

THE VIEW FROM ABOVE

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PREFACE

At first I intended this book to be a series of concise reflections based on passages spanning the whole Gospel of John. But at the outset, it began to explode into something that would be much longer. Since I have other worthy projects that demand my attention, to continue the book in the same manner would require time and effort that I cannot afford at the moment. Therefore, I have decided to release the completed articles covering the first four chapters of the Gospel. In its present form the book falls far short of the breadth of my original plan, but it makes up for this by the more detailed expositions of those points that it does cover.

By presenting select episodes and discourses from the life of Christ, the Gospel of John offers a heavenly philosophy that is superior to any earthly philosophy, and that stands in sharp contrast to it. It was my intention to demonstrate and expound on this as I teach through the entire Gospel. Although this work now covers only four chapters of the Gospel of John, I am satisfied that it draws sufficient attention to some of the foundational principles of this heavenly philosophy that we call the Christian faith, and that as a result readers should be able to read the rest of the Gospel from this perspective.

Although this book is now released as a finished work, it remains possible that I will resume my original plan for it at a more convenient time in the future. However, what is more likely is that I will begin another project to address some of the other passages in the Gospel of John.

Meanwhile, my desire for this book is that it will help readers appreciate the heavenly wisdom and power that have been brought to us in the Lord Jesus, so that we are no longer to think and live as people "from below." Rather, because we have been born "from above" through Jesus Christ, although we remain in this world, we are no longer of the world. As Christians, we think, speak, and function on a higher plane, an altogether superior level of competence and intelligence.

If Christians will finally grasp and enforce this principle, it will revolutionize all things. It will overturn their many deficient doctrines and policies, so entangled with human tradition and false humility. And it will also put an end to their compromise with the world of unbelief. That is, they will know that in Christ we are a superior race, and all strategies of appeasement will then appear as foolish and unnecessary.

This book takes its title from the first article, which also functions as an introduction to the rest of the collection.

1. THE VIEW FROM ABOVE

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. (John 3:31-33)

Truth is one by definition. It is singular – there is only one truth and not many truths. It is self-consistent – there is no self-contradiction in the truth. It is exclusive – anything that contradicts the truth must be false. There are, however, many philosophies that claim to be the truth. Here I refer to philosophy in the general sense of a principle, a way of thinking, and mainly a system of thought. Religion is included in this meaning of the word, but if you are suspicious of the word in a discussion about the Christian faith, then you can replace it with belief, or thinking, or perhaps doctrine.

Although it appears that there are many philosophies, each with their own methods, premises, and conclusions, there are in fact only two main philosophies. There is a philosophy from above, the heavenly philosophy. There is a philosophy from below, the earthly philosophy. One consists of revelation. The other consists of speculation. One is a message from heaven. The other is the opinion of man.

One comes from an all-powerful and all-knowing God. The other is the product of human delusions, inventions, and preferences. It is a result of man's delusions, because he has deceived himself into thinking that his methods can discover truth. It is a result of man's inventions, because he often simply makes things up. And it is a result of his preferences, because his methods, his delusions, and his inventions have been selected to please his sinful dispositions and to excuse himself from God's demands.

The philosophy from below is an attempt to escape or to replace the philosophy from above. Thus although there is an appearance of variety, all non-Christian philosophies are reduced to one because they are in fact all earthly philosophies. They never rise above the subjective and irrational principles of mere men. This is the simple dividing line: divine revelation or human speculation.

There was a theologian who wrote, "All teaching of Scripture is apparently contradictory." Such a statement, of course, is blasphemy. He was never able to offer an acceptable explanation or to demonstrate that the doctrines of Scripture were all apparently contradictory, and his followers have been entirely unsuccessful in explaining away this and similar statements that he made. Nevertheless, he was a professor in apologetics, and he was, and still is, hailed as one of the greatest defenders of the faith in the previous century.

My interest is not to discuss his sin of blasphemy, but rather to explain it in terms of our present discussion. Why did he blaspheme? He was convinced of his position on God's incomprehensibility, which led him to insist that our knowledge of God is nothing more than an analogical knowledge. This view of God was not derived from Scripture, but was imposed on Scripture, so that he did not regard only God as incomprehensible, but also the Scripture as incomprehensible. Thus he said that "Scripture is apparently contradictory" – all of it.

I have shown in another publication that the Bible does not in fact teach that God is incomprehensible. God is not incomprehensible in himself, for otherwise he could not fully know himself, and that would contradict his omniscience. He is incomprehensible to us only in the sense that he is infinite, so that there is always more about him to know than we already know. But what we do know, we know univocally, and not analogically – that is, unless we do not really know it.

So the relevant divine attribute is his infinity, and not his incomprehensibility, which is not a divine attribute at all. But now think about this. What would mislead a person into thinking that incomprehensibility is a divine attribute, when the Bible teaches no such thing, and when it does not fit in with other clearly defined divine attributes? The answer is that the doctrine is a projection of a human attribute, that man is finite. Whether or not we fully comprehend God, he is fully comprehensible in himself, since he fully comprehends himself. When we assert or imply that he is not fully comprehensible in himself – that this characteristic is a divine attribute – then we have imposed the implication of a human attribute on our understanding of God. When we do this, we are speaking about God not as he reveals himself, but as earthly men speaking about earthly things. Since God is not an earthly thing, when we continue in our earthly way of speaking while referring to him, the result is confusion, heresy, and even the great sin of blasphemy.

This theologian was fond of saying that we are to "think God's thoughts after him," but this was the one thing that he did not do. Because he held on to the philosophy from below, he failed to speak about God the way that Scripture itself speaks about God – the way that God speaks about himself. Unless God confesses that his own thoughts about himself entail apparent contradictions, or unless God confesses that his own revelation about himself entail apparent contradictions, it is not up to this theologian to determine this. A person who thinks God's thoughts after him would affirm that his verbal revelation is obviously non-contradictory and undeniably self-consistent. He would reject all this rubbish about how it is impossible to understand an infinite God in an immediately coherent manner – the omniscient and omnipotent God made us, and he knew how to speak to us, even in our fallen condition.

If God is self-consistent, knows that he is self-consistent, and reveals himself as self-consistent, then a person can perceive apparent contradictions in God's words about himself only because of something in man – because of the way man grasps and perceives things. But this is the opposite of thinking God's thoughts after him. Rather, it is to insist on using our own perspective, or our own thoughts, to examine and interpret God's thoughts. It is to think man's thoughts about God, even apart from and in antagonism to God's revelation

about himself. This way of thinking refuses to learn from God as to how we should think about God.

Thus the philosophy from above ended up invading his thoughts and clashing with his thoughts, rather than converting his thoughts. And the contradictions that he perceived were not contradictions that appeared within revelation, but they were contradictions between the philosophy from above that was in Scripture, and the philosophy from below that was in his mind, and that he refused to abandon.

This was evident in his method of apologetics, in which he approved man's methods of discovery, including the reliability of sensation and the scientific method. He claimed that biblical presuppositions account for them. But I have shown in my other works that these are false and irrational in themselves. It is impossible for them to lead to true conclusions about anything. To say that biblical presuppositions account for them is to say that these biblical presuppositions are also false and irrational.

He made a lot of noise about pressing the antithesis between Christian and non-Christian thought, but even at the very foundation of his system of thought, he tried to make divine philosophy endorse human philosophy, to make the philosophy of authority appease and approve the philosophy of rebellion. In this manner, he paid lip service to divine revelation, but retained all the evils and fallacies of human speculation.

Despite his pretension, he could not let go of his man-centered thinking, and it is for this same reason that many people continue to follow him. This philosophy offers a mask of submission to revelation, but at the root is subversion against revelation, and man's methods and judgments are jealously guarded as preconditions to even enter into the knowledge of revelation. He was so obsessed with justifying this tension within himself, and so possessed by the drive to make the heavenly philosophy bow to his earthly philosophy, that he even banded together with others to persecute those who affirmed that God's revelation was clear and coherent, so that all apparent contradictions were easily resolved.

In any case, by nature apparent contradictions tell us something about the person who perceives them, and not the matter that supposedly contains these contradictions. If you see a contradiction where none exists, as this is what it means to see an apparent contradiction, then all this tells us is that there is something wrong with you. You are defective in some way. And if you see a contradiction in God's clear and coherent doctrine, then all this tells us is that there is something wrong with you. To resolve this, we must not only explain the Bible to you, but we would have to adjust your perspective and your attitude.

Yet, is it possible to share the view from above? Is it possible to grasp and adopt God's thoughts, and God's way of thinking? This is a most important issue. Although he claimed that it was possible, this theologian did not really believe it, and he persecuted those who knew better than he did, and thought that he was doing God a service. But he was not the only one. As long as the earthly philosophy survives, it will persecute the heavenly

philosophy. By the light of heaven, man's thoughts are exposed as inferior and irrational, but in his rebellion he refuses to renounce them.

We must take warning from this, because it is popular to appeal to God's incomprehensibility to excuse man's refusal to accept revelation. Since this excuse draws attention to God's greatness, it appears to honor him, but the effect is to deny what he has revealed to us – the clarity of it, the simplicity of it – in order to protect human beliefs and opinions, or to excuse the refusal to adopt this higher and true philosophy. The admission of incompetence gives the appearance of humility, and at the same time excuses one's refusal to change. The admission of finitude, when done for this reason, is offered only to preserve one's comfort. It is a false humility. God is not deceived by it.

Let me give you another illustration, so that you would not think I am targeting one person for criticism. In a sermon on Psalm 73, in which the Psalmist stumbles over the prosperity of the wicked, Lloyd-Jones says, "We are dealing with the ways of Almighty God, and He has told us so often in His Book, 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.' Half our trouble arises from the fact that we do not realize that that is the basic position from which we must always start."¹ This statement is then used to justify the assertion that perplexity about the ways of God, such as that which the Psalmist experienced, is neither "surprising" nor "sinful."²

The verse that he cites comes from Isaiah 55. We will read verses 8 and 9: "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'" Verse 9 makes this passage especially relevant for us, since it states that God's thoughts are higher than man's thoughts just as the heavens are higher than the earth. This coincides with our consideration regarding the philosophy from above and the philosophy from below.

The question is whether it is possible for mere men to grasp and adopt the philosophy from above. And this question is answered for us by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:

However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" – but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.

For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Faith on Trial: Studies in Psalm 73* (Christian Heritage, 2008), p. 17.

² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:9-16)

Verse 9 says that man has not conceived of the heavenly philosophy, but then verse 10 says that God has revealed it to us. Verse 11 says that only the Spirit knows the thoughts of God, but then verse 12 says that God has given us his Spirit so that we may know these thoughts. And verse 13 says that the revelation of these thoughts touches even the very words used to communicate them to us. These are not just words spoken to us that we may or may not understand. Paul says that the Spirit taught him the words, and then he used those words to teach others. The passage is a guarantee that a Christian can grasp and even teach the heavenly philosophy.

What kind of person would find God's words apparently contradictory? "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." How can this be, if God is so lofty and incomprehensible, and we are so finite in our own minds and thoughts? But who told you to hold on to your own mind and your own thoughts? Paul answers, "We have the mind of Christ."

Thus Lloyd-Jones makes an illegitimate appeal to the statement, "My thoughts are not your thoughts." Using this statement to excuse perplexity about the ways of God or even the goodness of God is misleading and irresponsible. God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts, but who says that we are stuck with our thoughts? He has revealed his thoughts in the Scripture. He says that perplexity about God is not sinful. But if we are perplexed about the ways of God because we have failed to read the Scripture, then of course this is sinful. And if we have read the Scripture, but remain perplexed about the prosperity of the wicked, how is it not sinful? His statement amounts to saying, "It is not sinful to have never read the Scripture, and it is not sinful to have read the Scripture and act as if you have never read it." What an insult this is to God and the Scripture.

He says that we must begin with perplexity about the ways and thoughts of God: "Half our trouble arises from the fact that we do not realize that that is the basic position from which we must always start." Such a statement excuses sin and encourages rebellion in God's people. Our trouble is in the exact opposite. It is in insisting that this is the position from which we must always start. Because of unbelief and rebellion, we insist that we must begin from man's assumptions, and since God's ways differ from our expectations, it follows that we must begin from perplexity about the wisdom and goodness of God. Listen! Are we Christians or not? If we are, then we can begin from God's thoughts, and begin from a position of confidence, understanding, and obedience. Anything less is sin. Indeed, some of us may be weak at times, and God will forgive us when we stumble, but let us not mock God by saying that we must begin from sin.

All of this is relevant because it illustrates a broad theme in the Gospel of John. Jesus was from above, and spoke as one from above. The men who heard him were from below, and spoke as those from below. When Jesus came and bore witness to the things of heaven, he clashed with those who affirmed a philosophy from below. Those who did not convert their way of thinking became hostile, and persecuted him. But those who believed on him were changed and enlightened, so that Jesus said that although they were still in the world, they were no longer of the world. This is what he called being born again, or born from above. And he said that unless a man is born again or born from above, he cannot even see the kingdom of God. By this he did not mean physical sight, but a spiritual perception or an intellectual grasp of the things of God.

By depicting select episodes from the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of John presents a heavenly philosophy – that is, the view from above. There exists a constant tension between this heavenly philosophy and the earthly philosophy. And throughout this Gospel you will see how the men from below misunderstood, misrepresented, and clashed with this philosophy from above. Since the two philosophies were affirmed by persons, they are naturally personified in Christ and his disciples, and in the Jews, the Pharisees, the Greeks, the Romans, and so on. And the conflict between these two different and opposing ways of thinking were acted out by those involved in the history of Jesus Christ.

The Christian faith is a word, a revelation, a philosophy from another world, even from above. As we study the Gospel of John, I pray the doctrine from above will not only invade your mind, so as to disturb it, but that it will subdue your mind and convert it, so that in believing the Lord Jesus, you may also have life through him.

2. JESUS AND TRINITY

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

John explains the purpose of his Gospel as follows: "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). He does not tell us this until the end of his Gospel, although the doctrine is repeatedly asserted and illustrated in the text. It may be that he wishes to guide us to this conclusion, or to reach this conclusion with him as he presents episodes from the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

In any case, the central proposition that John advances by this Gospel is "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." And John advances the proposition because it is by believing this that men will "have life in his name." Thus we know that this Gospel is about Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ was the incarnation of the Son of God. That is, God took upon himself a human nature and lived on the earth for a time. He was the God-man.

However, John begins his Gospel with no mention of the God-man. He does not make the incarnation explicit until 1:14. One might argue that it is suggested in the previous verses, but they only indicate that "the Word" was in the world, and not that he was made flesh. The idea that the earlier verses could refer to the incarnation must be read back into them after the later verses are understood. And John does not name the incarnate Son of God as Jesus Christ until 1:17. Rather, he begins with several definite and precise statements about "the Word" without any consideration of the incarnation or the name of Jesus.

John does not introduce his subject as Jesus Christ right away, because he traces the history of this person to a time before the incarnation, stating that he was already in existence. And in fact, he traces the history of this person to a point before creation itself, stating that he was already in existence even at that point, that he was not a creature, but that he was the one who made all things. That which he calls "the Word" did not take upon himself a human nature until God's appointed time. As Paul writes, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law" (Galatians 4:4). Although he was born as a human person at that time, he had been in existence as the Word even before time.

This does not undermine the incarnation; indeed, it highlights and explains the doctrine. This approach highlights the doctrine because the incarnation would lose all meaning if it is taken as the birth of an ordinary human person who came into existence at conception. In fact, that would not be any special incarnation of anything at all. But John highlights the incarnation by drawing attention to the pre-incarnate condition of the Word. Then, this approach explains the incarnation because it tells us what it was that was incarnated, and who it was that came into the world. The divine nature is considered on its own before the incarnation is mentioned. Thus for John to begin his Gospel with the identity and activity

of the Word prior to the incarnation clarifies for us the nature of the Christ, that in him there was the divine nature, who was made flesh, so that there was also the human nature.

Perhaps because of their zeal to exalt the necessity and the reality of the incarnation, some people claim much more for it than they have biblical warrant to do. It is popular for some believers to insist that the Son of God cannot be considered apart from the incarnation, and there is even the claim that God cannot be understood without the personal revelation of the Son of God in his incarnate state. Those who think this way might congratulate themselves for rendering so much honor to Christ as the God-man, but they are wrong. John is doing right here what they say cannot and must not be done. He talks about "the Word" entirely apart from the incarnation.

It is wrong to say that we could not know what God was really like until the Son of God was made flesh and showed us what God was like by his words and deeds. This is because such a doctrine amounts to a denial of the whole Old Testament. It is also wrong to suppose that Jesus came to show us some of the major dimensions of God's character that had not been clearly revealed before, such as his love and forgiveness. This is because the Old Testament explicitly and repeatedly refers to God's love and forgiveness, and other attributes that the ignorant consider to be peculiar to the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Moreover, it would be wrong to suggest that Christ came to show us a way of salvation that was previously unknown. Since the gospel was preached to humanity even at the beginning, almost immediately after our first parents fell into sin. And then the ideas of atonement, faith, and repentance had been declared throughout the centuries by the prophets. Jesus Christ came to fulfill these teachings, already revealed long ago in the Old Testament.

Some Old Testament doctrines would either suggest or refer to the incarnation as predictions, but my point is that they were revealed before the incarnate Word came in the flesh to tell us about these doctrines. They were revealed by the inspiration of the Spirit to the prophets, declared by them, and understood by their hearers, prior to and apart from the incarnation of the Word. Even now, it is possible to discuss God, even the Son of God, without any thought of the incarnation, as John himself does at the beginning of his Gospel. It is indeed possible to know and to discuss the nature of God entirely apart from the incarnation. The same applies to the Holy Spirit – the Old Testament gives us teachings about him that are perfectly intelligible, although they were given before the incarnation.

Again, this does not devalue the incarnation, but it is to correct a misguided piety and an exaggerated claim in relation to it. It is wrong to exalt the incarnate Word by implying that the older portion of Scripture was almost entirely useless. Another point to consider is that if the Word is the revelation of God, the express image of the Father, the divine intellectual ambassador of the Godhead, then the Old Testament is his revelation just as much as the incarnate Word or the words of the New Testament. He had been revealing himself – clearly, accurately, and meaningfully – since the beginning. Thus in honoring the revelation brought to us by the incarnate Word, we must take care not to insult or deny the revelation brought to us by the pre-incarnate Word.

Apart from any relation to the incarnation, the Word "was God" and "was with God." That the Word "was God" refers to the deity of the Word. It was this "Word" that was made flesh, that took up a human nature, and the God-man was called Jesus, who was the Christ. The deity of the Word was unaffected by and unmingled with the humanity that it took up; however, the two natures had come together in a permanent union, so that it would be accurate to refer to Jesus Christ as God or as man, or as God and man.

The Word "was God," but John adds that the Word was "with God." This shows that it is possible to make a distinction between the Word and the one called "God" in this context. The doctrine of the Trinity is suggested here. Although John 1:1 does not mention the Holy Spirit, there are passages in the Bible that teach what we read here concerning the Word – that the Holy Spirit is God, or deity, and that he can be distinguished from the Father and the Son. When members of the Godhead are distinguished, then the word "God" usually refers to the Father; otherwise, "God" would denote the entire Godhead, or the Trinity. Thus our verse says that Jesus was God, in that he was deity, and that he was with God, in that he was distinguishable from the God the Father.

Again, this information serves to indicate what or who it was that came into the world, that was incarnated. John's answer is that it was the Word, or God the Son, that took up a human nature and lived among men in the person of Jesus Christ. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus refers to his being sent by the Father, that he is teaching the Father's words and doing his works. This would be unintelligible if there is no distinction between Jesus and the Father, although Jesus claims to be God himself. The Trinity makes perfect sense of this. John 1:1 prepares us for it, and notes that this relationship existed before the incarnation, and that it was not an effect of the incarnation.

The Christian faith affirms that there is one God, and that God is one. The objection against the doctrine of the Trinity is that it contradicts monotheism. Christians often admit that there is an apparent contradiction, and some seem curiously happy about it. But the idea of an "apparent" contradiction is subjective, so that it is useless except to expose the disturbed condition and the incompetence of the one to which such a contradiction is apparent. Either there is a contradiction or there is no contradiction. If a person sees a logical contradiction where there is none, this tells us nothing about the matter under discussion, but it tells us that the person is logically delusional. If the Christian faith contradicts itself by its doctrine of the Trinity, then the doctrine cannot be true. But if there is no contradiction, then there should not even be an apparent one. Contrary to common Christian behavior, to perceive an apparent contradiction is nothing to boast about, if we mean that one perceives a contradiction where there is none.

A standard explanation offered to those who suffer under the logical delusion that the doctrine contradicts monotheism is successful. The basic principle is to note that a contradiction occurs only when one asserts that something is so and not so at the same time and in the same sense. The doctrine of the Trinity is that God is one in one sense, and three in another sense. This alone is sufficient to avoid contradiction, even if we know nothing more about the Trinity, such as the precise nature of the union and the relation between the

members of the Godhead. As long as God is not one and three in the same sense, there is no contradiction.

Let us think about this another way.

As far as I can recall, when I first learned about the doctrine of the Trinity as a child, it did not occur to me that someone might consider it a contradiction to the doctrine that there is one true God. Even if I was aware of the alleged problem, it did not make an impression on me. In fact, the first time that I was really made aware of it was when I read a Christian's answer to it as a teenager.

Why was this? It was not because I lacked understanding of the idea of a contradiction. Even as a child, I knew that the various religions contradicted one another, that the Christian God was not like Buddha, or any non-Christian deity or figure – these things were very clear to me. I understood polytheism, that it contradicted monotheism, and I never thought that the Trinity was anything like polytheism. So I understood the idea of a contradiction, and I could distinguish between religions that contradicted one another. But I saw no contradiction, whether apparent or actual, in the doctrine of the Trinity.

Rather, I saw no contradiction because the Trinity was the one God that the Christian Scripture introduced to me from the start. The Christian God had never been introduced to me as an anti-Trinity. To say this another way, I had never accepted the pagan definitions of God as foundational, and then graduated from that to the Christian concept of God. I never had the need to make the Trinity consistent with the non-Christian idea of the oneness of God. The Christian God had always been a Trinity.

If we take one "god" as define by the pagans and multiply it, then we would have many gods, or polytheism. But if we consider the Christian revelation on its own terms, instead of comparing it with or accommodating it to the pagan definition, then we would see that Scripture does not define the oneness of God one way here and another way there. It teaches that there is one God, and only one God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is what God means. What are we saying, then, when we affirm that there is one God? We mean that there is only one Trinity. A problem occurs only when we smuggle a non-Christian idea of God into the discussion and then attempt to make the Christian God fit into it.

The Christian idea of God is a Trinity. Now, the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. However, this does not mean that, if God is a Trinity, then there must be three Trinities, or that each one is only a third of deity. This again fails to consider the Christian doctrine on its own terms. I will illustrate with the relation between the Son and the Father. The Son is God, and he refers to the Father as if he is distinguishable from the Father. But then the Son himself says, "The Father and I are one." That is, he can be distinguished from the Father, but not separated from him.

Of course, if God the Father does not exist, then there could be no relation that would make the other member God the Son. Moreover, if the Father could perish, or the relation

between the Father and the Son could be otherwise, or if the Father and the Son could ever disagree, then this would not be the Christian idea of God in the first place. The relations within the Trinity are intrinsic to the definition of the Godhead. When God the Son is said to be "God," it is understood that God is a Trinity, and the Son's relation to the Father is implicit, since we call him the Son. Thus we do not say, "God, God, God," but "the Father, the Son, and the Spirit."

The Christian God should have never been made to reconcile with some non-Christian idea of monotheism. Every idea of "God" comes from a worldview. If it comes from the Christian worldview, then we are already referring to a Trinity, and all other worldviews are contradicted by us right away. But if the idea of God comes from a non-Christian worldview, then it is different from the Christian view from the start, and the Christian view has no obligation to adopt this foreign definition in its self-description. If the Trinity were a community of three "gods" in the pagan sense, then it would be impossible to reconcile this with the pagan idea of monotheism, or one non-triune deity. But the Trinity is one God in the Christian sense, and this Christian idea of God necessarily includes the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, whose very names acknowledge the Trinity and imply their relations.

The Word, then, was God, or deity. In terms of the Trinity, he was God the Son.³ John begins his Gospel by preparing us to learn that Jesus of Nazareth was the incarnation of the Word, the incarnation of deity. As God, Jesus possessed all the attributes of deity and all the honor due to deity, even our worship. Throughout his Gospel, he would illustrate this to us by presenting episodes or snapshots of Christ's discourses and miracles, and by them to also show us the implications of his coming, especially as it pertains to our salvation.

³ God was, is, and will be the same, and the divine nature of the Word remained the same after the incarnation. If the Word was God, then he is God. The same must be said regarding the God-man Jesus Christ – he was God, and he is God. However, in this context we follow John in speaking of the Word in the past tense. His Gospel narrative begins from a time before the incarnation, and refers to the Word apart from the incarnation, so that we may have a clear understanding of who or what it was that took up a human nature.

3. JESUS AND REASON

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. (John 1:1, 9)

The Greek word translated "Word" in John 1:1 is *Logos*. There has been some debate as to what John has in mind when he refers God the Son with this term. Some of the Greeks regarded the Logos as the rational principle of the universe. It provided the structure that held everything together and regulated the operation of all of reality. It was this same principle that instilled reason in man, and provided him the ability to think, to distinguish, and to make deductions.

The question is whether John has this Greek Logos in mind when he applies the term to the Son of God. Some are concerned that, if this is admitted, then it would appear as if John is borrowing a Greek concept for use on something so fundamental to the Christian faith as the nature of Christ. Others suggest that John could not have the Greek Logos in mind since there are major differences between the Logos in John's Gospel and the Logos in Greek thought. To the Greeks, the Logos was not a personal entity, and they would have rejected the idea that the Logos could take up a human nature and walk among us.

Both of these objections are inadequate and inconclusive. Even if John has the Greek Logos in mind as he writes, it does not mean that his Logos is an *adaptation from* Greek thought, but it could be an *answer to* it. To illustrate, I could take the Chinese idea of "the King of Heaven" and use that as my starting point to speak about the Christian God. Whether or not that is advisable is a separate question, but it is possible, as long as I note the differences and add those things that are lacking along the way. I would not be borrowing the very idea of God from the Chinese, but using my existing understanding of God to correct their conception. And so, that the Greeks did not conceive of a personal Logos that could be made flesh has no relevance to the question. John could be asserting that God the Son is the reality of which their Logos is but a dim reflection, and along with this he introduces the idea that the Logos is in fact personal, and even had come in the flesh.

One proposed alternative is that John has in mind not the Greek Logos, but the "Word" or "Wisdom" in the Old Testament and Jewish literature. This "Wisdom" is said to be with God since the beginning, and is said to be an agent in the creation of all things. Thus there appears to be more similarities between this and the Logos in John's Gospel. However, we must not overstate the implication of this observation. The fact that the "Word" in John's Gospel may have more similarities with the Jewish "Wisdom" than the Greek "Logos" is no necessary indication that John must have in mind the Jewish Wisdom rather than the Greek Logos, or the Jewish Wisdom to the exclusion of the Greek Logos. It remains possible that John has the Greek Logos in mind, or that he has both the Jewish Wisdom and the Greek Logos in mind, or that he has neither one in mind.

The issue is of secondary importance, since what this Gospel and the rest of the New Testament say about Jesus Christ retain a complete and inflexible meaning regardless of any Jewish or Greek context in John's mind. Nevertheless, the debate brings our attention to the question of who or what Jesus was in relation to the creation and the operation of the universe, and to the rational nature of man. Does the Logos order and control the universe? Is it the Logos that enables man to think and to reason? We can understand the nature of the Logos from the teachings of the New Testament alone.

By the rational principle of the universe, we mean the intelligence that determines the structure of creation, and the power that regulates its operation. We refer to the Wisdom that conceives the design and the nature of all the various object in creation, and the Power that maintains the relationships between these objects. We find that Christ meets this description. Paul writes, "For by him all things were created...all things were created by him and for him...and in him all things hold together...in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 1:16-17, 2:3). Then, we read in Hebrews 1:3, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."⁴ And back in John's Gospel: "In him was life, and that life was the light of men...the true light that gives light to every man" (1:4, 9).⁵

Thus with a few words Christ is said to fulfill the entire conception of the Greek Logos, and even exceeds it, in that he is a person. If Logos is Reason, then Christ is Reason personified. And the Word made flesh was Reason incarnate. Again, Scripture says that all wisdom and knowledge are in him, and it says that all things were created by him, and that he is the one who sustains creation. Notice that it does not only say that he created and now sustains the universe, but that he is characterized by "wisdom and knowledge." So whether we call him Reason, or Wisdom, or Knowledge, Christ is the divine Mind or Intelligence that created and now sustains the universe. He fulfills and exceeds the Greek Logos, and he is what he is regardless of the Greek Logos, or whether we have any contact with Greek thought. It is entirely legitimate to call him Mind, or Intelligence, or Reason.

So, does John have in mind the Greek Logos? It does not matter. But is God the Son the rational principle of the universe? Yes, he is. This makes Jesus Christ the incarnation of supreme intelligence, and of wisdom and reason. Therefore, the disciples of Christ are rationalists in the highest sense of the word. Christians are the disciples of Reason. His revelation is our first principle, and our knowledge comes from valid deductions from it. Although he satisfies the idea of Reason, and although Scripture asserts that he is the Mind that created and now sustains the universe, some refuse to acknowledge this for fear that it would appear as if we are appealing to or agreeing with Greek thought. But this is to spit on Christ to spite the Greeks. It does not matter what the Greeks thought. And outside of

⁴ "He uses there the word 'Word,' but with such a meaning that he intends not only the power of the Son of God, but also an admirable arrangement and a well-defined order which He has put into created things, since He is the Wisdom of God. And we can behold Him in all creatures, because he sustains all things through His virtue and power." John Calvin, *The Deity of Christ* (Old Paths Publications, 1997), p. 30.

⁵ "And what life? As all things are made and preserved through the Word of God. However, there is something more excellent in man, that is, soul, intelligence, and reason." *Ibid.*, p. 32.

the Old Testament, it does not matter what the Jews thought.⁶ The New Testament teaches that Jesus Christ is Reason, Mind, Wisdom, and Intelligence.

Reason, then, is the way God thinks. This is reflected in the order and design of the universe, and in the ability in man to engage in logical thought. Thus when "reason" is used in a sense that is void of content, it amounts to the bare laws of logic. That is, reason without content refers to logic. When content is included, it refers to God's mind, part of which has been revealed to us through the Scripture. That is, reason with content refers to truth. And we have been enabled to think like him by the regeneration and illumination of the Spirit. As Christians, we can think according to Logic – the *structure* of God's thought. And with logic, we can understand, process, and apply Truth – the *content* of God's thought.

Let us consider some of the implications.

Since Jesus *is* Reason, we should exalt Reason to the highest place. It is a testimony to the success of Satan's deception that Christians have an almost superstitious fear of reason. Part of this is due to unnecessary and inaccurate definitions. One use of the word assumes an exclusion of religion or revelation. But as you can see by the way we defined reason above, the rejection of religion or revelation is an unnecessary addition to the bare idea of reason. Another use of the word has it refer to the human ability to think or to discover. But such a meaning carries with it a huge baggage that has been smuggled in without warrant, and not by logical or linguistic necessity.

If reason is necessarily associated with anti-biblical thought, then of course we should be wary of it. But our discussion should have eliminated all doubt that reason belongs to us, and if there is any remaining reservation, we should learn to get over it. I could use the word "wisdom" and refer to the same thing. The word is sufficient. For example, I could say that Jesus is Wisdom, and therefore we must serve God in a manner that follows and applies wisdom. For this statement, I would mean approximately the same thing whether I use the word "mind," or "wisdom," or "intelligence." But I would choose to use the word "reason" even when I do not have to, because Christians have such a hang-up over it, and I hope that by rubbing it in their faces, I will help them get over it. It is a good word, and not to be hijacked by the unbelievers so that they may gloat over us with it.

The typical discussion on the relationship between faith and reason is misguided. Given what we have said above, we must reject proposals like faith against reason, or faith with reason, or faith beyond reason. In these proposals, the loaded version of reason is referred to, that is, one that is inseparably tied to man's ability to think apart from revelation. But we must reject this loaded meaning, and rather use the word in a way that is consistent with our own worldview, which would equate faith with reason. In fact, anything that does not make faith and reason identical must be false. The only legitimate conception on the relationship between faith and reason is that faith *is* reason.

⁶ The Old Testament is a Christian book anyway, not a Jewish book. Any Jew who does not believe the New Testament – any Jew who is not a Christian – does not really believe the Old Testament.

You say, "Reason is limited." But God's reason is not limited. Stop using yourself as the reference point for everything in the universe, and you shall greatly expand your mental horizon, and the scope of your intellectual perception. For me, it would make no sense to say that God is beyond reason, since to me that would mean that God is beyond himself, or beyond his own ability to think. My view of reason leaves man's ability far behind, because it is a baggage that I have no obligation to accept regarding my use of this word or idea. If God can reason, and if God is reason, then the word does not have to be reduced to man's ability to think.

Another implication is that we must serve God with our thinking, with the utmost care and diligence in the use of reason. Consider what this means to our theology, preaching, education, and so on. We could spend many hours discussing these positive implications of the Christian's affinity to Reason; however, since we must mention a few other implications, I will leave it to you to spend more time thinking about how the proper use of reason should promote the health and soundness of Christian faith.

When God created man, he breathed life into him, and gave him a rational spirit. After man rebelled against God, the corruption of sin inflicted severe damage to his mind, including his desire and his ability to think in accordance to reason, to logic and to truth. This explains why non-Christians are very stupid. Any non-Christian of any period, any place, and any persuasion, can be easily defeated by a proper use of reason. There is no non-Christian view on any subject in all of human history that can withstand more than several seconds of logical analysis. And it takes several seconds because we are often too slow.

Nevertheless, the non-Christian has not turned into an animal. There remains a spark of reason in him, albeit something that is but a faint shadow of intelligence. This is why non-Christians, although they are very stupid, usually do not roam the hills like wild beasts, or randomly urinate on the streets, or babble nonsense and foam at the mouth while blankly staring at the sky. God preserves their ability to function for his own purposes – for the glory of his name and the good of his elect.

Even Satan can appear as an angel of light, but his light is one that blinds the judgment of man, and not one that guides him to the truth. The non-Christians are like their father, the devil. Instead of using the feeble intellect that remains in them to cry out to God for illumination and forgiveness, they use it to construct alternate interpretations of the world and of reality, and to conspire against the Lord and his people. Empirical science is one of the more prominent examples in our day. Non-Christians think that by seeing, touching, and experimenting, they can infer true information about reality. But sensation is unreliable, induction is fallacious, and the scientific method is merely a systematic way to repeat the unreliable and the fallacious over and over again. Yet, men think that this is the pinnacle of intellectual development, the surest and fairest way to discover truth!

Jesus is the Lord of Reason. He is the light of the mind. Although by his own decree, sin has darkened the intellect of man, by his power and for his purpose, he preserves a spark of reason in the non-Christian. But he can snuff out even this tiny intelligence whenever he wishes, as he did for a time in Nebuchadnezzar, so that his sanity was taken away from

him. He became like an animal, and was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle (Daniel 4:29-37). On the other hand, in those whom he has chosen for salvation and whom he causes to believe his word, he kindles this spark of intelligence into a mighty blaze, flooding their minds with light – with clarity of mind, depth of thought, and grasp of the truth.

Jesus is my Reason. He is my wisdom, my truth, my sanity. Without him I am lost – no, not just lost to hellfire, but to foolish beliefs and irrational assumptions. By his grace, he has filled my mind with light, with true information and clear perception. His thoughts were not my thoughts, and his ways were not my ways. His thoughts were so far above mine as the heavens were above the earth. But he has changed me – I have been born again, this time, born from above. Now his thoughts have become my thoughts, and his ways have become my ways. Now I can grasp the heavenly philosophy, the thoughts from above, in a clear, precise, univocal manner. There are some who count themselves unworthy of this blessing, who refuse to enter and who prevent others to enter. But this is the inheritance of all believers, and those who hunger and thirst after wisdom and truth will break away from human traditions, from religious threats and deceptions, and enter into that which God has prepared for us even before the foundation of the world.

4. JESUS AND REVELATION

No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (John 1:18, NASB)

Two thousands years ago, God the Son took upon himself human nature and walked among us. As great as this event was, there are right ways to describe it and wrong ways to describe it. For example, it could be misleading to describe it with a cliché expression like saying that it "altered the course of history." This is because it did no such thing – although it was a most significant point in history, history itself had been running in the precise direction decreed by God, a direction that had been building toward and that had cumulated in the incarnation of Christ. God had prepared the world for his coming, so that the conditions were exactly right for the Son of God to come to us as a man to instruct mankind, to atone for sin, to defeat the devil, and to demonstrate the love and the power of God. This is a more accurate way to understand the incarnation.

Earlier I mentioned a teaching that, probably due to false piety and the influence of non-Christian thought, overstates the necessity of the incarnation when it comes to our understanding of God. It suggests that God is almost entirely hidden from us and unintelligible to us apart from the incarnation. This teaching, to whatever degree it is affirmed, is an insult to and a denial of the whole revelation of the Old Testament. God can be known, understood, and discussed with clarity and precision apart from the incarnation. He does it himself in the Old Testament through the prophets, and John makes a point of doing this in this Gospel before he mentions the incarnation. Again, this is not to devalue the incarnation – the greatness of the incarnation is such that there is no need to exaggerate it in order to honor it.

Some people insist that it is impossible to understand or to discuss God "in the abstract," but this is only because of their refusal to accept a God that can be explained in speech and grasped by intelligence. They talk so much about how impossible it is to understand God with their finite minds that it seems that they are even arrogant about their ignorance. Indeed, it is presumptuous to assume that we know so much about God as to know that we could not understand him even if he were to explain himself to us, even if he were to think that we can understand him. It is a false humility and a lazy theology. It is a private conception of divine transcendence that is so fiercely insisted upon that it amounts to a rejection of divine immanence. This criticism, it seems, applies more or less to almost all theologians in history. But it is not up to them to dictate what God can tell me or what I can understand.

This leads us to another false teaching about the incarnation, probably also invented due to false piety and the influence of non-Christian thought. I refer to the notion that Jesus Christ brought us a superior revelation in the sense that he brought a *personal* revelation and not a mere intellectual or *propositional* revelation. In other words, it is said that his *person* was

the revelation, or that his main contribution in terms of revelation was his *person*, and this was more significant than the words said by him or about him. Proponents of this view would perhaps claim no higher support than the Gospel of John. However, the Gospel teaches the opposite.

Our verse says that Jesus came and "explained" God. This sets the tone for the rest of the Gospel, and we find many instances where this is illustrated. The Samaritan woman in John 4 says, "I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us" (v. 25). This could be her opinion about what the Messiah would come to do, but keep in mind that the Gospel presents episodes from the life of Christ that are meant to educate us about him. In any case, Jesus answers, "I who speak to you am he" (v. 26). He was the Messiah that she expected, who would "explain everything."

Then, in John 6, when his hearers become offended and turn away from him, Jesus asks the Twelve, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" (v. 67). And Peter answers, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (v. 68). He focuses on the words, or the propositions and doctrines, and this is in a context where he affirms that Jesus is "the Holy One of God" (v. 69). In John 18, when Jesus answers Pilate, he says, "In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (v. 37). A testimony is a verbal declaration about someone or something, and he has come to give a verbal declaration about truth. This is how he defines his own mission.

Commenting on John's Prologue, William Barclay writes, "Jesus did not come to *talk* to men about God; he came to *show* men what God is like, so that the simplest mind might know him as intimately as the mind of the greatest philosopher."⁷ This is wrong both in the general principle assumed, and in the particular case of Jesus. Take John 13 as an example. There it is said that Jesus washed his disciples' feet. In doing this, he said, "I have set you an example." So if ever Jesus wanted to teach by "showing," this was it. But he told Peter to his face, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand" (v. 7). After he was finished, he said, "Do you understand what I have done for you?" (v. 12), and proceeded to offer an extensive explanation.

The disciples did not understand the significance of his action, so that it had to be verbally explained – Jesus *talked* to them about it. He talked to them about what he showed them. And the explanation included principles that could not be inferred from the action. For example: "You also should wash one another's feet," and "No servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him" (v. 14, 16). He talked to them about what he could not show them. Even "the greatest philosopher" could not have inferred with certainty Jesus' intention or the lesson he taught. His concrete action baffled the disciples, but even the simplest mind could have grasped the abstract explanation that he offered.

Barclay reflects a common opinion, but it is the exact opposite of what John's Gospel teaches. Although it is unbiblical and nonsensical, it is stubbornly maintained due to false

⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John, Volume 1* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), p. 67.

piety. It must be discarded if we are to truly honor the work of Jesus Christ. He came to *show* us *more* of what God is like by *talking* to us about him. It was mainly an intellectual "showing," not a physical or sensory demonstration. As John writes elsewhere, "We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true" (1 John 5:20).

Another way to state the popular view is, as Barclay writes, "To see truth we must look at Jesus."⁸ By this he means that "very few people can grasp abstract ideas," so that they are more able to learn when something is shown to them rather than talked about. We have already exposed this error. But what about the idea that we should "look at" Jesus? Is there any biblical basis for it?

In John 12:44-45, Jesus says, "When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. When he looks at me, he sees the one who sent me." And in John 14:9, he says, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" People seize upon this kind of statements to assert that Jesus brought us a personal revelation and not a propositional revelation.

But what did Jesus have in mind what he said these things? And what did John have in mind as he related these snapshots from the life of Christ?

These verses in John 12 and 14 have been misused. In John 12, Jesus continues, "As for the person who hears *my words*... There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept *my words*... For I did not *speak* of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to *say* and how to *say* it... So whatever I *say* is just what the Father has told me to *say*" (v. 47-50). Likewise, in John 14, Jesus immediately refers to his words, "Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The *words* I *say* to you are not just my own" (v. 10).

It is popular to stress a personal revelation using the statements, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father," and "I am in the Father" and "the Father is in me." But what was he talking about? He was talking about his words, his discourses, his doctrines. He was referring to an intellectual "seeing" all along. To "see" Jesus was to "see" the Father *because* Jesus said what his Father told him to say.

Therefore, the Bible again teaches the opposite of what these people affirm. One must rip these passages out of their context in order to assert an alternate meaning for what it means to "see" Jesus. This is what those who affirm the popular view have done. In asserting their idea of a personal revelation in contrast to the propositional, they never paid attention to what this person had to say. And I wonder how much they respect this person after all.

Jesus revealed God not by just showing up, but by speaking up. He revealed God not just by being a person, as if his very incarnation or his very existence as a man communicated God to the world, but he revealed God by speaking about him, using words to tell people

⁸ Ibid., p. 66.

about the attributes, purposes, and precepts of God. The notion that Jesus came to help us *know* God rather than to help us *know about* God is complete nonsense. Again, this is tied to the error that the revelation of God, or at least the superior revelation of God, is personal and not propositional. On the other hand, John's Gospel teaches us that Jesus Christ was a *personal* manifestation, who came to offer us a *propositional* revelation. The emphasis is never on physical sense or empirical seeing, but on spiritual understanding and intellectual perception. John would repeat this theme throughout the Gospel.

Jesus came and gave us a revelation of God. It is often suggested that he came to give us a revelation that was superior to previous revelations, in that God gave us propositional revelations by the prophets, but he gave us a personal revelation in Jesus Christ. This is a false contrast. Jesus was superior in his person than all the prophets, but he was a superior person who gave propositional revelation. As Hebrews 1:1-2 states, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." In other words, in Jesus Christ, God did not give us something superior to verbal revelation, but he had a superior person to give us verbal revelation. There is no contrast between the personal and the propositional.

"All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16). The Spirit of Christ was the inspiration of the prophets, so that their words are just as authentic and authoritative as the words of Christ, since they are all the words of Christ. Jesus did not speak in red letters. He spoke all the words of the Bible. The difference was that the prophets did not have the fullness of understanding, and certainly no single prophet had insight into the entire plan of God. On the other hand, Jesus had the Spirit without measure, and spoke from perfect understanding. Moreover, he said that he came "from above," from the Father, and that he testified about God on that basis. This suggests that he spoke from recollection rather than revelation as such, and he talked about the things of God in a fuller, deeper, and more explicit manner. In any case, the point is that what he brought remained a propositional revelation.

Beware of a false piety that is exhibited in a constant sense of mystery, that which equates indefiniteness with spirituality, and that which cannot be put into words as the highest wisdom. It is a form of reverence that requires very little effort and almost no obedience, but that makes a person feel good about himself, and that gain the admiration of others. It is not a way to embrace the person of Christ, but rather to escape him. He has revealed himself to us in propositions, in doctrines to be grasped by the intellect. True piety, therefore, is to study those words, understand them, believe them, and obey them. This is how you learn from a person. This is how you respect a person.

Jesus was God's personal manifestation, who came to deliver a propositional revelation. This truth defines Christian growth and ministry. Now we know how to learn about God and how to teach others about God. We understand that God is transcendent. But this very understanding comes from his immanent propositional revelation. As the Bible says, "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart" (Romans 10:8). If you want to know God, he is not far from you. You do not need him to appear in the flesh. You do not need to feel some special presence. You do not need to grasp a "person" in contradistinction

to grasping the words said by the person, and words that reliable witnesses said about this person.

Words can be spoken, written, understood, and memorized. They are clear and public, so they can be studied, discussed, proclaimed, believed, and obeyed. There is no indefiniteness in how you can know God or whether you know him. And there is no excuse not to know him. No one can say that the way is ambiguous, or that it is impossible to fathom his "person," for he has explained himself in clear propositions. Likewise, we introduce God to other people not by presenting his "person," but by talking about him. Of course we should live out the doctrines that we proclaim, and become good examples to others. But because we understand that God shows himself by propositional revelation, we will also be sure to explain our examples.

5. LIGHT AND DARKNESS

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:5, ESV)

The Gospel of John is a history of some of the things that were said and done when the incarnate Son of God walked the earth. It is a true testimony about past events, but more than an account of events, it is also a testimony about the meaning and significance of these events. It states the correct interpretation of the events described.

To illustrate, in John 12:27-30 a noise sounded from heaven. That was the event. Some of those in the crowd thought it had thundered, while others said that an angel had spoken. Perhaps this was so beyond the expectation of some of the people that they could not believe it. The confusion demonstrates that sensations are unreliable, and serves as an inspired example against empiricism. Nevertheless, some of them thought that they heard words, that an angel had spoken.

In contrast, John is able to provide an accurate and thorough interpretation of the event. First, he gives us the context. Jesus was praying to the Father, who responded with an audible voice from heaven. Second, John also tells us the meaning and significance of the event. Spoken words are noises, but they are noises intelligently arranged in a manner that convey meaning. John records for us not only the fact that noises were heard, but the words that the Father spoke from heaven. Then, he also tells us the reason for the event, as Jesus gave the explanation that the voice was not for his own benefit, but for the benefit of the crowd that was present.

The Gospel of John is not an account of bare events, as in "A noise came from the sky," but an interpretation of the events, as in "The Father spoke from heaven for the benefit of the crowd in response to Christ's prayer." The Gospel does this for the person, work, and doctrine of Christ by presenting in this manner selected episodes from his life, beginning from the pre-incarnate Logos of God. This interpretation of the Christ necessarily goes beyond the observation of the senses, and beyond strict inferences from observable events.

When I say that revelation goes "beyond" the observation of the senses, I do not mean that they are on the same path, only that revelation completes what sensation started. No, I mean that revelation contains a higher kind of information than what sensation can obtain *even if* we regard sensation as reliable. But sensation is unreliable, and revelation has no necessary relationship with it. Rather, revelation is an entirely different way of knowing, and the only reliable way.

For this reason, it is no exaggeration to say that, logically speaking, one cannot be an empiricist and a believer at the same time. This is because the empiricist cannot know anything, and he cannot believe anything. This includes those who claim to hold revelation

as the first principle of their worldview, but then insist that the reliability of sensation is the precondition for any access to revelation in the first place. In reality, then, the reliability of sensation is their first principle. Despite their pretensions, they are nothing more than empiricists, because if they make empiricism their starting point, then they can never be anything other than empiricists. Logically, they cannot be Christians, although we can take the route of charity and assume that these people are inconsistent with their own philosophy. Nevertheless, since they seem to insist that they are intellectually competent and thus alert to the implications of their epistemology, this route is chosen by force out of a reluctance to condemn them.

John is fond of using certain devices and terms to communicate what he wants us to know about Jesus Christ. As he reminds us, Jesus said and did many things. Although all four Gospels record the truth about Christ's words and deeds, none can record all of them. So when we perceive that there are certain features that seem peculiar to this Gospel, it is because John focuses on these aspects of Christ. Two rhetorical devices that frequently occur in this Gospel are contrast and symbolism (imageries, figurative language, etc.), and they are often used together, so that many contrasts are made by symbolic language. This is in turn associated with the people's misunderstanding or lack of understanding of these symbolic expressions, thus highlighting their spiritual obtuseness.

There are many examples, but a brief mention of a few of them will help you understand what I am talking about. When Jesus said that a person must be "born again," he was referring to something spiritual. But Nicodemus could not grasp this and processed it the only way he knew how, by thinking that Jesus was referring to a second natural birth, which of course, did not make sense to him. Then, when Jesus offered "living water" to the Samaritan woman, she thought that he was referring to natural, physical water. After that, when Jesus talked about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, those who heard him failed to perceive the spiritual meaning in this, and thus were offended. Jesus brought a revelation "from above," and at times used imageries to communicate spiritual truth. But the people who were "from below," as long as they failed to rise above their earthly mentality, could not perceive his meaning.

In connection with this, I should also mention that John relates the miracles of Jesus as "signs" that illustrate spiritual truths. Of course, when he tells us about the miracles that Jesus did, those miracles really happened. For example, Jesus healed a blind man in John 9. That really happened in the sense that the man was physically blind – he could not see – but afterward, he could. It was a public and physical miracle of healing. However, the healing was then used to illustrate something about spiritual blindness. There are numerous such examples.

Some people might find it strange and incredible that the characters in the Gospel failed to understand what might appear to us as simple symbolic expressions. However, one reason they seem straightforward to us is because of the deep influence that the Christian faith has had in our language and culture. We are not in the exact position as those who heard them the first time. Those who have not been immersed in a Christian influenced background might not find the expressions so easy to understand. As Christian categories and

expressions lose their former hold in society, the people will also lose their understanding of the imageries in Scripture. That said, even those who seem to have a Christian influenced background often do not understand nearly as much as we might expect. This includes those who claim to be Christians. Ask ten people in your church what it means to be "born again." Happy are you, if you are in a church where more than one out of ten can give the correct answer.

It may seem to some people that the use of symbolic imageries and expressions render the Gospel's meaning a matter of subjective interpretation. This is not the case at all, since the Gospel itself explains the symbolic expressions that it uses. When the Gospel talks about water, light, death, and so on, it tells you what these things mean. So there is no need to resort to your imagination to determine the meaning of an expression, or to make it mean something other than what is intended by the Gospel. We can have a definite and accurate grasp of what the Gospel communicates.

A prominent and recurring contrast that John puts forth at the beginning of his Gospel is the one between light and darkness. The Word, or Jesus Christ, was the light, and he came into a world characterized by darkness. Although Jesus was the light in a unique sense, this set of contrast is applied also between those who follow him and those who do not. Thus Paul calls believers "children of the light." And when he cautions against improper relations with unbelievers, he writes, "What fellowship can light have with darkness?" In other words, Jesus Christ is the "true light," and Christians are also called "light" in a derivative sense. The rest of the world, including all non-Christians, are called darkness.

The dualistic nature of the contrast offers instructive implications. First, it divides the world into two groups. This means that there is more than one, and not everyone belongs to the same group. We are not all the children of God. We are not all one big family. And we will not all live happily ever after together. There are spiritual charlatans who deceive many into thinking that we all belong to the light. But even the light that they speak of is nothing but darkness. Remember, even Satan can make himself appear as an angel of light in order to deceive and to mislead. This is why John says that Jesus Christ is the *true* light.

Then, the dualistic contrast also means that there are not many groups. No matter how people identify and distinguish themselves, in the end there are only two groups, or two kinds of people. You belong to one or the other. You cannot say that you do not like either one, or that both are too extreme, so that you will join a third, or a fourth, or still some other. If you are not a Christian, you are a non-Christian, no matter what you call yourself as a non-Christian. It does not matter whether you are an atheist non-Christian, a Muslim non-Christian, a Catholic non-Christian, or a Buddhist non-Christian. In the end, you are all the same.

As a symbolic term, light is used in an intellectual sense and in an ethical sense. When used in the intellectual sense, it represents wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and clear mental perception. When used in an ethical sense, it represents righteousness, holiness, clean living and transparent lifestyle. In some contexts, both senses are intended at the same time. Accordingly, in the intellectual sense, darkness represents foolishness, ignorance, and a

mind that is dull and blind. And in the ethical sense, it represents unrighteousness, all kinds of evil and filth, and shameful living.

Of course, Christ, the Logos, the true light, represents both wisdom and holiness in the most perfect and complete way. He is the very definition of intelligence and righteousness. And these are the qualities that should be exhibited by his followers. In contrast, all non-Christians are characterized by darkness – they are stupid and evil, irrational and unrighteous. This is the contrast that John makes again and again in his Gospel, and it also frequently appears in other parts of Scripture.

Some Christians deny both aspects of the contrast, but it is doubtful that these people are Christians at all, since such a denial reflects a lack of understanding or acceptance of the basic claims concerning the necessity and efficacy of the work of Christ. Then, there are some who acknowledge the ethical aspect of the contrast, but they tend to neglect or undermine the intellectual aspect. This is also very dangerous. The Bible teaches about this aspect of the non-Christian's condition in explicit terms and with numerous illustrations. To deny or ignore this would render much of the Bible nonsensical, and would amount to a rejection of the biblical doctrine on the fall of man and a repudiation of the work of Christ in redemption. If you do not affirm that all non-Christians are both stupid and sinful, both unintelligent and unrighteous, and if you do not affirm that Christians are made wise and holy in Christ, then you should examine yourself to see if you truly grasp or believe the gospel.

There are those who call themselves Christians, but who criticize this kind of talk as unkind. Now, if you refuse to say that all non-Christians are sinful, then you are not even a Christian. You are just a non-Christian criticizing the Christian faith as an outsider. However, if you say that all non-Christians are sinful, but refuse to also say that they are stupid, although this is also the clear teaching of Scripture, then you are at least a hypocrite. Who told you that non-Christians are intelligent? The Bible calls them fools. You have been deceived by the non-Christians, who present themselves to you as intelligent. As for me, I am not ashamed of the gospel, for through faith in Christ, I am saved from both intellectual and ethical darkness. The God who said "Let there be light" at the time of creation has caused the light of Christ to shine in me also. He removed me from the kingdom of darkness and placed me into the kingdom of his Son. This is what happens at conversion. This is what it means to become a Christian.

Our verse says that "the darkness has not *understood*" (NIV) the light. The verb can refer to grasping with the mind, but also to seizing something to overcome it. Thus some translations say "the darkness has not *overcome*" the light. Some commentators argue for one or the other, while others suggest that the ambiguity is deliberate. Both aspects of the conflict between light and darkness will play out before us in the course of the Gospel's narrative of Christ. They correspond to the intellectual and ethical emphases I just mentioned.

Non-Christians are unintelligent. Although their intellectual defect applies to all areas of their thinking, it is most evident when they are asked to engage in spiritual discussions.

They fail to understand even the most basic spiritual concepts, and the more they try to argue against the truth, the more foolish they appear. They are also unrighteous, so that they would not only resist the light in thought and speech, but also in their actions and policies. The Gospel shows us that they would go so far as to murder the Lord Jesus.

Of course, these two distinguishable factors in non-Christians are nevertheless inseparably related. Their lack of wisdom contributes to their evil nature and perpetuates it, and their evil nature maintains their prejudice against the truth. It is most important that we acknowledge this conflict, that there is this necessary hostility between Christians and non-Christians, and also the dual nature of this conflict, that it entails the intellectual and the ethical. This is necessary for a proper understanding of the Gospel of John, as well as for a proper understanding of our conflict with the world.

Non-Christians are stupid, so they do not understand what we say, and they do not perceive that we are right. All of their arguments and refutations are foolish and irrational. And they are sinful, driven by their wicked dispositions, so that when they cannot refute us, they persecute us. But our verse says that the darkness has not overcome the light. The light always wins, and it always wins just by being what it is. However, this does not mean that light is passive, since it always attacks darkness. It does this naturally, actively, and constantly. Light is always invading darkness, always destroying darkness. It attacks just by shining. This is what Jesus came to do, to destroy the works of the devil. And this is what Christians should do by their very nature as the children of the light.

In one of his sermons, George Whitefield said, "It is very remarkable, there are but two sorts of people mentioned in scripture: it does not say that the Baptists and Independents, nor the Methodists and Presbyterians; no, Jesus Christ divides the whole world into but two classes, sheep and goats: the Lord give us to see this morning to which of these classes we belong. But it is observable, believers are always compared to something that is good and profitable, and unbelievers are always described by something that is bad, and good for little or nothing."⁹ Let me restate this. There are only two kinds of people: Christians and non-Christians. The Bible always describes the non-Christians as bad and good for nothing.

If this is still unclear, let me say it again. If you are a non-Christian, the Bible likens you to trash to be burned at the dump. You think you are smart? You are stupid. You think you are useful? You are worthless. You think you have value and significance? You are a piece of human garbage. Jesus compares you to weeds among wheat. You are nothing but a parasite, a hindrance to all that is good and fair. You contribute nothing worthwhile to humanity. Once I was like you, but Jesus Christ rescued me from the garbage dump, and made me a prince and a servant in his kingdom. But my status is derived. Even now, without Jesus Christ, I would have nothing, I would be nothing. I would be filthy like you, useless like you. Jesus Christ is your only hope. He is anyone's only hope. Believe and be saved. Disbelieve and be damned.

⁹ George Whitefield, *Select Sermons of George Whitefield* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), p. 187-188.

This sort of preaching is unforgivable today. This is often the case even among those who identify themselves as Evangelical or Reformed, who complain about the diluted gospel of seeker-friendly churches, and who with great passion urge believers to preach the word of God. Well, this is the word of God. Are you going to preach it or not? Or are you going to suppress the truth under the guise of social civility and academic courtesy? And are you going to support me when I preach like this? Or are you going to distance yourself from me, or even criticize and persecute me? If you oppose what I preach and the way I preach it, then you are nothing but a hypocrite. You say you preach the gospel, but you refuse to tell the truth about mankind, and about the necessity and the power of Christ for salvation to anyone who believes.

You say that we must answer the world with gentleness and respect, but you allow the world to define these virtues for you. Then you criticize me for ignoring this unbiblical standard, even this pagan ethic. I am suspicious of you. It is as if you have never read the Bible or the prominent preachers that you claim to admire and follow, or it is as if you have never paid attention. Have you read the preaching of Elijah, Jeremiah, Jesus, Peter, Paul? Have you read the sermons of Augustine? Calvin? Luther? Whitefield? You are the one who is out of line. You are the reason why the church is weak and unfocused. You are like the Pharisees who would polish the tombstones of dead prophets, but who would have murdered them with their bare hands if they had lived when they prophesied.

The Christian faith teaches that all non-Christians are intellectually feeble and ethically bankrupt, and it teaches this in vivid terms. This is how the Logos sees the world. If you do not acknowledge this and align yourself with it, then you cannot understand redemption and conversion. You do not understand the gospel. How then can you claim to believe it? How can you claim to preach it? Do you even like the Christian faith, or is your faith in Christ just a big misunderstanding? What, have I made you angry? What are you going to do about it? Are you going to throw the Bible at me? Which one? The real one, or the romanticized version of it that exists only in your imagination?

6. A MAN SENT FROM GOD

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. (John 1:6-8)

The Gospel calls John the Baptist a man who was "sent from God." This means that God conceived of him and decreed that he would serve a specific purpose. And after he was born, God prepared him to be the exact instrument that he wanted him to become. Then, God authorized him and anointed him with his Spirit. John was conscious of his purpose because God communicated this to him. He had received a commission from God. John was conscious of his obligation and authority to speak and to act because of this commission. Within the boundaries defined by the commission, John was speaking and acting on behalf of God with the authority of God, since he was sent by God.

There is a crisis of confidence and authority among Christian ministers. This is partly due to confusion regarding the proper basis of spiritual authority. The problem exists among all groups and denominations. Their theology of ministry is entirely inadequate to explain the legitimacy of their work.

Suppose I ask, "Who authorized you to lead and to speak, men or God?" I would not get an adequate answer from the typical minister, whose self-understanding is usually deficient.

If his authority came from men, then why is he speaking for God? What makes the men who authorized him better than other men who believe very different things, and who therefore might not have authorized him for ministry? And since his authority came from men, why do I have any obligation to listen to him? If he argues that these men were placed in position of authority by God, so that they exercise legitimate authority, in this context it changes almost nothing at all. It still does not explain which particular minister has authority over me, or if I must heed the authority of all the ministers ordained by men who oppose one another. If the argument amounts to saying that a man has legitimate authority if he is authorized by any organized group of men, then unless some qualifications are made to this, it would also legitimize any religion that has any kind of authority structure. But if to answer this he appeals to the authority of divine revelation, so that not all authorities are legitimate on matters of religion, then this brings us back to all the previous questions: Who authorized him, men or God? Which group of men, even "Christian" men, are legitimate? His answers appear to make him no different than any other person.

Perhaps he would be unwilling to say that his authority came from men, but that God himself had authorized him to perform the work of ministry. But then suppose I say, "Good. On what basis do you say that your authority came from God?" He might give an answer that again appeals to the approval of men. Why should I believe that you know anything?

"Well, I have a degree from the seminary." But often this tells me only about the poor standards of the seminary, so that someone like him could come from it, or that the seminary had overlooked a dud – or probably thousands of duds. What authority do you have to lead and to speak? "Well, I was ordained by my denomination." Right, but why must I respect your denomination? Who authorized your denomination? If the denomination is just a group of men who approve one another, and if your ordination is only another instance of this mutual approval, then it is not very different than a bunch of Pharisees calling each other righteous. It is totally meaningless. Human approval many times over does not divine authorization make.

When they talk about the canonization of Scripture, they insist that the church only acknowledged the divine authority that was already in the collection of inspired documents, and did not confer authority upon it. The Bible would be just as authoritative even if the church had failed to acknowledge it for whatever reason decreed by divine providence. Of course, although the Scripture claims divine authority for itself, since it does not promise that the church as a community would acknowledge its authority, *in principle* we must allow to stand the possibility that the church could have failed to acknowledge the authority of Scripture. Otherwise, we would make the church's acknowledgement the test of the authority of Scripture, which would make the authority of Scripture come under the authority of the church, which in turn would defeat the very doctrine that the church tries to affirm, that it only acknowledged the authority that was already there.

The question is whether the same thinking applies to how the church regards divine authority in other areas, such as individuals called to the ministry. We find one example in Acts 13: "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off" (v. 2-3). The Holy Spirit had already called these men. It was not up to the church to authorize or not authorize them, but only to agree and to obey. Again, God had already called them, so even if the church had disobeyed, the men would have still been commissioned and authorized by God, just as the Bible would remain a divine revelation even if no one acknowledges it.

Likewise, to assume that the church would without fail acknowledge every person that God has called leaves no possibility for an imperfect or even an apostate church. However, Scripture does not say that the church will acknowledge every legitimate minister without fail, or that no church can be imperfect or even apostate. Sometimes it is said that even if an individual is called by God, he should not be allowed to function until he receives the church's recognition. But the Bible does not teach this anywhere, and the doctrine is rather suspicious. It grants the church the right to ignore or nullify God's call. It also makes church reformers impossible – at least it makes all of them sinners until their views become the norm. If the claim is that God himself has instituted church order and therefore will ensure its proper function, this is refuted by examples of confused and disobedient churches in the New Testament. Scripture leaves room for God to raise up faithful servants to address and correct churches that have strayed from his principles and that would fail to acknowledge legitimate authority.

If it is agreed that church ordination only acknowledges a divine commission, then the commission exists without the ordination, and there must be a basis for the authority other than and prior to the ordination. In other words, our ministers have their Acts 13:3 event, but where is their Acts 13:2 event? Does the completion of Scripture render this unnecessary? Does the doctrine of cessationism render this impossible? But the Scripture does not affirm the relevance of its completion to this question, and it does not approve the doctrine of cessationism. These are religious traditions invented by men to cover their own unbelief and deficiencies, and to divert attention away from questions about their competence and authority. All this is sheer made-up rubbish.

A true representative of God wields divine authority because he has received a commission from God and he has been empowered by the Spirit. Do you have a seminary degree? Men will despise it. Unless you have what it takes apart from your seminary degree, it will only accentuate your incompetence. Do you have ordination papers? Try using that in place of the shield of faith. The devil will laugh at it and drive his fiery darts straight into your heart. Regardless of how many men endorse you, human approval will never transform into divine authority and power. After all, a degree, ordination, and such things are nothing more than and nothing other than men's opinion regarding your qualifications. A true man of God is taught by God and filled with his Spirit. A man who has received a commission from God is a man who has authority from God, and he will produce fruit that is consistent with the biblical description of a man of God. If a person leans on human approval in his own thinking or in defending himself to others, it shows either that he has no commission from God, or that he is in such a state of weakness and unbelief that he has no confidence in it.

Let me offer an example on how a loss of divine authority can distort our thinking about ministry. It might be too subtle for some people to notice, and perhaps for this reason, it is a good illustration of the depth of the damage.

First, we need to read 1 Peter 4:10-11. The passage says, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen."

The passage makes a broad statement to the effect that all believers should faithfully administer the abilities that God has given them, and then it divides these believers into two groups – those who are gifted to speak and those who are gifted to serve. Of course, every believer may speak the truth about God, but Peter has in mind those who have received a spiritual gift for a ministry of speaking. Also, to speak is to serve in a sense, but a distinction is made here so that serving stresses those spiritual works whose chief characteristics do not involve speaking. Peter is saying that each person should use whatever gift he has received. The one who speaks should use his gift to speak, and thus do it as one speaking the very words of God. The one who serves should use his gift to serve, and thus do it with the strength God provides.

Now, John Piper cites this passage in his *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*; however, according to his interpretation, Peter's meaning is that the one who speaks should use the Bible!¹⁰ Of course we should use the Bible, but the passage makes an altogether different point. Peter does not say, "If anyone speaks, he should quote the Bible." No. He says, first, each believer should use *the gift he has received* to perform his ministry. So if he speaks, let him speak using *the gift he has received*, and he would be doing it as one speaking the very words of God. If he serves, let him serve using *the gift he has received*, and he would be doing it by the strength of God.

Piper transfers all authority to the Bible alone, although Peter is talking about *the person* that God has called and gifted. Three times Peter states the principle associating a believer to a charismatic ("grace") gift, but Piper changes the second so that the one who speaks is now associated with the public and objective text of Scripture. But then the one who speaks is cut off from any relation to a charismatic gift, subverting the structure and meaning of the passage.

As if to maintain a relation between the person and the gift, Piper combines the two groups into one, and construes the passage into saying that the one who speaks should speak the Bible with the strength of the Spirit. This is an outright alteration of what Peter says, done to maintain one's theological prejudice. Peter's point is clearly that the one who serves can serve in God's strength because he has received the charismatic gift to serve, and that the one who speaks can do it as one speaking the very words of God because he has received the charismatic gift to speak.

This is embarrassing to those who affirm cessationism, or who reject this aspect of biblical teaching. It might mean that they are not speaking by the gift of God, or that they are not called to speak at all, and thus do not have the gift. I am convinced that most ordained ministers of whatever persuasion or denomination are in this position. On what basis do you speak to me? By whose authority do you lecture me? Do you speak to me on the basis of human credentials and by the authority of men? Get out! Send in someone who knows that he has received a commission from God, who has been endowed with a gift from God, and who can address me as one speaking the very words of God.

¹⁰ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Baker Books, 1990), p. 39-40.

7. WITNESS AND TESTIMONY

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."

Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked.

"Come and see," said Philip.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." (John 1:6-8, 32-34, 44-49)

John was sent from God "as a witness to testify." Here is another great theme of the Gospel, and it consists of the two ideas of witness and testimony. The witness refers to the person, and the testimony refers to what the person does as a witness. The two ideas are inseparable, and they explain each other. We are interested in what the Gospel means for a person to be God's witness, or one who testifies about the things of God.

The Gospel shows us that a testimony is mainly a verbal statement. Verse 15 reads, "John *testifies* concerning him...*saying*." Then, verses 19 and 32 say that he offers his testimony, and this is followed by a record of his verbal statements. Later in 18:37, Jesus tells Pilate, "In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." He came to testify to the truth, and the nature of his testimony is such that a person would listen to it. His testimony is a verbal statement.

We must add something else to this idea of a witness. John 3:11 says, "I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen." John 3:31-32 gives us something similar: "The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard." A testimony is a verbal statement about what "we know." In other words, a witness is someone who talks about someone or something, and he is supposed to know what he is talking about. He is supposed to be familiar about the truth of the matter.

A testimony is a verbal statement of one's knowledge about someone or something. This knowledge comes from what a person "has seen and heard." We must discuss what this means, since it does not refer to empirical sensations at all. Anyone with theological aptitude should immediately detect this – the truth is staring you in the face in John 3:31-32 – but we will take some time for it to make sure. In any case, we must first complete this part of the discussion by considering whether there is such a thing as a non-verbal witness or testimony.

There is a sense in which something non-verbal can function as a testimony. However, something like an item, an event, or an action can be a testimony only as a symbolic gesture that represents a verbal statement.

For example, when a nation lands on the moon, its representatives (the astronauts) plant a flag on the ground. The flag serves as a witness and offers a testimony. But in itself the flag means nothing and says nothing. Rather, it is only a symbol or a sign that represents a testimony the content of which can only be expressed in an abundance of words. In this case, the testimony might include the ideas, "We were here," or "We have achieved this level of technological development," or "This is proof of our determination and intelligence." The flag might represent all of these ideas. In fact, notice that as long as its meaning is not defined by words, it remains ambiguous. One might just as easily interpret it to mean, "This is proof of humanity's vainglory, for we would devote millions of dollars to shoot ourselves out into space when we cannot even take care of the problems on earth."

Likewise, a flag on Mount Everest might mean, "This is proof of our resolve, stamina, and achievement." But I might interpret it to mean, "This is proof of your futile life and selfish attitude, since you were willing to risk your own life and part with your loved ones just to show that you can do something so foolish and useless." What does the flag mean? No one can tell unless it is explained by a verbal statement either before or after the fact.

A non-verbal witness "speaks" only in a symbolic manner that awaits verbal interpretation, so even a non-verbal witness presupposes a verbal testimony. This is how we are to understand biblical passages that refer to non-verbal witnesses such as the works of Christ. For example, Jesus says that the "work" that the Father has given him to perform "testifies" that the Father has sent him (John 5:36). But this testimony makes sense only because an entire theology, verbally expounded, is presupposed. That is, the ideas of "Father" and "sent," and the principle that his "work" authenticates his commission, are not conveyed by the actions themselves.

Elsewhere, Jesus says, "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves" (14:11). Again, to believe because of the miracles presupposes the verbal assertions and explanations; otherwise, one would not know what to believe because of the miracles. When Jesus says to believe because of the miracles, he means to believe what the people might refuse to believe without the miracles. That is, verbal assertions and explanations have been made prior to and apart from the miracles. To paraphrase, Jesus is saying, "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe *that I am in the Father and the Father is in me* on the evidence of the miracles themselves." Or, "If you do not *believe my words* just because *I spoke them*, then *believe my words* because *I perform miracles*." This is why the Gospel often calls his miracles "signs," since they are historical events that symbolize and authenticate the verbal testimonies about Jesus Christ.

An essential characteristic of biblical testimony is that it is never truly based on human sensation or observation, even when the testimony comes from so-called "eyewitnesses." Almost any instance in the Bible of anyone testifying to anything about God will serve as an example, and a person who reads through the Gospel of John will encounter many of these. For now we will limit ourselves to illustrations drawn from the present context.

In 1:15, John the Baptist testifies, "He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me." Whether he refers to a metaphysical or chronological priority, since the Christ would be an incarnation of deity, or to a superiority of rank or status, since the Christ would be greater than any prophet, the "before" in "he was before me" cannot come from any empirical sensation or inference from observation, for the simple reason that this "before" was not anything that could be physically seen, heard, or observed. In fact, based on verses 31 and 33, at this point John the Baptist might not even know the human identity of the Christ. It was certainly impossible for him to have drawn the inference that the Christ was metaphysically prior or spiritually superior based on empirical observation.

Then, in 1:29, John sees Jesus and says, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" First, it was impossible for anyone to know that Jesus was the Christ just by looking at him. Otherwise, Jesus would have exhibited essential differences from the rest of humanity even in his appearance, which would be contrary to the testimony of Scripture. In addition, if it could be known that Jesus was the Christ just by looking at him, then John the Baptist would not have needed to say anything. In fact, a major part of his ministry would have been unnecessary. Second, it was also impossible for anyone to know that Jesus was "the Lamb of God" and that he came to take away the sin of the world" by seeing, hearing, or observing him. These statements are rich with theological content that had no necessary relation to the physical appearance of Jesus. Verse 31 states the reason for John the Baptist's ministry. This was part of his testimony, and it was also something that could not be inferred from sensation or observation.

Again, 1:32 states that John gave a testimony, and he said, "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him." Did other people see the dove? If not, then what John saw was not physical, not public, and not perceived by physical sight. But if other people also saw the dove, did they know that they were looking at the Spirit, or just

a dove like any other dove? If they did not know that they were looking at the Spirit, then John the Baptist perceived something additional, or rather the true nature of the matter beyond the appearance of the dove, and again the knowledge was not derived from physical sight or sensation. And if all could see the dove, and all knew that they were looking at the Spirit, then this just means that all perceived something deeper than the appearance of the dove, since all other doves were only doves. True knowledge of the situation, then, was not only beyond the appearance or what was perceived by the physical senses, but it was *other than* what was perceived by the physical senses.

Verse 33 tells us the basis of John's knowledge and testimony: "I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me...*told me*." That is, John the Baptist testified on the basis of revelation. He did not testify on the basis of anything that he had seen and heard in the physical sense, but on what he had seen and heard in the spiritual sense.

When we return to 3:31-32, cited earlier, this principle is even more clear: "The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard." Jesus came from heaven and testified about God and the things of God, or what he had "seen and heard." But in this same Gospel Jesus states that "God is spirit" (4:24). He is not a physical object that can be perceived by the physical senses. Also, Jesus indeed came from heaven and took up a human body, but before this he did not have this physical body, and thus he did not have physical sense organs by which to perceive anything in the physical or empirical sense. Thus when the Gospel says that he testified of what he had "seen and heard" in heaven, it cannot be referring to physical or empirical perception, but only spiritual or intellectual perception.

This is true in every instance where the Bible states that a person provides a true testimony about God or spiritual things. It is never a reference to something that is based on the physical or empirical, even when seeing and hearing are mentioned. Rather, in every case, the person obtained or applied a spiritual insight or perception based on revelation. This sometimes occurs in conjunction with or on the occasion of a physical sensation, but the knowledge that is claimed and expressed in the testimony is never derived from or dependent on sensation.

This principle is essential to the foundation of the Christian faith. It was the operating principle by which all the prophets testified about God and the Christ who was to come. They testified according to knowledge, but the basis of this knowledge was revelation, and never sensation or inference from sensation. And when the Christ had come, this was the operating principle by which all the disciples recognized Jesus for who he was, even God in the flesh. This is evident in our text. Jesus called Nathanael "a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." God was already at work in him. And when Jesus demonstrated supernatural insight, Nathanael responded, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."

The passage forbids us to think that he reacted this way due to a gullible personality or a lack of intelligence, since only a few verses earlier, Nathanael was in a skeptical state of mind, asking with a tone of sarcasm, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"

Rather, the heart of this "true Israelite" perceived Jesus for who he was upon meeting him. But his perception was not based on an empirical evaluation, nor was it inferred from what he saw, since at first Jesus did not demonstrate any power that was vastly superior to the prophets of old, yet the prophets were not perceived to be Messiahs. Jesus himself noted to him that afterward he would indeed see "heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

That is, the things that Nathanael was going to witness would catch up to his spiritual perception of Jesus, and not that his perception of Jesus would grow by greater and greater demonstrations of power and glory until he reached the conclusion that he was the Son of God. Indeed, if spiritual insight is limited to empirical sensation and inferences from it, then even if sensation is reliable (which the Bible denies), it would take nothing less than a show of omnipotence, perhaps the creation of a new universe, to demonstrate that Jesus was deity, the Son of God. However, even creation does not require omnipotence, but only great power. In any case, knowledge is available through more ready and reliable means, that is, by revelation.

The Gospel is careful to assert and reinforce this principle again and again, because it is also essential to the perpetuation of the Christian faith. As Jesus says near the conclusion of the Gospel, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Faith is intelligent assent to revelation, and any kind of faith must transcend sensation. The kind of faith that rests on the testimony of revelation apart from sensation altogether is not only the same, but it is superior, and more blessed.

If God's witness is one who has spiritual perception and who perceives revelation for what it is, as the truth of God, then he has knowledge of God and the things of God whether or not this knowledge is associated with any physical sensation or empirical verification. And he is able to provide a reliable testimony about God and the things of God when he speaks on the basis of his knowledge, based on and derived from divine revelation. That is, if knowledge refers to the mind's grasp of revelation, then even those who have not been with Christ in the flesh can be true witnesses for him – as the prophets who lived before his incarnation, and as we who have believed after his ascension.

The first disciples indeed saw Jesus with their physical sight, but they did not perceive who he was *because* of their physical sight. Rather, they were granted spiritual perception as to who he was, that he was God, man, and the Christ. As I contemplate the testimony of revelation about him, perhaps on the occasion of perusing the pages of Scripture, the Spirit grants me the same perception of the truth, that Jesus was the Christ, that he was God incarnate, that he died for my sins, and that he was raised for my justification. The Spirit enables my mind to perceive the living Christ *now* on the basis of revelation, so that I have a firsthand perception of him and a firsthand relationship with him. I truly know him, and I can testify about him with knowledge and conviction.

Is this true of you? Do you have the spiritual perception that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God? Do you have the intellectual understanding that to believe in him is life eternal? And is divine revelation the basis of this perception or this understanding? Has the Spirit

enabled your mind to grasp and affirm these things apart from sensation? If so, then you have true knowledge about the Lord Jesus, and you are a legitimate witness for him. You can invite people to "come and see," not in the physical or empirical sense, but to examine the testimony of revelation, so that the Spirit might grant them belief and insight into the truth about Jesus Christ. You have true knowledge about the Lord Jesus. You can provide reliable testimony that he is God, that he came to the earth in the flesh, that he died for the sins of those who would believe, and that anyone who believes in him has eternal life – he will inherit everlasting joy and glory, and a place at the Master's table.

8. WHEN RELIGION RUNS OUT OF WINE

When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

...Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine....and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

...When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!"

His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?"

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:3, 7-10, 13-22)

The miracles of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of John were historical events. They are not mere legends or symbols, but they happened at definite times and places, and produced the effects described by the text. That is, when miracles of healing are reported, those individuals had actual ailments and defects, and these were cured by the power of Christ, so that they no longer had these ailments and defects. When it is reported that Jesus commanded a storm to cease, there really was such a storm – the winds really blew, and the waters really moved – and the dangers and fears associated with it were actual and historical. But at Christ's command, the winds and waters became still. This is a rather elementary principle to a proper reading of the Gospels, and indeed all of Scripture. It is not up for discussion, and anyone who disagrees with this should be regarded as an enemy of the Christian faith.

When we read that Jesus turned water into wine, that was what happened. By an act of divine power, he changed one physical substance into a different physical substance. The event involved a number of things that were not subject to human control. They were not playing games – it was a serious situation that could lead to great embarrassment for the hosts. If they had more wine, they would have brought it out, and the matter would have never been raised. Then, the servants were the ones who brought the water and who filled the jars. And they were the ones who brought out the water that had been turned into wine to the master of the banquet, who tasted this wine and commented on its superior quality. There was no trickery, and no elaborate showmanship.

Thus the miracle "revealed his glory." It was a demonstration of his power, that he could do such a thing. The manner in which he performed the feat also demonstrated his spiritual confidence or assurance. The Gospel would go on to stress this a number of times, showing that Jesus always knew what he would do. He was never at a loss, never in a panic, never thrown into a state of turmoil or desperation. There were flaws in all the prophets, albeit not in their inspired words. Abraham produced Ishmael, Moses struck the rock in anger, Samson betrayed his vow, David committed murder and adultery, Isaiah had to be cleansed, but in Jesus we see one who had no flaw. In him was more than a disposition to holiness, as we see in the prophets, but the very definition of holiness, as we see in God.

These remarks lead us to the next point, namely, in the Gospel of John the greatest aspect of a miracle is not in its evidentiary power, but in its revelatory power. In other words, the significance of the fact that Jesus turned water into wine was not only in showing that he could do it, but when explained and considered in a proper theological context, it serves as an illustration about God and his relation to his creatures and his creation. Since John devotes much attention to this aspect of the miracles of Jesus, and selects and arranges his materials with this in mind, he prefers to designate these acts of power as "signs." They are historical events that convey spiritual meaning. Now, John selects and arranges his materials with purpose, and there is a definite progression of thought. The Cana episode is best read together with what comes immediately after, or the temple episode. Like John 1, other than what they convey by themselves, these passages continue to set the tone for the rest of the Gospel.

The Jewish religion had run out of wine. I am not referring to the system of doctrine and worship prescribed in the Old Testament. The Old Testament religion was a revelation from God, and it was right for its purpose. But the Jews of Jesus' time did not follow the Old Testament. Instead, as Jesus said elsewhere, they had invented their own traditions by which they pretended to follow God's commands, but that in reality served to subvert or to work around them. The religion of the Jews was not the religion of the Old Testament.

There are some Christians who think that the Jews rejected Jesus because they were too attached to the Old Testament, too hung up on the law, but this is entirely false. The Jews did not believe Moses, and did not obey the laws that he delivered. They followed their own traditions, invented by men for men, and practiced to impress men and to gain the approval of men. Despite the appearance that they tried to maintain, it had little to do with

the worship that God commanded through the prophets. If they had believed and followed Moses, they would have recognized Jesus for who he was (John 5:46).

Although the temple was the focal point of their religion, since they were not serious about the worship of God in the first place, the Jews had turned it into a marketplace. Jesus came to put an end to this. He used a whip to chase the sheep and cattle out of the temple, scattered the coins of the money changers, and even overturned their tables. This was a remarkable and daring display for a number of reasons. Among these we must note that although the text does not say that he struck anyone, this was nevertheless a physically violent act. There is no way around it, and we should not find a way to put it otherwise. Jesus invaded the merchants' businesses, and disturbed properties that, humanly speaking, did not belong to him.

This is the Jesus I know. This is the Jesus that I have always known since I first read the Scripture as a child, and human traditions have not been able to take him away from me. Those who hold to a false concept of Christ would have disapproved of him, and even now they show their disapproval by presenting a Christ that has been tamed and caged. We would expect to find this false Christ among the liberal theologians, but almost as often he is also preached by the Reformed and the Evangelicals. They claim to uphold the Christ of Scripture, but theirs is in fact the Christ of their tradition or denomination. This is Jesus Christ – the one who turned over tables. He did not behave this way all of the time, but he did at least some of the time. Either take all of him, or none of him. They say that they take all of him, but their hypocrisy shows in how they react to those who come in his name and follow his example.

Jesus came to destroy the Jewish religion, and to set his people free from the burden that it placed upon men's conscience. Of course, he could have cleared the temple a hundred times and it would not have effected a permanent change. What he did at the temple foreshadowed the destruction of Jerusalem that would occur within one generation of his earthly ministry. He was committed to the permanent conclusion of the Jewish religion and he came in AD 70 through the Roman army, which slaughtered thousands of Jews and destroyed their temple. The Jews that survived were dispersed, and their system of worship was dismantled. As Jesus says in one of his parables, "What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others" (Mark 12:9). Jesus in his human body overturned the Jews' tables. Jesus in his divine power overturned the Jews' nation and religion.

However, what really put an end to the Jewish religion was not its destruction, but the fulfillment of what the temple signified in the person of Jesus Christ. When Jesus died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The way to God was now open to everyone through Jesus Christ, apart from the Jewish temple, and apart from all Jewish rituals and traditions. Then, within one generation of this event, the Jews were slaughtered, Jerusalem was burned, and the temple was destroyed. The Jewish religion would never be restored as anything that has real significance. Of course, men can make a building and implement a religion, just like I can use popsicle sticks to construct a temple on my desk and call my room Israel. But all that would have no spiritual significance, and it would not

be a religious system that God accepts. There is no legitimate Jewish worship today, and there never will be again. The only true worship is Christian worship. Just like anyone else, a Jewish person can become a Christian and offer true worship through Jesus Christ. But just like anyone else, a Jewish person can never be righteous before God or offer him true worship unless he becomes a Christian. The Jewish person has no special standing with God just because he is a Jew, and he never will on that basis. Anyone who comes to God must come through Jesus Christ, or he cannot come at all.

The Jewish religion had no reality and no power, only a long list of self-serving traditions designed to excuse themselves from obeying the commands of God. Those who offered genuine worship did so through faith, and in spite of the human traditions that stood in their way. Jesus, on the other hand, came and brought reality, truth, power, salvation – wine superior to all that went before. He did not effect this change through economics or politics, or the methods of men, but by truth that came from heaven, and a divine power that was beyond a mere form of religion, but that could change water to wine, and that could bring the dead to back to life. It is through him that people can find reality and power in religion, and worship God in spirit and in truth. The Gospel tells us about this reality and power, and how we can sit at the wedding feast of Christ.

Alas, sinful human nature has remained the same, and many churches today have run out of wine. This is not because Christ has run out of wine – he *makes* wine by his inexhaustible power – but because these churches have very little to do with him. They have strayed from a simple and sincere devotion to Christ, and have turned to a religion of their own making.

They have turned to follow their own desires and traditions, both in matters of doctrines and ethics. Examples are too numerous for me to compile a balanced collection – one could easily name several hundred things – so I will mention only several that come to mind.

Churches have redefined compassion in order to justify divorce and remarriage, when the former is forbidden by Scripture, and the latter is permitted only after the death of the spouse. Denominations have redefined love in order to permit homosexuals to marry, and to even become ministers in their churches. But Paul writes that the wrath of God is poured out against the likes of these – both the homosexuals and those who approve of them. Some have abused the doctrine of the goodness of creation and the so-called "cultural mandate" to justify worldly pursuits, political ambitions, and personal expressions. The cumulative effect of hundreds or even thousands of traditions, each designed to subvert biblical teaching, is the almost total loss of truth, reality, life, and power in the churches.

They have turned the Christian faith into a marketplace. They use gimmicks to draw crowds, and they have commercialized the propagation of Christian doctrine and culture. Jesus has become a product for them to sell. They hit upon a marketable idea – a special prayer or fast, a novel series, a catchy slogan or song – and then comes the calendars, workbooks, seminars, jewelry, and movies to profit from that idea. The world has awards shows, so we will have them too. The world has concerts, so we will have them too. The church should gather to worship, but very often it has become a place for social gatherings to please men, and to facilitate business and personal relationships.

If even genuine signs effected by divine power did not in themselves produce true believers, then still less can worldly gimmicks and a commercialized Christianity lead people to faith in Christ. The Gospel tells us that Jesus did not need men to tell him about men, that they would appear to believe in him but do not in fact believe. The contemporary church either lacks this basic insight into human nature, or it really does not care about making true progress for the gospel at all. Like the Jews, they have subverted divine revelation by human tradition. Their religion is a way of life and thought made by men for men, to advance men's desires and ambitions, to approve one another, and to indulge their lusts.

We deceive ourselves if we think that Jesus does not judge his churches. As Paul writes, "For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off" (Romans 11:21-22). As the body of Christ, the church will remain forever. God will always reserve for himself a remnant of faithful believers, and he will never destroy the church as he did the Jewish nation. However, we cannot say the same about individual congregations and individual believers.

Revelation 2 and 3 show us that Jesus scrutinizes every community of Christians with a penetrating gaze, and that the fate of each church rests in his power. He dispatches messages to seven congregations. His remarks reveal that his standards are high, but they are also very clear. In sum, he is pleased with those who maintain sound doctrines and ethics with zealously even in the face of temptation and persecution, and he disapproves of those who fail to do so. Today, most churches fall far short of this. Do they – the leaders and the members of these communities – really think that no calamity will befall them? Is there a proper basis for this complacent attitude? What does the Scripture say? Does it show us a pattern of perpetual immunity or a pattern of eventual reckoning? We must not mistake God's patience for a lack of concern or even an inability to punish.

There is no fear of God in the churches. They do not believe that God will act. They say, "We are the Church of the Lord, the Church of the Lord, the Church of the Lord. No evil will befall us. Surely goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives." But if they have departed from Christ in their doctrines, in their ethics, and in their practices, will the bare banner of Christ save them? Surely what was true of the Jews is now also true of them, that they draw close to God with their lips, but their hearts are far from him. Will God spare ones such as these? Surely Christ walks among his churches to judge and to punish. Paul told the Corinthians that because of their irreverence toward the body of the Lord, many of them were weak, sick, or even dead. And he said that they were judged by the Lord so that they would not be condemned with the world. If Jesus Christ would inflict sickness on unruly believers and even kill some of them, how much more will he torment those who reject the gospel?

Many Christians lean toward a deistic faith because of their unbelief, so what I say here is not stressed often. The Lord killed Ananias and Sapphira in a dramatic and apparently

instant manner, in a way that comes under extraordinary providence. He also killed some of the Corinthians, but most likely in less spectacular ways, through ordinary providence, so that Paul had to indicate the reason to them. This thought ought to dawn on us: whenever he sees fit, the Lord kills the people who displease him. For Christians, this is discipline, so that they will not be condemned like unbelievers. For non-Christians, this is the beginning of everlasting punishment in hellfire. The point is that God kills people, even today, even in our churches. Sometimes he does this by extraordinary providence, but rarely, thus it is called extraordinary. But ordinary providence is still effected by his decree and power, and one who dies this way is just as dead as the one who dies under extraordinary providence. He watches. He acts.

No one should think that Christ does not see or that he does not act among his people and in the world. He is not waiting to sort everything out only after people die. He exacts punishments even in this life. But Christians do not think about this, do not believe this, or they are so blind that they do not even notice when it is happening. Paul wrote that God cannot be mocked, but whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. The churches have been reaping – reaping in sicknesses, in bankruptcies, in loss of attendance and membership, in an absence of spiritual fruit and theological aptitude, in ethical and financial scandals, and in a myriad of ways. They face oppositions from without, and implosions from within. They have sown to the indulgence of the flesh, and now Christ punishes them, and their own children – entire generations of them – forsake them.

Nevertheless, it is during times like this that God's remnant is revealed. In Exodus 32, Moses saw that Aaron had allowed the Israelites to get out of control, to worship a golden calf, so that they had "become a laughingstock to their enemies" (v. 25). So he said, "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me," and the Levites rallied to him. Then he ordered them to slaughter their own people. The Levites complied, and killed about three thousand of them. Thus Moses said to them, "You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day" (v. 29). God-centered religion produces a true zeal that enables one to condemn his own people for their defiance against the doctrines of the Lord. And this zeal is one sign of genuine faith. As John 2 also points out, it was zeal for his Father's house that moved Jesus to overturn the merchants' tables in the temple (v. 17). The Lord will use the disobedience and faithlessness of his churches to sift out the true from the false. His remnant will be those who are willing to separate themselves and denounce apostate churches and denominations.

In other words, it is to be expected that the true disciples of Jesus Christ will also turn over some tables. There are tens of thousands of pastors and professors who undermine or even deny biblical inerrancy, the deity of Christ, the atonement for sin by blood, and other basic and essential doctrines. They should be removed from their positions right away. If necessary, they should be physically (but legally) thrown out of the premises by authorized personnel. As it is written, "Expel the evil man from among you." What are they doing in our midst in the first place?

Churches, seminaries, and even entire denominations that tolerate heretics should be confronted, and if necessary, overthrown and destroyed. A pastor or professor who, say,

denies biblical inerrancy or approves of homosexuality, sends the world a mixed or a false message, and cause believers to stumble. Those who tolerate, defend, or endorse such a person share in his guilt. This also applies to individual Christians, who have long tolerated and even kowtowed to heretics. If you are loyal to Christ, why do you call a person "doctor" this or that in a church or seminary setting, when he rejects biblical inerrancy or shows himself a heretic in some other way? Why should I respect someone just because he studied very hard to become a heretic? Why should I stand in awe of his academic and ecclesiastical credentials when they only signify that other evil men approve of him?

The Gospel says that Jesus acted the way he did because of his zeal for God. Do we have any zeal of God? Some say they do, but what a bunch of cowards and hypocrites they are, if even when they purport to stand up for God and lambaste unbelief, they do it with an air of academic courtesy. Where was Jesus' sense of courtesy when he chased away the merchants' sheep and cattle, and when he turned over their tables, and scattered their money all over the temple? May their social propriety perish with them, "But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin" (Micah 3:8). They refuse to do the same, and even criticize those who do, because they do not have the Spirit of God.

The Jews demanded Jesus to prove his authority (2:18). If Christ was challenged on this matter, and if you are his disciple, then you will also be challenged by the religious establishment. Their idea of authority is based on human approval, so that if we are to initiate reform, we must not appeal to mere human approval as our license to speak and to act even if we have it. As Donald Guthrie observes, Jesus "did not have official sanction for his mission. The Jewish hearers entirely missed the sanction of God himself in the mission of Jesus."¹¹ There is a perverted understanding of spiritual authority among denominations, seminaries, churches, and believers – it is based on men's approval of one another. But as long as their concept of divine authority is defined by human approval, there is no basis for thinking that they have divine authority or approval for what they say and do. So what gives them the right to oppose other people, to oppose those who oppose them? Where does *their* authority come from?

Reformers will always be persecuted because they lack human approval, since if they have human approval, they would not be reformers. It also means that reformers will be in the minority, and sometimes they even have to stand alone. Jeremiah, for example, stood alone against the whole nation. He was considered a troublemaker, even a traitor to his people. But he was indeed sent from God. He was right, and everyone else was wrong. His words were vindicated by fulfillment, but even before that, he was supported by the Law.

So I do not say that a reformer is accountable to no one (he is accountable to God), and that he cannot be judged as false until it is too late (he is judged by the word of God). No, I only say that a man's calling cannot be vindicated by an appeal to human approval, and neither can it be challenged because he does not appeal to it. On the other hand, those who appeal to human approval to assert themselves or to challenge others can be safely ignored. Now, we refer to reformers only to stress a point, but reformers, at least in the sense intended

¹¹ Donald Guthrie, "John" in *New Bible Commentary, 21st Century Edition* (IVP Press), p, 1037.

here, are needed only when the norm must be overturned. But the principle stated about divine authority and human approval applies to all ministers of God.

Many churches have run out of wine, and they are dying, if not already dead. But Jesus Christ can turn water into wine, and even bring the dead back to life. To revive the churches, we must return to a simple and sincere devotion to Christ, not the Christ that has been tamed, caged, or altered, but the one that this Gospel testifies about. But this means that many traditions must die – doctrinal, ecclesiastical, social, cultural, academic, and all kinds of unbiblical traditions invented by men. We must bring people to know and to adore this Jesus as he really was and as he really is. This is not done through gimmicks, but by simply telling people to "come and see" – that is, by providing reliable testimony about him, so that the Spirit of God may also grant our hearers the understanding that he who came from heaven was indeed the Christ, the Son of God, that he had died, but was raised from the dead, so that all who believe in him shall not perish, but shall have everlasting life.

9. YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? (John 3:1-10)

When I was in college, I had an economics professor who worked with a prison ministry. One day, as he was making a point about race and economics, he referred to himself as a "born again Christian." Since his topic was not religion but economics, he mentioned that in passing and said nothing more about it. When the class was over, another student walked over to me and suggested that we have lunch at a nearby restaurant, and so we went. I was minding my own business and deciding what I should order when he looked up from his menu and said, "What did he mean by born again?"

Since my food was the will of God, I would have gladly put down my menu to answer his question right away. However, I did not want to disappoint the waitress, so I ordered something sumptuous (I cannot recall what), and then went on to talk to my friend about God, sin, judgment, Christ, the atonement, faith and justification, and of course, the new birth, or what it meant to be born again. As far as I could tell, most of what I said was new to him, and he promised to give our discussion further thought.

This story illustrates my contention that we do not always need to be in a hurry to tell others that we are Christians or to preach the gospel to them. There are those who insist that if you do not make people aware that you are a Christian within several hours, days, or weeks of meeting them, then there is something seriously wrong with you. Perhaps you are

ashamed of the gospel, so that you are too afraid to speak about your beliefs. Or, perhaps you are so deficient in your faith that your righteousness fails to overwhelm the unbelievers with the awareness that there is something different about you. Surely, if you are behaving as a Christian should, unbelievers will pick up on this and ask you about it. However, this way of thinking has no biblical warrant, and it is rather naïve and stupid. It betrays a lack of maturity and comprehension about spiritual things.

It is true that the Bible teaches us to be a light in this world by our good works, but it is always assumed that this is accompanied by the preaching of the gospel. It is just not true that if you behave like a Christian should, then unbelievers will automatically pick up on this and ask you about it. This false theory assumes some spiritual sensitivity in the unbelievers, but the Bible teaches that they are spiritually dull. Also, even if a Christian manages to distinguish himself in some situations, there are circumstances that are so ordinary that there is no opportunity for the Christian to naturally distinguish himself. As a whole, the church is to be a light in this world, but it is foolish to think that this can become naturally obvious in every single human relationship or interaction. The Bible never teaches this.

The only reliable way to draw attention to your faith is to bring up the topic and speak about it. And even when it comes to this, there is no rule that requires us to do it as soon as possible after we are first introduced to a person. Of course, in principle a Christian may preach the gospel to anyone at anytime, even to new acquaintances or complete strangers. It is also true that some believers may be too timid to do this, and may search for reasons to excuse themselves. But I am not referring to this aspect of evangelism. There is the issue of boldness, but there is also the issue of wisdom. When you are dealing with someone that you are likely to meet again and again, there is the option to wait until a convenient opportunity comes up to present the gospel.

In this case, I had been friends with this college student for months. I would see him several times a week, but not until that day did our conversation offered such a natural transition to an exposition of the gospel. And because he was the one who brought up the topic, and in such a direct and inquisitive manner, I was able to hold his attention for a great length of time without any protest. One could hardly imagine a more beautiful opportunity to present the gospel than being asked, "What did he mean by born again?" I do not say that you should wait for such a direct invitation. Something like this might never happen, but it remains that some contexts are better than others, some opportunities are superior to others, and some conversations are more easily transformed into religious discussions than others.

Again, a Christian should possess the boldness and the readiness of mind to approach a total stranger with the gospel, or to create the opportunity by forcing a conversation toward the desired direction. This should never been undermined. My point is that there are advantages to waiting for opportunities that enable you to naturally enter the topic. If such an opportunity does not come up, then there is nothing wrong with using a more invasive approach. I am, however, far from advocating a form of "friendship evangelism," where the Christian befriends the non-Christian, and impresses the latter with how normal, sociable, and attractive a follower of Christ can be. The "natural" opportunities that I speak

of can occur within the first several seconds of meeting a person, or it might not occur until several months later. In any case, no Christian should be made to feel guilty for not immediately announcing his faith to every person he meets, or for not dazzling an unbeliever with his holiness in a few days, especially if the reason for this is not a lack of boldness and conviction, but wisdom, patience, and faith in divine providence.

The story also illustrates something that is more relevant to our discussion, and it is the fact that not everyone is familiar with biblical concepts that seem commonplace to us. My friend was almost twenty, and was raised in the United States. With so many churches and believers in this country, we might expect someone like this to understand what Christians mean by "born again" even if he does not believe in it. But the truth is that very few unbelievers understand this and other biblical doctrines. Other than outright admission, there are other indications of their ignorance. For example, it is not unusual for a non-Christian to assert that religion should be primarily about unity, tolerance, social justice, good works, and so on. He would speak this way to a Christian without supplying any support and without making any effort to preempt objections, showing no awareness that his statement contradicts what his hearer believes. An unbeliever would often speak this way assuming that the Christian agrees with him.

This indicates that, no matter how wide we think that the biblical worldview has been propagated in Western cultures, it has not penetrated the consciousness of most people. It is not only that they do not believe what we believe, but they are not even aware of what we believe. Furthermore, it is also obvious that even those who identify themselves as Christians often do not know what we think they ought to know. Ask a number of church members what it means to be "born again," and it is almost guaranteed that you will hear many different answers, all of them ridiculous. The idea is not commonplace after all. Now ask the pastors the same question, and it is unlikely that you will get much better results. Of course, one reason for this is that most church members and pastors are not born again. If most people in Western civilizations – if even most "Christians" – do not know what it means to be born again, then we need to make our exposition of the Christian faith much more clear and forceful before the world. We should not assume that people in any part of the world understands even the most basic Christian ideas, including those in our churches and seminaries.

God created man, and called him Adam. He was created upright, but he fell into sin, and sin produced devastating damages to every aspect of man. The moment he transgressed God's command, death came into him. His body began to deteriorate. It would continue to survive for many years, but it eventually expired and returned to dust. The life and light of God dissipated from his soul, and in the place of peace, joy, and clarity of thought came fear, shame, and confusion. Adam was the federal head of all mankind, that is, the representative. Thus when he fell into sin, all of mankind fell with him. Every human person produced since that time would inherit his corrupt nature, and would also come under the judicial condemnation of God.

There is an intellectual and an ethical aspect to the damage inflicted upon the fallen soul of man. We can summarize the condition of every non-Christian with two simple words – he is *stupid*, and he is *sinful*.

The non-Christian is stupid. He turns away from God's wisdom in his thinking and attempts to construct his own interpretation of the world using irrational methods such as induction, sensation, and science. He claims to value reason highly, but he is considered rational only by other irrational men. In the intellectual arena, men's credentials come from mutual approval. They refuse to receive the wisdom that comes from God, but instead bands together to build their intellectual Tower of Babel. But under the test of logic, every project crumples to dust. It does not matter what they say about one another. I have no respect for their opinion. Since there is not one non-Christian theory, discovery, or claim to knowledge that I cannot refute in under ten seconds, the only reasonable conclusion is that non-Christians are unintelligent. They are very stupid. Their thinking is characterized by ignorance and irrationality. This is especially pronounced when it comes to spiritual things.

The non-Christian is sinful. To commit sin is to transgress God's moral laws and precepts in any way, whether in one's thoughts, motives, desires, or actions. The Bible, of course, includes many such laws and precepts, and they define for us right and wrong, good and evil, and how to distinguish between them. Even those who have no access to God's verbal revelation, or who reject it, are instinctively aware of some of the broader principles of God's moral code for mankind. These may not be in sharp focus in their thinking. In them they seem more like faint memories, and when they surface, they are usually suppressed, distorted, or explained away.

In the non-Christian man are strong motives, desires, and dispositions toward evil, toward beliefs, thoughts, and actions that are contrary to God's commands. It is not that unbelievers have no concept of morality, but they suppress in their minds what they instinctively know about God and his holiness, and in their wickedness they invent their own standards to replace the precepts of God. In other words, non-Christians call evil that which is good, and call good that which is evil. And they do this so that they can call themselves good even as they perform evil and defy their Creator. Nevertheless, they cannot even live up to the standards that they set for themselves. Thus the non-Christian is an intellectual failure, and he is an ethical failure.

The non-Christian is a defective person. There is something wrong with him. There is not just something wrong with what he thinks or what he does – a person *is* what he thinks and what he does. There is something wrong with his person, with him – all of him. Every non-Christian is a bad person, a rotten person. He is this way from the moment he is conceived. He is dead on the inside, and dying on the outside. Any religious or philosophical doctrine must be false that denies the true condition of man, that proposes a superficial solution, or that proposes a solution that is powerless to effect the necessary change.

Jesus said that the only solution is for a person to be "born again." The word rendered "again" can also be translated "from above." The Bible teaches both ideas. It refers to the need for regeneration of the soul, and to the "new creation" of the inner man. But in the

Gospel of John, a prominent contrast is made between that which is "from above" and that which is "from below." And Jesus referred to his disciples as "not of the world" even though they were still living in the world. So both ideas apply. It is indeed a second birth, but it is not a second natural birth, but a different kind of birth. It is a birth of the spirit, in which God gives divine life to the soul of man, reviving his spiritual senses, enlightening his mind with truth, orienting his dispositions toward righteousness.

Jesus said that unless a man is born again – unless he is born from above, given birth by God in the spirit – he cannot "see" and he cannot "enter" the kingdom of God. The word "see" refers not to sensory perception, but to intellectual perception about spiritual things. That is, unless a man is born from above, he cannot truly grasp the things of God. He cannot understand the truth about God or believe what he has revealed to us. The word "enter" refers to participation. That is, unless a man is born from above, he cannot be a part of God's family of love, truth, and righteousness. A person can become a citizen of God's kingdom only by being born into it. In other words, unless a person is born again, or born from above, he will always be on the opposite side of God, and of all that is good and true.

There is only one Father, he has only one divine Son, and there is only one Holy Spirit. The Father has granted to the Son a fixed number of individuals, chosen before the creation of the world. All who are born again necessarily belong to the Son of God, and indeed all who belong to him will believe on him. We are not born again by believing in Christ, since no one who is still dead in the spirit can believe in the truth. This is man's problem in the first place, and he cannot rescue himself out of it. Rather, all those whom God has chosen belong to Christ, and all who belong to Christ will be born again, and all who are born again will show themselves as such by believing Jesus Christ.

As in natural birth, the spiritual birth is not a work that you perform. It is not something that you do; it is something that God does. It is something that happens to you, that happens in you by God's sovereign decision, and that he causes by the power of his Holy Spirit. And once it happens, you will do what your new spiritual nature dictates. Just as a human person is moved by a natural desire for human food, a child of God has a natural desire – natural as opposed to artificial or pretended – for spiritual food, that is, to consume the word of God and to perform the will of God. It becomes the most natural thing for this person to believe in the truth, to entrust his life and soul to Jesus Christ, and to love and worship God.

This is why all non-Christian religious and non-religious proposals fail. Unless a man is born from above, born of God, he cannot perceive or participate in God's kingdom. But God regenerates only those whom he has chosen in Christ. Therefore, there is no one who is a non-Christian who can say that he is born from above, that he is a child of God. It does not matter what religion he belongs to. It does not matter what philosophy he affirms. It does not matter how much education he has, or how many good deeds he has done. It does not matter if he is strong, wealthy, or clever by the standards of the world – men's approval does not imply God's approval. It does not matter if he claims to search for the truth, yet not by accepting revelation from God, but by utilizing the means that he thinks he has, and that he thinks are reliable, such as his physical senses, inductive reasoning, and the

scientific method. It does not matter if he reaches deep within or stretches far beyond for enlightenment. All is futile. Nothing that man can do can make a difference. Only a new creation, a new birth from above can remove man from the kingdom of darkness and place him in the kingdom of light, from the bondage of Satan to the righteous liberty in God.

Most people are not born again, or born from above, and it is often easy to tell who they are. Murderers, adulterers, homosexuals, robbers, deceivers, atheists, agnostics, all those who admit that they are non-Christians, and all those who tolerate or approve of them, as long as they remain such, will certainly not inherit the kingdom of God. The demonic nature is right there on the surface. Some people are not as obvious. It is, in fact, not difficult to see what they are, but clear perception requires us to discard some of our assumptions, and to look beyond appearances.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, even one of the Jewish rulers. He was educated in religion according to the standard of men. He admitted that Jesus performed miracles, and that at least on the basis of these miracles, Jesus must have come from God. As a side note, Nicodemus must have been familiar with the record of the false prophets and magicians in Scripture, so he knew that deceivers could produce tricks or miracles. And he realized that the miracles Jesus performed were beyond these – they must have been numerous, spectacular, overwhelming.

Nevertheless, Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, and the opinion expressed by Nicodemus fell short of this. Any opinion of God that falls short of seeing him as God falls infinitely short. Just as God is infinitely superior to man, as long as a person judges God to be a mere man, no matter how special a man, this person is wrong by an infinite measure. It should not surprise us that Jesus told him that he must be born again, born from above, in order to perceive and participate in the kingdom of God. No matter how much religious education Nicodemus had, and even though at least a part of that education was sound, he was a man of the world, a man "from below," so that his perception was limited to this perspective.

No matter how religious a person appears to us, and no matter how established he is in religious circles, if he fails to sincerely and intelligently acknowledge that Jesus was and is the Christ, the Son of God, he remains a person of the world, dead in the spirit, and not born from above. Many seminary professors, church leaders, denomination directors, will be thrown straight into hell when they die, not because they are these things, but because they have not been born again. Perhaps they have learned to say the right words, as a parrot imitates its master, but only a born again person can confess the truth with understanding and belief, and afterward grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, bearing much fruit.

There is another principle, a broader one, that helps us to identify those who are not born again. Many Christians fail to think clearly on this issue, and affirm that a person can acknowledge Jesus as the Christ, but deny the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. But on what basis do these people confess that Jesus is God and Christ? The truth is that the person who denies biblical inspiration and inerrancy is worse than Nicodemus. Of course we cannot say that he truly believed the Scripture until he also believed in what it said

about Christ, but at least he affirmed the authority of Scripture in principle. This is more than we can say about those who reject the doctrine. So let us not deceive ourselves and deceive others. A person who is born from above will naturally believe the truth that God has revealed. And since God has revealed truth to us in the Scripture, a born again person will naturally believe the Scripture – all of it – and it follows that he will believe and confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. There is no promise of life for anyone who affirms anything less than this.

When we speak with non-Christians, we must see through appearances and go beyond mere symptoms. Of course, we may begin our approach with any issue that we like or that is convenient. A conversation may begin with food, weather, career, politics, even religion. But very soon we must use it to lead to deeper questions, and especially to draw attention what is wrong with the non-Christians as people. What kind of people would say what they say about food? What kind of people would assume what they assume about the weather? What kind of person would take their view of work, education, parenting, ethics, and so on?

Even when we discuss these topics with them on a superficial level, the conflict of ideas between us should become evident right away. But what are the reasons for the conflict? We provide arguments for these beliefs, and so do they. If we believe in accordance with the Scripture, we will find that our arguments crush theirs every time and on every issue. But they cling to their positions. Why? Why are they so irrational? Why are they so dishonest, so immoral? What kind of people are they? Ah, they are stupid and sinful people. We have come upon it. We have come to the root of the matter – they must be born again, born from above, to even perceive what we perceive, to see the truth that is so clear and simple to us.

When an unbeliever comes to you with an objection or a comment about something that disagrees with the Christian faith, what do you do? Do you answer the objection or respond to the comment, and then stop and wait for the next one? If you have been educated by the Scripture in right beliefs and in the way of right reasoning, then of course you can defeat any objection and address any comment, but you must go further than that. Because the Bible has given you insights about the non-Christian, you understand him better than he understands himself, so it is up to you to push the conversation in a direction that will allow you to tell him what he needs to hear. His hostile objection is just an excuse. His comment – perhaps one that has no apparent relation to religion at all, but that conflicts so much with Christianity – is just a symptom.

There is nothing wrong with the Christian faith. He thinks the way he thinks, and he acts the way he acts, because there is something wrong with him. He is broken, defective, unintelligent, and wicked to the core. He is a stupid and worthless piece of spiritual garbage. He has no redeeming qualities. He must be changed. He must be born again. You need to tell him that. You need to show him that. Of course, I do not say that if you preach the truth to him, then you will cause him to be born again, or that he can decide to be born again. No, that is up to God. But you need to preach the truth to the unbeliever, as a witness

against him and as a witness to the truth about God, so that perhaps God may show him mercy and bring conviction to his heart, and convert him through faith and repentance.

So you answer the objection, but you also point out the foolishness of the objection, and then ask, "What kind of person are you, that you would think like this? See, you think you are a smart and rational person, but you are really a stupid and irrational person. But why are you so stupid? Why are you so irrational? Because there is something wrong with YOU. Your stupid objection is a product of sin's effect on the mind, an effect of the fall of man. Only Jesus Christ can save your mind and give you light."

If the unbeliever remains stubborn, even though he has lost the debate, or if his comment, question, or objection has to do with a conflict between Christian and non-Christian ethics, then you should say, "Now I have answered what you said, but what kind of person are you, that you would insist on believing a lie, even though I have refuted you? Why are you so dishonest, although you claim to respect truth and reason? Or, what kind of person are you, that you would think this way, that you should make such a protest, or ask this question? Do you not see it? You are an evil, sinful, rotten person. Why are you so despicable? It is because you were born a child of the devil. But Jesus Christ can save your soul and give you life."

Jesus' teaching that a person must be born from above to perceive and participate in God's kingdom defines the way that we look at the non-Christians, and thus also the way we perform evangelism and ministry. The doctrine requires Christians to stop flattering the unbelievers, and to stop lying to them about their condition. Our debate with unbelievers, and with many of those who call themselves believers, can be reduced to this basic difference – they are from below, but we are from above. So our message to them is not that we are very much the same, only that they are misinformed and misguided, that if they would only hear us out, they could decide to make that slight adjustment and become like us.

Rather, we must tell them, "You have a problem, a big problem. It is not something superficial that you can easily fix. You are ignorant, but you cannot fix this problem by learning a little more information. Your intellect is so broken that you cannot learn what you need to know. You are irrational, but you cannot fix it by gaining more practice or exercising more care in your thinking. Your mind is so confused and stupid that you can never learn the way of right reasoning as long as you remain the person that you are. You are evil, wicked, immoral, and filthy. But you cannot do anything to change that, try as you might. In fact, you are so stupid and sinful that you cannot truly understand what it means to be righteous and how to live up to it. You see, you are the problem. You are not an intelligent person who lacks opportunity. You are not an ethical person who makes mistakes. You are an unintelligent person. You are an unethical person. You need a power that is greater than you and that is outside of you to change you into something else. You must be born again. You must be born from above to see into and to live in the realm of God."

The doctrine also defines how Christians ought to understand themselves. Even before the creation of the world, God chose to justify and to adopt me through Jesus Christ. When I was born, I inherited Adam's corruption in my soul and body, just like everyone else, and shared in the effects that sin produced in the intellectual, ethical, and physical aspects of man. Then, at God's appointed time, his eternal decree regarding my salvation was made manifest, and I was changed. I was born from above. The life of God flooded my soul, and the light of Christ filled my mind, and opened my eyes – that is, my spiritual or intellectual perception – to the truth, and I believed the gospel. The Spirit of God came into me, and testified to me that I was the son of God, and declared to my conscience that I was justified and sanctified in Jesus Christ.

On the outside, I may look like everyone else, since the change was not a physical birth, a birth from below, but it was a spiritual birth, a birth from above. I remain a human person, as non-Christians are also human, but the similarity is only superficial. In the spirit I belong to an altogether different spiritual race, a race that is so much superior in substance – in intellectual capabilities and in ethical dispositions – that it is sometimes difficult to make satisfactory comparisons. You can compare a man to a dog, but they are so different in some areas that it might not make sense to do so. Jesus said that he did not come to bring peace between men, but that he came to bring a sword that would disrupt even the most intimate relations. Of course, the race of God had been in conflict with the race of Satan since the fall of Adam, but Christ made the divide clearer than ever before.

I am a man from another world. I can comprehend the things of the spirit, and belief in the doctrines of God is natural to me. It does not strain me to believe the truth, because I see truth for what it is, and I can testify to what I perceive in the realm of God. In the natural, I am a descendent of Adam, and I can also grasp all that the non-Christians believe. I know how they think, what they believe, and the reasons that they provide to justify their beliefs and their actions. But I can also see that they are wrong, and I can show how they are wrong, every time. So I am a Christian not because I am ignorant or gullible, or because I do not understand the non-Christians' positions and arguments. I understand them, and I see that they are wrong, but that the faith of Jesus Christ is true. I stand in judgment over the thinking of unbelievers. But the non-Christians cannot rise to my level of thinking and perception, since as Paul wrote, the things of God are spiritually discerned, grasped by a mind that is capable of processing spiritual things.

This birth from above is not a work of man. I did not give birth to myself in the spirit, nor did I cause God to do so. And it did not happen because I deserved it. If I was so good that I deserved regeneration, justification, and adoption, then I would not have needed these things, for I would have been born from above in the first place. No, God decided to adopt me, justify me, and sanctify me in eternity, before the creation of the world, without regard to my faith and conduct. Rather, my faith and good works are the products of his divine decree, not the cause of it. Thus to note my privileges as a believer, as a member of the superior spiritual race, is not to boast about myself, but to boast about the grace and the power of God, and to make nothing more than a factual statement.

This is how every Christian should understand himself. It is astounding that those who claim to be Christians would resist this, and would criticize those who speak like this. Like the Pharisees, hypocrites respect a person after he is dead, and they would practically worship him when it is fashionable to do so, although they would condemn someone who is alive for saying the same thing. This is why I am often criticized by "Christians" for merely repeating the doctrines of the prophets and the apostles, as well as Reformers such as Luther and Calvin, and for teaching them with the same attitude and force. Luther is praised, and Calvin is exalted, but let no one dare repeat what they said!

Thus I cite Spurgeon for their benefit: "What is a Christian? If you compare him with a king, he adds priestly sanctity to royal dignity. The king's royalty often lies only in his crown, but with a Christian it is infused into his inmost nature. He is as much above his fellows through his new birth, as a man is above the beast that perishes."¹² He says it well: The Christian is as superior to the non-Christian as a man is above a brute. This is the teaching of Scripture, and of all those who have respect for God's work in regeneration.

Let us not be hypocrites, but be true to our profession of faith. If we say that we stand with the prophets and the apostles, the Reformers, and the great theologians and preachers of the past, then let us also declare the same doctrines that they taught, in the same boldness of speech with which they declared them to their generations.

¹² Charles H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, evening reading for May 4.

10. ALREADY CONDEMNED

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.

The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him. (John 3:16-21, 31-36)

The Gospel of John is often used by Christians, in one way or another, to introduce the Lord Jesus to the unbelievers. Of course, many other parts of the Bible can be used for this purpose, but many favor this Gospel. This is understandable. This Gospel presents an exalted view of Jesus Christ, clearly teaching both his divinity and humanity. It offers a number of instructive descriptions of Christ, such as shepherd and witness. It speaks in vivid metaphors such as light and living water. It stresses positive ideas such as salvation, belief or faith, a birth from above, truth, life, resurrection, and so on.

However, I wonder if many of these Christians who so favor the Gospel of John know what it really says, or if they read it and use it with such strong preconceptions that they fail to see its plain concerns. This Gospel contains explicit and repeated contrasts between Christ and the world, between Christians and non-Christians, between light and darkness, good and evil, and almost continuously stresses the idea of condemnation against those who do not believe and follow Christ.

These things are often not reflected by those who employ John to introduce the Christian faith to unbelievers. Do they know what the Gospel of John really teaches? Many unbelievers also fail to notice these items when they read the Gospel. They are, as this same Gospel teaches, blind to spiritual things, even when they are explained in plain letters right

before their eyes. And the distorted message that they hear from Christians ensures that the cloud over their minds, already so destitute of intelligence, remain dark and heavy. It is good for Christians to present Jesus Christ to the world by the Gospel of John, but sometimes they do not know what it is that they are offering. We must not let people read the Gospel, but then preach something different from it.

John 3:16 is one of the most popular verses used in evangelism. It is almost entirely positive, and refers to love of God, his giving of the Son, and the life received by those who would believe. The next verse does not disappoint, for it says that the Son did not come to condemn the world, but to save the world. Christians so adore this verse that some allege that it sums up the entire gospel message.

However, it is doubtful that this is the exact impression that John wishes to convey. This is because John 3:16, which sounds so positive and assuring, is bracketed by many more verses on the non-Christian's spiritual and intellectual impotence (3:1-12) and God's condemnation against him (3:18-21, 31-36). The verses before 3:16 teach that unless a person is born from heaven, he cannot perceive or participate in God's kingdom. A person is in a state of inability and hopelessness unless this happens to him. Then, the verses after 3:16 tell us that a person who does not believe in Christ is condemned already, and that unless he believes, God's wrath remains on him.

Thus of course Christ did not come to condemn, since the world was already condemned. No special effort or extra step was necessary to place all non-Christians under God's wrath – they were already under it. Even 3:16 itself suggests that anyone who does not believe in Christ will "perish," and that this is the existing verdict against him unless he believes. A Christian fails to convey the message of John 3:16 unless he preaches it against this background.

As he does in many other places, John divides humanity into two groups. There are the elect, those whom God has chosen for salvation, so that they are those who have already believed or who would believe in Christ at God's appointed time. And there are the reprobates, those whom God has chosen for damnation, so that they are those who would refuse to believe in Christ. Before the creation of the world, God had already decided who would belong to which of these two groups. So this is not determined when Christ is preached to a person; rather, by his reaction to Christ, it is revealed as to what kind of person he is, and which group he belongs to.

Jesus Christ is the same exalted Lord whether or not anyone believes in him or has any respect for him. A man's reaction to Christ does not tell us something about Christ, but it tells us something about the man. No one stands in judgment of Christ, but every man is judged by him, and exposed by their opinion about him.

It is popular to confess that we cannot know a man's heart, so that in most cases we must reserve judgment. This is misleading. We cannot know a man's heart by our own thinking and investigation, but we must not make this human limitation greater than divine revelation. When God states a principle about the heart of man, we can believe it, and we

can judge a man by it. John writes that Christ came into the world as a light, but many men refused to come to this light because their deeds were evil, and they preferred to remain unexposed under the cloak of darkness. There is no such thing as a good person who is at the same time a non-Christian. Unbelievers may complain that they think the Christian faith is false or irrational, but all objections are easily answered. These are only excuses that hide the real reason. The truth is that they refuse to come to Christ because they are evil people, damned souls that God has not chosen to rescue but to condemn, for the guilt that they inherit from Adam and for the guilt that they incur by their own sins.

The Gospel does not portray unbelievers as unfortunate victims, but as people who remain in intellectual and moral darkness, in evil thoughts and schemes, in rebellion and open hostility against God's holy nature and standard. How can Christians so eagerly commend this Gospel, when their preaching does not reflect what it teaches? It would seem that, due to their own remaining sinfulness and the influence of the world, they have also become blind to what Scripture says in plain language. And some even attack those who preach this way, as the false prophets assailed Jeremiah for proclaiming judgment against his own people. Just as unbelievers reveal their true nature by their reaction to Christ, these professing Christians reveal their true nature by their reaction to the Scripture and to those who faithfully declare it.

At the conclusion of the Gospel, John would state that he has written this record of the life and teaching of Christ so that his readers might believe in him, and that in believing in him, they might have everlasting life. And here in John 3, he confronts his readers with the mission of Christ to save those who would believe, and with the reality of the condemnation that non-Christians come under. He does all this by a written document that he sends forth.

In other words, to accept or reject Christ does not necessarily entail an encounter with Christ in the flesh, the physical person. To accept the apostolic testimony about Christ is to truly accept Christ, to believe in him and to have everlasting life. And to reject the apostolic testimony about him is to truly reject him, and to remain under condemnation. That a person is unable to meet Christ in the flesh poses no hindrance, and thus provides no excuse for unbelief. This is because the claims made about him are spiritual, and the knowledge of him and reaction to him are also spiritual, so that he can be truly accepted or rejected without physical contact or perception. He can be accepted or rejected in the mind alone.

John was an apostle, and he indeed had physical contact with Christ, but his testimony about him concerns the spiritual, not the physical. And as I said earlier, a person who has been granted a true spiritual perception of Christ is a reliable witness for Christ. That is, the Holy Spirit enables this person to perceive in his mind that all the apostolic teachings about Christ stand true – that he was God and man, that he walked the earth, taught, healed, and performed miracles, that he died for the sins of the chosen ones, and was raised from the dead for their justification. A person who has received this insight is able to offer true testimony about Christ. He has perceived Christ in a manner and on a level that Christ ought to be perceived.

Therefore, although we may not have had physical contact with Christ, and although we may not be apostles, we can confront the world with the person of Jesus Christ just as truly as the apostles did. And indeed, our testimony is based on their testimony. To accept our testimony about Christ is to accept Christ, and to reject it is to reject Christ. That said, we still have the testimony of the apostles with us in the Scripture, so that they being dead, still speak.

Christians tend to use the Gospel to advance their tamed view of Christ and the Christian faith. However, it should be the Gospel that shapes the way we see the world, how we see people and the differences between them. And it says that there are only two kinds of people, Christians and non-Christians. Those who believe in Christ shall inherit everlasting life, but those who do not believe in him shall be condemned, for God's wrath is already upon them. Just as John states all of this openly to those whom he wishes would believe in Christ, it is far better to declare the whole message of John 3, rather than a selective exposition of John 3:16 alone.

11. A WORLD OF METAPHORS

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers.

They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world." (John 4:7-14, 19-26, 28-30, 39-42)

If every sinner would fall on his face and cry out for mercy at the mention of our Lord Jesus, surely no Christian would be afraid to speak about him. But we understand that this is not the case. Non-Christians are ignorant, confused, proud, dishonest, and wicked, so that the gospel is frequently met with resistance. This makes some believers nervous about even bringing up the subject.

However, by the Scripture and the Spirit, God has provided us all that is necessary to make us confident and skillful witnesses for the Lord. The right kind of confidence is more than raw attitude, but it is based on understanding, and understanding will lead to skillfulness. If you have a problem with speaking to people about Jesus Christ, then here is where you must begin. You must begin with understanding, that is, knowledge about Jesus Christ, your place in him, and what happens when a conversation turns to the topic of religion.

Jesus approached every situation with purpose, knowledge, and boldness. He knew who he was, that God had sent him, and what he had sent him to do. He was able to perceive everything in his life within the framework of performing the will of God. The Gospel of John portrays him as one who always knew what to do and what to say, and more than that, as one who knew the appropriate time for every word and action. Thus as the scriptural record shows, he handled every encounter with ease and assurance. This was the case whether he was speaking with eager inquirers, with hostile skeptics, or with someone like this woman at the well. He always had his mission in mind, or what he called the Father's will, and no matter how a situation began, he could take control of it to advance this cause.

He never approached any situation to see what he could learn from it, and he never talked to anyone to see what he could learn from him. This was not because he lacked humility – far from it. The fact that he would talk to anyone at all was an act of infinite condescension. Rather, there was no point to submit. He never had to back down, to compromise, or to be corrected. He spoke from a position of absolute and unquestionable superiority. He knew that he was superior to anyone that he faced, and superior to anything or anyone that the world trusted in. The sense of superiority and confidence was based on knowledge, knowledge of who he was.

When the woman mentioned Jacob, it did not impress him. He was greater than Jacob. The woman had the means to draw water from the well, but he could provide a different kind of water, superior than that from Jacob's well. When the woman finally deferred to the Messiah, the ultimate authority figure, who would come and explain everything, and settle all disputes, even then he did not retreat, for as he told the woman, "I who speak to you am he."

We preach not ourselves but Jesus Christ, and his superiority is not lost when his disciples speak about him. He is the same Jesus. In fact, we would make him into a different person if we do not assume his utter superiority over everything and everyone. He is superior to each unbeliever that we speak to, and everything and everyone that this person trusts in. You strengthen your grasp of Christ's superiority over all things by praying for illumination by the Spirit, by meditating on the greatness of Jesus based on all that the Scripture says about him, and by thinking about how even the most approved and enviable things in this world are but poor imitations of his wisdom, power, and glory. Then, you will know that, before Christ, the unbeliever is a worm to be pitied, and not a man to be feared.

This is the confidence we have in Christ: It does not matter what the non-Christian believes or whom he worships, but Jesus is always right, always relevant, always superior. Just as our Lord was never surprised, embarrassed, or overwhelmed by anything, we never need to be surprised, embarrassed, or overwhelmed.

It is true that Jesus preached himself, so that the messenger was also the message, and there was no distance between the two. The confidence, then, was thoroughly natural, even unavoidable. But we are not him, so how can we speak with confidence and authority as he did?

The difference that this makes has been exaggerated. Again, we do not preach ourselves, but we preach Jesus Christ, the same superior person that he himself preached. On that point, there is no difference, and our confidence in him will be in proportion to our understanding about him, and the measure of faith in our knowledge of him. His hearers observed that he spoke as one with authority, unlike the scribes and the Pharisees. The religious leaders of that day did not have firsthand knowledge of God. Even though they had the Scripture, they did not believe it, or they would have known God for themselves. Christ, on the other hand, spoke as one who came from heaven, and as the Son of God.

Whether you can speak about him with confidence and authority reveals whether you are his disciple, or whether you are as one of the scribes, who read the truth but did not grasp and embrace it. The Christian is one who sees Jesus Christ for who he is, who truly knows him, and who has received the Holy Spirit, that is, power from heaven to be a witness for the Lord. So the fact that we are not Christ does not make the difference that is supposed by many.

There are those who defer all authority to Christ or to the Scripture. We need to be careful here. It is true that any authority that we possess is derived from Christ and the Scripture; however, that is not the conclusion of the matter. Do *you* know Christ or not? Do *you* believe the Scripture or not? Do *you* have the Spirit of God in you or not? Preachers, have *you* been sent to speak for the King or not? If all this makes no difference, so that you could speak only as the scribes and the Pharisees, or like the unbelievers, then you still speak as an outsider. It is as if you have no place in the kingdom of heaven, as if you have no part of it, and have no role in it. An understanding of the superiority of Christ must be followed by an appreciation of our place in him.

When you engage an unbeliever in conversation, you are to position Christ, and thus also yourself, in the right place. It is not a dialogue of equals, nor a dialogue about equals. You come at him with a sense of superiority, because you understand that Christ is superior to him, and superior to everything about him. You may protest that you are not superior in yourself, but this is irrelevant, since you do not preach about yourself. However, this way of thinking, that you are not superior in yourself, is itself based on a deficient theology. The Bible tells you that you are a co-heir of Jesus Christ, even now seated with him at the right hand of God. It says that you are a new creation, born from heaven into the kingdom of God. It declares that you are in this world, but you are not of it. How is that not superior?

To acknowledge this has nothing to do with arrogance or self-righteousness, since you do not credit yourself with this reality. You attribute your superior condition to God's sovereign kindness toward you. You have obtained your current station as a gift that you have received, not as something that you have earned or merited apart from God's charity. The reality remains that this is what you are, and it is something that the unbelievers are not. And this enables you to speak with confidence and authority even when you face the best of them. Thus even when Paul addressed the elite Athenians, he did not say, "I am overawed by your culture and wisdom, and it would be my honor to present my humble Jesus to you for your consideration. Perhaps we can learn something from each other." No, he said, "I have come to tell you something that you do not know, to address your ignorance about the matter."

Any conversation can be guided toward a spiritual direction. Some contexts are more appropriate than others, and are given to more natural transitions, but it is always possible to take control and compel the unbeliever to consider deeper things. One way to do this is to make the mundane, the physical, and the natural things of life into analogies and metaphors for spiritual things, and by doing so elevate the conversation to a higher plane, compelling the unbeliever to follow you from the earthly to the heavenly. This approach is able to take the things that the unbeliever is usually concerned about, and redirect his attention to his true condition, and to his greatest needs and obligations.

I am not saying that we should use analogies and metaphors to facilitate comprehension. There are those who insist that God and other spiritual concepts cannot be understood except by analogies and metaphors, by comparisons with natural things, since it is alleged that we can understand the concrete better than the abstract. This is a popular notion that has arisen from false humility. It is simply not true that we can understand spiritual things only through analogies and metaphors, or that we can understand the abstract and the non-physical only by comparisons with the concrete and the physical.

Some people apply the tiresome "Hebrew vs. Greek" contrast, and even claim that the Hebrews had no abstract ideas, and that God cannot be considered in the abstract – only the Greeks try that. This is an anti-intellectual invention that goes along with the way that some scholars wish to see things, but it has no basis in the Bible. Instead, as mentioned in an earlier chapter, John begins his Gospel with an entirely abstract consideration about God and the Word. Ideas such as time, creation, life, light, and so on are used without any connection with the concrete. Frankly, the assumption behind the unwarranted contrast

seems to be that these people are stupid, or at least they think that the Jews were stupid, and who were incapable of abstract thoughts, even though they were made in the image of God.

Thus I do not refer to the alleged advantages in using analogies and metaphors to explain spiritual things. Rather, I am saying that natural things are reflections of spiritual things, so that they can be used as starting points in a conversation to draw attention to the things of God. This allows you to make a smooth transition from the natural to the spiritual in any conversation.

There are those who disagree that we should make a sharp distinction between the natural and the spiritual, and to say that natural things are reflections of spiritual things, to them, again sounds Greek. But to repeat, there is no such distinction between Hebrew and Greek thought – that is, the differences are not found in concrete vs. abstract or dualistic vs. holistic. This is a myth in biblical scholarship that cannot withstand the test of simply reading the words of the Bible, and noting its plain statements and assumptions.

The Bible is filled with both concrete and abstract thoughts, and it is dualistic whenever the distinction between the natural and the spiritual is needed, or whenever it refers to the true nature of things, but it is holistic whenever the distinction is not needed, so that in those instances it would refer to a part as if it were the whole for the sake of convenience. For example, although the Bible makes a sharp distinction between the spirit and the flesh, or the mind and the body, when someone speaks to me, I do not think, "His body is speaking to me the words that his mind has arranged," but rather, "He is speaking to me." Both statements are true, but metaphysical precision is unnecessary in this context. However, if I make the distinction even once, this means that I believe in it. The Bible often makes such distinctions.

It does not matter what is Hebrew, or Greek, or Chinese, or Russian, or Martian – the Bible reflects a culture of its own. At what time did the Israelites in general think like the prophets? Since when did the Jewish population agree with the Lord and the apostles? If the prophets spoke in the abstract, then I can also – it does not matter what culture they spoke out of. If the apostles spoke in dualistic terms, making distinctions between the natural and the spiritual, the secular and the sacred, as they certainly did, then I will also – it does not matter what the Greek thought. If this sounds all Greek to you, then this means that the Greeks agreed with the Bible – well, then good for the Greeks!

The scholars protest that it is necessary to understand the cultures of biblical times in order to understand the Bible. Evidently, they do not understand the cultures, since what they say about the Hebrews in this area plainly contradicts how the Bible speaks, and what the Bible teaches. Again, regardless of what is assumed about Hebrew thought, the Bible speaks in the abstract, and the Bible is dualistic, in that it distinguishes between the natural and the spiritual, the secular and the sacred, the body and the soul.

Jesus initiated the conversation by asking the Samaritan woman for a drink from the well. The woman was surprised, since Jews did not associate with Samaritans. The conversation

remained on the natural level, although there was a religious background behind this. Then, Jesus elevated the conversation to a spiritual level by mention "living water." At this point, Jesus had already transitioned to the spiritual. The next mention of water was also a spiritual reference, since it was the water of "eternal life." He used physical thirst as a metaphor for a deeper thirst, a spiritual thirst. Jesus brought attention to this, and stated that "the gift of God" can provide "living water" that would perpetually and permanently satisfy it. The woman could not follow at first. Her thinking remained on the natural level, and thought that this strange water could relieve her from coming to the well to draw water. Thus Jesus probed deeper into her background.

He did something similar with his disciples, who came and found him speaking with the woman. They were baffled but did not demand an explanation. When they offered him something to eat, Jesus said that he had food that they did not know about. At first they did not understand, and their thinking remained on the natural level, so that they thought he had food from somewhere else. So he explained that he meant his food was to do the will of God. Again, by making something mundane, natural, and physical into a metaphor for something spiritual, he elevated the conversation and the disciples' thinking and priorities to a higher level.

Likewise, a Christian can elevate any conversation into a spiritual discussion. For example, a conversation on wealth can be transformed into one about true riches. A financial recession can become a metaphor for a famine of the word of God, that is, a shortage in knowledge about him. A conversation on various kinds of scandals can be transformed into one about spiritual deception, mental strongholds, or heretical theologians. They can also serve as illustrations for the destruction that results from sowing to the flesh rather than to the spirit. We indulge or invest in the things of the flesh, and we reap a whirlwind of troubles and punishments.

A conversation about friends and family can be transformed into one about the Christian's true friends and family in Christ. When the unbeliever talks about education, the Christian can elevate the discussion to one about true wisdom. Or, if the topic is marriage, the Christian can make the transition to talk about true love, and the union between Christ and the Christians. At the mention of food, the Christian can make the transition by musing on the significance of eating together, especially in some cultures, and then elevate the conversation by discussing how a person gets to sit at the table of the Lord. Art can be a starting point for the Christian to talk about true beauty, moral beauty, spiritual and intellectual beauty, and the beauty of the Lord. Sports is usually connected with heroics, but what is so great about people who are very persistent about hitting a ball really hard, or running really, really fast? All such feats are insignificant, and in fact quite pathetic, compared to the heroics of the Lord, who suffered great pain and humiliation to redeem his people.

One effect of this approach is that it generates a contrast. On the one side, there are the lower and almost beast-like life and desires of the unbeliever. On the other side, there are the lofty thoughts of God, and his many powers and blessings that correspond with the unbeliever's deeper needs. Jesus used the metaphor of water to press the point that the

woman had a need greater than natural and physical drink. There was a spiritual thirst in her that had remained unquenched. And he also used the metaphor to describe what only he could provide, that is, a continuous supply of living water, spiritual water, that would satisfy and that would never dry up.

The Bible does for us what Jesus did for this woman. As we read it, it elevates our thoughts from the mundane to the spiritual. It informs us in our contemplation of God the doctrines that he has revealed and his saving acts throughout history. It redirects our attention from natural, physical, and earthly things, to supernatural, spiritual, and heavenly things. Non-Christians are from below, but as Christians, we have been born from above, and the Scripture provides us with the content for rich spiritual thoughts and conversations, while the Spirit of God enables us to remain on this level of thinking and speaking. Jesus told the woman that if she knew about the gift of God and who it was that spoke to her, she would have asked him for living water. By the Scripture and the Spirit, we do know the gift of God and who it is that speaks to us, and we ask, "Lord, give us this living water, so that we will never thirst!" As Christians, we do have this living water in us, so that even when the body suffers decay, the inner man is renewed day by day.

Then, Jesus exposed the fact that the woman had had five husbands, and that the man she was with, the sixth man, was not her husband. Commentators might argue whether this meant that she was an immoral woman, or that she was a victim of abusive and unfaithful men. This is unimportant to us at this point. What is important is that Jesus did not refrain from mentioning painful and embarrassing things in a person's life in order to pursue a legitimate spiritual agenda. We may say that he did it with a note of gentleness, but this does not change the fact that he did it.

Regardless of the reason for her many marriages, Jesus showed that she was a broken woman, and she had a need deeper and greater than any natural solution can remove or alleviate. This is what happens when you use something in the unbeliever's life as a metaphor for his spiritual need. You will show that he is a broken person. By broken, I do not mean that the non-Christian is a victim, but I mean that he is deficient and defective – every unbeliever is damaged goods. He is in a shameful condition that nothing natural or physical can repair or reverse. He needs Jesus Christ.

Behind all the strong talk, blasphemies, and sarcastic comments is a spiritual loser, a filthy and pathetic person, and an overused whore of the devil. He would be an object of scorn, something to be kicked around, laughed at, and spat on, if not for the fact that all the other non-Christians are just like him. And he is so ignorant and proud that he would not ask Christ for renewal, for restoration, for life and light. The unbeliever puts on a brave front, unwilling to show you his inadequacies. But if you will probe a little, it should not be difficult to find out what they are. He wants you to see him as a giant, but inside he is but a scared little worm. If you will talk to him and ask some questions, you will always find that this is so. Here you will find an opening to attack all the things that he trusts in, and to hold out Jesus Christ as his only hope.

Jesus crossed several well-defined boundaries. She was a woman, a Samaritan, and one who had married five times, and who now seemed to cohabit with a man who was not her husband. All of these were reasons for a Jewish Rabbi to have refrained from associating with her. But Jesus did it anyway, and in doing so, he stood against human traditions and authorities. As we can see from the woman's initial response and then the disciples' reaction, his behavior contradicted what was expected of him from all human perspectives.

This is a common observation, but incorrect implications are sometimes drawn from it. There are people who construe Jesus' association with sinners as a license to attend dinners, parties, and all kinds of social gatherings with unbelievers. The Lord's example has become for them an excuse to indulge their own fleshly desires for unholy fellowship and entertainment. Moreover, because the Gospel sometimes contrasts the sinners with the Pharisees, at times these Christians make the unbelievers into some sort of heroes, and they congratulate themselves for being so Christ-like that they would cross all boundaries, supposedly as Jesus did, in order to revel in worldly activities, if not debauchery, with the non-Christians. They are moved to tears by their own courage and open-mindedness.

However, this is an all-out perversion of what Jesus did. Although Jesus crossed boundaries, he never violated the word of God, but only broke with human traditions and expectations. Thus when a Christian claims to follow Jesus' example in crossing boundaries, these boundaries should consist of human norms and rules only. A Christian is never allowed to transgress the word of God. This makes a large number of activities enjoyed by the unbelievers forbidden to Christians, and it also removes the sinful excitement and sensual indulgence from those that Christians are permitted to attend. This is just the way it is. The Christian should be honest about these activities and his motive for wanting to engage in them with the unbelievers. He must either refrain, or he must admit that he is an unbeliever himself.

Of course Jesus associated with sinners. He talked with them and ate with them. But he did this to save sinners, to teach them, to change them, and not to entertain them or to be entertained. It was not because he was bored or lonely, and had to socialize with unbelievers, because religious people were so dull. He crossed boundaries to carry out his mission, and not to indulge the flesh and sinful lusts, to appease his enemies, or to extend approval to unbelievers. As he would tell Pilate, his mission was to testify to the truth. This included the truth about God, about himself as the Christ, and about man and his sin. His crossed over to associate with people who were not like him, not to tell them that they were already acceptable in God's sight, but to tell them that they were already condemned and that God's wrath was already upon them, and that the only way they could be saved was to follow him and trust in him, for no one could come to the Father except through him.

Therefore, for a Christian to follow his example is to continue his mission to declare God's condemnation against all sinners, and to hold forth Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation. We may associate with sinners as we do this; in fact, if we have no contact with them at all, then we cannot tell them any of this. So we may tell them that they are wretched sinners on the street, on the beach, at work, at school, at a party, over a casual lunch or a candlelight dinner, in their mosques and synagogues as we challenge their religions, in

midair while plummeting toward the earth on a parachute jump together, or any setting where it is not inherently sinful for the Christian to be present.

Let us not use Christ's example to mask our hypocrisy, if the truth is that we crave the unbelievers' worldly company, and in fact care very little about the mission that God has entrusted to us. If you are one of those people who are fond of befriending unbelievers so that you can be "salt and light" to the world, then see to it that you really are salt and light. Otherwise, you are just lying to yourself and to others, and hiding the fact that you enjoy the unholy fellowship of non-Christians more than the chaste conversation of God's people.

The woman was incredulous at first. Although she had access to the well that Jacob made and drank from, Jesus claimed that if she knew who he was, she would have asked him for a drink of living water. She asked, "Are you greater than Jacob?" Jesus not only claimed that he was superior, but he explained to her how he was superior. Jacob, who was only a man, could provide only natural water that temporarily relieved physical thirst. Jesus, on the other hand, could provide living water that would perpetually and permanently satisfy a person's spiritual needs and desires.

The same difference applies to all the characters in biblical history. Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, Isaiah, and many others were indeed great men; in fact, the Spirit of God made them superior to their fellows in a number of ways. But still, they were but mere men, and nothing more than human. God regenerated them, and they were born from above, and transformed by the power of heaven, so that they became men of whom the world was not worthy. But Jesus Christ came from above. He needed no grace from heaven, for he came there as a bearer of grace in the first place. He was the mediator of the grace that transformed these chosen men.

Paul said that the Corinthians had a partisan spirit among them. They would align themselves to men that they favored, so that some would say, "I belong to Paul's group!" and others would boast, "I belong to Peter's group!" He rebuked them, and said that this type of thinking was carnal. It was not a reflection of superior knowledge or spirituality. This problem is still with us today. "Well, I am a Calvinist myself." "But what did Spurgeon say about that?" Or, "Are you greater than Jonathan Edwards?" And, "How dare you contradict this Confession of Faith?"

You can throw your whole denomination at me, but if this is all you have, why should I care? What authority do you have over me? You are but a crowd of weak and confused men who, lacking genuine spiritual power, have constructed a feeling of comfort and an illusion of authority by offering formal approval to one another. Then, you speak from this platform, quoting from your confessions and citing from your theologians, supposing that by this you can compel others to heed your opinions. This is not wisdom, not knowledge, not spirituality. It is carnal thinking. It is children's talk. It is idolatry. And its roots are far deeper and more widespread than many people realize, since many people share this way of thinking, and since it is often expressed in veiled forms.

For example, one of my critics dismissed my biblical commentaries because he could tell that they were substandard from "the footnotes." His point was that the footnotes indicated an inadequate reference to advanced scholarship. However, this tells us more about him than about me or my commentaries. He had a personal bias against me and most likely did not make the same criticism against authors that he admired, since some of them would not cite any works at all in their commentaries. In any other context, he probably would have acknowledged that there are several kinds of commentaries, and how many works the author cites and what kinds of works he cites depend on the purpose of these commentaries. There is no universal rule for this. His comment reflects that he had only one kind of commentaries in mind, and his standard of judgment came from academic custom rather than truth and reason.

He also assumed that if I had consulted the advanced works that he approved, then I would have cited them. I indeed interact with advanced materials in my study and research; however, I cite the works of others not because of their academic level, as if to impress readers with my learning, or as if I depend on the agreement of others. Rather, I cite works that are relevant, sometimes to agree and sometimes to refute, especially when they state certain things in a manner that make them helpful or appropriate in the context of my writings. That is, I cite others not mainly for support or to compel agreement, as if I have no confidence or authority on my own, but often to clarify and illustrate due to the particular expressions used, or the way that something is stated. But now I am rather suspicious of the critic's reasons for referring to the works of scholars in his own materials. Perhaps his eagerness to impress others made him assume that I would do the same.

This brings us to the most revealing point about his criticism. His thinking about scholarship, even when it came to the things of God, was bound to the level of human achievement, interaction, and approval. That is, good scholarship, even Christian scholarship, is constructed on human achievements, exhibited in interaction with other human works and approval by other human scholars.

His comment revealed that he had not learned to think like a true disciple of Jesus Christ. When people listened to Christ, they marveled that he spoke as one with authority, not like the scribes and the Pharisees. Later, the apostles made a similar impression on people, and they understood that they had been students of Jesus Christ. Spiritual confidence and authority is noticeably different from academic pretentiousness, so that the common people heard them with gladness. It is in the absence of spiritual power that a person must shroud himself under an air of academic sophistication – that is, academic sophistication as defined by non-Christian customs.

Should not a Christian who is filled with God's Spirit speak with some measure of authority, a kind of spiritual power that is independent of human tradition and approval? This critic complained that I did not speak like the scribes and the Pharisees! He remained out of touch with biblical truth and spiritual authority. He remained as a person who was "from below," and his understanding remained on this carnal level, so he thought like those who had no authority, or whose sense of intellectual cogency consists in the interaction and the approval of men. Thus he condemned himself by his criticism against me.

The biblical patriarchs and prophets were superior to their fellows only in the sense that God had chosen them, and at times moved them to speak by his Spirit. When they were carried along by the Spirit, their words were authoritative and infallible, for it was Christ who spoke through them. They were revered for the roles that they played in biblical history, but they were but mere men, and could produce no heavenly effects by themselves. And even as they spoke by the Spirit of God, they did not preach themselves, but pointed to the coming, the humiliation, and the exaltation of Christ. Thus although they were great men, Christ was infinitely superior to them. Although they were given birth from above, Christ was one who came from above.

This provides one way for us to understand the difference between the Christian faith and all non-Christian religions. Christ was greater than Jacob, but Jacob at least followed Christ and grasped some of the things of God by the Spirit. The founders of non-Christian religions had no such spiritual perception. If they had perceived and embraced any of the truth, they would have followed Christ. But they were men "from below," and so they spoke as men from below. All their teachings consist of human speculations and suggestions. Even at their best, they could only provide their followers natural water, which can never begin to satisfy spiritual thirst.

Many Christians would preface their opinion of these founders of non-Christian religions, saying, "They were great moral teachers, and had great insights, but...." Even famed and respected Christian apologists would say this. But even this is false and unacceptable, and it is a compromise and a betrayal. Those who speak this way sin against Christ and all those who believe in him. If those who call themselves Christians would throw off this sense of obligation to be sickeningly courteous and effeminate in religious discussions, doubtless imposed upon them by non-Christians and not by Scripture, they would see that these non-Christian religions do not in fact have good moral and human insights. Rather, they are all very pathetic and absurd, and their leaders are as blind men leading other blind men into the ditch of everlasting hellfire.

Seeing that Jesus was a prophet, the woman made reference to the religious dispute between the Jews and the Samaritans, and in particular their disagreement regarding the proper location of worship. Jesus sided against the Samaritans, and at one point said that "salvation is from the Jews." He went on to say something else, but we must pause here because there is so much misconception about the status of the Jewish people, that is, the natural descendants of Abraham through Isaac, that it would be worthwhile to consider the meaning and significance of this statement.

The Jews had been the focal point of salvation history up to the time of Christ. First, God's had manifested his acts of grace and power mainly through the Jewish people. They were the recipients and the carriers of historical revelation. Second, they were also the recipients and the carriers of propositional revelation. God had revealed the facts of creation and history, of his divine nature, and of his holy laws and precepts in words spoken through his prophets. Historical revelation, at least epistemologically, reduces to propositional revelation, because the history itself is recorded in propositional form, and is passed on

only in propositional form. In sum, God manifested himself in special and concentrated ways to the Jewish people, and superintended their history to construct a great portion of the Holy Scripture, that is, what we call the Old Testament, which already functioned as an established collection of sacred documents by the time of Christ.

The promise of the Messiah was not first given to the Jews, but much earlier than that, to Adam and Eve. Thus, in this broad sense, it had never been a promise to or for the Jews, but to humanity, and in particular to the elect of all times, all races, and all nations. But God focused this promise by decreeing that this Messiah would come as a seed of Abraham.

Because of the above considerations, it is said that "salvation is from the Jews." These considerations are indeed significant, and made the Jews a privileged people. However, since they are often overestimated and misapplied, we must also make clear what the statement cannot mean, and the limitations of this privileged condition.

First, although "salvation is from the Jews," it does not mean that all Jews are saved. In fact, most of them are not saved. During the ministry of Christ, so few of them accepted him that John wrote that "no one" believed his testimony. The fact that the Messiah came from the Jews in terms of his human nature did not benefit them, since they rejected him. They hated him, and tried many times to kill him. They finally murdered him by the hands of the Gentiles, although they would have done it by their own hands if they were able (John 18:31). They did not benefit from their natural affiliation with the Messiah.

Then, they did not benefit from the fact that God made them the recipients and carriers of historical revelation, since the history recorded about them is one of constant unbelief, idolatry, and rebellion. The record of their history benefits only Christians: "Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did....These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11).

Finally, they did not benefit from the fact that God made them the recipients and carriers of propositional revelation, since they did not believe in it. They claimed to believe the Scripture, but most of them never did. Rather, they constructed human traditions that allegedly enforced God's laws, but in reality enabled them to bypass and subvert these laws. Jesus said that if they had believed Moses, then they would have believed him, because Moses talked about him, and he fulfilled what Moses said. And he also said that they were not ones who believed and repented at the words of the prophets, but they murdered the prophets that God sent to them.

Nowadays, anyone who speaks this way might be called a racist and an anti-Semite. But this is only a smoke screen and a red herring. Their own Scripture testifies to what Jesus said. The Old Testament itself condemns them, but the Gentiles did not write the Old Testament. The truth is that the Jews already had their own culture and religion set up, in ways that were very contrary to Moses and the prophets, and they did not want anyone, not even God or the Messiah, to disturb their lifestyle.

By rejecting Jesus Christ, the Jews had repudiated every advantage they had over other peoples of the world. God manifested to them in history, but they rebelled against him. God revealed to them his words, but they did not believe it. God appeared to them in the flesh, but they murdered him. Yes, salvation came from the Jews, but they rejected it, and so as Jesus said, the kingdom was ripped from their hands and given to another people who would believe and bear fruit, namely, the Christians.

All the advantages that the Jews ever had now belong to Christians. They have disowned their history – that history now belongs to us. They have rejected their own Scripture, or they would be Christians. But we believe both the Scripture that the Jews had, and the fulfillment and extension of it, which we call the New Testament. We now have the complete Scripture. They do not even have what they hold in their hands, since they do not believe it. As Jesus said, "As for one who has nothing, even that what he seems to have will be taken away." The advantages that the Jews had over the Samaritans, the ones that they have lost since then, were the same advantages that Christians now have over the Jews.

This is so important but so little understood that I must repeat. The Jews indeed had spiritual advantages over others, but they have repudiated them by their unbelief, which persists to this day. All spiritual advantages now belong to Christians, and only Christians. The Jews are not even to be considered the children of Abraham, since Jesus said that if they were, they would have followed Abraham's example of faith and righteousness. Instead, they hated Jesus and plotted to kill him, and eventually did murder him. This, Jesus said, Abraham would have never done. Rather, Abraham saw Jesus' day and rejoiced. And now Christians, and only Christians, rejoice with him, sharing the faith of Abraham. Thus, as Paul wrote, Christians are the children of Abraham. True heritage is of the spirit, and not of the flesh. The flesh means nothing, but a follower of one's spirit is that person's true heir.

What does all of this mean? It means that any doctrine that even hints at Jewish superiority stands opposed to the spirit of the entire Scripture, and especially the New Testament. It is a most ridiculous notion that we should look to the Jews to learn how to become better Christians. Why, the Jews must look to the Christians to learn how to get saved at all! The appeal, popular in some circles, that we should "return to the Jewish roots" of the Christian faith is entirely without justification. The apostles never suggested this to the Gentiles, whether for the sake of spiritual attainment or for the sake of theological or hermeneutical advancement. There is not a hint that the Gentiles would benefit spiritually, that they would understand the Christian faith better, or that they would become more faithful interpreters of Scripture, by gaining knowledge and appreciation of Jewish culture, let alone by implementing some of it in their lives. In fact, the apostles vehemently fought against this. It was precisely what they wanted the Gentiles to refrain from doing.

The apostles were clear that the Gentiles could come as they were, as Gentiles, and become Christians, without having to become Jews, or to learn anything about the Jews, or to adopt anything from their thinking and culture. Of course they had to believe the Scripture, but as already indicated, this was not a Jewish thing to do, since the Jews rejected the Scripture. To believe God's word has always been a Christian thing to do, from the time of Adam,

when the promise of Christ was first announced. And again, the apostles never indicated that the Gentiles must learn about Jewish culture to believe or to understand the Scripture.

Moreover, it was not that the Gentiles were already familiar with Jewish culture. As indicated by various parts of the New Testament (e.g. Acts 17), and even the very passage we are considering (John 4:9), the original Gentile audience was often unfamiliar with Jewish culture. Yet the apostles made no effort to remedy this as if it would make possible a more accurate understanding of the Christian religion. The truth is that it is unnecessary. The assumption that it is necessary when it comes to theology and hermeneutics is false, and it is against the very thing that the apostles worked so hard to establish.

Once you mixed in the ideas of the superiority of the Jews and the necessity of understanding Jewish culture in order to become better Christians or better interpreters of Scripture, you have contaminated the gospel of Jesus Christ, and you have nullified the liberty that it extends to the chosen people of God. You do not have in mind the interests of God, but the interests of men. You have returned to thinking like men "from below." You are heading in the wrong direction. You are regressing in your faith. And you are in danger of falling away from the grace of Christ.

The faith of the New Testament, even the faith of Abraham, is spiritual. It is centered on Christ alone, and not on any race, gender, culture, or class. There is no such thing as a Jewish or a "Messianic" Christianity, just like there should be no such thing as a "Black Christianity." If someone entices you to think in these terms, refuse to do it. Stand firm in your liberty, and fight back. We must rebel against these private versions of the Christian faith without fear of being called racists or bigots. The apostles fought for the purity of the gospel and the liberty of faith, so that it would be a message about simple devotion to Jesus Christ, and not a message that exalts a particular race or serves the agenda of a particular people.

Paul wrote that when it comes to sin, "there is no difference" – whether you are Jew or Gentile, male or female, free or bound, you are all under sin. And when it comes to salvation, again, "there is no difference" – whether you are Jew or Gentile, male or female, free or bound, there is salvation only through Jesus Christ, who makes a new creation out of his chosen people. You are a Jew? Give it up. You are either a Christian or you are not. If you are a Christian, God accepts you, and if you are not, you will burn in hell just like the rest. You are black? Get over it. You are either a believer in Jesus Christ or you are not. If you are a Christian, you are saved from God's wrath, and if you are not, you can call God a racist when you burn in hell, but your race will have nothing to do with it because you will find people from all races there to burn with you.

Jesus made the same point that I make here. After he sided with the Jews in their dispute against the Samaritans, he said, "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24). The Jews were right, and the Samaritans were wrong. But both of them were going to be wrong if they would not follow God's program. The dispute about the proper

location for worship no longer mattered, for all those who would worship the Father must worship in spirit and truth through Jesus Christ, and independent of buildings and rituals. All the prayers, rituals, festivals, and holy places of all non-Christians, whether they are Jews, Mormons, Catholics, Muslims, or Buddhists, are meaningless.

Sometimes Christians forget that our faith is not about bringing people to our human traditions, our denominations, and our favorite theologians and preachers. We are to practice and to lead people to true worship, which is only possible in spirit and truth, through faith in Jesus Christ. The true worshiper must be a person who has been born from above, whom God has made his own holy temple. Thus he does not have to worship at a particular place, or to face a particular direction to be heard. And he does not worship someone or something that he does not understand, but he worships according to truth, that is, the doctrines of Jesus Christ. He worships God not with rituals and ceremonies, but with his intelligence, in his spirit, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The woman had a greater appreciation of the Messiah than many Christians today. She said, "I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Jesus did not oppose this understanding of the Messiah, but he embraced it and told the woman, "I who speak to you am he." This strikes at the foundation of the way many professing believers understand the faith. First, contrary to them, the Christian religion does not consist of mysteries or incomprehensive teachings. Instead, the woman assumed that "everything" can be explained, and Jesus agreed with her. Second, following from this, the Christian religion holds the explanation to "everything" – we have all the answers.

This is not an arrogant claim about ourselves, but it is a fact about Jesus Christ, and what he has revealed by his own words, and by his Spirit through the words of his students, the apostles. The relevance of this fact continues through us, since we are the present students of Jesus Christ and the apostles. To the extent that we have learned their teachings, now we have all the answers. By logical necessity, all non-Christian beliefs that contradict what we say must be wrong. And since all non-Christian beliefs in fact disagree with us – even when they do not disagree explicitly, they disagree in their nuances, assumptions, and implications – all non-Christian beliefs are false. Since Jesus and the apostles explained "everything," it also follows that there can be no new religion to supercede or even to build upon their teachings. The Christian religion is the final, complete, and perfect revelation from God.

Many converts seem to have their lives in order, at least more so than others, but they are still unwilling to testify about Jesus Christ before people. Or, some converts wait for things in their lives to be in order before they would do it. The thinking is that it is hypocritical to lecture others about truth, religion, righteousness, and judgment before we have attained perfection ourselves.

This woman did not wait, but she left her water jar at the well and returned to her people, and said, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" She was still that broken woman who had married five times. There was no hypocrisy in this, because she was not preaching herself, but she was telling people about Jesus Christ.

She did not wait until she could become more credible, because she did not claim that she was the one who could explain everything. But her message was, "Come, see."

This is what the Gospel of John invites its readers to do, to "come, see" this Jesus through the words spoken by him and written about him, and to perceive that he was the Christ. And this is our task before the world today, not to preach ourselves, or to tell people about our merits, our achievements, or our opinions, but to preach Jesus Christ, the one who has all the answers, and who has given these answers to us. We call people to "come, see" by inviting them to read about him in the Scripture, or by telling them about his words and works as recorded in it.