

SERMONETTES VOLUME 5

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1. Set Apart for the Gospel

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God – the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:1-6)

Paul was a Jew, and a Pharisee. The Jews, and especially the Pharisees, claimed that they believed Moses, but they did not. If they had believed Moses, they would have believed in Jesus, since Moses predicted the coming of Jesus and told the people to follow him. Rather, they wanted to believe doctrines that they invented in order to protect their unbelief and wickedness. They claimed that they defended and enforced the Scripture, but they did not. Instead, they worked around God's law by inventing traditions that were supposedly designed to facilitate obedience to the commandments, but in fact provided excuses for ignoring them and violating them. They were religious hypocrites. Indeed, Jesus repeatedly called them this in his ministry, and at one point, using a fig tree as a figure, he cursed the entire Jewish religious system and doomed it to a permanent end. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple occurred soon after.

Before Paul became a Christian, he was such a religious hypocrite. He was arrogant and hard-hearted, and he zealously pursued a righteousness that was of his own making, that underestimated man's depravity, and that spurned the mercy of God. He thought that he was gaining a righteousness that was according to the law, when the law itself could only condemn but rather pointed to the grace and truth of Jesus Christ. Remember, the Jews did not really believe or practice the law, but they believed and practiced the doctrines and traditions that they invented for themselves so that they could claim obedience to the law without actually rendering it. And that was how Paul lived.

When a man like this is exposed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, and his whole belief system, his way of life, and his ultimate destiny is threatened with this powerful message, he can become angry, and even violent. He had been pretending, so thoroughly and without reservation that he convinced himself, that he served God by the doctrines and traditions that the elders invented, and in this zealous hypocrisy he would cut down anyone who tells him otherwise.

So Paul was there when the Jews murdered Stephen, approving his death. Afterward he began to unleash his fury against the followers of Jesus Christ. He obtained authority to travel to Damascus so that he could hunt down the Christians there and take them as prisoners back to Jerusalem. But on his way there, Jesus appeared to him and astounded

him with a blinding glory. The Lord commissioned him to serve the Christian faith and gave him orders about what he must do with his life.

Then the Lord sent a certain disciple named Ananias to follow up. Although Ananias was not an apostle or called anyone special, he was appointed to initiate one of the most significant figures in church history. As far as we can tell, he was a believer like any other believer, but when he placed his hands on Paul, the apostle received his sight, since he was blinded by the glory of Christ, and then he was also filled with the Spirit (Acts 9:17), since until then he had been only regenerated and converted by his encounter with the Lord.

A man may be zealous for the Jewish system. He may be a hardened atheist. Or a man may be a devout follower of some non-Christian religion. But no resolve, upbringing, indoctrination, or previous commitment can withstand the power of Jesus Christ when the Lord decides to seize a person's soul. Paul was bent on destroying Christians, but Jesus made him a Christian and commissioned him to promote the Christian faith. God is the master of all souls, and Jesus Christ is the captain of ours. No man is free to decide his own destiny. We are grateful that he has chosen us to be recipients of his mercy, and to become messengers of his compassion and his judgment.

It was Jesus Christ who declared that Paul would be an apostle and to preach the gospel. Paul did not decide this for himself, and this also meant that other people had no authority to say that Paul was not going to be an apostle and to preach the gospel. Just as I do not decide my own destiny, because it has been foreordained and revealed by the Lord, neither can anyone dictate or interfere with it. My soul belongs to Jesus Christ, in sweet captivity to the gospel. No man can control me, and no one can impose his wish upon me to supplant the Lord's command.

I am thankful that God does not subjugate my soul to imperfect authorities and religious hypocrites. Although I must render proper respect to those placed in positions of power, my soul is subject to Christ alone. I am free to believe and perform all that he has commissioned me, so that even when I face opposition and criticism, I regard them only as part of my service to him. Before God's throne, I will not need to explain myself to detractors, because Christ is the one who judges me. God himself calls a person to believe. God himself sets a person apart for the work of the gospel. This is the basis of our boldness to condemn unbelievers, to dismantle all the science, philosophy, and religion that they trust in, and to rebuke and depart from cults, traditions, churches, and denominations that do not serve the Christian faith, so that we may follow Christ.

The gospel has its enemies from both non-Christians and those who claim to be Christians. Just as the Jews pretended to believe and follow the law, but in reality invented traditions and customs to work around God's commandments, the same sinful nature that inspired this also works in those who claim to be Christians, who uphold their traditions, churches, and denominations rather than the freedom and power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But if our calling and authority come from God and not from men, then men cannot hinder us. In the face of their threats and maneuverings, we can laugh at them and spit at them, and move on to fulfill our mission.

The prophets and apostles were in themselves ordinary men, but who were conceived, foreordained, and then created by God for the work that he prepared for them. They ministered by the Spirit of God, and whenever God willed it, they performed their work with perfection. They spoke to their generations and accomplished the things that God wanted to be done at those points in history. For our purpose, we will consider their role in the writing of Scripture, or the Bible.

God wanted to produce a perfect book to be his word and witness to humanity. It would be a tool for teaching the truth, for defining the standard of right and wrong, for exposing sin and rebellion, and for ruling the hearts of men. Since this book would be an expression of God's mind, it would reflect something of his nature in that it would be intelligent and infallible. Therefore, he inspired the words and actions of his prophets and apostles. To ensure that these would be performed with perfection whenever he willed, he carried them by his Holy Spirit, and controlled all things to guarantee that their words and actions were recorded in the exact form that he wanted.

Along with the fact of divine inspiration, there is often the concern to affirm the human differences in the text. Although all the words and thoughts are said to come from one divine mind, and there is a perfect harmony in the doctrines, promises, and predictions of Scripture, the documents were physically set down in writing by men, and their various vocabularies, backgrounds, and personalities seem to come through. So it is assumed that there needs to be an explanation on how divine inspiration worked through the human writers.

I have never regarded this question as necessary; in fact, it is rather foolish to consider it a pressing issue, as if there is a glaring problem with the doctrine of inspiration unless an explanation is provided concerning the so-called human element in Scripture. Given the existence and omnipotence of God, a matter like this is dissolved into the limitless possibilities of divine power. God can make rocks to speak with different vocabularies and personalities if he wishes. It has never been necessary to provide an explanation on how divine inspiration worked with the backgrounds and personalities of men.

The issue seems pressing only when people harbor a fetish for human freedom and independence, or something along this line. To desire to learn more about how God operates is one thing, but for one to think that the answer is needed to maintain the coherence of the doctrine of divine inspiration shows that he is a theological pervert. The pervert asks, "How can God speak and write his words perfectly through a man and allow the man to retain his freedom?" The answer is that the man never had freedom in the first place. No one has freedom from God, and no one has his "own" personality as if it is something independent from God.

Rather, the explanation is the same one that we would offer if rocks were to speak – if a man has his own background and personality, God conceived it, foreordained it, and created it in him. It is not that God worked with the man so that the man could write Scripture; instead, God "wrote" out the man, and then he carried the man by his Spirit and

"wrote" Scripture using him as if a man would use a pen. The coherence of the doctrine of inspiration is preserved not by maintaining a tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom, but by affirming an absolute divine sovereignty and by denying human freedom.

Paul's gospel was not a manmade invention, nor did he learn it from a man, but he received it by revelation from Jesus Christ, who appeared to him and showed him the truth, and continued to teach him and guide him. Nevertheless, it was through the Scripture, and not in the flesh, that Paul knew the prophets, just as we know the prophets and the apostles through the Bible. This is not an inferior way of knowing, because the faith of a Christian is an intelligent grasp and belief of revelation. It is a matter of truth and wisdom, and not of sensation or encounter.

The message was not something entirely new, but God had long been speaking about it through the prophets before the time of Christ. Paul told the Galatians that God preached the gospel to Abraham. And Peter wrote that the prophets spoke by the Spirit of Christ, who revealed to them even the time and circumstances of the incarnation and work of Jesus. In fact, God revealed the gospel promise almost at the very beginning of human history, albeit in a succinct fashion, when he told Eve that her seed would crush the head of the serpent.

God created faith in his chosen ones and imputed righteousness to them as he causes them to believe the promise. They believed in the Christ who would come. In this sense, all those who were saved through faith before Jesus Christ came in the flesh could be called Christians, whether they were Jews or non-Jews. Thus Christians before the Son of God appeared in the flesh were saved by believing in the promise of the gospel, and Christians after the incarnation, the atonement, and the resurrection of Christ are saved by believing the fulfillment of the gospel.

The promise of the gospel was fulfilled by Jesus Christ. When Paul refers to Jesus as the fulfillment, he has in mind both the divine-human nature of Christ, as well as the work that he accomplished and the position that he gained as the Messiah. He says that the gospel promise was about God's Son, who would be born as a descendant of David. Thus the promise was that there would be an incarnation of deity. He was born into the royal lineage of David, and he was vindicated and exalted to the highest place when God raised him from the dead. Jesus Christ was what God promised, and Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the promise. Through him we have received righteousness, and through him we have received power from God to declare the way of salvation.

The preaching of the gospel is often wrongly understood and characterized. We do not beg people to give God a chance or to try Jesus, but we tell them that Jesus Christ is the only way that God has provided for anyone to receive salvation, and that it is not even up to them to receive Jesus, but it is up to God to enable and to cause them to receive. Thus to God belongs all power, to him belongs all grace, and to him belongs all the glory. To preach the gospel is to summon those that God has chosen to become obedient to the Christian

faith, that is, to agree to its doctrines and to submit to its demands. As Jesus said in the Great Commission, it is to teach the nations to obey everything that he commanded.

The Christian faith requires people to believe its doctrines. They must change their thoughts and opinions. They must abandon their science, their philosophy, and their religion, because non-Christian science, philosophy, and religion are always false and foolish, and they are always against God, reason, and righteousness. They must affirm the truth instead, and affirm that only the Christian faith is correct and rational. And the Christian faith requires people to follow the lifestyle that it teaches. They must change their actions and habits. If this means that they must denounce their cultures and customs, and to walk away from their heritage, then they must do it with joy and relish. Anyone who looks back is not worthy to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

2. The Fellowship of the Gospel

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles. I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome. (Romans 1:8-15)

One writer remarks that when a man is driven by a strong sense of mission, he could become unsociable and offer his time only to those who share his vision or in some way contribute to his goals. He claims that Paul is not like this because this passage shows his interest in people. However, this passage shows that he is exactly like this, or at least it provides no basis to claim that he is not like this. And it does not demonstrate that he has any interest in people apart from their relation to the gospel, whether or not he has such an interest.

Perhaps he might socialize with people about music, sports, and other things, but we have no basis to assert this, since in the Bible he is focused on the doctrines of the faith and the work of the gospel, and he relates to people only in this context. Sometimes people wish to portray him as a sports fanatic because he draws analogies from running and wrestling. This is perhaps to justify their own indulgence in extra-biblical interests and activities, but the suggestion is unwarranted. I have used chess analogies more than a few times in my teachings, but I seldom play chess. Paul could have some understanding about sports, the military, and so on, and at times this would help him make a point about the Christian life, but it does not follow that he has a special interest in them.

As I have elsewhere explained and defended, I oppose the idea that all things are religious, and that there is to be no distinction between the sacred and the secular, but rather, there is often a sharp distinction between the two. The idea that there is no distinction was invented by men, based on a misuse of certain biblical verses. It has been used to oppose the Catholic conception of the priesthood and of sanctification, which indeed ought to be opposed, but not like this. And since then it has also been used to excuse distractions and indulgences.

Although Paul might indeed have some non-religious interests, which in themselves are not necessarily wrong, there is no indication of this in Scripture. Of course he knows how to make tents, but how much he enjoys it is another question. Instead, the Bible shows that

he is singularly concerned about the Lord Jesus Christ, the spread of the Christian faith, and the spiritual welfare of people. Even if he has other interests, they are overshadowed by his obsession with true religion, or the faith of Jesus Christ.

Our passage does not indicate that he is interested in people as such, or that he is interested in people apart from their spiritual condition or apart from the progress of the gospel. He does not say that he wishes to see his readers so that they can attend a wrestling match or watch some criminals crucified. Instead, he writes that he wants to visit his readers so that they may build up one another in the faith, and so that he may further the work of the gospel.

As those who have been set apart to serve the Lord Jesus, our chief concern is for the gospel to advance, and for it to be honored and obeyed. This offers us a God-centered perspective on life, and it enables us to endure opposition, and to rise above envy, competition, and selfish posturing in the work of the gospel.

Many people want you to think that they care only about the honor of Christ, but they are constantly positioning themselves to receive honor from men and to further their career in the church. They work hard to gain the attention of revered leaders, use all kinds of methods, including flattery, slander, exchanging favors, echoing the accepted theology, and uniting against common enemies, in order to insinuate themselves into circles of influence among believers. They are not ambitious for the gospel, but they are ambitious for themselves in the gospel business, in the gospel industry.

On the other hand, when we are truly concerned about the progress of the gospel in the world, this is what drives our plans, our prayers, and how we relate to other people. It establishes right priorities and enables us to live productive and purposeful lives. And, unlike those who think that it is a matter of love or necessity to be sociable for its own sake, when their concern is in fact their own amusement and sense of security and community, the same drive that propels us to preach the gospel, to love people, and to save soul also enables us to shake off worthless people, and useless activities and amusements.

Peter writes that God manifests his manifold grace through the gifts that he has given to his people. Paul, although he probably has much more to offer the Romans than the Romans have to offer him, acknowledges this and says that they could build up each other's faith. All good things come from God, but we can receive from God through one another.

This is not limited to what can be done in person. Nowadays we can enrich one another in ways that were impossible or that were very costly in the past. Letters were expensive to produce and to deliver, so they were often brief, and they were slow. But with our modern technology and delivery system, our letters are easy to produce and the delivery is much faster. Of course, electronic mail is even more speedy and convenient, and can be sent and received on pocket-sized devices. Printed materials like books and magazines are relatively inexpensive, and many are available in electronic form. Even audio and video recordings can be transmitted in an instant. The principle of mutual enrichment remains the same, but the methods have multiplied.

There are those who think that it is always better for ministry to happen in person, but the Bible does not necessarily endorse this. For example, not even a verse like 2 John 12 constitutes the assertion of a fixed principle; instead, it might be nothing more than an expression of a practical need given deficient methods of communication. Perhaps the need expressed by the verse could be more than satisfied by audio and video calls, so that the believers could indeed speak to one another "face to face." And if the need could not be always satisfied this way, perhaps it could be satisfied most of the time, or at least some of the time. Moreover, it is unclear that to communicate by "paper and ink" appears insufficient in this case because John has in mind an inherent and unavoidable deficiency, or whether a faster and more convenient method of writing such as electronic mail would have removed part of, most of, or even all of the frustration. In any case, although the Bible acknowledges the importance of community and personal contact, we must not infer more from it than it permits, and then codify the result into an inflexible tradition that becomes a test of orthodoxy and piety, because to do this would be to follow the pattern of the Pharisees and the religious hypocrites.

It is a common assertion that we "need" each other in the sense that our ministry to one another is necessary to our spiritual growth, and even our spiritual survival. Again, the Bible does not teach this. It may teach that, given certain assumptions, our ministry to one another is a good thing, and that under God's plan it may be necessary for some individuals in certain spiritual conditions. But the Bible does not teach that it is necessary for our spiritual survival as a matter of principle, as if to say that it is impossible for anyone to stand firm in the faith and to thrive as a believer if he has no one but Jesus Christ. Such a teaching would require either the assumption that Jesus Christ is insufficient for our spiritual strength and nourishment, or the assumption that his sufficiency is only provided through the ministry of other believers. Neither assumption is taught anywhere in Scripture. On the other hand, the Bible teaches a Christian's direct access to Christ without the need to obtain permission or assistance from believers, preachers, churches, or denominations. He is our chief shepherd, and he is more than sufficient.

Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 12 is often cited to assert that we "need" one another; however, there the topic is not the spiritual survival or the spiritual growth of individuals, but the health of the church as an organization. One man cannot fulfill every role in a church, and one gift cannot satisfy every need in a church. A believer with the gift of prophecy cannot say to one who has the gift of healing, "I do not need you," because in the church the two gifts perform different functions. And if the whole church consists of people only with the gift of prophecy, then where is the healing? So in this sense the one with the gift of prophecy needs the one who has the gift of healing.

However, this teaching has nothing to do with whether a Christian can survive as a believer or thrive in his individual ministry. As a Christian, he has direct access to God from whom he can receive all the benefits of the gifts of prophecy and of healing. Then, there is no indication that the person who prophesies cannot do it, or that he cannot do it as effectively, without help from the person who has the gift of healing. Accordingly, Paul does not say that he would fall apart and abandon the Christian faith if he could not benefit from the

Roman Christians. There is no hint that he would be seriously impoverished if they could never meet. As for the Roman Christians, their faith is already known "all over the world" without help from this apostle.

Paul says only that he desires to meet so that they could enrich each other, so as to make a good thing even better. We can agree with this. On the other hand, how much better is another question. We can agree that mutual encouragement among believers can make a good thing even better only if we assume that we are dealing with true and dedicated believers, those who are biblical in their theology, and growing in their knowledge, reverence, and boldness for the faith.

One of the most misused teachings from Proverbs is that "in the multitude of counsellors there is safety." Ironically, the wise advice has been used in such a stupid way that it has probably done more to harm believers than it has helped them. In the context of Proverbs, this cannot be referring to just any kind of counselors. If the book insists that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and that we should heed the words of God, outside of which we will find only foolishness and disappointment, is it suddenly going to make us listen to non-Christian counselors, atheist counselors, or professing believers who really do not know what they are talking about? That is not wise. No, it is assumed that these are faithful and knowledgeable counselors who have no ulterior motives. That is, the verse refers to counselors that are extremely rare.

People will often misuse this teaching to manipulate you into taking their advice, and most of the time you will find that these are very stupid people who are trying to impose their very stupid ideas on you. In any case, if there is a multitude of counselors, it is likely that not all of them will agree, and by this fact alone we know that the teaching is an encouragement to seek and hear various *true* perspectives and to gather *good* information, and not a command to give your time to every idiot or to follow every suggestion. It is impossible to follow every advice, and often it is a bad idea to follow any of your counselors. All of them might be wrong.

When people misuse one such verse here, and then another there, and then several hundred more, their idea of what community can do or is supposed to do becomes further and further from what the Bible teaches. Do not trust people who are not serious and competent in the Christian faith. It is false humility and extreme folly to think that we should force ourselves to become submissive to every kind of counsel. Unless the spiritual and theological climate becomes drastically better than it is at this time, most of the counsel that you will encounter will more likely than not be bad counsel. And in the multitude of stupid, selfish, and unbelieving counselors, there is much danger and vexation of spirit.

3. The Power of Salvation

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." (Romans 1:16-17)

The Christian faith is power. It works inseparably with God's omnipotence to advance his purposes. It has the ability to achieve, to dominate, to overcome, to destroy and to build. It has the power to save and to damn. Paul writes that it is the aroma of life to those who welcome it, but the same message that is good news to God's chosen ones is a stench of death to those who reject it and oppose it. In addition to the condemnation that unbelievers stand under, the message about Jesus Christ is another witness against their wickedness, so that according to God's design it increases their punishment and suffering in hell.

The Christian religion is power. We must become accustomed to thinking of it this way. It is intelligent. It is important. It is influential. It summons God's chosen ones to faith and heaven, and it damns God's rejected ones to the pits of hell. It is the greatest power at work in the world. In fact, it is the only true power at work, because even those forces that oppose it are under God's direct control to serve its progress. The Christian religion is the only power that can pluck a man from the depths of hell, and to restore to him all that Adam had lost, and to grant him even that which Adam never had. No one other than Jesus Christ provides this, and no system other than the Christian religion possesses this power. In fact, all that is non-Christian resists this power.

The Christian message has the power to confer God's forgiveness and righteousness. It has the power to save all kinds of people – men and women from any country and any culture, from any social and economic and intellectual background, at any time in history. When God has chosen a person to believe in his Son, and he sends the gospel to this man, all his previous beliefs, assumptions, and commitments crumble to dust. If he resists, that resistance is ordained and controlled by God, and if he does not resist, that is also ordained and controlled by God. Then he finally believes, not because he possesses freedom to choose, but because God's appointed time for him to believe has come and God causes him to believe. Thus man is both not free and not coerced when he believes, because he so completely lacks freedom from God's power that when God wills it there is no place for coercion, not even the thought of resistance.

The gospel has the power to convince all kinds of non-Christians and seize them for the kingdom of Jesus Christ. It has the power to lift men from the superstition of science and from the abomination of idolatry.

We have often referred to the follies of science, and how irrational methods and assumptions pervade the entire enterprise, so that even when compared with the grossest

pagan religions and primitive cultures, it remains one of the most superstitious systems in existence.¹ The scientist hardens his heart. Against all reason he decides that he can discover the truth, even though we can demolish any scientific theory ever devised in a matter of seconds. He braces himself for the onslaughts of logic and the gospel. But when the Christian message comes in the power of the Holy Spirit, his superstition and his composure break down, and he hates himself for his credulity, for having believed that science could discover anything. Even though he sets himself against God, Scripture, and Reason, when these come with power, the scientist is reduced to nothing.

Likewise, a devout follower of a non-Christian religion hardens his heart, and he braces himself. He is determined to adhere to his heritage. If God wishes to damn him by this false religion, then according to what God causes him to think, he might not even consider alternatives, but would rather cling to his chariot to hell with an invincible tenacity, so that he remains unmoved by all truth and reason. But if God wishes to save him – and he saves only by Jesus Christ, through the Christian faith – then the man would happily spit in the face of his religion, his heritage, his ancestors and parents, and his prophets and teachers, in order to embrace the gospel.

This is the power of the Christian faith. Therefore, we are eager to preach the gospel even to scientists, to college professors, and to church leaders and biblical scholars (since many of them are false believers), and many others like them who are hardened in their hearts, and who are prejudiced against Christ in their ignorant and stupid minds. The Spirit of God can make even these people acknowledge their foolishness and their need to be taught the way of salvation. I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is power. It is power and wisdom and righteousness from God. I am not embarrassed of the Christian faith because it is better, wiser, stronger, superior in every way, and not only more true, but the only one that is true.

Why should we be embarrassed, when the Christian faith is the only hope for salvation? It is the only message, the only religion, or the only worldview that can do any good, that can save anyone, and that can teach any truth. It is the only true explanation for anything at all. The problem is that the rest of the world stands against God's truth, reason, and righteousness, and so non-Christians disagree with us and put pressure on us. They want to shame us into discarding it, or hiding it, or changing it into something else that is acceptable to them. They wish to neutralize the power of the gospel, because it is the only threat against their delusion and their way of life.

Why should we be embarrassed, when we hold the only truth and the only power? Why should we be ashamed, when non-Christians are the ones who are wrong, and ignorant, and irrational, and wicked? So what should we do? We will become even more bold and attack their beliefs and their lifestyles by the preaching of the gospel. We will make *them* ashamed of their science, their religion, and their heritage. We will make them embarrassed of their unbelief and their unrighteousness, so that the gospel of Jesus Christ may be honored, and so that some may awake to truth and righteousness, and be saved. Let us, therefore, take up the sword of the Spirit and thoroughly criticize and humiliate the non-Christians until

¹ See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions and Presuppositional Confrontations*, among others.

they have nothing to stand on. And then we will hold forth the only truth and power that can save them – the religion of Jesus Christ. God will enable us to do this by the power of his Spirit.

4. The Wrath of God Revealed

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:18-32)

Paul begins an argument in 1:18 that reaches a conclusion in 3:9. He writes, "What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin." He would conclude that both the Jews and the Gentiles are under sin, and that the Jews are not better than the Gentiles in this regard. As he says in the next verses, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who

understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (3:10-12).

Therefore all are guilty of sin, and subject to the wrath of God. And this means that all individuals without exception have a common need for salvation and for a righteousness that they cannot attain or produce by themselves. Since it is the purpose of the argument to reach this conclusion, it determines how we must interpret the statements that make up the argument. Whatever Paul says from 1:18 to 3:9, we realize that his general intent is to assert that all men are under sin and under the wrath of God.

Many people dislike the idea of divine wrath. Some of them would complain that the trait is unworthy of a perfect being. However, one could just as easily assert the same about divine love, or say that it is below such a mighty and transcendent being to have any concern with creation at all. But what is truly below him is men's senseless speculation. God reveals himself in the Bible as one who possesses both love and wrath. Of course, there are those who acknowledge that the Bible teaches about the wrath of God, and they despise him for it. So non-Christians attack the Christian faith for affirming such a God. As for Christians, they tend to struggle to explain it and find a place for it, and to justify the divine attribute, or even to excuse him, as if there is something wrong with him.

The trouble that people have with the wrath of God is rather irrational, and lame. No wonder God is annoyed. Even his people are embarrassed about it and feel forced to accept it, and they run through all kinds of philosophical arguments to explain why God must be like this, as if God himself is reluctant to be himself. Now, I can do that too, but why should I? Why should I go through the trouble, when there is really nothing wrong with the wrath of God and when there is no good objection against it? You are not the one to tell God what he should be. He tells you what he is and you will like it or else!

In fact, I find the wrath of God very right and appealing. Of course it would be a fearful thing to be the target of God's wrath, but as a Christian I understand that this is who he is, and I like it and praise him for it. And there is no reason to present it in such a vague and poetic way that nobody understands what it means. What is the wrath of God? If he disapproves of you because there is sin in your nature and lifestyle, then he is angry with you, and he is going to do things to hurt you and to torture you forever. This is the wrath of God. There is no sound argument against this, and there is nothing anyone can do to change it. Through Jesus Christ a person can attain peace with God and be rescued from this, but no one can change God's nature so as to nullify his terrifying plans against sinners who remain in his wrath.

God's wrath is directed at the non-Christians – he is angry with them and will do terrible things to hurt them and torture them – because they have turned from the true God and have invented alternatives for themselves. Although God is invisible, his creation is a constant reminder of his power, his wisdom, and his divine nature. This testimony does not point to just any kind of deity, but only to the Christian God, that is, the only God as he has been revealed in the Christian faith. We know this because Paul does not accuse sinners of failing to worship *something*, but of failing to worship *the* God that he worships, and that

is the Christian God, or God as presented in Christian theology. Thus God has made himself plain to people, so that his power and his nature have been clearly seen and understood.

The proper thing to do would be for men to admit what they know so as to acknowledge this God and to worship him. This would mean admitting that God is the creator and the ruler of creation, and that all men must obey his commandments. But because they are evil, men hate God and do not want to admit the truth about God or to obey the commands of God. So they deny reality and suppress the truth. They repress what they know about God in their minds. To help them do this, they band together to invent alternatives, and to focus their attention on other objects so as to worship them, and to produce stories and explanations to lie to themselves, such as the myths of pagan religions and the superstitions of science, so that they will not have to face the truth about God that lingers under the surface of their immediate consciousness. Then, when someone threatens to expose them, they become angry, hostile, and even violent.

God has testified about himself clearly, specifically, and effectively. He demonstrates his power, his wisdom, and his divine nature in creation, and he has made this plain to the minds of men. This means that there is no excuse for people to deny him or fail to worship him. But they do deny him and fail to worship him. There is a rebellion against the obvious. Therefore God's wrath is unleashed against them.

Nevertheless, God's wrath is not a mere reaction to the rebellion of men, as if their wickedness sprang from free will and then shaped God's thoughts and determined his plans. In another place Paul writes that "in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him" (1 Corinthians 1:21). In other words, God planned the whole thing. He testifies about himself through creation, and makes himself plain to the minds of men, but by his own arrangement he ensures that no one would arrive at true religion from his testimony in creation and in the human consciousness. He does this so that he would plunge all men into sin, and render all of them guilty, so that he may rescue his chosen ones to heaven and damn the reprobates to hell, and thus glorify himself through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Paul has this in mind and so he writes, "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge" (3:4). This is evidently his doctrine, because he adds that someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" It has been "slanderosly reported" that he says, "Let us do evil that good may result" (3:7-8). That is, he teaches a doctrine from which some have drawn this inference; however, he does not teach what has been inferred, and what has been inferred does not follow from the doctrine itself, so that it constitutes slander. But Paul indeed teaches that the wickedness of men has been divinely ordained and ensured so as to incur divine wrath and punishment, and thus "bring out God's righteousness more clearly" (3:5).

Even before God tortures non-Christians in hellfire forever, the wrath of God is displayed against them when he hands them over to false beliefs about reality, including science, false religions, and to various lusts and sins. A non-Christian worldview is not an

alternative to the Christian faith, but it is a punishment against the non-Christian. It continues to harden his heart, to increase his guilt, and to prevent him from meeting the true God. A false religion oppresses him with fearful tales, false gods, and powers that he cannot overcome. The stringent customs make him a slave to demons. The foolish and grotesque rituals make a clown out of him. As man struggles against this he tries to develop a view that is free from these trappings, and so he invents scientific explanations that are no less irrational than the worst pagan religions. Now he is an animal, or nothing more than a combination of molecules. Now the superstitions of science enslaves him. And he is still a clown.

God laughs at them. You refuse to worship the true God and turn to idols? Then have more idols. Serve them harder. Suffer under them in this life, and hellfire in the life to come. You wish to explain away God and deny reality by your science? Then have more science. Make up more ridiculous theories. And in the process make yourself even more inhuman, even more inferior, and even more abased and depraved. Meanwhile, all your sins are still being counted. Each time a non-Christian bows to an idol, each time a Catholic looks to an image of Mary, each time a professor teaches evolution, or each time a student compromises with a godless cosmology, God adds it to his list of transgressions and he will pay him back with fire and brimstone.

The non-Christian scoffs at God's judgment, and he does this because God makes him, so that God may cause him to suffer even more in hell, and so that God's righteousness will become even more obvious. Indeed, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). If God has it in for a man, the man is done for. Unless God decides to save the man, his wrath and judgment will plague him all the days of his life, and increase manifold forever in the life to come. Yet the man still despises God and considers himself very clever. He thinks he will win. This is the life of a man without the grace of Jesus Christ. So Paul observes that non-Christians think that they are smart, but they are stupid (1:22).

Then, according to Paul, the prevalence of homosexuals is at the same time a manifestation of men's overflowing wickedness and God's judgment upon it. God created the reprobates for filth (9:21), and since they enjoy the filth and wallow in it, God causes them to have more filth; meanwhile, God continues to count their sins and their condemnation multiplies. Among other purposes, God uses the reprobates to shock and disgust his chosen ones, so that they may take warning and be inspired to grow in holiness.

Paul selects homosexuality as one chief indication of human depravity and divine judgment, explaining God's design for it. Nevertheless, the apostle lists many other sins and indications of human depravity and divine judgment. They include greed, gossip, slander, deceit, malice, murder, and many others. A society defined by these characteristics is already in ruins, and only the gospel of Jesus Christ can save it. If God chooses not to enable the people to believe, then all this constitutes a death sentence upon them.

How should we think about non-Christians? And what should we say about them? Paul says that they are stupid people (v. 22), and that they are "senseless, faithless, heartless,

ruthless" (v. 31). This is what all men are like when they are not Christians, and when they do not have faith in Jesus Christ.

5. Condemned – With or Without Law

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.

God "will give to each person according to what he has done." To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism.

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares. (Romans 2:1-16)

Paul continues his argument in order to reach the conclusion that all men and women are under sin and subject to the wrath of God, and that when it comes to this the Jews are not in a better position than the Gentiles. Although the argument is detailed, it is easy to follow his reasoning. To make the passage more manageable, we will loosely divide it into three sections – v. 1-5, 6-11, and 12-16. In the process, v. 17-29 will also become clear.

After David committed adultery with a woman and arranged to have her husband killed, Nathan the prophet told him a story about a rich man who took a poor man's lamb and slaughtered it for his own guest. David was outraged and declared the such a man deserved to die. But Nathan said to David, "You are the man!" Nathan never said that the rich man did not deserve to die, or that David should not have passed judgment, or that David's judgment was wrong; rather, for the prophet to make his point, he depended on the fact that David would pass judgment and on the rightness of David's judgment. Thus the problem

was not that David passed judgment on the rich man or the judgment that the man deserved to die, but the problem was that the king did not pass the same judgment on himself.

Paul now writes as if to address a debate partner, a Jew who passes judgment on those who commit the sins condemned by the law, such as idolatry, homosexuality, and others listed in Romans 1. He says the one who passes judgment has "no excuse," but not because he passes judgment. The assertion that he has "no excuse" depends on the fact that this man passes judgment and that his judgment is correct. Rather, Paul means that this man does the same things that he judges others for doing, and he has no excuse for doing these same things, because his passing judgment on others shows that he is aware that these things are wrong and sinful. But he does them anyway, and thus he has no excuse.

It is important to grasp this. If we assume that the Bible does not take a judgmental stance, then we will miss the point of Romans 1-3. This is one of the most judgmental sections in all of Scripture, because it condemns *everybody*, and anybody who is anybody. These beginning verses of Romans 2 are intended to include more people under condemnation, namely, those who correctly use the law to condemn others. In fact, it condemns even those people who condemn judgmental people, those who take a judgmental attitude toward those with a judgmental attitude. When they judge those who judge others, they do what they condemn others for doing, and so they condemn themselves as well, and further illustrates the apostle's argument.

Paul affirms that the man who condemns people for doing the things listed in Romans 1 is right. He writes, "Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth." Thus in condemning them, this man merely agrees with God. And even if the man does not condemn them, God himself condemns them and punishes them. Again, the problem is not that he condemns people for their idolatry, homosexuality, greed, malice, and other sins, but it is in the fact that he does not condemn himself for doing the same things. So at this stage of the argument, now that the others are already shown to be under condemnation, Paul shows that this man who correctly condemns others is also under the same condemnation.

Although the argument applies to any man that fits the accusation, Paul clearly has the Jew in mind. He makes this explicit in verse 17 and writes, "Now you, if you call yourself a Jew... You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?" (v. 17, 23). This is in keeping with his intention to show that on this matter the Jew does not stand in a superior position to the Gentile (3:9). So he writes, "So when you...do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed."

Christians are often accused of hypocrisy. Do Christians make correct judgments about people's sins, but then do some of the same things themselves? Of course! But this just illustrates the point that Paul is making, that in ourselves we are awful people, and worthy of damnation. The difference with true Christians, and not those who merely pretend, is that we will condemn ourselves as well, and repent of our sins. We admit that in ourselves

we would be just like the non-Christians – idolatrous, driven by strange lusts, and filled with greed and malice. We have no righteousness of our own, but Jesus Christ saves us with his righteousness, and even though we still stumble in many ways, his Spirit works within us and makes us better and better.

The next section (v. 6-11) might seem slightly strange at first, but the difficulty is minimal if we keep in mind the purpose of his argument. Paul cannot be suggesting that eternal life can be attained by doing good, and "good" here is defined by the law, because soon after this he would conclude, "There is no one who does good, not even one" (3:12) and "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin" (3:20). He is not contradicting himself or working against his own purpose.

He begins the section by stating that God "will give to each person according to what he has done" (v. 6), and elaborates on this so as to reach the conclusion, "For God does not show favoritism" (v. 11). So this falls under his general purpose to show that all are under condemnation, and that the Jews are not better off than the Gentiles. This corresponds to verse 13, where he says, "For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous." It is not enough to have the law or to hear the law, but one must obey the law for it to show him righteous; otherwise, the law would expose him as a sinner, worthy to be damned.

But do the Jews obey the law? No, they break the law, and they break the law so regularly and thoroughly that Paul says, "As it is written, 'God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you'" (v. 24). God does not show favoritism to the Jews in this regard just because they are Jews. Just as he condemns the Gentiles for their idolatry, homosexuality, greed, malice, murder, and so on, he condemns the Jews for doing these things as well. Therefore, just having the law does not save the Jews, because they hear it but do not obey it. On the other hand, the Gentiles both do not hear it and do not obey it. Thus the Jews and the Gentiles come under the same condemnation. The apostle also applies this line of thinking to circumcision (2:25-27).

In any case, as Paul explains in the third section (v. 12-16), the Gentiles do have the law in a sense, or *a law*. Although they do not have the law as a "written code" (v. 27), their behavior seems to suggest a vague awareness of right and wrong, and a vague awareness of how right and wrong are defined by the law, so as to imply that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts as part of their constitution as human persons.

This does not necessarily mean that they possess the full moral code in their hearts, and still less does it mean that they follow it. Further, they do not always agree on the exact set of moral principles, so that one culture may consider it wrong to commit adultery and murder, but consider it acceptable to steal, and another culture may consider it wrong to steal, but acceptable to commit adultery and murder. Nevertheless, it remains that some of them consider it wrong to murder, and some of the consider it wrong to steal, and their thinking about these things sometimes superficially coincide with the law. And this shows

that they have an instinctive albeit ambiguous awareness of right and wrong, and the moral principles that define right and wrong.

It is important to prevent misunderstanding. Paul does not say that by instinct the Gentiles could know God, or achieve righteousness, or attain salvation. He has already stated that non-Christians suppress their knowledge of God and turn to idols and fables, and that although they know God's righteous decree that those who commit idolatry, homosexuality, and other sins deserve death, they not only continue to do these things but also approve of those who do them. The main purpose of Romans 1 and 2 is to reach the conclusion that all are under sin and subject to divine punishment. Therefore, he does not intend to say that the Gentiles can benefit from their innate knowledge of God and his moral laws.

Instead, his point is that although the Gentiles do not have a written code of worship and conduct as the Jews possess, they nevertheless have some awareness of its contents in their hearts, so that they are accountable to this just as the Jews are accountable to the written code. His intent is to condemn the Jews just as he condemns the Gentiles, and then condemn the Gentiles just as he condemns the Jews. So whether Jews or Gentiles, whether with or without the written code, those who consider it wrong to murder people still murder people, and those who consider it wrong to commit adultery still commit adultery. Even when Gentiles invent their own moral principles, and their own definitions of right and wrong, they still cannot live up to their ideals. Thus all men show that they are lawbreakers, and sinners subject to the wrath of God.

This is also the biblical answer regarding the fate of those who pass from this life without hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul writes, "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law." Those who have been exposed to the Bible will be condemned to hell for not believing and obeying the Bible, and those who have never been exposed to the Bible will be condemned to hell even without the Bible, because it remains evident that they are sinners and lawbreakers. This is the result of Paul's argument of comprehensive condemnation. How I rejoice that all men are condemned! "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge" (3:4). I approve every step of God's plan, and I rejoice because by the condemnation of all sinners God will show forth his righteousness and make his justice evident.

A man is condemned because he is a sinner, both by birth and by transgression. It takes a very stupid and perverse person to ask, "What happens to those who have never heard the gospel?" Same as always. No man is saved by *not* hearing the gospel. The fact that God has sent forth salvation in Jesus Christ does not somehow mean that all men who do not hear it are saved! Those who hear it and believe it will be saved. Those who do not hear it or do not believe it are condemned by the sins that have always condemned them. What is the conclusion of the matter? "Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin" (3:9). It makes no difference whether a person is a non-Christian Jew or a non-Christian Gentile – God will send him to hell and torture him forever.

6. Justified – Apart from the Law

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law. (Romans 3:20-31)

When it comes to having righteousness before God, all non-Christians are damned. God will damn the non-Christian Jews to hell just as he will damn the non-Christian Gentiles to hell. On this issue, there is no difference between the Jews and the Gentiles. The Jews are not saved just because they have the law. Rather, the law is a written code that provides a clearer knowledge and definition of right and wrong, and therefore causes a greater consciousness of sin.

However, the law itself talks about a righteousness that comes apart from the law, and that comes from God as a gift, which he delivers through faith in Jesus Christ. Since the law itself testifies of this, the Jew who does not become a Christian has ejected himself completely from the Bible's religion. He is not even a believer in the law or the Old Testament. You either take all of the Bible's religion, or you take none of it. You either have Jesus Christ, or you have hellfire. These are the only two possibilities.

Just as there is no difference when it comes to damnation, there is no difference when it comes to justification. God will not save a Jew more readily or on different terms than he would a non-Jew. But God will save all Christians, all who have believed in Jesus Christ for righteousness. It is strange that we must still press this point because even some who claim to be Christians consider the Jews as spiritually superior in some sense, just because they are Jews. This is not only unwarranted, but it is a denial of the apostle's doctrine that "there is no difference," and that spiritual fitness is attained only as a gift through Jesus Christ.

The same applies to other categories of people. As Paul writes in Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28-29). The doctrine is often used to abolish distinctions within society, but that is an abuse. If you are a man or a woman, you do not suddenly lose your gender when you become a Christian, whether in your physical makeup or in your place in society. The male is still to lead where God tells him to lead, and the woman is still to submit where God tells her to submit. It is a travesty to use a doctrine on the grace of Jesus Christ to wiggle out of God's commandments concerning the structure of human relationships. Rather, the teaching is that a man is not more readily saved or damned just because he is a man. And a woman is just as readily saved or damned as any man. But whether one is a man or a woman, slave or free, Jew or Gentile, he or she is saved when God causes this person to have faith in Jesus Christ.

God sent Jesus Christ as a sacrifice, to die and to make atonement for sinners. Paul writes, "He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished." As Hebrews 10:11 says, "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins." The priesthood and the sacrifices in the Old Testament could not take away sins, for the priests themselves were sinners and needed forgiveness, and "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). Thus these were only figures of the priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But Christ had not arrived, so the Old Testament believers relied on the promise that he would come and take away sins. God counted them as righteous and did not condemn them to hell – thus their sins were "left...unpunished" – but this means that in order to uphold justice, Jesus Christ eventually would have to come in order to take away sins, sins that were not punished in these people on account of the promise that he would come. And then, God did send him at the appointed time.

This is a matter of justice because in order to satisfy his own standard of justice God must punish all sins, but he wishes to save his chosen ones, and so he punished their sins in the impeccable and imperishable Jesus Christ. He makes Christ the champion of all his chosen ones and joins them to him by faith. Those who were saved from sins before he arrived believed on the promise that he would come and make atonement for them, and those who are saved after he has arrived believe on the reality that he has come and has made atonement for them.

The Jews claimed that they revered the law, but they despised it, and made up rules to work around it. Jesus said to them, "Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition" (Matthew 15:6). On the other hand, God does not make a mockery of his own law; rather, the law itself points to salvation through Jesus Christ, and in order to both uphold the law and save his people, God sent his Son to die for sinners. Both the promise and the justice of the law found its fulfillment in Jesus. He became and performed all that it required, and the punishment of the law was exacted on him. Therefore, the way of faith is the only way that honors the law, and Christians are the only people who respect the law.

One commentator remarks that faith is no basis for boasting because "in the last analysis" it is a gift of God. But there is no reason to save it for last, or to suggest that it takes some digging to discover that faith is a gift. Paul calls it a gift in Ephesians 2:8. And Jesus told the people, "You do not believe because you are not my sheep" (John 10:26), not as if they had a free will to decide, but they believed or disbelieved according to what God has made them. So the Lord added, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him" (John 6:65). Faith is a gift in the first analysis.

So Paul is not suggesting that instead of attaining salvation by "doing" the law, you should attain salvation by "doing" faith, because faith is not something that we "do" at all, but it is something that God produces in us by his decision and his ability. Paul stresses faith as something in contrast to law, just as one could stress God or Christ in contrast to man or self. He often refers to faith instead of God as the contrast to works because he is speaking of the way to righteousness from the perspective of our consciousness. He is speaking of our perspective, and faith, even though it is a work of God, is a work of God on our consciousness (unlike, for example, the divine decree to save us). Thus when it comes to works, the contrast is faith, but when it comes to man, the contrast is God (and his attributes, such as his will, power, wisdom, righteousness, grace, and so on). So there is work versus faith, but not man versus faith; rather, it is man versus God. Therefore, although we are so conscious of our faith, that we so definitely believe on Jesus Christ and lay hold of him to save us, it is not something that we produce or that is meritorious, and so faith does not lead to boasting.

There is only one God, and he is God over all. What follows from this when it comes to religious unity and diversity? He is the God of the Jews and the God of Gentiles, and so he has the power to condemn them all, and he has named all of them as lawbreakers, subject to everlasting damnation. A man cannot take refuge in a non-Christian religion and consider himself exempt from the wrath of the Christian God, the only God, because all of reality is under his jurisdiction.

As for salvation, Paul writes, "There is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith." There are those who imagine that because there is only one God, then all the different religions represent different ways of reaching the same God. Thus in apparent diversity, there is an essential unity. The Bible contradicts this idiotic fantasy, and teaches the opposite. That is, because there is one God, there is only one way to reach this God. There is only one redeemer and sacrifice for Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, and all other kinds of people. They can be saved only through one faith, the faith that believes Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who suffered death for the sins of his chosen ones, and who rose from the dead and ascended to the highest place at the right hand of God.

7. In the Footsteps of Faith

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God. What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."

Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Romans 4:1-12)

Abraham is a central figure to those who follow the biblical religion. He is the great patriarch. Paul calls him "our forefather." A doctrinal argument based on Abraham ought to carry much force, and thus the apostle refers to him to advance and to illustrate his doctrine of justification.

When we consider any prominent biblical character other than Jesus Christ, we understand that the individual does not attain greatness because of his own works or merits, but because of the sovereign kindness of God. That is, God decides to extend kindness to the man for reasons that are within God himself – in his own virtues, plans, and wishes – and not within the man. We should never think that God chooses a person because the man possesses this or that quality, or because the man has performed such and such a good deed. No, if God wishes to find a certain quality in a man, he would produce it in the man, and if he wishes for him to perform a certain deed, he would cause the man to do it. The man himself counts for nothing.

Abraham did not obtain righteousness by his works, but righteousness was credited to him as he believed the promise of God. Although he was old and childless, he was told that he would become the father of nations, and that his offspring would be numerous like the stars. God enabled Abraham to believe this, and even though he was not the first to have faith, he became a prototype or pattern of those who would also receive the gift of faith.

It is important to grasp not only the fact that righteousness came to him through faith in the promise, but since the promise itself has to do with our justification, it is also important to understand the meaning of this promise, as in what it was that God promised Abraham. The true fulfillment of the promise has never been about natural descendents, although the fulfillment would entail the development of a nation of natural descendents. Rather, the promise has always been about the increase of spiritual descendents through the Son of Promise – typified by Isaac, and fulfilled by Jesus Christ. As Paul said to the Galatians, "Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Galatians 3:6-9).

Abraham knew this, and so Jesus said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). He not only anticipated it, but as a prophet, he "saw" it as well. And of course, he rejoiced not because he foresaw some random fellow, but he appreciated the man's significance. In other words, Abraham was very informed and "Christian" in his theology, and in his grasp of God's promise. His understanding of it was what we would call the gospel of Jesus Christ: "God...announced the gospel in advance to Abraham." Thus when he believed in God's promise, he believed it with the Christian meaning in mind. This means that Abraham was a Christian, and this was the basis of his justification.

He was before Moses, so that he was not justified under the law or by the law. Paul's argument in his letter to the Galatians is that "The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise" (Galatians 3:17). God rescued the Israelites from Egypt on the basis of his promise to Abraham in the first place, and the law did not then nullify this. But it was added to regulate the people until the Son of the promise would arrive and to increase their guilt so as to drive them *away* from striving for the righteousness of works to the righteousness that comes by faith in the Son. The whole scheme, in fact, is rather simple and obvious.

Now if the promise is about faith and not blood, then those who have the blood but not the faith are bastards. So when the Jews insisted that Abraham was their father, Jesus answered, "If you were Abraham's children...then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things" (John 8:39-40). The Jews were thinking about their bloodline, as if that was the pivotal issue, but Jesus referred to the spiritual traits, because that had always been what the promise was about. By this standard, the Jews were not the children of Abraham. Jesus said that they were children of the devil (John 8:44).

David is another significant figure in the biblical faith. God installed him as a king and established his royal line, and he would become the human ancestor of the Messiah. God's promises to David built upon the earlier promises to Abraham, which built upon the original promise he made in Genesis, that the woman's offspring would crush the serpent. All the promises were in fact made about Jesus Christ, and were fulfilled in him and by him.

Just as Abraham saw and believed in Jesus, David also saw him and became a follower of the Christian faith. As he saw God speak to Jesus, he said, "The Lord said to my Lord." Thus he understood that although the Christ would be his natural descendent according to the human nature, this same Christ would also be Lord over him according to the divine nature. David knew that the Messiah would be the incarnation of God, and so he acknowledged him as Lord.

David knew what it was to sin. He exploited his position as king to commit adultery with a woman, and after she became pregnant, he arranged to have her husband killed in battle by ordering his comrades to trick him and to abandon him. For a time he did not repent, but then a prophet came and told him a story about a rich man who took a poor man's only treasure. The king pronounced a death sentence on the rich man, but the prophet declared, "You are the man!" Then David repented, and the prophet relayed to him God's forgiveness, although some consequences were still forthcoming.

You exclaim, "Then he was not a good man, was he?" In accordance to God's decree and control, he often behaved admirably, but his failures were spectacular. By God's wisdom and design, perfection would not arrive until Jesus of Nazareth. All of history intends to make this point clear, or as Jesus said, "No one is good – except God alone." Even Abraham, Moses, and David were sinners, and would have been doomed to an everlasting hell if not for the grace and power of Jesus Christ, which were extended to them through faith even before he arrived in human form.

People who proclaim the goodness of all men do not know what they are saying. Their idea of good is so evil that even David would have been declared good, although he was an adulterer and a murderer. If this is the idea of "good," then let us not insult Jesus by calling him that. True goodness is perfection. It is not only a passive sinlessness, but a positive excellence. By this standard, God alone is good. Therefore, we should either avoid calling Jesus "good" as we would casually call others the same, or we must acknowledge that he is God.

David also knew what it was to receive forgiveness. He said, "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him." Just as Abraham did not obtain his righteousness by works, David did not make up for his sins by his works. A man can never make up for his sins. All must depend on God and not on the sinner, and a sinner is saved when God chooses to forgive him, and when he decides not to count his sins against him.

When the non-Christian man enjoys fullness and comfort, he thinks that he has earned his station in life. But when he suffers he does not think that he has earned it – he complains that he does not deserve it. When his sins are not repaid with immediate calamity, he thinks that he is lucky or fortunate to get away with things. But the follower of God has entered into a different kind of life, a superior level of existence and perception. He does not say, "I am fortunate that this happened" or "Unfortunately, that happened to me." He knows that it is God who does all things, and he rejects the pagan ideas of freedom and desert, and of chance and fortune.

The Christian man is not fortunate – he is blessed. He lives in a state of peace and wellness and joy because of God's kindness toward him through Jesus Christ. He does not get away with sin, but God himself paid the price with his Son's life, and delivered this benefit to him through faith. Thus his sins are not counted against him, just as the righteousness of Christ is counted as his righteousness. Truly blessed is the man on whom God effects this salvation.

As for circumcision, God commanded it for Abraham, but it was not circumcision that justified him. Righteousness was credited to him before he was circumcised, and circumcision was nothing more than a sign and seal for the righteousness that he already possessed apart from circumcision. Therefore, Abraham is the "father" of the uncircumcised who receive righteousness through faith and who remain uncircumcised after they have received righteousness through faith. And he is the "father" of those who are circumcised only if they "walk in the footsteps of faith" of him who received righteousness without circumcision.

This doctrine is a stern rebuke against those who would attribute an inordinate significance to mere signs and seals, such as baptism and communion, when God himself has already credited righteousness and granted his Spirit to his chosen ones apart from them. Even though these signs and seals were commanded by God and ought to be applied, to elevate them to a level that God has never placed them, or to assign powers to them that God has never associated with them, is to commit an evil akin to the preaching of another gospel.

Now perhaps the Evangelicals and the Reformed cheer me on – perhaps not – but I am talking about them. The Jews and Catholics are so far from the kingdom of God that they need to be thoroughly converted. But are the Evangelicals and Reformed converted? They are not if they preach the signs and worship the seals rather than Jesus Christ. Give them no respect or attention, and laugh at their threats. I do not care what they call themselves, but if they are bored with a simple and sufficient faith or if they wish to interfere with mine, then I am kicking them out of my life. They can join the Catholics, and indeed some have. As Christians, false doctrines and traditions have no authority over us, and churches and denominations have no power in themselves. There is no need to obey them, nor can they force us to believe or to do anything – we have the freedom to live the truth in Christ.

Abraham and David were more Christian than most church members today. They believed in an almighty and sovereign God, and in his promise that he would spread the faith to many nations. They believed in the resurrection and in the incarnation of the Son of God.

They believed in Jesus Christ and were counted righteous apart from the signs and seals of this righteousness. How pathetic a person must be to follow Abraham's circumcision but not his faith, when his circumcision was a mere sign of his faith. This is the condition of many people, not only the Jews, but also many who call themselves Christians. The true heirs of Abraham are not those who have been circumcised, or those who have been baptized, or those who have participated in the Lord's Supper, but those who follow in his footsteps of faith, that is, his faith in Jesus Christ.

8. Peace with God

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:1-11)

Non-Christians consider it unhealthy to think so much about sin and condemnation. But if it is unhealthy at all, it is even more unhealthy to have the flames of hell burn your flesh and consume your soul. That is very unhealthy. Non-Christians persist in their wicked thoughts and deeds, "although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death" (Romans 1:32). Instead of retaining the knowledge of God (1:28), they suppress it (1:18). But it is not easy. They work hard to bury it under jobs, friends, amusements, alternate priorities, and false theories and religions, even their charity works. Some of them take lots of pills. Still, not too far beneath their immediate consciousness, the knowledge of God abides as a witness against them, and it rises up now and then to disturb their delusion. So some of them commit suicide. You ask, "Doesn't that make it worse, and send them straight to the place they wish to avoid in the first place?" Right, they are not very smart.

Even non-Christians admit that it is unhealthy to be in denial, but they are in denial about their denial. Jesus Christ changes this. When he comes to a man's life, he takes him by the hand and leads him to the mirror of God's word. There the man sees himself with all his filth and depravity, all his failures and shortcomings. He perceives that he is an awful and worthless person that could never pay his debt to God even if he were to burn forever in punishment. He is astonished at his plight and his helplessness. But soon despair gives way to hope, and power, and gladness as he learns that Jesus Christ has paid for his many sins, and that by clinging to him he is forever secure before God. Sometimes people say that the

life of Christ grants us joy, not happiness. But I am very happy. I am happy not because of pleasant circumstances and not because the demons are subject to me, but because my name is written in heaven.

Jesus takes us from the realm of delusion to the realm of reality, and the reality is that we were "powerless," "ungodly," even the "enemies" of God, and not worth dying for. Preachers sometimes attempt to bolster people's self-esteem by asserting that Christ's sacrifice proves the incalculable worth of all men and women, and that if we would learn to see ourselves as God sees us – as people so valuable that it was worth the suffering and death of the Son of God – then we would not wallow in defeat and self-pity.

However, Paul teaches an opposite doctrine. Using a human analogy, he notes that it is rare for a person to die even for a righteous man, although it is possible. And we were not righteous, but powerless, ungodly, and the enemies of God. It is for this reason that Christ's sacrifice is all the more magnified. Therefore, to assert that the sacrifice demonstrates our worth rather than his grace is to depreciate his work. He died for us not because of our worth, but because of his worth.

The apostle indirectly addresses the question of whether the elect, created and chosen for salvation, were ever God's enemies. As the chosen ones, it would seem that we were never *not* God's people. Jesus himself said that the sheep hear his voice and that some do not hear his voice because they are not his sheep. This means that people do not become God's sheep when they convert, but they convert because they are his sheep. Yet our text asserts that we were God's enemies. Like all biblical doctrines, there is in fact no difficulty.

Suppose I am a police officer and my son commits a crime. He becomes my enemy from the law's standpoint, but even then he remains my son. I would arrest him, and as I put the cuffs on him, he is still my son. For any other criminal, that would be the end of the matter for me. But because this one is my son, after I have arrested him I would hire a lawyer to defend him, and if possible, make restitution for his crimes. Either after he has been acquitted or spent his time in jail, I would watch over him, counsel him, and admonish him to ensure that he becomes a law-abiding man. So he transforms from a criminal to an upright citizen, and under the law, from my enemy to my friend, but all the time the defining factor in our relationship has been the fact that he is my son.

As with most analogies, this one is far from perfect, but if we can overlook the deficiencies, it illustrates that my relation to a person does not have to be dictated by the fact that he is my enemy under the law, if my relation to him is defined by a factor that holds a greater and prior significance. Likewise, a man can be God's enemy and God can still deal with him as he would a son if God himself has ordained a relationship with the person that holds a greater and eternal significance.

This is to say that the issue presents no problem under a supralapsarian scheme of the order of the eternal decrees. God decided in eternity that he would glorify himself by glorifying Jesus Christ. And he would glorify Jesus Christ by making him the savior and champion of a chosen group of men and women. (His role entails other achievements, but for the sake

of simplicity we will keep the description narrow and relevant to our context.) He would be their savior and champion by his sacrifice for them, so that through him they might be justified before God. In order for them to need such a salvation, God declared that they would be sinners, even enemies of God from the standpoint of his righteousness. And in order for this whole plan to begin, he would create the first man and effect his fall into sin.

Therefore, God conceived the chosen ones as his precious people in eternity before they were born in history, and they were created as sinners in history so that they could be redeemed and converted. On the other hand, God conceived the reprobates as targets of his wrath in eternity, and they were created as sinners in history so that they could be confirmed in sin and condemned to hell. Elements of this have been suggested in the previous chapters of Romans, and Paul would render certain points more explicit in Romans 9 and other places. As usual, there is no mystery in this doctrine, but only truth and clarity.²

Predestination does not do away with history, but it causes history to unfold according to God's plan. The order of historical events – being born in sin, hearing the gospel, converting to Christ and being justified in Christ – are meaningful because God makes them meaningful in relation to one another, so that even as some theologians speak of an eternal justification of the saints, it is still appropriate to refer to events in their historical order and relation.

God's eternal plan and its relation to how it unfolds in history are easy to grasp. All we have said is that God foreordains all events in eternity and then causes these events in the proper order in history. The doctrine itself is straightforward, but sometimes confusion arises when we talk about it. This could be the result of a failure to distinguish between God's decree and its execution, and also of equivocations in the use of terms such as justification and sanctification. The context, or whether we refer to these things from the standpoint of eternity or history, would determine how we speak about them.

Returning to the imagery that Jesus used, we derive a summary that can hardly be bettered. God's chosen ones have always been his sheep, but they have wandered off. Then the shepherd calls to them. The sheep know his voice, and the voice of a stranger they will not follow. If God had not made us his sheep in eternity, we would never have believed, but the reality in history is that we had wandered off and became lost. Jesus Christ is the shepherd of our souls. He recovered us and brought us into the Father's presence.

As for the enmity itself, here the emphasis falls on the objective antagonism between God and humanity because of God's righteousness and mankind's transgression. Of course, this determines the subjective attitudes as well. No doubt sinners harbor much animosity toward God, but it is not as if they can do anything to hurt him. The rage against God is ineffectual and self-destructive. The real issue is how these detestable creatures can be reconciled to a righteous God. Paul's diagnosis is that non-Christians are powerless, ungodly, without God and without hope in this world. But God, for the love of his name and his chosen ones, sent Jesus Christ and made atonement for our sins.

² See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*.

Non-Christians are hardened. Against all truth and reason, and in defiance of what they know in their hearts, they resist our message about God, sin, righteousness, and redemption. They do not want to think about these things. On the other hand, some people become aware that they are God's enemies even before we say much about this, and they are genuinely worried about it. And they quickly recognize that only the Christian faith possesses the solution. It is not because they are naturally better than those who remain obstinate, but it is because God has already started a work in their hearts, preparing them for faith. Thus whereas many refuse to come to Christ, some are ripe and ready for harvest. Their concern is not unhealthy, but instead it shows a psychological development that the others lack. Our minds mature when God leads us to think about eternal issues and the deeper things of life, cumulating in the conclusion that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the savior of all those who trust in him.

We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. All enmity has ended. We are saved from God's wrath, and there is no more war. This peace is the basis for further progress in the life of Christ. Those who are hardened do not grasp the significance of a right standing before God, and the new era that dawns on each individual as Christ puts an end to his conflict with heaven. Their spirits are dull. They do not admit their sins, and they do not care to have them forgiven by this God. In fact, they think that God himself should ask their forgiveness for a few things. The great gulf that Abraham spoke about exists now in our minds and in our lives. We are here with Christ, and they are over on the other side. God will bring some of them over to us, but the gulf will soon be impossible to cross.

A major aim in our preaching is to make people think about this: Do you have peace with God? You spend all your energy thinking about your career, your family, your love life, but do you have peace with God? We immediately run into a wall of intellectual retardation that human power cannot penetrate. But God will stir up his chosen ones, and he will work with our voice to do it. Then we tell them that God has made a way. You can have peace with God through Jesus Christ.

This is a solemn command, never a sincere offer. Believe, and live. Surrender, or perish. Take it, and have life and peace. Some theologians believe that it would make sense to preach the gospel to all men only when we reduce it to a sincere offer, in which even God who has foreordained the damnation of the reprobates sincerely offers to save them. Of course, this turns God into a schizophrenic, but theologians can euphemize any blasphemy by calling it a mystery.

But there is no mystery, because the gospel is not an offer but it is truth that all are obligated to believe. The inability of reprobates to believe does not excuse them from the command to believe. Sinners are unable to refrain from sin and still they are condemned for their sins, else all sinners would be justified from their sins precisely *because* they are sinners. Judgment has never been about moral ability, but it is about whether a transgression has occurred. If it has, then the offender is subject to punishment.

On the one hand, the theologians confess that God has immutably determined the exact identities of the reprobates, so that it is impossible for them to accept the gospel of Jesus

Christ and receive salvation. On the other hand, they insist that when the gospel is preached to the reprobates, God extends a sincere or well-meant offer of salvation to them, so that if they were to believe they would be saved. However, if God has immutably decreed the damnation of the reprobates, and if he extends a sincere or well-meant offer to them, then this must mean that in the preaching of the gospel God is saying, "If you can come up to heaven and pin me down, and stab me to death so that you can become God yourself (which is the only way to nullify the immutable decree), then you can believe the gospel of Christ and receive salvation." Of course, if the reprobates can do that, they would hardly need to believe the gospel.

Given God's immutable decree, if the gospel is a sincere offer to the reprobates, this is the only meaning possible. Is this what the theologians have in mind? Do they mean that in the preaching of the gospel, God extends a sincere and well-meant offer to kill him? Anyone who affirms the doctrine but does not teach it this way is either confused or dishonest, because this *must* be what the doctrine means. Since it is impossible to kill God, the preaching of the gospel then amounts to an obscene gesture against the reprobates: "Take this!" If this is what the sincere offer means, then I have no problem with it, because then the sincere offer becomes just a coward's way of referring to a hostile challenge.

Then, the doctrine often includes the idea that the gospel is a sincere offer in the sense that God genuinely wishes for the reprobates to believe the message and receive salvation, even though he has already expressed his wish to damn them in the eternal decree. This means that the theologians consider God to be both schizophrenic and suicidal, and that he sincerely wishes to be destroyed and cease to be God whenever the gospel is preached to reprobates. But God knows that it is impossible for him to be annihilated, and it would be futile to invite puny humans to attempt it; moreover, there is no biblical evidence to suggest that he so eagerly begs to be dethroned. Rather, he has declared that he will reign forever. What we can say for certain is that, once a theologian asserts such a schizophrenic and suicidal tendency in God, he ceases to be a Christian theologian, but has become a heretic and a blasphemer.

Think about this offer I made to a friend: "If you would pluck up Japan with your little finger, then uproot India with your big toe, make a ham and cheese sandwich with the two lands, fly to Mars with it, raise three million hippos on this Sandwichland, transport the hippos back on flaming chariots made of diamond, and travel back in time ten years with one of these fiery hippos and give it to my sister – and I do not have a sister – then I will give you ten dollars." What is the problem? It is a sincere offer, and very well-meant. I would really pay him ten dollars for the accomplishment. But am I being generous, or am I really mocking him and saying, "You can go die for all I care, but I am never giving you ten dollars"? In any case, the reprobates would do well to get in on this offer than to believe the theologians, since there is a much better chance of them doing what I asked than to overturn the immutable decree of God.

A common response to the doctrine of the sincere offer is that we will preach the gospel to all men because we cannot distinguish between the elect and the reprobates. Although this is true, it is also irrelevant. God's command to preach to all men is sufficient regardless of

whether we know why we should or whether we can distinguish between the elect and the reprobates. But we do know why. Supposing that it is possible to identify them, I would preach even to those whom I know to be reprobates. This is because the gospel is not only a summons to the chosen ones for salvation, but it is also a witness against the reprobates to further expose their wickedness, to increase their condemnation, and to multiply their punishment in hell. Thus Paul says that his preaching is the aroma of life to those who believe, but it is the stench of death to those who are damned. An intended function of the gospel is to make things worse for the reprobates.

Paul builds on justification and continues to our progress in the faith. The human personality does not develop in the right direction until we begin with Jesus Christ. Faith is a first sign of psychological health. Does faith make us dependent? But men are dependent. Either they leech on each other for assurance, for approval, for company, dragging one another down in the process, or they pretend not to care and harden themselves, smiling on the outside but rotting on the inside. Faith is an expression of intelligent dependence, because it relies on the power of God and not the weakness of men. Faith makes us holy and strong. Faith enables us to grow through adversity, and it fosters a hope that does not disappoint, because it is not based on the delusion of men but on the reality of God's love and his salvation through Jesus Christ.

9. The Great Contrast

But the gift is not like the trespass. (Romans 5:15)

A contrast is rarely a necessary teaching device, in that a thing is often knowable without perceiving its relations, its similarities, and its differences with something else. We must reject the assertion that things like love and goodness are without meaning, such that they cannot even exist, without hatred and wickedness. There are Christians who make this an integral assumption in their theology and a foundation for their theodicy. But since these qualities belong to the divine attributes, and since God is self-existing and independent, so that he can exist without Satan – indeed this must be so for him to be the creator of Satan, who had not eternally existed with God – this means that love and goodness, and many other things, can be in existence and be meaningful, so that they can be known and understood, without the existence of hatred and wickedness.

Rather, to assert that a contrast is necessary when it is not betrays an ignorance of the things spoken of, and an ignorance that is not overcome by the contrast. Thus to say that love is meaningless without hate shows that the person does not understand love, since love is not something that requires such a contrast to be understood. Instead, what the person thinks that he understands is not love itself, but the relation or contrast that supposedly exists between love and hate. And since he in fact does not understand love or hate, his understanding of this relation is also erroneous. In other words, he understands nothing.

That said, as long as we do not insist that a contrast is necessary when it is not, it can be a useful teaching device. When we place two different things close to each other for examination, their qualities often become clearer to our perception. Perhaps these qualities have always been there, but they are emphasized in our consciousness because of the contrast. Since it can sharpen our appreciation and precision concerning the things of God, it can be a helpful tool in theology. Then, some things can only exist because of other things. A trespass can only happen when there is a law (although there can be a law without a trespass). And there can be redemption only when there is transgression. Thus because God decided to reveal himself in redemption, he also decided that there would be transgression.

God is pleased to display his glory by making all of history a contrast between Adam and Christ. Paul refers to an aspect of this earlier in the letter, saying that "our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly." He does not deny this; in fact, it is a chief pillar in his doctrine. Rather, he denies the false inferences that because of this God would be unjust to punish sinners and that we should "do evil that good may result."

Theologians introduce difficulties into Christian doctrines when they lack the courage to affirm the Bible's teachings and their straightforward implications. Then from unbelief spawns traditions that receive the stamp of orthodoxy. But when we have respect for Christ

alone and shake off the shackles of men's inventions, we find that the truth brings no troublesome baggage with it. Its yoke is easy, and its burden is light. When we, spurning all the traditions and threats of men, boldly affirm what the Bible teaches and all that it implies, we discover instant intellectual perfection. Without effort, we have arrived at the pinnacle of wisdom.

This theology of courage and simplicity begins with the truth that God is sovereign over all things and that he has predetermined all things. This dissolves all mystery when it comes to the fall of Adam, because from this perspective Adam was doomed from the start. He was commanded not to eat from the tree with the promise of death if he transgressed. And then he transgressed. His role was to set up the depravity of humanity so as to prepare for the promise of redemption and the arrival of Jesus Christ. If one suggests that "if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly...God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us," then his understanding has not passed Romans 3, and he should revisit the apostle's argument again. Or rather, he can get over it instantly by acknowledging that God is God, that he is always right and just as long as he considers himself right and just.

In any case, while theologians imagine for Adam a promise to attain eternal life and lament that he failed to achieve such greatness for humanity with no thanks to any member of the Trinity, I am delighted that I do not forever owe Adam the heavenly bliss of an endless life with God. Instead, the promise was given to Jesus Christ and fulfilled by him. God himself came to attain eternal life for his people and to receive this honor. This was his design all along. Now the Messiah is the Lord of Glory, seated at the right hand of the Most High, and we owe him gratitude and worship forever.

The bare idea of transgression is plain. It is any disagreement with God, any rebellion against God, and any reluctance or failure to perform all his commands. There is nothing difficult to understand. Nevertheless, to overcome the dullness of sinful minds, God has ordained the effect of Adam's fall to run its course and to produce all its concrete implications. All the evils that we witness in the world – idolatry, murder, rape, adultery, homosexuality, dishonest businesses and corporations, theft and robbery, poverty and starvation, war and all kinds of violence, sickness and death – have resulted from the initial transgression of Adam.

A fundamental misunderstanding of redemption is that we save ourselves by the choices that God has set before us. However, just as it is not our choice to be included in Adam, it is not our choice to be included in Christ. Yet we do choose, because God causes that motion of the mind that we call choosing. A man does not choose to be in Adam, but his choice of unbelief is a manifestation of being in Adam. God has placed all of humanity under sin through Adam, and out of Adam he chooses some to be in Christ. The choice of faith, then, is a manifestation of being joined with Christ.

Many regard this an unjust arrangement, and even those who call themselves Christians are possessed with uneasiness, because they still think that the history of salvation is chiefly about them. But history is about a revelation of God and not the significance of men. This revelation unfolds through the centuries as God, by his sovereign choice, includes some in

Adam and causes them to continue in him, bearing fruit according to his nature, and as God includes some in Christ and causes them to continue in him, bearing fruit according to his nature. It is not about individuals choosing whether to join themselves to Adam or to Christ, but whether God joins them to Adam or to Christ in order to reveal his glory and his purpose.

As Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit." And he told the disciples, "Come with me. I will make you fishers of man." In other words, "Congratulations, I have chosen you. You are now removed from the realm of sin and death, and into the realm of life and glory. Follow me. You work for me now." It has never been a matter of our choice or freedom, but a matter of God rescuing us and drafting us into his service. This is the true picture of redemption.

Therefore, it is absurd to ask as some do, "Why does God give us only one way to salvation?" The answer is that history is not about you or saving you. To use another imagery, you ask, "Why can't we marry any husband we choose? Why doesn't God prepare more than one option for us?" It is because the history of salvation is not about God preparing a Christ for the bride, but it is about God preparing a bride for Christ. God does not exist for us, but we exist for him. Or, to use still another, it is not about God preparing a head for the body, but about God preparing a body for the head.

There is a kind of preaching that represents God as saying, "I know you have many options, but would you please pick me? Here are my good qualities, would you please consider them? I know you can deposit your soul anywhere. Thank you for worshiping at God & Son." This comes from an utterly erroneous view of history and of salvation. It is the voice of advertising, not the voice of divine calling. Preaching that is faithful to the gospel declares, in one way or another, "You, come to Jesus and work for him, or remain in Adam, and burn."

This insight, however, sometimes leads to a rather avoidable misunderstanding. There is nothing wrong with the doctrine, but the fault lies in men's confusion and misguided agenda. I recently came across another book that claims to restore the proper focus of the gospel as a message about Jesus Christ instead of the salvation of individuals. Although this seems to agree with what we have established, the harmony is superficial, because although the gospel is about Jesus Christ, an essential aspect of the message has to do with how he saves individuals. Then, there is also the teaching that faith is a community affair. A contrast is posed between the individual and the community, a private faith and a public faith. If the thesis amounts to a denial that one of the chief interests of the Christian faith has to do with the salvation of individuals, then it must be denounced as a denial of the gospel and a damnable heresy.

The idea sounds very pious, although not to me, and it purportedly reduces our individualistic focus and self-centered faith, but it distorts reality. Perhaps it will help those who burn in hell: "Stop screaming! This is not just about you. So don't think you are suffering as an individual. Hell is a community affair." That would be extremely annoying, and perhaps for this reason it will be preached in hell. The damned burn in hell as

individuals, not as an entity. And just as each individual cannot literally share another person's suffering, or suffer "as a group," no one can share another person's salvation or be saved "as a group" in a sense that reduces the significance of individuals.

The power of Christ is not in dissolving individuality, as in some pagan religions, but it is in uniting individuals who remain acutely conscious of their individuality. The beauty of the gospel is that because of a common faith in Jesus Christ, we are able to relate to God both as individuals, as communities, and even as one body. So to say that salvation is not an individual affair is not only strange and nonsensical, but it is a deprecation of the gospel. There is no need to diminish either the individual or the community, but it is harmful to attribute to one what properly belongs to the other.

The Christian faith is highly individualistic. Jesus himself made a sharp distinction between the individual and the community, and he relates to the church on both levels. This is so much the case that it takes an extraordinarily stupid person – or an accomplished theologian – to overlook it. For example, he said to Peter, "If I want *him* to remain alive until I return, what is that to *you*? You must follow me." In one admonishment Jesus forever established the distinction between the faith of each individual, and the right and duty of each one to follow him as an individual considered independently of any other individual.

John is different from Peter. Jesus relates to John and Peter as unique individuals, and Peter has no authority to inquire into the private aspect of John's faith. Of course, there is only one Christ and one doctrine, but the point is that each person lives out this same faith before God *as individuals*. There is a public aspect to faith, so that in the context of community, we ought to obey our leaders (Hebrews 13:17). Yet as in the case of John and Peter, there is a private aspect to faith in which we deal with God as individuals, independently from all other individuals. As the Lord said, "To him who overcomes...I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it" (Revelation 2:17). We must resist anyone who tries to maintain the significance of community, or even to rescue the Christ-centeredness of the faith, by reducing the significance of individual faith, because to do so would be to defy Christ himself rather than to offer him a service.

The Bible is not against individuality; in fact, it offers the most absolute foundation for individuality. Rather, it is against a demonic individuality that turns the self into an idol to be served and worshiped. The Bible's individuality is one that has been sharpened and made even more distinguished before the throne of God, but then throws itself at the feet of Christ. God's presence and power ought to make us more aware of our individuality, not less. What are the motives of those who advocate the faith of the community *at the expense of* the faith of the individual? Are they really attempting to restore genuine faith for the glory of Christ and the betterment of the church, or are they attempting to dissolve their own individuality into the community so as to relinquish their responsibilities as individuals? We ought to be suspicious of them.

To deny the public aspect of faith is also to deny the gospel; however, we must insist that the public aspect is never necessary to the salvation of the individual. Other people are never necessary. Only Christ is necessary. If God has to drop me a Bible from heaven and

if Jesus has to appear and teach me the gospel himself, he could and he would. I do not find this even slightly farfetched to believe. And if this is at least possible – if you do not think that it is possible, you do not believe in God and you are not a Christian – then it follows that, however important it is, the community is never necessary. The slogan that there is no salvation outside of the church is false, shameful, and outright demonic, unless it is meant that anyone who believes in Christ (as an individual!) becomes a part of the church in the spiritual and cosmic sense, in which case the slogan is useless even in its usual context. There is a lot of salvation outside the church – in fact, sometimes it seems there is more outside than inside! – but there is none outside of Christ.

Whereas the community is not necessary to the individual, the individual is necessary for the community, because there is no community without individuals. There is no such thing as a forest without trees, but there can be one tree without any other tree or a forest. The forest is not a thing in itself, but it is a designation for a group of trees. Likewise, the church is not a thing in itself, but it is only a name to designate a group of individuals. In this sense, there can be individual believers without the church, but there can be no church without individual believers.

Christianity is first about the power of one. Paul does not say that by one man all fell into sin, and by the vote of the majority humanity returns to righteousness. Voting will never do, and even the faith of the majority is powerless. But by Jesus Christ – one person – all of God's chosen ones are saved. By one person, individuals are united into a community – not dissolved into a community, but united as separate individuals into one community of Christ. Thus the issue is not to defend either the individual or the community, but to grasp how they fit with each other.

Then comes the contrast. If the work of Jesus Christ could effect goodness that is as extensive as the damage wrought by the sin of Adam, it would already be cause for admiration and gratitude. But Paul writes, "the gift is not like the trespass." The good that Christ brings is "much more" than the evil that came from Adam. This must become a controlling principle and a standard of judgment in our theological formulations. Our theology is unworthy of the gospel of Christ if we portray the gift of God as barely saving us from the depths of depravity. All our preaching and thinking about the Christian faith must reflect this "much more" of Jesus Christ.

Just as the death that Adam introduced brought crippling destruction into our intellect and character, how much more should the life of Jesus Christ infuse us with all kinds of wisdom and virtue! We will be more zealous for God than the non-Christians are for the devil. We will be more intelligent than they are stupid. We will be more kind and upright than they are cruel and crafty. We are able to do this because the life of Christ is greater than the death that Adam brought, and the gift of God is greater, much greater, than the fall of man.

The results of Adam's sin are all around you, and even within you. You are alarmed at the more concrete effects that it has produced, as seen in the corruption and incompetence in politics, the instability and deterioration of the economy, and then the troubles with education, crime, health care, and innumerable other ills. What will you do? If you take the

power of Adam to the problem of Adam, you will only get more of the same. Death on top of death is still death. Adam could not vote himself back to Eden, but Jesus Christ brings us before the very throne of God. The gift is not like the trespass. Salvation in every area of life comes as the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached and applied, and as God causes it to permeate the hearts of men.

10. Dead to Sin, Alive to God

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

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. (Romans 5:20-6:14)

Earlier in the letter, Paul established that God has placed all men under sin. No one escapes the verdict: Jew or Gentile, with or without the law, all men are shown to be damnable sinners. This is "so that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge." In the words of a detractor, this means that "our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly," and that "my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory." Paul acknowledges this and does not attempt to refute it. He opposes only the false inference that this would render God's wrath unjust or that it would make it improper for him to condemn men as sinners.

The detractor opposes the truth of Christian doctrine. His objection arises from the failure to recognize the obvious distinction between God's decree and precept, between causation and definition, between what God causes to happen and what he commands men to do. This non-Christian confusion is also at the root of the long-standing aversion to acknowledge God as the author of sin. For God to cause men to sin in the metaphysical

sense, and so that man has no freedom from God in any sense, does not mean that God himself is a sinner, or that he would be unjust to condemn sinners, or that he morally approves of sin in men, for whatever he morally approves would not be sin in the first place. The doctrine is that he metaphysically causes men to do what he preceptively forbids. There is no contradiction.

Theologians in all traditions have almost unanimously sided with Paul's opponent. They share the same assumptions, but are embarrassed to explicitly arrive at the same conclusion. So, eager to agree with anti-Christian thinking in substance but to share the apostolic heritage in name, they would declare what Paul must have meant even in direct contradiction to his words. But Paul meant what he said: God sovereignly caused all men to fall into sin so that his own righteousness may be manifested when he condemns them to hell. There is nothing wrong with this or unjust about this, and there is nothing anyone can do to change it.

The thought recurs throughout the letter. There is that passage we just reviewed from chapter 3. Then there is our text in Romans 5 and 6. In Romans 9, Paul will say that God chooses to save some and to damn others. Contrary to the theologians, he does not merely pass over the reprobates so as to leave them in damnation, as if the reprobates created themselves and made themselves evil. Rather, God is the one who directly creates both the saved and the damned "out of the same lump of clay"; moreover, "he hardens whom he wants to harden."

Again, Paul's opponent surfaces and asks, "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" A typical response is that God is not unjust in saving some and leaving others in their sinful condition, but apostolic authority destroys this traditional answer, since Paul asserts that it is God who creates the reprobates as sinners and as those foreordained for damnation. The objection again ignores the distinction between causation and definition. What God causes to happen and what he defines as right or wrong are two different matters. "Why does God still blame us?" Because you transgressed his law! The metaphysical cause for the transgression is irrelevant, and is not factored into the verdict. Regardless of the cause, the issue is whether there is a violation of God's command. Thus in offering a different answer that surrenders to some of the non-Christian assumptions, the theologians side with the enemies of apostolic doctrine even as they pretend to defend the justice of God.

Then, Paul writes in Romans 11, "For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all." Since he has already established that some are foreordained and created for damnation, the "all" cannot refer to all individuals. In context, it means that God will show mercy to both Jews and Gentiles. In any case, this is one statement of the supralapsarian doctrine. God wished to demonstrate his mercy, and in order to make that happen, he caused men to fall into sin so that there might be sinners to show his mercy to. Thus sin has always been under God's direct control as he uses it to further his own purposes. Since God is the sole standard of right and wrong and of what is just and unjust, there is nothing wrong or unjust about this unless God condemns himself as wrong and unjust. Moreover, there is nothing that anyone can do to change or prevent

this, and if one is a Christian, he would not want to change or prevent it. Your disapproval means as little as your lame and needless theodicy.

To make sense of Romans, and indeed, to make sense of much of the Bible, one must accept the doctrine that God is the sovereign author of sin. This is the kind of God there is – the only God there is. You can take it or leave it. You can embrace the truth and ascend to heaven, or cleave to your man-centered morality and burn in hell with it. As a preacher, what I cannot tolerate is the delusion that you are in agreement with the Christian faith when you deny the doctrine that God has deliberately bound all men to sin so that he may have mercy upon them. When I say that I walk out to the kitchen so that I may have a drink of water, the thought of the water comes first, and walking to the kitchen is the means to that end. Getting a drink is not a reaction to walking out to the kitchen. Mercy is the purpose, sin is the means, and God is the author of them both. The doctrine itself is invulnerable to attack – God is who he is, as he told Moses. But Paul had to answer false inferences made on the basis of his doctrine. The problem is never with Christian doctrine, but with unintelligent people.

This becomes another reminder of the essential and pervasive disagreement between Christian and non-Christian systems. If some Christians have trouble with this doctrine, then the non-Christians who argue against us would not even imagine that we believe in this kind of God, one who is truly sovereign over all. Thus we cannot apply the same standard of judgment that the non-Christians use when we speak to them. We must not argue that the Christian faith satisfies their sinful assumptions and aspirations better than their own systems. The task of apologetics is not to prove that we are better non-Christians, but that we are something else altogether. Because of the regeneration of our spirits and the revelation of God's word, our thinking operates on a superior plane. Other than logic, from which the non-Christians cannot escape, since man was made in the image of God, there are no shared assumptions between us. And even when it comes to logic, they do not understand it in relation to God as they ought. So when we preach the gospel, we want the unbelievers to know that the Christian faith is not something that they can slide into with their present resources. God must perform a work of power to save them.

All these remarks on God's design for sin and his control of it are not superfluous even if you have studied my exposition of the doctrine elsewhere, because the teaching is a foundational principle for every portion of Romans. Thus as Paul makes the transition from justification to sanctification in chapter 6, we shall realize that just as God has foreordained the fall of humanity, he has foreordained the rise of his chosen ones. In fact, God caused sin to happen so that he could cause his people to overcome it. He has not only foreordained our victory over sin through Jesus Christ, but he foreordained sin so that this victory could happen in the first place. It is our destiny in Christ to triumph over evil and to walk in holiness.

Returning to our text, Romans 5:20 says, "The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more." By now the meaning and significance of this statement should be clear without explanation. So we direct our attention to the false inference that was drawn from this: "Shall we go on sinning so that

grace may increase?" (6:1). Even if Paul has in mind no one in particular in this verse, the objection is not hypothetical, since earlier he stated, "We are being slanderously reported as saying... 'Let us do evil that good may result'" (3:8). The slander represents a false inference from the doctrine that "our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly." In turn, the very similar false inference in 6:1 is based on the doctrine in 5:20.

As with the other instances, the false inference betrays a failure to distinguish between decree and precept, between causation and definition. So it is asked, "If precepts were added to increase transgressions – that is, precepts were added so that there would be more transgressions of precepts – so as to make more room for the manifestation of grace, should we not keep on sinning so as to keep on making room for grace?" This misses the point about precepts. There is no precept that tells us to sin, or that tells us to sin so that grace may increase, so there is no basis to say that we should do this. Instead, the precepts tell us not to transgress the precepts. This is the only way that transgression can be possible, for if there is a precept telling us to transgress the precepts so that grace may increase, then it would no longer be transgression to violate the precepts. However, the precepts themselves define right and wrong and already imply a prohibition against violating them, so a precept that tells us to violate the precepts would itself contradict the precepts, resulting in the breakdown of this system of ethics. This is not the case with the Christian faith. Rather, God's precepts define sin, and his decree causes violations of these precepts to occur, and this makes room for grace as he redeems his chosen ones through Jesus Christ.

Paul's answer begins in 6:2 and takes us further down the road by assuming a more christological angle. It stresses not so much metaphysics and theology proper but thinks about the matter within the context of redemption. This is appropriate because the false inference applies to those who receive grace, and wonders if they should continue in sin so that there would be more of grace. Whereas an answer derived from the nature of God and the distinction between decree and precept is needed, since it is in fact the foundation for an answer derived from christology, and since it demonstrates how much the false inference betrays a failure to grasp the most elementary principles, an answer from christology meets the issue with an awareness of the context of the letter, of the progress that has been made in the previous chapters. Therefore, Paul writes, "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" The rest of Romans 6 elaborates on this.

Paul refers to baptism, so we will first comment on how we refer to a sign and the thing signified. A sign is commonly associated with the thing signified, and in language the sign is often referred to as if it is the thing signified, although it is never in fact identified with the thing signified, nor is it ever associated with it by necessity. To illustrate, in some cultures a ring and marriage are virtually identified, such that the two are often interchangeable in everyday speech. However, the two are never actually identified, and no one but perhaps the insane or the extraordinarily stupid would confuse the two. The ring (or the act of wearing the ring) is not love, or marriage, or in itself a promise of anything. And many rings are worn as fashion accessories.

A woman who removes her ring to wash her hands does not become unmarried for those fifteen seconds. The removal of the ring has no effect on her status. We may become

suspicious of a man who removes his ring right before he joins a party, and this is because the ring is a symbol of love, marriage, and commitment – but it is nothing more than a symbol. A man could be just as in love, married, and committed without a ring. Or, a thief may steal my ring, but that does not mean he has stolen my love, marriage, or commitment. My marriage is unaffected. I could replace the ring that same afternoon, or I may choose not to replace it at all. Still, the marriage is unaffected.

Sometimes it is said that a ring may help a person remember his commitment. I would consider him a weakling and an unfit spouse – it should be his marriage that reminds him to put on his ring! Indeed, it is better to heed a reminder than to commit adultery, but if one needs this reminder, he is already in trouble. In any case, instead of leaning on a ring for strength, why not possess the inner strength to wear the ring? And if one has such strength, he does not need the ring. It would then be what it should be – nothing more than a symbol, "the pledge of a good conscience toward God" (1 Peter 3:21). Thus as long as there is no confusion, and when there is no need for precision, it is acceptable to refer to a sign as if it is the thing signified, but if it is a sign, then it is never necessary for the sign to be present in order for the thing signified to come about or to persist.

The question is whether baptism is like the ring or whether it is something more. The above establishes that it means nothing when the language of a text seems to identify the sign with the thing signified. Jesus said, "This is my body." But he also said, "I am the door." So for something to be more than a mere sign, the text has to go beyond this type of language to say it or represent it, and it must be demonstrated that it is not a mere sign like circumcision, but that it is something else altogether. When the issue is posed this way, there is nothing in Scripture to suggest that baptism and the bread and wine are anything more than mere symbols. Some people wish to make more out of these things because they are weaklings and unfit believers. It is my faith that moved me to submit to baptism before many witnesses, and it is my faith that brings me before the table in remembrance of the Lord's sacrifice until he returns. A theology that makes a mere sign more than what it is reverses this order and suggests a defective faith, if there is any faith at all.

Whereas there is nothing in Scripture to suggest that the signs are anything more than mere symbols, we have encountered Paul's argument in Romans 4:9-12 where he shows us how he thinks about a sign of the covenant. There he calls circumcision a sign and seal, and confirms that it was a mere sign and seal by explicitly declaring it unnecessary to confer or maintain the thing signified. Thus to suppose that baptism and communion are anything more than mere signs and symbols is to at least in some degree return to the ancient Jewish error of a lazy and rebellious religion that substituted rites and trinkets for true faith and obedience. Instead of conveying the thing signified, which a sign never does in the first place, it then becomes a barrier to the thing signified.

Whatever we think about the Pentecostals, this is their advantage compared to the Catholics: the Catholics bring crucifixes and holy water to their exorcism rituals, but the Pentecostals bring the name of Jesus. In a publication that allowed four or five theologians from different traditions to state their positions on baptism and communion, one writer denied that they are mere symbols but at the same time wished to avoid the extreme of

Catholicism. He could not show from the relevant biblical passages that they are necessarily more than mere symbols, but he still insisted that they are more than symbols. But what is this something more, and how does this factor into how the sign relates to the thing signified? He wrote that this is a "mystery." And with this one word, even Satan is transformed into an angel of light. So let the man who values baptism take heed that he regards it only as a sign, but rather values more the thing signified, lest the water of baptism flushes him straight into the fires of hell.

Paul's topic is not baptism but identification with Christ. He introduces this as an answer to the notion that we should continue to sin so that grace may abound. Our identification with Christ is the basis for Paul's position that we *should* live free from sin's power, and that we *could* live free from it.

Although Christ never sinned, he was born into a human nature that was diminished because of sin, albeit without its defilement. He was made weak and mortal. More significant than this, he bore the sin of his people and suffered the punishment that they deserved, so that he was killed and buried because of it. When he was raised from the dead, he was no longer subject to the power of sin in any sense. He suffered the punishment for sin, and sin has no more claim over him. He died once, and he cannot die again – death is powerless over him.

Paul explains that, as God's people, we were identified with Christ in his death and resurrection. Theologians refer to a mystical union, but the Bible does not speak of it this way. Instead, it portrays Christ as the head of his people, as our champion and representative in his suffering, death, and resurrection. So the union is not mystical but forensic in nature. There is no merging of substance or personhood, but there is a recognition in the mind of God that Christ represented the individuals that were assigned to him before the creation of the world. This is the all-decisive factor.

Applying this to the Christian's sanctification, Paul does not use the language of mysticism, but the language of cognition and recognition: "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." The first step in sanctification is an act of intellectual recognition. It is the affirmation of a doctrine, the doctrine that Jesus Christ was dead and buried, and that he was raised from the dead, and that we were united with him in all of this, so that we have inherited his freedom from sin's power as well as his resurrection life. This is something that has already occurred, and Paul calls us to live in accordance with it, beginning with an intellectual recognition of the doctrine, and then by withholding our members from sin and by offering them to righteousness. Therefore, the abundance of grace is not a reason for continuing in sin, but it is the reason for a new life of dedication to faith and holiness through Jesus Christ.

11. Who will Rescue Me?

What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not!...For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good....

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:7, 11-12, 13-16, 21-25)

There are a number of issues with Romans 7, including a debate as to whether Paul is describing his own struggles as a Christian or whether he refers to his previous experiences as a non-Christian. For this reason, any message on the text requires some effort to prevent it from becoming an exegetical commentary. We will, nevertheless, briefly consider this one question so that it does not become an obstacle.

If we skim the text with our usual Christian terms and categories in mind, it would appear that Paul must be talking about a regenerate person. He writes, "I desire to do good" and "I delight in God's law," but the unregenerate does not desire to do good and does not delight in God's law. The previous chapters of this same letter have destroyed the possibility that a non-Christian could sincerely desire to do good or to delight in the law. This truth is so decisive and inflexible that it could compel all other considerations to accommodate it.

However, when we examine the text in its context and on its own terms, this conclusion is not as easily reached. Verse 14 says, "I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin." The thought is taken from the previous chapter, not too many verses before this, and describes a person in an unregenerate state. There Paul declares that the Christian is no longer a slave to sin, but a slave to righteousness. In addition, there is no mention of Christ in the description, as if he is absent from the man's life as he struggles; rather, Christ is presented in 7:25 as a solution to the struggle. Then, 8:1 seems to be a transition into the Christian life.

If we take the "I" in verses 14 to 25 not as a literal self-designation but as an editorial "I" representing the typical Jew, a number of issues appear to be resolved all at once. It explains the change from the past tense to the present tense in verse 14. It dissolves any conflict with Paul's claim that he was "blameless" under the law (Philippians 3:6). There is no conflict in the first place, since in Philippians he is most likely referring to the legalistic righteousness of the Pharisees, and not to actual perfect obedience to the law of Moses. This is evident since in the same statement where he claims to be blameless he also refers to his persecution of the church, and that as a badge of his zeal. As Jesus argued, the same law that pointed to Christ would not have condoned his murder, and by extension, it would not have endorsed the persecution of the church as something righteous (John 7:19, 8:40; Acts 9:4). Thus it appears that the man's desire to do good and his delight in the law refer not to the sincere faith of the Christian but to the ignorant zeal of the Jew (10:2).

Even if a definitive interpretation cannot be derived in a few paragraphs, the main purpose is clear. The section in fact continues to answer some of the false inferences from Paul's teaching on the law. In 6:1-2, he writes, "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!" Then in 6:15, he writes, "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" Now in 7:7, he continues, "What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not!" And in 7:13, he writes, "Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means!"

The false inferences are very silly. They reflect the assumptions that guide the thinking of unbelievers and unfaithful theologians. Paul's doctrine is that God has placed all men under sin so that he may show mercy to those whom he has created for salvation and so that he may display his wrath against those whom he has created for damnation. The law was given not so that men could earn their way to heaven, but more commandments were revealed so that more violations of the commandments may occur – "so that the trespass might increase."

Unable to make simple and obvious distinctions, Paul's opponent asks, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" and "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?" We find a similar intellectual handicap in those who ask, "If God is sovereign over all things, including human thoughts and decisions, then why should we preach the gospel?" Because he commanded you to do it, you defiant wretch! God's decree and his command are two different things. One refers to causation, and the other to definition. And again, "If God is the author of sin, does that not make him unrighteous?" Only if he defines his own sovereignty as unrighteous, you arrogant brat! Would you confine God or else condemn him by your own standard, as if you rule over the Almighty, and as if the universe revolves around you? Yet this is the sad history of Christian theology, so that scholars consider it necessary to preserve some sense of human freedom and argue for its compatibility with divine sovereignty, and to appeal to antinomies and paradoxes in order to excuse God from the tribunal of man. But the metaphysical causation of an action or event and the ethical judgment of an action or event belong to two entirely different categories. Failing to grasp this, unbelievers and believers alike continue to oppose the apostle's doctrine.

Paul has addressed the two false inferences in Romans 6. Now two other arise: "What shall we say, then? Is the law sin?" and "Did that which is good, then, become death to me?" To paraphrase his answer, it is not that the law is bad, but that the man is bad, and it is not that the law in itself causes death, but that sin leads to death as it drives the man to transgress the law. It is good that the law condemns adultery, but the pervert does it anyway. A brick wall in itself does not kill, but the lunatic rams his head into it and leaves others to clean up the mess.

If we take the latter section as a description of an unregenerate man who is zealous for the law, it can also become an analogy for all those who are without the written law, but who are zealous to win peace of conscience or to follow their adopted view of life. The situation then becomes like the one in Romans 1 and 2. There Paul shows that the Jews have the law, but they never obey it. And although the Gentiles do not have the written code, they betray an instinctive awareness of "the requirements of the law," and they also fail to obey it. Therefore, all Jews and Gentiles are condemned.

Here the man is zealous for the law, but he finds that he cannot obey it. There is an evil power within him that will not let him do it. The more righteousness is defined and declared to him, the more this power is stimulated to rebel and to perform evil. Although Paul's focus is a man's relation to sin and the law, a similar struggle is perceived in those without the law. A man is tormented by the losing battle to live up to the standard that he strives under. He is a transgressor. He will die a sinner, an utter failure.

What is the solution? Who will rescue him? "Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Although the law was good, it was powerless to produce good "in that it was weakened by the sinful nature" – in that men were evil. God accomplished what the law could not do "by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering" (8:3). In other words, what commandments failed to do, and what legalistic tradition and existential struggle failed to do, God did by providing an atonement, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, "in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us" (8:2). Those who are not united to him remain under despair and wrath, but "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). He liberates us from the hopeless struggle and ushers us into a new life in which we no longer live according to that evil power of the flesh but according to the Spirit of the Lord (8:4).

12. The Law of the Spirit

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1-2)

The word "law" is used in two different senses in the surrounding passages. It can refer to a rule or command, or a system of rules and commands. Paul uses the word with this meaning when he writes, "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin" (7:14). Then, the word can also refer to a regularity of operation, a vital principle, or a controlling force. As Paul says, "So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me" (7:21).

There is an evil force at work in every non-Christian. Even if the non-Christian is not possessed by a demon, he might as well be. This dark power drives him to unbelief and rebellion, to speak all sorts of damnable blasphemies and to espouse all kinds of absurd scientific and religious theories. Thus the non-Christian becomes the personification of sin and stupidity. If you want to see sin do its work, look at the non-Christian. If you want to see what stupidity does when it has lips and arms and legs, watch anyone who does not believe in Jesus Christ. This evil force runs his life – it *is* his life – and he cannot overcome it or escape from it. And because the non-Christian is so sinful and stupid, he does not want to escape it. This power has reduced man into a mere brute. If nothing is done for him, he will remain sinful and stupid all his life, and even as he burns in hell in the life to come.

Now "the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God" (v. 7-8). The non-Christian cannot obey God, and even though he lacks the ability to obey, this failure to obey is still counted as sin. Therefore, human ability and freedom have nothing to do with whether a transgression has occurred, they have nothing to do with whether the transgression results in condemnation, and they have nothing to do with whether this condemnation accords with justice. For the same reason, the fact that theologians consider it important to argue for the existence of human freedom in some sense, and for the compatibility of this freedom with divine sovereignty, shows that they have already disowned the biblical doctrine even as they pretend to defend it.

There is another power. It is the power of the Spirit, which comes to a man and assumes control as God causes him to have faith in Jesus Christ and transforms him into a Christian. This is the power of life. This is the power of righteousness. This is the power of intelligence. This is the power of holiness and resurrection. It is not a power that we take hold of, but it is a power that takes hold of us, because God has decided to show kindness toward us and by this law of the Spirit of life he delivers us from the law of sin and death. Therefore, although Christians find themselves in some of the same circles and societies as the non-Christians, the followers of Jesus Christ live on a superior plane. Poison, death,

and evil are at work in the non-Christians, killing their bodies and rotting their minds. But at work in the Christians are faith, joy, blessing, and reverence. As Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10, ESV).

The two different forces produce two different kinds of people. These two kinds of people are distinguished by their mentalities, their desires, and their preoccupations: "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires" (v. 5). Two different kinds of fruit result from this. As Paul writes to the Galatians, "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like....But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:19-23).

Non-Christians are "controlled by the sinful nature." But to the Christians, Paul says, "You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ." So one who is a Christian also has the Spirit, and one who has the Spirit is also controlled by the Spirit. If one is controlled by the sinful nature, then he does not have the Spirit, and he is a non-Christian.

These insights – that the Christian has the Spirit living in him, and that the Spirit rules over him to set his mind on the things of the Spirit – provide the Christian practical help as he strives to grow in strength and holiness. Whereas the non-Christian is ruled by sin and cannot submit to God, the Christian is ruled by the Spirit and he does submit to God. He is not only able to do this, but he knows how to do it. Paul tells the Galatians: "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Galatians 5:16).

In other words, the Christian can remain free from sin and grow in righteousness by being what has now become natural to him, by living in accordance with the dominant power that rules his thoughts and passions. This does not mean that all temptations have vanished and that he will never stumble again. Although Jesus Christ has fully accomplished redemption for his people, its application follows a divine plan and is not yet complete. The same Spirit who has made his dwelling in the Christian and who has started to rule over him and to transform him will also complete the change at the resurrection of the dead.

So although it seems that a struggle remains, it is not like the tension between an ignorant zeal for the law and the inherent rebellion of the sinful nature. No, the Christian's desire for righteousness is good, sincere, and empowered by the Spirit of God. His energies are not exhausted in trying to extricate himself from the clutches of sin, but the Spirit gives wings to his true desire for truth and holiness as he pursues these things with wild abandon. And as he does so, he will "not gratify the desires of the sinful nature." It is now possible to "put to death the misdeeds of the body" (Romans 8:13).

The Bible teaches this pattern in a number of places. Paul counsels the Ephesians to "put off the old self" and to "put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 5:22-23). Hebrews 12 admonishes us to "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles" (v. 1), and to run the race marked out for us, not only to escape from evil, but to run with our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (v. 2).

Paul applies this to practical items as he writes, "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Ephesians 4:28-29). The strategy to overcome sin is mainly positive, not negative. That is, a Christian should not only stop stealing, but he should work to supply for himself and to share with others. The Christian who used his words for evil should not only stop doing it, but he should now use his words to build up faith and hope in others.

If you are a Christian, then the power of the Holy Spirit is in you, driving you to desire and to perform the works of Jesus Christ. You might still struggle, and you might still stumble, but now Jesus Christ has drastically transformed the battle, and it is one that he has already won for you. Actively pursue the good things, and you will find that you enjoy doing them. This is the new you, and by developing in that direction, you will be living in the Spirit, and putting to death the deeds of the flesh. This is what is called being "led by the Spirit of God" (Romans 8:14), as Jesus Christ fills us with his power and ushers us into a glorious life of purpose, truth, and holiness.

13. The Witness of the Spirit

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Romans 8:15-17)

Jesus Christ attained for his chosen ones more than acquittal, as precious and necessary as that is, but in his exceeding kindness, God adopts them as his children and transforms them into the likeness of his Son. Then, his Holy Spirit causes them to be confident in his enduring love toward them, and to be confident in their place as his children. Therefore, a certainty that one has been rescued from condemnation does not go far enough. God has made us his very children, and he wants us to know it.

It is not a question of "Am I a member of this club?" That is a wrong way to regard the issue. When God converts a man through faith in Christ, the Spirit of sonship or adoption enables and inspires the person to address God as "Father." This is at the same time an indication of who God is to the man and who the man is to God. It becomes natural for the man to call God his Father because the man is a child of God. In other words, the confidence of adoption is not contingent on something that you have but concurrent with something that you are. This confidence is not an implication derived from something that we do or have done, but it is an identification with what God has made us. You are one who calls God your Father.

Paul writes, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." Thus the knowledge of our salvation is not a piece of information that we discover, but it is information that the Spirit of God testifies to independent of our effort or our subjective state of mind. Whether the emphasis is on the Spirit testifying *to* our spirit or along *with* our spirit, it is information that is announced, even imposed on us, by a foreign person and power.

God has made us into his children, so that we call him Father because of what we are, and the Spirit of God testifies to and with our spirit that we are his children. The result is not a subjective mindset or attitude, but knowledge and certainty. You are what you are – a child of God. And the Spirit says what he says – you cannot make him do it and you cannot stop him from doing it. When God testifies to something to and with your inner being, and when he has made you into that very thing that he testifies about, there is unavoidable knowledge. There can hardly be a more certain form of knowledge even in the life to come.

There is a distinction between the private aspect and the public aspect of our relationship with God, and where the issue of knowledge applies, there is a distinction between private knowledge and public knowledge. Unless we possess omniscience, or almost omniscience,

so that we know all the thoughts of all the believers in all of history as they commune with God in their minds, then this distinction is evident and undeniable. And this distinction will persist in the life to come unless we will gain omniscience, or almost omniscience, to know all the thoughts that the saints shall place on the altar of their minds in all of eternity. The distinction between private and public stands even if only one person has only one private thought before God in all of history. This is so not only because we lack omniscience, but because God sees to it that this is the case: "I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it" (Revelation 2:17). This private aspect of our relationship is precious to him, and he will not relinquish it to avoid upsetting our theological traditions and philosophical theories.

This distinction is usually not mentioned when we summarize the Christian faith as an intellectual system and when we engage non-Christians in debate. The reason is that in these contexts the aim is to present the biblical worldview as a public philosophy. The Bible is a public revelation of the history and worldview of the Christian faith. The information is accessible to all to be studied and discussed. This public revelation is what we declare to believers and unbelievers, and it is what we defend before its detractors. The Spirit's testimony that I am a child of God is not what I preach. And it is the Christian faith as a worldview and not myself as a believer that I defend when I face the critics.

Both our private knowledge and our public knowledge in the life to come rest on the same basis as the public knowledge that we now possess – all knowledge comes from God's mind and becomes ours by his action. In the study of philosophy and apologetics, we establish that there is no knowledge apart from what we derive from the Bible. The context is the kind of public knowledge available to us in this life. In effect, this means that our public knowledge in this life is limited to what God has revealed in the Bible, and our private knowledge is limited to what God would cause us to know as stated in the Bible, including the knowledge of adoption. Thus this distinction between private and public knowledge does not leave room for the non-Christian to derive even private knowledge, since their sensations and speculations remain unreliable. And the Christian's private knowledge of his place in Christ is not derived from his sensations and speculations, but it is caused by an action of the Holy Spirit that the man can neither initiate nor prevent.

To further illustrate, consider the innate knowledge of God mentioned in Romans 1 and 2. There it is said that all men possess knowledge of the nature and the power of God as well as the moral requirements of the law apart from the public revelation of Scripture. Although all men possess this knowledge, it is private in the sense that it is internal, so that it is not subject to public examination and cannot be the basis for public declaration – one man cannot examine another man's innate knowledge of God, even if both of them possess it. (Indeed, the influence of this private knowledge is often evident in men's public philosophy, but the knowledge itself remains internal.) This has some similarities to the private knowledge that the chosen ones receive regarding their place in Christ, but there are important differences. The confidence of sonship is not possessed by all men, but only by Christians. And they have this knowledge not because of their natural constitution as those made in the image of God, but because of the special operation of the Holy Spirit.

Christian doctrine must affirm that a private confidence of sonship is possible, and that it is a reality for the believer. It must affirm its possibility because the public revelation of the Bible makes room for it, and it must affirm its reality because the public revelation of the Bible declares it as an operation of the Holy Spirit in the Christian. Although some oppose this doctrine, the Spirit still testifies to my spirit, apart from my effort, that I am a child of God. It is an objective divine work, and not a subjective belief or attitude. It is not a matter of self-discovery. If he does not testify the same about you, how is that my fault? But some wish to divert attention from their own lack of certainty, and some would crucify the Bible to protect their own tradition or philosophy.

The testimony of the Spirit is a secret operation that results in private knowledge. The Spirit testifies to my spirit that I am a child of God. Again, this is usually not mentioned because we do not relate to one another on the basis of the Spirit's internal testimony. The Spirit does not tell you what I am. You will have to judge me according to the public revelation of the word of God. You must interact with me and examine my confession, my character, and so on. I cannot preach the Spirit's testimony to the non-Christian, and it would offer him little personal profit to believe that I am a child of God. Rather, I must declare to him the gospel and the doctrines of Jesus Christ, so that he might believe and become a child of God.

Now if we are children of God, then we are also heirs of God, even co-heirs with Christ. Because of this, we have the confidence to endure suffering, knowing that if we share in his sufferings, we shall also share in his glory. On the other hand, non-Christians lack the Spirit of adoption and his testimony that they are children of God. They shall inherit nothing but fire and brimstone.

14. Groaning with Creation

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:19-23)

In accordance with God's plan, when Adam fell into sin he dragged down the creation with him. As God said to the man, "Cursed is the ground because of you" (Genesis 3:17). The result was not that man must learn to take care of the earth and cooperate with it in order to bring forth sustenance from it. Rather, God said that the earth would now resist the man, so that the man must subdue the earth to take from it what he needs (v. 18). Then, after a while the man would die and his body would return to the earth (v. 19). When two parties struggle under God's curse, neither comes out as the winner. Since that time the whole creation had been groaning for liberation right up to the time of Paul, and it has continued its groaning until now because what it longs for still has not arrived.

Thus long before creation became polluted with plastic bottles, it was polluted with sinners, with non-Christians. It groans not because it longs to be rid of factories and skyscrapers, but to be liberated from the bondage and decay that came upon it because of sin. That day is marked by the revelation of the sons of God, that is, when God shall definitively vindicate his people and complete their adoption by the redemption of their bodies, or the resurrection of the saints. Its liberation is bound up with the salvation that Christians enjoy, or with "the glorious freedom of the children of God." The corollary to this is that creation yearns to be rid of the non-Christians, so that the meek shall inherit the earth.

Therefore, non-Christian environmentalists make a mockery of creation, because they are the ones who perpetuate its sufferings, not by their foam cups but by their very existence! And Christians who match the non-Christian fanatics in their environmentalist zeal are just as aggravating, because to stay clean and alive is not what the creation wants at all. A prisoner may appreciate some books and magazines from his defense lawyer to help him pass the time, but when the attorney settles down to discuss the literature with him, the prisoner would likely complain that the time might be better spent in working on the case to secure his freedom. A lawyer who allows what is good but secondary to distract him from what is best and necessary is a bad lawyer. A Christian who allows even legitimate environmental concerns to distract him from advancing the message of Christ is a bad Christian. A true friend of creation will always put the gospel first.

Some Christians are not very good at preaching, or writing, or praying, or counseling, or even directing traffic in the church parking lot. They are pretty much useless when it comes to anything important. If these people wish to focus on recycling, I have no problem with it. They can even claim to fulfill the "cultural mandate" and make that part of the gospel ministry by force in order to make themselves feel better while the rest of us work at the actual commission that Christ gave us. If this sounds too harsh against those who labor so hard to improve the environment, the main point is that our priority must be to promote the Christian message about sin and righteousness, damnation and salvation, and the incarnation, crucifixion, atonement, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Any other item, no matter how practical and desirable, cannot be combined or equated with this, and must assume a distant second place.

Nowadays people would rather stab their neighbor to death than to allow their cats and turtles to go hungry, but creation itself longs to be set free from the likes of these imbeciles. Only Christians are in tune with creation, because they long for the same thing – not for alternative energy, as wonderful as that might be, but for the completion of the application of redemption. They long not for preservation but culmination, not for perpetuation but consummation. Of course, non-Christians do not share this concern, because that is also the day when they will be cast into the fires of hell. For this reason, non-Christians will always be the enemies of creation. As Christians, we groan together with all of creation not for the salvation of polar bears, but for an end to sin and for the redemption of our bodies.

Jesus Christ is the only hope for humanity and for creation. If creation could talk, it would reprimand some of us for posing as its savior. What arrogance! What dereliction of truth and duty! Be kind to animals, and be good to creation – I am extremely fond of animals, and even more fond of clean air and water – but remember the true work of the gospel and put that above all other considerations. Do not entertain the ridiculous notion that it is as important to save the environment as it is to save human souls. Indeed, these are not mutually exclusive, but they are two different things, and one is clearly more important than the other. If a choice must be made, the ministry of the gospel must always come first.

Go save the whales if you wish – especially if you tend to get in my way when you attempt ministry work – but do not glorify it as some heroic quest. The whales also groan for you annoying zealots to leave them alone and preach the gospel to your fellow men and women. And if you must bother the whales because you are bad preachers (the whales do not need to know this), at least pray for those who share the creation's actual concern while you are cleaning out the blowholes. Then both the preachers and the whales will thank you.

15. All Things for Our Good

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

What, then, shall we say in response to this?

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.

Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ...I am convinced that neither death nor life...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:28-39)

Christians would often say to someone, "God has a wonderful plan for your life." And they mean that the person could either go along with God's plan, or reject God's goodness and pursue a path of destruction. This kind of thinking is entirely hostile to the Bible, and entails a denial of the nature of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul insists in this same letter to the Romans that God creates some individuals for salvation, to receive his mercy and kindness, and he creates all other individuals for damnation, to suffer everlasting torment in hell. God's decision as to whom to save or damn is not based on the kind of people we are; rather, we are the kind of people that we are because of God's decision (Romans 9:10-24).

So we must not indiscriminately say to someone, "God has a wonderful plan for your life." No, if God has created you for damnation, then he has a terrible plan for your life. Do not feel relief when someone tells you, "Everything will turn out fine." No, everything will turn out wrong for you. Your future is filled with fear and confusion, and with extreme pain that will never end. And even the little pleasures that you enjoy in this life are designed to dull your conscience and to increase your trespasses, so that your punishment may be multiplied. As long as you remain ignorant of or resistant to the message of Jesus Christ, we have reason to think that you are numbered among the damned. But if God gives you faith, then you can become a Christian.

Everything is different when you are a Christian, when you renounce all confidence in yourself and trust in Jesus Christ to represent you, to rescue you from sin and condemnation, and to secure your place in God's kingdom. If God has chosen you for salvation – that is, if you are a Christian or will become a Christian – then he truly has a wonderful plan for your life, and he wants you to remember this when you face sufferings and disappointments. His plan was conceived and put into motion way before you came to faith. The day you believed was when you found out about it.

Like Satan himself, wicked men are eager to enslave God and to exalt themselves. They wish to place their feet on the neck of the Most High while he bows down to them in worship. For this reason, they would distort even the most basic and obvious biblical terms to accommodate their sinister aspirations. And so there are many who insist that God chooses men for salvation on the basis of their own decision to have faith in Jesus Christ, and that this faith comes about from their own free will. They rant on and on about how much they are able to do to liberate themselves. By the time they are finished, we marvel at the Tower of Babel and wonder why they would need Christ at all. Men are accustomed to self-delusion, but we know that no tower constructed by human hands can attain eternal life.

The proposal is defeated even if the misuse of foreknowledge remains unchallenged. This is because the Bible teaches that faith is not something men can muster up at will, but that it is produced in men by God according to his decision and as a gift from him (John 6:44, 65, 10:26; Ephesians 2:8). Therefore, to say that God chooses individuals for salvation on the basis of foreseen faith becomes just an awkward admission that he chooses whomever he wishes apart from the people's will and merit (Romans 9:16).

Suppose I was about to put on the greatest stage performance in the history of the universe. I wished to show it to fifty people, and so I made fifty seats and fifty tickets. To fill these seats, I conceived a hundred people in my mind and wrote out a guest list of fifty and a reject list of fifty – then I created these people from the lists (9:21). The blacklisted people are needed because part of the performance involves showing my guests the envy, rage, and agony of those who would be shut out (9:22-24). After this, I handed out the tickets to the fifty people on the guest list.

Now suppose a person declares that I chose the fifty guests based on whether they would have tickets. This would betray a strange misunderstanding of how the event unfolded, since I am the one who conceived them, who created them, and who handed them the tickets. If the illustration were to be more similar to what God has done, then I must have also picked up their hands and put the tickets in them, and then carried them to their seats! Thus the claim that I chose the guests on the basis of foreseeing those who would have tickets is just an unintentional admission that I chose them based on reasons that were entirely within myself, on the basis of knowledge about myself. This is the picture of redemption described for us in this letter to the Romans and in other portions of the Bible.

Of course, we entertained this claim about foreknowledge only for the sake of argument, because it would have failed even before we considered the nature of faith. First, Paul does

not say that God foreknew the faith, but the persons. At this point, faith simply does not factor into what he is talking about. Second, in a context like this foreknowledge does not refer to an awareness of facts in advance, but to "know" carries a sense of personal favor and intimacy. As God said to Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jeremiah 1:5). God conceived and designed the person, loved and favored him in his mind, and then created him.

Therefore, to foreknow means to forelove, and that not because of a passive awareness of future facts, but an eternal affection and faithfulness toward what God himself would create and cause. He conceived and designed the chosen ones – the Christians – in his mind, and he loved them in advance. This is how the wonderful plan began. And this is why in all things God works for the good of those who love him – whom he has created and caused to love him – who have been called according to his purpose.

God foreloved the chosen ones. Then these same individuals are predestined to become like the Son of God. Then, these same individuals are called. The same individuals that are called, are justified. And the same individuals that are justified, are glorified. The exact individuals were specified when God foreloved them. After this stage, no one enters or leaves this predefined group. For the present passage, the essential thing is that no one leaves. The individuals at the point of foreknowledge are the same individuals that he sees through all the way to glorification. What does this mean? It means that God is for us, that he is for us at every stage, and that he will be for us constantly, and over and over again. And he will never withdraw his favor because he was the one who foreloved us in the first place. The whole process was his idea, and he will see it through.

If God is for us, who can be against us? He sent his Son to die for us. Everything else is trivial in comparison, and nothing can hinder the completion of redemption. Who will bring any charge against us? Accusations can come from all sides, but God has justified us. God is in fact the only one whose charge carries any weight, and he accuses those who remain in unbelief, who remain non-Christians. Who is he who condemns us? Condemnation is all talk unless it can lead to a guilty verdict and result in punishment. But Jesus Christ has already died for our sins and has risen from the dead. He continues to represent us and speak for us at the right hand of God. God is in fact the only one whose condemnation leads to a guilty verdict and ends in eternal suffering. And he declares that those who do not believe in Jesus Christ are already condemned (John 3:18). No one can condemn us, and no one can bring a charge against us, not because we have never done wrong, but if there is any charge or any condemnation, Jesus Christ has answered it. Therefore, we denounce sin and proclaim righteousness without embarrassment. Surely we would feel self-conscious and hypocritical if we were to declare our own goodness, but as the heralds of Christ we preach about his righteousness and his salvation.

Who can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus? Only God can extend or withhold his love, and by his foreordination and through Jesus Christ, he has extended his love toward his chosen ones. No one is stronger than God. No one forced or persuaded him to love us, and no one can force or persuade him to stop. He has decided, and he will not change. The love of God toward us is immutable and invincible.

God is for us – for those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose, and who are predestined to become like the Son of God. How demeaning it is, then, when people become more concerned about whether God is for their nation, or race, or interest group. "Is God for America?" "Is God for black people?" "Surely this is a special time for the Chinese!" All such thinking is childish and unspiritual. As Jesus rebuked Peter, "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." God is for the Christians. Some people insist that Christians ought to support the Jews. What? How about telling the Jews that they must support the Christians? And they issue stern warnings about mistreating the Jews. We should not mistreat anyone, Jews or not, but what Paul wrote, he wrote to Christians: "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you" (2 Thessalonians 1:6). Those who mistreat Christians will live forever to regret it – in hell – unless God turns them into Christians as well.

Whether God is for us is not mainly a racial or political question, but a religious and redemptive one. God is for those whom he has foreloved, and these are the ones whom he causes to follow Jesus Christ. Even when Paul discusses his concern for the Jews, he states that God foreknew not all the Jews but the remnant among them – that is, the Christians (11:2-6). And his optimism is based on an expectation that many of the Jews would become like his Gentile readers – that they would become Christians. He warns the Gentiles against arrogance, not because the Jews are in a superior position – the warning is meaningful precisely because the Jews are not in such a position – but because the Gentiles themselves are saved only because of the sovereign kindness of God. Therefore, in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, American nor Brazilian, Asian nor European. We are either in or out. If we are in Christ, then we are all united in him. And if we are not in Christ, then we are nothing.

If we are in Christ, then God is for us, and he orders all things for our good and for his purpose. He has foreloved us in eternity, he has justified us in our lifetime, and he will see us through to our glorification. God has great things in store for us. We are so pleased with the Christian life. It is righteous and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit! And just as we are overcome by the exceeding kindness that God has already lavished upon his people, he reminds us that the best is yet to come.

16. But Who are You, O Man?

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? (Romans 9:19-21, ESV)

Paul has demonstrated in the previous verses that whether a man attains salvation through Jesus Christ does not depend on the person's will or decision, but on God who chooses to show mercy to this individual. Then, a man disbelieves or even opposes God not because the person decides this for himself, but because God has chosen to harden him for God's own purpose. The apostle concludes, "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (v. 18).

A man believes in Jesus because God causes him to believe in Jesus. Another man is hardened against the gospel because God causes him to be hardened. Each person's path is determined before he is born, even in eternity before the creation of the world. His decisions do not determine his path, but his foreordained path determines his decisions. A man's destiny is not determined, but rather revealed by, his choices, that is, by what God causes him to decide in accordance with the divine purpose.

This is one of the most simple and explicit biblical doctrines. However, it is also the most detested doctrine because it most clearly presents God as God, and even Christians do not like God very much. In this doctrine we come face to face with what it means to be God, and we are compelled to show whether we truly acknowledge him as the total sovereign, or whether we wish to retain control over some aspects of our selves, and to entertain the delusion that it is in fact possible to do so. Even as believers and theologians pay lip service to God's sovereignty, very few receive this doctrine of his direct and total causation of all things without attempting to make a way of escape for themselves. Or, they would condemn this true version of God and then rescue him by reducing him into something less.

So Paul anticipates disagreement. He expects someone to say to him, "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" (NIV). In other words, if God is the one who hardens a man so that he cannot pursue righteousness or believe the truth, then why does God still condemn and punish the sinner? The objection makes no sense unless it is assumed that responsibility presupposes freedom, so that a person must be free to make his own decisions if he is to be held accountable for them. But God does not grant this assumption; in fact, all these previous verses have repudiated it. A person is condemned and punished for his sins because he has transgressed God's commands. The cause of his transgressions is irrelevant. If he has transgressed, then he is a transgressor.

Paul proceeds to answer the challenge, and in the process reveals additional insights into the doctrine. He declares that the potter has the right to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use. The apostle has been making the contrast between two kinds of people – the elect, or those whom God has predetermined to become Christians, and the reprobates, or those whom God has predetermined to remain non-Christians. So the honorable vessel represents the Christian, and the dishonorable vessel represents the non-Christian. The honorable vessel would probably be displayed in the household as a testament to the owner's wealth and refinement. On the other hand, a dishonorable vessel probably refers to a trash can or even a toilet. Thus God thinks that the reprobates are the trash cans and toilets of this world. We know what toilets are full of – it is something that reeks of the non-Christian's unbelief, science, and religion.

The Bible contradicts the almost unanimous opinion of Christian theologians in that its exposition of the doctrine leaves no room for freedom and self-determination in any sense, or the notion that divine sovereignty is compatible with these. Why does it matter if the potter's control over the clay is compatible with the clay's wishes? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" The man is not represented as saying, in one way or another, "Why have you passively ordained that I should use my power of self-determination to concurrently decide to become what you have decreed that I should be?" No, he says, "Why have you made me like this?" You. You made me. You made me into this.

By direct contact, and with his own hands, the potter molds the clay into the vessel that he wants it to become. Although this applies to both the honorable and the dishonorable, the objection refers to those whom God "blames" – it is mainly concerned with how the dishonorable vessel is manufactured. Paul's reply means that God is hands-on in making the wicked man into who he is. He does this using the "same lump" out of which he makes the honorable vessels, and not some material with existing dishonorable traits. In other words, the characteristics of the reprobate come directly and entirely from God's hands and nowhere else. Paul sees nothing wrong with this. God has the right to make one man into his masterpiece and another man into a toilet. Who says that a master potter must not make a toilet if he wants to make one? And who is the toilet to say to the potter, "Why have you made me like this?" But even a complaining toilet knows better than to cry, "I have free will!" or even "I am not coerced!"

The truth of the Christian faith is plain and obvious. There is never a good objection against it, but it should be reverently accepted. And because the truth is plain and obvious, every objection against the Christian faith is always stupid and evil. Because every objection against the Christian faith is stupid and evil, we must attack every objection, and lest it is alleged that we avoid the issue, we should answer it as well. But more than this, it is characteristic of the Bible to attack the person who makes the objection. This is because whenever a person questions the Christian faith, it necessarily means that there is something wrong with the person.

Paul does not say, "O you wonderful and intelligent man, why do you make such an outrageous objection against God?" No, the apostle attacks the man himself – "But who

are you, O man, to talk back to God?" This is a rhetorical question – he means that the man is a nobody and should shut his mouth. Paul is not stupid like our preachers and theologians. They tell us that non-Christians can be sincere and intelligent and yet make objections against God. Where did this nonsense come from? Perhaps they learned it from the non-Christians, who are always desperate to assert their sincerity and intelligence. Or perhaps the preachers and theologians wish to compliment their own defiance against God. But Jesus said that the mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart. The non-Christian makes objections because he is a sinner, a rebel – he does not just act like one, but he is one. Any Christian who makes a meaningful contribution in preaching and debate must criticize and belittle the person – the non-Christian himself – and not just his arguments and his actions.

Who are you, O non-Christian, to challenge the truth of God, when the Bible declares that you already know about him? Like a coward, like a traumatized little child, you repress this knowledge so that you do not need to deal with reality. Who are you to reject a guilty verdict when the Bible shows that all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God? You retort, "Who are you to judge me?" Well, who are you to tell me that I may not declare God's judgment upon you? Who are you to decline the gospel? You are nobody. You are nothing.

Who are you, O legalist, O self-righteous religionist, to refuse Jesus Christ, when the Law itself tells you to abandon your own efforts and depend on him as your mediator and champion? Who are you to think that you can be his equal or better? Who are you to say that you can attain heaven by what you regard as good works, when God has renounced them as filthy rags? You are nobody. You are nothing.

Who are you, O Arminian, to say that God does not decree and cause all things solely by his own will and for his own purpose, and without consideration of the faith and decision of man, but rather causes man's faith and decision because of his eternal decree? Who are you to think that man has the power to choose, even to decide his eternal destiny? Who are you to say that Christ could pay the price to redeem a man, and yet loses the man to God's wrath? And who are you to say that a man, once apprehended by God, can pluck himself out of the hands of Christ? You are nobody. You are nothing.

Who are you, O Calvinist, to say that God cannot be the author of sin, and the one who directly creates and hardens wicked men? Who are you to say that God merely passes by the reprobates, when Scripture states that he forms them by his own hands as a potter molds clay into trash cans and toilets? You hypocrite! You pretend to defend the justice and holiness of God, when the matter arises only because you have judged him by the standard of man. With one hand you rob God of his divine sovereignty, and with another you repay him in human righteousness. Who are you, O man, to think that you can get away with this? You are nobody. You are nothing.

Who are you, O Reformed theologian? Are you much better than the Arminian? Again and again, in planting one foot in orthodoxy and one foot in blasphemy, you generate countless paradoxes and contradictions, and you call this the high mystery of God! Oh vanity of vanity, a theology of systematic futility!

Away with all of you! God exercises complete and immediate control over all things, including the decisions and destinies of all men. Just as he molds his chosen ones into his masterpieces, he molds the reprobates into receptacles of rubbish and feces. Unlike our preachers and theologians, Paul's opponent at least understands the doctrine, that it is God who creates and hardens the sinner, but the sinner is still blamed and punished. God hardens whom he wants to harden (v. 18), so that they cannot believe and be saved. He does this by his active and direct power, as a potter molds the clay (v. 21). Such men are prepared for destruction (v. 22). They cannot resist his will, but he still blames and punishes them (v. 19). He can do this because he is God, and no one can utter a word against him (v. 20).

17. Sincerely Wicked, Zealously Wrong

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. (Romans 10:1-4)

Paul's desire was that the Israelites may be saved. This means that they were not saved. What kind of people were they, that they were not saved?

First, they were zealous for God, but their zeal was not based on knowledge. This zeal for God sounds better to us than what is meant, because the kind of zeal that we know is a zeal for the God of Scripture as he has been revealed in Jesus Christ. But the Jews did not have this kind of zeal. Jesus said that they did not in fact believe God or Moses or the Scripture, or they would have believed in him instead of trying to trick him or murder him all the time. Rather, Jesus said, they were zealous for the religious traditions that their elders invented. Instead of enforcing God's commandments, these traditions subverted them, working around them while pretending to follow them.

So the religion of the Jews – their zeal for God – was not a precursor to the faith of the Christians. Indeed the religion of Moses was a precursor to Christ, but the Jews did not believe Moses. If they had believed Moses, they would have believed Jesus, because Moses told them about Jesus and commanded them to receive him when he arrived. Nevertheless, although their religion was not the religion of the Old Testament, it was heavily influenced by it, so that their theology and morality were closer to God's revelation than the pagans. It was the best non-Christian religion.

Yet even the best non-Christian religion could not save anyone. Instead of leading to charity, holiness, and salvation, it produced cruelty, hypocrisy, and damnation. Instead of leading to a true worship of God and faith in his Messiah, it resulted in idolatry of the heart, arrogance and self-righteousness, and the murder of their Messiah. Paul himself was an example of this kind of zeal. He condoned the stoning of Stephen and persecuted the followers of Christ until the Lord stopped him by force. Therefore, a zeal for "God" without the knowledge of Christ is not a good thing that needs to be made better, but it becomes an entirely blasphemous and destructive power.

This is God's answer to the claim that it does not matter what we believe as long as we believe it with sincerity and passion. A sincere non-Christian is still a non-Christian, and he is still condemned. The difference is that he is not pretending to be wicked, but he is sincerely wicked. And the fact that he is passionately wicked does not make him admirable, but dangerous.

Second, the Jews did not know the righteousness that comes from God, but they sought to establish their own. Although the text refers to the Jews, it is easy to see how this applies to every non-Christian religion or philosophy. Paul has demonstrated that there is a righteousness from God that comes only through Jesus Christ and that is imputed to us by faith. Therefore, anyone who attempts to make himself "right" by pursuing another route in principle commits the same error as the Jews. The verdict is the same that was declared against the Jews: "They did not submit to God's righteousness." The attempt to attain righteousness by any other means than faith in Jesus Christ is itself defiance against God's righteousness.

What kind of people were the Jews that they were not saved? They were people zealous for their idea of God, but who did not believe in Jesus Christ. They were not saved because their zeal was not based on Christian theology. They went to hell because they did not believe the right doctrines. And they were people who did without the righteousness that comes from God through Jesus Christ, but instead tried to establish their own. Through Jesus Christ, there is righteousness for everyone who believes. But they were not saved, because they were not Christians.

18. Submission to Government

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. (Romans 13:1-7)

It would be impossible to summarize all that the Bible teaches about government in several paragraphs. And it is difficult to say anything at all about it without stirring up related questions. Of course, it does not help that many Christians are more touchy about politics than they are about the Lord Jesus Christ. For our purpose, the solution is to restrict ourselves to the main thrust of the passage. Paul makes a point here that does not always receive sufficient emphasis. It is the Christian's basic stance toward the government.

The apostles were united in commanding submission to the government (see also 1 Peter 2:13-17). And in Luke's account of their ministries, they often made it a point to assure the authorities of their compliance, even as they stood firm for their message concerning God and the Lord Jesus. It is worth noting that they did not operate under some civic paradise, but a government that was, to put it mildly, less than righteous, efficient, and compassionate. Yet they instructed believers to submit.

Paul offers two reasons for this.

The first reason is a theological basis for submission. There is no authority except that which God has established. This does not mean that every official exemplify justice and holiness, and indeed the opposite often appears to be the case. Herod and Pilate were no saints. And Nero was insane. The apostle means that God is the one who has established the institution of human government, and the one who providentially installs each official

to serve his own divine purpose. Thus even Nebuchadnezzar was called God's "servant" when he was sent to slaughter and enslave the Jews (Jeremiah 25:9). He was God's servant not in the sense that he was saved – no, he was not saved, but he was used. In any case, God has established the institution of human government, and therefore Christians are to submit to it.

The second reason contains an element of practical concern. If you do wrong, the government will punish you. If you are punished because you are a thief, or a murderer, or a rapist or perjurer, then you deserve to suffer. If you do not wish to suffer, then do not be a criminal. Paul seems to have in mind an ideal government that rewards good and punishes evil, but his intent is to stress submission, and not to work out the matter from every angle. Peter teaches the same doctrine, but since his subject includes suffering and not only submission, he also recognizes the possibility of unjust punishment: "Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed" (1 Peter 3:13-14). Even then, Peter does not teach rebellion, but submission to the government. In another place, Peter writes, "However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name....So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good" (1 Peter 4:16, 19).

The conclusion is that we must submit to the government because of conscience, since God is the one who has established the institution, and because of possible punishment, since the government has the power to punish criminals. This is also why Christians must pay taxes and render to the authorities what is owed.

In some circles it is common for Christians to criticize the government, to lament the loss of religious liberty, to complain about excessive taxation, a biased curriculum, and so on. Although many times our efforts might be better directed elsewhere, this is not forbidden as long as it is performed in a legal manner and with restraint. The apostles worked with the laws of the land to facilitate their work, but unlike many in our day, they did not lose their focus on the gospel.

Even more important than taking advantage of existing laws is to declare the Christian's basic stance toward the government, and that is one of submission. The Christian approach to spreading the religion of Jesus Christ consists in communication – in speaking and writing – and in charitable deeds. We talk. We help. That is our method. We must make it a point to affirm, both to the government and to believers, that our method condemns violence and subversion. We are not troublemakers, but we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

19. The Objective and The Absolute³

Is there a difference between objective and absolute truth?

You will have to study how a person uses these terms to determine what he means by them. Of course, it will often be the case that he has never considered these terms, and he might use them in awkward and unwarranted ways, or in ways that are inconsistent with his own philosophy. I can tell you what I mean by the terms and how they fit with the Christian system. From the perspective of the Christian faith – the only perspective that is right – they ought to be just different ways of referring to the same thing.

It is often said that everything is relative, and the assertion is made in order to dismiss all definitive judgment. But we can reach a different conclusion when we investigate the matter further. To call something relative is to acknowledge that it is relative *to something*. A mass murderer is judged to be especially vicious relative to one who has murdered only one person. However, Christians would not call the underachiever an exemplar of righteousness and compassion. Why? Because we judge him by a standard that we have received from God, a standard relative to which all else is judged, and that is measured only relative to itself. The Christian faith acknowledges that God is the definitive standard of judgment, one that cannot be dismissed by an appeal to the relative nature of all judgments. Whether a man has murdered one person or a hundred people, or if he has only stolen a stick of chewing gum, he is a lawbreaker relative to God.

Every person is evaluated relative to God, or the standard that he has revealed. On the other hand, God's judgment is measured only against God's judgment. There is no higher authority. All creatures are judged relative to God. If he disapproves of a man, then that man is condemned. And God is judged relative to himself. If he approves of himself, then he is vindicated, and the opposition of men means nothing. When we lift our hands to heaven and praise him for his perfection, it is not because we recognize that he is closer to some final standard to which we are both accountable. There is no higher standard, and he is accountable to no one other than himself. We praise God because he is who he is, and that he is perfect relative to himself, who is perfection. Therefore, God is the absolute, and the absolute and relative are one in God.

Likewise, our judgments are said to be subjective. My judgment is my opinion, and you might have a different opinion. My opinion might be truly my opinion, but they might not be true – that is, objective. What is the difference? We must appeal to God to resolve this for man. My opinion is that there are three marbles on the table, and your opinion is that there are five. But God thinks that there are ten. The objective truth (one that is the case because of itself and that is independent of the opinion of creatures), then, is that there are ten, because God is the one who has created the marbles, who has put them there, and who

³ Adapted from email correspondence.

now sustains them moment by moment. So he knows about the marbles because he is the doer of all things and he knows himself. Our subjective opinions are wrong, and they are wrong because they differ from God's opinion.

With God, there is no difference between desire, opinion, and reality. If God desires to have ten marbles on the table, then there are ten marbles on the table, because his will is never defeated. He makes what he wills, and what has been made is always what he has willed to make. His desire and power are in harmony. And if God thinks that there are ten marbles on the table, then there are ten marbles on the table, because his knowledge never fails, and he knows himself. The will to create, the act of creating, and the knowledge of his own desire and action, are in harmony.

Therefore, God is the objective truth, and the objective and subjective are one in him. They are not one in his creatures; rather, they must look to him for objective truth. Since God is the ruler and cause of all things, he has decreed and caused my opinion that there are three marbles on the table, and God thinks that I think that there are three marbles on the table, although he himself thinks that there are ten. My subjective opinion is that there are three marbles on the table. It is the objective truth that this is my subjective opinion (because he causes and knows my opinion), and my opinion disagrees with God's opinion (because we disagree on how many marbles are on the table). Thus the objective truth is that my subjective opinion is wrong.

This is the basis for the condemnation of those who do not believe the message of Jesus Christ. Their opinion differs from God's opinion, and so it is objectively true that they are wrong and subject to the endless torment of hell. Since the objective and the subjective are identical in God, this means that whenever I agree with God – whenever my subjective opinion is identical to God's subjective opinion – that is when I attain objective, or absolute, truth. To have knowledge of anything at all is to agree with God on that particular matter.

In a realm where the king possesses total authority, his subjective opinion is the objective law for everyone – the two become identical. He always remains in good standing with the law as long as he approves himself, because he is the law. Anyone who crosses him is a criminal and is brought to justice, a justice that this same king defines by his opinion, which accords with his nature, or the kind of person he is.

"Ah," you say, "but this makes him a tyrant." The king is a tyrant only if the king thinks so, and it is bad to be a tyrant only if the king thinks it is bad to be a tyrant. In any case, no mere man possesses such authority, but this kingship is fulfilled by the Lord Jesus Christ. By him, all our beliefs and actions are measured. Without him, we are nothing and can accomplish nothing. But in him, we are the righteousness of God and the heralds of his kingdom.

20. Homosexuality and the Mystery of Christ

One of the most destructive consequences of sin is man-centeredness. The mind of man has become so feeble that it is unable to extend beyond itself to grasp the eternal principles from which all wisdom is derived. Having nothing different from or greater than himself as the reference point, he makes himself the first principle of his thinking, the source of his assumptions, and the standard for all judgment. This so warps man's view of the world that he inevitably comes to unrealistic conclusions in theology, science, morality, sexuality, and all other subjects.

Jesus Christ changes everything. He converts us by his power and reorients our thinking by his word. He brings us the truth and enables us to believe the truth. The truth is that God is the creator and ruler of all creation. He is the fountain of all life and intelligence. He alone defines right and wrong. Therefore, he is the first principle of our thinking, the source of our assumptions, and the standard of all judgment. Thus in the Christian faith, even when we are talking about man, or human sexuality, we begin with God and his revelation in Jesus Christ.

God created Adam, the man, in his own divine image. Then he paraded all the livestock, the birds of the air, and the beasts of the field before him, and the man named them all. Among the animals, no suitable helper or companion was found for him. Sometimes people remark that it is better to have dogs and cats as companions than to be with humans, and to suffer all the complexities, betrayals, and annoyances of human relationships. This is a witness to the havoc sin has wrought, because it is true that humans are often terrible company, but in the beginning it was not so. Those who prefer animals over humans, and those who prefer humans over God, serve as continual testimonies to man's fallen condition. They are willing to settle for a lower kind of communion, and indeed they are unable to have fellowship on a higher plane. An animal is never an adequate companion for a man. But sometimes a man prefers an animal because sin has reduced him and others to such an extent that he is now more comfortable with an inferior arrangement. Yet God has not changed – he remains the perfect company for man, if not for the fact that the sinner now hates him and shrinks from him.

As usual, God interacts with his creation not because he wants to learn something, but because he wants to teach something. The aim was to find a suitable companion for man, and among the animals, no one suitable was found. Thus when God made him a companion, the deliberateness of the creation and the suitability of the creature became all the more evident. Instead of finding him the best that was available, or a companion that was relatively suitable, God would make one that was exactly right. Adam's purpose was not only to work the soil, but his chief characteristic was that he was the image of God. When it is said that no animal was suitable for the man, this does not mean merely that no one was interesting enough to entertain him or capable enough to share his work, but it also means that none could complement him in reflecting the image of God.

So God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep, and while he was asleep, God took one of his ribs and closed up the place. Then from the rib he made a woman and brought her to the man. Adam said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man" (Genesis 2:23). God did not bring him a fish, a bird, or a monkey, or an elephant. He brought Adam another human that was different from him and that was suitable to him. Their bodily features and functions complemented one another – there was no conflict or redundancy, but a match. The woman was the ideal companion for the man, and no doubt, the man for the woman. And as the rest of Scripture suggests, the harmony of the two genders is not limited to the body, but they complement each other in their intellects and personalities as well. Most important of all, they complement each other in reflecting the image of God.

God did not bring him another man, but as Adam recognized, this other human was "taken out of man." Afterward humans would increase by sexual procreation, so that each woman after Eve would not come from the side of a man, just as each man after Adam would not directly come from the earth. Still, the Scripture says, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (2:24). Adam and Eve had no human parents, but from their relationship Scripture derives principles for future pairs that would have parents, showing that this relationship functions as a type or pattern for those that follow. That is, in a sexual relationship between humans, one member is like the one who was taken out of the earth, and the other is like the one who was taken out of man; otherwise, the relationship would be essentially dissimilar to the pattern established by Adam and Eve, and would exhibit a distortion of God's image rather than a true likeness.

Although the creation account makes a forceful and decisive argument, it sets us up for something even greater, and that encompasses the previous point. In his Letter to the Ephesians (5:22-23), Paul teaches that a marriage should imitate the relationship between Christ and the church. The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, and so the husband must love his wife just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. The wife is as the body of the husband as the church is the body of Christ, and so the wife must submit to her husband just as the church submits to Christ in all things.

Paul does not say that the union between Christ and the church is modeled after a human marriage; rather, he says that a human marriage ought to be like the relationship between Christ and the church. Even more remarkable is his reference to Genesis 2:24: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." He notes that "we are members of his body," but to declare this as the fulfillment of Genesis 2:24 means that Genesis 2:24 embodied this idea since the beginning.

In other words, it is not that the relationship between Christ and the church received its pattern from Genesis 2:24, but that Genesis 2:24 received its pattern from Christ and the church. Whereas Genesis 2:24 makes the marriage of Adam and Eve a type for future couples, the union between Christ and the church is in fact the archetype for all marriages,

including the one between Adam and Eve. The apostle calls this a "profound mystery," which in the Bible does not refer to something difficult to understand but to information hidden until a certain time, and that turns out to be simple and obvious when disclosed by revelation. The full meaning of human marriage was not revealed, or at least not revealed in such explicit terms, until the arrival of Jesus Christ.

Again, Paul's use of Genesis 2:24 indicates that, while the marriage of Adam and Eve provides a type for future marriages, it was in fact derived from the archetype of the union of Christ and the church. And while human marriage and sexuality began with creation and will eventually cease (Matthew 22:30), the union of Christ and the church was foreordained before the creation of the world and shall continue forever. Therefore, a human marriage is a reflection of Christ and the church. It has been this way since Adam and Eve. Although the union between Christ and the church is not a sexual relationship, the church is portrayed as female, and as the bride of Christ; likewise, we have established that Genesis 2:24 refers to marriage between a man and a woman. This in turn means that relationships that deviate from this pattern – that are adulterous, homosexual, religiously mixed, and so on – are incapable of properly reflecting and honoring the union of Christ and the church, and thus they are also inherently inferior, defective, and sinful.

An animal can be a good meal or a good pet to a man, and a man can be a good friend or a good business partner to another man, but an animal or a man can never become a suitable companion to a man, and an animal or a woman can never have this "bones of my bones and flesh of my flesh" intimacy with a woman as typified by our first parents. We all realize this. We know it by nature, by instinct, by reason, and by revelation. But just as men in their wickedness suppressed their knowledge of God "and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (Romans 1:23), they have also suppressed the truth about human nature and sexuality so that "their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones" and "the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another" (1:26-27).

Any time we deviate from God's arrangement, we inevitably end up with something grotesque and destructive. Thus when men abandoned the immortal God, they turned to worship that was inferior, and their deities became mere images of men, or even birds and beasts. Likewise, homosexual relationships are inherently inferior because they abandon God's arrangement for marriage and sexuality. Just as idolatry is an affront to the nature and majesty of God, representing him with images of birds, and bulls, and demons, homosexuality is an affront to Jesus Christ, who cherished his bride and gave his life for her. Homosexuality can never be an expression of love, but it will always be a demonstration of how unlike God we have become because of sin.

Here we focus on homosexuality because it is our topic, but similar criticisms apply to fornication, to adultery, to a marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian, or a marriage in which the wife refuses to submit to the husband, or one in which the husband fails to love the wife as Christ loves the church. Homosexuality is indeed a gross form of

perversion and a more obvious manifestation of human depravity, but we condemn all arrangements that deviate from God's design.

Since we condemn every arrangement that does not reflect the image of God and that does not honor the mystery of Christ, and since these are among the reasons that we oppose, this means that those who practice or endorse homosexuality do not cross us only on a narrow issue, but their stance represents a wholesale rejection of the Christian faith, even its very essence. And this must mean that they can have no part in salvation. Or, as the apostle writes, "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them" (1:32). For this reason, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against these wicked men and women (1:18).

There is much resistance to this message. As homosexuals and their supporters become increasingly vocal and aggressive, they begin to exhibit a disturbing resemblance to the homosexuals of Sodom. The angels that visited Lot's home probably looked like two strikingly handsome men. The homosexuals demanded, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them" (Genesis 19:5). But Lot would rather offer his own daughters for them to rape and abuse than to comply (v. 8). Instead of feeling ashamed, the people were filled with indignation, and said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge! We will treat you worse than them" (v. 9). And this is what the homosexuals and their supporters say. They complain, "Who are you to judge us?"

As they continue to escalate their propaganda and intimidation, it is not farfetched to imagine that they might eventually add violence to their repertoire and become the full successors to the Sodomites. This is not a slippery slope argument, for such an argument leaves the impression that it is the final end that we truly wish to avoid. Such a view would be overly lenient. Rather, I say that even without the violence, and even without the rape and abuse, homosexuality itself is a damnable transgression of God's law and God's design.

I mean that Sodom offers us a preview of how things may become. It is a realistic account of what sinful men will do and the extent that they will go in order to attain the freedom to live wicked lives. It is not farfetched, because Sodom shows us that this has already happened before. This is not to say that homosexuality itself leads to all of this – David committed murder to cover up his adultery, but adultery itself does not lead to murder. Nevertheless, when sin in all its facets, including homosexuality, is allowed to develop, the result tends to be an explosion of violence and destruction. And a society that condones homosexuality and other perversions is the environment that also encourages all kinds of wickedness to increase, because it is the kind of society that has rebelled against God's commandments.

Jesus Christ is the only antidote, and as his disciples, Christians must take a stand and declare the Lord's message and his standard. Those who sin are wretched and contemptible. More wretched and contemptible are those who sin but refuse to admit it. And even more wretched and contemptible are those who sin, refuse to admit it, and then by propaganda

and intimidation compel others to approve their sin. This is the kind of people that we face. Therefore, be strong in the Lord and be infused with his power, so that you may be able to stand your ground, and having done all, to stand. And let us resolve to endure opposition for the sake of God's elect. Some of the chosen ones are ensnared by homosexuality, but their souls will awake to righteousness when they hear the call of God. As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news." They are waiting for us to tell them, "Rejoice! Jesus Christ has come to set you free!"