for something, it means that zeal has content, and since the content – the beliefs or ideologies – can be right or wrong, then the zeal can be either right or wrong. Therefore, when a person's zeal moves him to do something wrong, if this zeal is consistent with and a product of his ideology for which he is so zealous, then the zeal itself is wrong. It is not just misdirected zeal, but a wrong or evil zeal, and a different *kind* of zeal than zeal for that which is true and right.

We must not suppose that Paul had a natural zealous attitude that was good in itself, only that it was misdirected, and that this zeal made him a more effective believer once it was redirected by the gospel. Again, this assumes that zeal can be considered in itself, apart from what the person is zealous for, so that a person may use the same zeal for this or for that, depending on how it is directed. However, zeal cannot be detached from ideology. No, Paul had the wrong kind of zeal, a zeal that made him a murderer. It was a kind of zeal that, by his own admission, was based on "ignorance and unbelief." The zeal that he exhibited as a Christian was based on an entirely different foundation, one that was generated by the work of the Spirit and a sound understanding of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. And since the Spirit works in all of God's people, and since all of God's people can understand the grace of Christ, all Christians can possess great zeal for the things of God. It is not something that belongs to the likes of Paul apart from the gospel, but something that is made available to all who believe the gospel.

The faith of Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the words of the prophets. Paul did not see this at first. He perceived Christ as a threat to his religion, although much of it was not the religion of the Old Testament, but of human tradition, that is, of human invention. Just as Ishmael mocked Isaac, the son of promise, and just as the Pharisees persecuted Christ, the Son of Promise, the Jews persecuted the Christians. The heirs of human tradition will always persecute the heirs of divine revelation. We must not have the slightest sympathy for Paul's position before his conversion. He followed tradition instead of God's word. His understanding of the law was wrong. He did not even believe what was written by Moses. If he had believed in God's word, he would have believed in the gospel of Christ right away. But he did not. He was wrong.

2. Paul and Divine Revelation

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my dear son:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. (2 Timothy 1:1-2)

The Jews commissioned Paul to hunt down Christians in various cities and to arrest them. He would then cast his vote against these Christians to have them put to death (Acts 26:9-11). Our attention is often focused on what happened on the road to Damascus, but to derive an accurate picture of Paul's condition before he was converted, it is important to realize that he participated not only in the murder of Stephen (Acts 7:58, 60), and that Damascus was not the first place he went to in order to persecute Christians (Acts 9:2). His own testimony tells us that he arrested Christians and voted to put them to death on multiple occasions (Acts 26:10), and the Damascus mission was only one of the many journeys in which he pursued the believers in foreign cities (Acts 26:11-12).

As he approached Damascus, the Lord Jesus appeared to him in a flash of light and confronted him. The account in Acts 9 might give the impression that the encounter was brief. It takes under ten seconds to read verses 3-6, but it is likely that the conversation lasted much longer. The conversations, sermons, and discourses recorded in the Bible are almost always summaries and not full transcripts of what was said. They are accurate summaries, but summaries nonetheless. It would be absurd to think that none of the speeches and interactions of the early believers lasted for more than several seconds. In Acts 20, Luke writes that Paul spoke to some people and kept talking until midnight. He talked for so long that someone fell asleep and fell to his death. Paul raised him from the dead, and kept talking until daylight.

In the case of Paul's vision of the Lord at Damascus, there is direct indication that we are given only a summary, and that the encounter was a conversation that lasted longer than several seconds. Acts 22 records Paul's testimony about the incident. The words used are similar, and the length is about the same as the account in Acts 9. But when Paul relates the event again to King Agrippa in Acts 26, the number of words attributed to Jesus is multiplied by several times. His initial statement now includes, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." And verses 16-18 consist of statements that are absent from Acts 9 and 22.

The proper explanation is that Acts 9 and 22, and even Acts 26, are only summaries of what happened. They include the essential points of the event, and additional details are included when they are relevant to the context or the situation. This is, of course, not

unusual, and it is the way that all of us summarize events and interactions. I could have a two-hour conversation with someone on whether American or Japanese cars are better, and the summary of it might be, "I said, 'I think American cars are better,' but my friend said, 'I disagree. Japanese cars are better.'" It could be as simple as that, and as far as an essential summary goes, it could be accurate and sufficient. But if I am relating the conversation in a context that requires more details, then I would recall additional statements made by either or both of us. Still, I would probably not repeat all the words spoken, but only the relevant ones.

Thus we do not know how much transpired in the vision on the road to Damascus, but we can be sure that much more was said than what we have recorded in Acts 9. It is possible that the Lord Jesus took the time to explain the gospel to Paul in great detail, and also the role that he was to take in proclaiming it to the nations. We do not know exactly what was said in this vision, and it would be wrong to speculate. However, it would not be wrong to say that the Lord himself taught the gospel to Paul, since this is what Paul claims in Galatians 1:12.

In addition, it would not be wrong to say that the Lord taught at least some of it to Paul by direct appearance in visions, since we see a pattern of this in the Acts of the Apostles. Acts 18 says that Jesus spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." Again, this is probably a summary – we do not know whether Jesus spoke to Paul for ten seconds, two minutes, or three hours. But there is no warrant to assert with certainty that the vision was brief. Then, Acts 23 says that one night "the Lord stood near Paul and said, 'Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.'" And again, it is possible that the Lord appeared to Paul, took two seconds to speak this statement, and then disappeared. But it is also possible that he appeared and stayed for two hours.

Whatever the case may be in individual visions, the biblical account is that Paul had an astounding life of revelation in which Jesus himself occasionally appeared and talked to him, taught him theology, and encouraged him in his ministry. There seems to be a pattern of Jesus' personal appearance in Paul's life. Although we cannot say whether other apostles experienced the same, we do know three important points. First, Jesus had already taught the other apostles for about three years. Second, the other apostles continued to receive revelation. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would continue to teach them and lead them into all truth. Sometimes extraordinary means are used. For example, God gave Peter a lesson in theology when he showed him in a vision, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15). Third, although we do not see a pattern of Jesus' personal appearance in the life of the other apostles (as we see in the life of Paul), we know that it could have happened, and did happen to John when Jesus appeared to him in a glorious form, dictated seven letters to him, and showed him the visions recorded in the Book of Revelation.

Thus in the life of the apostles, including Paul, there was a history and an ongoing pattern of direct, personal, and spectacular revelations. This helps us in understanding and

appreciating the basis of apostolic authority, and by natural and necessary extension, the authority of the Holy Scripture. The inspiration of Scripture was a distinct operation of the Spirit, in which he carried along the writers as they produced the text, and this occurred to ensure a perfect and permanent record of the history and message of the Lord Jesus, preached by apostles who were directly, personally, and spectacularly, taught by God himself.

3. God the Author

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my dear son:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. (2 Timothy 1:1-2)

God is sovereign – the will of God is supreme. This does not mean only that he can control something if he wishes to, but it means that nothing can happen unless he decides that it should happen and then causes it to happen by an active and unstoppable power. The distinction is crucial. The failure to acknowledge it has resulted in absurdity and inconsistency even in those who consider themselves the champions of God's sovereignty. God not only *can* actively and directly decide and control everything – as if it is possible for him to *metaphysically* leave some things to regulate themselves – but God *does* actively and directly decide and control everything, including all human thoughts and actions, whether good or evil. This is true by necessity because God is the sole and the pervasive metaphysical power in existence.

Of course, this would mean that God is the *metaphysical* author of sin and evil. He was the one who created Satan good and perfect, and then turned his heart to evil. He was the one who created Adam good and perfect, and then caused Satan to tempt him (the Scripture says that God *himself* tempts no one, since to tempt is to persuade to do wrong, and for God to directly persuade someone to do something by definition renders that a righteous act; therefore, it is logically impossible for God to directly tempt anyone), caused Adam to succumb, and caused his heart to turn to sin. Theologians are horrified by this idea, and almost always attempt to distance God from evil. However, if we *metaphysically* distance God from evil, this means that there is another metaphysical power that causes evil. And this means that God is not in control of everything, which in turn means that this "God" is not God at all. In other words, contrary to the popular notion that it is blasphemy to suggest that God is the author of sin and evil, it is blasphemy to say that he is not. God must be the author of evil, or evil could never have come about. God must be the author of sin, or sin could never have happened.

This is very different from saying that God *is* evil. One does not imply the other. Rather, God is the one who defines good and evil, and evil is that which violates his moral precepts. Although evil has come about, the Bible still calls God good. This necessarily means that God has never imposed a moral precept upon himself stating that he must never cause his creatures to violate his moral precepts. Therefore, it is not evil for God to cause his creatures to violate his moral precepts, but it is evil for the creatures, caused by God, to violate these moral precepts.

As to why God would create evil, and to cause his creatures to violate his precepts, and then redeem some of them, it is surprising that even those theologians who are so fond of referring to the biblical story as the "drama" of redemption cannot see the answer to this. Ask a writer why there is opposition to the hero in his own story. Is the writer not in complete control of what happens in his world? If we follow the absurd theories of almost all the theologians, we would have to say that the villains spontaneously appear and write their own lines in his manuscript, and the writer has to direct his hero to conquer them. Or, perhaps the writer somehow "permits" the villains to appear and wreck havoc, but they come about without the writer's direct involvement in writing them into the story. The villains within the story take control of the pen to write themselves into the story, even before they exist in the story! Or, righteous characters within the story take control of the pen and write evil into themselves, even before there is any evil within them to move them to do this! One wonders if the characters are infinitely more powerful than the writer. So much for God's "passive" decree and "permission" of evil. In any case, if the Bible records the "drama" of redemption, and if God is the writer and director, then the reason, purpose, and meaningfulness of the existence of evil in a world where God possesses direct and complete control is automatically addressed, except for those who have no grasp of drama. Romans 9 says that God wishes "to make the riches of his glory known."

Suppose a writer thinks that it is time for Richard, a character in his story, to die. There are many ways he can make this happen. He can write, without any explanation, "Richard died." And Richard would be dead. He can drop a boulder from the sky and crush Richard into the ground. He can simply stop mentioning Richard, and although the readers and the other characters in the story might not be aware of it, he would be dead in the writer's mind. But we are here for drama, so let us make it more interesting. The writer can introduce Tom into the story. He covets Richard's wife, and in the course of a complicated and unlikely plot, Tom shoots Richard in the head and kills him.

It would be absurd to "metaphysically" distance the writer from the evil in this story by using Tom to explain the whole thing. The writer is the one who conceives Tom in his own mind and introduces him into the story. The writer is the one who makes him covet Richard's wife and then shoots Richard in the head. Moreover, the writer is the one who makes Richard die. This is the part that many theologians and philosophers forget when dealing with metaphysics. It is not really Tom who kills Richard. It is not really the bullet that kills Richard. In a story where the writer wields omnipotent power, Richard does not have to die just because someone shoots him in the head. And if Richard dies, the writer can raise him from the dead. In fact, the writer can raise Richard from the dead and have him kill Tom just by giving him a disapproving look.

This is why, as metaphysical explanations, so-called secondary causes are meaningless. When the discussion is limited to the relationships within the story, then it is acceptable to say that Tom kills Richard. But when a metaphysical explanation is needed, we must say that the writer causes Tom to pull the trigger, causes the bullet to launch from the gun, and causes Richard to die. These events are metaphysically independent, and are related only in the context of the story. That is, the relationship between these persons and events exist

only in the writer's mind, and is then written into the story. Any event occurs only by the direct cause of the writer. An object within the story cannot write its own lines and produce an effect on another object within the story.

It is true that the writer kills Richard by using Tom, and it is true that Tom voluntarily shoots Richard. Tom acts on the strongest desire of the moment, and is not coerced by any other factor *within* the story. In fact, he is not even coerced by the writer, but this does not mean that he has free will, and it would be silly to mention that his desire and action are "compatible" with the writer's control, because the writer is the one who writes in the desire and action in the first place. Compatibilism is not so much false as it is irrelevant, because it misses the point. He is not coerced by the writer because coercion requires resistance in the one coerced, but Tom does not even have the freedom to exhibit any resistance to the writer's will. His desire is written into his mind by the writer, and then an action that is consistent with this desire is written into the story. To say that Tom's desire, choice, and action are compatible with the writer's authorship is to say nothing more than that the writer is compatible with himself, or that the exercise of his control is compatible with his possession of this control. This is irrelevant and unhelpful to the compatibilist's agenda.

Unless Tom is free *from the writer*, Tom is not free in any meaningful sense of the word. He might be free from other characters in the story, but even this is so only because the writer makes it so. Within the story, there is indeed an apparent relationship between Tom's action, the physics of the gun and the bullet, and Richard's death. But again, this is so only because the writer makes it so in that particular instance. In other words, there is no *necessary* relationship between Tom's action or the bullet, and Richard's death. The relationship is established, in appearance if you will, for the purpose of the story, or drama. In reality, the will of the writer is the sole explanation for any condition or event in the novel.

Tom possesses a relative freedom – he is free from the control or interference of other objects and characters in the story to the extent that the writer decides that he should be free from them. This relative freedom has nothing to do with Tom's moral responsibility toward the writer. If Tom is held accountable for anything, it is because the writer decides to hold him accountable, not because Tom possesses some kind of freedom. The writer is able to hold him accountable precisely because Tom is not free. If Tom is entirely free, even from the writer, then Tom would be accountable to no one. Tom's moral responsibility rests entirely on the writer's sovereignty and decision. As it is, the writer can express his disapproval of adultery and murder by arranging an especially gory fate for Tom. If he wishes to introduce a spiritual dimension, the writer can even send Tom straight to hell in the story.

Although the writer is the active and direct cause of Tom's adultery and murder, it would hardly be right to accuse the writer of these crimes, since the writer himself has not committed adultery and murder, and there is no law in the writer's world (outside of the story) stating that a writer may not write adultery and murder into his novel. Tom, however, committed both, since the world of the story disapproves of both and enforces laws against both.

You may complain that all this rings true when it comes to writing a novel, but we are not mere characters in a story. Well, God is not a man, and when he writes a story, he is not limited to ink and paper. Nevertheless, if you resist my analogy, you can deal with the one Paul uses in Romans 9 where we are just a lump of clay. Does this help you at all, or does it commit us to my view even more? He says that God introduces sin, evil, and conflict against himself and his people (v. 17-18), because he wishes "to show" (v. 22-23). You say, "What, then, all this for a show? Why does he still blame us? How can a character resist the writer?" But who are you to complain? Shall a character say to the writer, "Why did you make me like this?" (v. 20). The writer has the right and the power to display his values and talents any way he wishes (v. 21).

I am telling you what happened to Paul. He writes that he was an apostle of Christ Jesus "by the will of God." The phrase itself can refer to God's decree or precept. That is, it can refer to either God's eternal decision that Paul would be an apostle, or to God's temporal command that Paul should be an apostle. It seems that the phrase in our passage refers to God's decree. God has decreed all things before the creation of the world, and he conceived of Paul and foreordained that he would become an apostle. He writes that he was set apart at birth (Galatians 1:15), but he was not born a Christian. John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit while he was still in his mother's womb, but Paul lived the life of a murderer up until the Lord Jesus confronted him. Both were ordained by will of God, but God decreed different lives for them.

It was not that God "allowed" Paul to roam free until Acts 9. He was just as much in control of Saul the Pharisee as he was John the Baptist. His plan demanded that Paul was the way he was before his conversion. And Paul tells us at least part of the reason: "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 1:16). Paul's drama of conversion serves God's broader drama of redemption. God had foreordained that Paul would become an example of a great sinner who would receive mercy, so that "Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience." Again, it is for the sake of the "show," the drama. But for that to happen – for Paul to become a great sinner who receives mercy – he must first live as "the worst of sinners." It was not an accident that Paul became a display of divine mercy, nor can we explain this by some ridiculous theory of concurrence or compatibilism. No, it was his foreordained destiny. God planned it, and God made it happen – all of it.

At the appointed time, the Lord Jesus appeared to Paul and confronted him. Paul finally realized that he was wrong all along, and that Jesus was in fact the Christ foretold by all the prophets. Now Christ commanded him to change the whole course of his life, and commissioned him to become an apostle. The will of God was that he would become the most effective and prolific representative of the faith in the early church. Now, the writer has no need for Tom if he wishes to kill Richard, but it is his story and he can write it any way he wishes. In the same way, God has no need for men to accomplish his wishes, but it suits his plan, his "show" if you will, to employ human instruments and arrange human relationships in this drama of redemption. And when something is said to be "the will of

God" in the sense that it is the decree of God, then it will be done, because his will cannot be frustrated in the story that he himself writes. Therefore, although Paul was criticized, abandoned, and imprisoned, God's purposes in his life were carried out. He was to be the key instrument in establishing the presence of the gospel of Christ on the earth, to ensure its perpetuity through clear and extensive written explanations of the faith. This he accomplished, and we still have his writings today, because the will of God never fails.

4. The Question of Historical Context

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my dear son:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. (2 Timothy 1:1-2)

We have here a letter from Paul to his junior associate, Timothy. A letter represents only one side of a conversation. Supposedly, the challenge in reading a letter is in the fact that we do not know the precise nature of the issues and situations that the writer pens his letter to address, and it is assumed that we need some understanding of this other side of the conversation in order to have sufficient context to interpret the letter. Since the biblical documents are ancient literature, the distance between the original context and the modern readers is allegedly further extended.

Scholars constantly assume this difficulty and attempt to deal with it as they examine the text. However, the problem is exaggerated, but since it is stubbornly assumed, it is not unusual to see a commentator come up with a false interpretation that ignores or contradicts what is on the face of the text due to his obsession with discovering or speculating about the historical context. Even if one arrives at the correct meaning, it is not unusual to find a commentator base his interpretation on something that pertains to the historical context, when the words on the face of the text offers the same meaning, rendering his arduous investigation superfluous. The historical context, whether or not accurately ascertained, often does not affect the meaning at all.

The difficulty is a mere possibility in each case. Whether there is an actual difficulty depends on what the writer includes in his letter. If Paul writes, "Titus, that thing I told you to do, please do it soon," then we will have no idea what it is that Paul wants Titus to do, although we will still know that Paul wants him to do something. On the other hand, if Paul writes, "Titus, appoint elders in every town, as I directed you," and then includes a detailed list of qualifications, as he does in his letter to Titus, then due to the fullness of information included on this side of the conversation, there is no need for us to speculate about the other side.

Scholars might consider this a naïve simplification, but it is not. Rather, the problem is that they have so exaggerated the problem of the lack of historical context, and so underestimated the commonality of human thought and culture across the centuries, that they have complicated clarity itself, and refuse to allow straightforward language to be what it is. Their error is in overestimating and overdoing the detective work in the process of interpretation. The Bible is a reliable, current, and independent revelation from God. But

in constantly assuming that external information is needed to provide context for interpretation, they have underestimated the sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture.

Another problem related to the obsession with discovering the historical context, or perhaps even one that has arisen from the obsession, is the tendency to think that whatever Paul says, he says it to address a corresponding issue among his readers. Or, whatever he asserts, he does so because at least some among his readers believe the opposite, and whatever he says they are to do, he does so because they are not doing it or are doing the opposite. It seems that Paul would never even mention something unless there is a problem related to it, or unless his readers are believing or practicing the opposite of what is advocated by the apostle.

This ridiculous assumption is extremely common in biblical commentaries. But it is invalid and misleading, and must be discarded. Of course, it is always inconsistently applied, or we would have to think that Paul writes only to anti-Christian atheists, since he mentions God and Christ so often in his letters.

5. A Godly Heritage

I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. (2 Timothy 1:3-5)

Human traditions invented to neutralize the word of God are wicked and destructive, but a godly heritage is a beautiful thing. Both of them emphasize continuity of beliefs and practices from generation to generation, but whereas human traditions represent a continuity of rebellion against God's rule, a godly heritage represents faithfulness and a conscious dependence on God's grace. Only a Christian heritage is a godly heritage, and is one whose continuity deserves to be celebrated. All other traditions set up alternative paths for living that lead people away from truth and eternal life.

Paul says that he serves God with a clear conscience, as his forefathers did. One writer comments that, by this statement, the apostle acknowledges that Christianity is a continuation of Judaism. But this can be misleading. If by Judaism, we refer to the religion of the Old Testament, so that Paul's forefathers refer to those who believed and preached its promised Savior, then Christianity is indeed a fulfillment and continuation of that religion. But Judaism is not the religion of the Old Testament. By the time of Christ, the Jews have so rejected and perverted God's word that they murdered the personal fulfillment of the Old Testament. Christ's own ministry was not a continuation of the ministry of the Jews or the Pharisees, but a sharp contrast to it, with John the Baptist, who condemned the Jews and the Pharisees, as the forerunner. Paul had to convert away from the religion that he was serving and back into the faith of the Old Testament in order to return to the doctrinal track that coheres with the faith of Jesus Christ. His forefathers are not the Jews and the Pharisees, but those prophets and elders that they murdered.

Turning to Timothy's heritage, Paul mentions the faith of his grandmother and mother. This same faith now dwells in Timothy. Since Timothy's faith is a Christian's faith, when Paul refers to the faith of his grandmother and mother, it is likely that he has in mind the Christian faith also. If Paul has in mind the Jewish faith, then one or both of them must have died before they heard of the Christian faith, or they must have now converted to the Christian faith. This is because Jesus said that if someone believes in Moses, then he will believe in Jesus, since Moses spoke about Jesus. So no one who truly believes in the Old Testament will refuse to believe its fulfillment, that is, the message of Jesus Christ. And since the Old Testament faith is nothing other than a forward-looking faith in Christ, it is most appropriate to call it a Christian faith as well. In other words, whether Old or New Testament, there has never been any true faith other than the Christian faith.

Timothy is the third generation of believers. Paul uses this fact to encourage steadfastness in his protégé. It is necessary to cut off a history of human rebellion and false religious traditions, but it is a praiseworthy thing to continue a godly heritage. Sometimes there is no overlap between our spiritual and natural heritage, and there is no spiritual good in our natural lineage. Perhaps our parents and grandparents are evil people and believe some very foolish things. And when God saves us, he does not save us to continue a godly heritage, since there is none, but to depart from a wicked one. He rescues us from the abominations of previous generations, and shows us that we are not chained to their beliefs and practices.

Some of our parents are atheists. They imagine a fantasy world where there is no God to tell them what to do and to condemn them for their many sins. Atheism is a state of severe delusion, a mental disorder caused by sin. Or, perhaps our parents are adherents of non-Christian religions. These are alternatives taught by demons and accepted by people to avoid facing the truth about Christ the Savior and Judge. This is also an intellectual malfunction. Whether they are of the religious or the atheistic variety, non-Christians are stupid and insane. Visit a mental institution and observe the maniacs. Some mutter nonsense to themselves. Some scream incoherent profanities. Some foam at the mouth. Some laugh at nothing. And some are violent. All non-Christians are like that all the time on the inside. But God had pity on us while we were trapped in our insane delusions, and rescued us from the inner chaos. Now our minds are clear. Now we face reality and believe the truth. He has saved us from our insane ancestors, and from a history of idolatry, unbelief, murder, adultery, divorce, materialism, and the like.

This is the grace and the power of God, that in Christ we can have a new and glorious heritage. If our natural lineage does not overlap with it and does not share in it, then no matter – Abraham is our father through faith in Christ, and our predecessors are the prophets and the apostles, and all those who faithfully served God through the centuries. These people were not of our race according to natural lineage, but if we are so focused on race, as many people are, then we come under Christ rebuke: "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Matthew 16:23). Even when Paul expressed his concern for the Jews, his only focus was on their spiritual salvation. He never expressed any interest in the restoration of the economic and political strength of the Jews. It was just like how you would want your natural family to be saved through Christ. Caring about your countrymen would be a broader concern of the same type, but it remains mainly a spiritual concern, and not a racial one.

6. Ordination and Human Tradition

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. (2 Timothy 1:6)

Timothy received "the gift of God" when Paul laid hands on him. This refers to either the same incident mentioned in 1 Timothy 4:14, where it is said that a body of elders laid hands on Timothy (in which case Paul would have been one of the elders), or a separate event in which Paul alone laid hands on him. There is no biblical evidence to suggest that the laying on of hands, even when spiritual gifts are conferred, is reserved for the formal ordination practiced today. Nevertheless, one theologian equates what Paul describes here with the formal ordination of our denominations. Then, he remarks that ordination is not a recognition of gifts already present, but a bestowal of gifts not previously possessed. And, he adds, this gift is the authority to preach.

All three points are either wrong or misleading.

First, there is insufficient biblical evidence to establish the theory of ordination affirmed by denominations today. In fact, there is insufficient biblical evidence to establish formal denominations themselves. There was church order, believers working together in agreement, and conferences of elders to discuss doctrinal matters, but all this does not translate into an elaborate institution governed by regional and national councils. If a group of believers decide to join together in this manner to provide mutual support and accountability as a matter of practical advantage and convenience, I do not oppose it. However, it should be wrong for them to despise or criticize or in any way think less of other Christians who operate according to biblical principles but differ from them in details not defined or restricted by biblical principles. The biblical principles for church government are rich, clear, and inflexible, but they permit much freedom in the details, and they simply do not require a denominational structure, or many of the theories and practices assumed today. If you impose your own principles of church government on others when Scripture does not teach or require them, then you are following the example of the Pharisees, in that you claim to protect the prescribed order of the church, when you are in fact protecting traditions invented by men.

Second, it is misleading to say that ordination is not a recognition of gifts already present, but a bestowal of gifts not previously possessed. It is too broad of an inference from such a narrow and specific verse. According to the Bible, God bestows spiritual gifts in different ways. Sometimes they are directly given without any human agency. Sometimes they are given in answer to prayer. For example, Paul tells the person who speaks in tongues to pray that he may interpret. Then, sometimes they are given through human agents, as when the elders and Paul laid their hands on Timothy. What we call ordination is a public recognition of the calling. The calling is already there, whether or not the church acknowledges it. Spiritual gifts always follow the calling. They support the person's calling, and enable him

to fulfill it. But gifts are not always bestowed through ordination, nor is recognition of the call by the church always necessary. What if God calls someone to rebuke the church or oppose a denomination? Who ordains him then? Or does that never happen? What is the biblical evidence that makes our denominations and their formal recognition *necessary*? There is no rigid principles of ordination in the Bible. It is a matter of church order. Sometimes God uses it, sometimes not. God is still God. Whether or not our church policy permits him to be God, he can still do what he wants.

Theologians often assert doctrines that restrict the right practices to those already affirmed by their denominations. They start from the Bible, then they add their traditions to it, and the result is their denominational policies, which they assert to be the pure scriptural doctrine and criticize those who disagree. But the Bible's teaching leaves room for God's sovereignty, much variety, and the freedom to adapt. Christians could accept the church order prescribed by their traditions as a matter of practical convenience, but once it becomes more than that – once it becomes a formal doctrine that defines right and wrong – they should rebel against it. Let no man rob you of the freedom that Christ has purchased for you. Woe to the denomination whose rebellion against the gospel is built into its church order and policy.

Third, as for the authority to preach, this at least needs to be clarified. The Bible teaches that all Christians are priests in Christ (Revelation 1:6). And since we are all priests, the irresistible implication is that all Christians may preach and administer communion and baptism. The curious thing is that not all churches and denominations that admit the former (that all believers are priests) will at the same time acknowledge the latter (that all may preach and administer the sacred ordinances). This is because those in these churches and denominations are hypocrites. They say what they must in order to distinguish themselves from the Catholics, but then they practice the same thing in their own congregations. The New Testament indeed teaches that there should be leaders within congregations, and as a matter of church order, they are usually the ones who preach and administer communion and baptism. It is to maintain excellence in the church's operation and to prevent chaos and confusion. However, other Christians are not barred from these things as a matter of doctrine and principle.

God is greater than our traditions and our denominations. So many people say they believe this, but they deny it in their doctrines and practices. If God wants to ordain someone, he really does not need any human approval or acknowledgement. He often arranges human recognition to maintain good order, but nothing in Scripture indicates that this *must* happen or that it must happen a certain way. Christ is the only mediator between God and men. We must not allow anything in our church policy that seems to deny this.

If God wants to deliver his words or his blessings through men, that is his right. But if he wishes to deliver these directly, it is not up to the church to forbid him. The church is a community of people *individually* redeemed and called by God. He does arrange people to believe the gospel by the ministry of human agents, such as the preaching of a pastor or a member of a particular church. He does this for a number of reasons, such as to establish order, community, and relationships among men, and to exercise and reward those who

preach. But God does not need human agents even when it comes to the preaching of the gospel, and we must not resent or reject someone if he receives something from God without our mediation.

If you fear that this would lead to chaos, then it shows that you have quite thoroughly adopted the mentality of the Pharisees and the Catholics. This is the mentality that thinks we need to use human traditions to enforce divine precepts, and that by removing the freedom that divine revelation permits, including the freedom that God leaves for himself. If someone converts to the Christian faith or operates a ministry apart from our control, his faith and ministry are still subject to the word of God, and can be tested by the word of God. And this is the only legitimate basis to test his conversion or calling to the ministry. He has no obligation to answer or submit to human traditions that he has not promised to keep. And if these traditions violate the word of God, he has an obligation to break them.

It may be true that the church has fallen on hard times. Many people are drifting away from the local congregations, and false doctrines abound. However, the answer is not a theology of control through man-made traditions, but a theology of freedom in Christ. Let Christ draw the people that he has chosen and called. As for Christians, you are accountable to Christ, not to human traditions. Therefore, defy them when appropriate and necessary. It is often acceptable to submit to human customs for the sake of love and order, but not because it is required of you as a matter of principle.

Mark 9 tells us that a man was driving out demons in the name of Jesus, but the disciples told him to stop because he was not one of them. Jesus answered, "Do not stop him. No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about him, for whoever is not against us is for us." Who ordained him? By whose hands did God confer spiritual gifts upon this man? Even Jesus on earth did not do it. But God in heaven did, and apparently, without any human agency or approval. As one New Testament scholar observes, Jesus himself did not have official human sanction for his ministry. Human traditions are often just as dangerous as the threats to order that they seek to eliminate. And they often stray far from the orthodoxy that they claim to protect, to the point that they would even mandate the murder of the very Son of God. All Christians must be free to serve God, under the strict but sometimes broad guidelines of the word of God, and not the restrictions of human traditions.

7. A Spirit of Power

For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God... (2 Timothy 1:7-8)

Paul reminds Timothy that "God did not give us a spirit of timidity," or a spirit of cowardice, "but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline," that is, a spirit of soberness and self-mastery. It is common to infer from this that Timothy is a timid person. The text allows this possibility, but does not directly suggest it. Rather, the inference is made from the text due to the popular assumption that whenever Paul says something, it means that precisely the opposite is being believed or practiced among his readers.

That is, if Paul admonishes Christians to live in peace with one another, then this must mean that there is discord among them. Again, this is possible, but unless the text states that his readers have this problem, the interpreter has no right to infer that this must be the historical context behind the passage. As with other cases, no historical context is required to properly understand the admonition, and that the believers should live in peace is a general teaching that is always applicable.

It is an insult to the apostle to assume that whenever he encourages someone, it is only because the opposite is happening. If you give encouragement to someone only when he obviously needs it, then you are not a very good Christian, or even a good friend. Do you tell someone to have courage only when he is fearful? Where were you before he became fearful?

Also, Paul does not contrast only timidity with power, but he says that God has given us a spirit of power, and of love, and of self-mastery. To assume that the historical context is always the opposite of what Paul says requires us to believe that Timothy is not only a timid person, but that he is also full of hate and out of control. There is no evidence that he is such a person, and it seems that commentators do not dare to go this far. The ridiculous assumption is arbitrarily applied, and abandoned when the implication becomes too farfetched by the interpreter's standard. The lack of logical validity in making inferences and the lack of consistency in its application render the assumption useless as a principle of biblical interpretation.

It is possible that Timothy is too timid, but we do not know this. The text does not tell us. What we know is that Paul has been imprisoned, that there are enemies who oppose the gospel, and that even some who served the cause with the apostle have now abandoned him. We know all this because this letter tells us all this. It is more appropriate to associate this with Paul's encouragement for Timothy to remain steadfast. Given this harsh environment and unfavorable trend, Paul warns Timothy not to succumb to the pressure.

Whether Timothy is in danger of succumbing to the pressure is entirely uncertain, and for an accurate understanding of the letter, entirely unimportant.

Paul contrasts timidity with power, love, and self-control, or the ability to master or possess one's own thoughts and emotions. The contrast suggests the shades of meaning given to these words. Thus the "power" does not refer to miracle-working power, but spiritual and moral courage.

We can be even more specific than this. Verse 8 says, "So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner." This tells us what Paul has in mind when he talks about timidity and power. To be timid is to be too embarrassed to testify about the Lord Jesus, to tell people what you know about him, and what they need to believe about him. It is to be too afraid to tell people who he is, what he came to do, and that although he was killed, he was raised from the dead, and that he is now alive and in power, and that he will judge all men.

Then, although we know that only Christ deserves our worship and adoration, and that all his ministers are but mere men, God has arranged human relationships among his people so that they may serve his cause with their combined strength and talents, and a sense of solidarity as fellow-servants of Christ. To be a coward is to be too embarrassed to support and to identify with God's people, especially those who are persecuted for proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is to be too afraid to acknowledge our association with the teachers of the faith.

Christians have no reason to be embarrassed. We have done nothing wrong in believing and preaching Jesus Christ. Our faith does not make us inferior, or less intelligent or ethical. In fact, it is an insult to the Lord to be embarrassed. Our faith is in him, not in ourselves. And our message is about him, not about ourselves. Should Jesus be ashamed of himself? Should he be embarrassed about what he said and what he did when he was on earth? Should he apologize for his present position and ministry? What has he done wrong?

No, the Christian faith is the only true and rational system of belief. Even the zenith of human intelligence and ability cannot compare to it, since as the Scripture says, even the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength (1 Corinthians 1:25). For the Christian, this wisdom from God is not elusive, but it has been given to us through the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:18-24), so that we even have "the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). Thus non-Christians are in the inferior position. They are the foolish and wicked ones. They are the ones who should be embarrassed. And when God's Spirit uses our preaching to open their eyes, this is what happens – they become ashamed of themselves. The Spirit brings conviction to their hearts, so that they can finally see themselves for what they are.

One commentator says that the Spirit does not transform a timid person into a powerful personality, but that he gives us enough for each situation. Rubbish. The same commentator does not say that God gives us just enough love for each situation, that he will make each believer nothing more than a barely loving person. Paul says that God gives us a spirit of

power! He gives you a different spirit than what you were born with, and exchanges your natural timidity with courage and might. Perhaps this commentator's remark is more autobiographical than expositional.

The Lord is not a God of enough, but a God of plenty. When Jesus fed the five thousand with five loaves of bread, how many basketfuls of pieces were left over? And when he fed the four thousand with seven loaves of bread, how many basketfuls of pieces were left over? Do you still not understand?

8. Salvation: A Necessary Rescue

God...has saved us and called us to a holy life... (2 Timothy 1:9)

"God has saved us and called us to a holy life" – what a succinct and appropriate statement on what it means to be Christians. The idea of salvation is essential. Some Christians have used words like "saved" and "salvation" so often and so thoughtlessly that they have forgotten what they mean. They have become sounds without significance. Or, if they have any meaning at all, they have been so diluted that "Have you been saved?" is now the equivalent of "Have you signed up for the golf tournament?" It is something that is important, but still casual, subject to leisurely reflection.

Salvation is a serious word. It presupposes danger and desperation. You do not softly say to a drowning man, "Why don't you come out of the water?" or "Would you care to join us for dinner, and have some fellowship?" No, salvation is rescue. It implies necessity. You need this salvation. It is not an indifferent thing or a matter of preference. It means that a person will remain in a negative condition or suffer some negative consequence if he is not taken out of his present situation. In our context, this negative condition is man's guilt before God – that is, not only a guilty conscience for having done something wrong, but a guilty verdict for being wrong and having done wrong. The negative consequence is the wrath of God, that man would suffer alienation and rejection from God in this life, and endless hellfire in the life to come. God saves some people from this, and places them in an altogether different realm.

In addition, the idea of salvation gives credit to the one who performs the rescue, not to the one who has been rescued. So to ask someone "Have you been saved?" should bear an entirely different connotation than "Have you signed up for church?" It is not whether you have done something, but whether God has done something for you and to you in order to save you. This salvation that we need and that is performed by God forever characterizes our relationship with him, and it is to remain in the forefront of our theology and preaching.

To be saved in the biblical sense is to be rescued from something disgusting and terrible – life as a non-Christian. God extracts some people from the non-Christian life and installs them, not into a neutral condition or a mere immunity from condemnation, but into a superior life and destiny. We are not *saved by* a holy life, but *called to* a holy life. Thus Christians are not the same as non-Christians, although free from condemnation. We are different. If we are true and growing Christians, then we are a holy people, a people of insight and knowledge, of love and kindness, of faith and power, and of uncompromising truth. This is an integral aspect of our salvation, that God has not only saved us from something, but he has also called us to something. A complete gospel ministry must teach the full range of God's actions and blessings in salvation.

As Christians, we are familiar with the idea that it is Christ who purchased salvation for us by his death on the cross. He acted on our behalf, as our champion and representative. And he died in our place for our sins, so that we might be free from condemnation. Then, he was vindicated by his resurrection, and secured for us justification before God. Nevertheless, only those who are joined to him are saved by him, and this bond or relation with Christ is manifested in faith. Scripture defines this faith in definite and inflexible terms. To have faith in Christ is to believe that he died for my sins – not just *because of* my sins, but *to pay for* my sins. I show myself to be a Christian only if I have faith in this specific sense. All Christians agree with this, and those who disagree with this are not Christians. They are unsaved – they remain under sin and condemnation, and their destiny is everlasting hellfire.

9. Not by Man's Decision or Effort

God...has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time... (2 Timothy 1:9)

Christ is the one who saves, but the Scripture teaches that not every person is saved. What is the difference between those who become saved and those who remain unsaved? We can rephrase the question. The Bible teaches that only those who believe in Jesus Christ, only Christians, are saved. Non-Christians will burn in hell forever. Why do some people become Christians when others do not? What is the difference among men, that some would believe in Christ, while others refuse to believe in him?

Paul says that God has saved us "not because of anything we have done" but "because of his own purpose and grace," and that this grace was given "before the beginning of time." The references to works, to divine purpose, to divine grace, and to time, are highly significant. Paul uses these references to indicate a definite theology on the matter, a particular way of thinking. Mainly, by these expressions he attributes all of salvation to factors internal to God himself without any consideration of anything in man. I am making a point of this, because sometimes people seize on one of these references and distort them to make room for theories about salvation that are foreign or even contrary to Paul's thought. However, when we stop misconstruing his clear explanations but take into account all that the apostle says, often within the same passage, we will see that he leaves no room for loopholes or alternate interpretations.

In Romans 9, he offers a comparatively extensive exposition on the doctrine of God's sovereignty in salvation. Verses 11-13 say, "Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls – she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'" Notice the similar references to works, to divine purpose, and to time. Grace, and related ideas such as mercy, come soon after. When it comes to works, Paul denies that salvation is based on our works. Here it is combined with the references to time. Thus he writes that the matter was determined *before* the twins were born or *before* they had done anything good or bad.

I mentioned loopholes above, because here is where people attempt to inject their own theories to avoid the plain teaching of Scripture. They say it is true that the twins' destinies were determined before they were born and before they had done anything, but perhaps this determination was based on things that they were *going to do*. That is, perhaps God bases his decision on his knowledge of the future, of what the men were going to decide and to do.

First, even if there is nothing in the passage to contradict this, it does not say anything in support of this theory, so it is nothing more than groundless speculation. Second, the entire passage indeed contradicts it. The works of the twins are contrasted with something that is definite and explicit, namely, God's purpose and calling. He writes, "...before the twins were born or had done anything...in order that *God's purpose* might stand," and "...not by works but *by him who calls*." The contrast is not between past works and future works, but between human works and divine purpose. If not for the fact that men are prone to think of salvation as being based on their own works, the simple assertion that salvation is based on God's purpose would be sufficient to exclude all additions or alternatives. In other words, to deny that salvation is based on man's works is only an application of the truth that salvation is based on God's sovereign decision and grace.

This is confirmed by explicit statements that immediately follow. Verse 16 says, "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." Here he separates his reference to man from past time, and bluntly states that salvation does not depend on man's desire or effort. It is not that salvation is independent of man's *past* desire or effort, leaving room for salvation to rest on man's *future* desire or effort, but it is independent of *any* desire or effort in man. It is based on someone else and something else altogether, namely, on God and his mercy.

Popular Calvinism or Reformed theology is not spared by this passage. Or to state the matter from another perspective, it also tries to find loopholes in Scripture in order to assert its own theories and preferences. This theological tradition usually affirms unconditional election, in that God chooses to save someone not because of something good in that person or something good that this person will do, but it often denies unconditional reprobation. However, Paul puts the two on equal footing. He says, "...before the twins were born or had done anything good *or bad*" – not "had done anything," or "had done anything good," but "had done anything good *or bad*."

Again, the time reference does not leave room for future works, but it is intended to deny the role of works, whether good *or bad*, altogether. Then, having denied the role of works, whether good or bad, God chose to love Jacob and to hate Esau. Just as God chooses whom to save without consideration of good works, whether past or future, God chooses whom to damn without consideration of sin, or evil works, whether past or future. Are we saying that God sends some men to hell who are righteous or morally neutral? Of course not – those whom he has chosen to damn, he also causes to be unrighteous men. Infralapsarianism and conditional reprobation are direct rejection of apostolic teaching.

And again, this point is explicitly stated soon after. Verse 18 says, "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and *he hardens whom he wants to harden*." Verse 21 uses an imagery to make the same point: "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?" He does not use "good" clay to make noble pottery and "bad" clay to make common pottery. He uses the *same* clay to make some people good, and some people bad.

Romans 9 is a fuller passage, but Paul intends the same doctrine in 2 Timothy. When he says that God saved us "not because of anything *we have done*," he does not leave room for something that *we will do*. This is the way he speaks when he intends to exclude all human works, whether past or future, and not only that, he intends to exclude the role of man altogether. This is just his way of saying that salvation is not based on anything in us at all. He does not deny the role of human works in salvation only to attribute it to something else in man, or something that man does. Rather, he attributes salvation to God's "own purpose and grace." A person is saved because God chooses him, and God chooses him for reasons that are internal to God himself.

10. The Nature and Role of Faith

God...has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time... (2 Timothy 1:9)

The doctrine that it is God and only God who saves us extends to the nature and role of faith in salvation. Christians are accustomed to the idea that we are "saved by faith," but they are not always clear as to what this means. Paul puts forth faith as the contrast against works in his expositions of salvation. However, the simple ideas of faith and works are but abbreviations for fuller views on the matter. The apostle opposes the view that says "I save myself by my works" but he does not replace this with "I save myself by my faith"! Yet sometimes Christians talk and preach as if that is the apostolic doctrine, that we do not save ourselves by works, but we save ourselves by faith. When Christians forget that salvation by faith is posed as a contrast against salvation by works, they tend to put the focus on faith *as such* as the way or the means to salvation. But faith itself cannot save. Faith is a relational term – you believe in something. It is that "something" that saves you. Faith is only a descriptive term for the relationship.

This is essential because Paul does not say that God saves you because you put your faith in him. In fact, this would be true from one perspective – it depends on what "because" means – but Paul is considering the root of the matter. He says that God saves you because of his purpose and grace. That is, he saves you because of his own reason and his kindness. If so, then at least when we are speaking on this level, we cannot say that God saves you because of your faith, since your faith is not the same as his purpose, and your faith is not his grace. And if God does not save you because of your faith, then he does not save you because of foreknown faith. God has not chosen you for salvation because he knew ahead of time that you would believe in Christ. Rather, he has chosen you because of his own purpose, apart from your faith.

We are ready to address a widespread defect in the understanding of salvation by faith. Many Christians fail to define faith in such a manner as to meaningfully distinguish it from works. They acknowledge that we are saved by faith, not by works. However, faith, or to believe, is something that we do, is it not? They reply that faith is not an action that produces merit in order to earn salvation; rather, the believer is like a person who extends his hand to accept a gift, not earned but freely given by someone else.

There are at least two problems with this. First, it is arbitrary to insist that this action is not meritorious or at least a moral good, especially when the Bible calls unbelief sinful. Faith is indeed a moral good. Second, it cannot explain why one person believes while another does not. There must be some difference between the two. Since it is morally good to believe in Christ, and since it is morally evil to reject Christ, if faith is like a man who extends a hand to accept something, then the difference between the two people must also

include a moral dimension. In other words, under this view, a person who accepts Christ does so because he is already a better person than the person who rejects Christ *before* he actually accepts Christ. Christians are better people than non-Christians *before* they became Christians. However, Paul calls himself the worst of sinners.

Scripture defines faith in a different way. Paul says that faith itself is a gift (Ephesians 2:8). And if faith itself is a gift, what is the hand that receives faith? The analogy of the hand is inaccurate and unhelpful, but if we are going to keep it for the sake of illustration, then it must be drastically modified. Since faith itself is a gift, then salvation cannot be that God extends the gift of righteousness to us while we reach out with the hand of faith to take it. Rather, we begin with no hand at all, but God creates a hand where there was none before. Then, he reaches out and takes our hand and pulls it up, and puts the gift of righteousness in the hand that he created, and after that he pushes the hand back to our side. It is "our" hand only in the sense that it is attached to us, but it is a gift and a creation of God, and subject to his control. It is only in this sense that God saves us "because" of our faith, that is, in the sense that faith is part of *his work* of salvation in us and that faith is part of the process by which *he saves* us. Thus it remains that he saves us because of himself. It is more precise to say that we have faith because he saves us, and not that he saves us because of our faith.

We are not saved by faith *as such*, or faith *itself*; rather, we are saved *by Christ* alone, and *he saves* us by giving us faith. Faith is our consciousness of his operation in us as he establishes a spiritual relationship with us. It is correct to say that we are saved by faith, as long as we realize that this is a shorthand for saying that it is Christ who saves us by giving us faith, and the matter is put this way in order to make a contrast against the view that it is we who save ourselves by our works, or that God grants salvation to some and not to others on the basis of our works. The gift of righteousness is given to the chosen ones through the gift of faith. If you have faith, it is because it is God's purpose that you have faith. If you believe in Jesus Christ, it is because God decided, apart from anything in you or about you, that you would believe in Jesus Christ. Salvation is wholly a work of God, so that there is no place for us to boast, not even in the fact that we have faith.

11. The Gospel Brings Grace to Light

...it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day. (2 Timothy 1:10-12)

Before the creation of the universe, God had decided that he would glorify himself by the display of his mercy and his wrath. In order to accomplish this, he would create some men for salvation and some for damnation. So that those who are chosen for salvation would need salvation, he plunged humanity into sin through Adam. The promise of salvation was immediately announced in a simplified form, stating only that Satan would be defeated by one born of the woman. Throughout Old Testament history, and mainly through the prophets, he would disclose more and more details about this promise and this one who would be born of the woman. It is by believing in this promise and looking forward to the predicted Savior that men and women were saved even before the coming of Jesus Christ.

The substance and fulfillment of the promise appeared when Jesus Christ was born to the virgin Mary. A full understanding of this salvation is then "brought to light" through the gospel – that is, the message of the gospel, or the Christian system of doctrines, and the preaching and propagation of this religion. The historical appearance of Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the promise of salvation, and what we call the "gospel" is the message that tells about this salvation. To spread this gospel throughout the world and through the centuries, God calls all believers and especially chosen ministers in every generation to publish it in various ways, whether in speech or in writing.

Paul is called to be "a herald and an apostle and a teacher" of this gospel. The nature of the gospel is fixed and well-defined, and the work of its ministers reflect what it is. Paul does not "channel" Jesus Christ. He is not a performer who "acts out" the way of salvation. He cannot put the gospel in tunes or in paintings. No, he is an announcer, an authoritative witness, and a teacher of intellectual information that God has disclosed to men, with special focus on the facts regarding salvation in Jesus Christ. The gospel is a clear and definite message, communicated in words and understood by the mind. It is not a nebulous feeling or intuition, but a system of doctrines, of assertions and explanations about important facts.

Most men are filled with sin and hatred for God. So when a person comes with a clear and definite message about God, righteousness, salvation, and judgment, he will face opposition. This is a message that awakens the elect to faith and holiness, but incites the reprobates to anger and hatred. As Paul writes, "That is why I am suffering as I am." It is because he is a preacher and teacher of the gospel. But he says, "I am not ashamed." He is

regarded as a criminal, and chained like one, but he is not embarrassed. He has done nothing wrong, and said nothing wrong. He knows that he has believed in the truth, and has preached the truth. And God will vindicate his own message and his own people at the proper time.

12. Pattern for Preaching

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. (2 Timothy 1:13-14)

Paul has established a "pattern of sound teaching" for Timothy to follow. Since this pattern is authoritative because it came from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, what we can say regarding it also applies to the teachings of the prophets and of the other apostles, since they also taught by divine inspiration.

The Bible provides a pattern or standard of sound teaching. It tells all believers and especially ministers to *preach* the word. By definition, the preaching of the Scripture is distinguished from the Scripture itself. Therefore, to preach the message of the Bible is not the same as to quote from the Bible, and to preach a sermon is not just to read the Bible to an audience. A sermon is not an arrangement of quotations from Scripture; rather, the preacher produces the message on the basis of what he has learned from Scripture. Faithful communication of the gospel does not consist of a verbatim repetition of the Bible, for if that were the case, even ordinary conversations about the things of God would be eliminated.

The biblical idea of preaching leaves some freedom for variation in terms of expression, emphasis, and the like. There is no biblical basis to make the so-called expository method of preaching a *prescription* for what a sermon should be, although it represents what a sermon could be, precisely due to the freedom that Scripture allows in this area. All the attempts at making a biblical case for the expository method that I have examined infer much more from the texts of Scripture than what they say.

Moreover, along with these attempts, one reason given for why this method is preferred is that it is the best way to remain faithful to Scripture in our preaching. This is fine as an opinion, and it is indeed one way to remain faithful to Scripture. However, if to use the expository method becomes a rule as to what a sermon *must be*, and that other forms are either inferior or even wrong, then this preference for the expository method has become an unbiblical human tradition. The Pharisees also added human rules to the word of God and alleged that they were helpful or even necessary, but Jesus said they had the opposite effect. Granted, some sermon forms are indeed inferior and wrong, but they fall by their own faults, and not because they are different from the expository method.

Other reasons have been advanced to commend the expository method. For example, it is said that expository sermons, and especially expositions of entire biblical books, directly exposes the listeners to whole passages of Scripture in the proper context, and thus increases their familiarity with the Bible, and enables them to know and grasp it for themselves. This is a practical benefit, and the preacher might prefer the method because

of it. However, it still does not require him to use the method. It is indeed the preacher's responsibility to increase familiarity with Scripture in his listeners, but nothing in the Scripture itself requires him to do it this way.

The preacher must not come under bondage to the opinions and the traditions of men, no matter how well-intentioned they are. If he uses the expository method, it is because he prefers it for his own reasons and based on his own judgment in thinking that he can fulfill his ministry better with it, and not because he is pressured into it. And if he cannot follow or discover a method that is suitable to him and that follows the pattern of sound teaching, then he should not be a preacher in the first place.

Thus the Bible provides a pattern or standard of sound teaching, and this leaves room for some freedom for variation in method and expression. That said, the pattern is much more than an outline. It is much more than a skeleton – the details have been filled out. It is a highly developed pattern and a fully sufficient standard. Therefore, although it permits a measure of fluidity in presentation, and although it is adaptable to all kinds of conversations, there is no room for variation, addition, or subtraction in substance. That is, to follow the biblical pattern of sound teaching is to conform exactly to its ideas. There is flexibility only in presentation.

To illustrate, Peter said, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). We can communicate this idea by citing the verse, but it is also acceptable to say, "The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation." And we remain faithful to the pattern that this verse has established when we assert, "Muhammad cannot save you. Buddha cannot save you. Mary cannot save you. Only Jesus Christ can save you from everlasting condemnation." These statements are not found anywhere in Scripture, but they conform to the exact ideas of Scripture, and they do not add to or subtract from the substance of what Scripture teaches.

Since preaching entails our own expression of biblical ideas, it is all the more important that we learn these ideas with precision, and that we care to preserve them and to promote them without contamination, guarding them with zealous vigilance. If preaching is mere reading from the Bible or if it involves only rigid exegesis, then even non-Christians can do it. What the Bible says about the qualifications of the minister would then make no sense. However, the quality of preaching indeed depends on the quality of the preacher, and this is true because to preach the gospel is not just to read the Bible, but to digest its ideas and then convey and apply them in a manner that is shaped by the preacher's own background, personality, competence, as well as the audience and the situation that he addresses. In preaching, the Scripture is not simply read, but it is "handled" (2 Timothy 2:15). Its ideas are processed, arranged, rephrased, and applied by the preacher. And this is why the preacher must constantly purify himself and strive for growth.

Some instructions on homiletics suggest that the best preaching occurs when the minister gets out of the way as much as possible and allows the Bible to "speak for itself." The expository method is then recommended. But the best way to achieve this effect is to have the minister read the Bible to his audience without any comment. This, however, is reading

and not preaching. The Bible commands us to preach. The minister must make decisive contributions to the form and content of his sermon. To preach is not to get out of the way, but to be very much in it.

In this sense, to preach is not to let the Bible speak for itself, but to speak for it. Many Christians are uncomfortable with this, but to the extent that our definition of preaching weakens the human role, to that extent it also destroys preaching itself, and also reduces our responsibility in the matter. Perhaps this is why so many people favor such a definition in the name of allowing the Bible to speak for itself: it makes us feel like champions of orthodoxy without having to assume the responsibility.

13. Loyalty to Men

You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes.

May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains. On the contrary, when he was in Rome, he searched hard for me until he found me. May the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day! You know very well in how many ways he helped me in Ephesus. (2 Timothy 1:15-18)

Paul has become a lightning rod, a focal point for criticism and persecution, and the government treats him like a criminal. Many people have deserted him. We do not know how many of these abandoned him because they were afraid to be associated with him, as when Peter denied that he even knew Jesus, and how many of these also repudiated the doctrines that he taught. We do know that there were defections from the gospel and that there were teachers of strange doctrines. So, if we can make the distinction, some people abandoned not only the man, but also the religion he preached.

Scripture condemns an over-adulation of men. It is obviously unacceptable to make a mere man into some kind of god. And the respect that we have toward ministers of the gospel must not be the kind that divides Christians into sects by identifying ourselves with persons. Paul rebukes the Corinthians for forming cliques based on loyalty to Peter, Paul, Apollos, and so on. The Corinthians might consider themselves current on religious scholarship and personalities, and each group might congratulate themselves for their discernment and good taste, but the apostle regards it an unspiritual way of thinking.

However, although our direct and ultimate loyalty is offered to God alone, there is a legitimate loyalty to the human representatives of the gospel. God himself often arranges human relationships for us that he teaches us to nurture, and in which we are to apply the biblical principles of love and faithfulness. Thus it is not wrong, but even obligatory, to exhibit a relative loyalty to men for Christ's sake. As Jesus says, "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (Matthew 10:40-42).

Onesiphorus will certainly receive his reward "on that day." While other people, including those who claimed to be Christians, were afraid and embarrassed to be associated with a prisoner, he "searched hard" for Paul until he found him. He did it for Paul the man as his friend, but he did it for Christ's sake, as a Christian and for a Christian. As Jesus says in another place, "I was in prison and you came to visit me...I tell you the truth, whatever you

did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:36-40). You cannot judge a man based on his circumstances. Suppose you know a man's good doctrine and character firsthand, but now he has fallen into disfavor, what will you do?

Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus include principles that apply to all Christians, but they also address situations that especially pertain to ministers of the gospel. Although we would like to think the best of people, the fact is that many people are weak and fickle. A minister cannot put too much confidence in his supporters, especially if they have never been tested by pressure. Such pressure can take the form of criticism, slander, and persecution against the minister. A few men might prove themselves faithful in the face of negative public opinion and even serious danger. Such men are reliable and are to be entrusted with the task of transmitting and continuing the Christian faith. Of course, it is not that we would withhold gospel teaching from unreliable men, but we must deliberately discover those who are reliable and establish them in the ministry, so that the Christian religion may advance in this generation, and may continue to future generations.

God entrusts the work of the gospel to men, but that does not mean he needs their service. Commenting on a previous passage, William Barclay writes, "The idea of God's dependence on men is never far from New Testament thought. When God wants something done, he has to find a man to do it....he has to find some instrument to do his work." This is a demonic doctrine. Rather than something that is "never far" from New Testament thought, this opinion is in direct contradiction to explicit New Testament teaching about God. As Paul says, "He is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else" (Acts 17:25).

It is an attack on God's nature to allege that he depends on his creatures for anything. Even on a human level, a father may tell his son to perform certain chores around the house, like taking out the trash, but that does not mean he is dependent on his son to do them. He can do them himself, and he will probably do a much better job. In fact, his son may sometimes make a mess of things, and the father may have to come clean up or fix the problem. You ask, then why does he tell his son to do the chores? If you are a father and you do not know the answer to this, you should probably take out the trash yourself until you figure it out. And think about what we discussed earlier about the "drama" of redemption.

14. A Public Intellectual System

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 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 2:1-2)

Many men are fickle when it comes to doctrine and legitimate human loyalty. A few men, because of their love and allegiance to Jesus Christ, remain faithful to the end both in their doctrine and in their loyalty to God's people, especially to his ministers. In connection with this, Paul urges Timothy to "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." This is what produces the unusual character of courageous loyalty. The inner strength that distinguishes great men from selfish losers is not our natural disposition, nor our human resolve and willpower, nor secular education and propaganda, but the power of Jesus Christ at work within us.

All Christians must be strong for the gospel by the grace of Christ, but this is especially true for ministers, because they are to do the very thing that got Paul into trouble in the first place. He 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." What are the "things" that Timothy heard Paul "say," that "many witnesses" can also know, and that reliable men can "teach others"? They are words, sentences, propositions, expressing ideas and doctrines, spoken in a public manner, and in a form that can be understood and transmitted by the same method, that is, by speaking and writing words. This is of supreme importance to the right understanding and performance of ministry, because it defines the nature and method of its work. A minister's task does not first pertain to politics, economics, and such aspects of life, but it is firstly and directly intellectual. This does not mean that it is academic, but that it pertains to the mind or spirit.

Of course a godly example is important. Paul mentions his own example and instructs Timothy to set a good example before others, and insists that overseers must be above reproach in their behavior and lifestyle. But words and doctrines are infinitely more important than actions. First, without doctrines, we cannot even tell which actions are commendable and which are condemnable. Good and evil actions are distinguished by doctrines. Actions do not speak louder than words, because they do not speak at all. They are interpreted by words and doctrines. If they speak at all, it is because words speak for them. Second, actions are not what ministers of the gospel declare to the world and entrust to reliable men. When it comes to perpetuating the power to save and sanctify, we pass on words and doctrines, not actions and examples, for only the gospel can save, and the gospel is an intellectual message about God, man, and Jesus Christ, expressed in spoken and written words.

A godly example is important, but its importance is frequently misunderstood and exaggerated. It does not directly contribute to the propagation of the gospel. Rather, we set

a godly example before the world and the church because by it we honor God, so that we ought to live godly lives even when there is no one watching us, and by it we *illustrate* (not declare, since the actions *themselves* are silent and without meaning) the gospel that we preach. Many people stumble when they witness hypocrisy and hear of scandals among Christians. This is irrational, since the failures of Christians have no direct bearing on whether the Christian faith is true. Nevertheless, Christians ought to set good examples in order that irrational people will not stumble because of our failures. This is another important reason to set a good example, and to live godly lives according to God's commandments.

The words that Timothy received from Paul could be entrusted to reliable men, and these men can in turn "teach" others. That is, Timothy has been taught by Paul, but in order to pass on Paul's teachings, it is unnecessary to pass on Paul's person to others. To pass on the things that he said – his words, ideas, propositions, doctrines – is to pass on Paul's teachings. The same teachings can then be passed on by the same method. The Christian faith is taught, not caught, and it is taught by the use of words.

Timothy was taught by Paul mainly in the sense that Paul spoke words to him about Christian ideas and doctrines. It is a common error to exaggerate the difference between being taught by someone in person and being taught by someone by his words. It is supposed that the physical proximity of a person imparts something that is otherwise unobtainable. This is unbiblical and irrational. Jesus says, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (John 6:63). He tells Philip that anyone who has seen him has seen the Father, and explains, "The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work" (John 14:9-10). A person's words are sufficient to represent the person.

Thus to receive words from Paul is to be taught by Paul himself. This simple insight carries powerful implications for us. This is because we also have the words of Paul. We have many of his letters, and some of his discourses are recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. We also have many words from the prophets and the other apostles, and we even have words from the Lord Jesus. Just as to read the words of Paul is to be taught by Paul, to read the words of Jesus is to be taught by Jesus. This means that we do not have an inferior Christianity just because the apostles have passed on and because Jesus Christ is not among us in the physical and bodily sense. They have left us their words, and this means that they are still here to teach us.

When I mention that we have the words of Paul and even the words of Jesus, I do not mean that we have something essentially superior in the latter. In terms of authority and value, there is no essential difference between the divinely inspired words of Paul and the words of Jesus. Some Christians tend to think that the words of Jesus in the Bible carries special authority, even above that of the prophets and the apostles. However, far from expressing reverence toward the person of God, this position amounts to an attack against the Holy Spirit. Paul states that Jesus himself taught him his doctrines (Galatians 1:11-12), and that the Holy Spirit himself taught him the words to use (1 Corinthians 2:13). The same applies

to all other apostles, since Jesus said to them, "All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you" (John 16:15).

The words of Jesus and the apostles are the words of God, and to make the words of one superior to the others is to make God superior to himself, which is impossible. And to say that the words of the apostles are inferior to the words of Jesus is to insult the work of the Spirit in the apostles, which is blasphemy. We must extend the same principle to all the prophets, since they spoke as they were "carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). They declared the very words of God, saying, "Thus says the Lord." And Paul states that "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16), that is, as words spoken by God's own mouth and breath. Therefore, the whole Bible consists of the words of God. Since to read the words of a person is to be taught by that person, by reading the Bible, we can all be taught by God.

This is good news. People cannot be transmitted. Example cannot be transmitted. But words can easily be transmitted with ease and precision. And by preaching the words, ideas, and doctrines of the Bible, we present the very voice of God to the world and the church. The main task of the ministry is to pass on these words of God and expect the Holy Spirit to use them to affect the people in the way that he wishes. He uses God's words to awaken, convert, and sanctify those created and chosen for salvation. And he uses the same words to blind, to anger, and to harden those created and chosen for damnation.

15. Share in the Suffering

Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer. Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this. (2 Timothy 2:3-7)

God foreordained the salvation of some individuals and decided that he would show his grace to them. This salvation was promised and described throughout the Old Testament documents by the prophets. Then, at God's appointed time, this grace appeared in the person of Jesus Christ, who suffered the penalty of sin in himself for the sake of these chosen ones, and died, and who was raised from the dead for his own glory and vindication, and for the justification of these same individuals. This salvation was preached and believed even before the appearance of Christ, and those in the past were saved by trusting in God's promise of salvation that was to come.

In this sense, the gospel was preached even at the early days of human history. God himself preached it to Adam and Eve, and to Satan as a witness against him. And in his letter to the Galatians, Paul says that God preached this same gospel to Abraham. This message is no longer a promise, but has been fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ in a definite and conclusive manner. Now we preach Jesus Christ crucified – not that he will be, but that he was already crucified – and raised from the dead. Salvation appeared in him, and is now explained and propagated by the message of the gospel. Although all Christians are to engage in this effort, and the power of the Holy Spirit is available to all of them, God calls some individuals to dedicate their lives to this task and grants them special abilities to perform the work with excellence and effectiveness. Paul was appointed "a herald and an apostle and a teacher" of the gospel.

This gospel is preached to sinners. By their very nature, they are spiritual morons and rebels who do not know the truth and who resist the truth when it is presented to them. Christians must always tell non-Christians that they are wrong, that they are wrong in their thinking and in their behavior. If a Christian does not say this, then he is not talking about salvation at all, since he does not explain why the non-Christian is in need of rescue. But sinners do not like to be told that they are wrong. They are filled with rebellion and they do not want to change. Unless God acts in their minds to alter their inner dispositions, they will persist in this rebellion, and they will react with unbelief and malice.

For this reason, the ministry is difficult and dangerous. When the Christian preaches the gospel to non-Christians, he is presenting something that is obviously true, but he is presenting it to some very foolish and stubborn people. They are so dull and wicked that the truth of the gospel does not register on them. Nevertheless, they perceive enough to

realize that it is something that they do not like, and sometimes they react with aggression and even violence. Paul himself is chained like a criminal because he preached the gospel.

Now, the work of the preacher is to declare the gospel. He is to declare it to all men, and to teach men the doctrines of the Christian religion. And he is also to train others to carry on the same work. So Paul tells Timothy, "And the things you have heard me say...entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others." He is telling Timothy to do the very thing that got him into trouble in the first place, and moreover, to train more people to do this same thing.

It is to be expected, then, that Timothy and those he trains will also face trouble. So Paul continues, "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus." He is aware that the work he tells Timothy to do will likely plunge him into the same kind of trouble that he is in as he writes this letter. Paul loves Timothy dearly, but instead of telling him to run the other way, he urges him to share in the suffering that is common to those who are called to preach the truth about Jesus Christ.

He uses three analogies to illustrate his point: the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer. He has used them elsewhere, but as the same analogies can serve to illustrate different points in various contexts, he uses them with a particular emphasis here. A soldier can have a family and other things associated with a normal life, but the fact remains that he is not entangled with civilian affairs. His work is more than a hobby or even a career. It is a way of life. In the main, his life is about this one thing, and it will control other aspects of his life. An athlete is characterized by self-discipline. He is dedicated to training. Even when he is doing other things, this one thing rules him, and controls even his sleeping and eating habits. He may go on a vacation, but he does not stop training, and he does not return with a potbelly. Likewise, a farmer's work is intense labor and demands all his attention.

A minister must not take his work any less seriously than the soldier, athlete, or farmer. He is not to be given to excess in luxuries, in private interests, or even in social interactions that have no spiritual purpose. Of course he can have a normal life as far as biblical principles permit. He might have a family. He might have hobbies that he wishes to pursue. He might take vacations. But whatever he does, his life is ruled by this one thing, by his dedication to prepare for and to perform the work of the gospel. He will teach his family to serve God. His hobbies will contribute to this ministry. And he will devote extra time to study and prayer during his vacations. He never stops doing the work of the ministry.

Just as the single-mindedness of the soldier, athlete, and the farmer enables them to persist through hardship, the minister's dedication to his work enables him to endure suffering and face persecution. The ministry is not a hobby, but a mission that claims the preacher's whole life, every aspect of it. The gospel is not only one option among many, but it is a necessary message, and the power of God to save those who believe. Combined with the expectation for future fruit and reward, a single focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ prepares the minister for the suffering that he will likely encounter.

The teaching is applicable to all Christians, even if they are not ministers who dedicate all their time and effort to the work of the gospel. A Christian must take his religion seriously just as a preacher must take his ministry seriously. How seriously? He must be prepared to stand true to it and suffer for it. Some of us do not suffer nearly as much as Paul did, but Christians in many parts of the world do, or come close to it. And even if we do not suffer now, we might later. Thus it is important to keep Paul's words in mind. We are unfaithful to the gospel and unprepared for suffering if we do not regard our religion as seriously as the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer regard their work. And unless our faith rules all aspects of our lives, we do not have the same dedication.

16. Remember Jesus Christ

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. (2 Timothy 2:8-9)

There is a God, and we are his creation. For sure, he is not only a metaphysical power, but also a personal intelligence. Christians think about God with an emphasis on the fact that he is a person, but often only partially think of him as a power. They call him powerful, and even say he is omnipotent, but they slap themselves in the mouth – and also God in the face – when they attempt to distance him from being the direct, total, and even the sole *metaphysical* cause of all evil. The implication is that there is another metaphysical power that constantly rearranges the universe without God's immediate control. It is said that this power functions by God's permission, but this is as far as it goes in terms of his involvement.

The result is a form of dualism, the view that there are two ultimate forces – one good and one evil – that control the universe, and that are in constant conflict with each other. This is a heresy that Christian theologians condemn, but they propagate a form of it themselves. Admittedly, this form of dualism does not say that the two forces are equal, but that the evil force is subject to the "permissive will" of the good force, and it is the good force that makes "permissive decrees" to regulate all the operations of the evil force. Nevertheless, the good force does not exercise direct control over all of creation, and for some unexplained reason, although the good force only "permits" the evil force to cause evil, the evil force is stupid enough to fulfill the good force's agenda by performing the precise evil in the precise manner and degree permitted. In no instance does the evil force abstain, if only to defy the good force.

Of course, the whole theory is nonsense, but it is asserted in some form by many schools of theology, including almost all versions of Calvinism, which claims to honor God's absolute sovereignty. But this popular form of Calvinism utterly fails, and must retreat into paradoxes and self-contradictions. Its enemies rightly mock this ridiculous construction, although they usually have an even weaker view of God's sovereignty. The only view that is true to biblical revelation and necessary reason, and that avoids dualism, is the one that says God exercises complete, active, direct, and causative (not permissive) metaphysical control over all of creation, including all instances of evil. God is the author of sin and evil. There is no problem at all with this view because there is no divine law stating that God must not be the author of sin and evil, and God is the very definition of righteousness; therefore, it is a righteous thing that God is the author of sin and evil.

Although theologians think of God as a person, they fail to think of him as a total power, the only force that can create anything, sustain anything, and make any change to anything in the universe, whereas we as creatures cannot make even one hair white or black

(Matthew 5:36). They think of him not as total power who is also a total person, but as nothing more than an extremely powerful person. Thus they easily apply human ethics to him, and judge him by a standard that they judge themselves – they deny that he is God. In any case, if God is not this total power, then we have dualism. But if God is indeed this total power, and if there is evil in the universe, then by metaphysical and logical necessity, God must be the author of sin and evil. There is no escape from this conclusion. Anything less than this is blasphemy against the nature and the majesty of the Most High. This blasphemy is the cherished tradition of almost all of Christendom.

So God is both a total power and a total person, and a person with a moral nature. He makes distinction between good and evil, and he defines them to man by his precepts and commands. But man has transgressed these precepts and commands, and this is called sin. The Bible says that the guilt – that is, not the subjective feeling of guilt, although that can be true also, but the objective condemnation – of the first man has been imputed to all his descendents, to every human person. God is a God of justice, and he is inclined to punish all sinners in a lake of fire for an endless duration. But he is also a God of mercy, so that even before he created humanity, he had already selected specific individuals that he would rescue from hellfire. He would accomplish this by sending God the Son to take on a human nature, to die for the sins of these chosen ones in this human nature, and then to rise from the dead for their justification before God. These individuals, then, would be changed from sinners to saints through the gift of faith and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

They will not suffer punishment for their sins, since God in the flesh, Jesus Christ, has paid their penalty. As God said through the prophet Isaiah, "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more" (43:25). And he said by Jeremiah, "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (31:34). How terrible it is to realize the truth that we have sinned, and that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. But then how wonderful it is to learn that God has rescued us from the penalty we deserved by taking on a human nature and suffering the punishment in his own flesh! It is God who grants faith and repentance, for no one can come until God has chosen him and has moved him to come. If we will come to God through faith in Jesus Christ, then we are numbered among those who are saved, saved from hellfire and destined for heavenly glory.

These verses say that God will no longer "remember" our sins. According to a pastor in Hong Kong, this means that God takes our sins and throws them behind him, and when God throws something, it keeps on going forever. But does Newtonian physics apply to God's power and our sins? The pastor is now a cult leader. Then, one preacher said that our sins are thrown into the "sea of forgetfulness" when God forgives them. But who is forgetful? God? Since then I have discovered that many evangelicals hold this view. Maybe they should join that cult in Hong Kong.

As usual, it takes a Reformed theologian to refine the blasphemy. Perhaps this is unfair – popular Reformed theology is already burdened with enough blasphemies and contradictions. In any case, this theologian wrote that although man cannot by an act of his will forget what he has done, God is all-powerful and is able to do this. He can inflict

amnesia upon himself. And because of his grace, he is willing to do it. He can literally forgive and forget. But the idiot – I mean the theologian, not the God with amnesia – forgot that this contradicts God's omniscience. To him, God must be merciful, and this necessarily means amnesia, and God must be omnipotent, and this also means amnesia. But he does not have to remain omniscient. Or maybe he is omniscient, at least when we are not talking about forgiveness. Can we affirm both divine omniscience and divine amnesia? Wonderful, another antinomy.

To remember often means more than to call to mind the mere existence of an object, but also to call to mind its significance, and sometimes it also implies taking some action that corresponds to this significance. I can remember that someone owes me money in the sense that the fact is present to my mind, but I do not have to note its significance or to act on the significance of this fact. I do not have to make him pay me back the money. I can even forgive the debt, but unless I have amnesia, I will still remember it. Or, someone can pay me the money on his behalf, so that he no longer owes me, but even then I will still remember that he once owed me the money. There will, however, be no basis to enforce the significance of the debt, since it has already been paid.

God will always remain omniscient. For this reason, he will always remember all of our sins down to the most minute details. But because the debt has been paid by Jesus Christ, God will not condemn us for them, either by verbally accusing us of them, or by punishing us with hellfire or other means. There is no longer a debt to be paid, but the memory of the debt cannot be erased. In fact, it would be disastrous for God to forget our sins in the sense of having amnesia. It would shake the entire fabric of the universe. This is because the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus Christ were all part of the plan of salvation, and salvation presupposes sin. The Godhead, or at least God the Father, would be hopelessly confused if he were to forget one of the crucial steps that led from creation to consummation. Imagine a startled Father who sees the Son at his right hand and demands, "What are you doing here? And why do you have a body? How long have I been asleep?" There is no need to continue the silliness. God does not forget. He remembers our sins, but not in the sense of acting on their significance, since those who believe in Christ have been forgiven and justified by his sacrifice and his perfect righteousness.

When Jesus instructed his disciples to break bread in remembrance of him, he did not mean that they were to call to mind his mere existence, but rather the significance of his sacrifice, symbolized by the breaking of bread. When the man who was crucified next to Jesus asked the Lord to remember him, he was not asking Jesus to call to mind his mere existence as one who was crucified next to him. He was, rather, asking Jesus to call to mind the fact that he confessed that Jesus was an innocent man and that he believed Jesus would possess a kingdom, and that Jesus should act on the significance of this confession. Jesus promised to bring this man to paradise that very day.

Thus when Paul says to remember Jesus Christ, he is not suggesting that Timothy should call to mind his mere existence. Although it is probably necessary to remind today's Christians that there is a Jesus Christ, Timothy is not that spiritually bankrupt. Rather,

Paul's instruction is to call to mind the significance of Jesus Christ. This significance is explained in the message of the gospel. Contrary to how some people use the word, the "gospel" is not a bare minimum extracted from the whole body of biblical doctrines. New Testament usage indeed seems to focus on the redemptive events and actions associated with Jesus Christ, but it does not suggest a minimum.

Paul insists that he declares to his hearers the whole counsel of God, or the entire Christian faith. Sometimes he would mention one aspect of the faith to represent the whole, that is, either to focus the attention on an especially relevant issue or to employ it as a mere shorthand, referring to a part to represent the whole. For example, he writes that when he preached to the Corinthians, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). Many people, especially those with an anti-intellectual bias, interpret this to mean that Paul did not preach an entire body of biblical doctrines, and that he was not interested in theology or in intellectual arguments, but that he only preached the "gospel." Likewise, we should not be so interested in doctrines, but only in preaching the gospel – or to put it in slightly pejorative terms, to preach barely enough information to slip people into heaven. Again, such usage misrepresents what the New Testament means by "gospel."

In any case, Paul does not mention the resurrection here in 1 Corinthians 2:2. In fact, although he mentions that Jesus was crucified, he does not even say that he died as a result. And nothing is said about Jesus dying for our sins. Are not these facts necessary parts of the gospel, even as a bare-boned message? Later in the same letter, when the context demands it, Paul reminds the Corinthians that when he preached "the gospel" to them, he mentioned that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, that he appeared to witnesses, and so on (see 1 Corinthians 15:1-8).

Evidently, although he uses "Jesus Christ and him crucified" as an expression that embraced all that he preached to the Corinthians (since he says he resolved to know nothing else among them), this is only a representation (not even a summary) of what he preached, when what he preached was doctrinally much more extensive than the bare expression can convey in itself. That is, the expression is not intended to be understood by itself, but as a representation of all that was preached to the people, which Paul calls "the gospel." Jesus' idea of preaching the gospel is for his disciples to teach people "to obey *everything* I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20). When introducing the Christian faith to unbelievers, and when teaching it to believers, we ought to present the maximum, not the minimum.

Here in the letter to Timothy, "my gospel" is represented, not summarized, by the two propositions that Jesus Christ was "raised from the dead" and that he was "descended from David."

God the Son took upon himself human nature, and this human nature was tied to the historical lineage of David, fulfilling the ancient prophecies concerning the Messiah. Then, men murdered him. He was physically dead, and was buried. But God raised him from the dead. Thus the gospel is both historical and supernatural. Since God is the direct metaphysical cause of all natural and supernatural events, there is no essential difference

between the natural and the supernatural. The supernatural designates only the extraordinary, that is, not something that is metaphysically different, but something that is unusual.

In any case, if a message compromises either the historical or the supernatural aspect, it is no longer the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. The facts about him are no longer told. We cannot say that Jesus indeed appeared in history, but that he did no miracles and that he did not rise from the dead. Neither can we spiritualize or supernaturalize the whole account about Jesus and sever him from history. The historical and the supernatural are one in Jesus Christ. To reject either is to reject the whole, and to be an unbeliever, subject to endless punishment in hellfire.

This message leaves no room for non-Christians to disagree. Because we claim both the historical and the supernatural, they cannot surrender one and retreat into the other. We say that there is absolute knowledge and morality. There is one correct account of the world, and one exclusive and comprehensive revelation from God. One is right, and all others are wrong. Therefore, total conflict is inevitable. Our gospel makes non-Christians look very bad, and when that happens, they get very mad. And because they cannot triumph in the arena of intellect and argument, they resort to persecution. But somehow we are the ones regarded as fools, as obscurantists, and even as terrorists, as disturbers of the peace. Paul was chained like a criminal.

Nevertheless, God's word cannot be chained. Non-Christians may murder a preacher, but they cannot murder the gospel. What men can do to us, they cannot do to God or his word. The Christian faith will continue and will triumph.

17. A Workman Approved by God

Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:14-15)

A minister of the gospel is called to communicate with people by speaking and writing. Sometimes theologians and homileticians who wish to exalt the place of preaching attribute what seems to be a mystical power to the very act of speaking the message aloud, as if the same words become more effective once they transform from ink blots on paper to sounds in the air. The motive to exalt preaching is commendable, since the Bible itself stresses its importance in declaring the knowledge and majesty of God. However, unless there is biblical evidence to attribute some special power to speaking the message in contrast to writing the message, such a view of preaching is mere superstition. And there is no such biblical evidence.

Those who advocate this superstition appeal to Romans 10:17, where Paul says, "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." Faith comes by hearing, they say, and a person hears when someone preaches. The claim is that something unique happens when a person hears the word of God. However, the verse says nothing about reading and writing. Just because faith comes by hearing does not mean that it cannot come by reading, or that it cannot come just as effectively, or even more effectively. The verse does not suggest that there is something mystical, supernatural, or unique in hearing itself. Rather, John says, "these are written that you may believe" (John 20:31).

Thus even the deaf can experience the full power of God's word by reading it or when someone preaches to him by sign language. The power is in God's ideas, communicated through words, whether by speaking or writing, by hearing or reading, and made effective by the Holy Spirit. There is power in preaching not because man make sounds in the air as opposed to symbols on paper, but because the words and ideas communicated come from God. Superstition distracts attention from God's wisdom and power.

So the minister of the gospel is to communicate. What is he to talk about? Many ministers fill their sermons with social issues and superficial concerns. They are useless people. It is a waste of time to listen to them. These topics are not trivial, but a doctrinal foundation is needed to correctly address them. Yet the doctrinal foundation itself is not established mainly to address them; rather, it is valuable for its own sake. The minister is called to handle the word of truth, the gospel, or the doctrines of the Christian faith. This is what he must talk about all the time. The workman who correctly handles the word of truth, Paul says, is one who does not need to be ashamed. This implies that one needs to be ashamed who does not handle the word of truth or who mishandles the word of truth.

This is the defining difference between a good and a bad minister, or one who does not need to be ashamed and one who does. The difference is doctrine. If a minister takes the Bible, validly deduces teachings from it, and then communicates these teachings to others, then he is one who does not need to be ashamed. If he does not do this, then he needs to be ashamed. The matter is simple and clear-cut, but it is of supreme importance, because it sets the standard by which all ministers are evaluated. If we are ministers, then this is what we must become and remain. If we are church members, then this is the kind of ministers that we should follow and support, and we must reject all those who do not correctly handle the word of truth.

It is not rare for some to say about a certain minister, "His doctrine may be a little off, but he has good character." The assumption is that it does not require good character to recognize and believe sound doctrine, or at least belief of the truth is a minor part of the personality. In any case, the standard used is wrong. Of course a minister ought to have good character, but if he does not first possess sound Christian doctrine, let him show off his good Buddhist character in the pew. Doctrine, or the word of God, is the standard. Does the minister know and believe the word of truth? What does he do with it?

A minister who correctly handles the word of truth is not a child in the things of God. He applies sound doctrine in a serious and mature manner, and faces head-on the reality that confronts us in this world. In the same context where Paul states that a workman should correctly handle the word of truth, he tells Timothy, "Keep reminding them of these things." If "these things" do not include all that precede the verse since the beginning of the letter, at least they refer to verses 8-13. And in these verses Paul speaks of the doctrinal contents of the gospel, including Christ's resurrection and royal heritage. He says that it is because he preaches this gospel that he is suffering to be point of being chained like a criminal. He speaks of enduring hardship for the elect, so that they may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus. Then, he speaks of the consequence of disowning Christ: "If we disown him, he will also disown us." This is serious, solemn business, and a minister who correctly handles the word of truth must communicate this to those who hear him.

18. On Heretics and Heresies

Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. (2 Timothy 2:16-18)

False doctrines are dangerous. People who are affected by them and who promote them become increasingly evil. To many people, the idea of evil evokes images of murder, adultery, oppression, and the like. But as evil as these things are, as a general and primary understanding of evil, this is insufficient and superficial. Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God, and the second is to love people. To define good and evil mainly by the second, and even to the neglect of the first, betrays a humanistic inclination.

The biblical standard begins with God. Thus the right knowledge and worship of God come before right conduct and relation with men. We are to have no other gods, but this entails sufficient knowledge of the one true God to identify him, and to recognize variations and imposters. We are to make no idols and worship no images, but this entails an understanding of the very nature of God – of what he is and is not. And we are to use his name rightly – not in vain, but with the right understanding and attitude, with reverence and adoration. This involves a definite inclination of the mind. To love God, of course, also means that we are to love his word, to count his teachings as precious and sacred. This also occurs in the mind, before outward obedience is exhibited.

False doctrines lead a person to transgress the greatest commandment even before they lead him to transgress the second, and even before any outward action is exhibited. That is, to believe or think something false about God, or to believe or think something other than or contrary to what he has revealed, is itself sinful. It is a violation of the greatest commandment. Therefore, morally speaking, to believe and promote false doctrines is much worse than murder, adultery, theft, and the like. This is the reverse of what many people, including Christians, appear to believe.

The false teachers that Paul has in mind include Hymenaeus and Philetus. They are false because they have "wandered away from the truth." Again, it is the truth or doctrine that represents the standard. Any doctrine that is not the truth is by definition a false doctrine. Any teacher that has wandered away from the truth is by definition a false teacher. A church leader must possess, as closely as possible, a character that is above reproach. But even before character is considered, the line is drawn by doctrine. This is the rule that guides Christians in selecting teachers to follow and to emulate. This is the rule that governs church policy in appointing church officers, as well as in setting their agendas, budgets, and so on.

It is appropriate and sometimes necessary for ministers to discuss these matters both in private and in public. Ministers are to warn people about false doctrines and false teachers, at times announcing the names of the heretics, so that believers may avoid them. Nevertheless, an inordinate focus on false doctrines, even to oppose them, throws a ministry out of balance. As it is not Paul's habit to indulge false teachings, it is not often that he directly refers to their contents or to describe them in great detail. Here he mentions that the heresy includes the idea "that the resurrection has already taken place."

Could it be that they have spiritualized the resurrection, with the implication that Christ's resurrection was also merely spiritual? In any case, as Gordon Fee writes, "For Paul, denial of our (future bodily) resurrection is to deny to faith itself." Since Christ's resurrection was physical, and our resurrection is to be like his, then until we have a body similar to his, the resurrection still has not happened, and any doctrine that says the resurrection has already happened is heresy, and tantamount to a denial of the Christian faith.

We cannot be sure as to the exact nature of this false teaching, but whatever it may be, it contradicts one of the crucial doctrines of the Christian faith. And if this is sufficient to evoke an aggressive reaction from the apostle, then it is our duty to react strongly as well when foundational teachings of the gospel are under assault. False teachings about the nature of God and of Christ, about the creation and fall of man, about atonement and justification, and at least several others, are to be met with condemnation. To deny what the Bible teaches on these topics, or to teach something other than what the Bible asserts, is to deny the Christian faith itself.

19. God's Solid Foundation

Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness." In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work. (2 Timothy 2:19-21)

Paul writes that the false teachers "destroy the faith of some" (v. 18). He does not mean that true faith can be overturned, because he adds, "God's solid foundation stands firm...The Lord knows those who are his." To "know" here must refer to more than mere awareness. The assertion is that God's foundation remains firm, but if the individuals that constitute God's people constantly alter, so that some who were not his become his while some who were his become not his, then a mere awareness, a mere keeping track of, the identities of these individuals would not count as a solid foundation that stands firm. Rather, consistent with biblical usage, to "know" here refers to a positive relationship established by God's choice.

God is the creator, and all "are his" in this sense, but he has not established a friendly, loving, and saving relationship with every individual. The idea is used in a different sense here, namely, those whom he has chosen to have this special relationship with him "are his." Because God has made his selections even before the creation of the world, there is a fixed list of individuals who would have such a relationship with him through Jesus Christ. Therefore, even when false teachers lead people astray, and appear to destroy the faith of some church members, God's foundation remains firm.

This means that those whose faith are destroyed by false teachers have never been true Christians in the first place. As the apostle 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). God's foundation is his own decision, enforced by his own power. It can never be shaken or altered. And thus the church cannot be destroyed by evil influences.

There is a second part to this: "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness." God has chosen a fixed list of individuals to have a special and saving relationship with him through Jesus Christ. And he causes these individuals to come to him through Jesus Christ by performing a direct action in their souls, regenerating them and producing faith in them. They in turn confess the name of the Lord.

Reprobates can imitate the physical action of confessing the Lord; however, the relationship that the chosen ones have with God is not founded on their confession as such,

but on God's election of them, which produces the confession. Thus the confession is an effect of election and regeneration. True confession is not something that can be imitated, or something that anyone can put on. Those who truly confess the Lord Jesus have the power of God within them, and they are in covenant relationship with God. They must and they can turn from wickedness. This is something that the reprobates cannot do.

In the context of our passage, wickedness must include false doctrines, and not only immoral actions. Likewise, when the apostle proceeds to the metaphor of household articles, the cleansing that he speaks of must also include false doctrines. Of course a person must be cleansed from immoral actions and habits in order to become one of the more useful articles in God's household, but he must also, and in this context he must mainly, be cleansed from false doctrines. Otherwise, he would be as one of the "ignoble" vessels, which in the ancient household, would probably be used to gather rubbish or excrement. Anyone who respects God's word – who respects God – must agree with his judgment. Non-Christians and false teachers are as excrement containers. They are toilets.

20. Foolish Controversies

Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. (2 Timothy 2:22-23)

Earlier in verse 14, Paul writes, "Warn them before God against quarreling about words," and now he writes in verse 23, "Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments." Placed in this context, the "evil desires" in verse 22, also translated "lusts" and "passions," refer not only, or even mainly, to such things as sexual urges and materialistic ambitions, but to a sinful propensity to indulge in false doctrines, including an inordinate desire to investigate them and to argue about them. The sin is often legitimized by being called "apologetics," and the entire lives and ministries of many Christians revolve around this. They are more familiar with the secrets of Satan than the mysteries of God. They think they are doing God's work, but they are kept where Satan wants them. If he cannot make them abandon the truth, then at least he can lead them to become obsessed with error. In the extreme, the effect is almost the same.

We are to confront false doctrines, but we are not to be taken up by them and to become obsessed with them. Satan has captured the attention of entire armies of promising Christians by stirring up their "evil desires," so that they confuse self-righteousness and vainglory with the satisfaction of genuine Christian service and the preaching of the gospel. The positive effect that they have for the cause of Christ is sometimes practically nil. But watch out! If you tell them that, they will turn and do some of their "apologetics" on you!

Timothy is cautioned against this, and some of those commentators who called him timid now call him contentious. If the apostle writes about courage, then it must mean that the reader is a coward. If the apostle warns against foolish controversies, then it must mean that the reader is entangled in them. Since the apostle offers so many positive exhortations in the letter, Timothy must have been a terrible person, unfit to live. We have already considered this absurd but strangely popular principle of biblical interpretation.

Sometimes a disagreement is foolish because it is a matter of semantics. We often hear that something is "just a matter of semantics." If the disagreement revolves around the use of a word – that is, the sound or symbol – apart from the meaning, then it is indeed "just a matter of semantics," and relatively trivial. It is most likely not worth an intense and prolonged battle over something like this. On the other hand, often when people say that something is just a matter of semantics, the intent is to remain vague, to avoid confrontation, or they are too dull to perceive a real distinction in meaning. In such cases, whether something is worth pursuing depends on the substance of the disagreement, since there is indeed a disagreement in substance, and not only in the sounds and symbols used.

Sometimes a disagreement is foolish not because it is a matter of semantics, but because the substance of the matter is trivial, strange, unproductive, and poses a distraction to the saving message of the gospel. Endless debate over the matter is sometimes possible, and to some people, desirable. An ambassador of the gospel with a sense of mission and who speaks with authority will approach the situation differently compared to a wannabe who is trying to make a name for himself by screaming bloody murder over everyone and everything. Since many Christians harbor an unhealthy interest in controversies, he might gain a good following if he screams loud and long enough. It is a shortcut around true devotion to Christ and love for people. A good minister of Jesus Christ knows better than to engage in prolonged battles over either trivial or settled matters with incompetent and unimportant people.

Just as there is a time to "shake the dust off your feet" and move on, there comes a time when you should leave a controversy unsettled, and your opponent angry and dissatisfied, and move on. Beware of Satan's devices. Do not let false teachers control the program of ministry. If they can keep you in a narrow and foolish debate, they will. They enjoy it. This is what they do. They do not perform any real ministry. They have been taken captive by the devil, and they are wasting their lives in unproductive conflicts, and now they are trying to take you down with them. Do not let that happen. This is very different from the advice to stop all debates and "just preach the gospel." No, the preaching of the gospel will entail conflicts and debates. You must take a stance and state your reasons, and provide basic refutations to objections and to false doctrines. But you must avoid being sucked into controversies so that you have little time to do anything else. It is a trap of the devil.

21. Teaching the Devil's Captives

And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:24-26)

Sometimes people criticize me for obeying the biblical teaching that I should sharply rebuke certain individuals and for following the examples of the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus, even when I merely repeat the harsh words that they used to condemn unbelievers and heretics. According to them, the practice is against Christian teaching on kindness and gentleness. Their criticism against me, sometimes just as harsh as the harsh words that they criticize me for using, amounts to saying that it is unbiblical to obey biblical commands and follow biblical examples.

Here Paul says, "The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone." This poses a tremendous problem for my critics. The modern church equates kindness with the use of non-threatening and non-condemning words, preferably accompanied by an effeminate tone and posture. They have confused a homosexual stereotype with the kindness of Jesus Christ. This is a blasphemy that in itself demands harsh rebuke and punishment. If this is the definition of kindness, then the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus himself were never kind. The definition is unbiblical.

Consider the two letters to Timothy. Paul writes, "They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm." Is this kind? Then, he says, "Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme." Is this gentle? Later, he adds, "Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared with a hot iron." Is this polite? "Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done." By the standard of my critics, is this even "Christian"? Then, he writes to Titus, "'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply." Is this not offensive? And of course, he just got through comparing unbelievers and heretics to dumpsters and toilets. Why am I not allowed to do the same? Also, what about that time when he told the Judaizers to go all the way and castrate themselves? Was Paul "kind" to everyone in the sense understood by my critics and by contemporary believers? There are hundreds of similar examples in the words of the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus, many of them stronger than those cited above.

Given the unbiblical definition of kindness, the biblical instruction to "be kind to everyone" presents some troubling options. If the biblical examples and commands are consistent with kindness, then we cannot use the unbiblical definition of kindness, which means that there

is no biblical criticism against me, the biblical writers, or the Lord Jesus. But given the unbiblical definition of kindness, one must regard the biblical examples and commands as inconsistent with kindness. If this is the case, then those who hold this definition must either limit the application of the verse in question to the point that no criticism can apply against me, or they must say either that Paul is a hypocrite, or that Scripture contradicts itself. In either case, they have exposed themselves as heretics, and I recommend church discipline against them. The truth is that Scripture does not support the definition of kindness that can be used to contradict or criticize my approach.

You may answer that the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus were exceptions because they had the benefit of infallibility through divine inspiration. On the other hand, we are fallible, and we do not know the hearts of men, so that we ought not pronounce judgment on anyone. However, if I must not say something negative about people, even though my judgment is based on the word of God, then why can I say anything positive about them? What gives me the right to say "kind" words to them? Lacking infallibility, will I not make the mistake of approving something or someone that I ought to disapprove? And while we are at it, why are you judging me for being harsh? Are you infallible? Hypocrite! You have no respect for the word of God. If my judgment is based on the word of God, then my judgment is correct, and the judgment that I pronounce is in reality God's judgment against people, and God is always right. If you say that my understanding of Scripture is imperfect, then the same criticism applies to you. Your interpretation of those biblical passages on kindness and gentleness is also fallible, so how can you apply them to me?

You are using the infallibility of the prophets and the apostles as an excuse not to believe and apply the word of God. You are a coward and a hypocrite, and you are unfaithful to the Lord Jesus Christ. But I say, let us not be cowards and hypocrites. Let us use our fallibility and their infallibility, not as an excuse, but as a motivation for us to cling ever closer to the word of God, so that we will praise what God praises, and condemn what he condemns. Is it better to condemn God, or to worship the devil? You tell me to refrain, lest I condemn God, but do you say that I should worship the devil? Is that what you do? But I would rather worship God and condemn the devil. The word of God tells me the difference.

The passage does not negate the testimony of the whole Bible, but is rather consistent with it. It does not forbid reasoned debate. And it does not exclude the place of rebuking false teachers and their followers in the harshest terms and tones imaginable when appropriate. Paul would soon tell Timothy to include "rebuke" when he preaches the word of God (4:2), and again, he tells Titus to sharply rebuke the Cretans. Instead, Paul is telling Timothy to avoid "foolish and stupid arguments," and specifically to avoid "quarrels." It is in this context that he says to "be kind to everyone." This is different from the application that some people make out of verses like this.

Those who follow false doctrines are the devil's captives. To use a convenient term, they have been "programmed" to process ideas a certain way, so that their minds think in directions that always lead them to the wrong conclusions no matter what you feed into them. The phenomenon is pronounced when dealing with cult members, but a similar

pattern is seen in anyone who affirms false doctrines. They are impervious to unbiblical kindness and persuasion. If you act like a pervert around them, they will miss your point or laugh at you. Biblical kindness is so much greater than a non-offensive vocabulary and an effeminate tone. It entails instruction, pleading, reprimand, and warning. It persists in wrestling the demon within the other person hour after hour after hour, determined to extract him out of the devil's snare. Even when it screams harsh insults at the person, it does so for the benefit of his soul and for the honor of God, and not out of resentment or for the sake of personal vindication. This is biblical kindness and patience.

We must give it a good effort. Nevertheless, it is God who decides whether to grant repentance to the person. Repentance is not something that a person decides to do by himself, but it is something that God decides to cause the person to do. It is true that man makes a decision, but it is God's decision that causes man's decision. Again, the folly of compatibilism is evident. Of course the fact that man makes a decision is compatible with the fact that God makes a decision. But since it is God's decision that determines and causes man's decision, this is like saying that God's decision is compatible with God's decision. God is compatible with himself. The effect of his control is compatible with the fact of his control. Of course that is true, but how is this useful to the person who affirms compatibilism?

Repentance means a change of mind. Since God is the one who grants repentance, this means that it is not the person who changes his own mind, but God who changes a person's mind. What does he change his mind to? Paul says that repentance leads to "a knowledge of the truth." Again, it comes down to a matter of doctrine. This is how we are to recognize true repentance. There is no repentance unless the person turns to affirm true doctrines. If he does not affirm true doctrines, then he has not repented, and he remains in his sins.

22. Bad People, Bad Times

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.

They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth – men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone. (2 Timothy 3:1-9)

The kind of people that Paul is talking about are non-Christians. He says that they are not lovers of God, that they oppose the truth, and that as far as the Christian faith is concerned, they are rejected. The vices he lists in verses 2-4 are non-Christian characteristics. Since I first started reading the Bible as a child, and long before I came across the term "total depravity," it has always been clear that Christianity describes unbelievers in the most derogatory terms.

Non-Christians are unrighteous and dishonest people, so we expect them to protest the way that they are described in Scripture. But we are surprised that those who claim to believe the Bible and those who teach the doctrine of total depravity are the ones who would denounce and even persecute those Christians who would apply these same terms to non-Christians. The two are incompatible. Either they admit that they do not in fact believe the Bible, that they disapprove of and disagree with the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus, or they must throw their full support behind those who speak to and speak about non-Christians as Scripture does.

What is at stake includes the right standard of social discourse, but much more important than that, this pertains to whether or not we will affirm or deny the inspiration of Scripture, the righteousness of the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus, and therefore by implication, the basis of our salvation. In condemning the use of biblical invectives, these religious hypocrites condemn themselves by exposing what kind of people they really are, and where their allegiance truly lies. Are they much better than the non-Christians and the false teachers described here? I counsel them to examine themselves, to see if they are truly in the faith.

Compared to other things, it might appear a small error, but Jesus says that whoever is unfaithful with very little will also be unfaithful with much. If a person does not let the

Bible teach him what is genuine love and kindness, and the right way to address the unbelievers, but rather kowtow to the philosophy of the world in how he must speak and act before the non-Christians, as if they are his masters, should we listen to anything else he has to say? Should we let him stand behind a pulpit to lecture us about truth and error, right and wrong? And would I not be stupid and insane, if I were to listen to his criticisms?

Paul is talking about people who exhibit a form of godliness, but deny its power. The apostle probably has specific people or kinds of people in mind, but the principle is universal. It is always wrong to have a form of piety but deny its power. These people affirm a form of religion, even the Christian religion, but they deny the power of it. They have a form of godliness, but they are still "ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal," and so on. And, although they have a form of godliness, they "oppose the truth." Therefore, in this context the denial of the "power" of religion includes both character and doctrine.

Many people are fond of their religious formulas and rituals, but they have no power to live a holy life. Roman Catholic priests may appear pious in a perverse and unbiblical sense. At least their parishioners, who have no understanding of Christianity, regard them as holy men. But many of these priests secretly molest children. They have a form of religion, dress like clowns and mutter nonsense in Latin, but there is no true spiritual power in them.

Then, many people consider themselves pious, and even claim to be Christians, affirming a form of religion, but they deny its power in a doctrinal sense. Some reject the divine inspiration of Scripture. Some reject God's sovereignty, omniscience, and omnipotence, so that perhaps they affirm various versions of dualism, open theism, Arminianism, and so on. There are those who claim to affirm the authority of Scripture, but reject the virgin birth, or the resurrection of Christ, or the miracles of the apostles. Even though they confess God and Jesus Christ, since they deny the biblical doctrines regarding them, their confession consists of the mere physical motion of speech, making sounds in the air with no meaning or significance. There is no real belief, no real power, and no salvation.

Terrible times are made up of terrible people. Terrible people are those who reject biblical holiness and biblical teaching. Even worse are those who say that they are religious, who put on an appearance of spirituality, but deny the power of true religion in one's character and doctrine. The list of vices gives us the impression that Paul refers to especially terrible people, but such people are numerous today. They are everywhere. Go out to your balcony and throw a rock, and you will probably hit one of them. As if this is not bad enough, the person you hit probably goes to your church, because churches are full of these terrible people, who have a form of godliness, but deny its power.

Paul says to have nothing to do with them. This does not mean to turn the other way and run from them. They are already among us. But it means that when we discover these people in our churches, we must try them before the church, and when they are found guilty, we must excommunicate them, and expel them from our communities and our gatherings. It means that we are to avoid hiring seminary professors that have a form of

godliness, but deny its power in their character and doctrine. If we have already hired some, we must terminate their employment and remove them from seminary property. It means that we must never support churches, conferences, and projects that provide a platform for heretics to speak.

Sometimes people think that even heretics have something good to offer, and all is well if we disallow them from promoting their heresies when they are among us. This is foolish and naïve. It is also disobedience to biblical instruction. Paul writes that we must not "share in the sins of others." To give heretics any token of respect, support, or endorsement is to share in their sins. It is spiritual adultery, a sign of unfaithfulness to the Lord Jesus. It is far better to follow the apostolic command: "Have nothing to do with them."

23. Theocentrism vs. Anthropocentrism

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.

They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth – men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone. (2 Timothy 3:1-9)

The fundamental trait of these non-Christians, whether we are talking about their doctrine or character, is that they are "lovers of themselves" and "lovers of pleasures" rather than "lovers of God." This is similar to what we mean when we say that Christian doctrines and ethics are God-centered, while non-Christian doctrines and ethics are man-centered. We call one theocentric thinking, and the other anthropocentric thinking.

Anthropocentric thinking places man at the center of a worldview, and posits certain assumptions about man that is considered essential and nonnegotiable. These assumptions are considered essential and nonnegotiable not because they are rationally necessary, but because they are desirable to and consistent with the wicked inclinations of the unregenerate. They are rationally arbitrary and unjustified. Once these assumptions are in place, all other things are categorized, prioritized, and interpreted by relating them to this central concern, man, in a manner that is consistent with and controlled by these essential and nonnegotiable assumptions.

For example, if it is considered important for man to possess free will, then this is a basic assumption by which even the nature and action of God are interpreted. Christians are often unable to break free from man-centered thinking, so that they introduce man-centered concerns into their theological constructions. Thus we have heresies such as Arminianism and Open Theism. A more subtle example would be a misleading doctrine like compatibilism. A God-centered theology would attribute all power, all cause, and all freedom to God, and deny that man has free will. The foundation of moral responsibility would rest solely on God's sovereignty, and not any freedom or choice in man.

The nature of the center, or foundation, of a worldview determines the rest of one's system of thought. For example, a man-centered system may assume the reliability of human sensation instead of the reliability of divine revelation, and following from this, the system

may also depend on the fallacious method of scientific experimentation. Christians who remain captive to man-centered thinking even makes the reliability of sensation a precondition for any reliance on divine revelation. This places man himself as the center of all knowledge. There is a school of thought that does this, but at the same time is famous for claiming that God is the presupposition or precondition of all knowledge! As Paul writes, "impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived." It is God-centered in appearance, as least to those who are misled by its claims, but it is man-centered in reality.

Then, when it comes to man-centered ethics, right and wrong are not defined by divine commands, but by the relation of a given action to the basic assumptions about man. So, because the dignity and welfare of man is paramount, an action might be considered morally acceptable simply because, in the opinion of man-centered thinkers, it does not harm the welfare of any man. It is completely irrelevant as to whether the action is consistent with the command of God or whether it honors him. Thus, for example, some non-Christians argue that homosexuality is morally acceptable because it inflicts no harm to others. But why is this the standard of moral judgment? And how is harm defined? It can be argued that homosexuality is harmful in some sense even when evaluated by a man-centered standard.

An example of Christian compromise in the area of ethics is graded absolutism. In this prevalent system of ethics, first, God's commands are prioritized, often not according to revelation but according to man's opinion. Second, many situations are said to present dilemmas, according to man's judgment, in which two divine commands (or at least two) seem to apply, but a person must violate one of them in order to obey the rest. Third, the command that is regarded to be the higher one is obeyed, and the other one is broken, while the breaking of it is, without biblical warrant for saying so, not regarded as sin. Graded absolutism is in reality guided relativism.

The rebellion is quite explicit, but the blasphemy is implied. That is, when God gave the commandments, he did not have the intelligence or the foresight to realize that they would generate ethical dilemmas in so many situations, in which it would be impossible to obey all relevant commandments. But it appears that man detects these dilemmas rather easily. We may not be able to kill God, but we can at least work around him. So we prioritize his commandments, sometimes according to his revelation, sometimes according to our own judgment, and decide to obey only those that we consider feasible in any situation.

Can he expect more from us? What, total obedience to every command in every situation? Does God really think that he is God? What if someone knocks on the door and demands to know the location of a friend so that he may murder him? This is the classic test case. Is it not more important to protect a man's life, than to tell the truth, although truth is the principle by which God functions, by which he establishes the value of life, and by which he testifies to us the gospel of grace? But there is no way to obey both commands, is there? What did you say? We should attempt to subdue the attacker, or refuse to disclose the information and risk suffering torture, or even sacrifice our own life to save the friend?

You must be joking. We only gave you two options to choose from. Man-centered thinking cannot process selfless courage and sacrifice. Stop confusing us.

Consider what this means for Jesus Christ. Scripture says that he was tempted, but he never sinned. What would this mean according to the proponents of graded absolutism? They say that divine commands often contradict due to the circumstances in which they apply, and when they contradict, the right thing to do is to obey the higher command, whereas to disobey the lower command does not count as sin. This means that, in their view, Jesus could have killed hundreds of thousands of people with his bare hands – men, women, and children – but as long as he was obeying a higher command in each case, he never sinned or murdered anyone. Or, he could have committed fornication, even homosexual acts, hundreds of thousands of times. He could have raped thousands of women and children. He could have stolen hundreds of thousands of times, and lied hundreds of thousands of times. If he was compelled to do so in each case in order to follow a higher command, then he did not sin.

At least by implication, this is their idea of the sinlessness of Christ. If they do not abandon graded absolutism after this has been clearly and repeatedly explained to them, then they should be tried before the church and excommunicated. People who know that their doctrine implies this blasphemy about Christ and still insist on it cannot be considered Christians. And all those who spare them share in their sin. The only correct view is to acknowledge that God's commands never contradict one another, and that it is always logically possible to obey all of them.

In light of the above material on anthropocentric thinking, theocentric thinking needs only a brief explanation. Instead of placing man, and what is considered his inherent ability to discover information, at the center of a system of thought, it places God and his revelation at the center of the system. The basic assumptions pertain to the attributes of God – that he is creator, sustainer, ruler, and eternal, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, holy, righteous, merciful, and so on – and the attributes of Scripture – that it is inspired, true, complete, rational, consistent, authoritative, and so on. These assumptions are essential and nonnegotiable. And once they are in place, all other things are categorized, prioritized, and interpreted by relating them to this central concern, God, in a manner consistent with and controlled by these essential and nonnegotiable assumptions.

Accordingly, the rest of the system is also very different from a man-centered worldview. When it comes to doctrines, God's majesty and sovereignty are determinative, and not man's dignity and freedom. Whether we are talking about metaphysics or soteriology, the correct conclusions will agree with this principle. And when it comes to ethics, the central concern is not man's comfort and welfare, but God's honor. God's commands define right and wrong, and all his commands are to be obeyed in every situation. There is no situation in which the circumstances require a person to disobey a divine command. Perhaps he will disobey because of defects in his intelligence and character, but no situation makes it a logical impossibility to render complete obedience to all divine commands.

It is evident that these two ways of thinking and these two kinds of systems are not only radically different, but even the basic principles are in conflict. The two systems can never truly agree on anything. One cannot retain the same foundation and modify only the details. For this reason, for a non-Christian to come to agreement with God, he must abandon his man-centered principles and embrace God-centered principles. Therefore, a person who comes to faith in Jesus Christ does not only add one piece of information to his existing man-centered philosophy. Rather, he renounces all of his old worldview, and adopts a new foundation, a new way of thinking, a new intellectual structure and system.

No persuasion on the basis of man-centered assumptions can accomplish this, because man-centered assumptions cannot lead to God-centered conclusions, and the end is for him to adopt a whole new set of God-centered principles. Thus, whether it is done on the occasion of a presentation of arguments, this event occurs in a person when God changes him by a direct action in the soul. This is what we call conversion. The product is a person who not only exhibits a form of godliness, but also possesses its power.

24. Intelligence for Salvation

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 3:14-15)

It is a non-Christian dictum that people should live authentically, or that they should be true to themselves. The trouble is that when terrible people live out their true nature, terrible times result. All kinds of evil flourish in society because evil people live authentically. They think and behave in line with the nature of their father, the devil. Many of them have even infiltrated the church. They exhibit a form of godliness but deny its power in their character and their doctrine. They oppose the truth and persecute the righteous.

But we are here to stand against them. Although they conspire against us, the Bible says that the Lord sits on his throne and laughs at them. Just as the Lord laughs at his enemies, Elijah mocked the false prophets. Those who are faithful to the gospel ought to follow their godly example and ridicule unbelievers. We honor God when we jeer at those who spurn his wisdom and power. We embolden the elect when we remind them that unbelief is foolish and futile, and that it is proper, even necessary, to say so. And we take a stand against the onslaughts of non-Christians when we demonstrate that they are the ones who are irrational and immoral. To paraphrase the confrontation between Ahab and Elijah, when they say, "Are you the ones who trouble this world?" we answer, "No! You are the ones!"

Paul says that he is different from the false teachers and religious impostors. Whereas they are ungrateful, unholy, without love, and so on, and whereas they oppose the truth, the apostle points to his sound teaching, his way of life, his purpose, faith, patience, and other godly qualities. He also mentions that he has endured persecution numerous times. His doctrines, virtues, and sufferings are public information.

Commentators hurry to explain why Paul's statement does not constitute prideful boasting of his accomplishments. What is strange is that such a defense is needed. Perhaps they mention it for the benefit of the readers. Clearly, Paul does not consider himself prideful, nor is there anything in Scripture that would condemn this kind of straight talk. So unless we approach the Bible with a standard of humility that is foreign to the Bible – an unbiblical standard – we would regard it as a truthful statement about the work of God's grace within him, and it would not even cross our minds that he might be making a prideful boast about his own spirituality. The way we approach Scripture exposes our attitudes and prejudices. In any case, the apostle provides a forthright statement to contrast himself against those who have a form of godliness but deny its power.

Then he tells Timothy to be different also. The way to do that is to "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of." Again, the basic difference is doctrinal. Paul says that Timothy is convinced of the doctrines that he has learned. This is a sharp contrast to those spiritually weak and confused individuals who are "always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth."

Some people are always curious about the latest religious theories and movements. They enjoy taking snippets of teaching here and there, comment on it, and argue about it. We used to complain that there are so many Bible studies without competent oversight, where ignorant believers, swayed by their own desires and prejudices, are allowed to contribute their opinions on Scripture. Now we have the Internet, so they do not even need to leave their homes to do this.

Then, some are more adventurous and even arrange public debates to defend Christianity. But for them the whole enterprise is a personal and academic quest. They revel in the discussions and controversies, but not in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not genuine zeal or love for God, but it is only another example of a form of godliness without its power. Their activities constitute a form of entertainment for themselves. Their work appears to be a ministry only because it happens that they side with the Christian faith, at least for now. Rather, we should learn the truth and become convinced of it, established in it, and stand firm on it.

Timothy has learned the right doctrines from reliable instructors since he was an infant. Parents and ministers should teach children biblical doctrines at least as soon as they are able to understand language. Even better, they should teach children language through biblical doctrines. It is commonly assumed that children find doctrines boring and difficult. So instead of teaching them the Old Testament prophets and Paul's epistles, we tell them stories about Noah's Ark, Samson, and David and Goliath. Of course, these are very fine stories, but we must not present them only as stories, but as historical events placed in the context of God's revelation concerning his purposes and actions in time, leading to the appearing of Jesus Christ, and also explaining their place in the system of Christian doctrines. It is not up to us to assume on behalf of the children that doctrines are boring and difficult. Teach them. Let the little reprobates fall asleep, but give the elect children a chance to learn. There might be a Timothy among them.

A well-known theologian recently published a book of systematic theology for children. It is a wonderful idea. However, this otherwise decent work is marred by repeated reminders that some of the doctrines under consideration are hard to understand. But this is almost always preceded or followed by clear and simple explanations of the doctrines, and most of the time the explanations are sound or at least acceptable. It seems the writer is programmed by the religious tradition that some doctrines are supposed to be hard to understand, so this is what a person is supposed to say even if he is able to explain almost everything clearly and in simple terms.

However, it is a gross injustice to the children, even a poisoning of their minds, to tell them that certain doctrines are hard to understand unless the Bible itself specifically declares

those doctrines to be difficult for human comprehension. Otherwise, we would be imposing our own incompetence and unbiblical tradition on the next generation. The apostle Peter admits that some of Paul's writings are hard to understand. But he does not specify particular passages or doctrines. In addition, even something that is hard to understand can be understood – hard does not mean impossible. And something that used to be hard to understand, once understood, can be understood better and better until it becomes easy to think about and to explain. Unless the Bible is more specific, it is not up to some theologian to tell us what we can or cannot understand just because he finds it difficult, or just because he thinks we are stupid. He has no right to impose his own limitations and prejudices upon us. Let us stop installing mental blocks in our children's minds, so that they may advance beyond us.

Paul remarks that the sacred writings are able to make Timothy "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." As he does in other places, the apostle makes the difference between Christians and non-Christians a matter of wisdom, that is, of the intellect and of intelligence. In his letter to the Romans, he refers to wicked men who have refused to acknowledge or worship God since the creation of the world. And he says, "Their thoughts are useless, and their stupid minds are in the dark. They claim to be wise, but they are fools" (Romans 1:21-22, CEV).

It is strange that even Christians insist that non-Christians are intelligent. Whose side are they on? Sometimes they posit a narrow meaning for wisdom that limits it to moral issues. So the unbelievers are "morally stupid." This argument fails for at least three reasons. First, the Bible does not use this or equivalent words in this narrow sense. The context always lends itself to an intellectual interpretation, that the non-Christians are intellectually stupid. Second, the Bible distinguishes between being stupid and being wicked, and declares that unbelievers are both stupid and wicked, not just wicked. Third, the Bible says that the unbelievers "claim to be wise" but that this claim is wrong. But the unbelievers do not claim to be wise only in a moral sense. Unless these Christians are ready to accuse the Bible of equivocation, when it says that non-Christians are fools, it corresponds to the unbelievers' claim that they are wise – that is, not only in the moral sense. Therefore, the teaching of the Bible is that non-Christians are unwise people – they are unintelligent, stupid fools. Of course, they are wicked as well. This quality is related to foolishness, but it is distinguishable from it.

Scripture gives wisdom that leads to salvation. This presupposes sin and hell. We are rescued from these by the wisdom that we receive from biblical doctrines. This wisdom teaches the way of faith, and this means that personal belief in something definite is necessary. Salvation is not automatically and universally applied, but only certain people receive it, and those people are marked by faith.

This faith is in "Christ Jesus." This is associated with a definite idea of God, of incarnation, of atonement and resurrection. The faith of salvation is definite, and its focus is singular and exclusive. Salvation belongs to those who intelligently believes in what Scripture says about Jesus Christ. Any proposal that is not of faith, or that is not of faith in Christ, is not only unintelligent, but it is powerless to save anyone from everlasting damnation.

25. Breathed Out by God

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Paul writes that the Scripture "is given by inspiration of God" (KJV). To inspire means to breathe or blow *into* something. However, the Greek word refers to expiration, to breathe or blow *out*. Inspiration can also refer to mere stimulation or incitement. That is, a grand scenery may "inspire" a poem or painting. An exciting event may "inspire" a novel or documentary. The triumph of an unlikely hero may "inspire" others to reach for greater goals. We often refer to inspiration in this weak sense, but there is only an indirect relationship between what inspires and what is inspired. In fact, the relationship consists of mere correlation, not direct causation. This idea of inspiration is far from what Scripture teaches about God's relationship to itself, that is, how he produced the Bible.

The NIV is more literal and says "All Scripture is God-breathed." The ESV makes the meaning clear: "All Scripture is breathed out by God." He did not produce the Bible by merely stimulating the minds of the writers or by suggesting ideas to them. He did it by direct causation. You say, "Certainly this cannot be, since human authors were the ones who wrote down the words." But God is not a man – he does not write out only words on paper, but also entire planets and galaxies. No, he "wrote" out the human authors themselves by his creation and providence, and then he directly caused the human authors to write out what he wanted them to write. This does not mean that he suspended their consciousness. His control was much more extensive than that – he "wrote" out their very thoughts and personalities. Peter tells us that the prophets "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

It is not necessary to abandon the use of "inspiration." The word has taken on a theological meaning that could accurately represent the doctrine of Scripture. Except for those who are unfamiliar or those who are unfaithful to the doctrine, it is understood that the word does not refer to mere stimulation or incitement, but an exercise of God's supernatural power to communicate his thoughts, control the human writers, and to ensure the exact recording of his words. This is what we mean by divine inspiration, or that the Bible is given by the inspiration of God. Then, by his providence, the various documents were caused to be compiled into a single complete volume, with no error, and with nothing to be added to it or subtracted from it.

The Bible is inspired, infallible, and inerrant. This doctrine is mandatory belief for all Christians, all church leaders and members, and all seminary professors. We excommunicate those who affirm heresy after they have been repeatedly instructed and warned, but the Scripture is the standard by which truth is known and heresy is detected, as well as the basis of the authority by which the Christian community expels unrepentant

members. In fact, the Scripture is the standard by which everything about Christianity itself is defined.

Therefore, our view toward the Scripture is the root of the matter. This is one battle where no Christian can run from, and this is one place where no compromise and no disagreement can be tolerated. This is one doctrine that is not open to negotiation, and whose truth is not even open for discussion. Our conflict with those who reject the doctrine of divine inspiration is not a quarrel about semantics, or a foolish and unproductive controversy. This is it. This is everything.

For this reason, dissenters are to be met with the harshest treatment imaginable that is within biblical and legal boundaries. This includes public ridicule and condemnation, the use of imprecatory prayers against them, and excommunication, including their physical removal from church and seminary properties. The offenders should be removed from employment where applicable. Any church or seminary that pays someone to resist biblical inspiration and inerrancy does not deserve to exist. There is to be no leniency. Those who openly disagree with this policy should be regarded as accomplices and co-conspirators against the Lord, and should be punished in the same manner.

Of course, I do not expect this to be implemented in churches and seminaries, because in this period in history, it appears that most people who call themselves Christians do not care about the Lord Jesus to this extent. They would much rather allow him to suffer disgrace than to make even the slightest effort to root out evil in their congregations, let alone a decisive policy so faithful to God and Scripture that it would certainly be met with tremendous shock and resistance.

Sometimes Scripture is rejected in ways that are less than forthright, so that there are people who claim to affirm the inspiration of Scripture, but who disagree with what it presents itself to be. For example, there are theologians who assert that, because of the great gulf or distinction between God and men, between the creator and his creatures, men can know the mind of God in an analogical way at best. Therefore, even Scripture cannot speak of God or to reveal God in an exact or univocal manner. However, Scripture does not present itself this way. It presents itself as an univocal revelation of the mind of God.

Paul writes, "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). He does not say, "expressing spiritual truths in natural words," but "spiritual words," or words that are able to express the meaning of spiritual truths. This means that God is really the way he is as he describes himself in Scripture, and he really thinks the way that he says he thinks. There is no difference. Of course, God knows and thinks more than what he says in Scripture, but to the extent that Scripture says what it says, it is what God thinks and says. The Bible is the exact, perfect, and univocal expression of the mind of God. To deny this is to reject the inspiration and authority of Scripture. Once this has been clearly and repeatedly explained to the offenders, if they do not repent, they should be treated in the same way as those who explicitly reject biblical inspiration and inerrancy.

These theologians and those who follow them have worm their way into churches and seminaries, and have established themselves as faithful defenders of the faith, by hiding their heresy behind a false humility, namely, the assumption that the difference between creator and creature entails a total qualitative difference between God's thoughts and our thoughts. The Bible indeed says that God's ways are higher than our ways, that his thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and that "no mind has conceived what God has prepared," but then it adds, "but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:10).

Therefore, to deny that we know the exact thoughts of God to the extent that he has revealed them in Scripture, and in the exact way that he himself thinks them, is to reject not only the idea of the inspiration of Scripture, but the actual content of Scripture. These theologians and their followers speak about human finitude so much that I am inclined to believe that they are vastly more finite than the rest of us. So some patience is needed when explaining to them again the elementary teachings of Christ. However, there comes a point when idiocy is seen to be so mixed with obstinacy that they must be regarded as unrepentant heretics who deny the inspiration, the usefulness, and the teachings of Scripture. They claim to honor God with their false humility, but in reality they harbor a secret contempt for him, and their doctrine makes room for them to maintain their personal and speculative views regarding the nature of God and man, and the relationship between the two.

Since they turn biblical revelation into analogical communication, how can they believe the univocal gospel? Their faith can never rise above the level of an analogy. Therefore, although they claim to be faithful Christians, they are Christians only in an analogical sense – that is, Christians, but not exactly. If, contrary to their own theology, some of them have an univocal faith in the gospel, then although they are real Christians, they are teaching people to have only an analogy of belief in the truth, since even an univocal belief in an analogy of the truth can amount to only an analogy of belief in the truth. In other words, no one who truly affirms such a theology believes in the gospel. Unless a person at least implicitly rejects this theology, he cannot be a Christian. And if he affirms it explicitly but rejects it implicitly, he is a hypocrite and a deceiver.

What the Bible says is what God says. There is no difference. For this reason, a person's attitude toward the Bible is his attitude toward God. To the unbelievers, to heretics, and to theologians of analogy and paradox, this is bad news, because it means that there is no significant barrier between them and God's voice. There is no basis to make the excuse that we cannot know what God says or what he means. The explicit and univocal words of God are right before us.

On the other hand, those who reverence God rejoice in this fact, that God has given us an exact revelation of himself, of his thoughts and commands, of the nature of reality, of man and the world, and of salvation, and that he has expressed this revelation in explicit and univocal statements, and not in analogies and paradoxes. We want to submit to his authority, and we will not hide behind excuses and say this or that is difficult to understand, or this or that statement must mean something other than what the words say. We want to hear from him and be taught by him, and we can, because in the Bible he speaks clearly, and what he says there is what he means, and what he truly thinks in his divine mind.

The authority, usefulness, and sufficiency of Scripture is therefore established on this basis, that the Bible is divinely inspired, and that its content is comprehensible and its language is univocal. How can you teach me anything, or be so presumptuous as to rebuke me, when all you have is an analogy of what God means? Why should I pay any attention to you, when the basis of your assertions is an interpretation of an analogy by a ridiculously finite mind that insists on seeing paradoxes? Let me hear from God himself, directly and univocally, or deliver his word to me without analogies and paradoxes, and I will believe and obey. This is what we have in the Bible, and this is what true preaching accomplishes, so that the Scripture is useful for "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."

Even though I am a mere man, I have the authority to teach another person, and to tell him what to believe about God, man, sin, and salvation, because as long as I communicate to him what the Bible says, it is as if God speaks to him, and God has the authority to teach him these things. Although I am a mere man, and have no direct knowledge of a man's heart or the authority to condemn him, God has this knowledge and authority, and the Bible is God himself speaking; therefore, the Bible has the authority to rebuke and to correct. And as long as I speak in accordance with biblical revelation, I have the authority to rebuke and to correct those who are in error in their doctrine and behavior. When the message of the Bible is faithfully communicated, it is as if God is speaking, teaching, and rebuking. All believers are priests of God, and are permitted to handle the Scripture, to teach and to rebuke, but those whom God has called to be ministers of the gospel are especially authorized and obligated to do so.

26. Proclaim Sound Doctrine

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (2 Timothy 4:2-4)

Paul's main concerns are for the honor of God and the progress of the gospel. Since he has reached the end of his life and ministry, he now commands Timothy before God and Jesus Christ to continue the work.

The prophets, the apostles, and the Lord himself have established the presence of the Christian faith in the world. The Lord Jesus said that this is a permanent presence, and that the forces of hell will not prevail against the church. The Christian religion will never be wiped out, and its doctrines can never be refuted or destroyed. However, in accordance with God's plan, Christianity will continue to have its enemies. There will be those who resist it and attempt to annihilate it. There will be those who refuse to embrace the only person and message that can save men's wretched souls, and even strive to prevent others from entering into everlasting life. Although they will never succeed in their evil schemes, their efforts will remain more than an annoyance to the followers of Jesus Christ.

Paul tells Timothy something about what the church will face, including the depths of depravity that non-Christians will sink into. There will be terrible times. People will be lovers of themselves, of money, and of pleasure rather than lovers of God. They will be ungrateful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderous, and so on. They will have a form of religion but deny its power. Some will claim to be religious, or even claim to be Christians, but will in fact oppose the truth. Evil men and impostors, he writes, will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

What is Paul's instruction for a church that faces opposition from every side, and confronts trouble of every kind? Terrible times are here and more are ahead, and the apostle's ministry is about to come to an end. If there is one potent weapon, one special strategy, one spectacular insight, now is the time to talk about it. With an almost threatening solemnity that is unsurpassed elsewhere, he charges Timothy: "Preach the Word." We must have this fixed in our minds: when it comes to the ministry, this is one apostolic prescription that applies at all times and in all situations.

In order to reduce offense, to show respect, to display humility, and to incite interest, preaching has often been reconceived in non-authoritarian terms. So instead of to "preach," the minister is often said to "share" God's word or to "discuss" with the congregation what ought to be believed and practiced. Although it is entirely appropriate to share and to

discuss the teachings of the Bible, here Paul does not say to share or to discuss, but to preach. There is a difference. To preach is to assert, declare, and to proclaim with knowledge, conviction, and authority. It is to deliver a word from God about something of considerable importance.

Paul says that the content of preaching is "the Word." Here it is synonymous with that which some people will refuse to hear, that is, "sound doctrine." Although our preaching should be totally consistent with Scripture, it is not identical to Scripture. To preach is not simply to read the Bible aloud, for if that were the case, there would really be no such thing as preaching, and preaching would not be good or bad, accurate or inaccurate. And there would be no difference between a good preacher and a bad preacher. All would be readers. Neither should a preacher sound like a commentary. Rather, the preacher assimilates the Scripture and then declares its message.

Again, preaching must always be biblical in the sense that it must follow "the pattern of sound doctrine" (2 Timothy 1:13). But it is a pattern, not a script. It is a model, not a prepared outline. Homileticians often prescribe methods by which the preacher may best accomplish his task. The expository method, by which both the headings and the contents of the sermon are derived from a passage, is regarded by many as the preferred approach. However, since the Bible itself does not mandate any particular method, and homileticians have failed to prove that it does, or even to prove that any one is to be preferred, no one has the authority to assert that a preacher is faithful, or more faithful, to his commission only if he uses the expository method.

Paul preached sound doctrine just as faithfully to the Athenians in Acts 17, where he cited no biblical passage, as when Peter used a "proof-text" approach in Acts 2. But to preach without citing Scripture, and to cite passages merely as proof-texts, are regarded as inferior or even unacceptable methods by many homiletic theorists. The truth is that although the preacher must always be true to the Bible, the Bible permits much freedom and variety in sermon construction and presentation. He must preach sound doctrine, but he does not have to let the homileticians tell him how he must do it.

In fact, if we insist that the method itself must come from Scripture, it would seem that the expository method (where both the headings and the contents are derived from a passage) would have the least scriptural support. No sermon in the Bible follows this method as defined by homileticians. This does not make it wrong or inferior. In fact, it is arguable that the expository method is the one that I use the most often, albeit sometimes loosely. The point is that some people have claimed too much for it, and have imposed it on others, whereas the Bible seems to permit some freedom in this area. Thus although there is no rigid method, the content of preaching is definite and decided, so that the essential thrust of the message is nonnegotiable. And since the message is based on the revelation and the authority of God, it legitimately obligates men's conscience.

The preacher applies biblical doctrines in a number of beneficial ways – he is to instruct, to rebuke, and to encourage. To instruct, or to announce and explain the truth, is the foundation for the other uses of the word of God. The preacher then corrects and rebukes

those who deviate from the biblical standard set forth. It is also on the same basis of sound doctrine that meaningful encouragement is possible. There is to be a right proportion of these uses of God's word. Encouragement without a biblical basis, without the foundation of teaching, is empty or even misleading. Correction is only meaningful when the right standard is defined, so that it can be shown that one has deviated from it, and so that it can be known what one must return to. Then, if a preacher only instructs and encourages, but never rebukes, the one who strays from the truth is never confronted with his error, and the preacher has not fulfilled his duty.

Paul says that there will be a time when people will not put up with sound doctrine. They will reject preaching as a method of hearing from God. And they will reject the message that preaching is intended to communicate. Instead, they wish to hear things that will entertain them, fascinate them, and justify their wrongdoing and their evil desires. And they demand a certain carnal and sensory stimulation in the method of presentation. Some Christians claim that we must go with the times and adapt our approach according to cultural trends. In other words, we should follow the non-Christians and submit to their wishes. But the apostle prescribes preaching already with the above resistance in mind. He is the one who mentions those who will not put up with sound doctrine. He is the one who says to preach the word "in season and out of season," whether or not the time is favorable to this method or to our doctrine, and whether or not it is the popular thing to do.

Therefore, those who propose alternatives to preaching, and those who propose alternatives to sound doctrine, are in fact proposing surrender to sin and unbelief. Now, if the people are inattentive and rebellious, a king does not order his herald to stop declaring his message, and to dance and juggle like a clown so that he can draw a crowd. No, if the people will not listen to the herald, and if they will not agree with the king, the next thing that the king does, if he so pleases, is to send his soldiers to slaughter them. The herald does not change his approach or his message. If a preacher changes his approach or his message to accommodate distraction and resistance, he is no longer a preacher. He has abandoned his ministry. But let the heralds of the King insist on performing their duty, endure hardship, and keep the faith.

27. Alone, But Never Alone

At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. (2 Timothy 4:16-17)

God has ordained that human beings are to form communities and to have fellowship with one another. Thus men and women gather to form families, various societies, and even nations. God calls out his chosen ones from these families and nations, so that they may have fellowship with himself and with Jesus Christ, and also with one another. The "church" is the society of believers in Jesus Christ, but the word can be used in several different ways. We can refer to all those who have been chosen for salvation through Jesus Christ, including all those who are on earth and those who are in heaven. Or, we can limit the term to only those who profess the Lord Jesus on the earth. When used in a still more narrow sense, the word refers to a local gathering of believers. That is, in this narrow sense, each local congregation is a church. God has ordained that there should be local communities where his people could worship, learn, and serve together.

There is no doubt that the local church is a God-ordained institution. Its importance deserves emphasis. That said, theologians and preachers often overstate the case with assertions that have no biblical support, or that are based on inferences that extend far beyond what the relevant biblical passages permit. They say things about the importance of human community and of the obligation of church membership and attendance that are foreign to the Bible, that cannot be validly inferred from it, and that are outright inventions. This does not produce a safer doctrine, but false doctrine. The result is not a strong community and faithful service to Jesus Christ, but a theology that is focused on man, an attitude that is dependent on human instrument, and pervasive weakness and unbelief in Christians.

For example, it is often asserted that a Christian can never develop his biblical knowledge better by reading books at home than by listening to sermons at church. However, there is no evidence, biblical or otherwise, for this view. In fact, it appears that the assertion is not necessarily true or even outright false, since there are good arguments for saying that a person can develop both the depth and breadth of his knowledge far more effectively by reading at home than by listening to sermons at church.

In some societies, almost anyone can access the writings of Augustine, Calvin, Turretin, and so on. In terms of knowledge and reliable doctrine, how likely is it that the pastor at any local church can preach sermons that can rival their writings? How likely is it that a local pastor can preach sermons that rival that of Spurgeon's? The truth is that, in today's climate, a person is more likely to go astray in doctrine by going to church than by staying at home and reading generally reliable authors like Calvin and Spurgeon.

The assertion that it is superior to listen to sermons at church is often accompanied by statements to the effect that "there is just something different" and that "there is just something about it" that is unavailable to a person who stays home and read. But unless this extra "something" is defined, and unless there is biblical evidence to support its presence at church and its absence at home, then the idea amounts to mere superstition. God's word is powerful and effective in any situation, the Holy Spirit is with every believer, and knowledge is no less true and useful just because it is gained by private study.

Rather, we must admit that, if a person possesses at least average reading skills, and if he has the discipline to pursue private studies, then it is very likely that he will gain much, much, much, much more biblical knowledge by reading books at home instead of listening to sermons at church. Even if the church provides classes where Scripture is expounded in great detail, this still cannot compare to the depth and breadth that is attainable by a determined student who pursues a vigorous program of private studies. It is foolish and dishonest to say otherwise. It is true that many people do not possess adequate reading skills, and that many people do not have the discipline to pursue private studies. But then the problem is with these individuals, and it says nothing about whether or not it is better to read books or to listen to sermons. In fact, the same people may have even worse listening skills, and although they lack discipline, it may still be easier to pursue studies at home than going to church.

The correct approach is to admit the truth, that reading and private studies have their advantages, and so does listening to sermons at church. When it comes to growth in knowledge and understanding, reading books by reliable authors is likely to be far more effective than listening to sermons at church. This is especially probable given the condition of contemporary pastors and churches. However, Christians must then be reminded that to increase in knowledge is not the only reason for church membership and attendance.

Other reasons to attend church include corporate worship and service. Nevertheless, exaggerated statements are also made about them. In their zeal to encourage membership, attendance, and participation, Christian leaders must be careful to avoid making claims and threats that cannot be supported by Scripture. Many, if not most, statements about what Christians *must* do in these areas are overstated, and cannot be validly inferred from the Bible.

Sometimes they think that a mere mention of Hebrews 10:25 is sufficient: "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing." But it is not sufficient, because that verse has a particular context and refers to people who stopped gathering for a particular reason. If it is to be used in some different context and in reference to people with different motives and reasons, and if it is even to be used to derive rules and threats, then it is necessary to provide sound justification for it. Otherwise, the greatest danger to the church is no longer a lack of attendance, but these modern Pharisees that impose their own human traditions on the people of God and who threaten their souls for noncompliance.

As another example, it is sometimes said that a person cannot grow in holiness without a community of like-minded people to encourage and admonish him. Again, there is biblical support for saying that a community could help, but there is no biblical support for the assertion that one cannot succeed without the help of a community. It is said that a person who is held accountable by a community is more likely to conform to a pattern of holy living. However, we can reply, it is also possible that he will become a religious hypocrite, in that he will develop an outward show of holiness, sustained by pride and the desire for approval. It is said that God uses human instruments to save men from falling away. But it is unbiblical to assert or to imply that God will or must always use human instruments; in fact, it is clear from Scripture that he does not. It is not men who would keep us from falling, but God. Sometimes he uses human instruments; sometimes he does not. To assert the importance of community on the basis of an overstated view of human instruments leads to rules and threats that are without biblical warrant. And again, this kind of theology falls under Christ's condemnation against the Pharisees and the Jews.

Then, there is the emphasis on "team ministry." Again, the problem is not in teaching cooperation, but in overstating its importance and application. The Bible indeed teaches that Christians should work with one another and respect the different spiritual abilities that God has given to us.

For example, consider what Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 12. Using the human body as a metaphor, he writes that the eye cannot say to the hand, "I do not need you" (v. 21). Applying this to the spiritual gifts that he lists earlier in the chapter (v. 8-10), we understand him to mean that a person with a gift of prophecy cannot say to a person with the gift of healing, "I do not need you." The "need" here is used in a specific sense. He writes, "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts." That is, his concern is for a healthy and complete church. And when this is in view, then there is a "need" for every member. One person cannot do it all. The person who has the gift of prophecy but not a gift of healing can prophesy, but he cannot heal the sick.

We must not overstate what this means for team ministry. Although the person who has the gift of prophecy cannot perform another person's function, he can still perform the function that he has been enabled to do. That is, he cannot say to the one who has a gift of healing, "I do not need you," if the context is the health of a complete church, but as an individual, the person who has the gift to prophesy can do so whether or not he is associated with the person who has the gift to heal, or for that matter, any other person. Likewise, the person who has the gift to preach, or to write, or to sing, has the ability to do so whether or not he is associated with any church or with any other person. Therefore, to broaden the idea of "need" beyond the restrictions of the biblical context may lead to an exaggerated teaching on team ministry.

The teaching is sometimes so exaggerated that it is as if a lone ministry is always wrong, even sinful, and even doomed to failure. Sometimes it is suggested that a minister or believer will always fall if he stands alone. However, this teaching cannot be derived from Scripture; instead, it is a manifestation of weakness and unbelief.

It is often said that we should look to Jesus as our model, and even he chose disciples to be around him. But this is a misleading view of his ministry, since it is easier to argue that they hindered him rather than helped him. Time after time, the Lord rebuked them for their lack of faith and understanding. Sometimes they were even used by the devil to tempt the Lord to sin, as when they asked permission to call down fire from heaven to consume those who rejected his ministry, and when Peter insisted that he would not be killed and raised from the dead.

Then, at a most crucial time, when Jesus asked the disciples to pray with him before his arrest, they fell asleep. And after his arrest, they fled and abandoned him. He knew all of this would happen, and said, "But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me" (John 16:32). If we aspire to be like Jesus, then let us stop making excuses, and to stop codifying our weakness and unbelief into doctrine. Instead, let us be willing to work with others, but also aspire to be able to stand alone.

This is especially important for a Christian leader. He should not need a community of believers to hold him up in the faith. Rather, he should be able to single-handedly lift up a fearful and discouraged congregation. In fact, he should be able to remain faithful and fearless in the Lord even when the whole Christian and non-Christian community band together against him in order to oppose the Lord's precepts and commands. Whether a minister of the gospel is able to attain this is one question, but there is no warrant to make it a matter of doctrine to say that it is impossible to attain.

Sometimes it is God's will for a man to stand alone. This is undeniable. As Paul writes, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me." In light of this, it is a gross injustice to believers to overstate the doctrine of community and cooperation, because it might leave them confused and unprepared if they are ever left to stand alone. Instead, we must teach them that God has not given them a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, of love, and of a sound mind. A Christian can stand alone, even when all others have abandoned him, because the Lord stands with him, and he can do all things through Christ who gives him strength.