

SERMONETTES VOLUME 6

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1. Conversations of the Righteous

You have said, "It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape."

Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name.

"They will be mine," says the LORD Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not." (Malachi 3:14-18)

God is a topic of conversation. He is a figure of interest and controversy. To his enemies, he is an object of hatred, slander, and ridicule. Non-Christians act out not because they are confident, but because they are disturbed and terrified. Like the scared little demons that caused their victims to throw themselves around and foam at the mouths when Jesus approached, unbelievers know in their hearts that they are in trouble, even as they put on a defiant front. God has shown them his nature, his power, and his righteous demands. They know that he is coming for them, coming to punish them and make them suffer forever. The whole creation bears witness against them day and night, and the people of faith testifies to them of God's truth, holiness, and judgment. The non-Christians are angry, and they are afraid.

But even those who claim to worship God often dishonor him in their speech. When success eludes them, or when evil men appear to prosper, they become indignant. When tragedy strikes, or when the righteous appear to suffer along with the wicked, they become anxious and full of doubt. They complain that it is futile to serve God, and cry, "Where was God when this disaster happened? Where was he when this wicked man plotted against us?" They consider themselves deep and feeling persons, and when they challenge God because they see the suffering of others, they admire their own compassion all the more.

There is an entire market of books that cater to these people. The authors acknowledge their pain and legitimize their slander. They discuss in detail how God indeed appears to be unjust and uncaring. Then with reluctance they finally affirm that God must be somehow righteous in all of this and consign the matter to some mysterious higher purpose. Doubt is encouraged. Anger is applauded. They claim that these things belong to the process that leads to greater faith and understanding.

But the Bible always labels these as sins and condemns them. It does not comfort the murderer with the assurance that killing people will eventually help him appreciate life. It does not comfort the homosexual with the assurance that experiencing all the facets of sodomy will help him relish the purity and sanctity of heterosexual marriage. God can indeed use our sins and make them contribute to our growth, but only as we agree with him in condemning them and repenting of them. Likewise, God can use these books to help our faith, not as we read them and agree with them, but as he alerts us to their evil so that we may cast them out of our lives and condemn the authors.

If there is a place for books on this subject, the bulk of these volumes should be dedicated to rebuking those who complain about God and those who encourage them to do so. The real reason that people speak this way about God is because they do not fear the Lord. They doubt God not because they are intelligent, but because they are stupid and defiant. God is the one who makes people intelligent, and intelligent people believe God right away. They become angry with God not because they care about justice and the welfare of others, but because they are so arrogant that they are displeased with how God orders his creation.

God's people, those who truly fear him, praise and honor him in their conversations. They do not complain all the time and criticize the Lord. This might seem obvious, but for many people, it is not; rather, it is said that doubt and anger must be allowed to foster and then resolved in order to lead to growth. But God does not take orders from modern psychology. If they blaspheme, he will throw both the psychologist and his client into a burning hell, and there they can work out their doubt and anger. No, sin is always wrong, and it must be stopped – now.

The righteous make their lips into altars of praise everywhere they go. Their daily conversations are sweeter to the Lord than the sacrifices of the hypocrites. Just talking about God is an act of worship, and each conversation is a doxology. Their words carry eternal significance, because God does not take lightly their reverence, but he hears them and makes permanent remembrance of them.

God is just – he makes a distinction between the righteous and the wicked. This distinction will become evident to all, but even now the difference is revealed in our speech, in how we refer to him. God is the same whether or not we honor him. A man changes. He gets worse, and then he might get better. He loses integrity, and then he might gain it again. He is stubborn, but then he repents. God is perfection, and he remains the same. Thus what we say about him is not a judgment that determines who he is; rather, we are either right or wrong about him, and this becomes a reflection on ourselves, on our faith, knowledge, and character. God remains the same. You cannot improve him, and you cannot hurt him. But what you say about God reveals who you are.

Therefore, let us refer to God with fondness, gratitude, and reverence. Let us talk about God as if we like him! Let us talk about him as he really is, and say that he is just, good, and kind, that he has saved us through Jesus Christ, and that all things work together for the good of those who love him, those whom he has called for his purpose. Our circumstances change, but God remains the same. He is full of grace and power. Jesus

Christ is our sacrifice and champion, and our righteousness. The throne of grace is always open to us. Instead of allowing doubt to develop and giving anger free expression, let us fix our eyes on that which is perfect and immutable, and come before God with praise and petition on our lips.

2. Contend for the Faith

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 3, ESV)

What a delight it is to talk about our salvation in Jesus Christ. It is a place of rest, a pleasant exercise, and an act of worship. We desire to declare it in our preaching, and in our mutual teaching and admonition. We enjoy discussing the intricacies of God's wisdom, power, and grace. This is a salvation that we have in common through Christ, so we do not talk about how we are better than other believers, or boast about how much we have accomplished. We were all in trouble, and we have been rescued by one champion and made rich by the same benefactor. Jesus Christ has made this glorious life a reality for us, and we are eager to advance in our faith and service in the gospel.

However, not everyone shares our enthusiasm. Christ has many enemies, and we must contend for the faith that we love. Non-Christians criticize and ridicule our faith, and seek to turn men against it. But we are able to meet them with invincible arguments and the power of the Spirit. The gospel will achieve the effects that God has foreordained. The Bible also warns about those who would slip in among us. These are false teachers and false believers who present themselves as Christians, but whose doctrines and practices are subversive of the Lord Jesus. Some might distort God's grace into a license for immorality. Others might corrupt the holiness of the gospel into a legalistic self-righteousness. The possibilities are endless, because the sinful desires of men are multi-faceted.

The Bible commands us to fight for the faith. We do this, first, by maintaining a clear vision of sound doctrine in our lives so that we may stand firm in it. Then we must follow the apostles' example in denouncing the false teachers and their doctrines in the most clear and scathing terms. This is demonstrated in this same letter from Jude. And we must go further than this, because to contend for the faith means more than to argue for the faith, but it also means to enforce the faith. Thus we are to locate and excommunicate the offenders, publicly display their errors, cut them off from fellowship, and remove them from our gatherings.

All Christians must take up this cause and contend for the faith. It is not the responsibility of church leaders alone. The gospel has been delivered and entrusted to the saints. Even if you consider yourself an ordinary believer with no public ministry, you must contend for the faith. If you have benefited from this salvation that we share, then you have been called to fight for it as well, because God has entrusted the faith to you.

3. Feed My Sheep

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?"

He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:17)

Jesus was arrested. As Peter followed and waited at some distance, he was asked three times whether he was a disciple, and three times he denied that he was a follower of Christ. It was unacceptable, and he knew it. A disciple must be faithful under all circumstances. He must boldly proclaim his master and identify with him not only where Christ is welcomed, but also where Christ is scorned and hated, and where the very mention of his name stirs up hostility and violence.

Peter was afraid. His master was in trouble, and if he confessed his loyalty now, he could be next. So he said, "No, I am not his disciple. No, I do not even know the man!" Jesus had been to him a perfect father, teacher, and friend, but in this hour of darkness, Peter abandoned him. To add insult to injury, earlier at supper he boasted that even if all fell away, he would not, and that he was ready to go to prison and even to die for his master. Now he discovered that a man's best intentions are easily reduced to nothing. He went outside and wept.

Yet with God there is forgiveness and restoration. If God marks our transgressions, who could stand? But he would have us learn that our righteousness and our faithfulness are all of him, so that no one may boast in his presence. His chosen ones are never finally fallen, for he causes them to repent, to stand up again, and to return to the service of the gospel. But the arrogant and self-righteous are brought low.

Jesus was killed and buried, but after three days he was raised from the dead. He returned to his disciples and encouraged them. He took Peter aside and allowed him to reaffirm his loyalty. He asked, "Peter, do you love me?" And Peter would answer, "Lord, you know that I love you." As Peter did this, Jesus also reaffirmed his calling to the ministry of the gospel, and commanded, "Feed my sheep."

Thus we are reminded that the motivation and authority behind the gospel ministry is first a love for the Lord Jesus, and not a love for the men that we teach and serve. Men are sinful, immature, and ignorant. They will distort the command of God and manipulate those who minister to them in order to satisfy their own desires and promote their agendas. But if the ministry is first about serving and pleasing Christ, and not about serving and pleasing men, then we will not accommodate them.

As long as we are holding forth the standard of God, we will not care when men complain and criticize, because they are nothing. What we do, we do for Christ. Of course we love the men that we teach and serve, but we love them only because we first love Christ. If I do not love Christ, I would not be in the ministry. I would not try to lead men in the way of salvation and righteousness. This is the way it ought to be. For if you say that you would work in the ministry even if you do not love Christ, but because you love men even apart from Christ, then your whole attitude and labor are centered around men. Your work caters to sin and evil. It is wrongheaded and worthless.

After Jesus ascended to the right hand of God, he poured out his Holy Spirit. Peter and the other disciples were clothed with power from heaven. From then on he boldly declared Jesus Christ to the masses. Under the cloak of darkness, when men warmed themselves around a fire, he denied knowing the Lord. But now he marched to the temple and openly confessed to be his disciple and witness. And then he faced interrogation and imprisonment with a composure that honored his master.

We would like to say that Peter was never again intimidated by men. But he later stumbled again because of religious tradition and human opinion. When he was in Antioch, he became afraid of the men of circumcision, and so he drew back from the Gentiles and stopped eating with them, that is, as if to acknowledge that they were unclean. But God had taught him, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." No one is clean because he is a Jew, and no one is unclean because he is a Gentile. A person's race, gender, or status is irrelevant. Any non-Christian is unclean, but anyone who believes in Christ has been cleansed by his blood. Peter knew this, but he fell into error and denied the gospel because he was afraid of what certain men might think of him. So Paul opposed him to his face, and we can only assume that Peter repented and received mercy.

Take heed that you do not stumble over human traditions and opinions. Do not be intimidated by churches and denominations. Let Christ be enthroned in your heart, and let men be brought low. Only then can you truly serve the Lord, and feed his sheep. The Bible says, "The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe" (Proverbs 29:25, ESV). Love casts out fear, and our love for Christ casts out the fear of men.

4. Have I Not Seen the Lord?

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? (1 Corinthians 9:1)

Here we consider the question of whether it is possible for there to be apostles today, at least in principle. We say "in principle" because whether there are actual apostles today is a separate issue and is irrelevant to the question itself. Even if no one possesses a ministry of giving, there is no teaching in Scripture and no fact in the world to eliminate the possibility that there could be one who exercises such a ministry. Perhaps God would raise up two thousand of them by tomorrow. Thus even if there are no apostles today, it does not necessarily mean that the ministry has ceased in principle, and even if the ministry has not ceased in principle, it does not necessarily mean that there are apostles today. Right now we are interested in the possibility.

Beginning from the assumption that the Bible has been completed, some argue that there cannot be apostles today, or it would open the possibility for additions to the Bible. But this is a foolish and desperate argument. We agree that the Bible has been completed, but this is irrelevant to the question, because the materials of most apostles were never included in Scripture.

It is doubtful that the production of Scripture was even among their main tasks. Instead, it appears to be a special work assigned to a small number of individuals, including those who were not necessarily apostles or prophets, such as Mark, Luke, and any editors involved. Although the most prominent writers of Scripture were prophets and apostles, and indeed the doctrines and messages came from divine inspiration given to them, the writing of Scripture remains a related but distinct issue from that of apostleship.

Just as God can even turn rocks into the children of Abraham, if he wishes, he can inspire even dogs and monkeys to write Scripture. And there are still dogs and monkeys today. Fools! Scripture was written not because there were apostles, but because there was a God. And no matter how much theologians wish it, God is not dead. If there are no more additions to Scripture, it is because God has stopped writing, and not because there are no more apostles.

Another argument is that an apostle must be an eyewitness to the Lord Jesus. Peter insisted that they had to "choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us" (Acts 1:21). However, Paul did not fit this description, and he was still recognized as an apostle. The requirement seemed appropriate for one who would replace Judas, but it was not a requirement for the ministry of the apostle. Nevertheless, Paul asserted that he saw Jesus, and thus it is said that to see Jesus remains a requirement for one to become an apostle.

This is an invalid inference from the text. It offers one of Paul's possible meanings, but not the only one. He also said, "Am I not free?" and "Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?" But these are usually not emphasized as the necessary or exclusive credentials of an apostle. And the statement, "Am I not an apostle?" does not appear necessarily related to "Am I not free?" "Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?" and "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" These three points can apply to any person who is not an apostle, including seeing Jesus in the flesh or in a vision. Paul himself insisted that Jesus appeared to more than five hundred people after his resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:6).

Therefore, seeing the Lord does not turn a person into an apostle, and there is no conclusive evidence that it is necessary to see the Lord for a person to be an apostle. But for the sake of argument, let us suppose that it is indeed a necessary qualification for a person to be an apostle, why is this impossible today? Paul acknowledged that God put him on a different schedule, since other apostles in his day were followers of Jesus in the flesh, while he saw Jesus in special appearances after his ascension. He insisted that his apostleship was genuine and legitimate apart from the endorsement of the other apostles, or those who followed Christ in the flesh. He wrote that when God first revealed Christ to him, "I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was" (Galatians 1:16-17). It would be some years afterward that he met the other apostles. He noted that they agreed with his doctrine and ministry. That was welcomed, but unnecessary. If they had disagreed with Paul, it would have meant that they were wrong. Christ directly commissioned Paul.

Thus even if it is a necessary qualification to see the Lord for one to become an apostle, this remains possible, and it is unnecessary for there to be other apostles to confirm it. Therefore, it remains possible at least in principle for there to be apostles today. But again, it has never been established that to see the Lord is a necessary qualification. And just as we would use the Scripture to test any person who claims a call to any position of spiritual leadership, we can test one who claims the call of apostleship by the biblical revelation already given.

Cessationists, or those whose faith in God's miraculous gifts has ceased, sometimes mention this when they argue for their position. They say that if even those who affirm the continuation of spiritual gifts acknowledge that apostleship has ceased, then it is admitted that at least one gift has ceased. This makes all of us cessationists in a sense, and then additional arguments are attempted to show that other gifts have ceased as well. This line of reasoning entails multiple logical leaps and exegetical errors. But now we refuse to acknowledge that even apostleship has ceased, at least in principle. Instead, we charge the cessationists with criminal mishandling of the word of God. They would force a conclusion that they desire regardless of what the Bible says. They claim to guard the finality and sufficiency of Scripture, but what good is Scripture to them, if they distort it so much that they might as well write their own? They are imposters and hypocrites.

As for you, follow the wholesome teachings that have been entrusted to you. Reject the doubts and theories of men, but persist in your faith, that with God all things are possible, and that all things are possible to him who believes.

5. God Testified by Miracles

This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. (Hebrews 2:3-4)

The text is not mainly about miracles but salvation. The writer urges us to respect the message and pay attention to it. To emphasize its significance he lists three kinds of testimonies. First, this salvation was announced by Jesus. Second, those who heard him confirmed it, bearing witness to the words and works of the Lord, including his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Third, God himself endorsed the message by signs, wonders, and miracles.

From this arises the strange cessationist argument that because God authenticated the gospel with miracles, then since it has been authenticated, it follows that the miracles should cease. It is ridiculous even on its face, since it would be like saying that once the followers of Jesus have preached or testified about the Lord, it follows that they should stop preaching – more than that, it follows that they should stop speaking altogether for the rest of their lives. But the text does not eliminate the possibility that there are other reasons for speaking, or the possibility that the followers of Christ could continue speaking about the truth of the gospel, even today. Thus we can still talk on the phone and order dinner at restaurants.

Likewise, the fact that God testified about the gospel by miracles does not eliminate the possibility that there are other reasons to work miracles, or the possibility that he would continue to endorse the gospel by miracles. The argument maintains that God would perform miracles to confirm new revelations, so that if there are no new revelations, there should be no new miracles. But the text does not teach this, and there is nothing in the Bible to suggest that God could not or would not perform miracles to continue confirming and advancing a revelation that he has delivered long ago.

The cessationist argument is based on an assumption conjured up by evil men to limit the Holy One of God, because of their doubts and traditions. It demonstrates their inferior intelligence and depraved character. We ought to adjust our estimation of their worth as theologians, believers, and human beings, that they would so distort the Bible to advance their false doctrine and to disguise their unbelief. As for you, "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God" (Hebrews 3:12).

6. Because of Your Unbelief

Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

He replied, "Because you have so little faith." (Matthew 17:19-20)

The disciples were unable to cast out a demon from a boy and bring healing to him, so Jesus did it instead. When the disciples asked why they failed, the Lord replied, "Because you have so little faith" ("You don't have enough faith," NLT; "Because of your unbelief," KJV).

Christian preachers and theologians often resist the notion that a person may fail to receive what he asks for in prayer due to a lack of faith. Rather, this is frequently castigated as the false doctrine of some fanatical and insensitive charismatics whose teachings offer people false hope and impose unwarranted guilt for failure. The Bible shows that their criticism is in fact directed against the Lord himself.

Jesus repeatedly scolded people for their lack of faith. He rebuked everyone for their lack of faith when they worried about food, clothing, and shelter. He rebuked his disciples for their lack of faith when they were fearful in the face of a deadly storm. More than this, when Peter failed to walk on water, Jesus rebuked him for his doubts. And in our text he told his disciples that they failed because they did not have enough faith. He represented all that our preachers and theologians condemn. His teaching on faith is too extreme and farfetched for them, and they refuse to tolerate it.

The apostles learned from Christ and agreed with him. As James wrote, "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:6-7). The prayer is unanswered because the man doubts and lacks faith. This is the exact teaching that religious traditions have excommunicated from our churches. But if the Bible so often refers to this as the explanation for failure, the traditions must be wrong in almost always avoiding this as the explanation. They criticize those who follow Jesus' teaching as those who offer false hope, but the truth is that they are the spiritual charlatans who offer false comfort.

In order to remain true to the Lord Jesus, we must restore this aspect of his teaching in our own ministry. Whenever it is appropriate – and it often is – we must repeat this explanation to those who hear us. Do not let them wallow in doubt and self-pity, or in the delusion that they have strong faith. Push them to greater heights. Why did I fail? Because of your unbelief! How come I did not receive an answer to my prayer? Because you have so little faith! Instead of making excuses for ourselves and for others, let us heed the words of Jesus, condemn unbelief, and strive to grow in faith.

Let us restore the high expectation that Jesus commanded. What unbelief regards as false hope, let us teach it all the more: "I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20). Let us shrug off the yoke of human doctrines and traditions, so that we may do great things in the name of Christ. If we will have faith, then nothing will be impossible for us. We will move mountains, and the unbelief of the theologians and their denominations will not stand in our way. By faith, we will cast them out along with the demons of hell.

7. A Man is Not His Own

I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps. (Jeremiah 10:23)

A fool once said: "I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul." A rat in a dark hole might think that he is the king of the universe, but he could think this only because he has no idea what it means to be a king and how big the universe is. Against contrary circumstances, a man might be considered heroic who insists that he is the master of his fate and the captain of his soul, but he is heroic only if he in fact possesses this power and control. If he does not, then he is a delusional lunatic who is bound for failure, suffering, and final punishment. The Bible dispels the empty boasts of men, and reveals the truth to us.

God is the master of my fate. Before I was born, he conceived me in his mind and designed me for his purpose. He decreed the works that he would have me accomplish by his power. He foreordained my path, that I would believe and cling to his Son, and conform to his image. He predestined me for the glory of heaven, so that I might enjoy eternal life, and serve him forever.

Christ is the captain of my soul. I could do nothing for my soul, but Jesus Christ became my champion. He bore my sins and died for them. Then he rose from the dead for my justification. And now he is seated at God's right hand to make intercession for me. I am at peace because Christ is my righteousness. I am at rest because Christ is my Sabbath. And I am determined and immovable because Christ is my rock. He is more faithful, more able, and more intelligent than any man who claims to be his own master and captain.

He is the author and finisher of my faith. What he has started in me, he will bring to completion. I am confident of my success not because I believe in myself, or in my ability, effort, and potential, but because I believe in his promise and his power to finish his work in me. It is not easy to believe in myself, because I have been delivered from delusion and have a realistic view of life. But it is easy to believe in Christ's work in me, because it is easy to believe that God is faithful and powerful, that perfection would perform a perfect work.

It is not for a man to direct his steps, but his life is determined by divine foreordination and providence. When the Lord chooses to delight in a man, he establishes him so that even though he stumbles, he will not fall, because the Lord holds his hand and leads him on his way. But he ensnares the wicked and the unbelieving, so that having boasted of their ability and resolve, he causes them to slip and fall headlong into destruction.

The Christian is satisfied, because he trusts God's arrangement. In God's wisdom and goodness, he works out all things for his own glory and for the benefit of his people. God's

will is always best. The Christian is confident, because if it is not for him to direct his steps, then neither can other men direct his steps. If God is my master, then men are not. They may be misguided men, or even men who hate me and oppose me, but I need not fear them, because they cannot determine my fate. And men cannot dictate to my soul or bind my conscience to their desires and traditions, because in Christ I am stronger than ten thousand denominations. He is the captain and the shepherd of my soul.

8. God Wanted to Kill Them

His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the LORD's will to put them to death. (1 Samuel 2:25)

"Eli's sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the LORD" (2:12). They abused the worshipers and the offerings they brought, and committed fornication with the women who served. When Eli their father rebuked them, they did not listen. What is the explanation for sin? What is the power that hardens the heart? The Bible says that Eli's son did not heed the warning, because it was God's will to kill them. They could not listen, and they could not repent, because God decided that they would remain in wickedness so that he could punish them according to his own justice.

Eli's rebuke was a declaration of God's righteous standard. He indicated that his sons had transgressed and appealed to them to change their ways. But God's wish or decree was for them to continue in their transgression of his own standard, so that he would continue in his plan to destroy them. Likewise, the preaching of the gospel is a declaration of truth. It includes a statement of God's command or moral precept that all men should repent, but it does not suggest that it is God's wish or decree that all men would do so.

Even before the creation of the world, God had conceived in his mind some for salvation and some for damnation, and throughout history he would directly create them to become what he has designed them to be. When we announce the Lord Jesus to all men and women, we declare that it is God's command or moral precept that all of them ought to believe in him. This draws a clear line that differentiates the true and the false, the right and the wrong, but it does not indicate God's wish for specific individuals, as to whether he wishes for one to believe the true or whether he wishes for one to cling to the wrong.

God's wish is a separate matter. Some people will believe what we preach. All men and women ought to believe, but these individuals believe because God wishes for them to be saved. Then, some people will reject what we preach. All men and women ought to believe, but these individuals reject the message because God wishes for them to be damned. He wishes to kill them and punish them, and torture them in hell forever. This is the Bible's explanation for the different responses.

Non-Christians detest this doctrine, and most Christians attempt to castrate it. The theologians who seem to declare the doctrine most forcefully nevertheless introduce foreign concepts and assumptions into their expositions so as to make God's sovereignty "compatible" with man's own decision or freedom. Or they say that there is an apparent contradiction and call it an unsolvable mystery. The Bible anticipates this reluctance to accept the truth and has a detractor ask, "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?"

If a man sins because God causes him to sin, then how can God blame and punish this man for his sins? And if a man rejects the gospel because God causes him to reject the gospel, then how can God blame and punish this man for rejecting the gospel? Christians and non-Christians agree that God is wrong in this. Whereas non-Christians ridicule the doctrine, Christians try to invent excuses for God. The fact that the Christians make up excuses indicates that their basic assumptions about justice and the rights of God are the same as the non-Christians.

However, both the Christians and the non-Christians are wrong. The Bible denies that there is a problem to be solved at all. It acknowledges that God is the one who causes men to commit sins and causes them to reject the gospel, and God is the one who then blames and punishes them. In response to the complaint, it notes that a man who challenges this does not know his place. Again, the same applies to anyone who claims to be a Christian but who responds to the complaint as if there is some merit to it, as if the standard of justice inherent in it needs to be satisfied. All of them – the non-Christians, the unbelievers, the theologians – do not know their place. The Bible answers that God is within his rights to do whatever he wants. If he wants to cause a man to sin and to refuse to repent, and then punish him for it, he has the right to do this.

The doctrine teaches us what attitude to take when we consider our salvation and our ministry. If you have received grace, and if you have believed on the gospel of Jesus Christ, do not think that in yourself you were more righteous or intelligent than the sinners that refuse to believe. You were not better than they, but God was better to you than he is to them. Then, when you preach the gospel and warn people about divine judgment, do not despair if they refuse to listen. God's will is not subverted. His desire is always carried out. He ensures that they reject your preaching, because he has decided to increase their guilt and damn them to hell.

Even as those who claim to be Christians reject my preaching, I know that it is because they are in fact non-Christians, and God is exposing them, or if their case is not so severe, it is because God has decided to maintain a measure of rebellion in them and to limit their reward. Therefore, I continue in peace and confidence, knowing that God's will is always done through my work. "Yes, Lord, do whatever you wish with the people. Have mercy on whom you wish to have mercy, so that they may receive your gifts and blessings. And harden whom you wish to harden, so that they may be punished."

9. God is Always There

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. (Psalm 139:7-10)

We should make it a habit to reflect on the attributes of God, on how they relate to our faith and life, and how they determine our message to the world. In these verses we are led to think about God's omnipresence. He is present in all places and at all times. This does not mean that he occupies all of physical space, because he is spirit and not physical. But he is present in every place in a sense that is consistent with his nature. All that is true about him is true everywhere. God is not only master of the hill or of the valley. He is not only a lord in the office or the home. His glory is not limited to a church building or a prayer meeting. God is the God of all creation. He is all-powerful and all-knowing everywhere. He is gracious and righteous in every place.

If this truth penetrates our thinking, we would not do some of the things that we do, or we would not do so much of them. The fear of God would curb our adultery, theft, gossip, and shameful dealings. We would not spend so much time in meaningless amusements, sports, and games. We would also do some of the things that we ordinarily might not do. If we think that the Lord is with us, even standing in our midst, we would want his approval. We would take courage in his presence and execute his commands and teachings. We would boldly preach the gospel. We would treat our spouses with kindness and respect. Following the pattern of the Lord and his disciples, we would blast stubborn sinners with harsh threats and demeaning insults. We would become diligent in study and worship.

God's omnipresence ought to penetrate our message as well. The God that we believe in is the God that we preach to the world. Thus we say, "When you are in your home where no man watches, God sees your sins. When you are at work, God watches your greed and cruelty. When you steal, God sees it. When you lie, God hears it. He keeps a record of wrongs, and even though you escape the light justice of men, the full power of God's punishment will soon come crashing down on you. Your only hope is to trust in Jesus Christ to save you and represent you before the Father." By the same doctrine, we encourage the faithful: "Although men do not appreciate you, God sees the good works that you perform. Although men slander you, God sees the truth and will vindicate you and reward you. Take heart! Your faith in the Lord will not be in vain. When you are weak, or when you are surrounded by troubles and enemies, be courageous and joyful! God is there to hold your hand. He is with you, and he will deliver you."

10. Worthless Worship, Worthless People

They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves. (Jeremiah 2:5)

It is popular to think that there is value in every religion, and that there is value and wisdom in every philosophy. Moreover, it is said that those who believe very different things from us are often individuals of high intellect and morality. And so every opinion deserves our respect. It is remarkable that this has infiltrated the thinking of Christians, so that even those who profess the name of Christ often regard this respect for all religions and opinions as an expression of Christian love and humility.

God demands us to take the opposite view. His opinion is that non-Christian religions are worthless. He revealed himself as the only deity who could receive worship, and he commanded that there should be no other gods before him. He does not praise those who worship other gods as diverse and broad-minded people, but he calls their religions worthless. He is not fooled by another popular idea, that intelligent and righteous people can believe some unintelligent and unrighteous things. The fact that they participate in worthless worship means that they are worthless people. Let us agree with God in all things, and join with him in calling all non-Christians worthless. They believe in worthless things, they worship worthless things, and they are worthless people.

God has rescued us from our worthlessness and called us to a life of true worship. He saved us not because we had value, for we were as worthless as the non-Christians all around us. But he saved us because of his own kindness and for his own purpose. He enlightened us and taught us the truth about reality, that there is only one God, and only he deserves worship. He has called us to become worthwhile people who could do worthwhile things and live worthwhile lives. This is the new life that he has given us through faith in Jesus Christ.

11. The Word of Faith

But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. (Romans 10:8-10)

My life revolves around this message. It is not a word about human potential and progress. It is not a doctrine of self-reliance. It is not a delusional theory that exalts science as the door to knowledge about everything and the solution to every problem, although it cannot really know anything or solve anything.¹ It is not a foolish and hypocritical argument for mutual understanding and tolerance. It is not an empty political promise about change and prosperity. Men continue to depend on these things, and so they continue to become worse and worse.

My message is altogether different and superior. It is the only message that is true. It is the only message that is good. And it is the only message that works. This is the message that men are saved through faith in Jesus Christ. It is the word of faith. There is nothing technically difficult about it, but men cannot grasp or believe it unless they are enabled and drawn by God to embrace it. He has hidden it from men's elite, so as to spite them, but he has revealed it to his chosen ones, so that even infants in Christ are more enlightened than the best of those who do not believe.

The message is this: Men need salvation. Jesus Christ came to save us. He died as a sacrifice for our sins. God accepted this sacrifice and vindicated Christ by the resurrection, demonstrating that he was not a criminal, but that he was the perfect man, even God in the flesh, that he acted as the head of those chosen for salvation, to lead them from wickedness and punishment to righteousness and heavenly glory. God has made him Lord over all, and salvation depends on the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord and that God has raised him from the dead.

Therefore, faith does not say, "Who will bring Christ down?" The Savior has already arrived. And faith does not say, "Who will bring Christ up?" The Savior has been raised from the dead. Our message is not one that speculates or searches for some unknown truth. It talks about not a mere possibility but a fulfilled promise. There is no need for dialogue or investigation. Faith has the solution. It affirms the completed works of Christ in the reality of his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. These things have been accomplished and are effective for salvation.

¹ See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, and Captive to Reason*.

Man is broken down by sin and false religion. He is a hypocrite and a contradiction, so that even as he draws near to God with his lips, his heart is far from him. Faith integrates the human person and makes Christ the center of his life. As he believes in his heart that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead, he confesses with his mouth, "Jesus is Lord! He is the incarnation of deity. He died for my sins and rose again for my justification. He is my Savior. He is the Shepherd of my soul. He is the author and finisher of my faith." As we enthrone Christ in our hearts and declare him the master and center of our lives, faith replaces delusion and hypocrisy with wisdom, love, sincerity, and peace. And this is the word of faith, which we preach.

12. The Sign of Jonah

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you."

He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." (Matthew 12:38-39)

Jesus' statement is often used to criticize those who believe that God's miraculous gifts and powers remain at work today. Labels are often misleading, because they tend to generalize and preserve stereotypes. But for the sake of convenience, let us call the two groups the cessationists and the charismatics, although not all cessationists and not all charismatics are alike.

The charismatics are portrayed as people who seek spectacular experiences and sensations instead of God and his truth. Thus they are likened to the wicked and adulterous generation that demanded a sign from Christ. However, those who use the text this way condemn themselves, for this strange and farfetched application exposes them as those who would do violence to Scripture in order to assert their own theological agenda and to mask their own unbelief.

Their interpretation makes no sense even when we note nothing more than the immediate context, and it is even more ridiculous when seen in the context of the Gospels and the whole Bible.

First, Jesus said that no sign will be given his generation (except the sign of Jonah). This could not be correct if he was referring to those signs sought by the charismatics, since both he and his apostles characterized his ministry by them (Matthew 11:4-5; Acts 2:22). If healing the sick, casting out demons, walking on water, and raising the dead mean that "no sign" is given, then the charismatics would happily accept no sign at all.

Second, numerous individuals asked Jesus for the same miracles that the charismatics seek, and he commended them. A woman who hemorrhaged came to touch his clothes, and he said, "Your faith has healed you" (Matthew 9:22). Blind men called out to him, and he said, "According to your faith be it unto you" (Matthew 9:29). Another came to seek deliverance for her daughter, and he said, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted" (Matthew 15:28). These are three examples out of thousands, perhaps tens of thousands. What happened to "no sign will be given"?

Third, Jesus sent out his disciples, and they performed the same miracles that the charismatics seek. This was not limited to the twelve, but he sent out many others who returned and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name" (Luke 10:17). And

as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, even ordinary believers who had no obvious connection to the apostles performed miracles.

Fourth, Paul told Christians to "eagerly desire spiritual gifts" (1 Corinthians 14:1), referring to the same gifts that the charismatics seek, including healing, powers, tongues, and prophecy.

Moreover, the cessationists often miss the motives connected to the working of miracles. They assert the God performed miracles to confirm his word, and that the charismatics continue to seek miracles because they are after the sensational. However, even if God performs miracles only to confirm his word, there is no reason to think that he would do this only to confirm new revelation. He could confirm his word by miracles whenever it is preached, even centuries after it has been revealed. That said, there is in fact no basis to suppose that the only reason for him to perform miracles is to confirm his word.

Jesus said in one place, "Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?" (Luke 13:16). He made no direct reference to the confirmation of any new revelation. Rather, he explicitly appealed to God's blessing to Abraham, established centuries before, as the basis for her healing. Healing was her covenant privilege. In addition, Jesus was concerned to relieve suffering. The Gospels repeatedly state that Jesus healed because he "had compassion" on people (Matthew 20:34, Mark 5:19, Luke 7:13, etc.). Likewise, since Christians are the children of Abraham by faith (Galatians 3:7), why does it seem so strange to think that healing is a covenant privilege, and why is it farfetched to think that charismatics wish to relieve people's suffering by God's power? Or did Jesus' statement applied to only a few dozen Sabbaths?

By their accusations, the cessationists seem to confess that if *they* were to desire miracles as the Bible commands, then *they* would do so only because they wish to enjoy the spectacular. It does not occur to them that God's miracles may be useful to confirm his word – his old revelation – today. And it does not occur to them that his healing power may relieve people's suffering and encourage them in their faith. They are concerned about an ancient confirmation – good! – but what about a modern compassion?

Therefore, even if the charismatics could be refuted by some other argument, our text cannot be used for this. It pertains to something else. Jesus said that his generation would be given the sign of Jonah. By this he referred to two things.

First, Jonah was swallowed by a huge fish and was released from its belly after three days. This prefigured the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Thus he meant that his death and resurrection would be a sign to his generation (Matthew 12:40).

Second, Jonah preached to the Gentiles and they repented. But those who were supposedly God's people refused to repent at the preaching of one greater than Jonah, and so the Gentiles would become witnesses against them (v. 41). He confirmed that he had this in mind when he added that the Queen of the South would also testify against this generation,

since as a Gentile she traveled a great distance to hear the Christian wisdom of Solomon. Yet those who were supposedly God's people now refused to hear one greater than Solomon.

Thus Jesus' statement was directed at people who kept demanding signs as an expression of their unbelief, and as a challenge against him. This cannot be applied to the charismatics. The charismatics seek miracles as an expression of their faith, and as a means to confront concrete problems in life. The charismatics do not say that they refuse to believe in Jesus until they witness enough miracles; rather, they think that they can perform or experience miracles *because* they believe in Jesus.

Anyone who applies this text against the charismatics commit the sin of slander. This is serious, but those who are possessed by the spirit of the Pharisees would strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. If this text is applied to the charismatics, then it is much more easily applied to the cessationists, albeit not in a direct and exact manner, but by analogy. They often taunt charismatics by demanding miracles: "If you have the gift of healing, then why don't you go to the hospital and heal everyone there?" Instead, they ought to have compassion and help the charismatics pray for sick people.

They are like the soldiers who mocked and tortured Christ. As they struck him, they demanded, "Prophesy! Who hit you?" However, although there are different schools of thought, a significant number of charismatics would insist that God is the one who determines the distribution and manifestation of the spiritual gifts. For example, God would withhold information even from someone with a strong prophetic gift like Elisha (2 Kings 4:27). It was not up to him to exercise the gift whenever he wanted. How come the charismatics believe in God's sovereignty, and the cessationists do not? Then, in one place the Bible says of Jesus, "And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief" (Matthew 13:58, ESV). This means that God will not always perform miracles to comply with the cessationists' challenge. In addition, charismatics admit that they often fail because of their own imperfect faith (Matthew 17:20). But this is better than total unbelief.

Like the Pharisees and Jews who despised the Gentiles, the cessationists often regard themselves as faithful theologians, elite believers, and guardians of the faith, and they regard the charismatics as uneducated, fanatical, and little children who lack sense and discernment. But God's doctrines and powers have much freedom outside of their churches, seminaries, and traditions. Those that they consider uneducated, fanatical, and little children, and the people of Africa, India, China, and many other places that welcome the power of God will rise up and testify against the unbelief of this generation of cessationists.

The cessationists boast about their reverence for the Bible and their ability to handle it aright, but then they rape the passages that disagree with their traditions and that expose their unbelief. On the use of this text, they ought to repent of slander, apologize to the charismatics, and shut their mouths, lest in their murderous zeal to defend the faith, they defend themselves right out of the faith.

13. If Your Brother Sins

"If your brother sins,² go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

"But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'

"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." (Matthew 18:15-17)

Christians are individuals whom God has chosen for salvation and delivered from sin through faith in Jesus Christ. Yet God is pleased to withhold perfection from them and orders them to grow in faith and holiness. Thus Christians continue to stumble, but God upholds them by his Spirit. Since the church is a community of such imperfect individuals, its members continue to exhibit false doctrines and sinful behaviors. But another reason that these things continue in the church is that many of its members are in fact non-Christians who have infiltrated the community.

A popular complaint is that Christians are hypocrites in that they declare a high standard of morality but stumble over it themselves. However, if many in our community are in fact non-Christians who have never truly believed and committed to our message, then the complaint should first be directed against the non-Christians. The non-Christians are double hypocrites because they pretend to be Christians when they are not, and then they fail to live up to their own lie. But Christians are not hypocrites if they admit that they still stumble and if they confess their sins when they do. In any case, we must deal with believers who have sinned and with unbelievers who have infiltrated our ranks. Jesus teaches us how to do this.

First, there is the principle of confrontation. As Christians, we are children of the light, so that we should not ignore or hide our sins, but we should define them, uncover them, and confess them. If someone has sinned, then you should confront him about it. Jesus says that you should "show him his fault," and that you will either win him over or he will refuse to listen. This suggests that the confrontation involves a discussion on what he has done and an attempt to convince him of his error.

The instruction assumes that the man is indeed in the wrong, but we realize that it is possible for one to misjudge another. Perhaps there is a misunderstanding, or perhaps you have misinterpreted what the Bible teaches about the topic. If so, this procedure Jesus prescribes would still manage to resolve the issue, since the person will have the opportunity to explain himself when you confront him, and perhaps to correct you instead.

² See NIV text note.

Second, there is the principle of escalation. Again, the text assumes that the man has indeed sinned, that you are able to correctly identify his sin according to God's revealed standard, and that you are able to carry a discussion about it with him. If he admits his fault and changes his way, then you have helped him and rescued him from continuing in sin. However, it is possible that he will harden his heart and refuse to listen to you. If this happens, you need to escalate the situation.

When you first approach the offender, you should discuss the matter "just between the two of you." If the man renounces his false doctrine or misconduct, then there should be no need to expose him to public scrutiny and embarrassment, although criminal activities must be reported to the authorities. If he refuses to listen and persists in sin, then bring with you one or two others to speak with him. The group can combine their knowledge and influence to convince the offender. The additional individuals can confirm that the man is indeed in the wrong, and they can become witnesses to what has been discussed and to the man's response to the arguments, pleadings, and reprimands used to call him to repentance. If the man remains stubborn, then escalate the situation again and bring the matter before the church.

Third, there is the principle of excommunication. If the offender defies the whole church, then the community should treat him as "a pagan or tax collector." This means cutting off the offender from both religious and social relations. You must no longer think of this person as a Christian or even as a friend, but as an unclean and despicable person to be shunned and regarded with contempt. The man can be restored to fellowship and reintroduced to the community only if he repents and changes his way.

Of course, it is possible for the entire church to misjudge one man. The church might err, but it must still strive to maintain order and comply with the Lord's instructions on how to do it. As for the man, suppose he is excommunicated because of a misunderstanding. He remains secure and innocent, because it is not the church that saves, but Jesus Christ. If a man is in Christ, no church can cut him off from Christ. If a church excommunicates a man because he stands with God and the Bible against the church's apostasy, then the community condemns itself when it condemns the man. God has placed him there as a prophet and a witness against the whole group, and he fulfills his role by suffering excommunication.

14. God is Always Right

You are always righteous, O LORD, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease? (Jeremiah 12:1)

This is the way we should ask when we approach God about what troubles us. Jeremiah had a question about God's justice, but he did not approach as if God's justice was open to question. It was an established truth that God is righteous. God has revealed himself as one who is righteous, all-powerful, all-knowing, and so on. When we wish to better understand a doctrine, event, or situation, we bring these divine attributes and apply them to the question. It is God's nature that explains everything else, and never the other way around. Since God is the one who defines, creates, causes, and controls all things, we interpret all things in the light of his divine nature.

God replied, "If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?" (v. 5). He did not sympathize with the man's attitude. He did not express understanding for the man's frustration. He did not indulge the man's doubt, self-pity, and indignation. Instead, he faulted the man for these things and challenged him to rise above them.

This is the way we should answer when people approach us about what troubles them. We must never indulge their doubt, self-pity, and indignation. We must never agree that they might have reason to waver about God's goodness and justice. Rather, we hold as established and nonnegotiable the things that God has revealed about himself, and we confront and rebuke those who ask questions that challenge them. We must never commend their questions, no matter how much they are suffering. If we show any sympathy toward unbelief and blasphemy, then we are already defeated, and we have disqualified ourselves from providing real help to those who stumble.

We must hold constant the nature of God and explain all things by it. Christians often fail to think this way. For example, they would say that God is sovereign, and this appears to make him the author of sin. But since he is righteous, this means that he cannot be the author of sin. Instead of explaining all things by the nature of God, they have allowed their interpretation of the effects and circumstances in this world to determine the meanings and implications of the divine attributes. They have defined God by the creation. This is the essence of idolatry. Instead, we must hold constant the nature of God, that he is sovereign and righteous. The fact that he is sovereign must mean that he is the author of all things, including sin and evil. And the fact that he is righteous must mean that it is righteous for him to be the author of sin and evil.

Why do the wicked prosper? If we hold constant the truth that God is just, then this means that it is just of him that the wicked prosper. Even if we do not know how that could be, this must be the answer. And since God is the one who defines justice, there is no higher definition of justice by which to challenge this. But the Bible indeed tells us how God is just in the prosperity of the wicked. As Psalm 73 teaches, he prospers the wicked in order to ensnare them in their wickedness, to increase their guilt, so that they would slip into damnation and suffer torture in hell forever.

Some questions should no longer be asked, because the Bible has given definitive answers to them. As a Christian, I should never ask how a person could be saved as if I have never read the Bible's answer or as if its answer is inconclusive. I know that a person is saved through faith in Jesus Christ. Likewise, no one should complain about the prosperity of the wicked and demand an explanation from God. In the first place, no one can demand an answer from him. But he has answered this question, as well as many others. Our task is to study his answers and to challenge others to accept them.

15. Rebuke Them Sharply

Even one of their own prophets has said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the commands of those who reject the truth. (Titus 1:12-14)

Christians have no obligation to follow the customs and standards of this world, especially when they hinder the advance of the gospel. The Scripture defines the way that we are to think and behave, and that is sufficient and authoritative. Non-Christians may fluctuate, and they may disagree among themselves. Sometimes a practice is acceptable, and after a while an ethical fad comes along and the opposite becomes the thing to do. They regard this as progress, but they are foolish thinkers and false guides.

God's revelation remains true and unchanged. Men have no right to judge it, but it is the standard by which men are judged. Paul shows that it is acceptable to make a generalization about a whole people group if that testimony is true. The issue is truth. If it is alleged that generalizations are never true, then this is a generalization about generalizations. If the generalization is false, then it does not matter who we are talking about – it should not be accepted or repeated. But if a group of people – be they from a certain tradition, or gender, or race – exhibits a common flaw, then it is appropriate to acknowledge it and state the fact.

When we encounter those who deviate from the Christian faith in their theology, character, and lifestyle, whether they are individuals, churches, or entire races and nations, we must rebuke them. To rebuke someone is not only to teach him and reason with him, although it entails these things, but it is to aggressively point out his shortcomings and mistakes, to criticize and threaten him, and to verbally pressure him to change and improve. This is more than mere noise, but it is an intelligent and responsible activity.

There is great reluctance to rebuke those who are in error, because believers usually lack the zeal and courage to uphold God's word, and they lack the love to correct those who wander from the faith and to protect those who might be affected by them. Thus if they admit the need to rebuke people, they often insist that it is to be done with unchristian "gentleness," an effeminate tone and vocabulary entirely foreign to the Bible, but that they have inherited from non-Christian culture.

Paul commands his student to make a sharp rebuke, not what modern men might regard as sharp, which is nothing, but as demonstrated by the ancient prophets and apostles, and the Lord Jesus himself. A sharp rebuke must be characterized with a loud and harsh tone, filled with divine threats and curses, and insulting words and degrading jeers. This is not the time to praise the people and then sheepishly suggest a better way. No, in a sharp rebuke we put

people down for the way they think and behave, shout at them, and command them to change. This is especially needed when the people are stubborn and the errors are grave.

Although we rebuke people not because we derive some sick satisfaction from it, there is no reason to dislike doing what God commands. In any case, we rebuke people because we want them to become sound in the faith, and this means to affirm the correct doctrines and to behave in a way that is consistent with these doctrines. God despises the kind of love that is so concerned with people's momentary feelings that it would rather leave them in bondage to the devil. But the love that is deep and true and powerful issues a sharp rebuke, and it liberates men from myths, false teachings, and the control of those who reject the truth. It beats back the wolves and chases the sheep back to safety. Therefore, be bold and be fierce. Rebuke sharply and with all authority.

16. We Too Were Non-Christians

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. (Titus 3:3)

Paul means that at one time we too were non-Christians, because in the next verse he tells us that we are now different because Jesus Christ has saved us. His description of what we were is at the same time a description of what non-Christians are now. And because the apostle writes by God's Spirit, this is also God's view of non-Christians. Thus God regards non-Christians as foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved, living in malice, envy, and hatred.

Christians tend to show too much restraint in belittling the intelligence and character of non-Christians, and in many cases they even praise them for being astute, charitable, and so on. But Christians who do this not only defy what the Bible says about non-Christians, but they also defy what the Bible says they were like before Jesus Christ saved them. If we used to be what the non-Christians are now, then to soften our criticisms against them is to soften our criticisms against what we were before our conversion, and to praise the non-Christians is to praise what we were before Jesus Christ saved us. While many Christians think that they are being winsome fellows, they are nothing other than ungrateful bastards. They are concerned with the feelings and approval of men, and so they arrive at this approach with no consideration for God's truth and honor.

We sin against Christ not only when we directly deny that we were foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved, and so on, but also when we do not declare that non-Christians are foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved. If you refuse to call non-Christians stupid, wicked, depraved, and worthless, then this means you refuse to admit that you were these things before Christ saved you. It means that you think you were not as bad as he says you were, and that he did not do for you as much as he claims he did. When we fail to demean non-Christians, we demean the blood of Christ that saved us.

Humility is one of the most distorted virtues. The previous verse instructs us to "show true humility toward all men." The word translated "humility" refers to meekness, gentleness, or "courtesy" (ESV). Christians often demonstrate what they regard as humility or courtesy by declaring that, in many essential aspects, they are still like the non-Christians. They insist that they are still foolish. However, the Bible teaches that Jesus Christ has enlightened us, that he himself has become our wisdom so that we even have the mind of Christ. Do we call him impotent or stupid? They sing that they are still sick with sin. But the Bible says that by his stripes we have been healed. Healed! False humility says that Christ did no such thing. Then they say that they are poor beggars. But the Bible says that Jesus became poor so that we might be made rich. The Christians say that we still have

nothing, just like the non-Christians. This is not humility or courtesy, but unbelief, hypocrisy, and supreme arrogance. It is a denial of the work of Christ, and it is blasphemy.

Therefore, God's word condemns two rampant errors. The first is the denial of what we were, and of what Christ has saved us from. The second is the denial of what we are, and of what Christ has made us to be.

17. True Humility

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone. (Titus 3:4-8)

In verse 2, Paul instructs us to "show true humility toward all men." The word translated "humility" refers to meekness, gentleness, and "courtesy" (ESV). At one time we were also non-Christians. Like the non-Christians all around us now, we were pathetic losers who did not know God through faith in Jesus Christ. They are foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved, being hated and hating one another (v. 3). It is easy to despise such unintelligent and worthless people, but we must not become high-minded because we were like them at one time. We have become different not because of our own wisdom, ability, or goodness, but because of God's kindness revealed to us in Jesus.

Therefore, to show true humility or courtesy toward all men does not mean that we should say that we are also foolish, deceived, enslaved, and so on. It cannot consist in simple self-deprecation, and still less does it consist in an outright denial of the works of Christ and the effects of his grace. For the Christian to say that he is still sick and poor would be like for Bartimaeus to say, "I am still blind" or for Lazarus to say, "I am still dead." That would not be humble, but wicked and ungrateful. But this is the mentality of many who call themselves servants of Christ.

Instead, verse 4 teaches us that to show true humility or courtesy toward all men means that we credit the source of our salvation and improvement, and declare Jesus Christ as the real reason for our intellectual and ethical superiority over the non-Christians. We confess God's kindness toward us in that he has rescued us from the non-Christian condition, even as we blast the heretics and the unbelievers with harsh rebukes and insults. God saved us from our miserable condition, "not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." This confession is a pillar of humility, and a foundation for courtesy toward all men.

The non-Christian is foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved. But what about the Christian? What about the one who believes in Jesus Christ? Paul says that he is justified by God's grace – Jesus has endured his punishment and now he stands before God without condemnation. He is washed by rebirth – not that the washing leads to regeneration, but it is the regeneration that is the washing, and of which water baptism is only a symbol – so that he has been cleansed from filth. He is renewed by the Holy Spirit, whom God has

poured out on him through Jesus Christ – he has been altered, and made superior. He is an heir of God, a co-heir with Jesus Christ, and he possesses hope that transcends the present life.

This is what the Christian has received. How could he escape, if he denies this in the name of humility, or belittle it in the name of courtesy? No, he is to exalt it before all men, but credit God alone for it. If anyone wishes to boast, let him boast about Jesus Christ and what he has done for his people.

We must stress these things when we think about our faith and when we teach people about it. We must stress that God's grace justified us, that regeneration washed us, that the Spirit renewed us, and that we now live as heirs of God, heirs of eternal life through Jesus Christ. We are no longer like the non-Christians – foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved. It is because we stress this difference and because we stress the specific ways that we have been made better that we can also insist that we must adopt a different lifestyle, that is, one in which we devote ourselves to doing what is good.

18. The Blast of a Trumpet

Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. (Isaiah 58:1)

Those who call themselves Christians often do not know what God is like, and the more they find out, the less they like him. Or, if they wish to maintain their pious profession of faith, they would insist that God is not as the Bible presents him, even as they claim to believe every word that it says. But if the Bible were to become a man to say and act out what it contains, most of them would not recognize him. In fact, they would declare him an unloving extremist with thoroughly unchristian traits, so much so that they would take up a hammer and nail him to death in the name of God.

This was what happened in the first century, when the religious people conspired with the heathens to silence Jesus Christ. The Bible came alive and became a man, and they murdered him in the name of the same Bible. They are still doing this today. Everywhere, "Christians" continue to hunt down Jesus Christ so that they could silence him, to put him to death, so that their strange doctrines and powerless traditions may continue in the name of this same Jesus.

The Jesus in their sermons carries little resemblance to the Jesus in the Bible, perhaps because they are the very kind of people that Jesus attacked. The Jesus in the Bible contradicted the religious leaders on their false doctrines and traditions, and he embarrassed them about their intellectual and ethical failures. He made their shortcomings explicit and traveled all over the place to advertise them. He liberated people from the paradoxical doctrines and oppressive traditions that men invented in the name of God. The Jesus in the Bible made the religious establishment angry, angry enough to murder him.

The Jesus in the Bible attributed people's failure to their lack of faith, encouraged hope in miracles, became angry with people when they were hardened against his healing power in order to secure their own tradition and reputation, and turned over tables when merchants defiled the place of worship. The Jesus in the Bible cursed a fig tree because it could not bear fruit out of season, and then cursed an entire people to destruction because it failed to bear spiritual fruit. He raised a widow's son from the dead, not only to authenticate a new revelation, but out of compassion for the woman, and blasted the religious hypocrites for opposing such a ministry.

The Jesus in the Bible rebuked with a loud voice, with demeaning insults and threats. This is so much a characteristic that his own disciples were sometimes afraid to ask him questions. This has always been a facet of God's anointed servants. The prophet must shout with a loud voice, like the blast of a trumpet. He must not hold back as he declare the sins of the people. He is to show no restraint in the volume and content with which he attacks

them. The people who think that this is wrong are out of touch with the Bible, and out of touch with the Word who became a man and walked among us.

19. Purpose and Resolve

Now my soul is deeply troubled. Should I pray, "Father, save me from this hour"? But this is the very reason I came! (John 12:27, NLT)

Jesus was not in the habit of hiding things from his disciples. They were not ready to hear everything all at once, and so he had to arrange and prioritize the truths he could teach them. When he saw that they were ready for more, he told them more. There is a similar pattern in the New Testament letters. A few times the inspired writers complained that they could not move forward because the readers were slow in their spiritual development.

We face the same situation in ministry. There are things that I might temporarily withhold from a larger audience of believers because of their dullness and unbelief. Instead of freely talking about any truth that comes to mind or that follows in a natural course of teaching, I focus on the more foundational doctrines upon which additional progress depends, attempting to first drive them through to secure understanding and acceptance. That said, any teacher who is faithful to his commission is eager to proclaim the whole counsel of God, and the basic policy is always one of transparency in doctrines.

Jesus wants us to understand him. And we can know his thoughts because he tells us his thoughts. Sometimes he even reveals his motives and thought processes. They are not complex, paradoxical, and mysterious, but definite and easy to understand. In fact, it is only because this is true that it is possible to be his disciples. To be his disciples means that we believe in him, listen to him, learn from him, and then follow and imitate him – not only his actions, but all of him, including his motives and thought processes.

He was a brave man. He was the Word of God since the beginning, but he took on a human nature to fulfill God's plan and promise, and the fullness of deity dwelled in him. So he was sensitive to pain and hardship. He was soon to be arrested, humiliated, tortured, and killed. As this happened, he would bear upon himself the condemnation and punishment of all the sinners that God had ordained for him to save. Thus his soul became deeply troubled. Shall he ask his Father to deliver him? No, he said, because the very reason he came was to endure what was before him.

Let us consider this, and learn from our master's noble and intelligent courage. Although his divine nature was impervious, his human nature was like ours, except for spiritual corruption, and in the face of what he had to endure, became troubled. But he recalled his purpose and stood firm. He was to be tortured and murdered. He was to bear our condemnation and punishment. But the reason he came was to do all this. He came to be tortured and murdered. He came to bear our condemnation and punishment. He came to do the will of God, and now it was before him to do the will of God. Therefore, instead of turning the other way, he faced it and ran toward it.

What is our purpose? It is to hold firm to the message of Jesus Christ, to declare it to this world, to make disciples in his name, and to become his light before all men. The enemies of Christ will hate us and harass us, and they will put obstacles in our way. They will ostracize us and criticize us. They will conspire against us, and some of us may suffer violence at their hands.

When we are surrounded, when we are troubled and afraid, and when we are desperate to the point of escape and compromise, we will reason like our master. If we will not die for our destiny, then for what shall we live? What is the purpose of your life, if you save your life by shrinking from your purpose? This is why we are believers. This is why we are preachers. And so we will say with Christ, "O, Father, bring glory to your name!"

20. The Lying Pen of the Scribes

How can you say, "We are wise, for we have the law of the LORD," when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely? The wise will be put to shame; they will be dismayed and trapped. Since they have rejected the word of the LORD, what kind of wisdom do they have? (Jeremiah 8:8-9)

The scribes were the teachers of the people. They were supposed to study and explain God's word, and so spread his wisdom throughout the land. However, instead of promoting God's agenda and message, they had their own agenda, and so they mishandled his message and advanced their own ideas.

Theologians commit this same error when they allow the sinful desires of their own hearts and the traditions of their groups to control their interpretation of God's word. Instead of God's commands, they relate distorted versions of his holy requirements in order to excuse themselves. Suddenly, what the Bible explicitly condemns becomes something that God heartily approves. And instead of God's doctrines, they teach the creeds and traditions of their organization. But these often do not fit, so they take the Bible and twist some ideas here, impose several strange principles there, add a few epochs and a bunch of covenants, then divide his revelation as it fits them and force the whole thing into schemes that they invented.

This happens not because theologians as such are incompetent and dishonest, although many of them are, but because all men are by nature incompetent and dishonest. The Bible causes non-Christians to display their demonic nature in its full measure, but even regenerate theologians stumble over their remaining sinfulness and inaptitude.

God states that to mishandle his word is to reject it. His word is plain and direct, so that to distort it is only a hypocritical way to say "No!" to it. After that, it is futile to claim, "We are wise. We have the word of the Lord." A man who has rejected God's word does not truly have God's word, since he has twisted it into something else. And God states that there is no wisdom once his word is rejected. This means that there is wisdom only in the Bible, and once a person rejects the Bible, there is no wisdom for him. Any person who distorts or rejects the Bible is stupid. He has no wisdom, and we must not say that he has any.

Look down on theologians who do not faithfully affirm and relate what the Bible teaches. Laugh at preachers and professors who uphold the traditions of their groups instead of the word of God. Do not respect them, and do not be afraid of them. So what if they have many degrees and credentials? Do these things fall from heaven or are they conferred by mere men? If we have reasons to distrust these theologians, then why should we so quickly believe those men who approve of them? Perhaps they are useless people also. Never be intimidated by people, and it makes no difference when there are many of them.

Christian, do not have the faith of Jesus Christ through someone else. Let faithful theologians be your guides, but hold fast to the truth with your own understanding, and cling to the Lord with your own hands.

21. Stand Up and Speak

Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. (Jeremiah 1:17)

God called Jeremiah to a difficult ministry. Most Christians today would not be able to do it. In fact, most of them might not even regard such a ministry as legitimate. God ordained the prophet to stand alone against the entire nation and to deliver a message that the people regarded as sacrilegious and unpatriotic.

He criticized the authorities, not from the perspective of politics but from the perspective of religion, because God is the only sound basis for arguments concerning any sphere of life. He criticized the religious establishment. What semblance of piety that they exhibited was only for show, but their hearts were corrupt to the core. They cried that they had the temple and that they had the law. But God saw that although they drew near to him with their lips, their hearts were far from him. Too long had they committed adultery with their idols under every tree in the land. So he said that they would soon be attacked, slaughtered, and exiled.

How did the people react? Think about our contemporaries. Nowadays when some disaster happens, whether natural or manmade, and someone suggests that it might be God's judgment because as a nation we have rejected or abandoned the doctrines of Christ, or because of our moral laxity and tolerance, people – including Christians – become extremely indignant and denounce such talk as insensitive, unpatriotic, and treacherous. This was the reaction that Jeremiah faced, except it came from every direction and every strata of society, and it was much more hostile and violent. Even his own family denounced him and plotted against him.

God sent Jeremiah to testify against the people. He knew how they would react, but still he said, "Say to them whatever I command you." And he warned the prophet, "Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them." This is a most valuable lesson for the ministry. If God has commanded you to speak a harsh message to the people, one that exposes their wickedness and hypocrisy, one that condemns their unbelief and traditions, you will be met with resistance and persecution. If you carry out God's command, you might suffer at the hands of men, but if you shrink from the task, you will suffer at the hands of God.

Most people who claim to serve God use him as an excuse to serve themselves. Like those in Jeremiah's time, when we confront them, they cry, "We are the church! We are the church!" But those who think that Christ does not judge churches are sorely deceived: "If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" (Revelation 2:5). Jeremiah could stand up against apostates who appealed to the temple, and faithful Christians today ought to stand up against those who appeal to the church. Or,

perhaps they cry, "We have the Bible! We have the Bible!" But do they believe and respect the Bible? Jeremiah stood up to those who said they had the law, because God said that they were lying scribes who handled it falsely. Religious hypocrites today use the same tactics that they did centuries ago. When they are embarrassed and threatened, they will attempt to silence you, and even destroy you.

God does not allow us to retreat from this, but he says, "Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them." There is no option to soften your words. There is no option to retire. The only option is to bravely move forward, step up, and declare God's message to the people. So what if the message is harsh and unpopular? Show no restraint. Let them have it! We ought to be more afraid of offending God than we are of offending men. When God's command could bring about persecution from men, it is always better to do it anyway and suffer the displeasure of men rather than that of God, because when I am afraid to get into trouble with men, then I am already in trouble with God.

22. For You Have Taught Me

**Oh, how I love your law!
I meditate on it all day long.**

**Your commands make me wiser than my enemies,
for they are ever with me.**

**I have more insight than all my teachers,
for I meditate on your statutes.**

**I have more understanding than the elders,
for I obey your precepts.**

**I have kept my feet from every evil path
so that I might obey your word.**

**I have not departed from your laws,
for you yourself have taught me. (Psalm 119:97-102)**

Christians often flatter unbelievers and insist that, although they deny all the truths that God reveals to us, these enemies of the faith are still eminently intelligent and have much to offer us in terms of insights and instructions. It is a matter of wisdom, they say, to converse with demons so that we may become like the angels. And it is a matter of humility to learn from children of darkness so that we may become the children of light. This is treason against the Lord, and there is no wisdom or humility in it. Rather, the Bible teaches us to separate from them and to oppose them. God's teachings are ever with us, and they make us wiser than the non-Christians, so that we may defeat their schemes, arguments, and unbelief.

The world respects human credentials and professionals, and this mentality has infiltrated the church to such an extent that Christians also categorize and evaluate themselves by the non-Christian system. However, if we become trapped in human measurements, we will become limited by human accomplishments. When we spurn man's artificial system and commit our attention to God's words, then we rise above what our teachers have achieved and decided, and advance to the realm of the mind of Christ. The world bows down to its doctors and professors, and Christians have implemented the same system so that they can also perform this exercise. But God tells me that I can have more insights than my teachers because I meditate on his words.

Then, experience is said to be the greatest teacher. But if experience is the greatest teacher, then it must be a greater teacher than God himself. So this is blasphemy, but it is a blasphemy that many Christians heartily affirm. What has happened? Lacking a sure guide,

non-Christians have chosen for themselves substitutes, so that as a drunk man drives another drunk man home, they both crash into a wall and die. When God's people are weak in their zealousness and reverence, the tendency is to follow the unbelievers. So Christians also think that experience is the best teacher. But God tells me that I can have more understanding than the aged and the experienced because I follow his precepts.

God has established the Bible as a reliable way for his mind to contact our minds, and for his thoughts to become our thoughts. The way to advance in Christ and in life is to think on God's words all the time and follow his teachings. And because God is wiser than our enemies, our teachers, and our elders, we can be as well. We can break through the clichés that there is always something to learn from people, even those who deny our faith, that there is authority in human credentials and positions, and that there is superior wisdom in age and experience. I can advance beyond these because through the Bible, God himself has become my teacher.

23. Shout Louder, Press Harder

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stopped and said, "Call him."

So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."

"Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road. (Mark 10:46-52)

Multitudes claim to follow Jesus, but most of the people are not united with his heart and his purpose. When you seek that which only God can give, do not ask men for permission, and do not accept their verdict. Their doctrines and attitudes are often contrary to Christ, undermining his teachings and his wishes, and his way of doing things. If you want something from Christ, then go to him directly and ask in faith. Do not let his followers stop you. Do not listen to their excuses and vain arguments. When the religious leaders say "No," Christ often says, "Yes!" When his disciples say "Stop," Christ often says, "Come!"

People are interested in safeguarding their opinions and traditions much more than they are in showing you compassion. In fact, they would murder you if you threaten the doctrines they invented. But if they are not interested in helping you receive from Christ, then why should you pay attention to them? Shout louder. Press harder. Do not settle for unauthorized underlings. Do not submit to preachers who are powerless or theologians who are full of unbelief. Demand a direct audience with Jesus Christ. Ask from him without doubt and without shame. If you will seek him according to this word, he will answer you according to your faith.

And let us not be disciples who claim to preach Jesus but hinder people from coming to him because of our unbelief, personal agendas, false doctrines, and religious traditions. Let us never be so out of touch with the heart of God that we become stumbling blocks to those who come to ask from him. Jesus Christ is not our slave or our property. Anyone can approach him in faith according to his word, and this one will receive according to his faith.

Therefore, instead of opposing the ministry of Jesus, and instead of rebuking someone who seeks his mercy and power, thinking that we know better, let us help this person. And instead of saying, "Restrain your fanaticism! Abandon your false hope!" let us encourage his faith and say, "Stir up your faith! No one who hopes in Jesus will be disappointed. I also believe that he can help you, and that he will reveal his mercy and power to you. Come, I will bring you to him!"

24. God is Always Evident

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Romans 1:20, ESV)

God is not hidden. He is evident in his creation and in our minds. Sinners do not acknowledge him because they repress what they have perceived about him. They have no excuse for doing this, and they have no excuse for denying God or transgressing his commands.

The distinction between the conscious and the unconscious provides a framework for thinking about this. The conscious refers to thoughts and perceptions that are before your awareness at this very moment. The unconscious refers to memories, assumptions, and perceptions that are not immediately before your awareness, but that could be recalled or applied, and that might, perhaps without your knowing it, affect your conscious thoughts and actions.

This is all that we mean by the distinction right now. You are not constantly aware of or thinking about all your memories, assumptions, and so on. Perhaps you were not thinking about your favorite food a minute ago, but although you might not be thinking about it all the time, you always know what it is, and you could recall the item to your consciousness at any time. And now that I have mentioned it, you might be thinking about it. It rose from the unconscious to the conscious.

Now, a song might remind you of a friend. He enjoys pancakes, likes tennis but dislikes hockey, and is six feet tall. Perhaps you were not thinking about him a moment ago, and the song that reminds you of him does not contain all this information, but it is a trigger that brings to mind what you know from the unconscious to the conscious.

All men know about God, his eternal power and divine nature, and even his righteous decree and the requirements of the law (1:32, 2:15). But because sinners are traumatized by this holy God and desire to continue in rebellion against him, they try to forget about him. Whenever they are reminded of God, they suppress their thoughts about him into the unconscious, or they reinterpret and redirect these thoughts, resulting in idolatry, heresy, and false philosophy.

For this reason, they detest and persecute believers. The Christian reminds them of everything that they want to forget; he represents everything that they wish to destroy. But the Christian is more active and concrete than a passing thought – he testifies to the righteousness of God and salvation through Jesus Christ with declarations, anecdotes, and arguments.

The Christian becomes a living banner for Jesus Christ in the world, telling unbelievers to repent and to believe the truth. Those who have been chosen for salvation are awakened. Their innate knowledge of God is stirred and surfaces to their consciousness. They recognized the Shepherd's voice, and follow. The preaching of the gospel adds so much more to what they already know, revealing to them the works of Christ and the way of salvation.

But the reprobates are hardened. They suppress or redirect what they already know about God, and they resist the gospel knowledge that comes from our preaching. If they are without excuse before hearing us, they are condemned even more after hearing us. This, too, is God's purpose in his command for us to preach the gospel to all creation.

Let us, therefore, constantly place Jesus Christ before men's consciousness, so that the chosen ones may be stirred to faith and holiness, and that the reprobates may be confirmed in their rebellion, and suffer God's righteous punishment in this life and in the life to come.

25. Because He Cares for You

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:6-7)

As Christians, although we do not belong to the world, we still live in it, and we face problems that are common to all men in this creation that has fallen into sin. If we do not know God, we would often feel helpless and alone. But we do know God through faith in Jesus Christ. It is not that we have found him, or that we have apprehended him with our own wisdom and strength. But even before the creation of the world and the fall of man, he conceived us as individuals and ordained us for salvation, so that we may believe him and worship him, and bear fruit for him. Then, he sent Jesus Christ to die for our sins, and his Holy Spirit to summon us to faith and holiness.

So even before we were born, he cared for us, and he has demonstrated his love by his promise and his sacrifice. He has already shown us that he cares for each individual who believes. And if he spared not his Son, but sent him to die for us, how will he not freely grant us all things? If he would send his most valuable treasure to suffer and die for us, will he now be frugal with his grace and power? No, surely God will always be caring and generous toward his people, whom he purchased by the blood of his Son.

Therefore, I can afford to behave as a sheep of Christ when I face dangers and difficulties. I can endure hard things. When I exhibit a spirit of patience and humility, I am not surrendering to men, but submitting to the hand of God's providence. I am not alone. I am not helpless. I am not the only one who cares about myself, or the only one who can help myself. I will cast all my cares upon him, because he cares for me. He will not abuse me or shortchange me. In his time, the same mighty hand that orders all things will vindicate me and honor me through Jesus Christ. He cares for me. He has helped me. And he will continue to deliver me.

26. You Will Receive Power

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. (Acts 1:8, NLT)

Power. Power. Power! There are Christians who regard the pursuit of spiritual power as a sign of immaturity, and they are suspicious of all claims of spiritual manifestations. This attitude does not come from Jesus Christ, but from unbelief, human tradition, and false humility. Jesus taught his disciples to be complete followers of him. He taught them about grace, prayer, service, the church, and many other things. But more than anyone in the Bible, he repeatedly urged upon them the teachings of miracle faith and spiritual power.

His teachings in this area are explicit and matter-of-fact. He said that if they had faith, they could command a tree or even a mountain to be removed. When a diseased woman touched him in faith, he said that power went out of him. Power. He sent the disciples to preach, to heal the sick, to cast out demons, and to raise the dead. He rebuked Peter for his lack of faith because he failed to walk on water. He rebuked the disciples because they thought he worried about bread when he could make bread from bread, that is, they ought to have assumed that he could do it again.

Then he told his disciples that they would be endued with power from heaven, and that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. Power. He talked about it often, and he talked about it last. He said, "Power is coming. Wait for it. Do not concern yourself with the political situation, or whether this or that will happen, or when it will happen. God will do what he wishes in his time. But listen, power is coming. You will need it. This is going to be great! The Holy Spirit is coming to you, and when he arrives, you will receive power. Power!"

Power is not evil. It is a good thing. It is an attribute of God. He has more of it than anyone else. In fact, he has all of it. He made man to be his image, to reflect his attributes. Then, by God's design, man fell into sin, so that not only did he become unable to properly reflect God's glory, but he became brutish in his intellect and demonic in his character, although he was still made in the image of God, so that he remained human. In his time, God commanded his light to shine in his chosen ones through Jesus Christ, and the divine image has been restored in them.

God has called us to reflect his multifaceted glory to the world, but some Christians concern themselves with only a few aspects of his total image. Some stress that the Christian faith must exalt truth, and this means to affirm and defend sound doctrine. What a marvelous insight this is. The Christian faith cannot be defined and known without sound doctrine. But sound doctrine commands us to perform good works. It teaches us that true religion cares for orphans and widows, and those who cannot care for themselves. To neglect this aspect of the gospel is to neglect this aspect of Christ. It is to have a narrow view of Christ, or to exhibit an inadequate image of his glory.

What about the power of Jesus Christ? He often talked about it. He sent his disciples out with power, so that even the demons scattered when they heard that these people marched in his name. He said that he would ascend to his Father's side, but his people would continue in power. "Power!" he said. Why are people suspicious of power? It is not because they are humble, but because they are full of themselves. This matter of going forth with the power of the Spirit is not about you. It is about reflecting the full glory of Christ, and presenting the image of Christ to the world in every generation.

The Bible calls Christ the light of the world, and we tell people that Christ is the light of the world. But he said that his followers are also the light of the world. Because we are his disciples, we are to become like him, and show the world what he is like. The Bible talks about the humility of Christ. The truth of his humility is established forever even if we fail to reflect his humility. But we are indeed called to do it. The Bible talks about the sacrifice of Christ, a sacrifice that cannot be duplicated in its essence and extent by his followers. Still, we are to follow his example and display a likeness of his sacrifice.

What about the power of Jesus Christ? He told his people to go forth in power. It is not about status, or excitement, or personal glory – why are these things on your mind? He sent his Spirit so that we may be effective witnesses of the truth about him, and to be full reflections of his person. We are his disciples – his students, his apprentices – and we are to reflect his wisdom, his zeal, his humility, his sacrifice, and his power.

Therefore, as we embody the virtue of Jesus Christ, we shall also embody the power of Christ. Let us think more about it, talk more about it, and let us pray that as Christ shows forth his wisdom, compassion, and other qualities through us, he will also manifest his power through us, so that we may be his true disciples, and become complete witnesses and reflections of his glory.

27. Healing for the Glory of God

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." (John 9:3)

All sickness and suffering come because of sin in the general sense, that is, through Adam's transgression. Jesus Christ came to save his people, so that for them there will be no more suffering in heaven, but everlasting bliss and fellowship with God. But for those who do not trust in him, the pains and agonies of this life are but faint foretastes of the endless torment that they will experience in hell.

Here we are interested in particular instances of sickness and suffering. Sometimes sickness and suffering come upon a man because of his sinful action or lifestyle. Jesus healed a man in John 5 and said to him, "Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" (v. 14). We cannot dismiss the possibility that a man suffers because he has sinned. On the other hand, Job suffered not because of specific sins that he committed, but God ordained him to be an example of faith and patience.

Job honored God in his suffering. Although he did not maintain a perfect spirit in the process, in his relatively innocent suffering and faithful endurance, he was a type of Christ, who would indeed maintain a perfect spirit before God even as men falsely accused him, tortured him, and nailed him to a cross. Job's suffering saved no one's soul, not even his own, but it foreshadowed the Christ whose truly innocent and redemptive suffering would rescue the souls of his chosen people.

Nevertheless, suffering did not have the final word in Job's story. God restored him and gave him twice as much as he had before (Job 42:10), along with relatives and friends, sons and daughters. Did Job cease to honor God when his troubles ceased? No, God also honored himself through Job in his health and prosperity. Likewise, Jesus Christ honored God in his suffering and death. But death did not have the final word. He also honored God, and honored him more and more, when he rose from the dead and ascended to the Father's side.

God is honored not only when his people patiently endure setbacks and troubles. He is also honored when they overcome problems and achieve victories by faith. He is honored not only when his people remain grateful in sickness, but he is also honored when he displays his power and compassion in healing them, in relieving their suffering. These two aspects of the Christian life reflect different facets of Christ's character. Any theology that undermines either is an insult to him.

For one to maintain a selective view of God and his dealings with men because of tradition and prejudice means that this person worships not the true God but an idol that he has conjured up. God is as he presents himself, and not as sinful men wish him to be. Do you

deny that, in any age and in any place, God brings evil down on men for his own purpose and glory? You are wrong, because the Bible refers to Job's suffering as "all the trouble the LORD had brought upon him" (Job 42:11). Satan himself acted under God's direct command and power. Do you deny that, in any age and in any place, God removes men's suffering, even what they regard as incurable, in order to show forth his power and compassion? Then your God is a bastard child of unbelief and tradition.

Since God controls all things, the fact that this man was born blind meant that God made this happen, that he ordained and caused this man to be blind from birth. But the blindness did not have the final word. God arranged this not because he wanted the man to demonstrate his trust and gratitude throughout his life as a blind man, but he set this up so that his Son would have this occasion to show forth the healing power of God. Far from belittling healing as something that is coveted by an inferior spirituality – unlike some theologians, the apostles were not spiritual idiots – it is a part, a significant part, of a broad redemption that God was working in this man.

The miracle of healing awakened noble qualities in him. The man went on to become a bold witness for Christ the likes of which I hope every day to see in this generation. In contrast to the man in John 5, he spurned the unbelief of the religious establishment with derisive sarcasm and countered their challenges with a stubborn loyalty to the one who healed him. This one helped him. This one healed him! What had the Pharisees done for him? And now they did not celebrate with him, but they interrogated him. But they could not keep him down. He stood up to them until they threw him out. And then Jesus found him, and the man's gratitude and reverence overflowed in worship, saying, "Lord, I believe."

God's will was for Adam to sin and plunge all men into ruin, although his will was not for all of humanity to remain there, but it was to send Jesus Christ to redeem the chosen ones. His will was for Joseph to be sold to slavery. Even though he behaved admirably, he was falsely accused and thrown into prison. There he continued to honor God with his wisdom and conduct. But prison did not have the last word. God's will was deliverance and exaltation, and to make him the ruler of all Egypt under Pharaoh. God's will was for Jesus Christ to die an unjust and gruesome death, but his will did not end in death. He raised Jesus from the dead so that he could become the high priest of all who come to God through faith.

God has ordained your suffering or it could not have come about. Therefore, you must honor him in your suffering and imitate the patience of Christ. But you must also follow God's precepts that teach you to strive and to overcome. Suffering does not have to be the final word. Stir up your faith, and pray without ceasing, so that you may also honor God in your deliverance and victory.

28. A Liar Like You

My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word. (John 8:54-55)

This is what Jesus taught. The Jews did not believe that he was greater than Abraham and the prophets, and said, "Who do you think you are?" When Jesus answered that Abraham foresaw Jesus and rejoiced, and that before Abraham was born, Jesus was already in existence, the Jews tried to kill him. Jesus did not say to them, "We believe in the same God, only that you are mistaken in your opinion on the Christ." No, he told them that they merely claimed the Father as their God, but they did not in fact know him.

Do Christians, Jews, and Muslims believe in the same God? What about Catholics and Mormons, and many others who claim to worship God? Certainly, they do not know God, and they do not worship him. Unless a man believes in Jesus Christ, and believes that he was what he said he was – the unique Son of God, himself God and Christ, and one who existed even before Abraham – this person does not know God. He can claim our Father as his God all he wants. He can think the thoughts and speak the words, but his claim is false.

This is how Jesus talked. He said, "You claim to know God, but you do not. You are liars. But I know God, and if I said I did not, I would be a liar like you." Today's Christians would say that it is not Christ-like to talk like this! This is because, although they claim to know Christ, they are liars. They do not know Christ, and they do not approve of him. If he were to walk among us today, they would condemn Christ himself as not Christ-like, as unloving, ungentle, impolite, heretical, and arrogant.

The Jews had an idea of God that was not the God who revealed himself to men, but that was an idol they invented. Likewise, Christians often have an idea of Christ that bears little resemblance to the Christ who revealed himself, but that is an idol of their minds, and a personification of their own ideals, desires, beliefs, and customs. They claim to know Jesus, what he is like, and how he would act, but they are liars. And Jesus would tell them so to their face.

Jesus refused to play their religious games, and he would refuse to play ours. He would not submit to what Christians today consider the proper protocol for religious discussion or what they regard as Christ-like behavior. We ought to follow Christ instead of the bogus ideas that religious hypocrites have about him. Therefore, let us follow his doctrine, and say that those who claim to believe in God do not in fact believe in him or know him unless they believe that Jesus was the incarnation of deity. And let us follow his example, so that whether Christians or non-Christians, when people claim to know God or Christ but in fact

do not, rather than submitting to the restrictive rules of men, we will declare to their face,
"You are liars! You are liars!"

29. The Truth Will Set You Free

Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32)

Let us consider the much abused statement, "The truth will set you free." Some people assert it as a general moral principle. So it is said that we should tell the truth because it is the right thing to do, that telling the truth will relieve a stricken conscience, and that telling the truth might help us escape punishment. Others use it as a joke. And still others point out that sometimes telling the truth will get us into trouble instead of getting us out of it.

However, the statement does not refer to telling the truth, but knowing the truth. Many other applications are based on this. It is said that knowing the truth about something delivers us from ignorance or misinformation. Then, of course, sometimes the opposite is asserted, so that knowing the truth might become a reason for worry or devastation.

All these unworthy uses neglect the context of the statement and dilutes the original message. As with many other cases of abuse, we must attack foolish and irreverent uses of the Lord's words with harsh rebukes and threats, and ridicule the ignorance of those who would remove divine revelation from its original context and misapply it to irrelevant and trivial matters.

There is a much larger context to the statement, and the entire episode described is important and instructive. But even if we were to take into account just a little more of the context, it becomes clear that there is a very narrow application.

Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples." These disciples are the ones who know the truth and become free. This freedom is also restricted in meaning, since he said, "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (v. 34). So the statement, "the truth will set you free," does not benefit all men, but only Christians, and true Christians are those who hold to and continue in the teachings of Christ. They continue in believing and obeying his doctrines.

Jesus made a point of this, because he was speaking to "Jews who had believed him." By this John does not acknowledge them as true believers, but he refers to them as what they claimed or appeared to be. Rather, one purpose of this passage is to show that they were false believers, and that there would be people like them who would be false believers as well. The Lord exposed them when he said that if they would continue in his teachings, then they would become free. Then they started to argue with him about it. In the ensuing discussion (v. 33-59), Jesus revealed that they were in fact murderers, liars, and children of the devil.

Freedom from the enslaving power of sin is granted only to Christians – that is, not those who claim to be Christians but then argue with Jesus, but those who continue to believe and follow his teachings. As he said, "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (v. 36). All Christians are free in Christ. All non-Christians are slaves of sin, and the children of the devil. Jesus is the only one who grants true freedom from the power of evil, and he grants it only to those who believe and follow him.

30. Not Of This World

He said to them, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins."

So they said to him, "Who are you?"

Jesus said to them, "Just what I have been telling you from the beginning. I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him." (John 8:23-26, ESV)

There is much more to the universe than what men can grasp with their sensations and investigations, and they are mistaken in even what they think they have attained. No matter how hard they try, they cannot arrive at reliable information about this natural world. Under rational analysis, even the most established theories of science and philosophy are shown to be groundless in a matter of seconds.³ In his divine wisdom, God has so arranged it so that men will never know him through human wisdom. But since God is the creator, sustainer, and controller of all things, not one thing in creation can be truly understood unless it is considered in relation to God. Men are from below, and are of this world. By human wisdom, they can understand nothing.

Jesus Christ was not of this world, but as God himself he came from above and dwelled among us as a man in all the fullness of his deity. He was not bound by the ignorance and sinfulness of the men of this world, but he brought knowledge and salvation with him. He was the one predicted by the prophets, but the Jews did not believe their own prophets, and they did not believe that Jesus was who he claimed to be. Jesus said, "Then you will die in your sins." The best of their intellectual and ethical achievements were still the products of this world, and could never rise to the realm of God. Since men do not recognize Jesus Christ as the one who came from above, even their religions are the results of worthless speculations, derived from a natural development of their culture. The Christian faith is the only religion that came from God. It is not of this world.

Christians are those who believe that Jesus Christ is indeed who he claimed to be, the Messiah and Son of God who came from heaven, to bring us salvation and knowledge from another world. In receiving the mind of Christ and the fullness of his Spirit, Christians are elevated above the men from below, so that even as they remain in this world, they are not of the world.

Jesus said that he had much to say in judgment of the people. There was so much wrong with them, and so much about them that he could criticize and condemn. As we continue

³ See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, and Captive to Reason*.

to mature in Christ, we gain his perspective on the world, and we also see more and more about non-Christians that we could criticize and condemn. Christ did not allow the people to despise him, but he declared that they were people from below, while he came from above. Likewise, we are to tell the people of our generation, "You are from below. We are not like you because Christ came from above and saved us, so that even as we are in this world, we are not of this world. If you remain stubborn and do not believe what he said about himself, you will die in your sins. Listen, unless you believe in Jesus Christ, things will not get better for you. You will die in your sins."

31. His Love Endures Forever

**For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations. (Psalm 100:5)**

God loves us with a steadfast and everlasting love. He loves us not because we deserve it, and not because we have done something to gain his attention. He loves us because he has chosen us, so that we may serve him and be with him. And we love him because he first loved us and because he has gained our attention. Through the gospel of Jesus Christ, he has made a formal declaration of his love toward us. He has given this love a definition and an explanation, so that we may understand it and talk about it, and have confidence in it.

The stability of our relationship rests on him. We may believe in the strength and permanence of this love because, although we have no confidence in ourselves, we can have confidence in God's resolve and power. His love is trustworthy and dependable, because it is not capricious like human affection and faithfulness, and it does not ebb and flow like an emotion. It is not vulnerable to trickery and persuasion, because God is not vulnerable to the accuser's schemes. It does not stumble over our sins, because he loved us while we were sinners, and he sent his Son to die for our sins, so that we may believe and be saved.

God has manifested his love in Jesus Christ. He has made Christ a focal point in our belief and conduct, and in our message to the world. This honors the Father because we recognize that the Father and the Son are one, and that the Father has sent the Son to atone for our sins and to teach us the truth. All Christians know this love that endures forever, saving and blessing his people through all generations. Consider all the ways that you have transgressed his commands, hardened your heart, and sinned against other people. Yet there is forgiveness and restoration in Jesus Christ. His love is stronger than our sins.

We were all sinners and deserved the punishment of hellfire. We were deceived, and deceiving one another. We were hated, and hating one another. God's love has united us through Jesus Christ, and we have come together to believe in his son and celebrate the mercy that we have received from him. Let us, therefore, praise him for his love, mercy, and compassion. Think on the strength and tenacity of his love. Be bold in believing it. Throw your whole heart into it. Be zealous in proclaiming it. Rejoice! Be happy! Shout and dance, because God is faithful and devoted to his people. His love is great, and his mercy endures forever.

32. An Iron Pillar

"Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land – against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 1:18-19)

Jeremiah stood against kings, officials, the priests and the people of the land. God sent one man to take them on. It is his way to challenge the many by the few, so it cannot be said that his will is achieved by a human power that overwhelms the opposition, but rather by a divine power that defies the human majority. The people stood against Jeremiah, and he stood against them. They wanted to kill him, and he suffered their persecution, but God delivered him and enabled him to do all his will.

Jesus also stood against many. They were hostile to him and plotted to kill him. He came to die, but he could not be killed before the appointed time. Again and again, he eluded capture and continued spreading his message. He went all over the place preaching the gospel, healing the sick, and exposing the failure and hypocrisy of the religious establishment. No one could touch him, because God was with him to deliver him. God made him a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall.

When God sends me out to speak, he makes me a fortified city. When he commands me to say a harsh word, he makes me an iron pillar. When he moves me to address a rebellious people, he makes me a bronze wall. By his power I stand unscalable, unyielding, and unbreakable. Although the people fight me, they cannot overcome me. They cannot win. No, I will win. I will accomplish all that God has commanded, because he is with me to deliver me.

If you preach the faith of Jesus Christ, people will become angry with you. Even the simple message that Jesus Christ is the savior of sinners will offend them. In this message, we declare that man is sinful, that there is divine punishment of sin, that Jesus Christ is God, that he came as a man to die and make atonement for sin, that to trust in this person and his work is the only way to escape divine wrath, that man is helpless and cannot contribute to his own salvation, and that he must depend on God's sovereign kindness to save him.

Every item in this message is offensive to man's pride and to what the sinner wishes to believe about himself. Repentance is God's gift to man that enables him to abandon these assumptions, these assumptions that amount to idolatry and the worship of self, and to turn to God with his whole heart. So men will hate you when you preach the gospel of Christ, because they hate God and his righteousness. They do not want to hear from him, and when you speak his word, they will want to silence you.

The most dangerous opposition will likely come from others who claim to be Christians – it will come from the church and the religious establishment. The Pharisees desired to murder Christ because his message and his righteousness became a threat to them. Likewise, when you confront today's false teachers and religious hypocrites, and those who have institutionalized the faith of Jesus Christ to serve their prejudices and traditions, they will also descend upon you with a demonic viciousness that is sufficient to inspire perjury and murder.

O man of God, O woman of faith, beware of Christians. But if God has put his words in your mouth, say it! Of course people will be angry. Say it! They will fight against you, but they will not overcome you, because God is with you to deliver you. God has made you a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall. You will declare his message. You will succeed in your mission.

33. Justice and Wrath

Correct me, LORD, but only with justice – not in your anger, lest you reduce me to nothing.

Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you, on the peoples who do not call on your name. (Jeremiah 10:24-25)

God is a God of justice. This is who he is, and he is never void of justice. Thus he never regards good as evil, or evil as good. He never despises righteousness, and he never overlooks transgression. But he has shown mercy to those whom he has chosen for salvation, and he has exacted on Jesus Christ the punishment that we deserved, so that he may remain just and the justifier of those whom he would call to believe in his Son.

Even as he deals with his people, his justice is not nullified, but it is fulfilled in Jesus Christ instead of in our damnation. He does not relax his holy standards, but he declares to us his righteous precepts and corrects us when we transgress them. He deals with his beloved children according to his justice, but he does not deal with us according to his wrath, because Jesus Christ has suffered his wrath in order to save us from it.

Therefore, we are bold in the face of God's justice, and even as we continue to fall short, instead of running away from it, we desire to conform to the image of Christ so that we may live up to its demands. Lord, teach us and correct us according to your justice, but we come before you in the name of Jesus, so that you would not strike us in your wrath and reduce us to nothing.

Those who cannot believe in Jesus Christ, and who are destined for damnation, do not have this protection. They do not have Christ as their righteous champion, their atoning savior, their perfect high priest. For God to deal with them in his justice is also to deal with them in his wrath. See, the full measure of God's anger is about to unleash upon them, and even now we witness the foretastes of their damnation.

If you have been chosen by God for salvation, then surely you can hear the voice of the Shepherd and perceive the truth of the gospel. Do not circulate among the damned any longer. Come out, and separate yourself from them. Come, stand behind the righteousness of Christ. Trust in his love and perfection. God will uphold his holy standards and correct you in his justice, with fairness and fatherly sternness, but he will not deal with you in his hot anger, lest he reduces you to nothing.

34. Ask, and Be Happy

In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete. (John 16:23-24)

Jesus is always teaching you to move up in faith. He tells you to reach higher, to expect more, to ask for more, to receive more, to achieve more, to be better, to be greater. His teaching in this area is clear and direct. There is little room for misunderstanding. But when men are weak in their faith, and when their hearts harden with unbelief, they often make excuses and demand others to join them. So preachers and theologians admonish you reduce in faith, to sympathize with doubt and unbelief, to stay safe, to expect less, and to suffer more.

They try to convince you that Jesus did not mean what he obviously said. The more you know about the Bible, the more you will know what he does not mean. The more you become proficient in theology, the more you will know how not to have faith, how not to pray, and what you cannot ask for. And lest you call them hypocrites, their lives exemplify the unbelief and impotence that they wish you to embrace. Instead of faithfully delivering the words of Christ and commanding you to believe and follow them, they reduce his teachings to match their own limitations.

But Jesus Christ calls you to rise higher, even if no man encourages you or permits you. His words remove you from the realm of unbelief, defeat, and religious humdrum and false humility to the place of power and victory. Because of Jesus Christ, this is possible for you. Because of him, you have direct access to the Father. You can go to God and talk to him, and ask from him. He will hear you, and he will give you what you ask. Jesus Christ has opened to you this door to supplies, blessings, and feats of power.

If you want a breakthrough, you will have to listen to Jesus. Stop listening to spiritual losers. Stop listening to theological quacks. Stop listening to people who try to explain away what he said. Believe what Jesus said. Do it. This is the way to move forward in faith, in life, and in ministry. Ask, and advance. Some make a sharp distinction between joy and happiness, as if you can be full of joy and not at all happy. No, listen to Jesus, and move higher. This is what he tells you: Ask, receive, and be very happy.

35. If Sinners Entice You

My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them.

If they say, "Come along with us; let's lie in wait for someone's blood, let's waylay some harmless soul; let's swallow them alive, like the grave, and whole, like those who go down to the pit; we will get all sorts of valuable things and fill our houses with plunder; throw in your lot with us, and we will share a common purse" – my son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths; for their feet rush into sin, they are swift to shed blood.

How useless to spread a net in full view of all the birds! These men lie in wait for their own blood; they waylay only themselves! Such is the end of all who go after ill-gotten gain; it takes away the lives of those who get it. (Proverbs 1:10-19)

A number of reasons are suggested as to why someone would join a gang, even a gang of violent criminals to rob and kill. Perhaps he is desperate for friendship. Perhaps he surrenders to social pressure. Perhaps there is the desire to belong, to feel the strength of many. Or, even if he realizes that it is not the ideal lifestyle, among the few undesirable options presented to him, this might be the one that gets him what he wants.

Whatever the reason seems to be, there is always the deeper issue of sin. From sin arises a sickening sense of dread and isolation, a need for human company and social acceptance, and a lust for material treasures. These are the symptoms of sin. At the root of the non-Christian's personality, he desires to rebel and cause mischief. He wants to commit evil and to thumb his nose at God. The invitation of other sinners incites sin in him, and offers him an opportunity to exercise his wickedness into concrete action. Seeing the obvious dangers, some non-Christians warn their children about violent gangs. So they work hard to receive an education and become white-collar criminals instead.

Jesus Christ is the true solution. He alone vanquishes evil in our hearts and fills us with a love for God. Now we desire to obey him. Now we want to praise him with our lips and honor him with our lives. Accordingly, although it still warns about gangs and violence and many other things, the Christian's moral education is not chiefly founded on practical concerns and still less on ethical principles that are detached from God's commands. Rather, the Christian's moral education comes under the banner of "the fear of the Lord" (Proverbs 1:7).

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge. It is not the conclusion of our own moral reasoning, but we ought to begin our moral reasoning with it. It is generated in our hearts through the gospel of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the true solution to sin, to crimes, to that sense of sadness, dread, and isolation. The non-Christian's education and welfare programs only put a white handkerchief over a big pile

of wet dung. What is underneath always seeps through and the handkerchief soon becomes part of the problem. Superficial measures are absurd and ineffective, because sin is underneath and it always seeps through. There is true reform and deliverance only in Jesus Christ.

36. Slanderer and Hypocrite⁴

I have been attending a small community church that is in the midst of a pastoral search. We have had many different speakers come in. Something I have noticed that makes my heart cringe is the way these men speak out against the Catholics specifically.

I certainly am all for preaching what the Bible says in all areas but it just seems to me like slander when proper names are used to speak against a certain practice of belief. I have been told that it is "righteous anger" that allows them to speak out and say the Catholic Church is wrong for doing/practicing/saying this or that. I just feel that this is not a biblical way to point out sin. I believe that it borders on slander and shows no mercy or grace.

I look at Jesus and how he didn't condemn Mary Magdalene for her life as a prostitute in front of the men who were condemning/slandering her.

I believe that if you preach the Word of God as written, there is no need to point out who is doing/committing the sin. That's the work of the Holy Spirit, and if you do then you are also sinning against another, which is hypocrisy!

Mary Magdalene was repentant. Do Catholics admit that they are wrong, and renounce Catholic doctrine? Any Catholic who does this receives mercy. Any Catholic who does not do this receive condemnation and the fires of hell. Anyone who shows your attitude is an accomplice.

The reason you think the way you do is because you do not know Jesus, the apostles, or the Bible. They harshly condemned people all the time, by their personal names and by their group labels. Jesus even became physically violent and turned over tables in the temple. If you cite Jesus' example, then why don't you cite those examples too? Why be selective and hypocritical about this? If you have read the Bible at all, you have chosen to rebel against God and filtered out much of the Word of God to protect your bias. You do not worship God, but a "God" that you made up. You do not believe in the Jesus of history and revelation, but the Jesus that you invented out of your own temperament, philosophy, and desire.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!"
(Matthew 23:13)

⁴ Adapted from email correspondence.

"You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matthew 23:33)

"Herod wants to kill you." He replied, "Go tell that fox." (Luke 13:31-32)

"For Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica." (2 Timothy 4:10)

"Even one of their own poets has said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith." (Titus 1:12-13)

"I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us" (3 John 9-10)

"But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." (Revelation 2:6)

There are hundreds of these verses, too many to include. You want to "preach the Word of God as written"? Then why not preach these verses? You talk about "sinning against another, which is hypocrisy"? You are the hypocrite.

As it is, you are the one who has slandered your church, slandered Christ, and the writers of the Bible. Repent and join them in fighting false doctrine while there is still time for you.

I congratulate you for finding a church that would speak out against the heresies of Catholicism. I urge you to stop being the agent of Satan in opposing the truth, repent, and join the cause of Christ.

37. No Perfect Justice in Human Court⁵

Since science cannot provide any knowledge at all on or of anything, what is the biblical position on using fingerprints, DNA, etc. as evidence or witnesses in courts of law?

The biblical position is submission to government, and to accept a court or legal system that can never attain any truth about anything about reality. God himself revealed the legal system employed under Moses, but he never said that even by this system men would always discover the truth and uphold perfect justice. No, even under this system guilty men were frequently acquitted and innocent men were frequently condemned.

This is partly why God established such harsh penalties against perjury. The perjurer received the punishment that the one on trial, that the perjurer testified against, would have received. A perjurer who lies against a murder suspect, who is subsequently judged to be innocent, ought to be executed.

Follow the standard of evidence of any court that you operate under. The existing legal system is epistemologically arbitrary. It cannot, and from God's perspective, it is never meant to maintain perfect – or perhaps even a little bit of – justice.

In the United States, it appears that hosts of innocent men are jailed or punished. Who are they? We do not know, and neither do the courts. And hosts of guilty men run rampant. The government helps prevent society from slipping into total chaos, but it is never intended to do God's own work, not even a little bit. But God will render perfect justice to all and against all when he judges.

As a side note, this is why lawyers, although they think they are the best debaters in the world, they are often some of the worst, and the easiest to defeat. This is because they are often stuck thinking in terms of the rules and standards of human court in their argumentation. But these rules are arbitrary and not rationally necessary.

Once they leave the court where they must debate an issue relative to the rules of truth and reason, it is like they are using basketball rules in a street fight – completely confused and helpless. I have no obligation to accept empirical and scientific evidences or the rules, standards, and procedures that he is accustomed to outside of a human court unless these are rationally supported.

Lawyers must learn to switch modes when arguing outside of court, and Christians should never be intimidated or show special respect to them in debate.

⁵ Adapted from email correspondence.

38. Conspiracy Theories⁶

What do you think about conspiracy theories, such as those concerning the Illuminati, Freemasons, and Satanism behind world governments, and the New World Order? How can we advance the Kingdom of God when secret societies might be in control of the masses?

The conspiracy theories are irrelevant, because all non-Christians conspire against God in one way or another. It is a waste of time to investigate those pertaining to secret societies and organizations. John wrote long ago that "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). What difference does it make if any particular conspiracy theory is true? Some of these theories could be true, some could be false. They could all be true, or all be false. It makes no difference to the Christian approach to the world. It is the devil's red herring. In studying them and spending energy on them, people are already ensnared and defeated. Do not allow the devil to set the agenda for the church.

⁶ Adapted from email correspondence.

39. Can God Enjoy Worship?⁷

I believe in God's complete control of all things, actions, and thoughts, but I have difficulty responding to this question.

Since God determines all that happens, then he determines my worship of him and all the thoughts that occur in my worship. How can he enjoy this worship if all the thoughts of this worship come from himself?

As an analogy, what if a girl can put thoughts in her doll and cause it to praise the girl's beauty? But the compliment comes from the girl's mind.

Whenever someone asks a question against a biblical doctrine, it represents an attack against God and his glory. Therefore, you must both answer the question and attack the person. There must be something wrong with the person for him to ask such a question. By extension, you should also examine yourself for failing to answer it. If you truly grasp God's nature and glory as revealed in the Bible, instead of letting an analogy that represents him as a human person throw off your entire theology, then you would not have any difficulty answering this.

Although the Scripture uses human analogies to illustrate some things about God, the points asserted are always clear, and they are often asserted directly along with the analogies. Moreover, the Bible represents man as the image of God, and not God as the image of sinful man! Even when something is said about man, and then God is said to be like it, it is said that God is better or greater, and not inferior.

First, we assert the positive doctrine and see that there is no problem with it. So he causes his people to worship him, and he approves of this worship. The issue is not whether we think he ought to be able to enjoy it, but whether this is what happens, that he truly causes the worship, and whether he declares that this is the way he likes it. If so, then the matter is settled. It is finished. The person who makes an objection against this is in fact saying that he (the man) is unhappy that God can be happy with this arrangement. He is insisting that God should not be happy with this, even though God himself does not complain. Instead of threatening the doctrine, this objection is blasphemy. This man thinks that he himself can be a better God, or that he knows better in how to be a God who is happy and satisfied. Our doctrine is not in trouble, but this man's very soul is in trouble. This answer is sufficient for both the Christian and the non-Christian, because the objection logically makes no sense.

Second, this person's reasoning can apply to many other attributes of God. Even if God cannot cause anything at all in this universe, if we continue to affirm his omniscience, this means that he knows everything about past, present, and future worship – every motive,

⁷ Adapted from email correspondence.

every thought, every prayer, every intonation of every word in every hymn, every gesture of the hands and face, and so on. If we think that he has a mentality very much like that of a human person (as the analogy of the girl implies), then how can he "enjoy" worship? So the God that this person has in mind must be striped of his knowledge also. How about his power? How can God "enjoy" worship when his infinite power means that no one can go against him? How about his promises and blessings? As Satan said to God, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" We can continue this analysis until we are left with a God that this man is satisfied with, who in his opinion can have a meaningful existence. And this God will be nothing more than a superman, if even that. This answer is especially applicable to the Christian, since it shows that he in fact does not believe in God. His "God" is something very different that he invented, and this "God" (a mere superman) is the deity that he worships. But it is also applicable to the non-Christian, because the God that he objects to is not the God of the Bible, and the Bible is not obligated to present him with a God that he likes.

Third, many other details in the objection remain unclear. What does it mean to "enjoy" worship? What does this person think worship is? Does he really think it is like a girl who receives flattery? Is that the kind of God that he has in mind, and the reason he thinks God commands worship? Does he offer arguments to support this? Is this person a Christian? And if he is a non-Christian, does he understand anything about the Christian faith to make this silly assumption? Also, do you think this is what worship means? Why do you allow this assumption, that God is like a little girl, and that worship is like flattery?

Fourth, the human analogy itself backfires against this person. A little boy who takes up two toy soldiers and makes them fight each other is in constant control of both items, but he still finds the whole scenario exciting. A little girl who sits down with her toys to have tea with them and to chitchat with them still finds hours of amusement. I do not say that worship is like this, but this shows that *even if* worship is like this, it would not necessarily be a problem, and it does not necessarily mean that God would not "enjoy" it. This man is so stupid that he does not even understand the human situation, and he dares to scrutinize God's nature against God's own revelation.

What an inferior thinker! What a despicable and worthless person! Attack him. Belittle him. Scold him with harsh words and with a loud voice. But first, examine yourself. It is very serious that you cannot answer such an easy challenge. It is not just an intellectual problem, but also a spiritual and ethical problem. If you had held on to your God as he is revealed in the Bible, you would not have allowed blasphemous assumptions and analogies to trouble you.

40. Follow Jesus Christ⁸

You are to be congratulated for the grace of God that is upon you. We know it is never by our own wisdom that we arrive at the truth. Everywhere we witness God's power in shutting men's eyes and minds so that they could not perceive the plainest facts and reasons. Faith like a mustard seed can move mountains, but most people do not have even this. A little truth from God is more precious than gold and rubies, but God enables us to know truth in its breadth, and depth, and beauty and wisdom. We could have nothing, but God has given us all good things.

Now that God has enabled you to break free from human tradition into his truth, take heed that you do not trade one human tradition for another one, even if the second is better than the first. It would be so comfortable for me to adopt one of the creeds of Christendom and become its scribe. Then I will have instant acceptance, instant fellowship, instant support, and multitudes to fight along my side. No matter how good a tradition is, you are always directly accountable to Jesus Christ. Even within the best of traditions, errors and disagreements abound, and there seems to be no rest. But I have discovered a greater peace than human camaraderie – in Jesus Christ there is peace in the midst of a storm. He is the sole master of my conscience, and in him I can stand up to a thousand years of human consensus.

The religious establishment accused Jesus of being an imposter and a magician. It denounced Paul as a heretic and usurper. This kind of error did not die when the Christian faith gained strength in the world, because this is not a pre-Christian error that died with the Pharisees, but it is a human error and sin. Therefore, do not be surprised that even the best of human traditions often oppose the truth of Christ and the power of the Spirit. Do not take part in this, and do not become a victim to this.

My view on many things agree exactly with some existing traditions, but my view on some things disagree with them. Have I not considered views different from mine in great detail? Do I not wish to agree with some existing system and have unity with somebody? Of course I do. But God's word told me to say what God says: "Do not be terrified of them, or I will terrify you before them" (Jeremiah 1:17). It will be worse for me, if I know the truth and perceive their error, but agree with them anyway.

The fact that you can agree with me on some of these things again shows that the grace of God is upon you, that you are willing to heed truth and reason instead of allowing traditions and prejudices to make you their slave. However, it is not easy to be entirely liberated in following Christ, because men will try to subjugate you to their ideas, if not in this, then in that, or in another area. Pray that you will always be free to follow Christ alone with your whole heart.

⁸ Adapted from email correspondence.

Therefore, follow Christ directly – perhaps *with* other believers and *with* the church, but not *through* other believers or *through* the church. Never be hindered by men, their traditions, their procedures, and their self-conferred authority. Also, develop a faith that is whole, that is full and well-proportioned. An interest in apologetics is excellent, but continue to advance in all other areas of your faith, including theology, prayer, worshiping the Lord in songs, loving your spouse and children, diligence in your work, exhibiting honorable conduct before all men, and even legitimate spiritual powers and experiences (I am not against experience, but I maintain that truth does not come from experiences, but that experiences are judged and understood by truth).

41. Secular Entertainment⁹

I am very against making up a restriction where the Bible does not state or imply one. On the other hand, I am also very against using "God made all things good" as a blanket justification for everything that people want to do. This application pushes the text far beyond its original purpose. It means only that food and marriage and such things are not spiritually unclean, but that all such things are clean through faith and prayer. Yet we still do not eat poisonous mushrooms, even naturally grown ones! Indeed mushrooms are not spiritually unclean, but which mushrooms are fine to eat? Books or reading as such may not be spiritually unclean, but which books should you read? Certainly it does not mean that the Satanic Bible is holy. Music, or rhythms and sounds as such, may not be spiritually unclean, but which songs are acceptable? Paul says that (even if) all things are permissible, not all things are expedient.

Both illegitimate restriction and permission are characteristics of the Pharisees. They make restrictions where the Bible does not. And then they pretend that the Scripture says something or that it does not say something (whichever suits their purpose) in order to justify and excuse every little thing that they do.

With this in mind, it seems that secular music could be consumed in principle, but it ought to be used with discernment and moderation just like other forms of non-Christian entertainment and expression, such as paintings, novels, and movies. It might not be wrong for me to admire a non-Christian photo of a beautiful lake or mountain (but it would be ridiculous to follow one tradition that would make it a holy mandate to take more and better photos than the non-Christians). It might not be inherently wrong to watch a movie produced by non-Christians, but which non-Christian movies are acceptable? The broad principle does not automatically sort out every instance for us. We will have to pay attention to the contents.

Non-Christian songs, even when they are not singing about sex and drugs, continuously exhibit and suggest certain beliefs regarding romantic love, freedom, dreams and ambitions (common theme in children's movies), a festive spirit, tolerance, and many other things. Even the song "Happy Birthday" assumes that each human being is so important that he ought to mark the day of his birth every year, and that everybody else ought to celebrate it as well. Is this good or acceptable? Maybe, maybe not, but the song assumes an answer to the question. It is not neutral. The mind could absorb these things so that they become mental strongholds. Christians ought to agree with this general assessment and caution, and understand that it is not paranoia. The Bible teaches us to protect the heart, because out of it are the issues of life.

Still, I would not make a law for myself and say that I must not watch movies or listen to songs. And I would not try to excuse myself by saying that all things are good. If you ask

⁹ Adapted from email correspondence.

why I am watching a movie, I would answer, "Because I want to watch a movie. After this I am going to eat a steak!" The one who tries to find a precise justification for letting them do something when the Bible does not really offer that justification, is a Pharisee. He is condemned whether he does it or does not do it. We must pursue purity, but also hold on to the liberty that Christ won for us with his blood.

42. Church Selection and Attendance¹⁰

I have always considered the usual arguments on church attendance and membership forced and unconvincing, often outright made-up and dishonest. It seems that those who make these arguments wish to enforce a human tradition no matter what, and they impose a moral obligation beyond what the Bible teaches and implies.

All the arguments that assert the *necessity* of corporate spirituality and that undermine and condemn individual spirituality, even an isolated spirituality (when this isolation occurs not because of rebellion, but because of providence), are completely invented and unbiblical. One popular Reformed theologian even appealed to the slogan that God is our Father, and the Church is our Mother. This is heresy and blasphemy.

Although the church as a local community in itself is not a human tradition but God's idea, so that it is good and biblical, there are practical elements in how the teaching is implemented so that there is flexibility in its application. If a church is indeed very bad, and you are unable to guide it to a better direction, then there is no biblical reason to force yourself to attend that church, even if there is no other church in the area.

It is popular to insist that a Christian can never survive, or can never grow, or can never grow properly, unless he is surrounded by supportive believers. This is utter rubbish. The Bible does not teach it. Perhaps it is true in some people's experience because they are not faithful believers who cling to Christ, but rather weaklings who rely on one another – theirs is, at least partly, not a spiritual faith, but a human or social faith. So you do not need to be threatened by them or be enslaved in conscience by their teachings.

That said, you still need to be realistic about your reason for not attending a church, your faith as an individual, and your ability to live and grow as a Christian apart from a community. It is indeed possible and not necessarily wrong, but *why* are you doing it, and can *you* do it? Take your faith seriously, and if you indeed must do this, then design measures that will help you grow without a community, such as regular times of prayer and worship, study, ministry, and so on.

When evaluating and choosing a church, we should prefer a "charismatic" church that is overall sound in doctrine even if it is somewhat anti-intellectual, than a cessationist church that presents itself as better in doctrine. I put "charismatic" in quotes because I should not need to make a distinction in the first place, since this is so central to the Christian faith that it ought to be part of its definition. A church that believes in God, or the Scripture, or the atonement, should not need a special designation. Cessationism is the aberration.

Avoid a church that is dead in unbelief. We would want a church that is both sound in doctrine and strong in faith, but such a church is hard to find. Of course, the truth that God

¹⁰ Adapted from email correspondence.

performs miracles for people and through people is in itself sound doctrine, an essential aspect of the gospel. Thus with other things equal, a "charismatic" church has a superior theology compared to a cessationist church. A "charismatic" church might not emphasize your favorite doctrines, but it might still be correct on doctrines such as God's omnipotence, omniscience, Christ's nature, his atonement, justification by faith, and so on. And it is less likely to explain away everything that the Gospels and the Acts teach about God's power at work through his people.

Even as a strong advocate of biblical intellectualism, I will tell you that the more intellectual a group is, the more it tends to be possessed by the spirit of the Pharisees. This is avoidable if the spiritual development is well-proportioned, and integrated with faith in God's power, miracles, and blessings, but many communities fail in this and become possessed by a murderous religious spirit. It is very strong in Reformed and other scholarly circles. Do not stop being a mindless fanatic just so you can become a murderous Pharisee. The Pharisee considers himself superior, but he is in fact much worse.

43. Habitual Sin¹¹

It is good that instead of excusing yourself, you admit your sin and you are taking it seriously. Even if the sin persists, remember to never lose this – never begin to make excuses or to think that it is not a sin.

It is correct that true faith in Jesus Christ leads to holiness. However, a stubborn sin – or two or three – can tend to capture our attention to the exclusion of other aspects of our lives. When you take your entire life into account, is the basic disposition toward holiness? Is there an overall growth in knowledge, reverence, purity, and good works? If so, then this is consistent with a genuine faith in Christ. Instead of allowing a stubborn sin to become a stumbling block for your whole faith, you should consider the fact of your continuing growth in Christ to draw strength and encouragement in the ongoing battle against the remaining evil.

Accountability to other believers is not useless, but it is often overrated as an aid to sanctification. When it is effective at all, it is helpful mostly when it comes to outward conduct, and not as much when it comes to motives and thoughts. And it is effective only when the person does not hide or lie about his situation or progress. If you really want to sin, you will lie so you can do it and so other people will not find out. So even if you draw on the strength and pressure of a Christian community, see to it that your main focus remains on Jesus Christ. He is the sole Mediator, the Lord of the conscience, and the Shepherd of your soul.

¹¹ Adapted from email correspondence.

44. Leaving Traditional Churches¹²

Almost all "traditional" churches are heretical, dead, and full of unbelief. They include churches from every human tradition, such as the Reformed, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Anglican -- all of them. There are cases where I will not support someone's decision to leave a church, but it is often understandable, even commendable. Many churches should not exist. Instead of improving themselves, they use tactics of terror and control to keep their members from leaving. It takes spiritual courage and commitment for one to extract himself and his family from such places.

When several Christians join together, they indeed constitute a church. Things like seminary degrees and denominational ordinations are human credentials that often help church order but are never necessary. However, this does not mean that every Christian is qualified to start or lead a church, but it means that no Christian is forbidden in principle. These groups are indeed churches, but only sound doctrine and divine power make good churches. Some groups are likely to be worse than the churches that they have abandoned.

Even though many leave for incorrect motives and reasons, instead of making it a matter of doctrine or policy to condemn and threaten them, traditional churches should repent, and fix themselves. If people return and get more of the same death, unbelief, and church politics, they will just leave again. And this time, I hope, they will know better than to come back.

¹² Adapted from email correspondence.

45. A Son with Health Condition¹³

All the teachings that you have learned about honoring God in all circumstances would apply. Many writers have produced works on this topic. Perhaps you may find some and see what you can glean from them.

However, I would add that you can pray for your son's healing, while you continue to give him all the natural help that he needs with his condition. Of course, some church traditions tell us that there is no longer miraculous healing for us. But I spit on these traditions. This is a wicked man-made teaching, not remotely hinted at by Scripture.

There is no time to explain this in detail, so I hope you would consider this and pray that God may give you insights on the matter. While you do this, as I said, continue to give your son all the natural help he needs.

¹³ Adapted from email correspondence.

46. The Dishonest Manager¹⁴

The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. (Luke 16:8-9)

Each parable usually has one main point (or very few points), and the details are there to move the story along. And the Gospels almost invariably tell us directly the point of a parable.

For example, the Parable of the Good Samaritan answers the question, "Who is my neighbor?" The Law commands us to love our neighbor, and as they tended to do, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law would try to define "neighbor" in a way that would excuse them from having to love anyone that they did not wish to love. But Jesus turned it around on them and said "Who was a neighbor to this man?" The one who showed mercy. And he said, "Go and do likewise." Details like where the man was traveling to, the inn, the two coins, that they were silver coins, etc., most likely do not symbolize anything, but serve to keep the story together and to further the plot.

In the Parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18), Jesus uses the *a fortiori* argument. It is not that God is like an unjust judge, but it is precisely because he is not one (that he is a just judge), that he is better than an unjust judge, and that we ought to be encouraged even more to persist in faith and prayer. Jesus explicitly declares the point of the parable: "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (v. 7-8).

Likewise, the Parable of the Dishonest Manager in Luke 16 is directly explained: "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (v. 9). It is not that Jesus tells us to be dishonest managers, but that unbelievers know how to use wealth to make friends in the sphere of their lives, and believers ought to know how to use wealth in their own sphere, in their own context and according to their own worldview.

Thus the dishonest manager provides only an analogy to how Christians are to use their wealth, and not an example that is directly applied or imitated. So although we might be unaccustomed to the phrase in a spiritual context, the expression "to gain friends" is carried over from how the dishonest manager uses wealth to how Christians ought to use wealth. This wealth is used in a way that would make us "friends" in eternal dwellings, in the next life. Therefore, the natural interpretation is to use wealth in a way that carries eternal

¹⁴ Adapted from email correspondence.

significance, most obviously, in evangelism and discipleship, but also other good works that the Bible commands, such as feeding the poor, caring for widows and orphans, and so on.

The power of this teaching is often underestimated. Several times the Bible observes that believers and unbelievers, the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, appear to suffer the same fate – they die and cannot carry their wealth with them. But then there is the power of the gospel. Through Jesus Christ our wealth *can* transcend this life and break through to the next life. In Christ, what you earn here can benefit you there. What you do with your wealth here will affect what happens there.

The dishonest manager and his friends would die, and all their money would be lost. All the wisdom and shrewdness of the non-Christian finally comes to nothing. The friends that he bought with his money cannot help him or welcome him. They, too, cannot bring their money with them. And in the next life they would all be destitute and in suffering. But if the Christian uses his wealth wisely (wise in the Christian context, and not in the non-Christian sense), then his natural wealth turns into spiritual and eternal riches. We rejoice and celebrate this power that God has given us through Jesus Christ!

47. Cessationism and Church Selection¹⁵

Arminians are not always pushy about their Arminianism. They might assume it, but they do not constantly assert human freedom in contradiction to divine sovereignty. They would often tell a man to decide, such as to decide to believe and follow Christ. Although they say this on the basis of false assumptions about human freedom and ability, the statement itself is true. The Calvinist must also tell the man to decide for God.

A Christian should always prefer a church that fiercely insists that God continues to work miracles for people and through people, that the gifts of the Spirit have never ceased. This should take priority over whether a church teaches Arminianism or Calvinism. Of course, it would be better if the Christian has been informed and convinced of the doctrines concerning God's sovereignty, election, reprobation, and so on. Cessationism is so demonic and harmful that it warrants this policy.

This is the general principle. It is possible that a "charismatic" church is so bad that one finds it difficult to prefer it over a nearby Reformed or Evangelical church. However, in this case, one has to consider the possibility that it might be better to attend no church at all than to attend a cessationist church. Cessationism is so heretical that it amounts to teaching another Jesus, another Spirit, and another gospel.

¹⁵ Adapted from email correspondence.

48. Neither Unbelief Nor Fanaticism¹⁶

The Reformed probably represents the best overall human theological tradition. As a human tradition, it invents things that complicate and undermine the biblical system of truth, and it often rebels against God's doctrines and commands. Compatibilism is one example. The tradition also embraces cessationism, which is one of the most demonic and harmful heresies in human history.

The truth that God continues to work miracles for people and through people is just as essential as other Christian doctrines. Both Jesus and the apostles presented it as the front and center of the gospel (Luke 4, Acts 2). Anyone who affirms cessationism is a heretic, a false teacher, and a puppet of Satan to drag the church into a state of weakness and defeat.

There is no need to resign ourselves to either the unbelief in Reformed and Evangelical circles or to the fanaticism in other places. You do not need to choose from any human tradition. Affirm the truth as God revealed it in the Bible, and have faith that God will manifest his miracles and blessings.

It is the custom to bow down and worship under a school of human tradition. If you refuse, you will probably face persecution from modern-day Pharisees. I am attacked with slander from all sides, and also very boring and stupid criticisms. Cling to the Lord Jesus and serve him alone. Then you will remain bold to speak in his name, and you will not be intimidated by men.

¹⁶ Adapted from email correspondence.

49. Faith is Certainty¹⁷

Faith is certainty. It is so certain that Jesus said if you pray in faith you would believe that you have received what you asked for before you actually attain it. When the devil attacks you and you doubt, that means his attack is beginning to be successful. Fight it and kill the doubt. Faith and doubt are not feelings as such but qualities of thought. Fear might be a feeling that arises from doubt.

The Reformed and Evangelicals are very fond of making excuses in this area. They would probably condemn Jesus Christ himself as one of those fanatical "faith teachers." They might indeed suggest that you can doubt and still be full of faith, or even say that doubt is good. Jesus would loudly rebuke them. No, doubt is bad, always bad. Peter feared, and he sank. James said that if you waver, do not think that you will receive anything from the Lord. The Pentecostals and Charismatics are overall far more faithful to Scripture in this area.

These are generalizations that do not apply to every particular case. There are counterexamples from each side. And although I state the overall situation as I perceive it, the truth is that I could not care less which tradition wins and which one loses. I do not want to take a side and say, "I am of this one!" or "I am of that one!" Neither the Reformed and Evangelicals nor the Pentecostals died to redeem me from sin and endued me with power from heaven. Jesus Christ alone did these things. I will follow him. The rest can come along or they can burn in hell.

Jesus taught that if you even have a mustard seed faith, nothing will be impossible for you. Christians have often twisted this to mean that you can have 1% faith and 99% doubt! This is a demonic perversion of the teaching. No, Jesus said, "If anyone...*does not doubt* in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him" (Mark 11:23). If you waver, do not think that you will get anything from the Lord.

Of course, sometimes God shows mercy, as when Jesus rescued him while Peter was sinking. But without faith, a man cannot expect to receive, although he still might receive despite his doubts because of God's sovereign kindness. In any case, rather than making excuses and twisting Scripture so that everyone will feel better, we should accept what Jesus taught on faith, condemn our own unbelief, and strive to attain to the level he commanded.

If you pray full of faith, you will know it, and you will not need to ask anyone, and no one will be able to convince you otherwise.

¹⁷ Adapted from email correspondence.

50. Be Stronger, Be Better¹⁸

The Reformed and Pentecostals are both wrong on some important points. The Reformed are more correct on several central issues, such as predestination and eschatology. However, the people are driven by unbelief and tradition, and some of their doctrines, including their cessationism, amount to preaching another God, another Jesus, and another gospel. We must be faithful to the teachings of Christ only, and not to any human tradition or heritage.

Read the Bible for yourself and see what it really teaches. Jesus said, "If you have faith, you will have whatever you say" (Matthew 21:21, Mark 11:23). When he was brought to a dead girl, he said, "The little girl is not dead, but sleeping." He apparently made a "faith confession" that contradicted reality, and then he raised the girl from the dead. He told the disciples they failed to cast out a demon because of their lack of faith, not because it was the will of God to withhold healing.

The Reformed, the Evangelicals, and the cessationists have not been able to make good sense of these and many other biblical passages, not because they are difficult to understand, but because the people's false theological assumptions cannot permit or process what the Bible says. And their attempts to explain away the passages amount to a rejection of Christ and a rejection of biblical inspiration and inerrancy.

The Pentecostal doctrines on faith and power, healing, prophecy, and the Holy Spirit, are much more faithful to Christ than the Reformed and Evangelicals. Faith is what Jesus said it is. Faith is certainty, certainty of things hoped for, and of things not seen. When we have this certainty, it is the evidence of things hoped for and not seen. We have it. We know we have it. And we receive what our faith is certain of.

Be stronger. Be better. See for yourself what the Bible teaches. Beware of human traditions, just as much as you should beware of idolatry and witchcraft.

¹⁸ Adapted from email correspondence.

51. Will God be God in Heaven?¹⁹

The fact that you can ask if God will still control us when we get to heaven tells me that you still do not fully grasp the basis for God's sovereignty and that your thinking is still man-centered.

God is sovereign not because of who you are or where you are, but because of who he is and what he is. He controls all things because this is what it means to be God. His sovereignty is first an ontological and metaphysical issue and not a soteriological issue. It has nothing to do with where we are or our state and condition. We will never become autonomous and independent from God. His sovereignty is not a game, where we will arbitrarily decide to go by one set of rules for a while, and then when we have stopped playing we will go by another set of rules. He controls all things because he is God.

Be careful when you ask a question like this so that you do not blaspheme, because your question amounts to "Will God still be God when I am in heaven, or will I have independence from God and become equal to Jehovah himself in his freedom?" Nevertheless, I do not wholly blame you, because Calvinists and Reformed theologians have trained people to think from a narrow soteriological viewpoint even when the question pertains to a broad ontological and metaphysical issue. If you ask them a metaphysical question, they will give you a soteriological answer. This has resulted in much absurdity, and sometimes blasphemy. For an example, see my article, "But What About the Thingamajig?"²⁰ As for you, always think of God with the utmost fear and reverence. Do not blaspheme, not even indirectly or by implication.

¹⁹ Adapted from email correspondence.

²⁰ See Vincent Cheung, *Sermonettes, Volume 2*.

52. Romans 9: Individual vs. Corporate Election²¹

Arminians tend to interpret the election of Jacob and Esau to mean the choice of the people Israel and Edom. According to them it means the election of a collective and not of individuals. So they would say Romans 9 does not deal with the salvation of individuals but the election of Israel as a nation.

The Arminian interpretation is impossible, and the answer stares at us plainly from the text:

[6] It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. [7] Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children.

On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." [8] In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. [9] For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son."

[10] Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. [11] Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God's purpose in election might stand: [12] not by works but by him who calls – she was told, "The older will serve the younger." [13] Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

The point of the passage is to show that God's word to Israel has not failed (v. 6). The reason this question comes up is because it seems that God promised salvation to Israel, but salvation is only available through faith in Jesus Christ, but Israel on the whole (most *individuals!*) has rejected Christ, and therefore it appears that Israel on the whole is not saved.

Paul answers this right away. God's word has not failed, "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children" (v. 6b-7). Now stand in amazement at how STUPID the Arminians are. Paul takes Israel as a whole when he brings up the question, and then explicitly calls attention to the individuals within Israel in order to answer the question. In fact, his answer depends on individual faith and individual election. That is, God's word to Israel has not failed, because not every individual within Israel belongs to the true Israel, and not every descendant in Israel is a child of Abraham.

²¹ Adapted from email correspondence. Also see Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Commentary on Ephesians*, and *Commentary on Malachi*.

Then he adds two illustrations to emphasize individual election:

From v. 7b-9, Paul says Abraham's true children would come through Isaac. By this, he means that they would come through God's supernatural power to fulfill his promise rather than by natural generation. "It is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" (v. 8b). God made the promise to Abraham, but he distinguished the individual of Isaac against the individual of Ishmael. So his grace does not apply to "children of Abraham" in an all-inclusive and corporate sense, but in a selective and individual sense.

But lest one thinks that from Isaac forward divine grace is given in a corporate sense without consideration of individuals, Paul makes the same point again, this time with Isaac's children (v. 10). Two children, even twins, came from the same father, but God chose to love one and hate the other. As if to stress individual election even more, he chose the younger instead of the older.

Returning to Paul's reason for writing all this in the first place, his argument is intelligible and compelling only because he asserts individual election, and in a sense, even *against* corporate election. God's promise to Israel (corporate) has not failed because the promise applies only to chosen individuals within this Israel, which we might call a true Israel.

With this in mind, read the rest of Romans 9 and you will see that it consistently insists on God's control over individuals. Again, Paul's argument would not make sense and would fail unless this is what he intends.

The Arminian argument is almost a sign of surrender. If it tries to make this a teaching of corporate election, then it admits that this is talking about God's sovereignty in choosing nations, so that the nations do not choose themselves. The Arminian perceives the teaching of God's sovereignty in this, but redirects it to a corporate application. Therefore, if this redirection is prevented and it is shown that the text obviously refers to individuals, we retain the Arminian admission that it teaches election, and since it refers to individuals, it teaches the election of individuals.