

# SERMONETTES VOLUME 2

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## 1. The Axiom of Gabriel

**"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"**

**The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."**

**"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:34-38)**

Here God sends the angel Gabriel to tell Mary that she will become pregnant and give birth to a child. This will not be an ordinary child. As the Son of the Most High, he will be divine. And since he will be born through a woman, he will be human as well. He will be the incarnation of deity. According to God's promise, he will take permanent possession of the throne of David. And unlike those who prefigured him, this king will never die, and his kingdom will never fall.

Mary is perplexed. She does not ask about this Son of the Most High, or the throne of David, or the permanence of the kingdom. But she says, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" In times past, God enabled barren women to conceive, and he made Abraham and Sarah fertile in their old age. However, to conceive without a man is something that has never been done. It is without precedent even in the records of the acts of God.

Gabriel begins with a relatively concrete answer: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." It is not a detailed or a mechanical explanation, but he makes it clear that this will be an act of divine power, with specific reference to the Holy Spirit's role. He also tells Mary about Elizabeth, who has been pregnant for six months by this time, although she was barren. Then, the angel appeals to a basic principle that covers both events: "For nothing is impossible with God."

This shows us something about the method and the content of his thinking. The plan of salvation now overlaps with a question on biology, or on a more basic level, a question on possibility. To address this, Gabriel first mentions what God is about to do and what God has already done. Although this is significant, his final appeal is made not to the past and future history of God's acts, but to his knowledge of God's nature, stated in a proposition that is broad and abstract, and that is intelligible even apart from the history of divine actions. It is not dependent on the history of redemption; rather, the history of redemption is explained by it and dependent on it. As for the content, it is simply this: "For nothing is impossible with God." This is excellent theology.

Objections against divine omnipotence commit categorical fallacies, among other things. "Can God create a rock so big or heavy that he cannot lift?" is an overused challenge, but

it comes in different forms, and it illustrates the failure of other attempts. It is also a fair teaching device, since it offers the opportunity to follow Gabriel in his appeal to a basic axiom on the divine nature. That is, the Bible teaches that "God is spirit"; therefore, size, weight, and other physical properties do not apply to him, and when he moves a rock, he does not "lift" it. The challenge commits a categorical error, and reflects the usual ignorance of non-Christians.

Then, it is asked whether God can perform a contradiction, as in, "Can God create a square circle?" This is answered by noting the nature of a contradiction, so that because a contradiction is what it is, this attempt also commits a categorical fallacy. A contradiction is in fact nothing. This is often obscured by the fact that we can still say it. To illustrate that we can utter meaningless sentences, suppose I ask, "Can God walk a cat wrench omelet door super?" Even I do not know what this means. I cannot conceive of a cat wrench omelet door super, nor do I know if it is something to be walked. I can state the question, but it is meaningless, and because it is meaningless, it is not a question that applies to God's ability. Likewise, although we can say nonsense like "a square circle" or "a rock that is not a rock," these are nothing. They are not things to be created, nor does anyone who talks about them know what they mean. We maintain that divine omnipotence is a coherent concept and reality.

When man abandons the axioms of revelation, or the basic propositions about God's nature, power, and wisdom, his intellect falls from the heights of heaven to the depths of hell. Now his thinking takes after the animals rather than the angels, and he strives more and more to become stupid. When confronted with questions on possibility, he appeals to his sensations, observations, experimentations, and such things. This places a false, artificial, and narrow limit on what he could consider as possible – not because reality is as narrow as the non-Christian thinks, but because his mind is so small and his intelligence so feeble. Without true and basic axioms to anchor his system, and without sound methods to guide his thinking, all his science and philosophy are false, and are the products of arbitrary conjecture and speculation. All his arguments are fallacious, and his learning consists of fantasies instead of discoveries.

True religion first concerns itself, not with man's dignity and progress, but with God's majesty and power. This is a condemnation against all the philosophies of men, and many theological schools and traditions. It may seem obvious that, when we think about God, we ought to assume that he can do all things, and that this basic principle should determine our idea of what is possible. But this is not obvious to everyone. Rather than beginning with God's power, there are those who begin their thinking, even when it comes to theology, with what they regard as men's abilities, discoveries, and experiences. I say "what they regard," because they are always mistaken even about men's abilities, discoveries, and experiences.

God is the foundation of theology, and once this is established, the rest of the doctrines are affirmed without any strain or contradiction. These are doctrines such as the inspiration, preservation, and canonization of Scripture, the creation of man and the world, the resurrection of Christ and of his people, and the predestination of individuals for heaven

and hell. As Paul said, "Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?" (Acts 26:8). And Jeremiah said, "Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you" (Jeremiah 32:17). The foundation for these statements is that nothing is impossible with God.

Gabriel's final appeal is to a principle about the eternal nature and power of God, and not to the history of redemption or to the progress of revelation. The teaching and its application cannot be restricted by eras and epochs. God can do anything he wants at anytime he wants to do it. If he does nothing, we cannot make him do something. If he does something, we cannot stop him.

Let no one trouble you, therefore, with doctrines that impose fabricated limitations on God's sovereignty and omnipotence. We can have confidence in the doctrines of the Christian faith. They are immune to refutations that are based on non-Christian axioms and concepts of possibility. And as God is both transcendent and immanent, we can have confidence in God's ability to care, to protect, and to fulfill his many precious promises in our lives.

## 2. All Things are Possible, When You Believe

**And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:21-24, ESV)**

The desired end is a benefit not in the category of salvation as narrowly considered, but in the category of healing, or deliverance from demonic power. It is not, or not only, a deliverance from ethical influence, but from the demon's mental and physical control over the boy. When the text is applied, this aspect of the event cannot be removed by appealing to its place in God's plan of redemption or the progress of revelation. The event is what it is, and what Jesus says in verse 23 applies to the need specified in this same context, even if it also applies to other things. Otherwise, the alleged respect for the history of redemption would become an excuse to practice allegorical interpretation. And since the principle is tied to the nature of the need, to deny one is also to destroy the other.

Along with verses like Mark 11:24, John 16:23, and a few others, Mark 9:23 is one of those texts that preachers and theologians spend more time to explain away, and to expound on what they cannot do and do not mean, than to assert their truth and encourage belief in them. Those who refer to them without also destroying them with a thousand qualifications are branded as heretics, as those who instill "false hope" in people. But why should the main thrust of an exposition of a text be to avoid abuse of the text? And what they consider abuse is often clearly within the natural, even undeniable, meaning of the text.

Indeed, our interpretation would be man-centered and merely psychological if we were to ignore the history of redemption and the majesty, the grace, and the power of God that scream for attention in all the verses. However, if we are so theologically acute that we no longer see the troubled father who wishes deliverance for his son, not so that the son would be converted and attain heaven, but so that he would no longer burn or drown himself, then we are so theologically acute that we have become illiterate.

We reject the positive thinking of self-help psychology. Yet there is a biblical faith, which indeed produces a positive outlook, and constitutes a spiritual and psychological power in the Christian. The two are different, and it requires some misunderstanding of both to mix them up. If you reject Buddha, do you have to renounce Jehovah? What does one have to do with the other? And if there is any superficial likeness, where do you think the non-Christians stole the idea from in the first place? They desire the power apart from the source. So theirs is a "faith" without a proper object, and an optimism without a proper basis. Theirs is a counterfeit strength. Theirs is a false hope. When biblical faith is thrown out as if it is self-help psychology, Christians become weak and ineffective. This is why there is so much fear and depression in the church.

Read the Gospels and notice how Jesus behaved. What confidence! What power and composure! What finesse in speech and movement! "But that was Jesus." Yes, but Jesus became impatient and rebuked his disciples when they did not possess the same outlook, and even when it came to casting out demons and walking on water. He expected them to think on a similar plane. He never praised unbelief. There are some Christian books on how doubt helps us grow. Now, *that* is false hope. The Bible calls it sin. Faith helps us grow, and to grow so that we will not doubt.

Therefore, let us take a revolutionary approach to Scripture – let us believe it and be strengthened by it. When we expound on it, let us spend more time telling people that it means what it says instead of explaining to them why it means something else, or spelling out the hundreds of ways that people can abuse it, so that when we are finished they are more depressed and more discouraged than when we started. And when we are unable to assert the plain truth of the text, let us not pretend to be heroes who rescue people from fanatics, or "false hope," or "insensitive" preaching. Rather, let us be as honest as the father, who in response to Christ's challenge cries, "I believe; help my unbelief!"



### **3. The Unsurprised Simeon**

**Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.**

**Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."**

**The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2:25-35)**

When referring to God's promises, Christians often say that they are "incredible," "surprising," "hard to believe," and "too good to be true." While the intention is to accentuate the exceeding excellence of the things promised, these expressions offer God slothful and insulting praise. Used by preachers and theologians from various traditions, these expressions imply that the Christian mindset remains in the realm of the natural, the human, and the unbelieving. God is not incompetent or a liar, but he is a God of truth and power, and we can expect from him exactly what he tells us to expect. All his promises and their fulfillment are credible, unsurprising, easy to believe, and expectedly good and true.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ is one of those doctrines that has incited much lazy doxology. Mary said, "May it be to me as you have said." But after it had happened for two thousand years, preachers and theologians are still saying it is "too good to be true." Lame? Certainly. She was not reduced to speechlessness, but uttered a lengthy and substantial praise (Luke 1:46-55). She did not say that it was surprising, but said that "His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation." She did not think that it was incredible, but that "He has performed mighty deeds with his arms." She did not sing that it was "hard to believe" for God to make or fulfill his promises, but that "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." What is that last part? "Even as he said to our fathers."

Praise consists in an affirmation of God's goodness and faithfulness, and not in an expression of shock that he would make wonderful promises and then fulfill them. The incarnation was not incredible, not surprising, not hard to believe, and not too good to be

true. It was exactly what we would expect. And we should say the same about the resurrection, the ascension, and the second coming.

Parroting a sound theology is of limited value if it is tied down by unbelief. To let your theology fly, you have to believe it, all the way, without hesitation or reservation. If tradition tries to stop you, defy it. If believers try to sedate you, flick them off like flies. If sinners try to oppose you, run them over. God's word is like fire, and like a hammer. It is destructive to the heart that is hardened by unbelief. If you stand up *on* his word, it will be your sure foundation; nothing will sway you in this life or in the life to come. But if you stand up *to* his word, it will destroy you and punish you, in this life, and especially in the life to come.

Simeon was thankful, but not surprised. He affirmed the excellence of what God had done, without the childish and unbelieving exclamations that pass for praise today. He said to the Lord that what happened was "as you have promised." In addition, his praise carried substance and insight. The Spirit of God gave him understanding on the person and work of Jesus Christ, and what his incarnation would mean to the world. Here we will select several items to discuss:

He is salvation. Our time is short and we face many hardships in this world. Even then, life can be beautiful in Christ. A person is worthless if he does not serve Christ. Whether he dies now or later, or whether he is rich or poor, happy or unhappy, influential or obscure, none of it really matters. He serves God's purpose, who uses him as a display for divine justice and wrath, to declare his honor and to educate the elect, and then he is discarded, thrown in hell to be tortured by the flames. But in Christ there is everlasting life and love, fellowship, meaningful labor and glorious worship. In Christ there is true understanding and fulfillment.

Our problems, and thus the solutions, do not directly concern politics, economics, education, or how the sciences are applied to the environment, to cure diseases, and so on. Non-Christians are the problems. You say, "I thought our sins are our problems." Yes, but you do not see sins running around robbing banks, cheating on their wives, and fighting for religious diversity. Those who are non-Christians, including false Christians, do these things. Jesus Christ did not come to save people from the Romans, at least not directly. He came to free the people from the burden of self-righteousness and men's religious traditions, from the enslaving power of our own sinful nature, from demonic powers, and by the Father's own decree, to deliver us from the most powerful force of all, that is, the wrath of God. Jesus Christ saved us from the non-Christians, and from being non-Christians. And he continues to save us from the remaining non-Christian forces within us. This is true salvation. There is no other answer to the world's problems.

He is revelation. Simeon knew that Jesus would be salvation for "all people." He did not mean that salvation was for every human person, since the distinction between the elect and the non-elect would have been fundamental to his thinking. Rather, through Jesus Christ, salvation would be extended to all kinds of people, regardless of their race, gender, and social and economic status.

Here the contrast is made between the Gentiles and Israel. The Jews already had the light of revelation in a measure, but when Jesus arrived, he found that most of them were blind. The Gentiles, on the other hand, did not have the light. Who is God? What is the truth about this universe? What are we as men? What is right and wrong? The Jews possessed the answers conveniently in a written form. The Gentiles had only their wild speculations. Then, the light of Christ came into the world and began to reach out, exploding to all the nations, penetrating every level of society, refuting every religion and philosophy, which men have invented in the absence of this revelation.

He is glory. Simeon regarded Jesus as the glory of Israel. Certainly he should have been perceived thus by the nation, although many of the Jews did not see him this way. So a distinction is necessary. Simeon spoke from the viewpoint of God and of those who loved him, and not from the viewpoint of wicked men. If we speak from the perspective of the wicked, then many things would not be called what they are in Scripture. The message of Jesus Christ is called good news, but Paul states that those who do not believe perceive it as the stench of death.

Jesus said that salvation came from the Jews. Of course, this does not mean that the Jews saved us. Rather, God used the line of Abraham as carrier for his promise of salvation, so that the Messiah himself was born to it. In itself, there was nothing special in Abraham's blood, since as John the Baptist said, God could raise to himself children of Abraham even from rocks. They were natural vessels for a spiritual promise. In this sense, salvation came from the Jews, but we must not give them undue honor, since salvation also quickly got away from them. They soon rejected Christ and murdered him, so that God destroyed their nation and flattened the temple. Nevertheless, for the Jews who follow the faith of Abraham, they share in our belief that Christ is indeed the glory of Israel, that is, the true Israel, or the Church.

He is a sign. Simeon said that Jesus would be a sign that would be opposed, or spoken against, "so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed." It is often said that we cannot know the hearts of men, and it follows that we ought not to judge them. However, although we are unable to directly and infallibly perceive men's thoughts and motives, we are not completely ignorant. We can know what is in a man's heart if God tells us. And if he tells us, then we must admit that we know, and we must affirm the same judgment that he has pronounced on the individual.

He does not need to tell us by special and specific revelations. He has given us a sign in Jesus Christ, so that we may judge all men by their reaction to him. A man says that Jesus is the Son of God, in him the fullness of God dwells, and whoever trusts in him shall be saved. We accept him as a brother. Another man denies what the Bible says about Christ, and regards him as only an excellent man or teacher, if even that. We know that this unbeliever is a demon from hell. His heart has been revealed by his attitude toward Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34), and to introduce dissension and animosity even among immediate family members. He also said, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters" (Matthew 12:30). Notice that "with me" corresponds to "gather with me." In other words, the dividing line is very explicit, and there is no neutral ground. No one can be a non-Christian who is not against Christ. To be for him, a person must be a Christian, and who wants other people to become Christians.

Thus he separates humanity into two groups – Christians and non-Christians. When we speak Jesus Christ to a person, we present him a sign that compels a response. Even silence is an answer, and represents a rejection of the Christian message, since "he who does not gather with me scatters." The only answer that puts a person on the side of righteousness is an enthusiastic and wholesale embrace of Jesus Christ. And the person who embraces Christ invariably thinks that everybody else should do the same; otherwise, there is no true faith in him.

## 4. The Anointed One

**"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19, ESV)**

The Old Testament contains some examples of the anointing. When a servant of God was chosen or inaugurated into an office, oil was poured upon him. Among other things, this signified a separation for special service and an endowment of power to perform this service. Of course, there was no power in the oil, but it was a symbol of the Holy Spirit coming upon the person.

That said, when God anointed a person with his Spirit, the act of anointing with oil was not always performed. Or, the anointing with oil was not significant enough to be always recorded. Rather, God often directly endowed his servants with his Spirit and ushered them into service without any anointing with oil, or without any record of an anointing with oil, without any public ceremony, and without any human endorsement. This is also the case in the New Testament. There was a man who performed miracles by faith in the name of the Lord without any association with his company, and without any official recognition from him. The disciples tried to stop him, but Jesus told them to allow the man to continue, thus lending his approval to his work (Mark 9:38-39).

This is contrary to the traditions that to various degrees associate the legitimacy of a ministry with its human credentials. Such a view appears to preserve order in the church, but it also maintains a culture of hypocrisy and incompetence, as the Pharisees imagined that they had God's approval, when their credentials came from only one another. Even in those traditions that boast of their doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, it is insisted that only those who have been duly ordained by human hands may preach, administer communion, and perform baptism. There is no biblical warrant for this position, and no excuse for this hypocrisy. If all believers are priests, then all believers may perform priestly functions, and all believers may rebuke religious officials who attempt to impose this man-made rule on the church. The adoption of a flexible and guiding principle for the sake of order is one thing, but when it assumes the power of divine law over men's faith, the system is to be revised or overturned.

This point is essential to several aspects of Christian living and ministry. First, it upholds the true biblical pattern. Sometimes selected scriptural texts are used to prove a doctrine of ordination. However, the texts never prove as much as the theologians wish to make out of them, and certainly not the elaborate schemes that they assert. Also, the selective procedure at best shows that some ministers were ordained, or ordained in a particular way, but it fails to demonstrate that it was, and that it now must be, the universal practice, especially since it ignores all other biblical texts that do not conform. Rather, Scripture seems to indicate a variety in how men were brought to the work of the ministry. Second, since the traditional

doctrine is contrary to the biblical pattern, it draws attention away from the true source of calling and power, which is God's sovereign prerogative. God can do whatever he wants, in any way he wants to do it. He can and does directly choose and empower his servants without human approval, and very often against human opinion. His chosen messengers do not require the endorsement of existing church institutions, as he sometimes even sends them to oppose these institutions. Jesus himself operated apart from the religious establishment of his day, and he was challenged on account of it (Luke 20:1-8).

The true license for ministry has nothing to do with a human document or ceremony, even if these could contribute to church order, but it has to do with God's commission that is manifested in doctrinal purity and divine power. It is because this truth has been obscured that the church is overrun with incompetent preachers and theologians, who have studied in seminary, but are not called, and who have been ordained by men, but have no power. Contemporary Christianity is so out of touch with the Spirit of God that preachers and theologians retreat to the symbol instead of the reality, to the natural instead of the supernatural. Meanwhile, many who have been truly called by God are persecuted because they do not conform to tradition. In the case of Jesus, although it was not the only reason, this lack of human association contributed to the Pharisees' rejection of his ministry, so that they even assigned his power to the chief of demons, and thus blasphemed the Holy Spirit.

You say, "Does this mean that anybody can assume a divine mantle and speak for the cause?" Pay attention. "Anybody" has already been doing it. Sometimes it is legitimate, and sometimes it is not, but men have been judging by the wrong standard, and thus unable to distinguish between good and evil. The man who performed miracles in the name of Jesus without joining his company evidently possessed genuine faith and power, and experienced success. Still, Jesus found no need to tell the man to come under his own ministry. On the other hand, it was obvious that the Jews who used the same name to cast out demons had no commission from God, and no relation to the Lord (Acts 19:13-16). The traditional doctrine is unbiblical and defective, and it hurts those who are ordained by men as well as those who are not, because it removes the focus from the anointing, the true badge of authority and source of power.

Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, but baptism is not ordination, and John himself did not have the human endorsement from the establishment. Rather, like many of God's servants, Jesus was directly anointed by God without any human approval or human instrument. Some might think that the situation is now different, claiming that we live in a different spiritual administration of the church. But Jesus recognized the existing authority, that at least formally speaking, it was not void: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach" (Matthew 23:2-3). If ordination or some form of human endorsement was always necessary, and if it was a divine principle, there was no reason why Jesus would have operated entirely apart from the existing institution.

As for the false doctrine of cessationism, it overlaps with this topic but remains a separate issue. It is said that the calling of ministers is now deferred to the church because special

revelation has been completed. However, even if cessationism is accepted, appealing to it misses the point. Regardless of the times and circumstances, divine calling and endowment come from God whether or not they are accompanied by human recognition or ceremony. For example, the gift of teaching comes from God whether or not there is human ordination, and a person could receive it and stand up to teach even if all human institutions oppose him. So cessationism is a red herring. It has something to do with what kinds of powers are available, but the topic is the principle that all callings and endowments come from God and not men, and that he could grant them without the approval and involvement of men. Without human endorsement, some groups may not welcome an individual, but this is again a matter of church order and not of calling and power. And a minister ordained by one group is often not accepted by another anyway. All this is to say that, no matter what is done to enhance church order, a minister's authority and power is the anointing of God. And Jesus had it.

Why did Jesus need to be anointed? Since he himself was God, why did he require divine approval and divine power? In his divine nature, and as the second person of the Trinity, he indeed had the Father's approval and the very power of God. However, as Messiah he did not operate in his divine nature alone, but he functioned as the divine-human mediator. He was anointed to fill this office, to perform his work by the Spirit of God, and as the champion of his people.

His anointing set him apart from all others. First, it distinguished him from all the founders and teachers of non-Christian religions. All these are detestable in the sight of God. They not only refuse the truth, but they construct alternatives to it so as to lure men away from everlasting life, and to be tortured in hellfire forever along with them. They do not have God's anointing, or the Spirit of God, but all non-Christian figures are driven by the demons of hell. On the other hand, God's anointing marked Jesus Christ as the chosen one, the true savior, the one who would teach the truth and provide the only way to heaven for his own people. Second, his anointing exalts him above his brothers, and all the angels of heaven. The prophets and the apostles, and all of us who believe, share the same heavenly blessing of the Holy Spirit. There is no antagonism or competition. Yet Jesus Christ far exceeded us all in his ministry, in that he was anointed without measure (John 3:34). "But about the Son he says, '...God has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy'" (Hebrews 1:8-9). His anointing was unique; it was poured out upon him without limit or restriction.

If he had operated solely by the power inherent in the second person of the Trinity, then there would be no way for his people to imitate him. But he said, "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). This is the same Spirit that he called the Father's promise, and which he poured out upon his people. As he said, "A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). We are a reflection of Christ. We are not him, but we can be like him. And we can be like him because the Father has chosen us, and has anointed us with his Spirit.

Jesus was anointed to preach. In their expositions of several legitimate doctrines, some theologians refer to the objection that Jesus did not mention them. Their answer is that Jesus was sent to make atonement for his people, and not to preach. This is very strange. Although Jesus indeed came to make atonement, it is explicitly said that a significant part of his mission was preaching. Our passage says it, and it was Isaiah's prediction of what the Messiah would do. Preaching was not incidental to his work. A number of verses later, we read, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent" (Luke 4:43).

The correct answer is twofold. First, Jesus indeed taught these doctrines. And these theologians would often refer to the verses where he did so in the same works where they say that he did not mention them because his main task was to make atonement. It seems to be a case of carelessness and of an unnecessary readiness to make concessions. Second, and more significantly, it is a false assumption that only those doctrines that were explicitly mentioned by Jesus in his earthly ministry were legitimate. And we know that the Gospels contain only a partial record of what Jesus said when he walked the earth. He told his disciples, "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth....He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you" (John 16:12-14). He would continue to teach them through his Spirit, and he would continue to transmit this revelation to the world through his disciples.

As Peter mentioned that the ancient prophets also spoke by the "Spirit of Christ" (1 Peter 1:11), in this sense, all the words of Scripture are the preaching of Jesus. Certainly, all the words are the words of God. Christians must be waned from the foolish red-letter Bible mentality, which assigns special prominence to what Jesus said with his body as instrument when he was on the earth over what the same Jesus said by his Spirit with his servants as instruments. This unbiblical mentality institutes a Scripture within Scripture, and wrecks havoc on the inspiration, authority, and unity of the Bible. It allegedly honors Christ, but in reality, it denies, or at least obscures, the fact that he is just as much the author of the words in the rest of the Bible.

Jesus' ministry of preaching must be given due prominence, and along with that, preaching itself. This is the ministry that announces and explains the doctrines of God. And this is how he advances his kingdom, awakens his people to faith, incites holiness and good works, and also hardens the reprobates. By the preaching of the word, Jesus Christ builds his church and defeats his enemies through his people, and the Holy Spirit works in great power to accomplish God's purposes.

Here we encounter another problem. It is a common Christian superstition, shared by preachers and theologians of various traditions, that there is some special power in the act of preaching itself, whose effect is almost impossible to reproduce through other methods of communication, such as the written word. This is a rather depressing claim, judging from how little power that is in the preaching of most men, except the uncanny power to induce sleep. It is a double insult to the Bible, which is written word, to suppose that it has



inferior power as a matter of principle, and then the principle is supposedly demonstrated by such an embarrassing display of impotence.

The Bible does not teach that the power of God's word is especially unleashed by preaching. Of course God's word was often delivered in preaching at a time when the literacy rate was lower, when written documents were expensive, and when no electronic recording devices were available. There is nothing in the Bible to suggest that a book or an audio recording could not deliver the word of God with power and great effect. Indeed, the Bible itself is a book that men can read, and by this to be converted and sanctified in Christ, and to be taught by God for the work of ministry. The power is in God, who will back up what he says no matter what form it takes, as long as it fully represents the contents of his revelation. Thus speaking, writing, sign language, and even Morse code, can be used to communicate God's words, and the Spirit will see to it that the divine purpose is accomplished. On the other hand, pictures and melodies are disqualified, since they cannot communicate and explain the words that God has revealed. It is true, as they say, that a picture is worth more than a thousand words, because what a thousand words can make plain, a picture requires more than that to explain.

There is indeed a power that is associated with proximity, as people were healed even when they came close to Peter (Acts 5:15). I would accept this explanation, and integrate it into a theology of preaching. But most of those who regard preaching with their superstitious reverence do not believe in this power, and they certainly do not have even a little of it. So they are left with a mystical something that has no biblical foundation, and that they do not in fact have or demonstrate in their preaching.

You say, "Is it not still true, though, that there are some unique advantages to preaching?" Yes, but there are also some in writing. Let us exalt the word of God, whether it is expounded in preaching or in writing. And let preachers and theologians stop making up magic where there is none, that is, at least not in *their* preaching. Instead of inventing some advantages that hearing their preaching hold over reading a book with far superior content, if they are so desperate for church attendance, why not just say so? Christians are often compassionate, and will feel sorry for them and oblige. There is no need to lie or to make threats.

Jesus Christ preached a message of liberty. This does not mean that there was no fire and brimstone in his preaching – he talked about hell more than anyone – but it means that when he referred to God's wrath, he meant to teach his chosen ones to escape it, while the reprobates become more blinded and hardened. Non-Christians are oppressed and enslaved. Their hearts are bound by sin, and their conscience crushed by guilt, until they become callused. Their intellects are shackled by the superstitions of science, of philosophy, and of false religions. Even Christians are often burdened with unbiblical doctrines and traditions.

But Jesus Christ brought a message of truth, of simplicity, and of faith. This is the gospel. It is the same message that Paul preached, that John preached, and that Peter preached. The message does not change, and it is the same one that we preach today. The message is that,

if you will renounce all else, including yourself, but look to Jesus Christ, and rely on him, then you are set free from these things. He is your Lord, your Teacher, your Righteousness. Men's rules and traditions have no authority over your conscience. Men's science and philosophy cannot disturb your mind. He becomes your one focus. He releases you from the controlling power of sin, but still you fix your eyes on his righteousness as that which allows you to stand before God. This is the essence of faith, and the message of salvation for all nations.

## 5. Only Believe

**While he was still speaking, someone from the ruler's house came and said, "Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the Teacher any more." But Jesus on hearing this answered him, "Do not fear; only believe, and she will be well." And when he came to the house, he allowed no one to enter with him, except Peter and John and James, and the father and mother of the child. And all were weeping and mourning for her, but he said, "Do not weep, for she is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. But taking her by the hand he called, saying, "Child, arise." And her spirit returned, and she got up at once. And he directed that something should be given her to eat. (Luke 8:49-55, ESV)**

How we admire the Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was not without emotions, and could be disturbed in his feelings, he never wavered in his confidence, and he never faltered in his determination. He is our true teacher and champion.

Jairus was in trouble, or rather his daughter, who was sick and about to die. He begged Jesus to heal her, and the Lord agreed. While they were on the way, Jesus was pressed by the crowds, but the touch of curiosity and excitement proved futile. Even though he was in the flesh, he was not known or appropriated by the flesh. But then, there was a touch of faith.

In Mark's parallel account, the woman said to herself, "If I can just touch his clothes, I will be healed" (Mark 5:28). This was not an ordinary thing to think of somebody, but she perceived his spiritual significance, and not just his physical frame. Jesus stopped, and said that someone had touched him. His disciples thought that this was a strange thing to say: "You see the people crowding against you, and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'" (Mark 5:31). Many people touched him, but only the touch of faith mattered. It was a touch that regarded Jesus as more than an ordinary man, and more than a mere teacher or scribe.

While Jesus was still speaking, news came that the daughter had died. It was too late. Or was it? Jesus turned to Jairus and said, "Do not fear; only believe." What kind of man was this? The people wondered the same thing when they saw him dominate demons and command the storms. He was not just another religious founder. He did not bring only theories and ethics, but he brought the truth about God, out of which came ethics and power, and salvation. Now may his people also be different. If our leader is Lord over all things, then why would we think like weaklings, or behave like the followers of false religions, only with a different name?

When he arrived, he told the people to stop mourning, because "She is not dead but asleep." He did not mean that there was a misdiagnosis, for the girl was indeed dead. And it was not a mere euphemism, because they laughed at him. The case of Lazarus illustrates both of these points. Jesus told his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up" (John 11:11). His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will

get better." The misunderstanding shows that this was not a euphemism or a common figure of speech that others would readily grasp. Jesus then explained, "Lazarus is dead." Thus when he said that a dead person was asleep, he did not refer to a misdiagnosis.

Rather, Jesus spoke as God would speak. Just as God called Abraham a father while he was still childless, Jesus was one who called things that are not as though they were (Romans 4:17). God can never lie, not because there are things that omnipotence cannot perform, as some would put it, but because lying is inapplicable to God, since the will, the power, the word, and the truth are one in him. If God says something, then even if it was not true before, it would become the truth.

Some Christians are faulted for imitating the Lord in this, but regardless of their errors on other matters, and there may be many, on this issue the criticism exhibits ignorance and prejudice, because this is the language of faith, and the Lord was not the only one who spoke this way. Consider the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4). When her child died, she requested a donkey from her husband so she could visit Elisha. Her husband asked for the reason, and she said, "All is well." When Elisha's servant asked her "Is your child all right?" she said, "Everything is all right." She did not deny the reality of the situation, since she instructed the servant to hurry, and when she met Elisha, the prophet perceived that she was in great distress. She said, "Did I ask you for a son, my lord? Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes'?" Yet she never mentioned that the child had died. Elisha went to the boy and raised him from the dead. And the woman is commended in Hebrews 11:35 along with the great men of faith.

This is not the only way to speak in faith, and a superstitious fear of stating the natural fact is unbiblical, since Jesus said that Lazarus was dead when the disciples misunderstood. Still, at least in principle, there is no warrant to criticize those who in faith call things that are not as though they were. Again, Jesus did it, and the practice was not limited to the divine mediator. At the least, we must say that faith in God is reflected in our speech. If we trust in God, our words will be filled with confidence, not pessimism. Speech that is characterized by doubt, depression, and extreme self-abasement dishonors our Lord, who is mighty and glorious. Such talk does not come from humility, but unbelief.

Jesus raised the girl from the dead, as easily as one would wake a person from natural slumber. When we implore the Lord to help us, even when the situation becomes worse and defeat appears final, it is not final to Jesus. He calls us to have the same confidence. He rebuked the disciples for being afraid in a deadly storm. He rebuked them when they forgot that he could multiply bread, and always had leftovers. Did he demand this faith only from apostles? This is one of the biggest theological scams in history, that there is an essential difference in the faith of the apostles. It is an excuse for unbelief and for untenable doctrines. Jesus rebuked the apostles for doubting that he could be crucified on a cross, stabbed by a spear in the heart, wrapped in linen and spices, shut up in a grave by a boulder, and after three days walk right back out. Are we excused from this too? Then only the apostles were Christians.

Jesus never told the apostles to trust in their apostleship, but he said, "Trust in God; trust also in me" (John 14:1). If Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, then he would still rebuke us for being afraid in a deadly storm. He would still rebuke us for being anxious about food and clothing. And he would still rebuke us for doubting the resurrection. The apostles understood this, and referred to our religion as our common faith. Stop mourning, but only believe, for Jesus Christ has come.

## 6. The Elephant in the Room

**"Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." (Luke 12:51-53)**

A number of years ago, I had an altercation with a relative. She was a devout follower of a non-Christian religion, and it was because of this that the conflict erupted. She was of the rather lame opinion that all religions are essentially the same, and direct mankind toward good, and as devout as she was, she claimed that she regarded family as the most important. There are some people who assume that if a religion divides a family, then it must be a dangerous cult.

She said, "Isn't religion about unity? And isn't family the most important?" I replied, "Of course not. Religion is about truth, and especially truth about God and truth from God. This truth leads to right worship and salvation. I hold that the truth is in Jesus Christ, and only in him. And since you do not think this way, I denounce your religion as false. Since religion is about God, it is more important than anything else, and much more important than family."

Then I added, "However, if you really believe that religion is about unity, and if you really believe that family is the most important thing, why don't you renounce your religion so that there may be unity between us?" She refused. You see, she was a hypocrite. She wanted me to compromise my faith to accommodate her, but she would not budge an inch herself, even though she was the one who said that religion should be about unity and that family should occupy the highest place.

So it is with all those who tout religious tolerance and diversity, and who fault the Christian faith for refusing to follow their agenda. They are hypocritical, self-righteous, and self-contradictory people. They do not really mean that everyone should accept everyone else, but that all Christians should abandon their beliefs and embrace this other hodgepodge of madness and confusion. If we reject this nonsense, then they say we are bigoted and violent, a menace to society.

Do not be tricked. They are liars. They will portray Christ as someone that he was not, construe his words to say something that he never meant, or somehow manipulate you into compromising your allegiance to him. Even though they claim that peace is more important than our ideological differences, they will not renounce their own beliefs in order to have peace with you. Even though they scream tolerance and diversity, their tolerance and diversity have no room for the Christians that disagree with them.

Perhaps even the contemporaries of Christ imagined that he would bring harmony into all human relationships, or at least in the household or the country, where the bond of blood and of nationality already existed, waiting to be perfected by this great prophet, the Messiah. Jesus said that this would have been a misunderstanding. He did not come to bring peace or unity among men, but he would introduce division even where there was none before. He was not embarrassed about this, but he said, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37).

True peace is possible only when non-Christians renounce their religions, their philosophies, their sciences – which are false and irrational – and bow down to Jesus Christ. True unity is possible only when non-Christians throw up their hands, and repent in dust and ashes. Then we shall embrace them, and call them brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers. Unless this happens, there will always be division between us.

Non-Christians try to blame us for this, but the division persists because Truth has come, and they cannot chase him away. He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This is what he said. What are we going to do about it? They do not believe it, but we do. People talk about "the elephant in the room." Well, Jesus Christ has come, and he stands in our midst. He is the issue that cannot be ignored. If you pretend that it is not there or that it makes no difference, it will kick you in the face.

As Christians, we long for peace, but we are not satisfied with pretense, with a peace that is based on compromise, on delusion, and on hiding our true beliefs. We are satisfied only with a peace that is based on a common belief in the truth, the truth that God has revealed to us in Jesus Christ and recorded for us in the Bible.

Indeed, as he declared in a different context, Jesus Christ brought unity, but only for his own people. In fact, this unity was so powerful that it overwhelmed many generations of prejudice, so that Jews and Gentiles learned to accept one another, the rich embraced the poor and washed their feet, and women were recognized as co-heirs with men through Jesus Christ, even priests of God who had direct access to the heavenly throne, with full rights to receive an education in godliness.

Of course, there is always more work to be done, since sin still works among us, and new believers come into the church daily, but outside of Christ there is no such unity at all. Again, we refer not to a superficial civility made possible by compromise or suppression of disagreement, but an unbreakable brotherhood united by truth and faith. Let us, then, follow the example of Christ, and bring unity where there should be unity, but division where there ought to be division.

## 7. Cast Your Lot with Christ

**Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him." Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you." Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him. (John 9:35-38)**

When I first read through the Gospel of John as a child, John 9 became one of the most memorable biblical passages to me. With its culmination in the man's faith and worship of Christ, I thought it was one of the most beautiful and moving texts in Scripture. Today the passage still comes to my mind regularly and with great force, in a measure that I still lack the skill to express.

I suppose it would have produced something of this effect in me even if I had read the chapter on its own, but the significance of what happened with this man in John 9 was brought into acute focus, even to the mind of this child, when I perceived a natural contrast with the man in John 5. It was not until some years later that I found confirmation of this in commentaries. Thank God, then, for the perspicuity of Scripture, so that the truth and power of Jesus Christ are clear to those whom he chooses to instruct, even if they are little children.

The man in John 5 had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. Jesus healed him, and told him to pick up his mat and walk. It was the Sabbath, so the Jews complained that he was carrying his mat. The man replied that someone told him to do it, but he did not know who it was that healed him. Later Jesus found him and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." This suggests that the man became an invalid because of his sin. Even if we cannot be certain of this on the basis of what Jesus said, without doubt his statement establishes the principle that it is possible for sin to lead to sicknesses and infirmities.

What happened next struck me as remarkable, even when I read it as a child. The Jews obviously had hostile intentions against the one who healed him. And now that the man realized that it was Jesus who did it, instead of shielding him from the Jews, he reported him. As a result, the Jews persecuted the Lord. Although the man was healed, it seems that he did not attain any significant spiritual or moral improvement, nor did he become protective of the one who helped him.

Then, 5:17 overturns an assumption held by some preachers and theologians, who assert that God would never create again, especially *ex nihilo*, because he rested on the seventh day. On the contrary, in this context of a controversy about the Sabbath, Jesus said, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." God's rest in Genesis was relative to those six days of creation. It does not mean that God would no longer create (whether he does or not is another issue). Therefore, the assumption that God no longer



creates, or that he no longer creates out of nothing, should have no place in Christian theology. For example, we cannot follow those who speculate that Jesus did not perform creative miracles in his ministry – that is, create out of nothing. He could have done hundreds of thousands of them. Also, the Genesis rest cannot be cited to favor traducianism over creationism regarding the generation of human souls.

The man in John 9 had been blind from birth. Whereas 5:14 shows that one's sins may lead to sicknesses and infirmities, 9:3 shows that not all sicknesses and infirmities are the results of sins. Sickness, of course, came about because of the sin of Adam, and we have inherited his guilt and corruption. Here we refer to more direct consequences. When the context is so defined, both the teaching that says no sickness comes from sin, and the one that says all sickness comes from sin, are false. Unless there is some definite indication, there is no way to know whether a particular instance of sickness, or tragedy, or some such thing, is a direct result of one's sins, or a particular sin. Thus when the reason is unclear, it is best to avoid speculation, but it is always helpful to consider the relationship of the fall and depravity of mankind in general to our ailments and distresses.

Jesus spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. He put it on the man's eyes and told him to go wash. Lacking a definitive explanation within the text, it is disappointing that some interpreters so readily gravitate toward a naturalistic and psychological direction. For example, Merrill Tenney writes, "To make known his intention to the blind man, Jesus made clay from dust and spittle and placed it on the sightless eyes." But the man was blind, not deaf. Jesus could have told him what he wanted to do. A blind man who suddenly feels gobs of mud smashed into his face might more probably think that he is being hazed, not healed. He continues, "The touch of a friendly hand would be reassuring." This psychological interpretation is possible, but in the context of healing, the touch of Jesus is more often associated with the transfer and operation of miraculous power. This power can move and can be sensed (Mark 5:30).

Tenney adds, "The weight of the clay would indicate to the blind man that something had been done to him, and it would induce obedience to Jesus' command. Certainly he would not want to continue sitting by the roadside with mud smeared over his eyes. Though his lifelong affliction may have made him apathetic, he now had at least one motive for obeying." So instead of telling the man that he would be healed, Jesus used the weight of mud to suggest this, and hoped that he would not mistake the Lord for a heartless bully. And instead of compelling obedience by his authority, Jesus depended on the man's sense of pride and cleanliness. The naturalistic and psychological interpretation is not only speculative, but somewhat depressing coming from a New Testament scholar.

Many of those who immerse themselves in the Scripture, even on an academic and professional level, never managed to absorb the biblical worldview. They become familiar with the cultures and languages of the people, but contrary to those delusional souls who advocate a "return to Jewish roots," the culture of the Jews was not identical to the culture of Scripture; otherwise, it would have been natural for the Jews to believe in Christ. But they rejected him, precisely because they had another culture, another worldview or way of thinking, than the one revealed in their own Scripture. Jesus said that they did not believe

Moses, and some knew neither the Scripture nor the power of God. The Jews who believed had another culture, one that was different from the Jews who disbelieved. There is no need for Christians to adopt Jewish peculiarities, but only faith in Jesus Christ. Faith is the root, and has always been the root of our religion since the time of Adam, Noah, and Abraham. The role of Jewish culture is insignificant. To disagree with this is tantamount to a denial of the gospel.

Whether dressed in Jewish culture, Greek culture, Chinese culture, or American culture, those who are of faith possess their own culture and their own worldview. The Christian should be one who can think in terms of raw power. John the Baptist told the Jews not to depend on their natural relation to Abraham, as if that was what made them special, since God could raise up children for Abraham out of rocks. Jesus told his disciples that if they had faith, they could command a mountain to throw itself into the sea. Commentators who regard this as hyperbole expose themselves as foreigners to the biblical worldview, or the worldview of faith. How could it be hyperbole, when before he said this, Jesus cursed a physical tree so that it dried up from the roots?

More natural to the text and to the biblical worldview is the interpretation that the man was blind from birth because he was born without eyeballs, and as God made Adam's body from the earth, Jesus took mud from the ground and made eyeballs for the man. Since the text does not state this directly, this remains only a possible interpretation of what happened, and of why Jesus made mud and put it on the man's face. Nevertheless, a reluctance to accept this as at least possible is an indication that one is still looking at Scripture as an outsider, even if he is thoroughly versed in the natural shell of Jewish culture.

Jesus was irritated with the disciples who could not think on this level. When he used a metaphor to warn them against the doctrines of the Pharisees, they thought he said it because they did not bring any bread with them – they imposed a naturalistic interpretation on this teaching. He replied, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread?" (Matthew 16:8-11). Jesus could make bread by miraculous power – in fact, he always made much more than they needed, so bread was never a problem. Thus to think that he was complaining about a lack of bread suggested a lack of faith. We can say the same thing about a habitual naturalizing and psychologizing of biblical passages and of the Christian life.

This is relevant not only to biblical interpretation and theological formulations, but also debates about ethics and current events. For example, it is claimed that homosexuality is a genetic disposition, so that a person is a homosexual not by choice, and thus it cannot be immoral, nor is it possible for him to change. Christians often fail to answer as Christians, but they answer as foreigners to the kingdom of heaven speaking to other foreigners, and attempt to refute their claims about choice and genetics.

The Christian who has truly embraced his intellectual inheritance would answer differently, and much more forcefully. From the perspective of theology and ethical philosophy, he responds that moral responsibility has reference only to God's law and judgment, and not to human choice or freedom. On the matter of sexual disposition, even if he accepts the non-Christian claim that homosexuality is set in the genes, it makes no strain on his faith to say that God can either change the genes, or change a person's disposition regardless of his genes. Bread is never the problem. And DNA is never the problem.

This healing also happened on a Sabbath, and so the Pharisees came to investigate (9:13-34). When I first read this – and I always refer to Scripture with reverence – I found it a little comical (see 9:27). Little did I know that similar scenarios occur regularly in Christian churches and denominations of all traditions, where religious leaders continue to oppose the doctrine and the power of Jesus Christ, and to persecute those who have received from him.

However, whereas persecutors of Christ in the church are common, it is rare to find a Christian who possesses a backbone like this man in John 9. At first he knew very little about who healed him. He knew that the man was called Jesus (v. 11), and thought that he was a prophet (v. 17), and then concluded that he must have been a godly man and not a sinner (v. 31). Although he had so little knowledge, he defied the educated and powerful religious establishment with these truths about Jesus Christ, even when his own parents were too fearful to stand up for the healer or to stand with their son (v. 22).

Blind from birth, and without superior education and backing, he gave sharp and effective replies to the leaders, and lectured them about their bias and about the ways of God. For this, he was excommunicated, and expelled from the synagogue (v. 22, 34). While he was blind, he was an outcast of society. And now that he was healed, he became an enemy of society and of the religious authorities.

If we think that there is no analogy between the Pharisees and Christian leaders whose hearts have hardened against Christ, it is because we have overestimated the difference between the revelation possessed by the Jews and the Christians. As I have demonstrated in a number of places, it is not an anachronism to say that all those who have been saved since Adam could be called Christians, since they all believed in Jesus Christ. Even if they did not know his name, they believed in the promise about him, and some definite propositions about his person and his works. He was first announced in Genesis 3:15, and the revelation about him grew from there. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes that God preached the gospel to Abraham. Peter says that the prophets spoke by the Spirit of Christ. And Hebrews 11 states, without anachronism, that Moses preferred to identify with Christ than to enjoy the pleasures of Egypt. Thus all who believed in the true God, and believed him rightly unto salvation, also believed in Christ to the extent that he had been revealed.

Therefore, it is not farfetched to regard the Pharisees as the leaders of what would be our Christian churches and denominations. Just as many of them claimed to be true worshipers and experts in biblical doctrines, they did not in fact believe. Likewise, many of the leaders

in our churches and denominations claim positions of religious authority, but they do not in fact believe.

The Bible is God's revelation, and is infallible and inerrant. God is sovereign, all-wise and all-powerful. Christ is fully divine and fully human, one person with two natures, and suffered the punishments we deserved in order to save us from sin and from hell. He was killed and buried, but he rose from the dead. The only way to salvation is association with Jesus Christ through faith without regard to our works and merits. He is the sole and sufficient mediator between God and mankind, and between God and each individual believer. The church, no matter how beneficial, can in no sense assume the place of Christ.

Any person who disagrees with the above does not truly affirm God's revelation in the Christian faith. If he is in a position of ecclesiastical power, and if he pressures the individual believer to conform, then he is a modern Pharisee.

Even the children of the Reformation often attribute an importance to church membership and church attendance that cannot be derived from Scripture. In our own day, this is perhaps aggravated by the loss of interest in corporate worship and religious activities that has affected many cultures in many regions, resulting in a seemingly unstoppable hemorrhage of people from our congregations.

However, it only makes things worse when leaders begin to make unbiblical threats in their sermons and doctrinal pronouncements. Rather than holding forth the same message of simple faith in Christ alone, the emphasis turns desperate, sinister, and demonic, so that even in Reformed churches, sometimes it is said that "there is no salvation outside of the church." This is wrong even if it means that it is always the church that contributes to the spread of the gospel.

For example, if someone finds a Bible on the street and comes to faith by reading it, we might assume that the Bible was translated, printed, and distributed through the church's effort. Now, it seems when it is said that "there is no salvation outside of the church," even by someone of the Reformed tradition, much more than this is meant. But even this minimal meaning is wrong, because if God wishes, he can preach the gospel by direct revelation to a person, or he can drop a Bible – one that was translated and printed without any human involvement – into his lap straight from the sky. If anyone denies this, then let him also say that John the Baptist was wrong when he said that God could produce children for Abraham out of rocks, and since he rejects the truth of Scripture, let him immediately excommunicate himself and leave us.

There is salvation when an individual believes in Jesus Christ, even if this means defiance against all churches and denominations, and it may indeed appear this way during those times when the church is in a state of apostasy. Let us have proper regard for both the individual and corporate aspects of the life of faith. There is no need to denigrate either.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to acknowledge that the corporate is based on the individual, and not the other way around. There is no such thing as a forest without trees, because the

forest itself is nothing. It is not a thing in itself, but a term for many individual trees, and many individual objects that are not trees cannot congregate to become a forest. Likewise, the "church" itself is not a thing – it does not exist as an independent entity – but it is only a term for many individuals. These individuals believe in Christ as individuals, not as a group. The Bible says that Christ is the good shepherd, and he calls his sheep by name. The Book of Life records the names of individuals, not names of churches and denominations. Without individual faith, there can be no church, and no corporate worship and ministry. And an individual's faith is not falsified even if it is not associated with corporate worship and ministry. Any doctrine that suggests otherwise preaches rebellion against Jesus Christ, and seeks to subvert his role as the sole and sufficient savior and mediator.

The desire to strengthen the church as a whole, as a corporate entity, is admirable, but it can be achieved only when we pay attention to the faith of individuals. To claim a necessity, prominence, or authority for the church that is greater than what is warranted by Scripture harms the faith of individuals, and ultimately damages the church.

The individual, all by himself, has every right to defy the religious leaders and entities that have become too full of themselves, and that have become hardened against the doctrine of Christ. He may not accomplish much, and he may be expelled from the congregations. But when he is thrown out, Christ is there to receive him. And thus we return to our text:

Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him." Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you." Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.

The best commentary on this is the one offered by Christ himself in the next verse: "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." Christ revealed himself to the man, and he cast his lot with Christ. It is ironic, but when Christ works in you and reveals himself to you, it may make you an outcast of society and an enemy of the religious teachers and authorities, even those who claim to serve him. If this is the life that God has arranged for you, then so be it. Defy those who oppose, mock their claims and threats, and resist to the death if necessary. Cast your lot with Christ. He is the only one who matters.

## **8. Debt, Pardon, and Love**

**Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.**

**When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner."**

**Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."**

**"Tell me, teacher," he said.**

**"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"**

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

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

**Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven –for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."**

**Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."**

**The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"**

**Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:36-50)**

Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, healing the sick, preaching the gospel, and forgiving sins. Fantastic! Excellent! Non-Christians – and some Christians too – worship actors, musicians, and athletes. They set their sights too low. Jesus Christ slept during a fatal storm, woke up, and rebuked the winds and the waves, and they ceased. Then he turned and

rebuked his disciples, as if to say, "What? You woke me up for this?" Thousands followed him and they had nothing to eat. Jesus said to his disciples, "You give them to something to eat." They stuttered and choked. So he took some food and multiplied it, and made too much of it so that there were leftovers. Pilate said to him, "Don't you know that I have the authority to release you or to put you to death?" Jesus replied, "You have no power over me except that which is given to you from heaven." They spat on him, whipped him, and nailed him to the cross, and he said, "Father, forgive them." He died, so they put him in a grave. He waited a few days and walked right back out.

Jesus was the most spectacular man who ever walked the earth. He makes the world's idols look like losers, and all non-Christian religious figures look like clowns. In the light of his blinding glory, it is difficult to admire someone who runs a little faster than others, or who can hit a ball harder than the rest. Some theologians will tell you that the goodness of creation renders it acceptable, and even obligatory, to pursue the lesser things of this world, and then they go to church and sing, "And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace."

They say that God's authority is over all things, so you must watch some movies and play some sports, and invest in the stocks. It is strange that the doctrine seems to justify just about anything that they already want to do. Paul writes, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." One theologian replies that this is not a spatial distinction, but an ethical one. But the previous verse says, "Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." The ascension of Christ was spatial – his body was taken up and placed on a seat of power. The theologian's statement, which aims to protect his tradition, implies a denial of this. And when a theologian's attempt to justify his own desires (he wishes to set his mind on earthly things) becomes blatant heresy, surely a cry of anathema is in order.

So I remain undeterred and unashamed in the pursuit of spiritual-mindedness, and in fixing my thoughts on the Lord Jesus. Forgiveness intrigues me – music and sports, politics and culture, not so much. Even if all things are acceptable, not all things are worthwhile. My attention remains captured by the forgiveness of sins – my sins. Let me think about Jesus some more. What a beautiful savior! The Pharisee did not think so, because he assumed that Jesus should have and would have behaved differently if he had known what kind of person this woman was. But Jesus did know; rather, it was the Pharisee who lacked understanding about sin and shame, repentance and gratitude, and love toward God.

Jesus likened sin to an objective debt. A person who owes money lives with much fear and embarrassment. And there are dreadful consequences to his failure to pay. The more he owes, the greater the pressure and desperation. But the forgiveness of his debt fills him with relief and gratitude, probably in an even greater measure than the darkness that clouded him.

Here is the story of the gospel. Were those tears of shame or gratitude? Jesus had not pronounced forgiveness upon her at this point. She knew to come to him. She did not go to the Pharisee, to wet his feet with her tears, nor did she entreat any of the other guests. She

went to the one to whom the debt was owed. Jesus did not preach self-acceptance, but seeing the woman's self-rejection, he accepted her. He did not ignore or beautify her wrongdoing, but he referred to her "many sins," and forgave her for them. He noted that her behavior was a sign of faith. She became conscious of her many sins, and she cast her all on Christ. Is this not the essence of the gospel, and of a faith that leads to salvation? Assuring her of her pardon, he sent her on her way. The Pharisee, on the other hand, was left with nothing.

Sinners shun the acknowledgment of their transgressions, and of the debt that they have incurred before God. They lash out at those who shine the light of God's word upon their many sins. They regard it as impolite and harsh. However, an acute awareness of an insurmountable debt toward God is a manifestation of grace. By this, God prepares us to love him, and love toward God is the grandest saving virtue in man. By it, we know that a man has truly been redeemed. Thus we welcome the knowledge of our debt with all its fearsome despair, for it is followed by faith and love, but reprobates are blinded, and remaining in their ignorance, they await a terrible judgment. Their debt remains, and there is One who comes to collect.



## 9. Why You are Not a Christian

There are Christian essays and sermons that are titled "Why I am a Christian." Sometimes this is done in answer to Russell's "Why I am Not a Christian," but not always, since the title is often relevant apart from this background. In any case, the "why" is ambiguous, and could be misleading in the context of Christian theology.

If the word means "how come," or "for what reason," or "by what cause" I became a Christian, then the answer, of course, is God's foreordination in eternity, which he carried out by his omnipotence in history, and which resulted in my conversion by means of his Word and Spirit. If the word means "how come," or "for what reason," or "by what cause" I still *am* a Christian, then the answer, of course, is God's foreordination in eternity, which he now sustains by his omnipotence in history, and which results in my continuance in the faith by means of his Word and Spirit.

The word "why" can refer to metaphysical causation or intellectual justification, and it seems a bare "why" is more appropriately associated with causation than justification, especially in a Christian context. This is because the Bible teaches that God is the one who converts a sinner, who causes a person to believe the gospel and to become a Christian. He may associate a person's conversion and perseverance with arguments in support of the faith, but the arguments themselves are never the cause, or the "why," of a person's conversion and perseverance. The truth is there, and there are arguments to support it, but a person's conversion and perseverance are never credited, in any degree, to his own appreciation of the rational merits of the Christian faith.

Thus a more apt title for these essays and sermons would be "Why *I am right* to be a Christian." Also acceptable is "Why *I am rational* to be a Christian." Or, to be more precise, "My communicable intellectual arguments that constitute a rational justification to be and to remain a Christian (although I did not become and do not remain a Christian because of these arguments, but rather by God's promise and power)." In this case, precision destroys concision, but it is worth it to preserve God's honor and to avoid misleading implications.

No matter how much a person likes the cosmological argument, and no matter how much he appreciates the historical evidence for the resurrection of Christ, he will not and he cannot become a Christian on the basis of these arguments and on the basis of his own agreement with them. These arguments have no power to convert him, and he has no power to convert himself. If nothing else happens other than his appreciation of these arguments, then the only possible effect is that he would become more convinced than before that he is doomed to hell. He would be just as far from salvation as before. God is the only power that saves, and he saves through the message of Jesus Christ with or without arguments.

Now, despite his smugness and confidence, the non-Christian has no understanding of the causes of unbelief. He thinks he is a non-Christian because he disagrees with this or that argument, or because he believes in evolution, or some other silly scientific view or stupid

religion. But he really has no idea "why" he is a non-Christian. He can only offer arguments as to why he thinks he is correct and rational in being one. As I constantly emphasize, we ought to attack these arguments with overwhelming force, and completely devastate the non-Christian's pride and his estimation of his own intelligence.

Here I also urge that we should add to our repertoire essays and sermons on "Why You are Not a Christian." The Christian can make specific points tailored to his audience, but most of them should fall under three categories:

First, "You are not a Christian, because you are not intelligent." A person is a non-Christian because he is stupid. As Paul writes, "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). The Christian faith is true, and obviously true, but the non-Christian cannot see this because he is a stupid person. He lacks the intelligence to grasp the simplest principles and to perceive the plainest facts. His mind is broken. He is a defective person. The Bible calls him *moros*. The non-Christian is a moron.

Second, "You are not a Christian, because you are not righteous." A person is a non-Christian because he is sinful, wicked, and evil through and through. This characteristic operates closely with the previous one. As Paul also teaches, the non-Christian suppresses the truth because of his wickedness. That is, because the non-Christian is a bad person, and because he is no good, he refuses to see the truth. When the truth confronts him, or when it surfaces in his mind, he represses it and pushes it from his consciousness, and forces a smile on his face, pretending that nothing is wrong. The non-Christian is indeed a stupid, dishonest, and pathetic person.

When we witness the vain arguments and base behaviors of a non-Christian, it reminds us that we were once like him, a piece of garbage, intellectually and ethically bankrupt. It reminds us that what Jesus Christ did for us, and what he continues to do for us, is nothing short of a gracious salvation, and a mighty rescue. It is a removal of shame. Looking at the non-Christian, we realize that without Christ, we would be...*that*. Our Lord teaches us that without him we are nothing. This saying is true, and we do not resent it. Rather, when we are reminded of this truth, gratitude erupts from our hearts, tears from our eyes, and praise from our lips.

Third, "You are not a Christian, because you are not chosen." God has destined and created some people for salvation, and destined and created all others for damnation. This is the doctrine of predestination, or the doctrine of election and reprobation. The Bible says that God is like a potter, who out of the same lump of clay would make some vessels for honorable use and some vessels for common use. Among other purposes, honorable vessels were used as decorations, to display the wealth and culture of the owner. These are like the Christians, the chosen ones, who display God's grace, wisdom, power, and righteousness. Then, among other purposes, common vessels were used as toilets, to contain the excrements and such things. These are like the non-Christians, who contain the filth of this world and are full of grotesque and repulsive things.

Just as a lump of clay does not divide itself and make itself into vessels for various purposes, no man chooses what he is to be. Rather, God makes one into a vessel of honor, to be a bearer of his grace and power, and through whom he displays his divine mercy and forgiveness, and he makes another into a vessel of dishonor, to be a container of spiritual and intellectual refuse, and to be a target for his wrath and everlasting punishment. The Bible makes this the real explanation as to why a person is a non-Christian and why he remains a non-Christian. The previous two reasons are also biblical explanations, but they are secondary, and are the effects of this one. A reprobate is stupid and sinful, and remains stupid and sinful, because God makes him so.

A vessel cannot say to the potter, "Why have you made me like this?" Likewise, no one can challenge God's decision to make a person into a reprobate, into a vessel of dishonor and of wrath. The person who cries that he is the master of his own soul and the captain of his own fate, says so with his mouth full of feces. That non-Christian who laughs and claims that there are no rational arguments for the Christian faith does it with excrements running down his face. Then, here is one who says he has too much tolerance to become a Christian, as he takes a large gulp of urine. And there is one who says that he has too much education, or that he is convinced of another religion, as he feasts on the mess on the bathroom floor. The picture is both comical and unappealing. When God wants to make a point, he does not do it in a half-baked manner.

## **10. An Invitation to the Frontlines**

**And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. (Ephesians 6:15, KJV)**

If you are a new convert, or one who has never received proper training, I wish to help you. As a Christian, you are eager to preach the gospel. Like a patriot who longs to fight for his country, you have the infinitely more noble ambition to take a stand for the faith of Christ and to take part in rescuing humanity from its continual downward spiral into depravity, ignorance, and ultimate destruction. Above all, you desire to honor God by declaring his truth, refuting slanders, and subduing unbelief and blasphemy.

You look at the theologians, preachers, and even some of your friends, who faithfully labor on the frontlines, declaring the gospel of Christ and facing the enemies of our precious revealed religion. You regard them as the Lord's elite infantry. They seem to bear most of the burden of the Great Commission, while the rest languish in fear and apathy. You are embarrassed and gravely concerned that you belong to the latter group. Yet you hesitate, because you do not know what to say, or you do not know how to make an approach, or you worry that you might fail to answer all the questions that will be posed against your message. Or, you are intimidated by the hostility and the intolerance of the non-Christians, for clearly their tolerance is reserved for all views except the Christian faith. This is easy to explain once you realize that all of humanity is divided into Christians and non-Christians. All non-Christians, whether religious or non-religious, and whatever their religions, belong to the same group. Their difference consists only in confusion, and not in differences that matter, since they are united as one man against God, against truth.

So you agonize in fear and indecision, but it does not have to be this way. There is so much work to do. There is much ignorance and misconception about the Christian faith in both the non-Christians and those who call themselves Christians. Thus even if you have only the most basic grasp of the Christian faith, as long as it is accurate, you are already a more advanced and valuable individual than most of the population. You do not need to be a seminary graduate to preach the gospel (and many seminary graduates are useless), but there is no workaround for a lack of basic knowledge and conviction. And there is no excuse for a lack of continual improvement in your faith and understanding of the gospel. For someone who wrestles with doubts and many moral lapses, a temporary retreat is recommended, so that he may regroup and rebuild his faith, and so that he may not be destroyed by the assaults of the devil. Nevertheless, if you have this basic foundation, a foundation of knowledge and conviction, and of a stability in the faith that even a new convert should possess, then there is work for you to do. You are not helpless. You are not useless. There is a place for you on the frontlines.

The most basic and helpful idea is that salvation comes from the Lord. This means not only that God is the one who provides salvation or makes it possible, but that he is the one who controls how and to whom his grace is dispensed. The whole of salvation comes from the Lord, and it is not up to a man to convert himself from darkness to light in order to receive

the gift of Jesus Christ; rather, conversion itself comes from God. A man cannot come to Christ unless the Father causes this person to do so by a direct action on his soul. And when God performs this action on a man's soul, the person never fails to come to Christ and to believe in him. This action is not mere persuasion, but conversion by divine power – God flips a switch and changes the man's whole inward disposition.

Even if you are a most moving speaker, you will never save anyone. God is the one who saves. Even if you are a formidable debater, and able to offer an endless array of arguments, you will never convince anyone. Non-Christians are irrational. They are dishonest and unintelligent. They are unwilling to acknowledge truth, and unable to process it. This is not to say that arguments are useless. The Bible insists that we must argue for the Christian faith, and to humiliate all non-Christians in debate. The issue is not whether to argue – you must argue, or at least learn to do it – rather, it is the exact role of arguments. Arguments that are biblical and intelligent honor God, demonstrating the truth of his revelation and the superiority of the Christian faith. And he sometimes uses the presentation of arguments as occasions to convert non-Christians. However, in themselves they are not necessary to produce faith, nor are they able to produce faith. Again, this is not because the arguments are flawed, but because non-Christians are idiots, so that they cannot perceive truth, and because they are liars, so that even if they perceive that you are right, they will not admit it.

It follows that we should define success in evangelism according to this fact, that it is God who saves, and that although he may use our attempts as occasions for him to work, strictly speaking, his action is independent from our efforts, and is not proportionate to our competence. No matter how perfectly we deliver the message and defend its merits, not every person will believe. Indeed, God commands every person to believe, because the Christian faith is truth and the only way to salvation. This command imposes a moral obligation to trust in Christ, and defines unbelief toward the gospel as sin. But God has not chosen every person to believe, and will not enable every person to believe. In fact, the Bible teaches that he actively hardens those whom he has created for damnation, and he blinds their perception, so that they will not see and be converted.

Although God commands that the gospel be preached to all men, he has determined that many of them will never believe. Your preaching serves not only to awaken the chosen ones from their spiritual slumber, and to be resurrected by the power of God, but it also serves to harden the hearts of those created for damnation, and to be a testimony or evidence against them, that hearing they truth, they nevertheless reject it and despise it. As Paul says, "To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life" (2 Corinthians 2:16). This is God's design.

Therefore, the true definition of success is not in how the non-Christian responds, but in our performance as considered apart from its effects. Are you faithful to speak up for Christ, or do you compromise, and retreat into the shadows as the unbeliever blasphemes? Is your message biblical and accurate? Is your presentation precise and unambiguous? If you are faithful to speak, sound in doctrine, and clear in presentation, then your effort is a success. You have performed your duty. You are called to deliver a message, not to convert

a soul. You are called to speak, so as to provide the occasion for God to do whatever he wants with the person. If you faithfully perform this, then you are a success whether the person is converted to Christ or hardened against him.

This removes the psychological burden from you to produce a certain effect, as in conversion and the like, an effect that you really have no power to produce, and that you cannot claim credit for if it happens. Once it is clear that your main task is to deliver a message, you realize that this is something that you can already do, and can easily learn to do better. Since it is not up to you to worry about the outcome, this gives you the freedom to focus on the message.

This is the most important thing: the message should be a summary of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith – God, creation, man, sin, Christ, the atonement, justification by faith, judgment and the afterlife. We do not have in mind an exhaustive and technical study of these doctrines, but only a most elementary level of understanding that is nevertheless intelligible and accurate. In the first place, these doctrines should have been your first course of learning as a Christian, and you may have learned something about most or all of them even before you became a Christian, when you were on your way to conversion. These doctrines constitute a summary of the Christian faith, and a sufficient basis for a conscious acceptance or rejection of this religion. A person who truly believes what the Bible teaches on these topics is rightly said to be a Christian, and one who denies them is rightly said to have rejected the Christian faith, and also eternal life. This summary of the Christian faith, once introduced to the unbeliever, also serves as a basis or starting point for future discussions.

Therefore, this approach is not to be underestimated. Sometimes one who is supposedly more educated in theology and apologetics, precisely because he thinks he is capable, but evidently not very sharp, can become distracted and argue with a non-Christian for several hours about an issue that is not pivotal to salvation, and concludes without having transmitted the gospel message. In comparison, to be able to tell someone what the Christian faith teaches by a summary of its major doctrines is a great accomplishment.

If the main focus is to deliver the message – a simple telling of what the Christian faith teaches – then this is something that you can do today. You may begin even if you are still unable to explain all the doctrines, or to answer all the questions and objections that will arise. You may even admit this to the non-Christian: "I am a new Christian (or I have never received the proper training). I know that there are arguments that vindicate the faith, and that there are refutations to all your challenges. But I am not yet familiar with them enough to articulate them myself. This is my shortcoming, and one that I strive to rectify. But I still want to talk to you about the Christian faith, and if it is his will, it is really God's word and God's power that will convert you. For now it is sufficient that I tell you what the Christian faith affirms, or some of its basic doctrines. If God wants to save you, he will change your mind and cause you to believe."

In 2 Kings 7, we read about four lepers. Their city was under siege, and there was very little to eat. They said to themselves, "Why sit we here until we die?" So they walked

toward the enemy's camp. They were certainly not better warriors, but the Lord caused the enemies to hear the sound of a great army, so that they fled and left all their belongings. It would be absurd to credit the lepers, since they only walked toward the enemy, and did not fight anyone; in fact, they intended to surrender. But God was pleased to use that as the occasion to work. Victory comes from the Lord. Biblical arguments can overwhelm all non-Christians, and honor the Lord Jesus by demonstrating the truth of the Christian faith. So arguments are not worthless, and it is the Christian's duty to learn to argue for the faith. But when all is said and done, the salvation of a soul comes from God alone.

Come to the frontlines and tell the message. Give a summary of Christian doctrines. If you are unable to do more at this time, do at least that. If you are unable to explain every detail and refute all opposition, at least make sure the non-Christian understands what the Christian faith is. Then, trust in God's word to work, and in God's power to produce the effect that he wishes.

As for how you should introduce the topic, your options are limited but not grim. One who is more mature and capable in the faith can at times take an aggressive approach. He can seize control of the conversation, disregard the awkwardness, and force his point across. From biblical teachings and examples, it is clear that this approach has God's approval and the Spirit's endorsement. But even for someone who can do this, it is not always the most appropriate or effective.

A Christian who is ill-equipped or at the learning stage should petition the Lord for more natural opportunities. This does not need to be so much a strategy of fear and retreat than one that expects providence to provide an advantage, so that one may talk about the Christian faith in a context that minimizes pressure and hostility, and that retains the sinner's attention for a longer period of time. Once a person asked me, "What did he mean by 'born again'"? This was one of those natural opportunities, but most of them are not nearly as straightforward. Sometimes a statement about ethics, or even politics, technology, or sexuality, can serve as an easy lead-in to a discussion about ultimate commitments, worldviews, and religions.

## 11. Evangelism at the Workplace<sup>1</sup>

I have heard differing perspectives from pastors and theologians about sharing the gospel with people at work. Some say don't do it because one's employer doesn't give one pay to evangelize. But at the same time, others have said that because one is on salary and what matters with salary employees is getting work done, nothing is necessarily wrong with evangelizing at work. Do you have a perspective on this?

If you are in favor of evangelism at work, would you recommend the same approach as you do in your books? I'm just worried that using such a blunt approach, which you've aptly defended from Scripture, could get me to lose my job, or hinder work relationships and stifle career progress. I know that my career does not precede my faith, but just like approaching those in authority with the gospel, would one have the same approach here?

To begin, we will consider the two arguments in an almost purely human context, since things change once we broaden the discussion.

The argument that the worker operates on the employer's money and should not pursue another agenda at work is compelling. It would be a form of theft or fraud for a person to receive a salary without offering the kind of service and the amount of productivity expected from him.

In fact, this first argument refutes the second, which claims that the salary is paid for getting work done, and as long as the work is done, the worker should be free to evangelize. This is a naïve view of employment. It is unrealistic, and it cannot be consistently carried out. The truth is that an employer never pays only for the work as such, but he also expects the worker to integrate himself into the company and adhere to the culture that the decision-makers wish to develop.

Thus, to illustrate, one cannot say that as long as he gets the work done, he does not have to show up for work on time, or that he may wear a bunny suit to the office. Employment is not just about getting the job done, but it entails getting the job done in a specified manner, or within specified perimeters. The worker is expected to behave in a way that is consistent with the company's culture and practice. Even those who use the second argument know this, and in general follow this principle without thinking about it. But when evangelism or some other issue of interest comes up, suddenly it is only about getting the job done.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from email correspondence.



This mentality is shared by those who are very centered on individual rights, on democracy, who despise wealth and the wealthy, or those in authority, and who lack the kind of work ethic and respect for property rights that Scripture teaches. They are generally inferior workers and inferior human beings, and a nuisance and vexation to employers.

When I was in college, a professor of economics mentioned an actual case for the students to consider. A young couple was caught fornicating in the storage room of the company that employed them. They were terminated on the basis of a clause in the contract that targeted this kind of behavior. But they sued to get their jobs back and to recover lost wages. The argument was that they were not on duty at the time, although they were on the company's property. The case was settled by binding arbitration.

The professor gave us several minutes to think about it, and asked how we would have decided the case. I was surprised, much more so than I would now, that in a large class only a few sided with management. Many students were indignant that the couple was fired in the first place! Forget the contract – as long as they were not on the clock, they could do whatever they wanted even though they were on company property. The arbitrator in the case decided in favor of the employer. Doubtless the couple thought that they were cheated by the rich and powerful once again.

That said, at least in a relatively free society, workers possess certain rights even when they are operating on the company's time, money, and property. It would be unreasonable to forbid lunch breaks and bathroom breaks, or to forbid personal friendships among the workers. But when we refer to rights on this level, it is all relative to human culture and opinion, so that no universal principle can be established.

In the United States, a company that forbids bathroom breaks would be considered inhumane, but this thinking is based on certain ethical and biological assumptions that a company in another culture might not share, and as long as the discussion remains on this level, does not have to share. Thus it is impossible to further postpone a reference to the authority of God, since nothing definitive can be said on the basis of human law and culture alone.

There is no such thing as intrinsic human rights. When a person possesses a right, it means that others are obligated to treat him in a way that is consistent with this right. It is owed to him. This, of course, contradicts the sovereignty of God. He is the creator and ruler of all things, and he can do with any person whatever he wants. He can kill or make alive, and he can prosper and bring low. If man has inherent rights – rights that he possesses just because he is a man, without reference to any principle external to himself – then even God would be obligated to treat him in accordance with these rights. But since God is sovereign, there is no such thing as intrinsic human rights.

Instead, a right is something that is owed to a person because God has commanded that this person is to be treated certain ways or given certain things. These commands refer to how men are to treat one another, not to how God must treat them, and so these rights are only derived and relative, and not intrinsic or absolute. For example, God forbids one person to

kill another, but he can kill whoever he wants, and he can command one man to kill another (as in the case of the death penalty). So God does not owe a man the right to live. Then, in the context of his covenant with man, God has promised to treat him in certain ways and to give him certain things through Jesus Christ, and this tells him how God would treat him. This is not a right intrinsic to man, but a promise freely given by God. Thus the only basis for thinking about rights is the word of God.

We learn how God thinks about these things in his law. There even slaves and animals have rights. They must be treated in the ways specified, not because they have these rights inherent in themselves, but because God has commanded that they must be treated in these ways. For example, Deuteronomy 25:4 says, "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." The idea is that the ox should be allowed to eat while it works, or it should be allowed to benefit from its labor. Paul applied this to the ministers of the gospel, and said that those who preach the gospel should have their needs supplied by or because of their preaching – that is, they should be paid. This and other divine laws form the basis for a universal principle of rights for workers.

This discussion is not a detour, but it shows that both arguments, although the first is compelling and refutes the second, are in themselves futile. And the first seems to have force only because the divine law against theft is assumed. Unless God's word is considered and submitted to, neither the employers nor the employees have rights. There would be no authoritative and universal basis to say that theft and fraud are wrong, or that oppression is forbidden. Lunch breaks and bathroom privileges are thus taken away, but the workers retaliate by stealing office furniture.

The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ possesses authority over all realms and all spheres of human life (Matthew 28:18-20). This trumps all human laws and customs. There is the complaint that the missionary enterprise is subversive of the people's beliefs, cultures, and lifestyles. They protest that Christians invade a people and tell them that they are thinking wrong and living wrong, and that they need to change. Yet this is what Jesus has commanded us to do. Indeed, each people group has its habits, languages, and idiosyncrasies that often do not conflict with the Christian faith, and these can remain undisturbed. But we are under divine command to run over their religions, their philosophies, and to disregard their preference to be left alone. Their resistance is irrelevant. We are going in anyway.

Therefore, when it comes to our topic, the starting point of our thinking is the Great Commission, and this means that Christians are authorized to preach the gospel at the workplace. This is the starting point, or the general principle, but it does not settle the issue. Although we may disregard man's laws, customs, and preferences when they are against God's commands, we may not break God's own commands while fulfilling his other commands.

To illustrate, although we are commanded to preach the gospel, we are also commanded to respect other people's possessions, so that we cannot rob a bank to finance the gospel. We cannot break into a house while people are sleeping and wake them to call them to

repentance. We are forbidden to use violence to advance the faith, and so we cannot threaten to murder a man's children if he refuses to accept our religion. Of course the command to announce eternal life in Christ is more important than personal property or even physical life, but the Bible does not teach graded absolutism.

So as a general principle, God's command authorizes us to preach the gospel to anyone in any setting, but his other commands establish restrictions on how this is carried out. This provides biblical support to the first argument mentioned at the beginning, that workers should honor the employer's rights and expectations. The second argument, that we are at liberty to preach as long as we get the job done, is unworthy of the saints of God, and ought to be abandoned. Rather, we say that we may preach the gospel at work, but we add to this the restrictions that God himself has imposed, and also other restrictions that the employer has imposed, provided the employer's restrictions do not contradict God's word, since God's word says that we are to submit under "every authority instituted among men" (1 Peter 2:13).

What this means in practice is that the Christian could preach the gospel at the workplace when he functions within that circle of liberty that remains after the divine and human restrictions have been observed. For example, earlier we said that a company could not within reason prevent workers from forming personal friendships. And friends talk about things. Here is one context where the preaching of the gospel can happen. I am not referring to "friendship evangelism," but to the bold preaching and vindication of the faith in the context of personal conversations. If a Christian can talk to another worker about why he likes sushi, then he can also explain why he believes that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation. If extended personal conversations are frowned upon in the office, then do it during a lunch break.

You wrote, "If you are in favor of evangelism at work, would you recommend the same approach as you do in your books?" This depends on what you meant by the approach advocated in my books. If by "blunt" you meant harsh, the truth is that I do not simply push for a harsh approach – I never did. In fact, time and time again I have stated that the relatively calm and gentle approach is the default, especially in personal conversation. I have been surprised a few times at how harsh some Christians are at the outset, before it becomes necessary, and I have urged them to soften a little.

Although this is the principle, it is also true that a harsher approach, when the hearer is shown to be hard-hearted or blasphemous, is very often needed. My position is that although it often ends up this way, it is usually not necessary to start out like this. In some situations, it is appropriate to start blasting right away. My complaint against other Christians, especially those who teach others, is that they make it a matter of principle that we should never be harsh. This is unbiblical, and implies a condemnation against the prophets, the apostles, and even the Lord Jesus.

However, if by "blunt" you had in mind direct speech, then this is necessary, because it is the only way to preach the gospel. There is no such thing as an indirect preaching of the gospel. The Bible does not teach us to suggest or to imply the message, but to preach it –

to assert it, declare it, proclaim it. The sentences themselves, even if spoken in a soft tone and with kind words, must be clear and direct.

Then, you wrote, "I'm just worried that using such a blunt approach, which you've aptly defended from Scripture, could get me to lose my job, or hinder work relationships and stifle career progress." Yes, this is called persecution. I always caution against unnecessary persecution. Avoid it without compromising the gospel, but if it is inevitable, face it with courage and honor. Do not bring disgrace to the Lord Jesus. Tact must not become an excuse for cowardice; rather, divine wisdom fills us with boldness, because by it we understand the power and the faithfulness of God, and also that he is to be feared more than men (Luke 12:4-5).

Finally, "I know that my career does not precede my faith, but just like approaching those in authority with the gospel, would one have the same approach here?" Of course not, unless you are speaking to your boss. And from biblical examples, we know that 1 Peter 3:15 does not exclude stern speech even against authority figures. Moreover, Peter commanded "gentleness and respect" in the context of his background, not ours. The meaning of these terms, therefore, refer to what gentleness and respect meant to Peter, and what gentleness and respect contrasted against in Peter's culture. Back then they tried to stone Jesus and to push him off a cliff, they arranged false witnesses against him, and sent him to a criminal's death, and as Pilate observed, all for religious jealousy. It would not take too much to behave with "gentleness and respect" against this background. On the other hand, Paul also commanded that some people ought to be harshly rebuked. Imagine what he considered harsh against the same cultural background. If we think about it this way, I have never been very harsh at all. It is just that other people are wimps or that they have been indoctrinated by culture instead of revelation, taught by men instead of taught by God.

Preach the gospel hard, or preach it soft, but it is impossible to avoid direct speech. If you are preaching the gospel at all, you will have to tell the person that he was born a sinner, and that unless he relies on Jesus Christ to save him, God will throw him into a lake of fire. Tell him "God will burn you in hell" in the most gentle and respectful manner, following all the mannerisms that the culture demands. If you want, bow down to him and put your face to the floor when you say it. It will still sound like "God will burn you in hell." How else can you say it? "God will heat up your being to an extremely painful degree in the cosmic inferno"? Will the unbeliever be pleased by this? If you preach the gospel at all, it is going to be direct, and it is going to be offensive, because it is not really the volume or the vocabulary that offends him, but the voice of God in the message.

If all this puts a lot of pressure on you, then you need to grow stronger in the faith. But perhaps I can provide some immediate relief. When it comes to evangelism, I disagree with the simplistic thinking often advanced. Some people say that if you have known a person for a week or a month, and he still does not know that you are a Christian, then there must be something wrong with you. In many cases this might be true, but the generalization itself is not. Just because you must preach the gospel does not mean that you must always charge at someone screaming "Repent, you heathen!" the moment he walks into your visual

range. I have used this approach with great effect, but I would not do it all the time. Much depends on the personalities and circumstances.

When we are referring to evangelism in the context of personal conversation, and with individuals that you regularly meet, then I recommend praying for natural opportunities to arise, and patience in waiting for them. You are to preach a God who is living and sovereign, so think like it. A natural opportunity might be a situation that lends itself to a discussion on religion or philosophy, or when a co-worker mentions religion outright, or at least some ethical or political controversy. When evangelism begins this way, the advantage is that the other person has somewhat committed himself to the discussion, and cannot easily withdraw once it makes a natural transition to religion and ultimate principles. Since these are people you will see again, there is no rush to complete the discussion in one session. This reduces the strain on the Christian, as well as the shock to the unbeliever, since the doctrines of the faith can then be gradually introduced and explained.

If you are really having problems, then focus the conversation on the non-Christian at the beginning. When he mentions something that could lead to a discussion on religion or ultimate principles, ask him to clarify his points and to explain his reasons for believing them. Then challenge him, as gently as you wish, with questions about the source, the validity, the relevance, and other aspects of his arguments. Ask, "How did you arrive at this conclusion?" "How do you know this is true?" or "But how does this prove your point?" and the like.

This is not an avoidance of your responsibility, but it is in fact an important part of it. You are only allocating it to the beginning instead of spreading it throughout the conversation. Non-Christians are confident in their beliefs and in their intelligence, and so they have already made up their minds that Christianity is wrong. Thus it is helpful to show that they are not as intelligent as they assume, and that their positions are not as carefully considered as they think. If you can shake their confidence, and even humiliate them a little, they may become willing to hear an alternate view.

You can spend several conversations talking about a non-Christian's beliefs without mentioning the Christian faith. When it comes to someone that you will regularly meet, you do not have to do everything in one day. This lessens the burden on you, since it focuses on the other person first, and as the discussion transpires, perhaps you will gain confidence to present your own view, the Christian faith. This approach enables even the most timid Christian to take a first step in preaching the gospel.

## **12. Bold as a Lion**

**The wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion. (Proverbs 28:1)**

God is not hidden in himself, because he says that the Spirit searches the deep things of God – God perceives and contemplates himself. But he so transcends his creatures that men cannot find him by their own methods and powers. He is not incomprehensible in himself, because he says that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in Christ – God comprehends himself by his own omniscience. But he is so immense in his greatness that his creatures can study him for all eternity and never know all that there is to know about him.

Thank God, therefore, for his revelation. Although we cannot find him by searching, the Spirit shows him to us. And although we cannot comprehend him, as in to possess exhaustive knowledge about him, we can comprehend all that he reveals to us, as in to possess a clear and exact understanding of what he commands us to learn. God is truth. What he thinks is true, and he tells us what he thinks in the Bible. He tells us the truth about his being, his works, his plans and priorities, and his standards and judgments. He tells us these things not in codes and puzzles, but in direct speech, and even the stories and parables that he tells contain plain teachings.

The religion that makes a show of proclaiming the greatness of God by declaring our inability to understand him, even though he tells us about himself and tells us to understand, is a lazy and unfaithful piety. True reverence studies God's revelation and submits to all that it says, even if it challenges our prejudices and preconceptions, and even if it leaves no room for rebellion disguised as humility. This is a false humility that shouts praises in God's face as he speaks, to drown out his voice, so as to make a way of escape from his doctrines and his commands.

The Bible is God's revelation, and it is true and plain. We may learn from good men of faith, but if we are true Christians, then in reality we care only about what God thinks. Men at best can explain to us what God thinks, and help us consider its meaning and applications, and to admonish us to believe and obey it. And these men ought to be overturned, even physically ejected from our midst, as soon as they incite unbelief and rebellion. If we will ever hold firm to this principle, that God speaks in the Bible, and in plain and direct speech that is not subject to fanciful distortions, then we shall be on the right path to fruitfulness in the faith of Jesus Christ.

The Bible's thinking is God's thinking. There is no difference. And the Bible constantly contrasts the righteous and the unrighteous, the children of God and the children of Satan, Christians and non-Christians. This is how God sees the world. There are only two kinds of people. There are Christians, and we may include or exclude those who have not yet been converted, but who would later become Christians. Since we do not know their

identities, when they are included, they are referred to in the abstract, and not as named individuals, except in the mind of God. And there are non-Christians. If we exclude those who would become Christians later, then this group consists of those who would never believe in the gospel of Christ, and who would be thrown into hell when their life ends and when the day of judgment comes. A more precise way to say this is that humanity is divided into the elect and the non-elect, or Christians and non-Christians, depending on the need of the discussion.

Christians are called believers, and non-Christians are called unbelievers. Christians are called wise, righteous, and the light of the world. All non-Christians are called stupid, wicked, and darkness. This is how God perceives and divides all people, and this is also how we must perceive and divide all people. We must eagerly and happily agree with God, lest we be counted among the unbelieving, the unintelligent, the rebellious, who shall burn forever in the lake of fire. As it is written, "And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever" (Revelation 14:11). But those who trust in Christ shall say, "Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever" (19:3). How different are the thoughts and attitudes, and the destinies, of those who are saved by God and those who are damned by him!

This is why the righteous are bold. We should not fear men, who can destroy the body and can do no more, but we should rather fear God, who can torment both body and soul in hell. But as believers, our lives are hidden in Christ, and through him we have peace with God. As the hymn says, "Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say, It is well, it is well, with my soul." The Christian's boldness is not founded on self-approval – he knows that in himself he cannot measure up to God's perfection, and thus to have fellowship with him. He repudiates all confidence in himself, and commits his fate entirely to Christ, so that he may have fellowship with God on the basis of Christ's righteousness. His boldness is as strong as his belief that Christ is right with God, and that the Father approves of the Son.

My confidence does not need to fluctuate with my performance. I look entirely to Jesus Christ, for him to save me and take me before the Father, for him to vouch for me before the heavenly throne. I depend on Christ not only to be introduced to this new life, since even now if I were to face God with only my Christian deeds, there would be no hope. God demands perfection, and it would be an insult to his holiness to say, "Behold these works. Have respect for me because of these." Even if I were a self-deluded egomaniac, my confidence would not be total and without limit. And God is not appeased by a man's giant ego. No, I cling to Jesus Christ. I believe that Jesus Christ is righteous, and that he ever intercedes for me and speaks for me before the God of Heaven. And I also see that this right standing before God is the only thing that truly matters whether in life or in death, or in life after death. Therefore, as long as my confidence in Christ is unshakable, and as long as I believe that he is good and faithful, I am as bold as a lion.

Through the Lord Jesus, then, we are bold to assume command of any situation, to speak and to do that which is right, to vindicate the gospel of God, to defeat every non-Christian thought and movement, and to shut up blasphemy and humiliate unbelief. As Paul writes, "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Then...I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved – and that by God" (Philippians 1:27-28). May God glorify himself by granting greater strength and boldness to his people.



### **13. The Fear of Men**

**"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.**

**"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.**

**"I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God." (Luke 12:4-9)**

The Christian faith is a divine revelation about God, man, sin, and salvation. Sinners, because they are evil, do not wish to keep a sovereign and righteous God in their thinking, and they are unwilling to admit the truth about their need for repentance and salvation. For this reason, unless God directly alters the disposition of a man, he will always resist the truth and refuse to accept reality. And when confronted by the doctrines of Christ, he will persecute the messenger. He will mock him, slander him, use violence against him, and even kill him.

The natural man cringes from danger, and persecution pressures a person to compromise his principles, and to recant the truth. Although non-Christians live by animal instincts, and exhibit an intelligence barely beyond that of beasts so as to distinguish them from these lower creatures, Christ calls his people to a life of truth, wisdom, and power. The spiritual man has resources from God that the world does not know. They enable him to mind the things of God, and not only the things of men, and to have the courage to stand firm on the truth. This otherworldly quality comes from the divine energy infused into the believer by the Holy Spirit. But the Almighty is not only a God of power, but also a God of wisdom, and he has given us an understanding, so that not only by power but also by truth shall our faith stand unmoved.

Jesus explains how we should think about the fear of men. He talks about it in terms of the consequences to our beings. The most that sinners can do is to murder a Christian, but after that they can do no more. They cannot sever God's love toward him. They are unable to destroy his union with Christ. They cannot rob him of his heavenly joy and inheritance. Jesus says that they can only kill the body.

Contrary to many theologians, the Bible makes a sharp distinction between the body and the soul. It is true that when we refer to the person in a general sense, a distinction is often unnecessary, so that we could refer to the whole man as one, or refer to a part to denote the whole. We know that salvation applies to both the soul and the body, but it is acceptable to

say, "Five souls were saved the other night." The Bible itself uses such language. Sometimes we count "heads," and when we do that, we include the souls as well.

However, when a distinction is needed, the Bible does not hesitate to make it. This is because the soul and body are in fact two different parts of a human person, and what applies to one does not always apply to the other. Theologians wish to preserve the unity of the human person, and they think that the way to do this is to deny a sharp distinction between the soul and the body. As a result, they are often untruthful about the biblical data. The issue is far from trivial, since it is a necessary principle to many doctrines, including the teaching in our text.

Another significant point is that personal identity is necessarily associated with the soul, but not the body. That is, a disembodied soul is still a person, and the same person before he was disembodied, but a body without a soul is not a person at all. The Bible refers to the body as a tent, or a housing apparatus for the soul. Again, theologians often resist this and claim that it is a Greek teaching. But regardless of what the Greeks thought and where they got it from, this is the biblical teaching, and to deny it is to oppose the word of God. Just as we should not be influenced by Greek thinking, neither should our theology be warped by an anti-Greek agenda.

Jesus addresses the topic differently than many modern preachers would. He says that men can kill the body, but after that can do no more. On the other hand, God can kill the body, and after that he can throw the soul into hell as well. Paul wrote that we should grasp both the kindness and the sternness of God. Jesus never shied away from talking about God's severity, or to implement stern preaching and harsh discipleship.

Unlike preachers and theologians who complain that it is insensitive to say that Christians fail because of a lack of faith, and to say that there is a relationship between faith and the blessings of God, or faith and effective ministry, Jesus repeatedly said it, and rebuked both the common men and his close disciples for it. He rebuked them for a lack of faith even when it came to situations where some would consider it unreasonable to expect faith. For example, he rebuked Peter for a lack of faith when he failed to walk on water. James wrote that if you doubt, if you are double-minded, do not think that you will receive anything from God.

Many preachers and theologians are out of touch with the Jesus of the Bible, and probably do not care to portray him accurately. They prefer their own invention, a Jesus who is stuck saying, "If it be thy will," which he said only once when he referred to his mission, and one who never rebuked people for a lack of faith, which he in fact did to various people in many situations, including those where they tried to obtain blessings from God. Against this trend, we should often rebuke Christians for a lack of faith. If this makes them feel guilty, then so be it, since if they lack faith, then they ought to feel guilty. It is always sinful to doubt. They should repent and strive for improvement.

If we wish to be like Jesus in our ministry, most of us should reach for a much harsher approach toward both believers and unbelievers. He teaches us to overcome the fear of men

with a greater fear, a greater threat. You say, "What will happen to me if I become a Christian?" But what will happen to you if you do not become a Christian? You say, "What will happen to me if I acknowledge Jesus Christ?" But what will happen to you if you do not acknowledge him? It is better to fall at the hands of a few thugs than to fall into the hands of an angry God.

Nevertheless, it is true that Jesus does not present only God's severity, but also his kindness and faithfulness. Even a sparrow is not forgotten by God, but we are worth more than many sparrows, and the very hairs of our head are all numbered. This does not mean that he prevents all the effects of men's opposition against us, or that he withholds from his people the glory of martyrdom. But it means that he is in control of all that happens to us, and whatever happens to us are ordained for his honor and for our good. This truth arms us to accept not only martyrdom, which only a few of us may face, but also the lesser troubles that will come our way because we are Christians.

## 14. Christ and Temptation

**Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. (Luke 4:1-2)**

Adam faced temptation as the representative of humanity, and when he sinned, the whole human race fell with him. But God showed mercy toward his chosen people, and immediately promised a Savior who would rescue a select number from sin and condemnation. Before its fulfillment, men were saved through faith in the coming Savior. Now that the promise has been fulfilled, men are saved through faith in this Savior who has come and accomplished redemption.

This is the gift of salvation. Yet the gift is not like the trespass – there is no exact correspondence. It is true that Jesus succeeded where Adam failed, but the Lord did not take up the same command given to man and merely fulfilled it. The two did not operate on the same terms. Adam represented the whole human race, but Jesus represented only the chosen ones, or those whom God has chosen to save, and whom he has determined to grant the gift of faith. God's judgment followed the one sin of Adam, but God's grace through Jesus Christ covers the many sins, of many men, committed over the course of many centuries.

Contrary to the farfetched arguments of theologians, Adam was never promised heavenly life for obedience, but only death for disobedience. It is said that there was a covenant, but there is no evidence of this. And even if there was a covenant, a threat in a covenant does not imply a corresponding reward. And even if there was a promised reward, of which there is no evidence or even a trace of an implication, it could not be the one that Jesus attained, for in his role as mediator he became the Lord of Glory, a position that receives worship and that is suited only to divinity.

If it is said that Jesus received greater promises that overlapped with those supposedly given to Adam, then the doctrine amounts to a supposed covenant, with a supposed reward, with a supposed correspondence, and then a supposed addendum. If this is theology, then let us suppose that the whole thing is worthless and throw it out the window, as many frustrated believers have done. Some theologians are very jealous for this false doctrine, but since they have no biblical case, even if they refuse to recant, they cannot prevent us from walking away. We can spit on them and laugh at them, and they can do nothing about it. Human tradition has no authority over our faith and conscience.

Jesus Christ acted as the champion for God's people, and he faced temptations for us, not only here in Luke 4, but throughout his life. It is said that God understands our sufferings and temptations because he came to us in human form and lived among us. Hebrews 4:15 seems to be in line with this idea: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin." However, we must not construe this in a manner that

diminishes the omniscience of God, or to suggest that even omniscience does not extend to human experiences and feelings, so that the Godhead learned something new by the incarnation of Christ, or that this new knowledge incited sympathy toward men that was not there before.

God had always known what human sufferings and temptations were like, even what they feel like. Even though he had no human organ to experience them, by his omniscience he knew these things exhaustively, and in an infinitely superior sense and degree than what could be registered on human flesh. The incarnation taught the Godhead nothing. Rather, Hebrews 4:15 and related verses refer to the experience of Christ as mediator and high priest, who in this capacity indeed sympathizes with us. This does not mean that God was ignorant of our plight before the incarnation, but only that as we focus on Jesus Christ, we are reminded that in his human nature he has experienced our sufferings and has successfully overcome temptations. We may have confidence in him even when we are weak in faith, and as if divine omniscience leaves room for any excuse, the incarnation makes it even more evident that we cannot say God does not grasp our difficulties.

What is temptation? First we need to distinguish between the author of sin and the tempter to sin. God exercises total and direct control over all things, and since there is sin in his creation, this means that he must be the author of sin. He must be the total and direct cause of sin in the metaphysical sense, although he does not approve of it in the moral sense. That is, he has defined certain thoughts and actions as morally reprehensible, but left to themselves, mere creatures cannot initiate anything, good or evil. Sin occurs because God directly causes his creatures to transgress his moral laws. There is no contradiction, because one relates to metaphysics and the other to ethics. One has to do with determination, and the other has to do with definition. And this does not undermine moral responsibility, since responsibility has to do with moral definition only, and not metaphysical causation.

The metaphysical perspective tells us why, as in the cause and the power, a creature transgresses the defined moral standard, but this has nothing to do with responsibility. Rather, moral responsibility has to do with the fact *that* the creature has transgressed. The metaphysical "why" is irrelevant. Tradition refuses to acknowledge that God is the author of sin because it fails to grasp this most elementary but necessary distinction. As a result, it assigns the direct metaphysical cause to the creature, and the product is the heresy of dualism or finite godism. Let this be clear: if a person does not admit that God is the sovereign and righteous author of sin, he commits blasphemy and cannot consistently affirm the Christian God.

The same distinction applies to God himself. For God to cause sin in his creatures is not the same as to commit sin. To commit sin, God would have to define it as sin to be the author of sin. In other words, he would have to do something that he has forbidden himself to do. There is no evidence that God has forbidden himself to do anything, including to directly cause and control sin. Rather, the Bible reveals a God who is sovereign over sin and still calls himself good. Therefore, the standard of good when it comes to whether it is good for God to be the author of sin is in what he actually does. And since he is directly sovereign over all things, which means that he is directly sovereign over sin, this means

that it is good for him to be directly sovereign over sin. As long as he does what he wants, he does what is good.

Thus God is the author of sin, but the Bible says that he is not the tempter. One person said to me that this needs to be reconciled. He said that temptation is persuasion to do wrong. But if it is God who actively hardens a sinner, such as Pharaoh, then it appears that he indeed persuades someone to do wrong. So how can he be the author but not the tempter? This is very foolish. Temptation is indeed a form of persuasion, but in the light of his confusion, should also be called suggestion or communication. This is because he thought of persuasion as *effective* persuasion, and it can sometimes take on this meaning, but not in this context. On the other hand, to actively harden someone refers to causation, and in itself does not need to include any persuasion, suggestion, or communication.

If I say, "Satan persuaded Tom to sin," the persuasion is indeed effective persuasion, but this is because the result has been specified. However, persuasion itself does not include the guarantee of success, but refers to the attempt, or that act of suggestion or communication. Even when we refer to effective persuasion, the persuasion itself is still distinguished from the metaphysical cause of its effectiveness. The persuasion still does not touch metaphysics, but causation refers to metaphysics. If Satan successfully persuaded Tom to sin, it means that there is a metaphysical power that caused Tom to accept the demonic enticement. This power could be associated with one who communicates, but not necessarily so. And in the Christian worldview, this power is completely absent in Satan, or in any creature, but it is solely in the hands of Almighty God.

I made the distinction clear in my reply, and included the illustration of the preaching of the gospel and the conversion of a sinner. When persuasion is used in the sense of suggestion or communication, it is the preacher who persuades, whether he succeeds or not, and it is God who causes the hearer either to believe or to be hardened. Again, he replied, how can this be, for is it not Christ who persuades and causes a person to believe? So even though it was explained to him, he persisted in identifying persuasion with causation. How, then, can I describe the preaching? I hope not all Christians are this stupid, but I am often disappointed.

If one insists that "persuasion" is always successful, if this is how he used the English word, then we should not use the word in this context, but we should replace it with "suggestion" or "communication," or some similar word instead. Satan communicated with Christ, but he could not cause Christ to sin. He told Christ to make bread, which Christ refused, but he could not possess Christ, cause him to make bread, and then stuff the bread down his throat. He suggested that Christ should do it, and this counted as temptation. He told Christ to worship him, which Christ refused, but he could not possess Christ's heart to make him adore the devil, and to bow his knees to him. He told Christ to jump from the temple, but he could not possess Christ and make him throw himself off, nor could Satan push him down.

To actively perform a work in one's heart or to actively cause someone to perform an action is clearly different from persuasion to do wrong, in the sense of mere suggestion or

communication. It is ridiculous that we even need to discuss this. If temptation, or persuasion to do wrong, is identified with causation, then it means that either Satan did not tempt Christ, or it means that Satan successfully tempted Christ, so that Christ indeed committed sin, including devil worship. As usual, there is nothing to reconcile in the biblical doctrines, but we need to reconcile how this idiot could call himself a Christian, unless the truth is that he was not.

God is not the tempter because he does not suggest that people should do wrong. Whenever he speaks or communicates, he commands people to do right, and warns them against sin. And his word constitutes the standard, or the definition, of good and evil. But God is the author of sin because he directly causes people to transgress this standard whenever it suits his purpose. If he does not do this, no sin can ever happen, since no creature has power within itself to act apart from God. He could cause sin on the occasion of temptation, that is, temptation that he causes some other creature to perform, but the cause in itself is independent from the temptation, so that he could even cause a creature to sin without any temptation. Whether he does that or not is a separate issue. Indeed, God is never the tempter, because his word defines right and wrong. If he were to suggest that a person should do something, then it would by definition be the right thing to do.

Temptation is talk, whether in the literal or figurative sense. And if temptation is talk, it means that we can talk back to it. This in turn suggests that the way to overcome temptation does not rest merely in the exercise of willpower, but also in the exercise of our intelligence, and our intelligence needs to be informed by the word of God. In this, Jesus Christ is our supreme example. He countered each temptation with a relevant biblical teaching. When Satan saw that Christ was anchored on God's word, he appealed to Psalm 91 in his final attempt. But Christ refuted him with Deuteronomy 6.

There is no conflict between the two portions of Scripture, and it would be pure ignorance to suggest, as some tend to do, that this shows how the Bible could be manipulated to say whatever a person wishes. Psalm 91 is a promise of protection, but it does not command a person to needlessly put himself in danger. On the other hand, Deuteronomy 6 refers to a command that would govern how Psalm 91 ought to be applied. Thus in using Scripture to overcome temptation, we maintain that the only proper use is an intelligent use, and not one that treats the holy book as a collection of spells and mantras.

## 15. What is Love?

Love is popularly regarded as an emotion. The main problem with this is that the Bible does not define it this way. In fact, if this anti-Christian definition is used as the operating principle, it would annihilate the reality and stability inherent in the biblical idea.

Does "love your neighbor as yourself" mean "have this affectionate feeling toward your neighbor, just as you have this feeling about yourself"? Done! But this does not necessarily mean that I would lift a finger to help him, even if he is starving or drowning. The definition may imply that I would help, but it does not compel this action – it is not inherent in the idea of an emotion. Does "speak the truth in love" mean "speak the truth with an affectionate feeling or with soft words in a gentle tone"? If so, then what motivates me, what compels me, to speak the truth with this feeling or in this manner? Does "love God with all your heart, and mind, and strength" mean "have this affectionate feeling toward God with all your being?" Done! But does this mean that I have to believe in him, obey him, or trust in Jesus Christ?

If it is said that although emotion might not be the definitive element in love, it is nevertheless one that is included in the definition of love, then what happens when I do not have this feeling toward someone? Do I still act in a manner that God commands? Do I still speak the truth? Suppose I "love" a friend so much – have such a strong affection for him – that I would sacrifice my life for him. But what if he falls into a river minutes after we had a fight, and I am still angry with him? Do I save him? Is there anything in me at that moment that I can call love, that would compel me to save him? The Bible says, "Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:8), but if it is this unreliable, then it is something that constantly fails. We would be better off with law.

If it is admitted that emotion is not necessary to love, but that it is only a part of the definition, the same problem remains. When is it not necessary? If it is sometimes necessary, then it remains just as unreliable and unpredictable. If it is never necessary, then this means that it is not really part of the definition at all. If emotion is never necessary to love, then it is never a part of the definition. Rather, the feeling of affection is incidental to love. There is a correlation, but not a necessary or proportionate relationship.

The Bible portrays love as a benevolent disposition that results in the corresponding expression, or action. The standards that define benevolence and the actions that correspond to it are revealed by God in the Scripture. These are explicit and inflexible, so that true love is always reliable. It may or may not be accompanied by an emotion of affection. One who loves operates by principles, not feelings. He will save his friend even if he is totally mortified. He will rescue his enemy, even if he has no good feelings toward him. Thus love drives out fear, doubt, unbiblical prejudice, unwarranted division, and all base and evil things. In light of this, the popular idea of love appears utterly inferior and unworthy, although even Christians favor it. It is preferred because it is easier, since it is



only the "love" of brutes. People define love as an emotion because they do not want to walk in love.

Paul writes that love is the summary and fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:9-10). In other words, love enables a person to grasp the law and do what it says. And when Paul says this, he provides explicit examples on what love summarizes and fulfills: "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and he adds, "and whatever other commandment." So love is not a replacement for God's laws and commands; rather, it ensures that we take them up in one gulp and do all that they say. One who loves will not commit adultery, will not murder, will not steal, and so on. Also, two people cannot engage in adultery, homosexuality, or the like, and claim to do so out of love for each other. By definition, these actions are contrary to love, because they are contrary to God's laws.

Love is a summary of these laws, and these laws are the specific aspects or implications of love. Just as the law is independent of emotions, although our emotions may correspond to the law, love is independent of emotions, although our emotions may correspond to love. Then, the Bible says, "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Romans 8:7). Since love is a disposition that results in the fulfillment of the law – the doing of the law – this means that non-Christians can never possess it or exercise it, even if they are so overcome with emotions that they bleed from every orifice in their bodies. A person can walk in love only after he has been inwardly converted by God's gracious action, and this change is evidenced by faith in Jesus Christ.

## 16. On Love and Rebuke

### **Better is open rebuke than hidden love. (Proverbs 27:5)**

The Word of God informs and satisfies the Christian intellect. It contains truth with substance, and not fireworks to tickle the speculative mind. God is unlike insecure human authors, who hope to feign greatness through ambiguity. The divine revelation is on the whole so clear and direct that man has no excuse to deny its inspiration, or to avoid the demand for true worship by hiding behind a doctrine of human finitude or divine incomprehensibility. The honest and humble Christian says, "Yes, I know him. Yes, I understand him. Yes, I will believe him and follow him."

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15, ESV). This is a most profound and excellent theology. Love is not an emotion, but a disposition to keep the divine commandments in our relationships to God, to men and women, and to the creation. This means that you will worship God alone, and you will trust in Jesus Christ to save your soul. It means that you will not steal from someone, or slander someone; rather, you will possess a disposition that cares about the welfare of others, and express this concern in the corresponding words and actions. You will behave this way not because you feel like it, and not in proportion to the intensity of your emotions, but because God commands it, and you will do it in proportion to the measure of your increasing faith and obedience.

A person's welfare includes his physical and psychological comfort. Christians help their neighbors with these needs, but so do animals and sinners, although they are moved by inferior and even sinister impulses. When it comes to the more important matter of instruction about God and the way of salvation, animals and sinners are useless. Animals lick themselves or fall asleep, and non-Christians point all over the place, to every direction but the right one. Therefore, it is up to the Christians to admonish one another and to correct the non-Christians.

However, Christians often fail to speak up. There are a number of reasons for this. Perhaps they are afraid of rejection, or that they would lose the affection of friends and relatives. This is a possibility, but it is also a selfish reason. Perhaps they fear that they would injure other people's feelings. This is also a possibility, but it is irrelevant. The need to rebuke a person suggests that he is in the wrong, that he is believing or doing something that dishonors God and that damages himself and others. Thus the matter is more important than his feelings. And if the fundamental problem is corrected, it is likely that his feelings will conform to his new understanding and disposition. To love someone, then, is to rebuke him when he is at fault. It is to declare God's standard, and to straighten that which is crooked.

Since love entails open rebuke, to withhold rebuke betrays a lack of love. Some people do not love God or men, but they love the image of themselves as gentle and kind. They would

rather allow God's honor to be tarnished, and their friends to perish, than to sacrifice their image. The reluctance to rebuke, therefore, is not love, but fear and selfishness. Indeed, if you rebuke wrongdoing, others will criticize you for your boldness, and call you harsh and judgmental, and the criticisms will mostly come from those who call themselves Christians, but this is because your behavior exposes their own love of self, and that their highest motivation is not love for God, but self-preservation. Thus those who refuse to rebuke, but who rebuke those who do, should themselves be rebuked. Nevertheless, if they count their friendly image more precious than Jesus Christ, then that is their reward. As for you, follow the example of the holy prophets, and proclaim the high standard of the Lord, so that by this perhaps some will be led to repentance and salvation, or greater obedience.

The Bible teaches us to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15), and this has been construed to mean "speak the truth in soft tones and with gentle words." This suggests a terrible misunderstanding of what love means. Love is much more profound than effeminate mannerisms. In fact, the text does not refer to the way in which we are to speak the truth, but the motivation behind it. When Romans 1:18 says that sinners suppress the truth about God "in unrighteousness" (KJV), it does not mean that they suppress it in an unrighteous manner (as if one could suppress it in a righteous manner!), but that because they are unrighteous, they suppress the truth. Likewise, when Paul says to speak the truth in love, he means that we speak the truth because we love one another. Recall that, in the Bible, love refers to a disposition that results in the corresponding words and actions. Thus because a person loves, he will speak the truth to instruct and to rebuke others. The words and tones will often be soft and gentle, but will sometimes be harsh and scathing, as the prophets and apostles both exemplified and commanded.

We reserve a most important rebuke for non-Christians. We cannot claim to care about them but not rebuke them for their unbelief and rejection of Jesus Christ. Let us not allow our relationships and other people's feelings to become idols in our hearts, so that we become like the non-Christians in suppressing the truth about God in unrighteousness, because of our idolatry, fear, and selfishness. And let us also rebuke those who claim to be Christians, but who oppose the love that the Word of God commands. They hinder the progress of the gospel, and of truth and holiness.

The Bible says, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy" (Proverbs 27:6, ESV). When I bluntly tell the truth to a person, I am the best friend that he has ever had, because I show him the way of life, when even his closest comrades conceal it or distract him from it. Jesus Christ is our best friend not because he never hurts our feelings or because he never rebukes us, but because he always speaks the truth, the truth that leads to genuine worship and everlasting life.

## 17. Don't Judge Me for Judging

**Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth – you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." (Romans 2:17-24)**

Although it is obscure by comparison, this is one of those passages that people construe to say that it is wrong to make moral judgments about others. It seems that Christians have an opinion about everything, and this irritates non-Christians to no end. And so even some among us say, "Should we be more sensitive to people's feelings? Should we share our faith without being so offensive?" Of course not. Did Jesus teach you this, or someone else? Perhaps someone with horns and a pitchfork?

Sometimes the way non-Christians describe what we do sounds more biblical than what church leaders suggest that we should do. The unbelievers complain that we "lecture" them and "preach at" them, but many ministers think that we should not. If we are too preachy, they warn, we will drive away people. However, this is God's chosen method for revealing the elect and the non-elect. Those who love God enjoy having the truth preached at them, while those who are destined for hell foam at the mouth.

It is not by subtle suggestions, detached discussions, or nebulous nudges that the faith of Jesus Christ is declared before the world; instead, it is by preaching – an explicit and authoritative declaration of what God reveals, what God commands, and what God has done through Jesus Christ. And when a Christian preaches, he will sound preachy, just like when a non-Christian whines, he will sound whiny. Paul said to the Athenians, "What you do not know, I am here to tell you." The very act of preaching, especially to unbelievers, assumes a spiritual, moral, and intellectual superiority, if not in the one who preaches, then certainly in the One who is preached.

In a more popular passage, Jesus said, "Do not judge" (Matthew 7:1), and this is often taken to be a teaching against forming and expressing any moral evaluation of any person's beliefs and actions. Even before we consider the passage further, this interpretation is impossible on its face, and if it is true, it would be impossible to implement. This is because the idea that it is wrong to judge is itself a judgment and evaluation. If it is wrong to judge in any sense, then one can never say this without condemning himself.

Jesus did not commit this error, because he meant something different. He continued, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (v. 3-5).

He was teaching against hypocritical judgment, and not judgment as such. Verses 3-4 describe someone who perceives a fault in his brother, when he himself is burdened with a greater fault. Verse 5 indicates that the point of this is to discourage hypocrisy, and it also states that after this greater fault has been removed, then the person becomes able to rightly and effectively remove the fault in his brother. This final point is highly significant, since as Jesus finished the teaching on hypocritical judgment, he affirmed that this person could in fact point out that fault in his brother.

Paul's aim in the beginning chapters of his letter to the Romans is to show that sin is universal, and to secure the verdict that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), so that he may proceed to expound on a righteousness that comes from God through Jesus Christ, provided as an endowment apart from the works and merits of men, which he imputes to all those whom he has chosen to save by granting them faith in the gospel.

In the process, Paul shows that although men knew about God, even his power and his nature, they suppressed this knowledge and turned to worship idols. And although they knew about his commands and the punishment he had decreed against those who transgressed, they not only did those things that God declared detestable, but also approved of others who did them. He also shows that, although the Gentiles did not have the Old Testament, they nevertheless had some sense of moral standards in their hearts. And their consciences sometimes defended them and sometimes accused them. Thus even their hearts witnessed against them, that they were transgressors. Even the laws that the Gentiles invented for themselves, they often failed to keep. Therefore, their guilt is clear and their condemnation sure.

This same argument applies to the non-Christians around us today. They reject God's moral commands as revealed in the Bible, and adopt their own standards of right and wrong. However, no matter how wrong, how arbitrary, and how accommodating their standards, they still do not constantly and perfectly live up to them. This shows that they are transgressors.

As for the Jews who had the Scripture, they had access to a precise revelation of God's commandments. Paul's aim is not to forbid judgment, but to prove their guilt. Thus he points out that, although they knew them and even taught them to others, they themselves transgressed these commandments. He writes, "You who preach against stealing, do you steal?" He does not say that stealing is not wrong, for the Scripture indeed condemns stealing. Rather, those who preached against stealing, against adultery, and so on, did these very things that they told others not to do.

Again, the point is not that they should not have preached the law, or to evaluate people and actions on the basis of it, but that because they did the very things that they knew to be wrong, they are shown to be sinners just like those who suppressed their innate knowledge of God to worship idols, and like those who were aware of God's laws, but who still sinned, so that their consciences accused them. The result is that, far from telling people to suspend judgment against sin, Paul has made our awareness of the nature and extent of sin even more pronounced.

In verses 21-24, Paul exposes the hypocrisy of the Jews, and thus their sinfulness and their need for a righteousness that comes apart from their own merits and efforts. But he does not deny what he says in verses 17-20. Because they had the law, the embodiment of knowledge and truth, the Jews considered themselves superior, a guide for the blind, a light for those in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, and a teacher of infants. Although Paul speaks as he does in verses 21-24, he does not disagree with how the Jews saw themselves in verses 17-20. This is confirmed in 3:1-2, where he acknowledges that having access to the Scripture was indeed an advantage "in every way": "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God."

Who has the Scripture now? The prophets and the apostles proved that the Jews did not in fact believe the Scripture that they had. Jesus himself said that if the Jews had believed Moses, they would have believed him also, because the Old Testament testified about him and predicted his appearance. And of course they rejected the apostolic writings that completed the Scripture. On the other hand, as Christians we believe all of Scripture and have inherited it, and also the advantages that come with it. We have the Bible, so that 2:17-20 and 3:1-2 now apply to us. We are superior. We are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, and a teacher of infants. This is the commission of the church, stated in the New Testament in almost these very words.

We are now at an advantage "in every way." There is no need to deny this. What we need is to fully appreciate Paul's point, so that we would not make hypocritical judgments, so that we would admit that we nevertheless fail to obey, and admit our transgressions, and renouncing our own works and merits, trust in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Romans 1-3 demonstrate that men never live up to what they know. They are transgressors, wicked sinners. Since sin is universal, divine condemnation is also universal. Only Jesus Christ can save us from God's wrath. This is the most important lesson. Rather than undermining judgment, this basic understanding of the message of salvation requires the most extensive and damning moral evaluation of all men.

Here is where we turn this passage against those who oppose moral judgments. The same reasoning applies: those of you who call other people judgmental, are you judgmental against judgmental people? That is, you who say that people are morally wrong because they are judgmental, do you do the same thing by being judgmental against these judgmental people? You hypocrite! You do the same thing that you condemn. You transgress the very standard that you invented.

Jesus said, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment" (John 7:24, ESV). It is not wrong to make a judgment; this verse tells us to do it. The problem is that some judgments are mistaken, some are premature or based on insufficient information, and some judgments are made with hypocrisy. If we will reverently and intelligently study God's judgment and declare it to the world, and to profess that we also stand under the same standard, and that even now we continue to fall short, so that we trust in Christ alone to save us, then we cannot be faulted.

Only the person who is judgmental, in the sense intended here, can stand up for what is right. He has knowledge of what is right, and can defend it and promote it. He has an idea of what is wrong, and can perceive it and oppose it. Let us, therefore, resist the judgmental criticisms of non-Christians, and become more and more judgmental according to God's standard, so that all may become aware of their sins, of the wrath of God, and of the salvation that is given only through faith in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## 18. The Legalist's Worst Nightmare<sup>2</sup>

My in-laws have decided to adopt Judaist lifestyle and to follow the Levitical laws. They continuously argue with us, saying that we should do the same. I have directed them to Galatians and Acts, but to no avail. I hope that you can lead me in the right direction.

Since I lack many details – whether they claim to be Christians, whether they consider it necessary for salvation to follow the Law, etc. – I can offer only a broad answer. But I will show you a strategy that is biblical, powerful, and that not many will have the Christian courage to recommend.

It would help us to define their condition:

The Bible teaches that if they depend on the Law to achieve a right standing before God or to maintain his approval – that is, if they depend on themselves – then, by definition, they have fallen from grace, and they are cut off from Christ. In other words, they are not Christians, and unless they repent – unless they renounce their own efforts, look outside of themselves, and trust on Jesus Christ to save them – God will send them to hell and torture them forever.

Assuming that they have heard about Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the Law, as the only atoning sacrifice, then their insistence on following the Law, including its ceremonial aspects, amount to a denial of the nature and the work of Christ. They do not accept Jesus Christ for who he is, and his work for what it is, that he is and has performed the once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of his people. Otherwise, they would not insist on the Law in the sense that they do. As it is, they are like the Jews that Christ condemned, who said that they did not really believe Moses, and that their religion is in fact based on the traditions of men, and not the commands of God.

So, we know that we should not regard them as Christians, and we know that they refuse to trust Jesus Christ for salvation. Even if they claim to trust Christ, by their doctrine and practice regarding the Law, they have shown that they do not trust him in the sense taught by the Bible, and therefore this means they do not trust him at all, and certainly not in a sense that is associated with salvation.

Yet the New Testament teaches that the Law is supposed to bring men to Christ. What this indicates to me is that they are not taking the Law seriously, just as the Jews, contrary to their own claim, did not take the Law seriously. Your approach, then, should be to force them to take the Law seriously, and to force them to feel the full power and burden of the Law. To do this, you should have a good knowledge of three things: 1. The Old Testament Law that they claim to follow (or what is truly required by the Law), 2. Their interpretation

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from email correspondence.



of what is required by the Law (you should either correct their lax interpretation, or make them live up to their own traditions also), and 3. All the New Testament arguments against dependence on the Law. As your knowledge of these three things continue to grow, you will be able to implement the following with increasing power and effectiveness.

Now, we are ready to discuss the method:

They have already heard about Christ, and they have already rejected him. And they reject him because of their wrong thinking, not only about Christ (they do not acknowledge him as a sufficient, exclusive, and once-for-all sacrifice), but about the Law (they think they can keep it). Therefore, in the near future, remove emphasis on defending the freedom that Christians have in Christ. Again, this is not to retreat from declaring the gospel, since they have already heard it and rejected it. Rather, before attempting to assert the gospel again, perhaps we can remove some of the obstacles.

Then, and this is the main thrust of the strategy, from this moment forward, demand them to perform perfectly all that the Law requires. For now, do not talk to them about what you believe, and do not let them talk to you about what they want you to believe or practice. Talk to them about what they believe and whether they live up to the Law that they claim to live by. Be fair, be accurate, but be completely merciless and relentless in your application of the Law to their lives. Beat them down with the Law that they insist on keeping. Criticize them over the smallest infractions. Deal with them exclusively on the basis that they want to be dealt with.

Examine what they eat. Examine what they say. Examine what they do, and at what time they do it. Examine how they wash their hands. Examine what they wear. Criticize even what they seem to think – the Law says "Do not covet." Criticize everything about them, on the basis of the Law. Cite the Law against them at every turn. If they have children, criticize their children openly when they violate any detail of the Law. Call them up on the Sabbath. Ask them what they are doing and whether they are allowed to do it by the Law. Are they even supposed to answer your phone call? Why?

Become the Law personified. Become their worst nightmare. If they run, pursue them. Run them off the cliff with the Law. Obviously, they do not understand or believe the Law enough to experience despair. So produce the despair in them. The truth is that they silence the Law when they want to ignore it. So become the voice of the Law and torment them day and night. On the basis of the Law, can they live where they live? Can they associate with whom they associate? Can they remain in their current vocations?

If they fail in any one point, no matter how insignificant it seems, then they are lawbreakers. This is why I say you should become familiar with the New Testament arguments. If they break one law, they have transgressed against the Lawmaker. How will their sins be atoned? Do they perform animal sacrifices? If they do not, how are they following the Law? Where is their temple? Where is their priest? And can their animal sacrifices, if they even have them, atone for their sins? Then how come they need to do it again and again? (This is another one of the New Testament arguments. Learn them.) What if they sin and

die without a final animal sacrifice? If they have made modifications to the Law by their traditions, demand a justification for these, or accuse them of subverting the very same Law that they claim they follow.

Can you see what you should do? You have to know the Law, know what they believe and how they live, know the New Testament arguments, and then, metaphorically speaking, drive them straight to hell with these. Show zero mercy, and make them feel the strictness of the Law. Make their lives miserable. Do not let them pester you about living by the Law. You have already defended your faith in Christ. Now go on the offensive, and stay exclusively on the offensive. Introduce a previously inconceivable level of fear, pain, and annoyance into their lives. Peter said that the Jews ought not to impose on the Gentiles a burden that they themselves could not bear. Make sure they feel this burden in all its fullness. They do not feel it, because their respect for the Law is a lie. They are just pretending because it makes them feel good, or because it makes their religion feel concrete (they need this because they are unspiritual). So you make it real for them.

This is the way. This is how you win this. Whether you care enough about God's honor and their salvation to do this and stick with it is up to you. If you are willing, I say that you should keep at it for at least a whole year. After that, if they count themselves unworthy of eternal life, then brush the dust off your feet and turn to others. Do not cast your pearls before swine.

## 19. It Gets Worse, Much Worse

Recently, since a number of young people were bullied and eventually committed suicide, often because they were homosexuals, some celebrities and others began a movement to assure victims of bullying that "It gets better." The message is that there is nothing wrong with them, and that they need to stand strong. But I am here to tell you that they are all liars. The truth is that it is going to get worse for you, much worse.

You need to understand something about God's providence, or his control over all the affairs of his creation. In the history of Israel, the Jews often turned to idolatry and worshiped false gods. When that happened, God would cause pagans to invade the nation, slaughtering and enslaving them. This does not mean that the pagans were morally in the right. God was sovereign over them, and controlled them for his own purpose. And since what they did was morally wrong, God later punished them. Thus the Jews sinned in their idolatry, and the pagans sinned in their invasion of Israel. God did this to punish and discipline Israel, and as a testimony to them, showing them the consequences of their rebellion. Some of them returned to God, but many of them did not, or repented only in pretense.

Those who harass you with cruelty and violence are indeed in the wrong. But so are you, if you are a non-Christian, a homosexual, or anything that God condemns. He will indeed punish the bullies, but unless you repent, you will likewise perish. And these bullies could be sent by divine providence to afflict you, to be a testimony against you. The suffering that you experience from them is only a mild foretaste of hell. If bullies make life difficult for you, just imagine what an angry and omnipotent God will do to you. The Bible says that it is a fearful thing to fall into his hands. He will inflict extreme pain on your soul and body, and this will go on forever. This is why suicide is not the answer, because it will only send you straight to hell, where your suffering will increase by an infinite degree.

Things will get better only through Jesus Christ. If you are a non-Christian, a homosexual, or anything that God condemns, you must admit that you are wrong, and cling to Jesus Christ to save you from the wrath of God, and so that you may gain strength through him to annihilate your sins. Now things will truly get better, even if the bullies and the temptations remain, because now you have the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and his power to resist sinful urges. Rather than letting others convince you that you are fine as you are, now you finally have the freedom and courage to admit that it is wrong to be a non-Christian, to be a homosexual, or some other thing. Now you no longer have to run, but you can face God and men by the assurance that comes from the righteousness of Jesus Christ, even when you have none of your own.

Paul has a realistic but also optimistic view on the matter: "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom

of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). True optimism, an optimism that is not a delusion, and that will not be disappointed, is found only in Jesus Christ. Contrary to the world's philosophy, this true optimism does not come from self-acceptance, but first in self-rejection, in rejecting who you are and then in accepting who Christ is. Rather than just pretending that there is nothing wrong, he washes you, sanctifies you, and justifies you before God. Now things will get better and better.

## 20. Is the Death Penalty Hypocritical?

Non-Christian: "You Christians are inconsistent and hypocritical on the death penalty."

Vincent: "How so?"

N: "Your Bible says, 'You shall not murder,' but you support the death penalty. You claim to be pro-life, and oppose abortion, but you kill criminals."

V: "The command forbids murder. If you will notice when the Bible forbids us to kill, and when it commands us to kill, you will see that the definition of murder is the deliberate termination of a human life without divine sanction. When a person commits a crime worthy of death, he is given a fair trial and then executed."

N: "That's barbaric!"

V: "Yes, the fair trial is an ancient practice...I am joking. Anyway, that is not murder, because it is carried out in response to the person's crime, and it is a punishment commanded by God."

N: "I was not aware of this distinction. I will have to think about this."

V: "How do you deal with criminals?"

N: "Oh, we put them in prison."

V: "Are they happy to go with you?"

N: "Of course not."

V: "Then how is it not kidnapping?"

N: "What?"

V: "If execution is murder, then how is incarceration not kidnapping?"

N: "Um..."

V: "So when someone breaks the law, you grab him and put him in a cage?"

N: "Pretty much. We make them wear what we pick out for them. Then sometimes we let them out to eat and play while we watch."

V: "Why, you people are a bunch of sickos, aren't you?"

## **21. Grace for His Own**

### **The sinfulness of man and the sovereignty of God**

There are two foundational ideas that determine how we must think about the matter of divine grace.

The first is the sinfulness of man, or the doctrine of total depravity. When Adam sinned, he acted as the federal head or representative of humanity, so that all of mankind fell with him. Now a verdict of guilt is imposed on all his descendants, and a nature of wickedness is passed on, not by natural generation but by divine power, to every human person born after him, Christ excepted. The result is that man is unable to save himself, to redeem himself before God, or to attain righteousness with God. Indeed, because he is evil, he is also unwilling to do so. He would rather burn in hell than to bow before the Most High.

The second is the sovereignty of God, especially as it is applied to the salvation of sinful man. The Bible teaches that God creates and chooses some men for salvation, that is, to show them grace and kindness, to change their nature from evil to good, and to produce faith and love in them toward the Lord Jesus Christ. These are called the elect, or the chosen ones. They are Christians, and will persist in their faith by divine power. And the Bible teaches that God creates and chooses all other men for damnation, to be vessels of wrath, and to be tortured in hell forever. These are called the non-elect, or the reprobates. They are non-Christians, or non-Christians who pretend to be Christians, and will remain in unbelief all their lives.

It is said that this doctrine of predestination is a "high mystery," and "to be handled with special prudence and care." This strange advice is unwarranted. The Bible itself does not call this doctrine a mystery, let alone a "high" mystery. Rather, it is one of the least complex, least difficult, and most fully explained teachings in Scripture. Jesus did not hesitate to throw it around either as a teaching in itself or as an explanation to something else. And Paul offered explicit expositions that addressed all general issues about the topic. There is not one broad question on predestination that we lack the answer to. The doctrine is completely and obviously consistent, so there is nothing to harmonize. There is no paradox, no antinomy, no contradiction, no mystery. There is just plain and glorious truth shining in our face like the noonday sun.

Thus to urge "special prudence and care" is prejudicial. Why not say the same about the Trinity, the nature of Christ, the atonement, and justification by faith without works? Many doctrines can become dangerous if distorted, but then it is not the doctrines themselves that are dangerous, but man's wickedness and incompetence that are injurious to souls. Unless there is biblical reason to do so, to single out this doctrine for "special care" is to insult the clarity of divine revelation. Predestination is not a toxic doctrine. It is not dangerous. The doctrine is nothing other than a "Yes, really" to the idea that God is God. Even a child in the kingdom should handle it with freedom and abandon. It is a doctrine of power, healing,

and assurance. It is to be learned well like other doctrines, and then to be preached and lived out boldly, and compared to what is urged by the tradition, outright recklessly.

So, all men are born thoroughly evil, and only divine power can change them, but God selects only some of them to receive this privilege. Two questions arise from this. First, if non-Christians are thoroughly evil, why do they sometimes appear to perform good works? Second, if God directs his grace only to his chosen ones, why do the reprobates seem to receive some of his blessings, such as food and water, friendship, education, order in society, and various talents and skills? As usual, the answers are clearly inherent in the original doctrine, and these questions should not have come up in the first place. And as usual, theologians have provided answers that are derived from or that are aimed to satisfy unbiblical assumptions, that complicate what is in fact a straightforward matter, and that end up making the situation worse and worse. Christians are quick to come up with fantastic theological inventions to solve problems so simple that they should not exist to begin with. It is fun for them. In this case, a blunt application of the two foundational ideas would be sufficient, and we will apply them to several items.

### **The good works attributed to the wicked**

The total depravity of man is a foundational doctrine. This means that subsidiary questions are explained by it, and not the other way around. That is, we do not regard certain non-Christian works as good, hold this idea as constant and nonnegotiable, and then challenge total depravity by it. Rather, we hold the total depravity of man as constant and nonnegotiable, and then interpret non-Christian actions by this. Therefore, since non-Christians are thoroughly evil, all their works are evil, whether they appear so to the judgment of man.

This is it. This is a sufficient answer, and no Christian who believes the Bible on the total depravity of man should demand more. In fact, to demand more would itself be a manifestation of evil and rebellion. Nevertheless, we can indeed offer a fuller explanation.

We recall that it is God's word that defines good and evil, and his definition never refers only to the outward action. Although the outward action is significant, greater emphasis is given to the inward intention. A human analogy is possible. Suppose a man unknowingly sits on a poisonous spider that was about to bite a child. The act is good in the sense that it saves the child, but we would not call the man the very picture of courage, the protector of children, the slayer of monsters!

Likewise, to determine whether an action is morally good or evil, the intention that is associated with an action must be considered, and even given the greater emphasis. Jesus said that the anger that is the first step to murder already constitutes sin, and the lust that desires adultery is already adultery. So a person who wishes to murder, but for some reason does not physically perform the act, is still not a good person. A person who desires to rape a woman, but who does not, is not virtuous because of it.

That said, Jesus declared that the first and greatest commandment is to love God with our whole being. The non-Christian, by definition, hates God with all his being. If he knows

and loves God at all, he would believe in Jesus, and he would be a Christian: "If God were your Father, you would love me... You belong to your father, the devil" (John 8:42, 44). One who has a saving and filial relation with God manifests this conscious and explicit love toward Christ. If there is no love toward Christ, if he is a non-Christian, then God is not his Father, and this relation of love does not exist between them. This means that the person is in constant violation of the supreme commandment, because this is who he is all the time, and this underlies all that he does, whether or not a particular action superficially conforms to goodness and righteousness.

A non-Christian raises a child, not because he wishes to produce an heir to the faith for the honor of God, but because he wishes to perpetuate the human race or his own legacy, or to satisfy some other desire or ideal. Again, if his desire is to honor God, he would already be a Christian, and our question would no longer apply. A Christian's action is never perfectly good, but it is sanctified and made acceptable by Jesus Christ. On the other hand, if one is a non-Christian, so that by definition his desire is not to honor God, then whatever we say about his action, it is not good, but it is in violation of the supreme commandment. It is an evil action.

When a non-Christian rescues a drowning man, it appears that he performs a good work. And when a non-Christian could rob a bank but does not, he appears to abide by the law and contributes to order in society. Thus it is said that God extends a kind of "grace" that is common to all, that restrains sin in the non-Christians and enables them to perform natural righteousness, although not spiritual good. This is a naïve conclusion. Oh, theologians, are you all but stupid children?

Paul wrote that when those who do not acknowledge God's law nevertheless attempt to live by a moral standard, they betray an awareness of good and evil, although their standard is not accurate. And when they fail to live up to even their own standard of good and evil, they show themselves to be sinners, and worthy of death. What we are talking about is a manifestation of Paul's teaching. It is an exercise that exponentially increases God's wrath against the non-Christians. They show that they are aware of such a thing as good and such a thing as evil, but at the same time they refuse to accept God's definition of what is good and what is evil, and they fail to live up to even their own false moral standard.

God is certainly the one who decrees and causes non-Christian works, order in society, and the restraint of sin, but he also certainly knows that this results in an increase of condemnation, and has designed it this way. So how is this "grace" to non-Christians in any sense? If I give a man a million dollars, knowing and intending that he would gamble with it, lose all of it, become addicted and borrow from a loan shark, and end up owing ten million dollars, is this "grace"? And I am the loan shark who would kill him for not paying the ten million dollars! Is it "grace" now?

What happened? Theologians practice lazy humility by calling attention to their finite minds. In this case, and this is a charitable interpretation (we will say more about this in a moment), their minds are so finite that they focus only on the man's perspective in receiving a million dollars. So they say it looks very good. But the whole thing, including the initial



donation, is designed to bring the man to utter ruin. What if I give a hungry man a poisonous roast chicken? It takes care of his hunger, but then it kills him, and I know this would happen and intend for it to happen. Is this grace? It could be called charity only from the hungry man's ignorant perspective, and only for a few minutes before the chicken melts his stomach and kills him. Is it not more proper to include my knowledge and intention in deciding what to call the scenario?

When it comes to theology, theologians take the wicked man's perspective and ignore everything else. He saves a drowning man! He works in a soup kitchen! He has musical talents! But God requires him to see himself as this drowning man, even a dead man, who needs Christ to rescue him. In saving the drowning man, he shows that he has an idea of rescue, but he does not ask Christ for salvation. By working in a soup kitchen, he shows that he grasps, at least in a natural sense, the ideas of poverty, hunger, and compassion. Why does he not acknowledge his spiritual poverty, so that Christ can make him rich? Why does he not hunger for the righteousness of God and for his kingdom? Why does he not ask for Christ's compassion? If he has musical talents, why does he not praise God with songs and melodies? Thus all these things become testimonies against the man. But God decrees and causes all things, and he is the one who makes him save the drowning man, who makes him work in the soup kitchen, who makes him a musical talent, all the while knowing and intending the final effects in a person who does these things but who does not believe in Christ.

If we are asking whether something is *God's* grace, then we must answer it from *God's* perspective – what does he intend? Of course, as we will soon consider, God may intend more than one thing when he does something. The same thing can be good for one and bad for another. Right now we are asking what he intends relative to the non-Christians. And we must answer that it is not grace, but a most deliberate, prolonged, and frightening display of wrath, only in preparation for an even more intense and permanent punishment.

### **The good things provided to the wicked**

Now the rest should become even more straightforward. God gives food and water, prosperity, and long life to the wicked. Food and water should remind all men of the God of creation and providence, and stimulate praise and thanksgiving. But non-Christians seek alternate explanations, and take these things for granted. They either refuse to give thanks, or offer praise to false gods. Food and water are beneficial in a superficial sense. They indeed allow physical bodies to survive, and so that society may continue. But it is not grace if God deliberately sends them to non-Christians, knowing and intending that every drop of water they drink would become another nail in their spiritual coffins.

As for prosperity and long life, Psalm 73 states that God sends these things to the wicked in order to slip them up, and so that they would be destroyed. It can be called "grace" only from the wicked man's false and ignorant perspective, who for now enjoys all these things and is unaware of why they come to him. For a reprobate person, long life does not mean more time to repent, since God has determined that he will never repent; rather, it means more time to sin, and to increase the measure of divine judgment against him. God knows that this is what happens with each additional moment of life that he gives a reprobate

person, and there is no disparity between what God knows and what God intends. Therefore, because he knows that each natural benefit increases the reprobate's condemnation, he also intends it, and if he intends it, it is not grace in any sense of the term. If God does something with the intention to condemn, then by definition, it is not done out of grace.

Should a major doctrine be invented, defined, and formulated chiefly, if not solely, from the perspective of wicked men, rather than from the perspective of God and eternity? This complaint, that the theologians have constructed their doctrine from the wicked man's perspective, is a charitable interpretation, and one that seems overly so given their expositions. It is based on the hope that they have misunderstood their own doctrine, or what they wished to accomplish by inventing it. Their doctrine, in fact, alleges that God shows a truly favorable disposition toward the reprobates, although not in a sense that produces salvation or any spiritual good in them. However, the Bible teaches that God knows all things and wills all things. This means that he always knows and intends the final effects of this natural benevolence, that it would stimulate thanksgiving in the elect, but increase condemnation in the reprobates.

So the theologians must either deny that God knows and wills all things, or they must assume that God is schizophrenic. Either option would make them non-Christians. Thus the false doctrine pressures us to regard these theologians as unbelievers, and the only way to save them from condemnation is to, with only slight plausibility, since these theologians do not seem to intend it, twist it from its theological perspective to an anthropological perspective. Even then, they are still stuck in a dilemma: from the theological perspective, their doctrine is blasphemy, and to take the anthropological perspective to interpret that which is theological – namely, God's intention or disposition – is clearly wrong. But it is better to be wrong than to burn. That is, they do not mean to blaspheme, but they are just too stupid to know the right perspective from which to formulate a doctrine, and to know the implications of what they say. But is this a credible defense? It is better just to renounce the false doctrine.

### **The good news declared to the wicked**

Another awkward thing that theologians try to do is to explain how the message of Jesus Christ can be "good news" to the reprobates. If the reprobates will not believe, and indeed cannot believe, then to be confronted with the message brings only greater condemnation. How is it good news? Various answers are offered, from the absurd to the sublime. Now it is said that the message is a sincere offer, although God has already determined that they cannot believe it. It is sincerity in the strangest sense of the word. And then it is said that, even though they cannot believe, the reprobates nevertheless receive some natural benefits from it. But we have already answered this.

The true answer is that the good news is considered so only from the perspective of God and his people. It is certainly not good news to Satan. And it is very bad news for the reprobates. Paul wrote that the gospel is a stench of death to some people (2 Corinthians 2:16). A stench of death, in case anyone wonders, is not good news. But to those who would believe, it is a fragrance of life. The attempt to make the message good news to both

the elect and non-elect is perhaps driven by the need to harmonize the term with the perspective of wicked men, so that the gospel may be good news even to those who can never believe, or more terrible but also more likely, by the desire to assert a blasphemous view of God.

### **God's grace only for his people**

Consider the parable that Jesus told about the wheat and the weeds. A man's field has both wheat and weeds. When his servants ask if he wants them to pull up the weeds, he answers, "No, because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them." The man allows the weeds to grow, to receive rain, sunlight, and nutrients, not out of kindness toward the weeds, but out of concern for the wheat. The weeds are there only to be burned. He says, "Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn."

Likewise, the Bible teaches that God created some for honor and some for dishonor. He created the former to be recipients of his mercy and riches. And he created the latter to be recipients of his wrath, in order to display his power and justice. It also teaches that God works all things for the good of those who love him, that is, even the creation, prosperity, and then the damnation of the wicked. As Christians, we are the recipients of God's grace, and we would never experience his wrath, but he has created the wicked so that as he torments them, he may show forth even his aspect of his glory to us. This is how much he loves us.

What about the natural provisions, the order in society, and the restraint of sin? You think he does all these things, even partly, for the reprobates? What an ungrateful and irreverent theology. He does all these things for his own people, and if you are a Christian, for you. He does these things so that you will have a world to live in, to interact with, where you can be converted, and where you can study, pray, worship, and to grow in Christ. He provides this environment so that you may face problems, make decisions, achieve victories, declare and defend the faith of Christ, and be persecuted for the gospel.

A diaper manufacturer makes his product strong and sanitary, and puts it in an attractive package. When it arrives in a mother's hands, she stores it in a dry and clean place, and brings it with her as if it is a most important item. Is it the diaper that she cares about? No, she straps it on her baby so it can use it as a portable toilet. The diaper, so well-made and eagerly purchased, is for the mother's convenience and the child's benefit. Then, it is soiled and discarded.

## **22. Emotional Grenades and Divine Sovereignty**

**I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. (Isaiah 46:10)**

**I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things. (Isaiah 45:7)**

**When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it? (Amos 3:6)**

The Bible teaches that God decrees, causes, and controls all things. God's sovereignty is both exhaustive and effectual. He does not only arrange all things to happen, but he causes all things to happen. This means that he is the author of sin, in the sense that he is the metaphysical cause of thoughts, decisions, actions, and events that he himself has defined as sinful.

Although the distinction should be obvious, it is important to point out a common confusion. To say that God authors or causes sin is not to say that God commits or morally approves sin, that is, to approve sin in the preceptive sense. The Bible defines sin as the transgression of God law. God has revealed his definition of right and wrong for human thought and behavior, and to do what he forbids, or to fail to do what he commands, is to sin. There is no law that says God must not cause sin; therefore, when God causes sin, he does not commit or morally approve sin. If our doctrine falls short of stating that God ordains and causes sin, then we should admit that we reject the biblical doctrine, that he exercises total power over all things.

As expected, there are many attempts at refutation. But the teaching is what God has revealed about himself. He demands us to believe it, and more than that, to like it. To refuse to believe it or to refuse to like it is to insult his nature and character. It is to suggest that there is something wrong with him. To insist that he is not like this is to refuse to accept him as he is. Many Christians find it difficult to accept God as he is. This is just another way of saying that they do not like him. And even those who exalt his sovereignty place a limit on him, and lecture him lest he asserts his direct sovereignty too far, even to the realm of sin and evil. But we are of a different breed. We affirm that God's sovereignty is exhaustive and effectual, and extends to all things, even to sin and evil. He teaches us this. We believe it, and we like it.

One of the attempts against the doctrine takes this form: "If God ordains and causes all things, then this also applies to the rape of a child." Whether this is stated as an observation or a rhetorical question, there is no argument here that compels an answer that is more than a simple "Yes." If God ordains and causes all things, then of course this applies to the rape of a child, or to five billion children. There is no refutation.

This is an emotional grenade. Its power is in the popular sentiment that the welfare of children is one of the supreme principles under which all other things are subservient. In this case, the grenade is thrown against the honor and power of God. Even so, it is one that has a considerable chance of success, because even those who call themselves Christians would eagerly place the welfare of children far above their reverence for God. These are, of course, bad Christians. But there are many bad Christians. In fact, many people would put their pets above their religion. Thus one could expect success with: "If God ordains and causes all things, then this also applies to your dog's indigestion." At this, it would not surprise me even a little if someone would either abandon the doctrine of divine sovereignty and retreat to a finite theism, or turn against God for hurting his innocent puppy.

We must not back away from the biblical doctrine, but we must advance and attack those who seek to undermine the glory of God, and make them regret their insolence. Instead of absorbing the opponent's blow, we ought to take the grenade and throw it back in his face.

The Bible says that even Christ's crucifixion was foreordained by God (Acts 2:23, 4:28), and that "it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer" (Isaiah 53:10). The rape of a child is indeed terrible. Anyone who commits such a crime should be executed. But even the rape of a child, or fifteen trillion children, is still insignificant compared to the shame and suffering that the divine Christ had to endure. Can you not see, that if you are offended at this, or even a little uncomfortable, it says something about you? It tells me that you treasure children more than God, and more than Jesus Christ. Your values are man-centered.

We are but dust, and should continuously give thanks that we are allowed to live. But the Most High ordained and caused his own Son, a person of infinite glory and value, to visit sinners and to receive insults, persecution, and even death from them. If the opponent is ignorant of this, it exposes him as incompetent. If he assumes that we would care more about the child, then he assumes that we are bad Christians. In many cases he would be on target, but not this time. And even if some stumble over this, it still does not refute the doctrine, but it means only that the opponent has discovered some bad Christians. And if the opponent claims to be a Christian, then he has exposed himself as a bad Christian. He cares more for a child than he does the Lord Jesus.

## 23. Two Silly Things

A doctrine of compatibilism is often asserted. It is said that God's sovereignty is compatible with man's freedom because man's decisions are not coerced, but that man always acts according to his strongest desire. Then, this so-called freedom is often used as a basis for man's moral responsibility.

However, if God's sovereignty is exhaustive, then everything is explained by it, including man's desires and the fact that he acts according to his desires. So the fact that there is no coercion is not an indication of freedom, but a reflection that God controls all things. And even if there is resistance, it does not indicate freedom, but that for his own purpose, God is causing one thing to react against another.

In other words, the doctrine of divine sovereignty is such an overarching principle that everything else is explained and interpreted by it. Under this principle, compatibilism is rendered irrelevant. Since there is only one true cause, compatibility cannot be used to make a point other than to say that this one cause is compatible with himself. To say that anything under this system is compatible with another thing is to say nothing other than that God is compatible with himself.

If I assert that I have power over my door, you could think you are very clever and point out that my closing the door is compatible with the door closing. Of course! And the door is not coerced! But this does not grant any freedom to the door, and the door does not close by its own will and power. The statement fails to make any point other than to reaffirm that I have power over the door.

Likewise, to say that God is sovereign and that man decides according to his own desire is to say that God causing a man to have a desire and to decide according to this desire is compatible with God being sovereign. But this only tells me how God uses his sovereignty, or what he does with it. If the aim is to carve out a place for human freedom, or to make a point other than to reaffirm God's sovereignty, it is entirely unsuccessful. It is one of the silliest things in theology.

Some have tried to rescue the doctrine by claiming that I have misrepresented it. They say that the theologians do not call this a kind of freedom, or whether they do or not, they do not make it a basis for moral responsibility. I have two answers to this. First, these people evidently do not know what compatibilism teaches. Theologians indeed call it a kind of freedom, and many if not most of them do make it a basis for moral responsibility. I have documented this with some of the same theologians they claim that they rely on to define the doctrine. Second, if the doctrine is never called a kind of freedom, and never used as a basis for moral responsibility, this might make it less absurd, but it also makes it even less relevant. It becomes a misleading observation that makes no point. And if the only point is that human decisions are not coerced, I have already answered this above.

It is sometimes said that my biblical position resembles pantheism, since it maintains that God is the only real cause. But this is not so much an objection to be answered than an assumption to be exposed and marveled at with horror. The person who makes this objection assumes that God is identified with whatever he controls or causes, so that if God controls and causes all things, then he is identified with the whole universe, resulting in pantheism. The Scripture and I reject this assumption, and there is nothing inherent in the idea that God is the only cause to compel an identification with pantheism. It is not impossible or contradictory to affirm that God controls and causes all things, but that he is not identified with those things. He can fully control a rock and not be the rock. Unless there is an argument to force this identification, there is nothing else to say by way of reply.

Still, Christians, including some Calvinists and Reformed theologians, use this assumption against a strong view of divine sovereignty, such as when Dabney opposed Edwards on the matter of continuous creation, and it has been used against me also. But if they use this assumption to oppose total divine sovereignty, they must continue to use it when they refer to any degree of control or causation by God. Now they are stuck with this false assumption that they use on other people. If they affirm that God is totally sovereign, then according to their own assumption, they are the pantheists. If they affirm that God is not identified with the whole universe, or if they reject pantheism, then they cannot affirm that God is totally sovereign. They will have to settle with a strange blend of finite deity and partial pantheism. Thus they must either accept this conclusion and renounce the Christian faith, or they must abandon the assumption and admit that the doctrine that says God is the only true cause is not the same as pantheism. This is also one of the silliest things in theology.

The biblical doctrine is much simpler: God is sovereign, and man is not free. Divine sovereignty is incompatible with man's freedom. This has nothing to do with moral responsibility, since moral responsibility refers to accountability, and God holds man accountable; therefore, man is responsible. Human freedom has no logical entry into the discussion.

## 24. But What About the Thingamajig?

Suppose I want you to do some hard labor for me. You ask, "What is the pay?" And I answer, "True payment consists of friends, happiness, and a long life. If you come work for me, I will become your friend. You will be happy for helping me. And the work involves a lot of heavy lifting, so it will be good exercise and contribute to a long life." Are you convinced? Or do you think I am avoiding your question? My answer may have some value in another context, but it is not relevant to your concern. Rather, I am imposing another meaning on a key term, and I am addressing *that* instead. You would think that I am either stupid or shifty.

When you ask about the pay, you are referring to money, to the amount of US dollars that will transfer from my account to yours. Your concern has nothing to do with true riches or the deeper meaning of life. The meaning of the term is fixed in your question, and even if the dictionary lists several other definitions, only one matters in this context, and that is the one that you are using. Now my answer looks ridiculous: "True *US dollars* consist of friends, happiness and a long life." It is obviously irrelevant. The true answer is, "No, I will not pay you."

When the same word is used with two different meanings, one or both of the words can be replaced, either with different words, or with expressions that represent the meanings these words are intended to convey. We can reproduce the dialogue this way: "What is the amount of *US dollars* that you will give me?" "I will give you \$0. However, you will receive a different kind of *reward* that consists of friends, happiness, and a long life." In other words, when X is used in two ways, it is always possible to state the matter in terms of Y and Z instead. This is much clearer, but putting the matter this way compels me to admit the fact that I will give you \$0, although I can try to convince you to work for me anyway by offering another kind of motivation. It makes my position more honest.

Now consider something that we read from Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*. He writes, "It is said that the doctrine of perseverance is inconsistent with human freedom. But this objection proceeds on the false assumption that real freedom consists in the liberty of indifference, or the power of contrary choice in moral and spiritual matters. This is erroneous, however. True liberty consists exactly in self-determination in the direction of holiness. Man is never more free than when he moves consciously in the direction of God. And the Christian stands in that liberty through the grace of God."

Can you see that he appears to say something valuable, but avoids the objection? This is a typical Reformed way of thinking. I have chosen this example because it happens to be on my desk, but there are thousands like this in Reformed writings, and it would be easy to find your own example and make your own analysis. In any case, Berkhof's answer is, "What you call X, I do not mean Y, but I mean Z." Fine, but what about Y? The objection is that X is inconsistent with Y, and Berkhof ignores this. And if the opponent claims that Y is essential, without which a system of theology cannot stand, then Berkhof's defense is



a complete failure. The opponent says, "If God is sovereign, then man has no thingamajig." The Reformed answer is, "True freedom is self-determination." But the objection refers to thingamajig. Just as I tried to trick you into working for me without pay, the Reformed answer is a scam.

This prepares us to examine the actual content of the objection. Freedom is a relative term – a person is free *from something*. The meaning that is intended by the word in a given context, then, is determined by what one is said to be free *from*. When the topic is divine sovereignty, election, regeneration, preservation, or the like – that is, when the topic is the control of God – the relevant contrast, or the thing that it seems inconsistent with, is necessarily a freedom *from God*. So the question is, "Do I have a freedom to think, to choose, and to act, in a sense that my decision is always arbitrary or that the reason for my decision is always entirely within myself apart from external determination, including the decree and the power of God?" It is unproductive, and understandably frustrating to the opponents, to say, "But that is not what the Bible means by freedom." You can call it whatever you want, but this is what our opponents are asking. Take back the word freedom, but you still need to answer the question.

This is important because freedom, in this rather strong sense, is what our opponents refer to when they use the term, and they consider this the necessary foundation for moral responsibility. To redefine freedom for them does not answer the question. The typical answer is compatibilism, or that man has the power of self-determination. He always decides according to his own desire without coercion. The Reformed deny their opponents' idea of freedom, saying that it is misdefined and impossible, and offer them this version instead as the basis for moral responsibility.

However, even a computer has this kind of freedom – it always functions according to its program, and it is never coerced. But man is the one who writes the program, and who designs the hardware so that the computer would function according to a program. Our opponents are asking if the computer can function without any programming, or if it can create its own programming, or to operate beyond or even against its programming. To them, the Reformed answer is tantamount to saying that if a computer runs a virus, then we can charge it with a cyber crime. Their thinking is that if a man writes the virus, and the computer merely runs it, then it is the man who should be charged with the crime. The computer can be held accountable only if it writes the virus by itself or if it performs the same mischief without a virus. If we are talking about divine sovereignty, then freedom must be defined this way – a freedom relative to divine control. And if this freedom is the necessary foundation to moral responsibility, then our opponents are correct. Either God cannot be sovereign, or man cannot be responsible. The Reformed answer is a total failure and embarrassment.

If you complain that a man is not like a computer in many ways, I agree. But be careful with this, since it might not go in a direction that you expect. A man might program the computer, but he does not control many things about it. He did not create the very materials that made the computer, and he does not control the electricity and many other things required for its operation. If a man is greater than a computer, then God is infinitely greater

than a programmer. So this complaint only stresses God's control over man. The analogy indeed breaks down, but not in favor of the Reformed or their opponents.

The same thing applies when it is asked if Adam had freedom before his fall into sin. It misses the point to reply with the doctrine of compatibilism or the "four states of man" scheme. Whether Adam was free *from sin* to abstain from sin is secondary. The opponents are asking whether Adam was free *from God* to abstain from sin. If he was free from God, then how is God sovereign? If Adam was not free from God, then why was he responsible? If God created Adam upright, and Adam acted according to his own nature, then how was the fall possible? As far as this goes, the opponents are completely right, and the Reformed are completely wrong.

The correct answer is simple: 1. Affirm divine sovereignty, and that it is exhaustive, extending to all things, even the thoughts, motives, desires, and actions of men; 2. Deny human freedom, and admit that it is indeed inconsistent with and excluded by divine sovereignty; 3. Deny that human freedom is the necessary foundation for moral responsibility; 4. Affirm that divine sovereignty is the true foundation for moral responsibility; that is, men are responsible because God holds them responsible, and he requires no warrant for this other than his nature and his will; and 5. Affirm that the very definition of justice is given by God's nature, decree, and action, so that whatever he decides and causes is by definition in accord with justice; that is, he is always in accord with himself.

This directly faces the idea of freedom as defined by the opponents of divine sovereignty, and instead of switching this freedom with something else, flatly denies it. And then it confronts their deeper concern, which is moral responsibility, and points out that their assumption – that responsibility presupposes freedom, freedom before God in any sense and by any definition – is arbitrary and unwarranted, and contrary to both Scripture and reason.

Do we really need thousands of pages written over hundreds of years to settle this? My computer's relation to its programming is morally irrelevant. It is my property. I can use my laptop like a Frisbee if I want. As the owner, it is within my rights to do whatever I want with it. Thus God is the potter who out of the same lump makes some vessels for honorable use and some vessels for dishonorable use. And no one can say to him, "Why have you made me like this?" That is the summation of theology, and the end of the matter.

## 25. Creationism vs. Traducianism

The biblical view of metaphysics requires creationism, that God directly and immediately creates every new soul.

Among others, there are two objections to this. First, some people think that this contradicts the view that God has rested after the creation of Genesis 1. But the rest there is relative to the six days of creation, and it is not as if Genesis 2:1-3 turned theism into deism. Jesus said that the Father never stopped working, and he said this when he was accused of working on the Sabbath (John 5:16-17). Second, the view that God must create every individual soul would necessarily mean that God creates every soul as sinful (after Adam and Eve). This would then imply that God is the author of sin. I eagerly acknowledge this, even insist upon it, and have demonstrated elsewhere that there is no problem with it.

The Bible teaches that "out of the same lump" of clay – not elect clay, not reprobate clay, but just clay – God creates the elect and the reprobates. That is, God does not draw the elect out of a larger pool of sinners, as many theologians assert. He does not rescue some and "leave" the rest to their own destruction, as if the reprobates created themselves. A potter does not take a large pile of common vessels, transform some into honorable vessels, and leave the rest to remain common vessels. If so, who created the large pile of common vessels? Is there another potter? That would be dualism or some other heresy. Did the common vessels create themselves out of clay? That would be even more incredible, and does not fit the biblical imagery. Rather, God directly creates men as either elect sinners (who would then convert to Christ and be saved), or as reprobate sinners (who would never believe).

God is the metaphysical author of sin, but not the moral approver of sin. The two are completely different, just as his decree and his precept are different. His decree is a determination of what would happen, or what he would cause to happen. His precept is a definition of what is good for men to believe, do, or not do. Again, one is a determination, and the other is a definition. Thus he could decree that a person would transgress his precept. There is a problem only if we say that he could decree that a person would transgress his decree, or that he issues a precept for a person to transgress the same precept. In any case, he has to be the metaphysical author and cause of everything, since no creature is God (which would be a contradiction), no creature has the power of God, thus no creature has "life in himself" – to sustain himself, to propagate himself, or to create new souls.

When we are referring to metaphysics, creationism must be right and traducianism must be wrong. We can make a place for traducianism only if we do not speak on this level. That is, it can be used as a description of the relationship between the parents and their offspring on a non-metaphysical level. In ordinary speech, if I push Tommy in the chest, it would be accurate to say that "Vincent pushed Tommy." But if we are talking about metaphysics, about causation and such, then I must say that "God caused Vincent to lift his hand (that is, God lifted Vincent's hand) and caused it to extend toward Tommy and to touch Tommy's

chest. Then God caused Tommy to feel an impact on his chest and caused his body to fall backward." That is, there is no direct and necessary relationship between my pushing Tommy and Tommy's falling back, since I do not have the metaphysical power to create (as if I am God) or to change anything in creation (as if to "create" a new configuration of the universe). Thus traducianism could be acceptable only in the relative sense and when not speaking on the creative level. But why make room for it if it is really useless? And it seems that almost all of the time, the question is indeed posed on the metaphysical level, so that creationism should be the answer. Man cannot create souls.

Like the doctrine of compatibilism, the doctrine of traducianism asks the question on one level and then answers it on another level, and ends up missing the whole point. Those who affirm traducianism either forget metaphysics, or they affirm some principle like secondary causation. Calvinists often say that God is the ultimate cause of sin, perhaps by a "permissive" decree or some other nonsense, but he uses man as a "secondary" cause – man is the one with direct contact with evil. This never answers the metaphysical question. Does man wield a metaphysical power to cause something or not? If he can wield this power apart from God, then man is God. If he wields it "with" God, then God is at least a co-author of sin. And who wields the power to move the man, if not God? Then God is in fact the only author. If sin is an effect that we try to explain, is not the action of man also an effect? If man has no such metaphysical power, then the "secondary cause" is not a "cause" that does anything at all. It is just a description of the apparent (but not actual) relation between objects, and not a real cause of anything. The word "cause" in the term is misleading, and because it is misleading, the word "secondary" becomes useless and also misleading. If a "something" is really nothing, then a "secondary" nothing is still nothing.

This applies exactly to creationism vs. traducianism. Those who affirm traducianism do not think precisely about this. The upshot is that if they affirm that God is the only metaphysical author, then they just lost their traducianism. If they affirm that God is not the only metaphysical author (that man is the sole or some kind of co-author, as if this is possible), then they just lost their God.

## 26. The Covenant of Works<sup>3</sup>

I was reading your recent comment on Adam and covenant. Are you saying that there was no covenant between God and Adam (the covenant of works)?

How would you understand Hosea 6:7? "But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me."

Hosea 6:7 is not as clearly supportive of the covenant of works as some Reformed theologians make it out to be. To cite from something simple, the *New Bible Commentary* says:

It is possible that *Adam* refers to the first man and his disobedience to God's direct command, but the word *covenant* is not found anywhere before Noah (Ge 6:18) in the story of Adam and Eve and their descendants. Most commentators read 'as at Adam', a place mentioned in Jos 3:16 where the waters of the Jordan were cut off, allowing the people of Israel to cross over into the promised land. If this reading is right, Adam, a town in Gilead on the way to Shechem, had become a place of violent robbers (8-9). We do not know of specific violent acts there, but the *coup* against Pekahiah was carried out by Pekah and fifty men from Gilead (2Ki 15:25). It is quite likely that priests were involved in this or in similar deeds (9: cf. 2Ki 11, where the priest Jehoiada played the major role in a useful *coup*). V 10 sums up the situation again in terms used before.

Again the prophet has a side swipe at Judah (11a). Those who hear of another's condemnation approvingly need to examine themselves.

As above, I agree that it seems "possible" that the verse refers to the man Adam, but it is far from certain. Even if the verse refers to Adam, it must be using the term "covenant" in a very general sense to accommodate the great differences between what God said to Adam and what God said to Israel. It is also possible that, even if the verse refers to Adam, the emphasis rests on the likeness in disobedience, in dealing "faithlessly" with God, and not in dealing faithlessly in the context of a covenant. Then, even if the verse refers to Adam, and the emphasis rests on the covenant, what you have is the bare idea that there was a covenant with Adam in an extremely general sense. This is by no means sufficient to prove an elaborate doctrine like the covenant of works.

After giving them so many passes, we still do not have the doctrine as stated by the Reformed theologians. It appears that they have "dealt faithlessly" with God by inventing

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from email correspondence.

a doctrine and placing it at a crucial place in the foundation of a system, without actual warrant.

Adam was indeed the federal head of humanity, but this did not necessarily involve a covenant. God can make anyone the head of anything just by thinking so without imposing a covenant in the sense meant by the theologians. If the word "federal" seems to denote the existence of a covenant by definition, then we can just do without it, and call Adam the representative of the human race. Again, if one insists that there was a covenant, then the word must be used in an extremely general sense, and there is nothing like what is said about the covenant of works in it.

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I just read your piece titled "Transgression: You Will Surely Die". In it you wrote, "[T]here is no indication of probation in God's instructions to Adam. And there is no promise of promotion to a higher life after a period of obedience. Neither is there any trace of the establishment of a covenant. The doctrine is a human invention, and must be discarded."

Can I assume you are referring to the Covenant of Works (CoW)? If so, are you stating that CoW does not exist? Or that if it does exist, it is established elsewhere?

I understand that some, like John Murray, do not like to refer to the CoW as a covenant though they accept the substance of it. But it seems that in the context of the piece, you neither accept the title nor the substance of it. Is it safe for me to assume so?

Right. My assertion is that there is no biblical basis for the doctrine of the covenant of works. There is no indication anywhere (1) that Adam was under probation, (2) that this probation was for a definite amount of time, (3) that some promotion or higher life was promised for obedience throughout this probation, and (4) that what God said to Adam can be called a covenant. It appears that these points were completely made up.

The Westminster Confession of Faith says: "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience." The biblical proofs cited are:

**Galatians 3:12** And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them.

**Romans 10:5** For Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which doeth those things shall live by them.

**Romans 5:12-20** Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: (For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come. But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many. And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift: for the judgment was by one to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offences unto justification. For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.) Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.

**Genesis 2:17** But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

**Galatians 3:10** For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.

There is nothing – nothing at all – in these passages that even hints at the above four points in the doctrine of the covenant of works.

Note that "shall live in them" refers to lifestyle, and not to something like "eternal life" or "have life instead of death." It means that if you go the way of the law, you have to make that your lifestyle. Strangely, some of the commentaries are unclear on this, but the *Life Application Commentary* has it right: "Quoting again from the law (Lev 18:5), Paul supported his statement, 'If you wish to find life by obeying the law, you must obey all of its commands.' The law itself says that only perfect obedience can gain approval from God – one can 'live' by the law only by obeying it completely, without fail. The problem is, no one can do that – it is humanly impossible."

In the same sense, the righteous shall live by faith, not that they will "have life" by faith, but that their "way of life" would be faith. The *ESV Study Bible* says this for "the righteous shall live by faith": "The life of faith is all-encompassing: it is by faith that one initially receives the gift of salvation (eternal life), but it is also by faith that one lives each day."

So it is a description or a precept, but not a promise. But even if we pretend that to "live" here is a promise, notice that the verses cited refer to the Law of Moses. Does that necessarily have anything to do with what God said to Adam, and does that make what he said to Adam a covenant? The theologians have utterly failed to make a case for this.

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In regards to the Law of Moses, I would guess that some may say that the covenant with Moses was a republication of a covenant with Adam, and would argue via the Law of Moses that what God said to Adam was a covenant. But this seems to be arguing backwards or even begging the question.

Yes, and unless they are able to prove the connection, this would be another thing that they made up. They are motivated to maintain the covenant of works partly because they want to say that Christ's active obedience fulfilled it, or because they think that his active obedience makes sense only against this background. I would disagree with this assumption, although I affirm a doctrine of Christ's active obedience.

I find it difficult to understand Christ's active obedience outside the covenant of works. I find an attractive relationship between the two.

The covenant of works appears to be needed to make sense of Christ's active obedience only because you assume a correspondence, probably because the Reformed have told you to assume one. This correspondence itself requires evidence, but what we find is evidence to the contrary. In a chief passage that teaches active obedience, a correspondence is explicitly denied:

But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.



The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5:15-21)

They were not operating on the same terms, and what Christ gained did not correspond to what Adam lost. That is, there is no evidence that Adam was to fulfill a covenant, and even if he was, there is no evidence that Christ picked up the same covenant to fulfill it. Otherwise, Adam would have become the Lord of Glory if he had succeeded, but that role is suited only to deity, thus it was impossible that God had promised him this. If it is said that Christ took up Adam's covenant, but with added promises, then this only increases the burden on the doctrine of the covenant of works. All the previous claims remain unsupported, and this one, also unsupported, is now placed on top of them. The doctrine thus becomes a monstrosity of patchworks and question-begging.

## 27. When a Leader Falls

Once in a while, or more than once in a while, we hear about alarming allegations against church leaders. Some of these we respect, or used to respect, and others we do not much care for in the first place. Whether the allegations involve spiritual abuse, financial misconduct, sexual molestation or other things, there are usually several issues to consider.

*Apostasy.* Whenever a scandal breaks out against a minister, a number of people become disillusioned and either slacken in their commitment to their religion, or abandon it altogether. Somehow the sin of a leader is taken as evidence that the Christian faith itself is false. These must be some of the stupidest people in the world. It is likely that their faith has never been associated with the proper object, Jesus Christ. Instead, they have put their hope on the leader, on the church, on other believers, or on the feeling of security and comfort that they derive from being a member of the community. We claim that our faith is in God and not men. Scandals test this profession to reveal the true nature and object of our worship.

*Hypocrisy.* It is said that Christians are hypocritical. A hypocrite is a person who claims to be someone that he is not, or who says he will do one thing but does something different. Even a murderous psychopath is not a hypocrite if he keeps slaughtering people. Hypocrisy is a specific charge, and does not apply to every person who does something wrong. It refers to an inconsistency between the claim and the truth. That said, Christians not only admit that they are imperfect, but they insist that they continue to sin, and sin often. They are not happy about this, and by the grace and power of God, they strive to put off the old man and put on the new man, to put on Jesus Christ. But the basis for this admission and this attitude is the very moral standard that Christians proclaim to the non-Christians. So where is the hypocrisy, if when Christians sin, they do exactly what they tell the world would happen?

*Identity.* One important point about church scandals is that many of the fallen leaders are in fact non-Christians. Anyone can say that he is a Christian, but does he fit the definition of a Christian? I can say that I am a Russian astronaut, but for that to be true I need to be Russian, and I need to be an astronaut. Otherwise, if I insult an American chef, one cannot then say that Russian astronauts hate American chefs. Yet this is often what happens in church scandals. We should first examine the doctrines. If a person denies what the Bible teaches about the nature of God, the creation of man and the world, the reality of sin, the divinity and humanity of Christ, the atonement, and justification by faith, then he is not a Christian. He does not fit the definition. I do not have to defend Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Scientists. And I do not have to answer for Catholic priests who molest hundreds of little boys. These people do not fit the definition of what it means to be Christians even in their doctrines – the most public and objective indications of their identity. I do not even have to check if they are people who profess the faith, who parrot the right doctrines, but who do not sincerely believe – they declare themselves to be non-Christians by the doctrines they publicly profess. They retain the name or label, but not the

actual teachings of the religion. Thus these are non-Christians who commit these atrocities while pretending to be Christians. If they are hypocrites, these are non-Christian hypocrites, and demonstrate the hypocrisy of non-Christians.

*Slander.* Preachers are targets for false accusations. The Lord himself was attacked by false testimonies, and the apostles were regularly slandered. Of course, when it comes to church scandals, we assume that some accusations are true, and we would not grant those who have done wrong immunity from discipline or even prosecution. But it would not be right to believe an accusation just because it has been made. If we have no information about the truth of the matter, it is best to withhold judgment. Also, if there is a temptation to gloat or feel vindicated when a Christian of a different persuasion is brought low, resist this temptation. Do not rejoice in evil. However, if it has been shown that the accused is indeed guilty, then we may rejoice in the righteousness that has been done against him.

*Sympathy.* If the accusations are true, and there are true victims involved, we are to show them due sympathy and assistance, and to pray for them, so that they may receive the comfort that only comes from God. At the same time, we must not allow them to become bitter against the Lord, or to wallow in unbelief and self-pity. If needed, we are to rebuke them with all sternness and authority, and command them to repent of their wicked attitude, and to climb out of the pit of depression by the strength of the Lord.

*Fear.* Paul writes, "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12, ESV). We should take warning, since indeed God intends them as warnings, when troubles fall upon others. Certainly, it reminds us to keep ourselves pure and upright, so that we provide no occasion for scandals. But we must also guard against false accusations, or even simple misunderstandings. There is no reason for a minister to lock himself into a room with a woman to "counsel" her. Have a witness present, and spend no time with her in private. Do not use compassion as an excuse. If she insists on private counsel, refer her to a woman, or just kick her out. And there is no reason to work with a child in private, or even a group of children. Insist that a parent of one of the children be present, or kick them all out. As for finances, it may be a good idea for the church members to select a competent individual, knowledgeable in accounting and filled with the Holy Spirit, to be the treasurer or to perform audits, so that the leadership does not consist in an entirely closed circle.

*Faith.* We must fear, because we see that in ourselves, we cannot live holy lives. We will fall short of God's righteous standard, and become vulnerable to criticisms and accusations. But we do not trust in ourselves to uphold our devotion and holiness. We have faith in God. We look to the throne of grace. He has called us to mature into the image of his Son, Jesus Christ. And Paul writes, "He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:24, ESV).

## **28. Blessed Mother, Blessed Rather**

**Now Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him, but they were not able to get near him because of the crowd. Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you."**

**He replied, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." (Luke 8:19-21)**

Even some evangelicals think that Christians have neglected the natural mother of Jesus, and suggest that we should reinstate her to a position of significance. Jesus, however, would have us reinstate Luke 8:21 instead.

His mother and brothers came to see him. How thoughtful. Wait, why were they not following him in the first place? Why were they not even part of the crowd, and just now came for a visit? Mark offers additional details: "Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind'" (Mark 3:20-21). His family, including his mother (Mark 3:31), thought that Jesus was insane. It would be a mistake to suppose that Mary was some ultra-spiritual super-saint. Later, she learned to worship Jesus, and like any Christian, to trust him to save her wretched soul from hellfire (Acts 1:14). But at this point, she was not even a believer.

Then, a woman called out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you" (Luke 11:27). That is, she said, "Blessed is Mary." But Jesus replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (v. 28). He did not even say, "Blessed also," but he said, "Blessed rather." It was indeed a privilege and a blessing to be the vessel for the Messiah's human body (Luke 1:30, 48), but her role was limited to the natural realm. She contributed nothing spiritual, and she evidently made no spiritual progress in thirty years (Luke 3:23).

There is an alarming defect in a person or theology that exalts someone because of his or her natural relation to Christ. His own mother thought he was crazy, and "even his own brothers did not believe in him" (John 7:5). They had no spiritual privilege. Some envy the closeness that must have existed between Jesus and his mother and siblings. But there was no such closeness. They were outside the crowd. Instead, let us strive to be the "blessed rather" group, to be people who hear God's word and obey it.

## 29. The Giver and His Gifts

You have heard it said, "Desire the Giver, not the gifts." I have never been able to say this, and I wonder where are all these demigods who can afford to do without God's gifts, and who think that they have the option to make this statement. This popular slogan implies the legitimate point that we should desire God for his own sake, and not only or mainly for what he can do for us. This is a valuable lesson, since God is indeed an end in himself. He is not a tool for us to use, or a stepping-stone for us to reach for something greater, for there is none greater. However, this slogan fails to directly assert this point, and after this, it treads beyond this to assert something that is dangerous and sacrilegious.

If we do not take words seriously, then any statement can be considered acceptable or unacceptable, since it would be meaningless. But if we take words seriously, then the "not" in the slogan must mean something, and must not mean other things. It does not say, "Desire the Giver *and* the gifts," or "Desire the Giver *more than* the gifts," or a more elaborate "Desire the Giver, and make your fellowship with him the context within which you desire his gifts, for your own sake, and for the sake of his kingdom" (this last one would be my position). Rather, the slogan says, "Desire the Giver, not the gifts." Sometimes people perceive that this is not right and use one of the other forms, but now our interest is in this form, where a "not" is applied to the gifts.

There are two considerations that uncover the problems. First, given the alternatives, to use "not" in the statement must suggest either a rejection of God's gifts or an indifference toward them. If there is some desire for them, then the correct term would be "more than" instead of "not." Second, although Christians from different traditions may mean different things by the word "gifts," in reality they are not only the things that we need to excel in life and ministry are gifts, but also the things that we need to survive, even the air and the rain, are gifts from God. This is especially true for Christians, who are supposed to possess the perception that all good things come from God, and who are supposed to be encouraged in the faith even by naturally benevolent things like food and water, when the reprobates are hardened by them.

That said, there are at least four problems with the slogan.

First, it is outright obnoxious. Imagine holding out a present to your child, and he says, "I want you, *not* your gift!" And you would think, "Yes, and I am right here, giving you the gift. Take it, you brat!"

Second, it reflects a prideful and high-minded attitude. Sometimes when you go out to eat with a friend, you pay for your own meal, and he pays for his. You desire his fellowship, not a free meal. But do you think you can pay your own bill with God? The statement speaks as if we can fellowship with him on equal footing. Again, I admit that this is probably not the intention of the statement, but the word "not" makes this implication difficult to avoid.

Third, it betrays either a lack of love for God or a tragically false perception toward his gifts.

When my wife and I first met and decided to marry, we were attending high schools in different countries. (It was not until we graduated from college, also at different locations, that we married.) At that time email was not as popular and phone calls were very expensive. So we wrote many letters to each other. It took up to ten days for a letter to travel from one location to the other. It was pure agony. I would wait for each letter with a burning heart and open it with trembling hands. Then, I would carefully fold it away and write a reply. Oh, how I desired the next letter! To this day we still have the letters we sent to each other, along with the original envelopes. We started using email when we were in college, and I have always, to this day, saved all the ones she sent me, no matter how trivial.

Why do you think I do this? Do you think I do this because I am infatuated with letters and emails? If so, this tells me that you know nothing about love. No, I behave this way because I am infatuated with her! I am in love with her. And I value the things that she gives me because they come from her. I certainly do not think more of the letters than I do of her. And in a fire, I certainly would not rescue the letters and leave her to perish. That would be absurd. No doubt I would rescue her and let the letters burn. There is a priority, but there is no dichotomy.

If the love between a man and a woman is a reflection of the love between Christ and the Church, if God is my Father and Christ is my first love, and the Holy Spirit is the source and the cause even of the love that I have for my wife, then how much more should I agonize to receive from him! Just as it would be unnatural to impose a dichotomy between my wife and her gifts, it would be unnatural to impose one between God and all the things in life, whether we refer to food and water, to friends, to health, or to the Spirit's power for ministry. The reason you think that you can "not" desire food and water is because you do not see God in your access to food and water. The reason you think you can "not" desire spiritual gifts, even though you sense the burden for ministry, is because you think they are optional. You think you are strong and rich. You are not desperate.

I was a beggar, and God made me a prince in Christ. But my status depends on my continual association with him; that is, *in myself* I always remain a beggar. As he said, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (John 15:4-7). He did not say, "Remain in me and ask for nothing," but "Remain in me and ask whatever you wish."

Fourth, and this follows from above, the popular slogan introduces unbiblical guilt, unnecessary limitations, and inordinate self-examination into a Christian's spiritual life,

crippling his faith in prayer and power in ministry. It persuades him to become suspicious of his own motives by a principle that is contrary to Scripture. It binds his conscience with a lie.

Praise be to God, his word sets us free to desire him and his gifts, and to be thankful for them. I desire God and all his gifts. I want everything, and more of everything. And the more I love him and know him, the more I witness his majesty and greatness, the more I become aware of my need for his gifts, and the more I increase in my desire for them. But when it happens this way, this desire is developed within the context of fellowship with him. There is no "not," no dichotomy.

Thus I refuse to let people trick me into rejecting what God is so eager to give and what I am so desperate to receive. Jesus said, "Seek first his kingdom, and all these things will be added to you." There he spoke against worry, which is contrary to God and contrary to faith, and the right priority must be established. But when he taught his disciples to pray – that is, in the context of faith and fellowship with God – he said to ask for their daily bread.

We need God's gifts to live in this world, and especially to succeed in the work of the gospel. If we care only for the gifts, then we are non-Christians, and it would be strange to even perceive them as "gifts." But if we have fellowship with God, then we should also have the right perception regarding his gifts, and to desire them with all faith and eagerness, without false piety, and without guilt and shame. The Lord told us to ask, and receive, so that our joy may be full.

### 30. An Emphasis on the Holy Spirit<sup>4</sup>

I once heard that the reason we don't hear more about the Holy Spirit is because He was to testify about Christ. Charismatic writings emphasize the Holy Spirit. Do you think charismatics speak too much about the Spirit and not enough about Christ?

Their emphasis is off. First, the idea that the Holy Spirit shuns attention because he is to testify about Christ, or to say that he is deliberately self-effacing, is speculative and a begging of the question. Second, the regularity and prominence with which he appears in Scripture would make such an explanation too simplistic. The Spirit puts himself on the very top of Genesis, prominently throughout Judges, the Kings and Chronicles, the Prophets, at the birth of Christ, the baptism of Christ, on the day of Pentecost, throughout the letters, and so on. However, the main attention still belongs to Christ and the Father. I believe that we should approximate the biblical proportion in our emphasis.

There are times to stress the Holy Spirit more, such as when he is especially misunderstood. Many years ago when I preached at a gathering, a lady said to me, "Is your holy spirit doing something to my holy spirit?" This showed me that it was time to teach on the Holy Spirit.

There is also the matter of prayer and worship offered to the Holy Spirit. It is said that because the Spirit is God, we should direct prayer and worship to him, and that we have really neglected to do so. I agree that the premise, that the Spirit is God, warrants the conclusion that he could receive prayer and worship, and it would not be idolatry to direct such to him. However, the proportion, emphasis, and examples in the Bible certainly cannot produce the conclusion that we should direct prayer and worship to the Spirit just as much as we do the Father or to Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from email correspondence.



### 31. Empiricism and 1 John 1:1-3

**That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3)**

In debates on epistemology, or how knowledge is obtained, our text is often cited to support empiricism, or the view that sensations are basically reliable, and that knowledge is obtained or derived from our sensations. If the substance and the veracity of the gospel are dependent on the eyewitness testimony of the apostles, then the denial of the reliability of sensations is also a denial of the reliability of apostolic preaching, and thus a denial of the reliability of Scripture.

The argument backfires. The Bible contains many examples demonstrating that the senses are fallible and unreliable. Elisha, by the power of God, exploited this and won a battle against the Moabites (2 Kings 3:22-23). Then, that time when God spoke from heaven in reply to Jesus' prayer, some in the crowd thought that it was thunder, and others thought that it was an angel (John 12:28-29). The Bible's own claim is that it is true because God himself breathed out the words – it is a product of divine inspiration. When an eyewitness testimony that is recorded in the Bible is said to be true, it is known to be true not because it is an eyewitness testimony, but because the Holy Spirit testifies that this particular sensation or testimony is true.

Thus the claim that the Bible itself is dependent on the reliability of sensations because it refers to eyewitness testimony turns inspiration on its head, and is in fact a denial of inspiration. The matter is serious. Those who advance or support such an argument has sinned against the Holy Spirit. Let them stop debating epistemology, but offer repentance with great fear and sincere mourning.

This is a broad answer to any argument that appeals to accounts of sensations in the Bible as support for the reliability of sensations. But when one appeals to our text to assert such an argument, the implication is even more alarming.

Consider the interpretation that the empiricist must give to this passage in order for an appeal to it to be relevant to his position. On the basis of this text, it would be irrelevant for him to assert merely that sensations happen, or that John saw something, touched something, sensed something. Rather, for an appeal to this text to be relevant to his position, the empiricist must assert, on the basis of this text, that John's seeing has something to do with knowing what he saw, and that John's touching has something to do

with knowing what he touched. What did John see? What did John touch? The Word of Life, which the Bible and all Christians affirm to be God, to be divine.

The trouble is that God has always insisted that he is invisible and without form (Deuteronomy 4:12, 15; 1 Timothy 1:16-17). Therefore, to assert that a person can see the body of Jesus, and by this seeing detect or infer that Jesus is the very Word of Life, even "that which was from the beginning" (v. 1), amounts to a denial of the spirituality and transcendence of God. And to deny the spirituality and transcendence of God is not only a rejection of the entire religion of the Bible, but it also makes nonsense of the incarnation itself (if the Word was already non-spiritual and non-transcendent, how was it an incarnation to possess a body?), which is the very thing that John tries to defend in his letter.

Therefore, an appeal to the passage to support empiricism is at the same time a repudiation of the Christian religion, and of one's confession in God and the Lord Jesus Christ. It suggests something very sinister in the person. It is blasphemy and spiritual suicide. If the argument is taken seriously, we must conclude that the person is not a Christian. Exercising the patience of Christ, we should accept that someone like this may just be stupid and careless, and is unaware of his blasphemy. After all, if he is a competent thinker, he would not support empiricism.

To the empiricist, to the one who affirms that sensations are reliable and that knowledge can come from sensations, we plead, "Please, if you must hold to this false and absurd philosophy, if you must deceive yourself and others, at least do not blaspheme the divine essence, and do not deny the nature of God and the deity of Christ, lest you perish in hellfire with the reprobates." If he insists that the text endorses the reliability of sensations even after the implications have been explained to him, he should be tried before the church and excommunicated.

The true interpretation of the passage is simple, and obvious from its language. If by seeing and touching, you cannot even tell if I am a plumber or a preacher, how can you tell by your senses that a man is the incarnate Word of Life, the Eternal One? John does not say that he learned that Jesus was the Word by seeing and touching him, but he says that what he saw and what he touched was the Word. He is telling his reader what it was that he saw and touched, and not that he learned what it was that he saw and touched by his seeing and touching.

Suppose I say, "That man I just shook hands with at church was the governor." I would not intend to suggest that I could tell that he was the governor by shaking hands with him. I would only be telling you who it was that I shook hands with, that the governor was at church, that I was in close proximity to him, and had a direct encounter with him. Likewise, John does not say that he inferred that Jesus was the Word by seeing and touching the body of his incarnation, but he says that what he saw and touched happened to be the Word, to be God himself. The reason that he makes a point of this is to defend the incarnation, that it really happened: "Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God" (1 John

4:2-3). He does this without denying the nature of God, and without making a complete fool of himself.

The Word, Jesus Christ, who is God, came in the flesh to save his people, so that by believing in him, we will have fellowship with him and with the Father. To have faith in him is more than to acknowledge his name as a mere sound or symbol, but to grasp and affirm the nature of his person and his work. It is necessary to confess his deity, his spiritual and transcendent essence. He was God in the flesh, and because he was God, one could not tell that he was God by sensations associated with his flesh. For this reason, the empiricist's appeal to our text implies a complete rejection of the Christian faith. Rather than winning the debate on epistemology, he has lost the confession of faith that is necessary for salvation.