

# ULTIMATE QUESTIONS

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# 1. CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY

## WORLDVIEW

While preparing for the publication of his book, Fred Heeren arranged to meet with several marketing executives who were experts in the area of religious publishing. He relates his experience as follows:

"People don't care about life's ultimate questions," said one seasoned old marketer. "People care about money. They care about their personal appearance. They care about getting more leisure time, more physical comforts..."

...Another executive told me he personally wasn't interested in the content. "I don't think about life's ultimate questions," he said..."Your book's got no appeal to me. No one's going to buy your books unless you appeal to some universal self-interest, some basic want. And what do people want?"

"Truth?" I ventured, just to be perverse.

"No, no – people want to dominate others. They want to emulate the admired, to *be* admired. They want more power, more popularity, more self-confidence," and he continued with another list, concluding: "You need to tell people how this will make them richer, happier, more fulfilled, how it will give them a spiritual high."

These were not words to be taken lightly. The men before me had successfully packaged many books for some of the largest religious publishers. One executive boasted that his company routinely packaged books even before they were written, relegating the content to a mere afterthought.<sup>1</sup>

After recovering from the nausea, not so much caused by the business practice described, but by the truth of what the executives said about the reading audience, we realize that here we have the formula for popular contemporary preaching. People want to hear a message that "appeal to some universal self-interest." Truth is unimportant as long as we "give them a spiritual high." Such a false gospel has generated a large group of readers consisting of those who consider themselves Christians but are not, and it is to these false converts that the businesses market their attractively packaged products.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Heeren, *Show Me God*; Wheeling, Illinois: Day Star Productions, Inc., 2000; p. xx-xxi.

However, our subject is not the astounding number of false believers in our midst; rather, we must consider the observation, "People don't care about life's ultimate questions." By ultimate questions, we refer to those issues, and those premises and assumptions, that are basic to every aspect of thought and life. Going beyond the superficial, these are the fundamental ideas from which we derive our worldview. For example, in the area of science, instead of performing scientific experiments to test a particular hypothesis, we are interested in theories that prescribe the place and limitations of science.

Some people say that they will contemplate the ultimate questions when they become older, when they get rich, or when they retire. This may make them slightly better than those who decide never to consider any issue deeper than the basest animalistic needs, but the effect is not any better. To delay obtaining answers to the ultimate questions, one must make the dangerous assumption that he does not require these answers in the meantime. The determination to first achieve financial success assumes a given purpose to life, and a set of priorities. To wait until retirement assumes that answers to ultimate questions are irrelevant for daily living. However, if the answers to the ultimate questions govern all subsidiary propositions within a person's worldview, then on what principles do these people operate until they are ready to think about them? One may plan to think about God, sin, and salvation later, probably after retirement, but if there is a God who holds men accountable, and punishes adultery and theft, this person should stop cheating on his wife and embezzling funds now and not later.

No one can live a day without presupposing answers to the ultimate questions. For people to delay a serious contemplation of these issues is equivalent to deciding that even if their presuppositions are false, they will still abide by them for most of their lives, and then they will consider if these presuppositions need to be changed. But until then, on what basis do they suppose that life is even worth living? Christians have an answer to this, but a naturalistic worldview has no defense against an invitation to commit suicide. Why is life worth living on the basis of evolutionary principles? To propagate the species? But why must the human species continue to exist? On account of humanistic theories, humanity would eventually become extinct. Even if this will not happen for many years, on their principles each individual lives for only so long, and afterward ceases to exist. Why should he concern himself with what happens to humanity? But Genesis 1:28 says, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." Christianity teaches us about a God who commands humanity to procreate, and about an afterlife and a final judgment.

Then, some people say that we should suspend judgment about the ultimate questions, since we cannot determine the answers to them in this life. However, if they believe that there is no afterlife, which is an assumption concerning an ultimate issue, they will have only this life to answer those questions. On the other hand, if they believe the opposite and affirm that there is an afterlife, then the next question is whether or not they need to prepare for it, and if so, how they should prepare for it. Those who claim to be agnostic about ultimate issues nevertheless assume definite answers about them, thus contradicting their agnosticism.

Another example comes from ethics. When we face a situation in which we must decide whether to tell a lie, how do we decide? If we decide that the expected positive effect justifies the lie, then we have assumed a teleological ethical principle that says the end justifies the means. But by what principle do we determine that the projected effect is positive in the first place? If teleological ethics is untenable, then we need some other authority or principle to justify lying. But perhaps lying is never justified. How do we know?

We need to know, because our presuppositions about ethics determine our daily decisions. But once we wonder how we can know something, we are talking about our presuppositions concerning knowledge, or epistemology. And since knowledge has to do with what there is to know, we are also talking about our presuppositions concerning reality, or metaphysics. If we think deeply enough, we will realize that every single proposition we speak or every action we perform presupposes a set of interrelated ultimate principles by which we perceive and respond to reality. This is our worldview.

Ultimate questions are unavoidable, and those who have never seriously considered them nevertheless make assumptions about them, and then they derive their positions about various issues based on these assumptions. But to live life by false or unjustified assumptions is to live it in vain. Therefore, everyone must settle these questions, and make it his top priority to think about them. He must not postpone this until he has lived out his life, and after he has carried out many futile plans founded upon false and unjustified presuppositions.

The ultimate issues include metaphysics, epistemology, theology, anthropology, and ethics. Whereas a looser meaning of "ultimate" may include, among other things, the principles of politics and education, we cannot divorce politics from ethics, or divorce education from anthropology. When it comes to science, any position that we take assumes something about metaphysics and epistemology. Thus the proposed topics will address the most basic questions in any system of thought. We will discuss them from a Christian perspective through a partial exposition of the prologue of John's Gospel. The study will amount to an introduction to philosophy.

## **LOGOS**

We will begin with John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This verse is a source of controversies, but the controversies are there not so much because the verse is especially difficult, but because some people do not want to affirm what it teaches.

Verses 1-18 expound on the meaning of "the Word." Verse 17 identifies it with Jesus Christ. Thus the prologue of John gives us much information for a biblical christology. Now, the "Word" in Greek is *logos*, and we must not pass by verse 1 without some mention of the *logos* doctrine.

I have complained elsewhere that modern preaching tends to hide the minister's learning from his congregation.<sup>2</sup> His homiletic theory demands that he makes a sharp distinction between the lectures he attended in seminary and the sermons he preaches at church. To oppose one who does not hide his learning as he preaches, *The Elements of Preaching* says:

Fresh out of school, he is so enamored of his notes that he tries to transform them into sermon outlines, and his congregation is subjected to terms such as *logos*, *hypostatic union*, *parousia*, and so on. We know of one church, located near a seminary, which always knew what the new student pastor would preach about in his first sermon – the *logos* doctrine in John 1. Why? Because that was one of the first lectures given in the Greek class each year.<sup>3</sup>

Anyone interested enough to read this book is probably also interested in knowing about the doctrines of the hypostatic union and the parousia. Of course, all Christians should talk about the return of Christ, and not only those who labor in the ministry, but it is suggested that we should avoid technical terms when addressing the general audience. Indeed, it is not necessary to use the word "parousia" to talk about the return of Christ, but if the theologians find it helpful to use a technical term, then it might be helpful for other believers also. They should know the term well enough to understand theological literature.

Technical terms are useful in summarizing concepts that may otherwise take several sentences to express; however, they should be carefully defined. It is irresponsible to "protect" the general audience from being exposed to them. Even the word "Trinity" is a technical term, but it has been used and discussed so much that most believers know something about it. But Christians need to know about the hypostatic union as well as the Trinity. Therefore, instead of hiding our theological education from other believers, we should share it with them by teaching them what we have learned.

The same chapter in *The Elements of Preaching* ends with the admonition, "Digest your material first, then prepare messages that meet human needs and glorify Jesus Christ." In other words, seminary lectures do not meet human needs and do not glorify Jesus Christ. Are these Christian seminaries? With this attitude toward seminary lectures, it is no wonder why Christians have a poor grasp of even the fundamentals of the biblical system of thought – it is because ministers hide theological information from them.

As Paul did not hesitate "to preach anything that would be helpful" (Acts 20:20) to his hearers, the church should teach a biblical system of theology to all believers. Of course, the minister should begin by teaching his hearers the basics before proceeding to the advanced materials, but to deliberately hide theological knowledge from Christians, allegedly for their own good, robs and insults them, and should disqualify a person from the ministry.

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<sup>2</sup> Vincent Cheung, *The Ministry of the Word*.

<sup>3</sup> Warren Wiersbe and David Wiersbe, *The Elements of Preaching*; Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1986; p. 85.

Now, Heraclitus of Ephesus (530-470 BC) argued that nature is constantly changing. His famous illustration contends that a man cannot step into the same river twice, since the water and the bed of the river are constantly moving and changing. In addition, the man himself is also constantly changing, so that when he steps into the river the second time, he is different from the man that he was when he stepped into it the first time.

If everything constantly changes, then nothing really "exists." Suppose a sculptor works a piece of clay into the appearance of a dog, but before you can recognize what it is in your mind, the object changes into a car, then a building, and then a pot. The appearance of the object constantly changes so that it is never one definite and identifiable thing at any point in time. If this is what happens, at least you can still call it clay, but what if the substance of the object also constantly changes? The clay changes into bronze, then to iron, then to ice, and then to gold. It constantly changes so that it is not one definite substance at any point in time.

The object is not any one "thing" at any point in time. If something is not anything, then it is nothing, and if it is nothing, then it cannot be known. Therefore, knowledge depends on immutability. Thus Heraclitus posited a *logos*, a law or principle, that does not change. It is "a rational and good agent whose activity appears as the order of Nature."<sup>4</sup> All would be chaos without it, and nature would be unintelligible.

Later, the *logos* is taken over by Stoicism, a school of thought founded by Zeno of Citium (about 300 BC). The Stoics were more ideologically diverse than their contemporary Epicureans, and Paul confronted both groups when he was in Athens (Acts 17:18). Stoicism regarded *logos* as a principle of divine reason, and the *logoi spermatikoi*, like seeds and sparks of divine fire, govern the development of every object in nature.

Philo (20 BC – AD 40) was a contemporary of Christ. This Jewish Hellenistic philosopher from Alexandria had a well-developed *logos* doctrine that appeared to make the Word "nothing else than the faculty of reason in God."<sup>5</sup> However, several points of inconsistency make it difficult to specify the exact nature of Philo's *logos*. Although it is variously represented in his writings, interpreters understand that its primary purpose is to "bridge the gulf between the transcendent deity and the lower world and to serve as the unifying law of the universe, the ground of its order and rationality."<sup>6</sup>

By the time the apostle John wrote his Gospel, the word *logos* had been invested with much philosophical background and meaning. Although there are some similarities between John and the Greek philosophers in how they used the term, to suggest that John's *logos* has "any connection amounting to doctrinal dependence"<sup>7</sup> on the philosophers would betray a misunderstanding of both the apostle and the philosophers.

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Ancient Philosophy*; The Trinity Foundation, 1997 (original: 1941); p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey*; The Trinity Foundation, 2000 (original 1957); p. 165.

<sup>6</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, Second Edition*; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999; "Philo Judaeus."

<sup>7</sup> *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, Vol. V*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981 (original: 1867-1887); p. 492.



For example, Heraclitus was like the Milesian philosophers in many ways, and the Stoics held to a materialistic physics. Their views of the *logos* fit into their own systems, which are incompatible with the biblical worldview. Philo's *logos* is also incompatible with John's christology. When John refers to the Word, or *logos*, he is thinking of a *personal* divine being who defines and exhibits rationality, and not a *non-personal* metaphysical principle. When Philo refers to his *logos* in personal terms, he does so in a metaphorical sense.

The Greek philosophers never conceived of this principle of rationality as having taken upon himself human attributes, as the biblical doctrine of incarnation affirms: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). An epistemological and soteriological mediator who is both fully God and fully man (1 Timothy 2:5) was far from their thinking. Therefore, *Kittel* concludes that, "From the very first the New Testament *logos* is alien to Greek thought."<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, John chooses a word that his readers could recognize, and his intended meaning does have some resemblance to non-biblical usage. Indeed, the biblical *logos* has much to do with logic, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. The *logos* doctrine addresses these and other ultimate questions, but in contrast with non-biblical views of the *logos*, the biblical doctrine is based on divine revelation and not human speculation. John's teaching on the divine *logos* supplies the structure and content of a complete biblical worldview.<sup>9</sup>

Although *word* is one acceptable translation for *logos*, also satisfactory are *proposition*, *sentence*, *speech*, *argument*, *discourse*, *logic*, and several other words. If we take into account the theological and philosophical background of *logos*, the best translations for John 1:1 may be a capitalized *Word*, *Wisdom*, or *Reason*.

Attributing such a high place to "Word" or "Reason" is repugnant to anti-intellectual thinking. The German romanticist Goethe writes in *Faust*:

"Tis writ, "In the beginning was the Word."  
I pause, to wonder what is here inferred.  
The Word I cannot set supremely high:  
A new translation I will try.  
I read, if by the spirit I am taught,  
This sense: "In the beginning was the Thought."  
This opening I need to weigh again,  
Or sense may suffer from a hasty pen.  
Does Thought create, and work, and rule the hour?  
"Twere best: "In the beginning was the Power."  
Yet, while the pen is urged with willing fingers,  
A sense of doubt and hesitancy lingers.

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<sup>8</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. IV*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999 (original: 1967); p. 91.

<sup>9</sup> See "Jesus and Reason" in Vincent Cheung, *The View from Above*.

The spirit comes to guide me in my need,  
I write, "In the beginning was the Deed."<sup>10</sup>

The result is not a translation of the biblical verse, but an expression of prejudice against the Christian view of the universe. Goethe does not care what the verse actually says, but he seeks to oppose John's intellectualism. If in the beginning there was the *Word* or the *Thought*, as the most straightforward translations would indicate, then it is this divine and personal principle of reason that created and even now controls the universe, and the Christian faith must be thoroughly intellectual and rational.

"Reason," "Wisdom," and "Word" are all acceptable translations for *logos*. Whereas the first two are self-explanatory, the third demands an explanation. The main point is that "Word" implies the intellectual self-expression of a person. This fits well with the christology of the New Testament, which says that Christ "is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15), and that, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3). If we keep in mind that this "Word" is a person, then this translation preserves the personification of the *logos*, as well as the meaning of reason and wisdom inherent in it.

Again, John 1:1 says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

The expression, "In the beginning," is reminiscent of Genesis 1:1, suggesting that the Word had a role in creation. We will see what this role is when we come to verse 3.

Then, "the Word was *with* God" suggests an important distinction that begins to reveal the doctrine of the Trinity. The word translated "with" is *pros*. To say that the Word, or Christ, is *with* God indicates that he is distinguishable from God. Some examples of *pros* include the following: "Aren't his sisters here *with* us?" (Mark 6:3); "Every day I was *with* you" (Mark 14:49); "I would have liked to keep him *with* me" (Philemon 13); "We proclaim to you the eternal life, which was *with* the Father and has appeared to us" (1 John 1:2). The final example refers to Christ and again implies that he is not identical with the Father, but that he has a definite relationship with him. The word "God" (*theos*) usually refers to the Father in the New Testament, and therefore Christ is not identical to "God" the Father. However, that Christ is not identical to the Father does not mean that Christ is not deity. John writes, "He was with God in the beginning" (v. 2), which suggests his deity.

More explicit is the third portion of the verse: "the Word was God." This has been the cause of much controversy. It is a phrase that "ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16). Wishing to deny the deity of Christ or the doctrine of the Trinity, some people have observed that the *theos* in *theos en ho logos* lacks the definite article (as in "the" God), and thus merely indicates that Christ has the quality of being divine, and not that he is deity. They say that Christ is *like* God, and not that he *is* God. But this is a misinterpretation.

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<sup>10</sup> *Great Books of the Western World, Vol. 45*; Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1996; p. 12.

Since the article (*ho*) precedes *logos*, it makes the "Word" the subject. Since "*theos*" immediately follows the conjunction "and" (*kai*), it receives the emphasis. If both *theos* and *logos* each had an article, the phrase would have identified the "Word" with "God" (*theos*), but this would be inconsistent with the doctrine of the Trinity that John affirms. In other words, if John is affirming the doctrine of the Trinity, then to have an article before *theos* would make John say something that he does not wish to say. The grammatical structure of the clause demands the translation, "The Word was God." The REB translates, "What God was, the Word was." The clause as it is written affirms the deity of Christ, and also preserves the doctrine of the Trinity.

The clause, "In the beginning was the Word," teaches the pre-existence of Christ, that Christ had existed even before creation. Then, "The Word was with God," implies an intimate relationship between Christ and God, without identifying the two. After that, "The Word was God" shows us that although Christ is not identical to "God" the Father, he is equal to the Father, and this is consistent with the doctrine of the Trinity. Therefore, it is impossible to use John 1:1 against the Trinity and Christ's deity, since the verse is precisely as it should be if the apostle affirms both of these doctrines.

## METAPHYSICS

We are interested in understanding how the prologue of John's Gospel answers the ultimate questions.

Verse 1 tells us that there is at the beginning a principle of reason and order, but unlike that of the philosophers, this *logos* is a divine person.

In one set of translations, verse 3 continues, "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." The NASB is preferable: "All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being." In a second set of translations, verse 3 and 4 are punctuated in a different way, so that verse 3 reads as follows: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (NRSV); "Through him all things came into being, not one thing came into being except through him" (NJB); "Everything came about through him, and without him not one thing came about" (Lattimore).<sup>11</sup>

Some commentators find it difficult to make sense of verse 4 when the passage is punctuated in this second way, for then verse 4 would say, "What has come into being in him was life..." (NRSV). But the symmetry of verse 3 has become more evident. D. A. Carson suggests an alternate translation of verse 3 that says, "All things were made by him, and what was made was in no way made without him."<sup>12</sup>

My concern is to prevent a potential misinterpretation of the words, "without him nothing was made *that has been made*" – as if some things were not created. The biblical view is

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<sup>11</sup> Richmond Lattimore, *The New Testament*; North Point Press, 1996; p. 195.

<sup>12</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991; p. 118.

that only God is eternal, so that it excludes any idea of creation in which God merely rearranges pre-existing chaotic matter into definite form. Christianity teaches creation *ex nihilo* – out of nothing. There was no pre-existing matter or material for God to work with or to rearrange at creation. God created both the matter and the structure of the universe.

The second translation of verse 3 eliminates the pitfall: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." If this rendering is rejected, then Carson's translation might help avoid the problem. In any case, the first half of the verse in itself makes the biblical view of creation clear in any translation: "*All things* came into being through him." The first part prevents a misunderstanding of the second part. Both portions of the verse say the same thing – the first half affirms that all things were created by the Word, and the second half denies that anything exists without having been created by the Word. There was no matter at all before creation. God made everything by agency of the Word.

Here is the foundation of Christian metaphysics, or the Christian view of reality. Verse 1 tells us about the creator, and verse 3 tells us about the creation. Against some non-Christian systems of thought, John denies that creation was merely an act of rearrangement of pre-existing matter; rather, there was no matter at all before God created it. Creation was by divine *fiat*. Since "Reason" (Word, Wisdom, Logic) is eternal and preceded creation, the laws of logic were not created. They are true not only for human beings, and they operate not only by cultural convention. Instead, they are necessary laws of thought that had eternally existed in the mind of God – logic is the way God thinks.

Contrary to a form of irrationalism that purports to be Christian, what is a genuine contradiction to man is also a contradiction to God, and what is non-contradictory to God is never a genuine contradiction to man. However, because of sin's effects on the mind, man often makes mistakes in his reasoning, so that what appears to him as a contradiction may not be an actual contradiction. The point remains that the laws of logic are the same with God as they are with man.

To the extent that a man thinks in accordance with truth and reason, his mind mirrors God's mind; however, because of sin's effects on the mind, man is often irrational. Now, the laws of logic are rules of valid reasoning, so that given the correct premises, a valid reasoning process enables a person to draw true inferences and conclusions. However, if man cannot discover any knowledge or information by himself, and if he cannot overcome sin's effects on the mind by himself, then he requires God's verbal revelation in Scripture to overcome the human mind's failure to grasp truth and gain knowledge. Man needs Scripture to give him the necessary premises to truly know and to correctly reason about God and reality. The foundation of Christian sanctification consists of knowing the propositions in the Bible, and reasoning correctly with them.

Christians have been hindered in their spiritual progress by an erroneous understanding and outrageous application of Isaiah 55:8-9: "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.'" It is

said that this means man can never think or understand God's thoughts. But if this is true, then no one can understand Isaiah 55:8-9! It is because our thoughts do not correspond to God's thoughts that we need to renew our thinking to match his thinking. Since our thoughts are not his thoughts, we must read the Scripture to know God's thoughts, so that we may change our minds, and conform our thinking to his thinking.

Colossians 1:16 says, "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him." The thrust here is that "by him *all things* were created," and the verse list what these things include. Then, the next verse adds that he sustains the creation by his power: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (v. 17). Hebrews 1 echoes this teaching, and says that by agency of the Son, God "made the universe" (1:2), and that he is "sustaining all things by his powerful word" (v. 3).

Therefore, the biblical view of reality is as follows. The metaphysical starting point is God the Trinity. By agency of the Son – the *logos*, Reason, Wisdom, or Word – the Godhead created the universe, which includes both the "visible and invisible" (Colossians 1:16), the spiritual and the material realms. God made everything that exists; nothing exists that he has not created. God is the only uncreated being.

God continues to exercise his power after creation, since even now he sustains and controls all the operations of the universe. He continuously sustains the existence of creation, and he is the cause of all that occurs. He may appear to use means or instruments to cause something to occur, but he is the one who creates, sustains, causes, and controls these means and instruments, as well as the effect that they seem to have on the persons and objects that they interact with. Therefore, God alone is the cause of all things. Nothing came into being apart from him, and nothing can happen apart from his sovereign will and direct power: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father" (Matthew 10:29).

This biblical view of metaphysics is essential to Christian epistemology, ethics, and soteriology. A sovereign God is the necessary foundation for a sound theology. Any compromise in the doctrine of God generates a rippling effect that destroys the integrity of all other biblical doctrines. Once we accept a false view of God, the rest of the system cannot be Christian.

For example, a sovereign God contradicts the idea that man exercises free will when it comes to any matter, including salvation. The sovereignty of God and the freedom of man are mutually exclusive. To affirm one is to deny the other. Accordingly, a person who insists that he accepts Christ because of his own free will, and not because of God's sovereign choice and direct action in his soul, cannot at the same time affirm a sovereign God. Since the only God presented in the Bible is an absolutely sovereign God, a person who affirms human free will cannot, without contradiction, affirm belief in God.

Some theologians perceive this dilemma, and so they choose to believe in a contradiction. But this makes them look stupid, and some of them cannot endure the humiliation. So they

invent a way out, and say that God's sovereignty is "compatible" with human choice. Sometimes it is even said that divine sovereignty is compatible with human "freedom" in the sense that the man who chooses is not coerced in his choice, but he chooses according to his desire.<sup>13</sup>

Of course man chooses, but what makes him choose? What is the metaphysics of human choice? And what is the metaphysical explanation for his desire? If God is absolutely sovereign, then he also decides and causes human choice and desire. And if God is the one who decides and causes human choice and desire, then to say that divine sovereignty and human choice are compatible is only to say that God is compatible with himself. But we already know that, and man is still not free.

Human choice is irrelevant, since it comes under divine sovereignty. To say that man is not coerced is only to say that in this instance God does not cause one effect of his power to clash with another effect of his power, as he does when he causes two objects to crash into each other. But if there is no contradiction when God causes two objects to crash, then even coercion entails no contradiction. It would only mean that he causes a person to desire one thing but to choose another, and he remains compatible with himself. What would be the problem with that?

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<sup>13</sup> I refer to the doctrine of compatibilism. It teaches a kind of human freedom and rests moral responsibility on this freedom. I have refuted it by showing that the kind of freedom that it teaches is irrelevant to a discussion of divine sovereignty, and that there is no necessary relationship between freedom and responsibility. In fact, the Bible denies this relationship. (See Vincent Cheung, *The Author of Sin*.)

Someone alleged that I misrepresented the doctrine by stating that it asserts a kind of human freedom and that it rests moral responsibility on this freedom. He said the doctrine only states that divine sovereignty is compatible with human choice, and that this is because man is not coerced, but chooses according to his desire. He named John Frame as a representative of this doctrine, and thus as someone whose view I misrepresented.

So we will cite John Frame. In his "Free Will and Moral Responsibility," he writes, "An alternative concept of freedom, one consistent with Reformed theology and held by a number of philosophers...is often called 'compatibilism,' for on that basis, free will and determinism (the view that all events in creation are caused) are compatible. Compatibilism maintains simply that in making moral decisions we are free to do what we want to do, to follow our desires....Reformed theology recognizes that all people have freedom in the compatibilist sense....I believe that compatibilist freedom is the main kind of freedom necessary to moral responsibility." Frame explicitly asserts that compatibilism teaches a form of freedom, and that it is even necessary to moral responsibility.

The person who accused me of misrepresentation also said that compatibilism does not say that man is free from God, as if I asserted that it does. He missed the point. I understand that compatibilism does not say that man is free from God, and that is why it is irrelevant. My point is that any kind of freedom that asserts freedom from God is impossible, and any kind of freedom that does not assert freedom from God is irrelevant. That man is not coerced is also irrelevant, since if God is sovereign, he is the one who causes both human desire and human choice.

As for my position, it is that divine sovereignty and human freedom are incompatible and mutually exclusive, and that since God is sovereign, man is not free. It appears that this person wished to dispute this, but he did not know how to do it. There is no way to do it. The confusion was probably fueled by the refusal to accept that this cherished doctrine is so easily shown to be ridiculous and irrelevant.

Indeed, the absolute sovereignty of God and the moral responsibility of man are compatible. Perhaps this is what the theologians are so worried about. But man is morally responsible only because God has decided to hold him accountable. This has no necessarily connection with choice or freedom. Even coercion does not eliminate responsibility. What does one have to do with another? The moral responsibility of man depends on the absolute sovereignty of God, and nothing else. Therefore, to say that man is responsible, once again, is only to say that God is compatible with himself.

It remains, then, that divine sovereignty and human freedom are incompatible. For man to be free in any relevant sense, he must be free from God, and if he is free from God in any sense and in any degree, then God is not absolutely sovereign. The God of the Bible is rejected.<sup>14</sup>

Then, others choose to believe that God does not exercise absolute sovereignty, or even that he is limited in power and knowledge. Refusing to admit their own limitations, they prefer to think that God is the one with the limitations. But then they can no longer claim to worship the God of the Bible. The logical consequence of Arminianism, Open Theism, and all other views that affirm anything less than the exhaustive sovereignty of God, is outright paganism. The Christian system requires an affirmation of God's absolute sovereignty.

This view of metaphysics solves the mind-body problem, which perplexes philosophers and theologians. It is the question of how an immaterial mind can manipulate a physical body. How can the non-physical contact and move the physical? The biblical answer is that since God controls all mental and physical operations, his omnipotence makes it possible for there to be a relationship between mind and body. Nevertheless, this relationship is one of correlation and not causation, since God is the sole cause of all things. In other words, without the sovereign God who controls all things, it would be impossible for a person to even roll his eyes at this doctrine. God causes a thought by his sovereign power, and at the moment the thought occurs, he also causes the corresponding physical motion. Man has no power of existence or causation within himself.

## **EPISTEMOLOGY**

This view of metaphysics produces a necessary implication for epistemology. If God controls all operations in the universe, it necessarily follows that he controls all operations relating to thought and knowledge. If the continual existence and operation of the universe depend on God, and man is not autonomous or independent, then all knowledge acquisitions and intellectual activities also depend on God. To say this another way, if God controls all things, then he also controls the mind of man. If God is the only cause of anything, then he is also the cause of every mental event in man. If this is denied, then the sovereignty of God is also denied. The God of the Bible is again rejected, and what remains is no longer the Christian view.

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<sup>14</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *The Author of Sin and Blasphemy and Mystery*.

Just as man cannot exist or function without God, man cannot know or think anything without him. God not only sustains and controls all things, but he *sovereignly* sustains and controls all things. He can bring to life or put to death, cause to move or cause to stop, and create or destroy, all at his will and pleasure. The mind of man is only one aspect of God's total control over the universe; therefore, God also *sovereignly* controls all aspects of human knowledge. This control comes under his ordinary providence. A Christian view of epistemology necessarily follows from, and is necessarily consistent with, this Christian view of metaphysics.

All alternatives are unbiblical and are failures. Empiricism is a prominent example. Empiricists defend the reliability of sensation, and those who are more extreme claim that knowledge comes only from the senses. In contrast, we affirm an epistemology of revelation founded on the infallibility of Scripture. We reject empiricism because biblical teaching contradicts it, and because of its inherent and fatal problems. No knowledge can come from sensation.

The empiricists respond, "But you must depend on your sensations to read the Bible." This challenge is futile. Whether or not we are able to defeat it, if they cannot answer the arguments against empiricism, then their challenge by itself does not rescue empiricism. Even if they were to refute the epistemology of biblical revelation, it does not mean that an epistemology of sensation is automatically justified. All anti-empirical arguments remain in force until they are refuted.

Nevertheless, we are indeed able to answer their challenge on the basis of what we have said about biblical metaphysics and epistemology. Consistent with Christian metaphysics, Christian epistemology affirms that all knowledge must be immediately – that is, without mediation – conveyed to the human mind by God. Thus on the occasion that a person looks at the words of the Bible, God directly communicates what is written to his mind. That is, a person's sensations provide the occasions upon which God directly conveys information to his mind *apart from* the sensations themselves. Therefore, although we read the Bible, knowledge never comes from sensation.

This again solves the mind-body problem, but this time it is illustrated in the reverse direction. In metaphysics, God facilitates physical motions in correspondence to the thoughts of the mind; in epistemology, God grants knowledge to the mind on the occasions of the sensations, but apart from the sensations themselves. Therefore, sensations do nothing more than to stimulate intellectual intuition, providing the occasions upon which the mind obtains knowledge from the divine *logos*.

Empiricists must explain how physical sensations convey knowledge to the incorporeal mind. Of course, some non-Christian empiricists do not believe in an incorporeal mind, but they believe that knowledge reside only in a physical brain. Although we can easily defeat them on this point, even apart from this, they still need to prove by valid and sound arguments how physical sensations can convey any information to the physical brain. No one can do this.



Empiricists think that they can make inferences from the many sensations present to the mind at any given moment in order to produce knowledge. However, I challenge them to write out the process in syllogistic form to show the logical validity of such inferences. Even if he can write out the process of reasoning, he will see that all inferences from sensations are unavoidably fallacious; no inference from sensation can achieve formal validity.

For example, if you are looking at a red car, by what valid process of reasoning can you infer from this sensation the conclusion that you are looking at a red car? It is impossible. However, if every inference from sensation is fallacious, then this means that every inference is an unnecessary or even arbitrary conclusion from premises that are doubtful in the first place. But an empirical worldview constructs its propositions on these fallacious inferences. Thus such a worldview is worthless, although it is embraced by multitudes.

At any given moment, you are bombarded by many sensations, and if you were to know the objects you are seeing by an empirical epistemology, this means that your mind must organize and combine these sensations in order to group together the ones that belong to their corresponding objects.<sup>15</sup> To illustrate, suppose you observe an apple on a table. For you to recognize that there are two objects and what these two objects are, you must be able to tell where one object ends and the other one begins.

However, this requires you to know the attributes and appearances of these objects *before* you observe them,<sup>16</sup> but empiricism teaches that a person learns the attributes and appearances of objects by observation. If you must know them before you observe them, and if you can know them only by observing them, then this means that you can never know anything that you do not already know. And if you follow some empiricists in affirming that man is born with a blank mind to be filled with knowledge gained by experience, then on the basis of empiricism, your mind will remain blank forever. Knowledge acquisition is impossible on the basis of empiricism.

Consider language acquisition. It is impossible for a person to learn the meaning of a word by sensation. A father may try to teach his child what the word "car" means by pointing at a car. In the first place, on the basis of empiricism, the child cannot even see or know the father, the car, and the act of pointing, but we will ignore this for now. The child must still make an inference from the father's act of pointing. If the father tries to teach his child the meaning of the word "car" by pointing at a car, then to the child, the word "car" may mean the act of pointing, the finger used to do the pointing, the color of the car, any part of the car, the car together with the road and the background, any large object, the meaning of "go away" or "leave," and an infinite number of other possible meanings. The act of pointing at a car does not necessarily produce the inference that "car" means what we mean

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<sup>15</sup> As Gordon Clark writes, one may "on one occasion combine the ruddy color and the juicy taste to make an apple, if he wishes; but may he not on another occasion combine that color with the smell of hydrogen sulfide and the sound of B-flat to make a boogum?" *Thales to Dewey*, p. 307-308.

<sup>16</sup> Otherwise, you would not know how to organize and combine the sensations. To aggravate the problem, by sensation it is impossible to tell the distance between two objects, or that there is any distance between two objects. Space itself is not observable to the senses; no one has ever seen or touched "space."

by the word. If one attempts to overcome the problem by pointing to many cars, then the meaning of the word may become "transportation," which may be an elephant or camel in some parts of the world. But even the idea of transportation is not a necessary inference from the act of pointing at many cars.

To teach someone the meaning of a word by repeatedly pointing to the object that corresponds to the word is an inductive method. A limited number of particular instances is used to produce an universal concept or definition. But induction is always a formal fallacy. For the sake of argument, even if we suppose that a person can gain an idea of "car" by being taught this way, how does the observer know what type of cars is meant – only those cars made within the past two or three decades? If the person who teaches the word wishes to include older cars, then he must find them, and point to them as well – "these are also *cars*." What about future cars? They are not observable. It is impossible to infer from sensation that the word "car" can refer to any car in history – past, present, and future – just because someone has pointed to several cars, or even several million cars.

In addition, the one who teaches the word must wave his hand or shake his head at *every object* that the word cannot designate, including items that have not been made; otherwise, nothing prevents the observer from inferring that "car" can refer to objects that are excluded by the word. Therefore, to teach a word by directing another person's sensation, such as by pointing to an object, one must point at every past, present, and future object meant by the word, and wave his hand or shake his head at every past, present, and future object excluded by it. Now, how does the observer know what the pointing and the shaking mean in the first place? If he does not already know, how can we teach him? If we try to teach him the meaning of these gestures by an empirical method, then we face the above problems all over again.

If Tom asks Harry what "walking" means, Harry may stand up and walk in the attempt to show him. Tom must make inferences from what he observes, but all such inferences are inevitably fallacious. Tom might infer that "walking" means standing, leaving, standing and leaving, standing and walking, and a large number of other things. In the first place, how does Tom know that Harry is trying to answer his question? If Harry tells Tom that he is about to show him what "walking" means by actually walking, then we must ask how they learned the words to communicate this. They could not have learned the words by empirical methods. If Tom and Harry are already walking together, Harry might walk faster to emphasize the act of walking, but how can Tom distinguish between walking, hurrying, jogging, or running? Even more perplexing is how a person can learn the words "God," "faith," "is," and "justice" on the basis of empiricism.

If a person explains what "walking" means by a verbal definition, then he must use words. But how did this person learn the words that he uses? To understand the definition, the hearer must also know the words in the definition, but how is this possible on the basis of empiricism? Even if both of them think that they understand the words in the definition, how can they know that their understanding of the words are the same? If they try to make sure that they have the same understanding of the words used in the definition by discussing

what they think the words mean, they still need to use words, and all the previous problems occur again.

Even if we assume that the senses can perceive the sounds of the words, the above shows that the mind must already know the meanings of the words before it can understand the sounds. But we have shown that the mind cannot learn the words by sensation. Therefore, knowledge cannot come from the outside, such as by sensation; rather, if it is possible at all, it must arise from within. In Christian epistemology, some knowledge is innate, so that "Christ enlightens every man ever born by having created him with an intellectual and moral endowment... This knowledge is a part of the image of God in which God created Adam."<sup>17</sup> Some knowledge is directly conveyed to the mind by God, often on the occasions of sensation or reflection. Nevertheless, the relationship between knowledge and sensation or reflection is not one of causation, but only one of correlation. God is the only source and cause of knowledge.

Although we will not summarize the detailed arguments of Augustine's *De Magistro*, we will reproduce his conclusion:

By means of words, therefore, we learn only words or rather the sound and vibration of words. For if those things which are not signs cannot be words, even though I have heard a word, I do not know that it is a word until I know what it signifies. So when things are known the cognition of the words is also accomplished, but by means of hearing words they are not learned. For we do not learn the words which we know, nor can we say that we learn those which we do not know unless their signification has been perceived; and this happens not by means of hearing words which are pronounced, but by means of a cognition of the things which are signified. For it is the truest reasoning and most correctly said that when words are uttered we either know already what they signify or we do not know. If we know, then we remember rather than learn, but if we do not know, then we do not even remember...

But, referring now to all things which we understand, we consult, not the speaker who utters words, but the guardian truth within the mind itself, because we have perhaps been reminded by words to do so. Moreover, he who is consulted teaches; for he who is said to reside in the interior man is Christ, that is, the unchangeable excellence of God and his everlasting wisdom, which every rational soul does indeed consult. But there is revealed to each one as much as he can apprehend through his will according as it is more perfect or less perfect. And if sometimes one is deceived, this is not due to a defect of external light, for the eyes of the body are often deceived...<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *The Johannine Logos*; The Trinity Foundation, 1989 (original: 1972); p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Augustine, *De Magistro*; Prentice-Hall Publishing Company, 1938.

Truth is necessarily propositional, since only a proposition can be true or false. By empirical methods, it is impossible to communicate any proposition from one human mind to another; rather, only the *logos* can facilitate communication. Since Christian epistemology rejects empiricism, it is not plagued by its difficulties. Sensation's only role in Christian epistemology is to provide the occasion for intellectual intuition; that is, it marks a time and place in which the *logos* communicates information to the human mind. The sensation itself provides zero knowledge or information. Man depends on God for his continual existence and intellectual operations; he is not autonomous or independent in any sphere of life. Thus of course we "read" the Bible, but this does not depend on sensation, but on God's sovereign will and power.

Some theologians agree that John's prologue at least hints at this epistemology. As Ronald Nash writes:

After John describes Jesus as the cosmological Logos, he presents Him as the epistemological Logos. John declares that Christ was "the true light that enlightens every man" (John 1:9). In other words, the epistemological Logos is not only the mediator of divine special revelation (John 1:14), He is also the ground of *all* human knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

Several of the early church fathers also taught this view: "On the basis of John 1:9, Justin Martyr argued that every apprehension of truth (whether by believer or unbeliever) is made possible because men are related to the Logos."<sup>20</sup> Every person depends on Christ for his knowledge and thinking. Believers admit it; unbelievers do not.

Even if one disagrees with this understanding of the prologue, it does not undermine the epistemology presented. First, nothing in the prologue contradicts this epistemology. Second, this epistemology is a necessary consequence of the biblical metaphysics introduced earlier. The Bible asserts that God created and controls all things, and all things must include all human intellectual activities. Third, more than a few biblical verses teach that God is the one who sovereignly grants understanding and knowledge.

God is the sole source of knowledge, and he has revealed some of his knowledge in the Bible. Thus the Bible is the first principle of the Christian worldview. The truth that is available to us consists of the propositions directly stated in the Bible and the propositions that are validly deduced from them or that are endorsed by them. All other propositions are at best unjustified opinion. This biblical epistemology necessarily follows from biblical metaphysics. Any other epistemology is indefensible, and collapses into self-contradictory skepticism.

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<sup>19</sup> Ronald H. Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man*; Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1982; p. 67.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

## ETHICS

Just as biblical epistemology necessarily follows from biblical metaphysics, biblical soteriology necessarily follows from biblical metaphysics and epistemology. But since salvation presupposes sin, and sin presupposes ethics, we should first discuss biblical ethics.

God controls all of reality, and all of reality depends on God, and since man is part of God's creation and part of reality, this means that biblical anthropology must address the relationship between God and man. Since God is sovereign over all of his creation, including man, then God is also the one who defines the proper relationship between God and man. This is the foundation of biblical ethics.

Verses 10-11 of John's prologue say, "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." F. F. Bruce translates verse 11, "He came to his own place, and his own people did not receive him."<sup>21</sup> Verse 10 refers to a more general rejection of Christ, and verse 11 deals with the historical situation in Israel. For our purpose, we will ignore verse 11 in what follows.

To say that "the world was made through him" (v. 10) reinforces the doctrine of creation, which is one aspect of biblical metaphysics, as introduced by verses 1-3. The Word became a historical person "in the world," but the world "did not recognize him." Instead of receiving the worship he deserved as the creator, he was ignored and rejected, and finally crucified by those whom he had made. Such is the nature of sinful men, so that although they owed obedience to their maker, they scorned his commandments and persecuted those who would follow him. If the creator dared invade their territory in the form of a man, then they were determined to kill him.

The Christian view of metaphysics implies, in the area of ethics, obedience to the creator's commands. Verse 10 suggests that the world ought to have known Christ because "the world was made through him." He was their creator, and he was in the world, but he did not receive the welcome he deserved. If they were aware that "the world was made through him," they surely did not act like it – the sinful mind is blind, ungrateful, and irrational. The verse shows that man's relation with God has been damaged through sin.

Many people have a distorted concept of sin due to the influence of secular philosophy and psychology. Some told me that they had never sinned at all; however, this must be false because 1 John 1:8 says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Scripture defines sin as a transgression of God's law, and it is God's law that defines right and wrong. Romans 3:20 says, "Through the law we become conscious of sin," and John writes, "In fact, sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). To break God's command is to do wrong, that is, to sin.

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<sup>21</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983; p. 37.

Some people think that the gospel has abolished the moral law, but this entails a gross misunderstanding of the message of the gospel and the work of Jesus Christ. Paul writes, "Where there is no law there is no transgression" (Romans 4:15). If the moral law has been abolished in the sense that there is no longer a moral law, then there can be no sin. However, even after Christ has accomplished his work of redemption, the New Testament continues to teach that everyone has sinned, and that even Christians continue to sin. Since there must be law for there to be sin, this means that the moral law is still in force.

Another view asserts that the command to love has replaced the moral law, such as the Ten Commandments. This is also false doctrine. Romans 13:9 says, "The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and whatever other commandment there may be, are *summed up* in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" The command to love is a summary of God's moral commands; it is not a replacement. In fact, love remains undefined until God's specific moral commands give it meaning. Murder and theft are still sins, and to love my neighbor means not to murder him or steal from him, because this is how God's moral commands define love.

Jesus does not relax the definition of sin; instead, he reinforces the strictness of God's moral commands, and dispels the human traditions that excuse people from obeying them (Mark 7:13). Against the religious traditions of his day, he brings to light the full meaning of God's commands, and insists that a person violates the moral law even by thinking evil thoughts. He says:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, "Raca," is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell....You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery." But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28)

It is a mistake to think that Jesus revises the commandments. In fact, he is expounding on their original and intended meaning against the distortions of human traditions. God has always regarded evil thoughts as sinful:

The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. (Genesis 6:5)

Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. (Isaiah 55:7)

Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood. Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways. (Isaiah 59:7)

O Jerusalem, wash the evil from your heart and be saved. How long will you harbor wicked thoughts? (Jeremiah 4:14)

A person must obey God in his motives, thoughts, and actions. It is sinful even to worry about food and clothing, since Jesus says that this is to commit the sins of unbelief and idolatry (Matthew 6:24-25, 30). Thus except Jesus Christ, no one is without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Moreover, James writes, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker" (James 2:10-11). If you obey God on one point but disobey him on another point, you are still a lawbreaker. You have not only committed murder, adultery, or whatever the sin may be, but by committing the sin, you have defied the one who issued the commandments.

The Westminster Larger Catechism offers an excellent definition of sin. Question 24 – "What is sin?" – invokes the reply, "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, any law of God, given as a rule to the reasonable creature." Any transgression or deviation from the moral law by a rational creature is sin. Now, God's law does not only prohibit evil, but it requires us to do good: "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" (1 John 3:17); "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins" (James 4:17). Since God's law requires us to do good, the failure to do good is a transgression or deviation from the moral law, and thus this failure is also sin. Add Matthew 5:48 to all of this, and the high moral standard that God demands is evident: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

## **SOTERIOLOGY**

There is a big problem. The moral standard is more than very high – it appears to be unattainable. It is no small matter to offend a righteous and omnipotent God – one evil thought is sufficient to damn a person forever. Therefore, because it is impossible to satisfy its demands, God's law drives us to despair: "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law'" (Galatians 3:10).

Since it is impossible to be justified before God by the law, this means that for anyone to be justified before God, he must be justified apart from the law (Romans 3:28). Galatians 3:24 says, "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith." The law sets an impossible standard that renders all men guilty, driving those to Christ who have despaired of their own efforts. Paul writes in Romans 3:21-24:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This

righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

No one is without guilt, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." As Psalm 130:3 says, "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?" However, the psalm continues, "But with you there is forgiveness" (v. 4). We are "justified by his grace," and so we have "the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7). We are not saved by our own goodness, because we have none, but we are saved by God's sovereign mercy.

For us to understand the nature of God's work in salvation, we must first understand the nature and extent of the damage of sin in man. Understanding the problem will help us understand the solution. What is the effect of sin in man? Can man contribute or cooperate in his salvation? Without God's power to determine man's will, can man decide to accept God's gift? To speak metaphorically, is man spiritually sick or blind, or is he something worse?

Jesus says, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32). The sinner is sick. This metaphor suggests that he is at least crippled in his ability to deal with spiritual things. The sinner is also blind: "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn – and I would heal them" (John 12:40). This metaphor provides a specific piece of information about the sinner. The verse implies that the blindness of his eyes is like the deadness of his heart, and both mean that the sinner cannot grasp spiritual things. Spiritual blindness is not different from intellectual blindness; rather, spiritual blindness is a subset of intellectual blindness, only that we are referring to an intellectual inaptitude about spiritual topics. Paul says that the unbelievers are "darkened in their understanding" (Ephesians 4:18).

The sinner is spiritually sick and blind, but more than that, he is also spiritually dead. To the Christians at Ephesus, Paul writes, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient" (Ephesians 2:1-2). He uses this metaphor not as a mere rhetorical device, but he intends it to be theologically decisive, so that he assumes its truth as he continues, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved" (v. 4-5). To the Christians, Paul says that God has "raised us up with Christ" (v. 6). This brings us from the problem to the solution, from sin to salvation, and back to John's prologue.

Having established the sinful condition of man implied by John 1:10-11, we now proceed to verses 12-13: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." All human beings are creatures of God, but not all are his children – non-Christians are children of the devil (John 8:44). In the writings



of John the believer becomes a "child" (*teknon*) of God, and only Jesus is the "son" (*huios*) of God. As for Paul, both Christ and the believers are said to be sons, but the latter only by adoption. Thus both apostles make a distinction between the sonship of Christ and the sonship of a Christian. A person never becomes the son of God in the same sense that Christ is the son of God.

We have seen two metaphors for conversion – resurrection and the new birth. Paul writes that God has "made us alive with Christ," and that he has "raised us up with Christ." Here in the prologue, those who believe in Christ goes through the new birth to become the children of God. As Jesus says in John 3:3, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Ezekiel 36:25-27 gives a summary of what happens at conversion:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Whereas it is impossible to obey God's moral laws before conversion, when a person is converted, God enables him to obey by the Holy Spirit.

There is now enough information to produce a statement on soteriology, and to relate it to biblical metaphysics and epistemology. The sinner is spiritually dead in sin. He is in a condition such that conversion requires a fundamental reconstruction in intellect and personality that amounts to a spiritual resurrection. Perhaps a person who is merely sick or blind may do something to help himself, or at least receive a gift that is offered to him. However, the Bible says that a person is dead in sin before his conversion; therefore, he can do nothing and decide nothing for himself. He cannot contribute to or cooperate in his own salvation, nor is he willing to do so. "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Romans 8:7).

Therefore, it depends solely on God to decide and effect a person's regeneration. God indeed justifies and adopts a person by means of faith in Christ. But whether a person have faith in Christ does not depend on the person, because if it does, then the person will never have faith, since he is dead in sin. Rather, God is the one who decides whether a person will have faith in Christ, since faith is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8). A person who is spiritually dead cannot produce or exercise faith – God must first regenerate him. But God regenerates only those whom he has chosen. Therefore, the order of what happens when God saves a person is regeneration, faith, justification, and adoption.

Paul writes, "What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day'" (Romans 11:7-8). Arminianism says that it is man who chooses whether he will accept Christ, but Jesus says,

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last" (John 15:16). Deceived by the false gospel of "free will," many people have been persuaded to go through the motions of receiving Christ; however, unless they have been chosen by God to be saved, their faith is false and futile. They have not been saved, and they will not bear true and lasting spiritual fruit.

Faith in Christ is the mind's true assent to the message of the gospel, and this means that soteriology presupposes epistemology. That is, salvation presupposes knowledge. Thus the question becomes how one comes to know, understand, and accept the gospel? When Peter says to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus replies, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:16-17). Peter did not observe the particular words and works of Christ, and then by a process of inductive reasoning infer that he must be the Christ. Instead, God illuminated his mind to know the truth about Christ. Again, this shows that a person cannot simply decide to have faith or to be saved, since he cannot even know or understand the gospel unless God decides to reveal it to him.

Nicodemus said to Jesus, "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" (John 3:2). However, his observation failed to produce the knowledge necessary for salvation. Jesus told him that he needed to be born again. By observing the same miracles, the Pharisees inferred, "It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons" (Matthew 9:34). Knowledge can never come by empirical methods, since any inference from sensation is bound to be an unnecessary inference, and thus invalid.

This is also true when it comes to the knowledge necessary for salvation. Biblical soteriology cannot rest on a non-biblical epistemology, but it rests on a biblical epistemology that emphasizes the sovereign God and the infallible Scripture. The knowledge necessary for salvation comes by the direct operation of the *logos* on the mind by means of the words of Scripture or the preaching of the gospel. Therefore, "faith comes from hearing the message" (Romans 10:17), but at the same time it is a sovereign gift from God (Ephesians 2:8), so that not all who hear the gospel receive faith, but only those whom God causes to believe the message.

Another important passage is 2 Corinthians 4:4-6:

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

The preaching of the gospel in itself does not save, because for the light of the gospel to penetrate, it is necessary for God to produce faith by acting on the mind. It is God who

"made his light shine in our hearts," so that "neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:7).

This is consistent with the biblical epistemology explained earlier, that sensation – in this case, the hearing of the gospel – at most provides an occasion for the mind to intuit the truth from the mind of God. If God does not grant it, then the man cannot understand (in a manner or extent necessary for salvation) or believe the gospel. We may add that knowledge often comes even apart from the stimulation of sensation, since God can convey to the mind any thought that he wishes, so that sensation is never necessary in obtaining any kind of knowledge.

Just as biblical epistemology depends on biblical metaphysics – knowledge is made possible only by the power of God – since biblical metaphysics covers the whole of reality, biblical soteriology also depends on biblical metaphysics. That is, since God controls every detail of the whole of reality, this means that he also controls every detail of each person's salvation. "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Romans 9:18), so that God alone dispenses his salvation to whomever he wishes. To those whom he has chosen for salvation, he issues an irresistible summon to accept Christ. To those whom he has chosen for damnation, he hardens their hearts against the gospel. As Psalm 65:4 says, "Blessed is the man whom thou choosest, and causest to approach unto thee, that he may dwell in thy courts: we shall be satisfied with the goodness of thy house, even of thy holy temple" (KJV).

Thus we have arrived at the core of the Christian worldview – we depend on God for existence, for knowledge, and for salvation. As Paul writes, "You were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:4-6). Whereas non-Christian religions and philosophies fail at every point in answering the ultimate questions, the biblical system provides true and coherent answers to all of them. From logic to metaphysics, from metaphysics to epistemology, from epistemology to ethics, from ethics to soteriology, the one and only sovereign God reasons, creates, sustains, reveals, commands, judges, and saves.

## 2. CHRISTIAN SOTERIOLOGY

### GOD SELECTS

Writing to the Thessalonian converts, Paul says, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you" (1 Thessalonians 1:4). Just as the sovereignty of God is foundational to Christian theology in general, the doctrine of election is foundational to Christian soteriology in particular. The doctrine maintains that in eternity, before the universe was made, God had selected an unchangeable number of specific individuals for salvation in Christ, and he did so without basing his decision on the faith and works, or any other condition, in the individuals so selected. Rather than choosing an individual because of any foreseen faith, the elect individual receives faith precisely because God has chosen him.

Against the Calvinists,<sup>1</sup> the Arminians oppose this biblical doctrine; instead, they turn divine election into God's reaction to what we choose, so that our choosing Christ is logically prior to God's choosing us, with the result that mere human beings determine the will of God in salvation. Against this humanistic heresy, Paul declares, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you." It is God who sovereignly chooses the elect, so that Paul says, "He has chosen you," and not "He has approved of your choice." If God does little more than accept our choice, then he does not choose us in any real sense of the term. But Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). Therefore, Arminianism is false.

In a disappointing paragraph on 1 Thessalonians, David J. Williams writes:

Election becomes ours only when we are "in Christ"...Thus the element of human choice enters into the process. If we choose to be in Christ, we have been chosen by God. There is nothing arbitrary, therefore, about election. Our choice makes us his elect. At the same time it makes us "somebodies" who in the eyes of the world may be "nobodies." Election gives us a value that otherwise we would not have, for God chose us, not because of what we were, but despite our being sinners and simply because he is the kind of God he is...Our election is entirely an expression of God's love.<sup>2</sup>

It is confusing, if not contradictory, to say that election "becomes ours" only when we are in Christ. Is God's choice of a person an object that can be given or taken away? Based on

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<sup>1</sup> We do not affirm "Calvinism" just because John Calvin taught it, but because it is biblical, and we oppose "Arminianism" because it is unbiblical. We are using these terms only for the sake of convenience.

<sup>2</sup> David J. Williams, *New International Biblical Commentary: 1 and 2 Thessalonians*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1992; p. 28.

this nonsensical statement – that election "becomes ours" – Williams asserts that "the element of human choice enters into the process."

He continues, "If we choose to be in Christ, we have been chosen by God." On the surface this statement can accommodate either Calvinism or Arminianism. If he intends to affirm Calvinism with this statement, then he is saying that a person who chooses to be in Christ discovers that he chooses Christ because God has first chosen him, so that God's choice is prior to and the cause of the man's choice. God first chose the person, and in due time causes him to choose Christ. But this is not what he means.

The next statement implies that Williams does not intend to affirm Calvinism: "There is nothing arbitrary, therefore, about election." He is saying that election is not arbitrary only because "the element of human choice enters into the process." In other words, he thinks that if election is completely up to God without reference to any condition found in the human person, then God's decision would be arbitrary. Therefore, to prevent a decision from being arbitrary, God must base his decision on man's decision. To Williams, an absolutely sovereign God is also an arbitrary God.

Both Calvinists and Arminians are very careless with the word "arbitrary." If by arbitrary we mean "existing or coming about seemingly at random or by chance or as a capricious and unreasonable act of will,"<sup>3</sup> then of course the Calvinist would deny that election is arbitrary. Both Calvinists and Arminians often use the word in this sense, but this is the last definition in *Merriam-Webster*. The previous definitions include: "depending on individual discretion (as of a judge) and not fixed by law...not restrained or limited in the exercise of power: ruling by absolute authority."<sup>4</sup> If we use these definitions, then the Calvinist can enthusiastically affirm that election is "arbitrary," since God indeed rules "by absolute authority," and election is indeed based on his "individual discretion." Paul writes, "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Romans 9:18), and therefore election is "arbitrary," but not in the pejorative sense.

Williams is clearly using the word "arbitrary" in the pejorative sense – that is, "existing or coming about seemingly at random or by chance or as a capricious and unreasonable act of will." Then, to paraphrase his position, he is saying that election does not exist or come about "seemingly at random or by chance or as a capricious and unreasonable act of will" *only because* "the element of human choice enters into the process." If election is completely up to God without reference to any condition found in the human person, then God's decision would be "existing or coming about seemingly at random or by chance or as a capricious and unreasonable act of will."

Therefore, to prevent a decision from being "seemingly at random or by chance or as a capricious and unreasonable act of will," God must base his decision on man's decision. To Williams, an absolutely sovereign God is also a random, capricious, and unreasonable God. To him, if God does something with you without first "asking" you, then he is random,

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<sup>3</sup> *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*; Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

capricious, and unreasonable. One term to describe this position is *blasphemy*. Perhaps Williams forgot that he was writing a *Christian* commentary. In contrast, Scripture teaches that God is indeed "arbitrary" in the best sense of the term – he "rules by absolute authority" and he does all things by his "individual discretion." He does not have to ask for your permission to do anything with you that he wishes.

The next statement makes his position even clearer: "Our choice makes us his elect."<sup>5</sup> Assuming he realizes that the elect refers to "the chosen," this means that he is saying, "Our choice makes us his chosen," or "Our choosing God makes us chosen by God." Notice the word *makes* – our choice is the cause or reason for God's choice. But if this is the case, how does election make us "somebodies"? God has not in fact chosen us, but we have chosen him. All he does is respond to our choice. God does not make us special; we make ourselves special.

After this, Williams has the gall to write, "God chose us, not because of what we were... simply because he is the kind of God he is." This cannot be true given his position. He has just said that, "Our choice makes us his elect." His position necessarily implies that God chose us precisely "because of what we were" – we are those who have chosen him first. Then, he dares to write that our election is "*entirely* an expression of God's love"! But if God chooses us only because we choose him first, then his choosing us cannot be *entirely* an expression of his love. Thus within several sentences, Williams manages to contradict Scripture, contradict himself, and blaspheme God.

The corollary of election is reprobation. The doctrine of reprobation teaches that, just as God has chosen those individuals who would be saved, he has also individually and deliberately decreed the damnation of all others. Many of those who affirm the doctrine of election nevertheless reject the doctrine of reprobation. However, just as election is a necessary conclusion from the sovereignty of God, reprobation is also true if by nothing else other than logical necessity. But many people are proud to reject this biblical doctrine "however logical it may appear to be."<sup>6</sup> They reject the doctrine on the basis of irrational prejudice instead of biblical argument or logical inference.

Commenting on 1 Thessalonians 1:4, William MacDonald writes, "The doctrine of election teaches that God chose certain people in Christ before the foundation of the world,"<sup>7</sup> and he cites Ephesians 1:4 as support. It seems that he accepts some form of divine election when he says, "In His sovereignty, God has elected or chosen certain individuals to belong to Himself."<sup>8</sup> This broadly agrees with the biblical doctrine of election.

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<sup>5</sup> By this, he shows what he means by his earlier statement, "If we choose to be in Christ, we have been chosen by God." He intends to assert Arminianism.

<sup>6</sup> Peter E. Cousins, "1 Thessalonians"; F. F. Bruce, ed., *New International Bible Commentary*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979; p. 1461.

<sup>7</sup> William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc., 1995 (original: 1989); p. 2024.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1714.

But then he continues, "These two doctrines, election and freedom of choice, create an irreconcilable conflict in the human mind."<sup>9</sup> I agree that divine sovereignty contradicts human freedom, but where does the Scripture teach human freedom? I deny that men are free in the sense of being free from God; that is, I affirm with Scripture that God possesses and exercises absolute and constant control over the human will. If MacDonald affirms human freedom, then he must prove it by Scripture.

In another place, MacDonald writes:

But the same Bible that teaches God's sovereign election also teaches human responsibility...How can we reconcile these two truths? The fact is that we cannot. To the human mind they are in conflict. But the Bible teaches both doctrines, and so we should believe them, content to know that the difficulty lies in our minds and not in God's.<sup>10</sup>

First, we must distinguish between human freedom and human responsibility – they are two different things. Many people assume that human responsibility depends on human freedom. They think that humans are responsible because they are free, and that if they are not free, then they cannot be responsible. But by what biblical, theological, or philosophical argument do they establish this? It is assumed without argument, but I reject this premise. Instead, I affirm that although divine sovereignty contradicts human *freedom*, and that Scripture never teaches human freedom, divine sovereignty does not contradict human *responsibility*, and that Scripture indeed teaches human responsibility.

Second, MacDonald fails to understand the nature of a contradiction. He says that if the Bible affirms two contradictory doctrines, then we must affirm both of them. According to MacDonald, the Bible affirms divine sovereignty, and then it also affirms what seems to him the contradictory doctrine of human responsibility. Since the Bible affirms both, we must also affirm both. What he does not realize is that if these doctrines are really contradictory, then to affirm one is to deny the other, so that it is impossible to affirm both at the same time.

If these two doctrines contradict each other, then when you read about divine sovereignty in the Bible, you are not reading only an affirmation of divine sovereignty, but also a denial of human responsibility. Likewise, a biblical affirmation of human responsibility is tantamount to a denial of divine sovereignty. Therefore, if the two doctrines contradict, it will be just as easy to say that the Bible *denies* both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. To say that these two doctrines only *appear* to be contradictory to the human mind is irrelevant, because even if it is true that they only appear to contradict each other, it remains that no human mind can affirm both doctrines, even if God can affirm both of them.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 1714-1715.

Unless MacDonald charges the Bible with error, he must either deny one of the two doctrines as unbiblical, or he must admit that they do not contradict. The real problem is that many commentators refuse to admit that they do not have the subtlety of thought or the intelligence to harmonize the two doctrines – that is, if they need to be harmonized in the first place. Instead, it is as if they think that if they cannot harmonize the two doctrines, then surely no human mind can! On other hand, I affirm that the Bible teaches both divine sovereignty and human responsibility, and I affirm that the two doctrines do not contradict. There is not even an appearance of contradiction.

MacDonald and many others like him think that there is a contradiction between divine sovereignty and human responsibility because they assume that human responsibility requires man to have freedom of choice, or free will; however, if God has absolute control, then man is not free, and therefore divine sovereignty and human responsibility contradict each other.

But this process of reasoning is fatally flawed. A large part of the problem results from an imprecise definition of "responsibility." What does it mean for a person to be "responsible" for his actions? The first definition for "responsible" in *Webster's New World College Dictionary* is, "expected or obliged to account (*for* something, *to* someone); answerable; accountable."<sup>11</sup> Regardless of whether or not man is free, is man "expected or obliged to account" for his actions to God? Yes, because Scripture says, "For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:14). God will reward the righteous and punish the wicked; therefore, man is responsible. What seems to so many as an "irreconcilable conflict" is hereby resolved.

Man is responsible precisely because God is sovereign, since to be responsible means nothing more than being held accountable to one's actions, that one will be rewarded or punished according to a given standard of right and wrong. It has everything to do with whether God has decreed a final judgment, and whether he has the power and authority to enforce such a decree, but it does not depend on any "free will" in man. In fact, since human responsibility depends on divine sovereignty, and since divine sovereignty indeed contradicts human freedom (not human responsibility), this means that man is responsible precisely because man is not free.

The Bible teaches that God controls all human decisions and actions. Autonomy is an illusion. Man is responsible because God will reward obedience and punish rebellion, but this does not mean that man is free to obey or rebel. Romans 8:7 explains, "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." The Bible never teaches that man is responsible for his sins because he is free. Man is responsible for his sins not because he is free to do otherwise; this verse says that he is not free. Whether man is responsible has to do with whether God decides to hold him accountable; it has nothing to do with whether man is free. Man is responsible because God has decided to judge him for his sins. Therefore, the doctrine of human responsibility does not depend on the unbiblical teaching of free will, but on the absolute sovereignty of God.

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<sup>11</sup> *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition*; Foster City, California: IDG Books Worldwide, Inc., 2000.



Right away the question becomes one of justice, or whether it is just for God to punish those whom he has predestined to damnation. Paul anticipates this question in Romans 9:19, and writes, "One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?'" He replies, "But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" (v. 20). This amounts to saying that God is "arbitrary" – he rules by absolute authority. No one can halt his plans, and no one has the right to question him. This is true because God is the creator of all things, and he has the right to do whatever he wishes with his creation: "Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?" (v. 21).

The next two verses say, "What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory..." (v. 22-23). Paul is still answering the question in verse 19: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" He is saying that since God is sovereign, he can do whatever he wishes, and this includes creating some vessels destined for glory, and some destined for destruction. Peter says regarding those who reject Christ: "They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for" (1 Peter 2:8). Whereas the elect rejoice in this doctrine, the non-elect detest it, but either way, this is the way it is and there is nothing that anyone can do about it.

It is because of poor reasoning that the issue of justice is even brought up against the doctrine of reprobation. In its various forms, the objection amounts to the following:

1. The Bible teaches that God is just.
2. The doctrine of reprobation is unjust.
3. Therefore, the Bible does not teach the doctrine of reprobation.

However, premise (2) has been assumed without warrant. By what standard of justice does a person judge whether the doctrine of reprobation is just or unjust? In contrast to the above, the Christian reasons as follows:

1. The Bible teaches that God is just.
2. The Bible teaches the doctrine of reprobation.
3. Therefore, the doctrine of reprobation is just.

The pivotal point is whether the Bible affirms the doctrine. One must not assume whether it is just or unjust beforehand. Since God is the sole standard of justice, and since the Bible affirms the doctrine of reprobation, this means that the doctrine of reprobation is just by definition. Calvin notes:

For God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous. When, therefore, one asks why God has so

done, we must reply: because he has willed it. But if you proceed further to ask why he so willed, you are seeking something greater and higher than God's will, which cannot be found. Let men's rashness, then, restrain itself, and not seek what does not exist, lest perhaps it fail to find what does exist.<sup>12</sup>

Scripture does not teach that God has made salvation actually possible for every human being – it denies it – rather, it teaches that salvation has been made available to "every nation, tribe, language and people" (Revelation 14:6). Joel's prophecy is that God would pour out his Spirit upon "all flesh" (Acts 2:17, KJV) in the sense of making salvation available to every ethnic group. One idiot of a preacher said that this means "all Muslim flesh, Buddhist flesh," and so on, but this is not what this means. On the day of Pentecost was present "God-fearing Jews from *every nation* under heaven" (Acts 2:5), and the Book of Acts chronicles the progress of the gospel to the Gentiles. That is, "God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).

This is the good news and the surprising message, that the elect company is not restricted to Abraham's blood descendants, but God has chosen individuals from all ethnic groups, so that, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28-29). In another place, Paul writes:

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men) – remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. (Ephesians 2:11-13)

In several passages related to our topic, the Westminster Confession of Faith says the following:

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.

These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and

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<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; Edited by John T. McNeill; Translated by Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960; p. 949, (III, xxiii, 2).

immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his free grace and love alone, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.

As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Where they who are elected being fallen in Adam are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.

The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice. (III, 3-7)

In connection with God's providence, the Confession states that his control extends itself "to the first Fall, and all other sins of angels and men, and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them" (V, 4). Just as the elect comes to Christ by an irresistible summon, and "it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13), the reprobate is by no means autonomous – not even in his sins. God directs a person's thoughts "like a watercourse wherever he pleases" (Proverbs 21:1), and there is no free will.

It is futile to repeat the silly objection that God permits some actions but does not will them, for as Calvin says, "Why shall we say 'permission' unless it is because God so wills?"<sup>13</sup> Since God controls and sustains all things, what does it mean for him to permit something except to say that he wills and causes it? To say that God "permits" something is nothing other than an ambiguous way of saying that God "permits" himself to cause something. There is no distinction between causation and permission with God; unless he wills an event, it can never happen (Matthew 10:29).

The Confession says that the election and reprobation of individuals belong to the "secret counsel" of God, so that the members of either group are not listed for public examination. If this is true, then on what basis does Paul say, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you" (1 Thessalonians 1:4)? Despite his very foolish comments elsewhere, MacDonald gives a correct explanation: "The apostle was assured that these saints had been chosen by God before the foundation of the world. But how did he know? Did he

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<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*; p. 956, (III, xxiii, 8).

have some supernatural insight? No, he knew they were among the elect by the way they received the gospel."<sup>14</sup> Paul lists the indications that his readers were chosen by God for salvation in the next several verses.

Verse 5 begins, "Our gospel came to you not simply with words." Because of the pervasive influence of secular philosophy, even the professing Christians in our day are often very anti-intellectualistic. Thus it is unacceptable to present the gospel with "just a sermon"; rather, they place great emphasis on music, drama, fellowship, and mystical experience. With such a disposition, at least some of them will distort "not simply with words" into an endorsement to this type of thinking, so that they may even see the expression as a deprecation of plain preaching.

Even the less anti-intellectual commentators stumble over the phrase. Leon Morris writes, "Words alone are empty rhetoric, and more than that is required if people's souls are to be saved."<sup>15</sup> But just because "more than that is required if people's souls are to be saved," does not mean that "words alone are empty rhetoric." Morris is unclear in the first place. If by rhetoric he means, "the art of speaking or writing effectively," "skill in the effective use of speech," or "verbal communication,"<sup>16</sup> then what he says almost amounts to saying, "Words are words," which is an irrelevant tautology.

However, the meaning Morris has in mind probably resembles, "artificial eloquence; language that is showy and elaborate but largely empty of clear ideas."<sup>17</sup> A fuller quotation from verse 5 says, "Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction." Now, if Paul's preaching had been stripped of the other elements, such as the power of the Spirit, it still does not follow that his words would have been "artificial eloquence" or "language that is showy and elaborate but largely empty of clear ideas." Morris' statement is equivalent to saying that the gospel by itself is nothing more than showy language void of substance and clear ideas.

Morris betrays his confusion when he writes in the next paragraph of his commentary, "The gospel is power...whenever the gospel is faithfully proclaimed, there is power."<sup>18</sup> But if "the gospel is power," then one can never preach the gospel as empty rhetoric. It is fashionable to repeat such anti-intellectual phrases as, "Words alone are empty rhetoric," but words are always rhetorical, and rhetoric always deals with words. Whether a presentation is *empty* rhetoric depends on the content of the speech. The proposition, "Jesus is Lord," consists of words alone, and no one will acknowledge its truth unless by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3), but whether one believes it or not, it is not empty rhetoric.

Any interpretation of verse 5 that deprecates the role of words or of preaching cannot be true. The entire Bible consists of words without a single picture or musical note; it uses

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<sup>14</sup> MacDonald, p. 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, Revised Edition*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991; p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*.

<sup>17</sup> *Webster's New World College Dictionary*.

<sup>18</sup> Morris, *Thessalonians*; p. 46.

words to convey intellectual information. Paul says, "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). We inherit the blessings of the gospel and grow in the spiritual life by means of the *words* of God.

Again, the verse says, "For our gospel did not come to you in word only" (NASB). There are two ways to understand the word "only," as the following examples illustrate:

1. The Godhead does not consist of *only* God the Father, but also Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit.
2. His wealth does not consist of *only* this broken bicycle, but also five cars and two houses.

In the first statement, the word "only" does not belittle God the Father, but merely indicates that he is not the sole member of the Godhead. However, in the second statement the same word suggests that one's wealth would indeed be meager if it consists of nothing more than a broken bicycle. That is, the word can simply mean that there are additional items in the list without implying anything negative.

Since the Scripture emphasizes the importance of words in many places, the word "only" (or "simply") in verse 5 cannot be understood in the second sense. That is, Paul has no intention of belittling words or preaching when he says that his gospel did not come "in word only," but he desires to indicate that other things besides his verbal presentation had happened, and these things suggested to him that his converts were in fact among God's elect.

Misconceptions in this area are common. Robert Thomas begins well his explanation of verse 5, saying, "Words are basic to intelligent communication. But the gospel's coming was not 'simply' in word; speaking was only a part of the whole picture."<sup>19</sup> But then he stumbles over the same point as Morris and writes, "Their preaching was not mere hollow rhetoric but contained three other ingredients essential to the outworking of God's elective purpose."<sup>20</sup> However, Galatians 1:11-12 eliminates the possibility that the content of Paul's preaching is *ever* "mere hollow rhetoric."<sup>21</sup>

Thomas' statement amounts to saying that if the Spirit does not accompany your reading of the Bible, then the Bible is mere rhetoric. Many unthinking people would agree with Thomas, but I call this blasphemy. As God's verbal revelation, the Bible is never mere rhetoric. That the Spirit does not act powerfully when you read only means that you may not be affected by what you read, but the content of the Bible, being the mind of God, does not suddenly become hollow.

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<sup>19</sup> *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 11*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978; p. 244.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

<sup>21</sup> "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."

Morris and Thomas do not seem to know what the word *rhetoric* means. Paul says he knew that God had chosen the Thessalonian converts *because* his preaching came "with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction." This means that his preaching did not always include these things, and that God did not always make his preaching effective; otherwise, all who heard Paul preach would have been saved. At those times when these things were not present, did the content of Paul's preaching suddenly become empty rhetoric, or did the content of the gospel remain the same – that is, the power and wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24)? If Paul preached the same thing, then whether the Spirit came with power to produce faith in the hearers, the gospel was still the power and wisdom of God.

Against the anti-intellectual interpretations of Scripture, we must maintain that words can be meaningful by themselves, and whether a presentation consists of empty rhetoric depends on the content of the speech. Since the gospel provides true and coherent content, it is never empty rhetoric. Paul never put down the importance and effectiveness of preaching, since he writes, "God...at his appointed season...brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior" (Titus 1:2-3). It is true that God must exercise his power to convert the sinner, but it is often on the occasion of our preaching that he exercises this power. Paul came to know that some of the Thessalonians were among God's elect because of the effects accompanying his preaching that he could not have produced as a man. But in affirming the necessity of God's power to convert the sinner, we take care not to belittle words or preaching, lest we blaspheme Scripture and the gospel.

### **GOD SUMMONS**

Now we will consider what it means for the gospel to come "with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (v. 5). Paul mentions two things that happened as he preached the gospel among the Thessalonians (v. 4-10). He was aware that God had chosen the Thessalonians for salvation because of his consciousness of divine involvement when he preached, and because of the converts' genuine reception of the gospel. Verse 5 refers to the first of the two.

Preaching is the means by which God summons the elect to salvation. God's power regenerates the elect who come under gospel preaching, and gives them faith in Christ, so that they are shown to be chosen and justified. Because not all who hear the gospel are among the elect, God's power might not operate in a saving manner every time the gospel is preached, and it might not operate in a saving manner toward everyone in any particular audience.

This is not because the gospel is ever void of power, since "it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16), but only those whom God has called to salvation will receive a change of mind, so that he may recognize Christ as the power and wisdom of God. Paul explains, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:22-24).

Therefore, the "power" in our verse refers to the Holy Spirit's divine influence at work through the apostle's preaching to effect a change in the minds of the hearers. Miracles often accompany preaching (Romans 15:18-19; Hebrews 2:3-4), and many theologians undermine this because of their unbelief, but this does not mean that the New Testament writers only have miracles in mind whenever they mention "power." They sometimes have in view the influence of the Holy Spirit, as in his divine power to convert sinners.

Since 1 Corinthians 2:4 parallels 1 Thessalonians 1:5, we should study it to better understand both verses. The entire chapter of 1 Corinthians 2 has been distorted by some anti-intellectual commentators. For example, Paul says in verse 2, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." It is ludicrous, as some of them assert, that this means Paul had decided to suppress his tremendous theological knowledge as he was preaching.

The expression, "Jesus Christ and him crucified," designates a central theme of the gospel message, that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3). It does not restrict the content of Paul's preaching to the crucifixion. As 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 indicates, Paul told the Corinthians about Christ's resurrection when he preached to them, so he did not restrict himself to Christ's crucifixion. "Jesus Christ and him crucified," "the message of the cross," and other such phrases are general designations of the Christian message and worldview. Of course, several aspects of Christianity may receive emphasis at the beginning, but Paul did not preach only a simple message with little regard for the comprehensive system of Christian doctrines. He says that he preached "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27) to his hearers.

1 Corinthians 2:6-7 also contradicts the anti-intellectual agenda: "We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began." Throughout 1 Corinthians 1 and 2, Paul does not say that the Christian message is somehow less intellectual, or that the gospel has no claim to intellectual respectability, but his emphasis is that the gospel's content differs from non-Christian philosophy. He is saying that the content of the gospel is superior to human speculation.<sup>22</sup>

Christianity is more intellectually rigorous than secular philosophy, not less. There is no trace of anti-intellectualism in 2 Corinthians 11:6: "I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way." Paul claims to possess "surpassingly great revelations" (2 Corinthians 12:7) and "insight into the mystery of Christ" (Ephesians 3:4). He says that love must abound "in knowledge and depth of insight" (Philippians 1:9). He prays for his readers for "God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Colossians 1:9). According to Peter, God has given Paul such great wisdom that "His letters contain some things that are

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<sup>22</sup> To *speculate* may mean "to think about various aspects of a given subject," or "meditate" and "ponder." However, my use of this word carries the meaning of "conjecture" or "guesswork." See *Webster's New World College Dictionary*.

hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:15-16). It is impossible for 1 Corinthians 2 to contain any anti-intellectual meaning.

The Christian system is thoroughly intellectual. Those who disagree with this often confuse the Bible's denunciation of human speculation with a denunciation of the intellect or of intellectualism. Scripture repudiates the false intellectual content of secular philosophy, and not the exercise of the intellect itself. However, many preachers distort Paul's statement, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (v. 2), so as to excuse their disobedience to 2 Timothy 2:15: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (NASB). Most preachers are not really qualified to be preachers, being especially weak in theological knowledge. To belittle knowledge and intellectualism is a convenient way to hide their deficiencies.

Our purpose for coming to 1 Corinthians 2 compels us to focus on verses 4 and 5: "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." The verse has the same emphasis as 1 Thessalonians 1:5 – that is, the Holy Spirit's influence to convert sinners through preaching.

The Greeks had tremendous admiration for oratory eloquence, so much so that at times it caused them to ignore the substance of what was said. The "wisdom" (1 Corinthians 1:22) they so respected "often degenerated into meaningless sophistries."<sup>23</sup> The sophists argued for whatever position the situation demanded. Their disregard for truth allowed them to be debaters for hire, that is, to argue for any position that they were paid to defend.

That they were professional debaters does not mean that the sophists offered sound arguments. As Plato pointed out, their arguments were often fallacious and deceptive. The Greeks did not help to stem the situation, for they "tended to judge the value of a discourse more by its external exhibition than by its inward power."<sup>24</sup> Their philosophical arguments were based on dubious human speculation. Thus as he defends his apostleship, Paul writes, "I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way" (2 Corinthians 11:6). The gospel is not based on speculative philosophy, but divine revelation.

Greek "wisdom" despised the message of the cross, because it appeared to be a message of defeat. But there is salvation in no other message, and so Paul writes, "We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23). Therefore, the statement, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2), is written in contrast to secular thinking, and does not at all imply an anti-intellectual strategy of evangelism. Paul is noting that he preached to the people a message that was contrary to their cultural and spiritual

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<sup>23</sup> Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 1 Corinthians*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999 (original: 1958); p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> *The Collected Writings of W. E. Vine, Vol. 2*; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996; p. 10.



disposition, and since the message was not founded on mere human speculation, he did not speak as the sophists did, but he relied on God's power to convince his hearers.

This is the meaning of verses 4 and 5: "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." Paul deliberately slips into philosophical terms in verse 4, asserting that his preaching was shown true, not by speculative and fallacious arguments, but by the "demonstration" of the Spirit. The word indicates a logical proof, as it is used in philosophy and geometry. The English translation is appropriate, since "demonstration" denotes a "logical proof in which a certain conclusion is shown to follow from certain premises."<sup>25</sup> Morris adds, "The word translated *demonstration* (*apodeixis*) means the most rigorous proof. Some proofs indicate no more than that the conclusion follows from the premises, but with *apodeixis* the premises are known to be true, and therefore the conclusion is not only logical, but certainly true."<sup>26</sup>

Paul is not belittling the use of intellectual arguments. His point is that when he approached the Corinthians, he insisted on presenting a message that was based on divine revelation instead of one that was based on human speculation. Gordon Fee writes:

He deliberately avoided the very thing that now fascinates them, "the persuasion of wisdom." But his preaching did not thereby lack "persuasion." What it lacked was the kind of persuasion found among the sophists and rhetoricians, where the power lay in the person and his delivery... What he is rejecting is not preaching, not even persuasive preaching; rather, it is the real danger in all preaching – self-reliance.<sup>27</sup>

As Bullinger observes, "Here, it denotes the powerful gift of divine wisdom, in contrast with the weakness of human wisdom."<sup>28</sup> This is the issue at hand. Paul's preaching differs from the orators both in method and content. His arguments are logical and persuasive, and not hollow and deceptive. Unlike the fallacious "proof" of the sophists, the apostle provides sound "proof" for his message that is powerful to effect conversion in his hearers. This parallels our earlier explanation of 1 Thessalonians 1:5.

We should have a precise understanding of Christianity's relationship with philosophy. In connection with this, one part of Vine's definition on the word "demonstration" is problematic. He says, "a 'showing' or demonstrating by argument, [*apodeixis*] is found in 1 Cor. 2:4, where the apostle speaks of a proof, a 'showing' forth or display, by the operation of the Spirit of God in him, as affecting the hearts and lives of his hearers, in contrast to

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<sup>25</sup> *Webster's New World College Dictionary*.

<sup>26</sup> Morris, *1 Corinthians*; p. 51.

<sup>27</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987; p. 94-96.

<sup>28</sup> E. W. Bullinger, *Word Studies on the Holy Spirit*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1979; p. 120.

the attempted methods of proof by rhetorical arts and philosophic arguments."<sup>29</sup> It is correct that *apodeixis* means "demonstrating by argument," and that it is the operation of the Spirit's power "as affecting the hearts and lives of his hearers." It is also true that Paul contrasts his approach against "the attempted methods of proof by rhetorical arts." In this case, rhetoric indeed denotes, "artificial eloquence; language that is showy and elaborate but largely empty of clear ideas."<sup>30</sup> Any speech is rhetoric in the sense that it is verbal communication or discourse, and as such Paul engages in it, but unlike the philosophers, his arguments are free from sophism.<sup>31</sup> The definition is acceptable to this point. Paul's approach differs from those who employed "mere rhetoric," since he preaches a message with true and coherent content without using fallacious arguments to deceive his hearers into agreeing with him.

However, Vine then contrasts Paul's speech against "philosophic arguments." This can be misleading. If "philosophy" is the "theory or logical analysis of the principles underlying conduct, thought, knowledge, and the nature of the universe,"<sup>32</sup> then Christianity is a philosophy. Scriptural teachings produce a *Weltanschauung* – a worldview, or "a comprehensive...philosophy or conception of the world and of human life."<sup>33</sup> Unless Vine means "sophistic" when he says "philosophic," his contrast between Paul's demonstrations and "philosophic" arguments is false. Scripture indeed addresses "philosophic" issues, using sound "philosophic" arguments, but unlike human philosophy, these arguments are not fallacious or "sophistic." We should contrast Christianity against sophistry, and not philosophy as such.

Contrasting Christianity against philosophy as such discourages Christians from thinking about the ultimate questions. Some people cite Colossians 2:8, which says, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." They assume this means that the believer should shun philosophy altogether. But if we turn away from an "analysis of the principles underlying conduct, thought, knowledge, and the nature of the universe," we must also stop studying the Bible, since the Bible constantly discusses "conduct, thought, knowledge, and the nature of the universe" – that is, ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics.

Paul never says to shun philosophy as such, but he warns against being taken captive by "*hollow and deceptive* philosophy." The Bible repeatedly warns against false doctrines, but this does not mean that we should avoid all doctrines. In fact, an essential step in guarding against falsehood is to know the truth. According to Paul, false philosophy "depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world" – it begins from erroneous first principles. At the same time, he has just as good as called Christianity a philosophy when he implies that true philosophy would be based "on Christ" – it has Christ as the first

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<sup>29</sup> *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc., 1985; New Testament section, "demonstration," p. 158.

<sup>30</sup> *Webster's New World College Dictionary*.

<sup>31</sup> "A clever and plausible but fallacious argument or form of reasoning, whether or not intended to deceive," *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

principle. Paul never tells us to stop thinking about the ultimate questions, which is the task of philosophy, but he says to stop thinking like the unbelievers.

Although the word is difficult to define, many people are willing to categorize Christianity as a "religion," and to affirm that Christianity is the only true religion among many false ones. Thus just because we must reject false religions does not mean that Christianity itself is not a religion. But religion is perhaps properly seen as a subset of philosophy. A religion is only a particular way of answering the philosophical questions, and as in philosophy, these answers combine to form a worldview. Again, not all worldviews are true, and the Christian will affirm that only the biblical worldview is true; nevertheless, they are all worldviews.

So there is no legitimate reason for denying that Christianity is a philosophy. As one theologian wrote, Christian philosophy is only Christian theology expressed in different vocabularies, so that there is really no problem in calling Christianity a philosophy. It is often said, "Christianity is not a religion (or philosophy), it is a life." This may sound clever and pious to some people, but it is false. Christianity is indeed a religion and a philosophy, and it is one that demands and produces a particular kind of life; nevertheless, it is first a religion and a philosophy. Recognizing the fact that Christianity is a philosophy sets it up to directly confront all other worldviews; that is, we are making it clear that Christianity is a comprehensive system of thought, and it is one that contradicts all non-Christian systems on every topic. If Christianity is true, then no non-Christian system can be true.

One problem may be that philosophy is often associated with futile speculation, but this is an unnecessary assumption, since the dictionary defines philosophy as the "theory or logical analysis of the principles underlying conduct, thought, knowledge, and the nature of the universe." Not all philosophy is bad philosophy. Whereas non-Christian philosophy indeed consists of mere speculation, in the sense of conjecture and guesswork, Christian philosophy, is founded on the indubitable premises revealed by God.

The ESV has Paul say that his preaching was not "in plausible words of wisdom" (1 Corinthians 2:4). Now, *plausible* can mean "appearing worthy of belief,"<sup>34</sup> and as such Christianity is of course not *implausible*. However, the first and second definitions in *Merriam-Webster* are "superficially fair, reasonable, or valuable but often specious;<sup>35</sup> superficially pleasing or persuasive." When these meanings are intended, as seems to be the case in the ESV, then we must affirm that Christianity is more than plausible, since it is not true merely on the surface, but also in its substance.

Non-Christian philosophy may sometimes appear reasonable or persuasive on the surface (although not to me), so as to deceive many people, but under analysis it turns out to be mere sophistry, or an intellectual "sleight of hand." In contrast, Christianity is supported by the "demonstration of the Spirit," and as pointed out earlier, "with *apodeixis* [or

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<sup>34</sup> *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*.

<sup>35</sup> *Specious* means, "having a false look of truth or genuineness; sophistic," *Ibid*.

demonstration] the premises are known to be true, and therefore the conclusion is not only logical, but certainly true."<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, the ESV brings to light Paul's position, that non-Christian philosophy is never too intellectual or logical, but it is precisely the opposite, since it depends on unjustified and unjustifiable premises. Non-Christian thought is not intellectual or logical enough. It does not convince people by sound arguments, but by tricks and fallacies that appear compelling to those who are unable to see through the deception. On the other hand, Christian philosophy draws necessary conclusions from true premises.

Paul tells the Corinthians that he preached the way he did "so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 2:5). As with 1 Thessalonians 1:5, "The main point is that the whole is God's work. The Corinthians were made Christians by divine power."<sup>37</sup> Since the *power* in both places refer to "the powerful operation of the Spirit, bearing witness with and by the truth in our hearts,"<sup>38</sup> "men's wisdom" and "God's power" do not necessarily refer to the object of faith – that which the person believes – but rather the means by which faith has been generated. We may understand the verse to say, "with the result that your faith should not *exist* by the wisdom of men, but by the power of God."<sup>39</sup>

This fulfills our purpose for dealing with 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 and takes us back to 1 Thessalonians 1:5, which says, "Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction." Or, we may paraphrase, "We know that God has chosen you for salvation, because when we preached to you, you did not receive only the external call of the gospel from us, but God issued the inward summon of the Spirit in your minds and produced in you faith in Christ."<sup>40</sup>

Two things happened in connection with Paul's preaching at Thessalonica, leading him to believe that his converts were among the elect. The first indication to that God had chosen some of his hearers for salvation was his awareness of active divine power in his preaching. He mentions this again in his second letter to the Thessalonians: "But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). Romans 8:30 says, "Those he predestined, he also called." It was God who summoned the converts to himself by irresistible power through the preaching of the gospel.

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<sup>36</sup> Morris, *1 Corinthians*; p. 51.

<sup>37</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *First Corinthians*; The Trinity Foundation, 1991 (original: 1975); p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Hodge, *1 & 2 Corinthians*; Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000 (original: 1857); p. 32.

<sup>39</sup> Clark, p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*, chapter 6.

## **GOD SUSTAINS**

This leads us to the second thing that happened when Paul preached. Corresponding to the first, it was the positive reception of the gospel by the Thessalonians. Paul describes this in 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10:

You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

He was confident that at least some of his hearers were ordained to salvation because he was conscious of God's power in his preaching. However, anybody can pretend to agree with the gospel, thus for one to acknowledge the converts as genuine believers, they must exhibit some indications of regeneration and faith. As Jesus says, "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them" (Matthew 7:18-20; see also v. 21-27).

Since regeneration is a fundamental reconstruction of the intellect and personality of the individual, the true convert should exhibit in his outward speech and conduct the changes that correspond to such a drastic inward transformation. From the transformation that had taken place in the Thessalonians, Paul inferred that they were truly born again, and that their faith in Christ was genuine.

For example, Paul says, "In spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit." Jesus explains in the parable of the sower that not everyone who appears to receive the word of God with joy is truly saved: "The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away" (Matthew 13:20-21). However, Paul is not referring to the superficial and temporary kind of joy coming from a heart in which the word of God has not taken root. Rather, the joy of the Thessalonians in accepting the gospel message was "given by the Holy Spirit," who had changed the very roots of their intellect and personality.

The Spirit performs this work of regeneration only in the minds of the elect. Jesus says, "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" (John 3:8). A doctrine of salvation that teaches free will cannot make sense of this verse, but the biblical doctrine of salvation affirms that, as "the wind blows wherever it pleases," so the Spirit of

God regenerates those – and only those – who have been chosen to be saved by God. Scripture says, "All who were appointed for eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). A person believes in Christ because he has been chosen. God did not choose us because he had foreseen our faith, but we have faith because God has chosen us without regard for any condition that would be found in us. God, being absolutely sovereign, would be the cause for any condition found in us in the first place. Since it was the Holy Spirit who gave Paul's converts such joy in receiving the gospel message, it means that God had performed a work in their minds on his own initiative, because of his own sovereign decision. And since God does not so affect the heart of those whom he has not chosen, Paul infers that the Thessalonians were among the elect.

Jesus says that the false convert falls away "when trouble or persecution comes because of the word." In contrast, the joy of the Thessalonians endured "in spite of severe suffering." Although many of our countries are unjust toward Christianity, most of them stop short of making persecuting Christians their official agenda. Under this relatively comfortable atmosphere, false converts that have been gathered by unbiblical preaching are not sifted out of the church. Contributing nothing but costing much, they continue to be a vexing but unacknowledged problem for the church. The solution is not to hope for severe persecution, but a return to the biblical gospel.

More than a few writers have expressed concern over the alarming rate with which professing Christians are converting to other religions – Islam, Mormonism, Buddhism, Catholicism, and other non-Christian groups and cults. However, the unceasing influx of false converts is even more alarming. By God's providence, non-Christian religions and philosophies actually help remove some of the false converts from the church, lest we become overwhelmed by them. That is, many reprobates – destined for destruction – join themselves to Christian churches because they have heard and affirmed a false gospel, and non-Christian religions and philosophies at times attract these reprobates away from the church.

On the other hand, true Christians belong to Christ forever, so that "no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28). It is better for a kingdom to have many easily marked enemies than to have many foreign spies within its own domain, wrecking havoc and draining its resources from within. Add to this the fact that many false converts have even become ministers, and it is clear that it is better for them to leave the church than to remain in it.

Since there are many false converts in our churches, there is a great need to evangelize our own congregations – let the gospel either convert them or drive them away. In John 6, Jesus gives his followers a "hard teaching" (John 6:60) after which "many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (v. 66). But even this did not remove Judas, who being "doomed to destruction," was not lost until later, "so that Scripture would be fulfilled" (John 17:12). He betrayed Christ as predicted (v. 70-71), and afterward committed suicide. But Peter denied Christ three times, and recovered to become a great apostle. What was the difference? Jesus had prayed for Peter so that his "faith may not fail" (Luke 22:32). He also prayed for the rest of his elect, but not for the reprobates: "I am not praying for the

world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours" (John 17:9; also Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 7:25). The truth is that "no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him" (John 6:65). Peter was enabled; Judas was not.

Genuine faith embraces the gospel message without regard to the practical consequences that may occur. If Paul knew that the Thessalonians were true converts because of their joy and endurance in the face of severe suffering, he would no doubt denounce those who compromise their faith because of financial disadvantages, political threats, or pressures from relatives and friends. On the other hand, "No one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life" (Luke 18:29-30).

Thus perseverance in hostile circumstances indicates the presence of genuine faith, which in turn implies that God has chosen the person for salvation, and sovereignly changed his heart. Peter writes:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3-5)

God has "given us new birth" because of his "great mercy," and we persevere in the Christian walk because he preserves us through the faith that he has given to us.

Contrary to Arminianism, God does not preserve us as a reaction to our enduring faith; rather, our faith endures because God causes it to endure. Hebrews 12:2 calls Jesus both "the author and perfecter of our faith." Faith does not come from our own wills – it is a gift from God. Neither does faith endure by our own power, but "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). Salvation depends on God's sovereign will and mercy from the beginning to the end. Therefore, it is by his immutable decree in election and not human free will that all "those he justified, he also glorified" (Romans 8:30). Those who fail to persevere until their glorification, have never received justification.

Genuine faith does not only endure, but it is active and growing. Paul continues saying to the Thessalonians:

And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. (v. 7-9)

And Peter writes, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Peter 2:2). One who shows no interest in studying theology is perhaps temporarily ill in spirit, but it is more likely that he has never received the impartation of spiritual life from the Holy Spirit.

By feeding on spiritual milk, the believer grows up in his faith, but one who "lives on milk" is still a spiritual infant, and "is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness" (Hebrews 5:13). Anti-intellectualism has prevented generations of Christians from growing up in the faith. Spiritual growth has to do with an intellectual understanding of God's word and not mystical experiences. Maturity has to do with how one speaks and reasons: "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me" (1 Corinthians 13:11).

The writer of Hebrews reprimands his readers, saying, "In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!" (Hebrews 5:12). How many Christians understand the letter to the Hebrews? Many people consider the materials to be very advanced, but the letter was directed to those who were "slow to learn" (v. 11), and those who still "need milk, not solid food" (v. 12). However, the anti-intellectuals are unabashed, because they reject the biblical standard of growth and make Christianity a matter of feeling and experience. But let us heed the apostle Paul instead, and begin to grow in knowledge and character, based on an intellectual understanding of Scripture, so that we can begin to speak and think as spiritual adults instead of spiritual infants.

Bearing spiritual fruit is another metaphorical way of indicating spiritual maturity. Jesus teaches, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The Bible contradicts the notion that the mere profession of faith guarantees salvation. Although it is true that a genuine profession of faith saves a person without regard to his works, one who has made a profession of faith but afterward bears no fruit produces no evidence that he has ever been a believer at all. Verse 8 says that a person shows that he is a true disciple by producing spiritual fruit: "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

The Thessalonian believers have passed this test. Their faith endured and grew such that they became models for other believers to imitate. As Paul instructs Timothy, "Set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). Other Christians recognized the powerful effect the Holy Spirit produced in the Thessalonian converts, so that wherever Paul went, he had no need to tell others about them. Believers everywhere knew how they had "turned to God from idols" (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

True conversion results from a drastic and permanent transformation at the deepest level of a person's intellect and personality. God changes the individual's most basic commitments, so that he denounces the abominable objects he once served, and turns to offer true worship to God. This change in a person's first principle of thought and conduct



generates a rippling effect that transforms the entire spectrum of his worldview and lifestyle. Thus conversion produces not only a negative change, in which one turns from idols, but Paul states that converts also turn "to serve the living and true God" (v. 9). Moreover, a biblical system of thought replaces the former unbiblical philosophy. This new worldview is one in which we "wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (v. 10).

Salvation does not come from turning to a generic "God," as if there is such a thing, but in true conversion, a person must explicitly affirm the biblical system of thought. Verse 10 is of course not exhaustive, but at least it includes the resurrection and the return of Jesus Christ, the coming wrath of God against the unsaved, and a partial reference to the Trinity, since Paul distinguishes between the Father and the Son. The Christian worldview offers a teleology that ties together the whole of human history. Turning from idols to serve the true and living God, the believer now looks forward to the culmination of the ages in the return of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, our biblical passage exhibits the apostle's soteriology from election to glorification. God has chosen those who would be saved through Christ by an immutable decree in eternity. In due time, he regenerates them and produces faith in their minds by means of preaching. Genuine faith then perseveres and grows into maturity. This transformation of the inward man results in a glorious hope, through which the believer yearns for and expects the return of Jesus Christ and the consummation of his salvation.

### 3. CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

#### INCOMPREHENSIBLE NONSENSE

In his essay, "The Ethics of Belief," W. K. Clifford writes, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." To many people, this often quoted statement appears to express the essence of good sense and rationality; however, in what follows we will show that this statement is in fact naïve and foolish.

First, we must correctly understand Clifford's assertion by noting its universality. To say that the principle applies "always" and "everywhere" indicates that it transcends cultures and eras, and to say that it applies to "anyone" and "anything" eliminates any exception. Therefore, the proposed principle applies to every belief without exception.

The immediate problem is that the principle fails to justify itself. What evidence do we have that, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence"? The principle itself is asserted to be a true belief, and thus must satisfy the requirements that it proposes. Unless we have sufficient evidence to say that we must have sufficient evidence to believe anything, the statement self-destructs.

In addition, what does Clifford mean by the word "wrong"? He cannot mean factually wrong, since one may believe in something that is factually correct, even if by accident, without having sufficient evidence for the belief. Since his essay discusses the "*ethics* of belief," we should understand that by "wrong," he means morally wrong. That is, he is saying that it is always morally wrong to believe anything without sufficient evidence. But if this is what he means, then we must inquire as to the source of his definition of morality, and whether there is sufficient evidence for him to adopt such a definition. And unless his definition of morality is absolute and universal, by what authority does he impose this morality on everyone?

What about the word "evidence"? What is Clifford's definition of evidence, and by what authority does he use and impose such a definition on the rest of humanity? People disagree as to what constitutes evidence to support a belief. During the debate between Christian apologist Greg Bahnsen and atheist Gordon Stein,<sup>1</sup> a question from the audience addressed to Stein asked, "What for you personally would constitute adequate evidence for God's existence?" Stein replied:

If that podium suddenly rose into the air, five feet, stay there for a minute, and then drop right down again, I would say that that was evidence of the supernatural, because that would violate everything that we know about the laws of physics and chemistry, assuming

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<sup>1</sup> Held at the University of California (Irvine); Covenant Media Foundation, 1985.

there wasn't an engine under there, or a wire attached to it, to make those obvious exclusions. That would be evidence for a supernatural, violation of the laws...or maybe we would call it a miracle, right in front of your eyes. That would be evidence I would accept. Any kind of a supernatural being putting in an appearance, and doing miracles that could not be staged magic would also be evidence that I would accept.

Really? Stranger things have happened than the unexplained levitation of physical objects. Atheists do not call them miracles, but consistent with their presuppositions, they assume these to be natural events explainable by natural causes. Even if they cannot immediately discover the natural causes to these events, they continue to assume that future research would uncover them. According to them, what primitive people believed to be supernatural events, scientists can now explain by natural causes – in the atheist's worldview, miracles are ruled out from the start.

Stein's worldview would reject the appearance of a supernatural being as evidence for God or the supernatural, since his presuppositions exclude the existence of such beings; rather, every event is explained on the assumption that there are no such beings. Therefore, all supernatural apparitions are relegated to the hallucinations of the poor deluded victims. Stein's answer was not only amateurish, but it was a lie. Jesus says, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

What one regards as conclusive proof seems irrelevant to another. On the basis of Clifford's statement, one must have sufficient evidence to show that a given piece of evidence is relevant to the claim under examination. Of course, the evidence that endorses the evidence must also be supported by evidence showing that it is relevant. Furthermore, Clifford says that we must believe nothing based on "insufficient" evidence, so if we ignore the irresolvable infinite regress just mentioned, we still have to define what type or amount of evidence is *sufficient*, which of course, we must also prove by prior sufficient evidence. But if "sufficient" has not yet been defined and substantiated by previous sufficient evidence, also undefined and without support from previous sufficient evidence, then on Clifford's principle we cannot accept the evidence that supports his definition of "sufficient" in his principle.

If I prefer to believe that there is a pink unicorn in my backyard, by what authority can Clifford forbid me? By his own authority? By imposing his principle on my epistemology? But I reject his principle. What then can he do? Unless Clifford can justify his principle, I can just as easily say, "It is *right* always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" – and I indeed would have insufficient evidence to justify this claim! At least I would be consistent.

On the other hand, Jesus says that the word of God is truth (John 17:17). Since God is the ultimate moral authority, he has the exclusive right to define right and wrong, and since he demands that we believe the truth, which is his word, it becomes morally right to believe

the Scripture and morally wrong to disbelieve it. Further, he can and he does impose his precepts and commands on everyone, and to resist him is to risk eternal damnation. Thus he has the right to demand belief in the truth, and he has the power to enforce this demand. Christianity is justified by God's authority, and no authority is prior or higher than him. According to the Christian worldview, God Almighty enforces the epistemological principle that he prescribes, but Clifford could merely wish that we accept his self-defeating principle.

What is the nature of relevant and acceptable evidence? Is it rationalist<sup>2</sup> or empirical? If it is rationalist, how do we know it is not arbitrary? What evidence do we have that evidence should be rationalist? And what kind of evidence would be legitimate to show us that evidence should be rationalist? If evidence is empirical, it depends on the reliability of sensation. What evidence is there that sensation is reliable? Moreover, if evidence is empirical, it is also inductive, and if it is inductive, then for Clifford to prove his principle, he must use it to verify every possible proposition conceivable by an omniscient mind in order for him to assert it without fallacy. But if he has not shown that his principle is correct by his own principle, then how can he verify any proposition by the same principle?

Clifford's principle destroys itself. It fails to be the essence of rationality and sound judgment. Rather, it is meaningless; it is utter nonsense. In contrast, Christian epistemology is founded on divine revelation. It accepts the propositions infallibly given by the omniscient and omnipotent God.

No other religion or philosophy can make the same claim. For example, contrary to what some people think, Islam's concept of God is very different from Christianity's concept of God. The Islam's view of divine transcendence is such that God is rendered unknowable. As one writer notes, "If they think at all deeply, they find themselves absolutely unable to know God...Thus Islam leads to Agnosticism."<sup>3</sup> Of course, non-Christians do not think deeply. In any case, if Islam's view of God makes him unknowable, then they could not have any concept of God in the first place, so that unless this point is refuted, this alone shows that Islam is self-contradictory, and thus self-destructs.<sup>4</sup> Other religions affirm a finite god or gods. Besides pointing out that the polytheistic gods often argue and fight among themselves, how do these finite gods, since they are finite, know what they know? They face the same problem that Clifford fails to answer.

Only the Christian understanding of God, as revealed by God himself in Scripture, is consistent with a God that possesses all knowledge, and at the same time makes knowledge possible for man. In God dwells "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3). Since God has all knowledge, he requires no one greater – there is no one greater – to justify his knowledge. His absolute sovereignty implies that he wills what he knows, that

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<sup>2</sup> Here the word alludes to "a theory that reason is in itself a source of knowledge superior to and independent of sense perceptions" (*Merriam-Webster*).

<sup>3</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999; p. 371.

<sup>4</sup> See Norman Geisler, *Answering Islam*.

he knows what he wills, and that there can be no error in his knowledge.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, "the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever" in the words of Scripture (Deuteronomy 29:29), and so we have knowledge as well. God has all knowledge – his knowledge consists of what he wills – and our knowledge consists of what he wills to reveal.

On the other hand, since non-Christian religions and philosophies cannot produce an adequate and defensible epistemology, on the basis of non-Christian thought, there can be no knowledge at all. If non-Christian systems of thought cannot provide a foundation for knowledge – if they cannot know anything – then they cannot even begin or produce any content. If they cannot begin or produce any content, then they can pose no challenge to Christianity. Without an adequate and defensible epistemology, it remains that no intelligible proposition can be uttered on the basis of non-Christian worldviews, let alone objections against the Christian faith.

Some people may misconstrue what has been said so far to mean that Christianity rejects the use of argumentation, or that Christianity has no rational support for its claims. But this is not what we mean; instead, what we have shown is that someone like Clifford cannot make an intelligible and coherent challenge against Christianity on the basis of reasoning from evidence. He may fail to defend the principle by which he seeks to guide the use of evidence. He may have a definition for evidence, but fails to defend such a definition. Or, he may fail to define evidence altogether. When a non-Christian says that he rejects Christianity because it has insufficient evidence in its favor, he does not know what he is saying; his objection is unintelligible. Likewise, when he demands evidence for the Christian faith, he does not know what he is asking. On the basis of his worldview, his demand – and indeed, every statement that he makes – is complete nonsense.

Nevertheless, a study of classical or evidential apologetics will show that, even on the basis of non-Christian presuppositions, Christianity is the superior worldview. That is, even if we, for the sake of argument and illustration, assume the false principles of verification employed by non-Christians, the Christian faith will still triumph in debate.

Since all non-Christian principles are false, when the Christian argues for his faith based on these presuppositions, he is only arguing *ad hominem*. By *ad hominem*, we do not refer to the fallacy of irrelevant personal attack. Instead, this form of *ad hominem* argument takes premises espoused by the opponent, and validly deduces from them conclusions contradictory to his position, or conclusions that would be embarrassing or repulsive to him – that is, a *reductio ad absurdum*. Using the non-Christian's own premises, the Christian apologist deduces conclusions that favor the biblical worldview and that refute the non-biblical worldview.

However, since all non-Christian premises are false, *ad hominem* arguments based on these premises do not prove the Christian's case, but only destroy his opponent's position. For example, although I have shown elsewhere that the presuppositions and methodologies of

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<sup>5</sup> That is, God's will determines everything, and since he perfectly knows all that he has determined, he also knows everything.

scientific investigations make it impossible to discover anything about reality,<sup>6</sup> there are indeed scientific arguments in favor of the Christian position that serve to silence and refute the non-Christian's objections against the biblical worldview.

On the basis of scientific presuppositions, the Christian may successfully argue that it is more rational than not to affirm that the universe was made by an intelligent and powerful creator. Even so, since science itself always fails to discover truth, on the basis of science, no one can construct a positive case for Christianity or any other worldview. That is, even if science shows that Christianity is true, we know that science itself cannot discover truth; rather, logical fallacies pervade all scientific procedures and reasonings. If scientific plausibility is made the standard of truth, at least for the sake of argument, then we can show that Christianity is superior, but scientific plausibility should not be made the standard of truth.

Consider another example. Historian C. Behan McCullagh writes that the best explanation to a body of historical facts must satisfy the following six requirements:

1. It must have great explanatory scope.
2. It must have great explanatory power.
3. It must be plausible.
4. It is not ad hoc or contrived.
5. It is in accord with accepted beliefs.
6. It far outstrips any of its rival theories in meeting the previous conditions.<sup>7</sup>

William Lane Craig argues that the proposition, "God raised Jesus from the dead," meets the above conditions.<sup>8</sup> The details of his argument are not relevant here. If it is successful, it would seem to vindicate the biblical claims concerning the resurrection of Christ and refute the unbeliever's objections. However, we question whether these tests are reliable, and whether an explanation that satisfies these conditions is in fact true. In the first place, by what authority or argument does McCullagh impose these tests upon all historical explanations?

Craig's argument cannot be considered a compelling proof for the resurrection of Christ, because these tests themselves have not been justified. However, if Craig's argument indeed successfully argues for the resurrection of Christ *relative to these tests*, then it is at least an *ad hominem* argument that refutes all objections against the resurrection of Christ made on the basis of these non-biblical principles. This means that if one adopts these tests to be the standard of truth concerning historical matters, he should come to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. In any case, on the basis of the historian's principles, one cannot prove anything about historical events, and this includes the resurrection. But at the

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<sup>6</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Presuppositional Confrontations*.

<sup>7</sup> C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984; p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> William Lane Craig, *God, Are You There?*; Norcross, Georgia: Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, 1999; p. 48.

same time, based on these same principles, there can be no good argument against the resurrection.

Since all non-Christian worldviews are without rational justification, nothing prevents them from collapsing into skepticism. But skepticism self-destructs – it is self-contradictory to affirm that we know that we cannot know. Only Christianity rescues the intellect from this impossible position; therefore, rather than depending on a non-Christian foundation to construct a case for the biblical worldview, the Christian adopts the epistemology of divine revelation and biblical infallibility.

Since the non-Christian theories of evidence are complete nonsense and render everything complete nonsense, when non-Christians demand evidence from the Christians, they do not know what they are asking. Unless one secures intelligibility by the proper presuppositions, his demand for evidence is unintelligible. It cannot be logically understood.

### **INESCAPABLE REVELATION**

The biblical worldview makes knowledge and argumentation possible, but it does so on a different basis than the indefensible principles of the non-Christians.

We begin with Romans 1:18-20, which says:

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

Some commentators take a more or less empirical interpretation of this passage, so they think it teaches that by observing the universe, man derives a knowledge of God and some of his attributes, and this evidence in creation renders his denial of God inexcusable. However, since empiricism is inherently and incurably defective, it is false to think that any knowledge or information can be derived from observation. Elsewhere Paul says that God has, in his divine wisdom, ensured that man cannot know him through human wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:21). Therefore, this passage in Romans cannot mean that it is possible for man to construct an argument that leads from an observation of the universe to a knowledge of God.

Indeed, when a man interacts with nature, he ought to realize that the Christian God is its creator. However, thinking itself is impossible without certain presuppositions to provide the preconditions of intelligibility. Since only biblical principles can serve this function, it follows that a person must know God in his mind before an interaction with nature causes God (or any other intelligible thought) to arise in his mind. Paul says that God has built into every human mind such principles, so that a person ought to perceive God as the

creator of the universe. Man possesses an innate knowledge of God. He already knows about God before he observes or interacts with the world, and when he observes or interacts with the world, he ought to be reminded of the God that he already knows. But because non-Christians are wicked, they attempt to suppress this knowledge.

Thomas Schreiner writes, "God has stitched into the fabric of the human mind his existence and power, so that they are instinctively recognized when one views the created world."<sup>9</sup> Charles Hodge, although somewhat of an empiricist, admits, "It is not of a mere external revelation of which the apostle is speaking, but of that evidence of the being and perfections of God which every man has in the constitution of his own nature, and in virtue of which he is competent to apprehend the manifestations of God in his works."<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, the NLT translates, "For the truth about God is known to them instinctively. God has put this knowledge in their hearts." This knowledge of God is innate. Although it can be called to one's consciousness, or ought to be called to one's consciousness, on the occasion of man's interaction with nature, it is present in man's mind and can be or ought to be called to one's consciousness prior to and apart from any experience, sensation, or interaction with nature.

Even if grammatical arguments surrounding verse 19 are inconclusive,<sup>11</sup> Romans 2:14-15 dispels all doubt that God has endowed man with innate knowledge about himself:

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law,<sup>12</sup> they are a law for themselves,<sup>13</sup> even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.

These two verses teach that man's innate knowledge is specific. It is not only a general sense of the divine, or an instinctive propensity to worship; rather, this innate knowledge includes at least the basic moral code of the Christian Bible. Robert Haldane comments, "This natural light of the understanding is called the law written in the heart, because it is imprinted on the mind by the Author of creation, and is God's work as much as the writing on the tables of stone."<sup>14</sup> Therefore, although we may be unable to enumerate every proposition included in this innate knowledge, we know that it is detailed and specific enough to exclude all non-Christian worldviews and religions; only Christianity is compatible with it.

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998; p. 86.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans*; Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997 (original: 1835); p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Leon Morris, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Romans*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988; p. 78-80.

<sup>12</sup> The NJB uses the term "innate sense."

<sup>13</sup> This means that although the Gentiles lacked the explicit revelation of Scripture, their innate knowledge of God's moral law is sufficient to condemn them (2:12). That is, "They show that in their hearts they know right from wrong. They demonstrate that God's law is written within them" (NLT).

<sup>14</sup> Robert Haldane, *Commentary on Romans*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1996 (original: 1853); p. 99.



Verse 15 mentions "conscience." We should make clear that it is not a part of the human being distinct from the mind or intellect. Anthropological trichotomy and popular preaching teach that the conscience is the voice of a non-intellectual "spirit" or "heart"; however, "spirit" and "heart" in Scripture are intellectual terms, and are often synonymous with "mind." The verse says that the people's *consciences* are at work when their *thoughts* are accusing or defending them. Therefore, conscience is a function of the mind, and not a separate and non-intellectual part of man.

J. I. Packer defines conscience as "the built-in power of our minds to pass moral judgments on ourselves, approving or disapproving our attitudes, actions, reactions, thoughts and plans, and telling us, if it disapproves of what we have done, that we ought to suffer for it."<sup>15</sup> However, contrary to some, it is not true that one will always do the right thing if he listens to his conscience. This is because the conscience is merely a moral function of the mind, and not an infallible moral standard – Scripture is the only infallible moral standard. Paul writes that some people's "consciences have been seared as with a hot iron" (1 Timothy 4:2). The conscience "may be misinformed, or conditioned to regard evil as good," and "may lead a person to view as sinful an action that God's Word declares is not sinful."<sup>16</sup>

What a person's conscience approves is not necessarily good, and although it is not safe to violate one's conscience, what it disapproves is not necessarily evil (Romans 14:1-2, 23). Only God's moral precepts as revealed in Scripture carry final authority for making moral judgments, and not a subjective evaluation based on this innate function of the mind. Nevertheless, as a person's conscience is more informed and trained by the words of Scripture, it will become increasingly reliable in making moral decisions.

John Calvin mentions man's innate knowledge of God in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Although the following comes from the translation by Battles, I also cite Beveridge's translation in the footnotes where his rendering is helpful or preferred:

There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops.<sup>17</sup> Since, therefore, when one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker, they are condemned by their own testimony because they have failed to honor him and to consecrate their lives to his will...So deeply does the common conception

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<sup>15</sup> J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology*; Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1993; p. 96.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>17</sup> Henry Beveridge's translation reads, "...the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges..." (I, iii, 1); John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998; Vol. 1, p. 43.

occupy the minds of all, so tenaciously does it inhere in the hearts of all!<sup>18</sup>

...Men of sound judgment will always be sure that a sense of divinity which can never be effaced is engraved upon men's minds...For the world...tries as far as it is able to cast away all knowledge of God, and by every means to corrupt the worship of him. I only say that though the stupid hardness in their minds, which the impious eagerly conjure up to reject God, wastes away, yet the sense of divinity, which they greatly wished to have extinguished, thrives and presently burgeons. From this we conclude that it is not a doctrine that must first be learned in school, but one of which each of us is master from his mother's womb and which nature itself permits no one to forget, although many strive with every nerve to this end.<sup>19</sup> (I, iii, 1 and 3)<sup>20</sup>

The mind of man is not born a *tabula rasa* – it does not begin as a blank slate that is without any *a priori* information. Instead, every person is born with an innate knowledge and awareness of God. The prerequisites for language acquisition, rational thought, and theological contemplation are inherent in the mind of man. Therefore, no one can think or speak without assuming and using biblical premises that provide the precondition of intelligibility, so that even objections against Christianity must first presuppose the Christian worldview to be meaningful. But once we presuppose the Christian worldview, the force and substance of all objections vanish.

No one can make sense of even false religions like Buddhism and Islam without first adopting the biblical presuppositions that allow logic, language, and ethics to be meaningful. It is necessary to presuppose Christianity, but since Christianity rules out other religions from the start, once we presuppose it, other worldviews cannot also be true. Without presupposing Christian premises, we cannot arrive at any truth or any knowledge, but then we cannot know that we can know nothing, and it cannot be true that nothing is true. Thus Christianity is a necessary precondition of intelligibility and knowledge; the whole Bible is true by necessity. This is the basis for our position that every conceivable proposition is evidence for the existence of God and for the Christian worldview.

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<sup>18</sup> Beveridge: "...so thoroughly has this common conviction possessed the mind, so firmly is it stamped on the breasts of all men"; *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> Beveridge: "For the world...labours as much as it can to shake off all knowledge of God, and corrupts his worship in innumerable ways. I only say, that, when the stupid hardness of heart, which the wicked eagerly court as a means to despising God, becomes enfeebled, the sense of Deity, which of all things they wished most to be extinguished, is still in vigour, and now and then breaks forth. Whence we infer, that this is not a doctrine which is first learned at school, but one as to which every man is, from the womb, his own master; one which nature herself allows no individual to forget, though many, with all their might, strive to do so"; *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>20</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; Edited by John T. McNeill; Translated by Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960; p. 43-46.

"Murder is wrong" is a proposition that lacks any authoritative justification unless an omniscient and almighty person has verbally expressed his forbiddance of such an act to creatures who bear his image of a rational mind, and then enforces such a command with a punishment that he considers appropriate, such as everlasting condemnation. Atheism, Mormonism, and other non-Christian worldviews have no basis from which to declare murder as morally reprehensible. On their presuppositions, they cannot even make the word *wrong* universally applicable. They cannot authoritatively define *murder*, nor can they authoritatively enforce any rules against the practice.

"Murder is wrong" finds rational justification only within the Christian worldview. Although many non-Christians also think that murder is wrong, if their non-Christian worldviews cannot lead to the conclusion that murder is wrong, and if only Christianity can produce such a conclusion, it can only mean that these non-Christians have presupposed Christianity in arriving at their conclusion. Although they attempt to suppress their knowledge of the God of the Bible, they have betrayed themselves by affirming propositions that can be deduced only from Christian principles.

In addition, although "Murder is right" is false according to biblical presuppositions, the proposition itself is intelligible only within the biblical system, because outside of the Christian worldview it is impossible to define or justify the concepts of right and wrong, and any definition of murder. That is, even when non-Christians affirm false propositions, these propositions are intelligible and are understood to be false only because this universe is what the Christian worldview says it is.

Of course, we are using murder only as an example. The above applies to every proposition, so that unbelievers in fact employ biblical presuppositions in every proposition they utter and in every action they perform. Therefore, contrary to the objection that there is insufficient evidence for the existence of God or the truth of Christianity, the revelation of God is inescapable, because God has made the truth plain and specific (Romans 1:19).

However, non-Christians refuse to acknowledge or thank God, who has provided men with the precondition of intelligibility and knowledge. Paul condemns them for this when he writes:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness...For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened...they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God. (Romans 1:18, 21, 28)

The problem has never been a lack of evidence, but the problem is that non-Christians "suppress the truth" by their wickedness. They cover up the truth because they are evil people. They already know about God – the knowledge is so much a part of them that they cannot escape from it. However, because non-Christians are foolish and wicked, they refuse to admit that they have this knowledge. But although they deny God, they remain

creatures made in his image, living in a world that he created, and therefore they must employ biblical premises in whatever they think or say. For the Christian, this fact provides the basis of an invincible strategy of argumentation, which we will further explore in a moment.

Although this knowledge about God is implicit in whatever a person says and does, sometimes it more clearly breaks forth. Paul says to the Athenians that even the Greek poets wrote, "For in him we live and move and have our being," and "We are his offspring" (Acts 17:28). But if we are his creation, then how can we justify the worship of idols – that is, serving objects inferior than we? Accordingly, Paul says, "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man's design and skill" (v. 29).

Non-Christian worship is incompatible with the innate knowledge of God. What man knows in his mind is substantial and specific enough that it excludes all non-Christian forms of worship. Thus this innate knowledge does not only exclude atheism, but also Buddhism, Islam, and all other non-Christian religions and philosophies. The writings of these false religions and philosophies betray an innate knowledge of Christian presuppositions, but then they refuse to live up to what they know to be true. As Paul says:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. (Romans 1:21-23)

What then is the verdict? Since God's revelation to man is inescapable, man's suppression of this revelation is inexcusable: "Ever since the creation of the world, the invisible existence of God and his everlasting power have been clearly seen by the mind's understanding of created things. And so these people have no excuse" (v. 20, NJB). The Greek says that these people have no *apologia*, no apologetic – their non-Christian positions are indefensible. One aspect of defending our faith involves demonstrating that the non-Christians have no defense for their own beliefs. Rather, we have caught them red-handed – they deny the Christian faith while continuing to use Christian presuppositions. They deny with their mouths what they know in their hearts.

This inexcusable suppression of truth and evidence leads to their inevitable damnation: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (v. 18). God's wrath is being poured out against the reprobates even in this life, as God gives them over to a depraved mind: "Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done" (v. 28). Their wickedness becomes worse and worse, and their sins become increasingly grotesque and unnatural. As examples, Paul mentions homosexuality and idolatry:

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. (v. 24-27)

He also mentions other sins for which God will punish them with everlasting torment in hell:

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. (v. 29-31)

Non-Christians do not do these things in absolute ignorance; rather, Paul again emphasizes their innate knowledge of God in verse 32: "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." They know what God requires, but refuse to acquiesce; moreover, they approve of those who rebel against him. This describes the non-Christians of our generation just as much as any other generation – not only do they defy God's commands themselves, but they approve of others who do the same, so that they even support and encourage atheists, idolaters, homosexuals, abortionists, and all kinds of detestable and wicked people. In their hearts, they know about God and his commands, and just as God's revelation to them is inescapable, their damnation is inevitable.

### **INVINCIBLE ARGUMENTATION**

Before outlining a strategy of argumentation against all non-Christian systems of thought, we will first summarize the Christian position again.

God created man in his own image. This image does not consist in his body, and not in a non-intellectual "spirit," as the term is often mistakenly used. Rather, the image of God refers to the rational mind of man, which is very limited compared to the mind of God, but it is nevertheless similarly structured. This not only separates man from the animals, but it also makes possible meaningful and extensive verbal communication between God and man. A dog cannot understand the Ten Commandments or the doctrine of predestination.

Man's mind is not born blank, to be filled with information gained from experience. Without *a priori* forms and categories already present in the mind, no empirical data can

furnish knowledge to man.<sup>21</sup> The Scripture teaches that man is born with an innate knowledge of God, so that apart from any experience, man knows something about God and something about the moral code that God has imposed upon all of humanity. This knowledge is specific and detailed enough to contradict and exclude all non-Christian systems of thought, and to demand the adoption of the entire Christian revelation.

Empirical investigations cannot teach man what he does not already know,<sup>22</sup> but only the divine *logos* can convey information to man's mind, in addition to the innate knowledge he possesses. Therefore, an observation of the world does not add information to man's mind; rather, it provides the occasion for one or both of two things to occur. First, observation, or any interaction with the world, stimulates the mind to recall what God has already placed into it. Second, it stimulates the mind to intuit what the *logos* immediately conveys to it on the occasion of the observation, often (but not necessarily) about what the person is observing. In both cases, no information comes from the act of observation itself.

Although the innate knowledge in man is detailed enough to exclude all non-Christian systems of thought, and to demand complete adherence to Christianity, it does not contain the entire biblical revelation. It is enough to render man culpable, but it is not a saving knowledge.<sup>23</sup> This means that this knowledge is sufficient to condemn everyone, but not sufficient to save anyone. It is fully compatible and only compatible with the Christian faith, but it does not contain all the biblical propositions. As the Westminster Larger Catechism says, "The very light of nature in man, and the works of God, declare plainly that there is a God; but His Word and Spirit only do sufficiently and effectually reveal Him unto men for their salvation." The "light of nature in man" refers to the intellectual illumination or knowledge about God that he has placed in man's mind.

Since the innate knowledge in man is insufficient for salvation, the doctrine of the necessity of Scripture naturally emerges. But a verbal revelation is necessary also because of the noetic effects of sin, that is, sin's destructive effects on the mind. As Paul says, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (v. 21). Man remains the image of God after Adam's fall; otherwise, he would no longer be human. Thus man still knows about God, but because his mind has been "darkened," he refuses to honor and worship God.

Although non-Christians implicitly acknowledge God and depend on Christian premises in their speech and conduct, because of their foolish and wicked thinking, they refuse to explicitly glorify God and affirm the Bible; instead, they give credit to other persons and

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<sup>21</sup> Even with these mental forms and categories, knowledge still cannot come from sensation, since empiricism is inherently irrational and impossible.

<sup>22</sup> See Augustine, *De Magistro*.

<sup>23</sup> Those who have never heard the gospel are nevertheless condemned for rejecting what they already know by their innate knowledge of God. Besides the information required for salvation, a number of other biblical doctrines are absent from this innate knowledge, such as those concerning church government and the second coming of Christ. Even what is part of this innate knowledge, clear enough to render a person culpable, is often obscured and distorted by the noetic effects of sin. Therefore, although man indeed possesses specific and detailed innate knowledge about God, the Scripture is necessary.

objects. Thus God, in his wrath, gives them up to increasing filthiness and darkness of mind, resulting in even greater sinfulness in them. In all of this, God exercises precise control over the mind of every individual, so that their rejection of Christianity has been decreed by God: "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Romans 9:18). On this theological basis, we will now construct a strategy for Christian argumentation.

Every person has a worldview. A worldview consists of a network of interrelated propositions the sum of which forms "a comprehensive conception or apprehension of the world."<sup>24</sup> A given worldview may be called a "religion" or a "philosophy" because of its specific content, but it is nevertheless a worldview. By worldview, we refer to any religion, philosophy, or system of thought.

Every worldview has a starting point or first principle from which the rest of the system is derived. Some people claim that a worldview can be a web of mutually dependent propositions without a first principle. However, even if a million liars vouch for one another, all of them are still liars. At least one reliable man would have to vouch for them. But if all of them are liars, a reliable man would not vouch for them, and their credibility falls apart. Likewise, a web of propositions would still need a first principle that supports them all. A true first principle would not produce a web of false propositions, and a web of false propositions would not be supported by a true first principle. Therefore, the first principle remains the crucial issue.

In a web of propositions, some propositions are more central to the web, the destruction of which would also annihilate the propositions that are more remote. But even the most central claims require justification, and a worldview in which the propositions depend on one another in a way that lacks a first principle is in the final analysis exposed as having no justification at all. The claim that a worldview can be a web of mutually dependent propositions without the need of a first principle is really an attempt at hiding the fact that all of the propositions in such a web lack justification.

Therefore, it remains that every worldview requires a first principle or ultimate authority. Being first or ultimate, such a principle cannot be justified by any prior or greater authority; otherwise, it would not be the first or ultimate. This means that the first principle must possess the content to justify itself. For example, the proposition, "All knowledge comes from sense experience," fails to be a first principle on which a worldview can be constructed. This is because if all knowledge comes from sense experience, then this proposed first principle must also be known only by sense experience, but the reliability of sense experience has not been established. Thus the principle generates a vicious circle and self-destructs. It does not matter what can be validly deduced from such a principle – if the system cannot even begin, what follows from the principle is without justification.

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<sup>24</sup> *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*; Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2001; "weltanschauung." *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, Second Edition*: "A worldview constitutes an overall perspective on life that sums up what we know about the world"; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001; "Wilhelm Dilthey," p. 236.

It is also impossible to begin a worldview with a self-contradictory first principle. This is because contradictions are unintelligible and meaningless. The law of contradiction states that "A is not non-A," or that something cannot be true and not true at the same time and in the same sense. One must assume this law even in the attempt to reject it; otherwise, he cannot even distinguish between accepting and rejecting this law. But once he assumes it, he can no longer reject it, since he has already assumed it. If we say that truth can be contradictory, then we can also say that truth cannot be contradictory, since we have abandoned the distinction between can and cannot. If we do not affirm the law of contradiction, then dogs are cats, elephants are rats, "See Jane run" can mean "I am married," and "I *reject* the law of contradiction" can mean "I *affirm* the law of contradiction," or even "I am a moron." If it is not true that "A is not non-A," anything can mean anything and nothing at the same time, and nothing is intelligible.

Since no legitimate first principle can be self-contradictory, skepticism is impossible, because it is self-contradictory. When used in the philosophical sense, a "skeptic" refers to one who maintains that "no knowledge is possible...or that there is not sufficient or adequate evidence to tell if any knowledge is possible."<sup>25</sup> Both of these expressions of skepticism are self-contradictory – one claims to *know* that one can know nothing, and the other claims to *know* that there is inadequate evidence to know anything. If a person claims that one cannot know whether one can know anything, then he is still claiming to *know* that one cannot know whether one can know anything, and so he contradicts himself.

Self-contradictory first principles are untenable. Skepticism is self-contradictory, and thus untenable. This means that an adequate first principle must guarantee the possibility of knowledge.

In addition to making knowledge possible, a first principle must also yield an adequate amount of knowledge. To illustrate, "My name is Vincent," may be a true statement, but it does not tell me anything about the origin of the universe, or whether stealing is immoral. It does not even give me the concept of "origin" or "morality." Moreover, although it may be a true statement, how do I know that it is true in the first place? The proposition, "My name is Vincent," does not prove that my name is really Vincent; it does not justify itself. A first principle is inadequate if it fails to provide information concerning epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics, and if it fails to justify itself.

For at least the above reasons, a first principle cannot be based on induction, in which the premises do not inevitably lead to the conclusion, such as reasoning from particulars to universals. For example, no amount of empirical investigation can justify the proposition, "Every human being has a brain." To establish a general proposition like this by empirical means, a person must examine every human being who has ever lived, who is now living, and since this is a proposition about human beings, he must also examine every human being who will live in the future. Also, while he is examining the human beings in one part of the world, he must somehow ensure that the nature of man has not changed in those parts of the world whose human beings he has already studied.

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<sup>25</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, "Skeptics," p. 850.



In addition, how does he prove that he knows a given human being has a brain just because he thinks he is looking at it? He must provide justification for the claim that he knows that something is there just because he thinks he is looking at it. But it would be viciously circular to say that he knows that something is there just because he thinks he is looking at it, because what he thinks he is looking at is really there, and he knows that it is really there because he thinks he is looking at it. Adding to the now already impossible situation, to prove this general proposition about human beings by sensation and induction, he must also examine his own brain.

On the basis of induction, it would be impossible to define a human being in the first place, since the concept of a human being is also a universal. In fact, on the basis of induction, one can never establish any proposition, let alone a universal proposition like, "All men are mortal."

Some people try to rescue induction by saying that, although it cannot conclusively establish any proposition, at least it can establish a proposition as probable. But this is both misleading and false. Probability refers to "the ratio of the number of outcomes in an exhaustive set of equally likely outcomes that produce a given event to the total number of possible outcomes."<sup>26</sup> Even if we grant that empirical and inductive methods can discover the numerator of the fraction (although I deny that they can do even this), to determine the denominator requires knowledge of a universal, and omniscience is often necessary to establish this.

Since probability consists of a numerator and a denominator, since the denominator is a universal, and since empirical and inductive methods cannot know universals, then to say that induction can arrive at "probable" knowledge is nonsense. Even apart from other insoluble problems inherent in empiricism itself, an epistemology that is based on an empirical principle cannot succeed, since empiricism necessarily depends on induction, and induction is always a formal fallacy.

On the other hand, deduction produces conclusions that are guaranteed to be true if the premises are true and if the process of reasoning is valid. Although rationalism is less popular, it is a tremendous improvement over empiricism because it reasons using deduction instead of using empirical and inductive methods. But still, non-Christian rationalism cannot succeed in establishing a true and coherent worldview, and we will briefly examine some of its problems.

Rationalism selects a first principle (or as in geometry, begins with one or more axioms) and deduces the rest of the system from it. If the first principle is true and the process of deductive reasoning is valid, then the subsidiary propositions or theorems would all be true by necessity.

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<sup>26</sup> *Merriam-Webster*, "probability."

A main problem with non-revelational rationalism has to do with how it selects a first principle.<sup>27</sup> If the first principle is self-contradictory, then of course it must be rejected. But even if the principle is not self-contradictory, it must also be self-justifying to avoid the charge of being arbitrary. Although I would say that only the biblical first principle is self-justifying, even if a non-biblical first principle is self-consistent and self-justifying, it must be broad enough to make knowledge possible. It must contain enough content so that one may deduce an adequate worldview from it. Thus to posit the proposition, "My name is Vincent," as the first principle in a rationalistic worldview would result in the failures mentioned earlier.

Still another problem with non-revelational rationalism is that there are various schools of rationalistic systems, and their starting points are all different and incompatible. Which one is correct? A rationalistic worldview with an arbitrary first principle cannot succeed. Although the deductive rationalistic approach is far superior to the inductive empirical approach, it also results in failure. Since any time a person uses either approach, he inevitably introduces the problems of that approach into his worldview, a mixture of rationalism and empiricism would only combine the fatal flaws of both methods.

Then, the propositions within a worldview must not contradict one another. For example, the first principle of a worldview must not produce a proposition in ethics that contradicts another proposition in metaphysics, or politics, or economics.

By this point, having examined the conditions for an adequate first principle, the problems of empiricism and induction, and the problems of non-biblical rationalism, we have already effectively destroyed all existing and possible non-Christian systems. They simply cannot satisfy all the requirements that we have listed. This includes Islam, Mormonism, and other non-Christian religions that claim to be founded on revelation, since upon examination, one will see that their alleged revelations cannot meet the conditions.

Our strategy for biblical apologetics begins with the recognition that Christianity is the only deductive system with a self-consistent and self-justifying first principle that has been infallibly revealed by an all-powerful and all-knowing God, and that is broad enough to yield a sufficient number of propositions to construct a comprehensive and coherent worldview. Christianity is the only true worldview, and it alone makes knowledge possible. All other systems of thought collapse into skepticism, but since skepticism is self-contradictory, one cannot remain in such a position, and Christianity is the only way out of the epistemological abyss.

Since knowledge is impossible on the basis of non-Christian principles, but that it is possible only when we presuppose biblical revelation as the first principle, this means that unbelievers are implicitly presupposing biblical premises whenever they affirm true

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<sup>27</sup> Some people defines rationalism as an approach that rejects all supernatural revelation from the start, and this is indeed true of some rationalistic systems. But as an approach to knowledge, rationalism does not include an inherent rejection of revelation; rather, whether it accepts or rejects revelation depends on the first principle selected for a particular system.

propositions.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, since biblical revelation is not only the precondition of knowledge, but also the precondition of intelligibility, in reality the unbelievers are implicitly presupposing biblical premises even when they affirm false propositions. Otherwise, these false propositions would be unintelligible, and it would be impossible to affirm them.

Although many non-Christians have never learned the contents of Scripture, they can and they do employ Christian presuppositions because God has implanted a minimal number of them in every person. All non-Christians implicitly presuppose biblical premises whenever they think or speak, or do anything; however, they refuse to admit this even to themselves. Thus although they cannot escape their implicit knowledge about God, they deny this knowledge in their explicit philosophy.

Among other things, a biblical strategy of apologetics challenges the non-Christians to be consistent with their own worldviews and explicit presuppositions, demanding that they cease using biblical presuppositions in constructing their systems. Since they cannot do this, their intellectual edifices thus collapse into self-contradictory skepticism. The only way out is to repent of their foolishness and wickedness, and be converted. This strategy of argumentation will succeed not only against secular philosophies, but also against all non-Christian religious worldviews.

The question of how it is possible for a person to know anything is sufficient to demolish any non-Christian system. Unless a person affirms a comprehensive set of biblical doctrines covering every aspect of life and thought – that is, unless he affirms a complete biblical worldview – his beliefs can be easily exposed as unjustified, arbitrary, and inconsistent. The non-Christian may not even know what is the first principle or ultimate authority of his worldview, but the Christian apologist can search for it by asking the right questions. This will probably involve asking questions that are directly related to the topic under discussion, whatever that may be, and questions related to what the unbeliever thinks about the ultimate issues (such as metaphysics and epistemology), which will include questions about how he attempts to justify his beliefs.

The Christian who presses the non-Christian to satisfy all the necessary conditions of thought that we have listed will discover that the non-Christian cannot even begin to answer any of the questions posed. On the other hand, the Christian who understands and affirms the biblical worldview will find that he can easily answer similar challenges.

For example, science assumes that nature is uniform and stable, that experiments are repeatable, that physics and chemistry will be the same next year as they are today. But on what basis does science believe this? Empirical observation can never justify such a bold

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<sup>28</sup> "The problems of history, politics, and ethics, so it has been argued, require for their solution certain theistic presuppositions....Apparently the best general procedure for one who wishes to recommend Christian theism is to show that other forms of theism are inconsistent mixtures. If some of their propositions should be carried to their logical conclusions, naturalism and eventually skepticism would result; whereas if justice is to be done to possible interpretations of other of their assertions, Christianity would have to be assumed" (Gordon H. Clark, *The Christian View of Men and Things*; Trinity Foundation, 1998; p. 155).

assumption. Even if a person can gain knowledge by observation, which I deny, it remains that whenever he considers whether nature will remain the same in the future, it is always true that he has not observed the future.

Again, I deny that a person can gain any knowledge by observation or experience, but even if we ignore this for now, it is futile to respond that we can affirm the uniformity of nature because the future has always been like the past in our previous experience. This is because the "future" in this reply is already in the past, and it is "future" only relative to something further in the past. Nothing in this reply addresses *our* future; however, the question about the uniformity of nature pertains to the future relative to our present, not observed by any human being.

Thus on what basis can empirical science guarantee that the future will be like the past? If it cannot make this guarantee, then the theories that scientists so diligently formulate and confidently employ in their calculations have no direct and necessary contact with reality. Instead, scientific theories are only principles that appear to be true relative to the scientist's unjustified assumptions.

It may seem absurd to question the uniformity of nature, but this is only because it has been assumed without justification all along. If it is so obviously true that nature is uniform and stable, and that it will stay the same way the next day or the next year, then why is it so difficult for scientists and philosophers to demonstrate this? The truth is that it is not obvious to them, and that by the principles of their worldviews, it is impossible to prove. Still, they continue to assume the uniformity of nature, and then turn around to accuse Christians of being irrational. The problem is not that Christians are irrational, but that non-Christians are stupid and hypocritical.

In any case, the many assumptions of science are without argument or justification. Some people may abandon certainty and respond that although it is impossible to know that nature is uniform and stable, it is at least probable that this is so. However, we have already discussed the problems with such a claim. Knowledge of probability requires knowledge of a universal, something that science, empiricism, or any non-biblical method can never obtain.

On the other hand, the Christian view is unassailable. Since biblical revelation does not justify anything that is inherently irrational, it provides no support for empiricism, inductive reasoning, or the scientific method. Truth does not save falsehood, but contradicts it and destroys it. So the Christian view does not save science, but refutes science. Nevertheless, the Christian foundation alone provides the basis for affirming any regularity in creation.

As Genesis 8:22 says, "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease." This does not affirm the uniformity of nature as such – in fact, I deny the uniformity of nature or that there are any "laws of nature." Rather, it affirms some regularity in God's action regarding how he controls and sustains some aspects of his creation. Thus although the Christian view can be confident in

the continuity of "seedtime and harvest," it still provides no basis for science to claim to be a rational enterprise, or to claim to have any rational contact with reality.<sup>29</sup>

The Christian worldview denies the uniformity of nature, but affirms the doctrine of ordinary providence, that there is regularity in God's actions regarding how he controls and sustains some aspects of his creation. That is, he has promised to control and sustain certain aspects of creation with some regularity. Since scientists cannot justify their belief in the uniformity of nature, this means that when they affirm the uniformity of nature anyway, then although the Christian worldview does not support the unwarranted assumption of the uniformity of nature, since it provides the only basis for any stability in the physical world, the scientists are in fact presupposing a distorted form of a Christian premise, while refusing to admit it or honor God for it.

Of course, the non-Christian will demand justification for our belief on this issue, and this eventually, if not immediately, pushes the discussion back to our first principle. This is not a problem, since we have already discussed how to argue for biblical revelation as the only adequate first principle.

If man is a product of evolution instead of creation, then on what basis does the unbeliever oppose genocide or infanticide? But Exodus 20:13 says, "You shall not murder." If morality is founded on mere human convention or the majority's consent, and not on divine authority and revelation, then on what basis does the non-Christian approve of a moral reformer? But Acts 5:29 says, "We must obey God rather than men!" Unless evolution can prove that all of humanity has evolved from one common source, then on what basis does the non-Christian affirm the unity of mankind? But Acts 17:26 says, "From one man he made every nation of men."<sup>30</sup>

If non-Christians reject our biblical premises, then on what basis do they assert ethical principles that mimic ours? And by what authority do they assert principles that differ? If their presuppositions cannot justify even their most basic beliefs on pivotal subjects such as metaphysics and epistemology, let alone ethics, science, politics, economics, education, and history, then their worldviews are irrational and worthless.

Scripture reveals that God himself stands behind every biblical proposition, and he demands everyone to believe and obey all that he says. Therefore, once a person assumes

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<sup>29</sup> One school of apologetics, represented by Cornelius Van Til and Greg Bahnsen, claims that the Christian worldview provides a basis for belief in the uniformity of nature. However, they have inferred much more than the Scripture allows. Their syncretistic system forces together Christian and non-Christian principles, often giving priority to the latter. Their view on science is one example, and exhibits the compromise and irrationality that characterize their teachings. They wish to affirm many, if not most, of the non-Christian assumptions, and their method is to place them on a Christian foundation so that they can "account for" them. Thus they make God and Scripture accomplices to falsehood, and merge Christ and Satan in an unholy matrimony.

<sup>30</sup> As another example, Bahnsen claims that the Christian view provides a basis to stand against racism on the basis of this verse. Again, this is to infer more than the verse permits. Of course, the Bible may provide a basis against racism, but the doctrine needs more than this one verse to sustain. Some followers of Van Til and Bahnsen have criticized me for making this unwarranted inference; however, I was merely relating what their own masters affirmed.

or employs any biblical premise, he logically commits himself to God, and to adopt the entire Christian system. That is, unless a person accepts the infallibility and inerrancy of the whole Bible, he has no right to use any biblical proposition. By what authority does he judge some biblical propositions as true and others false?

If he uses or claims to use a prior non-biblical authority or principle by which he evaluates each biblical proposition, then he is in fact submitting to this authority or principle instead of the Bible, and it is from this non-biblical authority or principle that he should derive the rest of his system. If he cannot derive a needed or necessary proposition from this authority or principle, and this needed or necessary proposition is only found or justified in Scripture, then this person's non-biblical worldview fails.

If he has adopted a non-biblical authority or principle by which he should derive the rest of his system, and this authority or principle does not yield the needed or necessary proposition, but that this proposition is only found or justified in Scripture, then he has no rational right to adopt this needed or necessary proposition from Scripture, because that would involve an irrational and illegitimate leap from what is deducible from his authority or principle to a biblical proposition.

Therefore, a person who assumes an empirical first principle is consistent when he evaluates Scripture with empirical methods, but he must also defend his empirical methods and produce all aspects of his worldview on this same empirical basis. In other words, if a person uses a non-biblical principle to evaluate biblical revelation, then he must also derive the rest of his worldview from this non-biblical principle without borrowing from biblical revelation. If he cannot do this, or if his non-biblical principle is false or unjustified, then his evaluation of biblical revelation and his own worldview inevitably collapse.

Every biblical proposition presupposes the infallibility of Scripture. If one uses any biblical premise, he must accept the self-attesting authority behind that premise, or be left without justification for using it. Since he has no justification for using the biblical premise, the Christian has the rational right to take it away from him in the course of discussion and debate. But if this biblical premise is necessary to maintain his worldview, then his worldview falls apart.

Some Christians can confidently argue against atheism, but find it difficult to challenge other religions, especially those that claim to have epistemologies based on revelation. However, claiming to have a divine revelation is futile unless the revelation is real, and it is the Christian's contention that all revelations alleged by non-Christian systems are false. Since religious systems of thought are worldviews just as much as secular philosophies, we can argue against non-Christian religions just like we argue against any non-Christian worldview.

Even if a worldview claims to be founded on revelation, unless it is a complete and biblical Christian system, it cannot satisfy the requirements and answer the questions that we have discussed. We launch the same kind of challenges against these non-Christian religions that we do against other non-Christian worldviews, although the expressions may differ

depending on the content of the opposing system and the context of the debate. Based on the ultimate authority of this non-Christian religion, is any knowledge possible? Are there self-contradictions inherent in the first principle or the subsidiary propositions of this religion? Does it borrow biblical premises? If the religion claims to acknowledge or follow the Old and New Testaments, does it nevertheless contradict them?

Some religions claim to borrow from or add to Christianity, but since their beliefs contradict Christianity, and since Christianity claims to be the only truth, this means that they are in fact non-Christian religions, so that we can argue against them as such. Christianity itself claims to be the final revelation, and leaves no room for supplements and revisions. Therefore, if a religion claims to supplement or revise Christianity, it contradicts Christianity and becomes a non-Christian religion.

Sometimes the "prophets" of these religions claim to be the new or final messengers of God, even revising the teachings of Christ. However, since Christ is God, no prophet can replace or contradict him – there cannot be a superior or more authoritative prophet than Christ. Although God can complete his own revelation, he does not contradict what he has said before with new revelations. The Old Testament predicted the new covenant, and Christ came to institute and confirm it. Then, he commissioned his apostles to complete God's divine revelation to us, and after that the New Testament disallows any additional revelation (Jude 3). Since the Scripture is complete, all non-Christian religions have no right to claim biblical support.

Many people who are ignorant about religions think that most or all religions are similar. They should know better, but because they are stupid and sinful (Romans 1), they refuse to see the clear differences between Christian and non-Christian religions. For example, they may think that Christianity and Islam are similar, but in fact these two systems of thought contradict each other at the most fundamental level. Christianity affirms the Trinity, but Islam rejects it. What Christianity affirms about God allows for knowledge about God, but what Islam affirms about God makes him an unknowable deity.

After pointing out the essential differences, we would proceed to critique the contents of this religion. Islam has a doctrine of sin, so it is proper to discuss its doctrine of salvation. Does Islam have an adequate and coherent doctrine of salvation? Or does it fail like Catholicism, Mormonism, Buddhism, and Arminianism? Does the doctrine of salvation answer the issues brought up in the doctrine of sin? Is the doctrine of sin consistent with the doctrine of man? Does the doctrine of man follow from the doctrine of God and the doctrine of creation? The Christian will soon discover that Islam fails at every point, including the all-important starting point of epistemology. Under examination, it easily collapses just like all non-Christian worldviews.

I have outlined a strategy of biblical apologetics in which a person can use any proposition and event to launch a defense for the truth of Christianity and to demolish any non-Christian worldview.<sup>31</sup> This simple method of argumentation, having been derived from

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<sup>31</sup> For more on biblical apologetics, see Vincent Cheung, *Presuppositional Confrontations, Apologetics in Conversation*, and *Captive to Reason*.

the content and authority of Scripture, allows even a child who has been taught the basics of Christian theology to utterly humiliate the greatest non-Christian scientists and philosophers.

The Bible tells us that all non-Christians stupid and sinful, and we were also like them before God converted us by his grace. Now that we have been enlightened by God, we do not defeat our opponents in argumentation by human wisdom and eloquence, but it is the superior content of the Christian faith that triumphs over all non-Christian worldviews. As Paul says, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?...For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Corinthians 1:20, 25). When we follow the biblical strategy for the defense and vindication of the faith, we confront the non-Christians with God's wisdom rather than mere human wisdom, and our victory is certain.

Thus the failure of secular philosophies is total; the defeat of non-Christian religions is complete.