

Godliness
with Contentment

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PREFACE

This book is a collection of four articles on topics related to Christian living. As is consistent with the biblical model and with my other writings, the theological foundation is primary in each chapter, with the practical ramifications of the doctrines as secondary. Even if we were to assume the questionable distinction between theory and practice, the theoretical defines the practical, and is thus always prior and more important.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he first sets forth his theological insights and arguments in Romans 1-11, and it is only in Romans 12-16 that some of the implications for Christian behavior are worked out. All Christian teaching should follow such a model, so that the theoretical remains paramount, and the pragmatic becomes secondary.

Modern mentality, if it pays attention at all to the theoretical, reverses this order, which explains the lack of doctrinal understanding among Christians, and the practical living they so treasure is robbed of its foundation. Such individuals are "blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (Ephesians 4:14). In neglecting the doctrinal and theoretical, they sin against God, and such negligence prevents them from obeying God in practical living.

For example, an attempt to outline the biblical guidelines for decision-making is futile unless one has already determined and understood the theology of divine guidance. And once the theology on a given topic is set forth, the quick-witted often requires no help in application. Nevertheless, we must insist that the knowledge of God is valuable in itself; its value does not depend on application. It is best to abandon once for all American pragmatism in favor of biblical Christianity.

Although the following chapters appear to address several different subjects, all of them emphasize the necessity of studying and obeying the divine precepts of God; that is, to conform one's thinking and behavior to the words of Scripture.

1. THE MEANING OF DISCIPLESHIP

There are numerous passages in the Bible that are important to developing a proper understanding of Christian discipleship, and so it may seem misleading to entitle the present essay, *The Meaning of Discipleship*, when only several such passages, and one in particular, will receive our attention. Nevertheless, to convey the intent of this piece of writing, but at the same time to avoid cumbersome qualifications within the title itself, we will leave the title as it is and proceed to see what we may discover regarding the meaning, or at least part of the meaning, of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

We will take for our main text Luke 9:57-62, where it is written: "As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' Jesus replied, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.' He said to another man, 'Follow me.' But the man replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-by to my family.' Jesus replied, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.'"

Luke here records the exchanges between Jesus and three prospective disciples, and it seems that all of them have certain defects in their commitment toward following Christ that, unless taken care of, would render true discipleship impossible. It is these defects that we would like to examine in what follows, so that we may recognize false pledges of allegiance to Christ both in ourselves and in others.

The first person comes to Jesus and says, "I will follow you wherever you go." In those days individuals tend to seek out their own teachers or masters, and there are those philosophers who would attempt "to repulse prospective disciples with enormous demands, for the purpose of testing them and acquiring the most worthy."¹ Since Scripture says that Jesus "knew all men" and that "he knew what was in a man," (John 2:24-25), we may expect his reply to this first prospective disciple to be directed at the greatest hurdle that prevents him from offering genuine devotion to Christ.

For example, when "a certain ruler" approaches Jesus and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 18:18), his reply reflects an ability to diagnose the exact condition of one's heart: "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (v. 22). But the man fails to obey Christ: "When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth" (v. 23).

¹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993; p. 215.

Returning to the person in our passage, Jesus says to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). We may not know precisely what this individual has in mind when he offers to follow Jesus, but it seems that he is not prepared to adopt the lifestyle that being a disciple of Jesus at that time entails. Jesus tells him that he does not have a home of his own in his travels, and must depend on the hospitality and support of others. Becoming a follower of Jesus would necessarily mean subjecting oneself to this difficult way of life.

Many people profess to be disciples of Christ for the wrong reasons. They may have false expectations regarding one who follows Christ such as arriving at a life of fame, wealth, and recognition. That some Christians do become successful according to worldly standards only serves to affirm such expectations in those who become Christians out of the wrong motives. It is not that Christians should not be famous or wealthy, but that one should not have these things in mind when he responds to God's call.

The modern man is not the only one who carries delusions about what the Christian life may bring. Jesus says in John 6:26-27, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval" (John 6:26-27). Here, Jesus realizes that the crowd follows him not "for food that endures to eternal life," but because they had eaten the bread miraculously produced by Jesus earlier. However, true discipleship is such that one does not "work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life."

Knowing the false expectations many may have regarding the Christian walk, Jesus warns, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'...In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:28-30, 33). One who does not "give up everything" *cannot* be a true disciple of Christ.

We must hear this statement afresh at a time when the call from the pulpit for people to become Christians is proclaimed as requiring only a simple decision to accept something, rather than a commitment to total transformation in both thought and conduct. Jesus repeatedly made clear his demands for those who would follow him, and it is strange how his shocking words are often read with interest but in a manner that fails to challenge and convict us. We must affirm that Jesus means what he says, and that one indeed *cannot* be his disciple and at the same time violates the conditions he has set forth: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26-27).

Again, we are not saying that being a disciple of Christ necessarily entails poverty or certain types of suffering. Many are quite prosperous as Christians, living relatively

comfortable lives, while others risk martyrdom daily. The question is, when you pledge to Jesus, "Lord, I will follow you wherever you go," do you really know what you are saying? Are you acknowledging his total lordship over your life, and dedicating yourself to abide by his teachings? Or do you fancy him to be a tool with which to fulfill your own fleshly aspirations? Some people's Christian life reflects not total dedication to Christ, but only a desire to justify pursuing their own visions of greatness for themselves by producing a christianized version of the "American dream."

After dealing with the first prospective disciple, Jesus calls for a second man to follow him. "But the man replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father'" (Luke 9:59). If the man's father has just deceased, or if the family is going through the mourning period, then he would not be there speaking with Jesus in the first place. However, one year after the initial burial of the dead, after the flesh has been rotted off the corpse, the son would return and place the bones in a special box to be reburied in a slot in the tomb wall. In other words, the man may be requesting up to a year's delay before he would follow Jesus. But if the man's father is still living and he is waiting for him to pass away first, then the requested delay would be indefinite in length.

In the Jewish mind, it is the children's sacred duty to attend to the burial of one's parents, and therefore what this person says may seem to demonstrate a note of filial piety that cannot be faulted. However, Jesus gives this shocking reply: "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (v. 60). The statement contains a wordplay with the two instances of the word "dead" having different meanings.

The first "dead" is figurative. It may refer to one's indifference, lack of relationship, or even hostility toward a thing; or the word may be used to indicate a thing's lack of influence over the person. The parable of the Prodigal Son provides an example of such a usage: "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:24). To be "dead" in the sense used here is to be "lost" spiritually. The second instance of the word should be taken literally as referring to physical death, since the object of burial is the physically dead.

The statement Jesus makes in verse 60 can therefore be paraphrased as, "Let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead, but you should go and preach about the kingdom of God." Or, as Leon Morris writes, "Let those without spiritual insight perform the duties they can do so well; burial is very much in keeping for the spiritually dead. But the man who has seen the vision must not deny or delay his heavenly calling."²

Jesus' demand to place him above honoring one's father would come as a great shock to the Jewish mind, as well as the modern non-Christian. "The language, no less the demand is uncompromising to the point of offensiveness."³ But given that this is what Jesus requires, such a level of commitment should not be regarded as extraordinary or optional;

² Leon Morris, *Luke (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries)*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988; p. 197.

³ *New Bible Commentary*; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994; p. 915.

rather, Jesus demands it as a prerequisite to discipleship that a person does not place anything or anyone before him, even one's parents.

Luke 14:26 says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple." One who refuses to put Christ first is not only a poor disciple, but he *cannot* be his disciple at all. Alas, much of contemporary preaching has failed to make this clear to its audience, that genuine faith is not a superficial "decision" to accept Christ as savior, but a true mental assent to the total gospel, acknowledging God's claim upon the entire person, resulting from the prior regeneration of the heart by the Holy Spirit. Propagation of a false gospel has led to the inflow of numerous false converts into the church. The refusal to make an immediate and total commitment indicates a lack of sincerity, and exposes the fact that one still has not made following Christ the first priority in life.

We often hear from professing Christians who would like to delay offering their services to God. There are some obvious excuses, such as how they wish first to enjoy all that the world has to offer, although the Bible says that the satisfaction derived from sins are only "passing pleasures" (Hebrews 11:25, NASB). On the other hand, there are those who concoct what appears to be more "noble" reasons for not taking their faith seriously right away. Some of them may say that they can better serve the kingdom of God by devoting their energies toward generating wealth, by which they will then contribute toward the spreading of the gospel. Others make similar excuses.

They reason that the long-term effect of their plans will vindicate their present spiritual condition. Nonsense! Are we to believe that the end justifies the means, such that we – nay, Christ himself – should take lightly their current negligence in prayer, heretical doctrines, morally reprehensible business practices, and other such things? If Christ does not even permit the burial of one's father to become a legitimate reason for temporary delay in following him, all other proposed reasons are unacceptable excuses. They do not wish to renounce Christ outright, but yet they refuse to follow him at this time. To say that one's delay in serving God will ultimately result in greater service to him is only an attempt to put an attractive front on one's blatant defiance against God.

Some may yet try to justify themselves by claiming that they are serving Christ "in their own way." But once again, they are only placing a spiritual label on the work they would like to do in the first place, whether it contributes to the Christian cause or not. But from our passage, we understand that "service in the kingdom of God" (v. 62) is equivalent to "proclaim the kingdom of God" (v. 60).

This is not to say that everyone must enter the full-time ministry – given the deplorable level of spirituality and theological understanding of Christians nowadays, most are better off remaining where they are. In any case, one may be a faithful disciple of Christ as a construction worker, a medical professional, or a Christian minister. However, the point is that those who claim to be serving Christ "in their own way," as opposed to the way explicitly prescribed by the Bible, are only pursuing their personal agendas in the name

of Christ. Such may take on different forms, from business ventures to humanitarian projects.

We must ask ourselves: Are our plans and goals honestly consistent with the cause of Christ? Do we really have the short-term and long-term interests of the kingdom in mind? Or are we simply easing our conscience by describing our selfish ambitions in Christian vernacular? One who is not actively working on his personal spirituality and contributing in some way to the advancement of God's kingdom *right now* is not a disciple of Christ.

Biblical teaching renders unacceptable all proposed reasons as to why one must delay giving one's faith first priority. Most excuses we hear today are not even remotely as noble sounding as the one given by this second prospective disciple. The "Let Jesus wait until I get rich and famous" excuse will not stand under God's judgment, even if one plans to give most of the profits to him – "he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything" (Acts 17:25). The only acceptable way to serve God is by the way prescribed by him. In other words, give him what he demands, not what you think he should demand. Those who imagine that Christ allows any flexibility in this area simply are not, and cannot be, his disciples.

We now come to Jesus' interaction with the third prospective disciple: "Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-by to my family.' Jesus replied, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God'" (Luke 9:61-62). Many commentators perceive an allusion in this passage to the calling of Elisha (1 Kings 19:19-21), but whereas he was permitted by Elijah to bid farewell to his family and friends, Jesus does not allow even this.

This person gives what once again seems to be an acceptable reason, from the non-Christian perspective, for postponing full commitment to Jesus. However, by now we realize that nothing is acceptable that puts a "but first" before the calling of the Lord. When God calls a man, there is nothing that comes before obedience to that calling. There should be no "but first," no matter what it may be, since God's command *is* first.

Jesus responds to the man by saying, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." The typical hand-held plow was made of wood, light in weight and often had an iron point. Its proper use requires uninterrupted attention from the plowman, guiding the plow with his left hand, while goading the oxen with the right. To look away while plowing would immediately result in a crooked furrow. Jesus' statement also contains a reference to Lot's wife: "Remember Lot's wife! Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it" (Luke 17:32-33).

The metaphor is figurative of what happens in a person's soul. The issue is whether one hesitates to leave behind his previous life in the pursuit of Christ. Paul writes, "What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes

from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith" (Philippians 3:8-9).

Note that to have a righteousness "which is through faith in Christ" is not a goal to be reached after one has become a Christian, but is rather what it means to become a Christian in the first place. We must abandon the misunderstanding that one is saved by nodding at the gospel in superficial agreement. To be a Christian at all is to "consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus..."

Misled by the false gospel preached from many pulpits today, some have the idea that one may first become a Christian, and then as an optional addition choose to become completely dedicated. Or, one may have salvation as an "ordinary Christian," but become a "disciple" afterward. The Bible knows no such Christianity. Jesus says, "In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33). True assent to the gospel demands conformity to all the demands inherent in the gospel message, and that is the acknowledgment of God's claim upon the total person. Although sinless perfection is not expected, a radical (at the root) change of direction occurs in the mind at the time of conversion, or else no conversion has occurred at all.

Greatly concerned about the large number of false converts brought into the church in recent years through a distorted gospel message, "which is really no gospel at all" (Galatians 1:7), Ernest Reisinger writes, "When those pronounced to be converts do not act like Christians, do not love what Christians love, and hate what Christians hate...some explanation must be found other than calling upon them to 'decide' for Christ. They have already done that and have already been pronounced by the preacher or personal worker to be 'Christians.' But when they don't act like Christians something is wrong. What is it? The teaching I have sought to answer says that the trouble is that they are just 'carnal Christians'; they have not made Christ 'Lord' of their lives...Too often, modern evangelism has substituted a 'decision' in the place of repentance and saving faith...The gospel preached in awakening power will summon men not to rest without biblical evidence that they are born of God. It will disturb those who, without good reason, have believed that they are already Christians. It will arouse backsliders by telling them that as long as they remain in that condition the possibility exists that they never were genuine believers at all...There is no surer certainty than the fact that an unchanged heart and a worldly life will bring men to hell...It is not only in the world today that evangelism is needed. It is needed in the church."⁴

Next time you are at church, look around you – in some places, most of the people that you see will be false believers, never having been regenerated by God. It does not matter whether they appear to be earnest in prayer, attentive to the sermon, or weeping during worship. If there has never been a radical transformation within his soul, he is destined for hell. Better yet, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?" (2 Corinthians 13:5).

⁴ Ernest C. Reisinger, *What Should We Think of The Carnal Christian?*; Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997; p. 22-23.

This is no place for a complete systematic theology on true conversion-justification-sanctification, but for now let it suffice to quote this dire warning from the lips of Jesus: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:21-23). Is this not a horrifying pronouncement? As the apostle Paul commands, "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). But the elect need not be overwhelmed with terror: "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (v. 13). Jesus is both "the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2).

Returning to our text, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes, "The third would-be disciple...lands himself in a hopeless inconsistency, for although he is ready enough to throw in his lot with Jesus, he succeeds in putting up a barrier between himself and the Master...Discipleship to him is a possibility which can only be realized when certain conditions have been fulfilled...The disciple places himself at the Master's disposal, but at the same time retains the right to dictate his own terms. But then discipleship is no longer discipleship, but a programme of our own to be arranged to suit ourselves...The trouble with this third would-be disciple is that at the very moment he expresses his willingness to follow, he ceases to want to follow at all...Discipleship means adherence to Jesus alone, and immediately."⁵ Those who dictate the conditions and timing of discipleship cannot be Christ's disciples.

Jesus says that a true disciple does not look back. As the work of the plowman demands undivided attention to his task, so one who "looks back" is disqualified from "service in the kingdom of God" (v. 62). Jesus does not say that one cannot excel as a disciple if he looks back, but that such a person cannot be his disciple at all. It is time we take his statement seriously. To be a follower of Christ, there is no room for hesitation, distraction, or regret. "How searching is this test to those who profess to be Christians!...Religion is everything, or nothing. He that is not willing to sacrifice everything for the cause of God, is really willing to sacrifice nothing."⁶

Matthew Henry writes, "If thou lookest back to a worldly life again and hankerest after that, if thou lookest back as Lot's wife did to Sodom, which seems to be alluded to here, thou art not fit for the kingdom of God...Those who begin with the work of God must resolve to go on with it, or they will make nothing of it. Looking back inclines to drawing back, and drawing back is to perdition. Those are not fit for heaven who, having set their faces heavenward, fact about. But he, and he only, that endures to the end, shall be

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*; New York: Touchstone, 1995; p. 61, 121.

⁶ Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications; p. 211.

saved."⁷ Religion must be all or nothing. It must permeate and dominate every part of thought and conduct; otherwise, our faith is not genuine.

I have encountered people who think that religious differences can be put aside in a way that they do not affect our relationships with others. But if religious commitments are ultimate commitments, as they should be, then any relationship not affected by such commitments must be remarkably superficial. If a person is able to have a deep personal relationship with another person of a different religious commitment, it can only mean that neither of them is in reality devoted to their respective faiths. A Christian who is committed to the Lord Jesus will have every part of his life dominated by his faith. To have a more than superficial relationship with a non-Christian would then necessitate compromise from the other party. And to have the deepest kind of relationship with such a person, such as marriage, is not permitted by Scripture at all.

To repeat, only by compromising his faith is it possible for a professing Christian (I say *professing*, since real Christians are not supposed to compromise their faith) to have a deep personal relationship with a non-Christian. This is because once they go beyond a superficial level of interaction, the enmity between the two opposing worldviews will become all too obvious. But if compromise is not an option for the genuine believer, then unless the non-Christian converts (the only kind of "compromise" the Christian should accept from others in the long run), no truly significant communication is possible. The non-Christian rejects what the Christian believes about the deeper issues of life, while the Christian may not acquiesce to the non-Christian point of view.

It is Jesus who says, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household" (Matthew 10:34-36). There *will* be conflicts between Christians and non-Christians. Genuine religious commitments are not something that can be put aside. Otherwise, why do unbelievers who claim to desire fellowship with us at the same time refuse to convert to Christianity? Thus, contrary to their denial, they acknowledge that religious commitments do matter, and that what one believes about ultimate issues is more important than even family relationships. The difference is that they are hypocritical about it – many unbelievers who say that they value relationships would like us to put aside biblical principles while they hold on to their own religions and worldviews.

One theologian remarks that only God has ever demanded such total dedication from human beings in the way Jesus does in our passage. Precisely! And this is what we must keep in mind, that when we are dealing with Jesus Christ, we are making decisions about our lives in relation to someone who is nothing less than God himself. Our readiness to follow him, therefore, reflects our attitude toward God – because he *is* God.

⁷ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible – Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*; Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001; p. 1855.

Many people who pledge to follow Christ are lying about it – they are using their Christian profession as a cloak to hide their personal aspirations. They continue to pursue their own selfish plans, only now they may conceal their true intentions by portraying their lifestyles as being for the good of the kingdom. Most contemporary preaching dilutes the biblical message on this subject, and only serves to foster the problem. Christ's call to discipleship demands the transformation and dedication of the total person.

With the church containing such a mixture of true and false disciples, how may we distinguish one from the other? And by what standard must we examine ourselves? Jesus gives us a direct answer in John 8:31: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples." Genuine discipleship is characterized by hearing, understanding, and obeying the precepts of God. One who believes and obeys the word of God will be saved by it, but one who rejects it will be destroyed by it. "The seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop" (Luke 8:15) – such is the true disciple of Christ, who possesses a faith that obeys and perseveres.

As mentioned at the beginning, there are a number of other biblical texts that we would need to study for our understanding of Christian discipleship to be complete. However, none of those passages remove the conditions set forth above; rather, they only make further demands upon the lives of those whom God calls. At the least, then, we must follow Christ without reservation, delay, or regret. We must follow him wherever he may lead us, even into places and situations that we do not expect. The work of the kingdom must be our first priority. And we must not look back once we have endeavored upon such a lifestyle, as if longing for the life we had in the past, or the lives that others have who are not following Christ. How many of those who profess Christ follow him in this manner? To be genuine disciples we cannot be anything less. Strive, therefore, to be certain of your place in the kingdom – stop deceiving yourself – that your work for Christ might not be in vain.

2. GODLINESS WITH CONTENTMENT

In his second letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul predicts that, "There will be terrible times in the last days" (2 Timothy 3:1), by which he refers to the evil that would become characteristic of the general population. Among other things, he says that "People will be lovers of themselves...proud, abusive...ungrateful, unholy...treacherous, rash, conceited..." (v. 2-4). Within this long list of ungodly traits, he indicates that people would also be "lovers of money" (v. 2).

Beginning with the love of money as the starting point of the present study, we turn, then, to a well-known passage in 1 Timothy 6, where Paul writes, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (v. 10). Before including the surrounding verses to our discussion, there are two elementary observations that we must make.

First, Paul's statement has often been misquoted as, "Money is the root of all evil," when it says, "the *love* of money is a root of all kinds of evil." It is the love of money that is under condemnation in this passage, and not money itself. The difference is not trivial. The "love" of money refers to an intellectual or psychological factor not indicated when only money is mentioned, the latter being material in nature.

That the love of money, which exists in the mind, is a root of all kinds of evil also implies that one may be a lover of money without being wealthy. If money itself is a root of all kinds of evil, then evil may be proportional to the level of one's wealth; to shun evil, one must be poor. The corresponding deception is that this "root of all kinds of evil" does not exist in poverty-stricken individuals. But it is possible for anyone to be a lover of money. And a rich man may at the same time be a true lover of God, rather than a lover of money.

Naming the love of money as the culprit, Paul identifies this source of all kinds of evil as originating in the mind of man, and not material substance. Jesus says as much in Mark 7:21-22: "For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly."

Much time and effort in theological expositions may be conserved if not for those who wreck constant havoc from the pulpit by propagating false ideas. On the other hand, the rise of false doctrines tend to have the positive effect of compelling the orthodox to greater theological precision – this is one role false religions and heresies play in God's sovereign plan. At any rate, one teaching that brings confusion to theological discussions generates a sharp distinction between the spirit and soul of man, identifying the "heart" with the spirit, and the mind with man's soul.

For the current study to be meaningful, we must take time to correct this popular misunderstanding; nevertheless, a full explanation belongs to a presentation on theological anthropology. We will therefore quickly cite several authorities on the subject, and move forward.

The *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* defines "heart" (Greek: *kardia*) as, "the inner person, the seat of understanding, knowledge, and will..."¹ Kittel, as expected, gives a lengthy article on the word, and says, "The heart is the seat of understanding, the source of thought and reflection."² As with other lexicons, it confirms that "The NT use of the word agrees with the OT use..."³

Heart in the Bible includes a range of meanings, but unless it points to the physical organ, it is speaking of the mind, with the context of the passage giving emphasis to its particular functions. The theologian-philosopher Gordon H. Clark estimates that, "the term *heart* denotes emotion about ten or at the very most fifteen percent of the time. It denotes the will maybe thirty percent of the time; and it very clearly means the intellect sixty or seventy percent."⁴

After spending a number of pages presenting relevant passages on the subject, Clark concludes, "Therefore when someone in the pews hears the preacher contrasting the head and the heart, he will realize that the preacher either does not know or does not believe what the Bible says. That the gospel may be proclaimed in its purity and power, the churches should eliminate their Freudianism and other forms of contemporary psychology and return to God's Word..."⁵ Head versus heart faith and knowledge are false distinctions. The head, or brain, is not the mind anyway. Or are we evolutionists and behaviorists? The mind of man is incorporeal, made in the image of God; it is not the "head" or brain.

Unless on rare occasions where the context requires a different understanding, the *heart* in the Bible refers to the mind with its various functions, such as the intellect, will, and emotions. Jonathan Edwards, in *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, writes regarding the inclination and will of man, that, "the mind, with regard to the exercises of this faculty, is often called the heart."⁶ Also, Thayer: "*kardia*...the soul or mind, as it is the fountain and seat of the thoughts, passions, desires, appetites, affections, purposes, endeavors...used of the understanding, the faculty and seat of the intelligence..." My point is that the heart is intellectual.

¹ *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. 2*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981; p. 250.

² Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. 3*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999 (Original: 1965); p. 612.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 611.

⁴ Gordon H. Clark, *The Biblical Doctrine of Man*; Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1984; p. 82.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87-88.

⁶ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2000 (Original: 1834); p. 237.

Even the *mind* is further misunderstood as consisting of the intellect, will, and emotions – but these are functions of the mind, and not different parts that together constitute the mind. Clark gives the illustration that, just as digestion is a function of the stomach and not a different organ altogether, we must not imagine the activities of the soul as parts within the human person that are distinct from the soul. Thinking, deciding, and emoting, are activities of the mind.

Even the word *spirit* does not indicate a differing part of the person, only a particular aspect or function of the soul or mind.⁷ A human being therefore consists of mind and body. For all general purposes, then, we may consider the terms mind, soul, spirit, and heart as interchangeable. Since many readers tend to think of spirit and heart, or even soul, as more or less non-intellectual, I often prefer the word *mind* so as to remind the reader of the intellectual nature of the subject, even when the other terms will do just as well.

It is possible to infer from Mark 7:21 that the heart refers to the mind, since Jesus says that it is "men's hearts" that produce "evil thoughts." Nevertheless, lest the obstinate anti-intellectual reader takes this merely as saying that the intellectual can come from the non-intellectual, and therefore no such inference can be made, we have tolerated the above excursus on the meaning of the heart.

Returning to our main topic, Paul says, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). The *love*, then, refers to the thoughts. Jesus confirms this when he includes "greed" (Mark 7:22) as one of the things that proceed from men's minds. The "money," on the other hand, designates the specific content of the thoughts. The "love of money" is therefore a particular way of thinking about money that generates "all kinds of evil."

Before we define further "the love of money," or this way of thinking, I will set forth the second observation concerning the verse in question, as mentioned at the beginning. It is simply this: Paul says that the love of money is "*a* root of *all kinds* of evil" (NIV; or, NASB: "a root of all sorts of evil"), and not "*the* root of *all* evil" (KJV).

In other words, many types and instances of evil occur due to the love of money, but this does not mean that every instance of evil is generated by it. This observation is important because unless Scripture blames all evil on the love of money, it would distort our view of reality to trace every instance of it to greed. This is easy to see from the verse once it is pointed out, and therefore no additional explanation is required.

Now, to help define the love of money, we quote verses 9-10 in their entirety: "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:9-10). The love of money is used

⁷ Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*, 2001; chapter 4.

interchangeably, and thus equated with, "eager for money," and is evident in those who "want to get rich."

To be eager for money, or to just want to get rich, makes one a lover of money, and brings all its accompanying consequences. Due to frequent but glib references to the expression, the "love of money" has become meaningless to people, so that even Christians nod their heads to Paul's words without realizing how much they apply to themselves. But once we define the love of money as being eager for money, or as merely wanting to become rich, then multitudes of Christians come under the grave warning as set forth in this passage.

Nevertheless, this wanting or wishing is more than a passive willingness to become rich, but a positive desire toward wealth. One writer observes that the word translated *want* (Greek: *boulomai*) in the NIV denotes a rational desire, and not an emotional one: "This desire to be wealthy is not a passing emotional thing, but the result of a process of reasoning. Mature consideration has been given the matter of the acquisition of riches, with the result that that desire has become a settled and planned procedure."⁸

Does this remind us of ourselves, or someone we know? Even many professing Christians, after prolonged deliberate reflection, consider the pursuit of wealth as their highest goal. As mentioned, it is not a momentary emotional lust for money, but an intellectual conclusion that money is what is important. The person then proceeds to formulate plans as to how it may be obtained.

Although on other grounds we may recognize an impulsive and short-term desire for money to be sinful as well, Paul here specifically considers the rational decision to pursue wealth. However, just because a decision is rational in nature – that is, it results from a process of reasoning – does not mean that the conclusion is rational in the sense of being reasonable or correct. This way of thinking is so damnable partly because it is the result of careful deliberation. That one may profess Christ and yet conclude that money is most important is both irrational and blasphemous.

Jesus contradicts this kind of thinking: "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). In the passage immediately following this verse, he tells a parable in which "anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God" (v. 21) is called a fool (v. 20). Although one who loves money in the way described by Paul has come to his conclusion using his reasoning powers, it only shows his lack of intellectual acumen.

Assuming that he at least professes the Christian faith, and thus has been given biblical premises to inform his reasoning, is this the best he can do? A person must be quite dull who claims to be a Christian but at the same time values wealth above other things, when Jesus says, "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Even a

⁸ Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies From the Greek New Testament, Vol. 2*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999 (Original: 1952); p. 95.

child can understand what Jesus means, and can accordingly avoid the erroneous conclusion of the money-lover. People who value wealth are just not very smart.

Parenthetically, the following words from one scholar help prevent misapplication of the text: "We are also to note that what is here condemned is not an ambition to excel in some lawful department of human activity, which though it may bring an increase in riches, develops character, but the having a single eye to the accumulation of money..."⁹ This is a crucial distinction: We are not speaking against wealth as such, and still less do we condemn legitimate practices that often generate wealth. As Proverbs 10:4 says, "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth." It is the intellectual factor – the *love* of money – that is reprehensible. And so, Proverbs 28:20: "A faithful man will be richly blessed, but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished."

People are constantly trying to evade biblical admonitions, and therefore we will consider the matter from another angle. If it seems that an ambitious pursuit of wealth does not apply, most would still come under the warning of Christ concerning the worship of Mammon,¹⁰ which he defines as worrying about material things. The relevant passage says the following:

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:24-34)

⁹ *The Expositor's Greek Testament, Vol. 4*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2002 reprint; p. 143.

¹⁰ *Mammon* denotes material riches. Contrary to popular belief, there is no evidence suggesting that the word refers to a pagan god of wealth. The NIV translation of "Money" (Matthew 6:24) is therefore acceptable.

Verse 24 does not make God and money mutually exclusive; it makes service, love, and devotion toward God and money mutually exclusive. That is, although both God and money may be a part of one's life, he can only serve, love, and be devoted to one of the two, but not both. It is possible for a rich man to love God and for a poor man to hate God. The issue is not whether one has money or not.

In verse 25, Jesus assigns service, love, and devotion to the intellectual realm: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?" The rhetorical question at the end of the verse echoes what he says in Luke 12:15, cited earlier: "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Life is more than wealth and material possessions. To think in a way that is inconsistent with this is what constitutes the love of money or Mammon worship. One who escapes the description of the apostle Paul concerning the love of money, but who nevertheless think of money as the deciding factor in life's situations remains enslaved to it, and thus becomes as one who hates and despises God (v. 24).

We will not repeat the rest of the passage, but the reader should pay attention to the emphasis on how serving God or money is related to one's thought life: "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?...And why do you worry about clothes?...So do not worry...Therefore do not worry..." (v. 27-28, 31, 34). In another place, Jesus states, "The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful" (Matthew 13:22).

To devote our thoughts to money is the equivalent of serving it as a god, and such is mutually exclusive with the worship of God. To be overly concerned about material needs is to be enslaved to money, which implies a rejection of the primacy of God. But to worship God is to enthrone him in our thoughts: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:14); "May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the LORD" (Psalm 104:34).

Returning to Paul's passage in 1 Timothy 6, he says that many disastrous effects result from the love of money: "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (v. 9-10).

Paul says that those who wish to be rich fall into many *foolish* desires. Contrary to their self-evaluation, no matter how successful they are in carrying out their moneymaking schemes, they should never be considered intelligent if their achievements are founded on such a basis. These desires are also harmful in that they "plunge men into ruin and destruction." Those who are eager for money "[pierce] themselves with many griefs." We

may be aware of many examples of such "ruin and destruction" from the lives of people we know, or even from our own lives.

In the words of Lenski, "Men who are set on being rich snatch at the tempting bait, are caught in the snare, are held by the lusts. So shrewd they thought themselves, but see into what they have fallen! They may get rich, may boast of their wealth, their business acumen, their successful deals. But look at the most successful among them – their lusts are 'reasonless,' such as a reasonable man must shun!"¹¹ Where the NIV translates "*foolish...desires*," Lenski has "reasonless."¹² After careful and prolonged consideration, the lovers of money can do no better than to conclude that wealth is supreme, and thus advertises his folly to the informed Christian.

Most significantly, the love for money causes them to "[wander] from the faith." As Luke 9:25 says, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?" Unless there is a change in thinking, it is futile to resist, or to pretend otherwise – the destructive process begins in the mind, and the moment one's agenda becomes making money instead of knowing God, he begins to stray from the faith that he professes.

Worship primarily consists of our thoughts regarding the things of God, and not in songs or bodily postures; the latter are easy to pretend, but the former requires genuine transformation of one's personality. God says in Isaiah 29:13, "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." The Bible makes no ontological distinction between the heart and the mind, but it distinguishes between the heart and the lips. True worship is in the heart – or as we have established, the mind; bodily activities may proceed naturally from the thoughts, or they may be performed in pretense and hypocrisy.

Therefore, one who seems to worship God in sincerity on the outside, but is ruled by greedy thoughts in his mind, is not a true worshipper of God. Jesus explains that unlike the hypocrites whose worship God rejects, "the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (John 4:23). There is no running away from our minds. There is no pretending; our thoughts define us. And God knows what we think: "You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar" (Psalm 139:2; also Hebrews 4:12); "The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Those who love money cannot at the same time be true and faithful Christians. Just as James writes, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22), there are many who are eager for money who also consider themselves superior Christians. They are self-deluded; it is possible that many of them

¹¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001 (Original: 1937); p. 707-708.

¹² The word is *anoetos* – "mindless," "senseless," and "unintelligent" are also acceptable translations.

are not believers at all. Again, Jesus makes it clear that although God and money themselves may coexist in a person's life, the *worship* of God and money are mutually exclusive.

Further on in 1 Timothy 6, Paul says the following regarding the wealthy: "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Since the world tends to measure success in terms of wealth, it is easy for those who have money to become proud. In Deuteronomy 8:17-18, the Bible warns of the temptation to take credit for one's financial prosperity: "You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth..."

It is God who grants the "power to get wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:18, KJV). And believers must acknowledge that God is the one who "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (v. 17). This statement reinforces an earlier thought that money itself is not the problem, but it is the ungodly desire for wealth that corrupts one's soul. Paul even says that God gives us material things "for our enjoyment," and not only for charitable donations or promoting the gospel. It is not against biblical teaching to enjoy the fruits of one's labor or investments, as well as to provide a good life for loved ones. However, we must acknowledge God as the provider of all good things, and in gratitude, allow his divine precepts to govern our attitude toward wealth, as well as its use and distribution.

The rich should not think too highly of themselves, nor should they rest their hope in the wealth they possess, for the reason that material riches form an unreliable foundation for their present and future life. At best, money can provide some superficial comforts for their earthly existence, but its power can never extend to the life to come: "For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it" (v. 7).

But wealth provides no guarantee even for the present life, as Jesus has God saying in one of his parables, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (Luke 12:20). This verse from Luke again emphasizes the folly of one who loves money. The difference in depth of insight between one who trusts in God and one who relies on wealth is as the distance between the power of the Almighty and feeble Mammon. Nevertheless, such faith or clarity of spiritual vision is a gift from God, and does not originate from the non-existent "free will" vaunted by the humanists, so that no one may boast in his presence.

Timothy is to "Command [the rich] to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share" (v. 18). Contrary to popular belief, the doctrinal minister possesses the right to *command* how wealth is to be used, as well as to dictate issues

concerning the moral liberty of believers – but only to the extent prescribed by scriptural revelation. He has the mandate to authoritatively apply biblical instructions to his audience.

Unbelievers, although they resist the authority of God, are morally obligated to obey when a minister repeats the divine precepts, and they increase their guilt each time they rebel against God's words. For example, the command, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13) is just as binding on one who rejects scriptural authority as one who professes the Christian faith, since God's rule is universal. Those who "do not obey the gospel" (1 Peter 4:17), therefore, violates God's command for "all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30), and will suffer just condemnation for their defiance.

Wealthy people are commanded to be rich not just in material things, but also "in good deeds." Only in this manner will they be able to gain a security impossible to come by through money alone: "In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life" (v. 19). No matter how fulfilling one may think money can make this life to be, it is not "truly life" until one takes hold of the life available only through Christ, who says, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

To summarize, Paul's instruction to the rich is to recognize the uncertainty of wealth, with the result that one ceases to trust in it, or to become arrogant due to the level of one's wealth. Faith in God and generosity ought to be especially evident in the rich, and those who neglect establishing this firm foundation endanger their own spiritual welfare.

In contrast to a love of money, Paul sets forth the Christian mentality as one of godliness with contentment: "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that" (1 Timothy 6:6-8). Before we discuss the meaning of Christian contentment as taught in these verses, we should look at the passage that leads up to them.

Verses 1-5 say, "If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain."

Note the warning against false doctrines, and how they are related to the misconception that "godliness is a means to financial gain." All false ideas are traceable to false theology, since one's religious convictions constitute the ultimate presuppositions that govern all other beliefs. The false doctrines here spoken of allow for the kind of thinking that fosters the love of money. To help explain the transition from verses 1-5 to verses 6-8, we will give some attention to the last phrase in verse 5.

These people who have been "robbed of the truth" think that "godliness is a means to financial gain." The word "robbed" suggests that they once had the truth, but since then it has been taken away from them, and thus they are said to be "men of corrupt mind." The word "godliness" may confuse some readers, especially when the words "godliness" and "gain" are used in the next verse with slightly different meanings. Here in verse 5, Paul refers not to those who believe that God would bless those who worship him aright, often with financial prosperity. There is a teaching that almost equates one's spirituality with one's level of wealth, but this verse does not target this idea in particular.

Besides the immediate context, the beginning of 1 Timothy gives a clue as to a main objective of this letter. In 1:3, Paul writes that he has left Timothy at Ephesus, so that the latter "may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer." Although the rest of the letter provides apostolic instructions on many issues that are universally applicable, 1 Timothy is better understood when the reader keeps its stated purpose in view.

1 Timothy 6:5, then is said in a context that attacks teachers of false doctrines. With this in mind, Paul is not saying that these possess true godliness, who at the same time consider such piety as leading to financial profit. Rather, the translation by J. B. Phillips conveys the correct sense of the verse, that these "men of warped minds...have lost their real hold on the truth but hope to make some profit out of the *Christian religion*."¹³

It is not that these teachers have a false view of how God blesses true spiritual worship, but they are not considering his blessings at all. Rather, the verse speaks of how they wish to reap financial gain from teaching or otherwise using the Christian religion, albeit their own false versions of it. They think, therefore, that such "godliness" leads to profit. Titus 1:11 states the problem in different words: "They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach – and that for the sake of dishonest gain."

However, there is a sense in which godliness is "great gain" (v. 6). That true godliness is characterized by "contentment" prevents the reader from identifying the concept as considered by the false teachers with that of Paul. While one is motivated by "the love of money" (v. 10), the other pursues "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness" (v. 11). First, we will briefly consider the gain involved in true godliness, and then proceed to discuss the meaning of contentment.

Earlier in 1 Timothy, we read, "For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1 Timothy 4:8). To pursue the things of this world instead of spiritual holiness and maturity reflects a lack of foresight. People are often impressed with their own abilities to advance in their careers or make profitable business investments, but they lack insight into what comes after death. They may ignore the question, or mistakenly think that this life is all

¹³ J. B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English*; New York: Touchstone, 1988 edition. Similarly, William Barclay: "They are characteristic of men who regard their religion as a profit-making concern"; *The New Testament*; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999 edition.

that there is, or at least live as if this is so even though they know otherwise. But godliness holds promise for *both* the present life and the one to come. Which, then, is more wise – the godly man or the greedy man? Godliness holds tremendous promise, and leads to great gain, although such gain is not always financial.

As with contentment, we must first remember that Paul speaks to both the rich and the poor, and therefore to be content does not mean that one must possess only a little. As with the love of money, which is fueled by a sinful dissatisfaction over one's earthly possessions, Christian contentment is also an intellectual or psychological factor, and does not make any necessary implications regarding the level of one's wealth. This deserves repetition because some tend to associate an attack on greed as an attack on wealth, and that to promote contentment is to advocate poverty. This is not so, since we have seen that Christians can be "rich in this present world" (v. 17), and remain godly in their lifestyle at the same time; that is, if they will take care to "put their hope in God...and to be generous and willing to share" (v. 17-18).

The word *contentment* (Greek: *autarkeia*) had been used to denote a prime virtue from the time of Socrates, and especially by Stoic and Cynic thought, as meaning an inward self-sufficiency. "The demand is that man should be content with the goods allotted to him by fate or by God...who thus becomes an independent man sufficient to himself and in need of none else."¹⁴ Barclay writes, "This was one of the great watchwords of the Stoic philosophers. By it they meant a complete *self-sufficiency*. They meant a frame of mind which was completely independent of all outward things, and which carried the secret of happiness within itself."¹⁵

The latter description is more accurate, emphasizing that this self-sufficiency is "a frame of mind," and does not directly refer the skills and knowledge required for survival. That is, the self-sufficiency in view is more of a psychological indifference to outward circumstances rather than the ability to provide for one's own necessities. The following helps illustrate the type of "self-sufficiency" taught in Stoicism:

There is a famous story about Epictetus, the slave. As his master was torturing his leg, he said with great composure, "You will certainly break my leg." When the bone broke, he continued in the same tone of voice, "Did I not tell you that you would break it?" The good life, therefore, does not consist of externalities, but it is an inward state, a strength of will, and self-control.¹⁶

Thus, a Stoic "will not groan under torture; and in general he will suppress emotion as irrational..."¹⁷ At least on this level, there are some important similarities between the Christian and Stoic concepts of contentment. They are much more pronounced than what

¹⁴ Kittel, Vol. 1; p. 464, 466.

¹⁵ William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975; p. 128.

¹⁶ Gordon H. Clark, *Ancient Philosophy*; The Trinity Foundation, 1997; p. 308.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

many schools of Christian thought are willing to admit today, since much of contemporary Christianity is characterized by an anti-intellectualism and emotionalism that has more to do with the religion of Kierkegaard than biblical faith. And the emphasis on experience has resulted from Schleiermacher's philosophy. But as one scholar writes when commenting on 1 Timothy 6:6, "[Christian contentment] is very similar to Stoic thought."¹⁸

Many detest a "stoical" Christianity that advocates an indifference toward material things and a suspicion of emotions. They argue that since Stoic philosophy is wrong, then the kind of contentment it teaches must accordingly be false. But it may be that Stoics also believe $1 + 1 = 2$ for their own reasons. The Stoics may be unable to justify their beliefs on the basis of their philosophical presuppositions, and these presuppositions may themselves be unjustifiable, but some of their beliefs may nevertheless be true, if for no other reason than by accident.

Even though some of their conclusions in this area appear to be alike at least on the surface, the principles of Christianity come from divine revelation, independent of Stoic influences. The point is that Paul here uses Stoic *language*, just as other biblical texts employ useful terms from the Roman military and Greek philosophy for their own purposes. Unless otherwise indicated, we must accept the meanings that come with the term, although we ought also to be aware of any fundamental differences between Stoicism and Paul's thought.

There are indeed great disagreements between Christianity and Stoicism, although we will introduce very little of them in this study. At any rate, to the extent that we may import Stoic meanings for the term, Christian contentment also exhibits a relative indifference to material things, a suspicion or even suppression of emotions, while prizing highly rational thinking and the virtue of inward satisfaction. What distinguish Christianity are the reason and basis from which such a view of contentment is derived.

To insert a side note, many teach that Christianity favors a free expression of emotions, some even making it a mark of the Spirit-filled life. However, this comes from popular psychology and secular philosophy, not biblical teaching. The Spirit produces "self-control" (Galatians 5:23). Theologians who care for orthodoxy should rework the entire scheme of biblical psychology, which has been so damaged by enthusiastic but ignorant heretics who claim to profess the Christian faith.

John W. Robbins says the following in his brief historical analysis on Pentecostalism:

Their focus was away from Christ's work to their own, from the objective to the subjective...In the time of the Reformers, the Munzerites and radical Anabaptists gave great prominence to the work and gifts of the Spirit. Their cry was, "The Spirit! The Spirit!" but Luther replied, "I will not follow where their spirit leads." They were the

¹⁸ *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Vol. 3*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986; p. 727.

sixteenth century charismatics...Already it is considered blasphemy to speak against the supernatural workings within the charismatic movement. A spirit of boastful certainty and arrogant intolerance has often been manifested by those who "have the spirit." The preoccupation with inward experience is leading multitudes back to the religious philosophy of the Dark Ages and the medieval church...

Many Protestants seem to be as paralyzed as Melancthon was when he did not know whether or not to speak out against the spiritualistic fanatics who came to Wittenburg while Luther was hidden in the Wartburg Castle. It was this issue that led the great Reformer to come out of hiding and to risk his life. Cried the spirit-filled leaders on being granted an interview with Luther, "The Spirit! The Spirit!" The Reformer was decidedly unimpressed. "I slap your spirit on the snout," he thundered...¹⁹

Robbins is a cessationist in theology, maintaining that the supernatural gifts of the Spirit have ceased, and it is from this basis that he attacks the Pentecostals and Charismatics. While I am convinced that biblical evidence affirms the present-day operation of miraculous endowments through believers, I readily agree that most of the criticisms from traditional Protestant circles against the charismatic Christians are justified.

The theology and practices of the Pentecostals and Charismatics are more often heretical than not. On almost every point in Christian theology, they are aberrant at best, and at times grossly heretical and anti-Christian. Their entire system of theology has little in common with the biblical faith. Of course, we are stating a generalization – some classify themselves as Pentecostals and Charismatics who at the same time affirm a more or less orthodox system of doctrine, but such people are rare.

It is therefore wise for us to create a distinction between the continualists – that is, those who agree that the gifts are still in use today – and the full-fledged Pentecostals and Charismatics. Besides being continualists, the latter also accept the heretical teachings commonly associated with these groups. This writer affirms the theology of the Reformation, with its motto of *sola Scriptura*, as the authentic Christian faith. At the same time, I deny that this prevents me from holding to the continuation of miraculous powers working through Christians in every generation.

Robbins continues:

American Christianity is drowning in a sea of religious subjectivism. Charismatic literature (and with it we include all this subjective revivalism) is infesting the land like the frogs of Egypt...Never has such a mass of literature been so devoid of the Gospel of Christ. There is scarcely one extrinsic, objective thought in it. It is all...a return to

¹⁹ John W. Robbins, "Appendix: Evangelicalism, the Charismatic Movement, and the Race Back to Rome," from *The Holy Spirit* by Gordon H. Clark; Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1993; p. 101-116.

sentimental, effeminate, medieval mysticism. No wonder one of the points of dialogue between Pentecostal leaders and the Roman Catholic Church is the remarkable similarity between Pentecostalism and Catholic mysticism...And to be critical of Catholicism is now an obscenity in evangelical circles.²⁰

Rick Joyner has written a book entitled, *Shadows of Things to Come*.²¹ In it, he rebukes Christians for rejecting Catholic *charismatics* on doctrinal grounds, saying that we have no right to reject those whom God has accepted, and cites the incident regarding Cornelius in Acts 10:47. However, it is God who tells us to oppose those who hold to false doctrines.²²

Cornelius, having accepted the preaching of Peter, gave complete assent to the apostle's doctrine. What at first hindered the apostle from recognizing Cornelius as a candidate to God's saving grace was his ethnicity, not doctrinal position; the latter was eager to accept whatever Peter told him. On the other hand, Jews who reject the apostolic teaching are denied salvation, whether they call themselves charismatics or not.

Or should we also welcome the likes of Simon the sorcerer as true believers (Acts 8:5-23)? Perhaps Joyner has never read Matthew 7:22-23: "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" Salvation only comes from believing the right doctrines, and not from being a "charismatic."

Against Joyner's anti-Christian position, biblical teaching dictates that we accept or reject others mainly, if not solely, on doctrinal grounds. What appears to be other issues on the basis of which we must accept or reject others are most often derived from differences in theological positions, with disagreements in moral principles as an example. For these same reasons – that is, theological ones – we must reject Joyner's writings. Charismatic beliefs and practices in general deserve a much more scathing and thorough attack, but we must await another occasion.

Returning to our discussion, the differences in Christian and Stoic premises are important because only true presuppositions are able to, through a valid process of deduction, produce true conclusions. Although the Stoics may assert a type of contentment that somewhat resembles Christianity, such a claim cannot stand if the premises leading to this conclusion is unjustifiable. Since my aim is not to explain the basic assumptions of Stoicism, but only its views on contentment in order to illustrate the teaching of Paul on the subject, we will proceed to expound on the basis and meaning of Christian contentment.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Rick Joyner, *Shadows of Things to Come*; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001; Chapter 10.

²² See Matthew 16:11-12; 2 Corinthians 11:3-4; Galatians 1:6-9; 1 John 4:1; Revelation 2:2.

We have established that the love of money is antithetical to the Christian faith, and religion should not be pursued for the sake of financial gain. Yet, Paul says that true godliness is indeed profitable in another sense, holding promise for this life and the life to come. As Jesus says in Matthew 19:29, "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life." True godliness, the kind that is not after money but exhibits profound contentment, is more thoroughly profitable than the love of money.

Differing from the teachings of some religions, Christian contentment is not an elimination of all desire, but rather an intensification of one's desire on God to a point where all other things become relatively insignificant. Psalm 42:1 says, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God." Paul denounces his earthly credentials in order to pursue Christ: "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:7-8).

Against the view that physical things are in themselves evil and corrupt, the Bible teaches that "everything God created is good" (1 Timothy 4:4). The body is not in itself evil; it is the mind that sins through it. And material possessions are not evil, but it is the mind that produces evil thoughts regarding them. Christian contentment, being a state of mind, so finds its satisfaction in God that a relative indifference toward material riches naturally results.

Popular Christianity and mysticism so confuse "self-denial" with asceticism that they cannot rightly separate the two. While Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24), Christianity is not an ascetic religion, where the slogan becomes, "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" (Colossians 2:21).

In Philippians 4:11-13, Paul defines the sort of contentment he has in mind, as well as the source of this virtue: "...I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

To be content "in any and every situation," regardless of one's outward circumstances, is the virtue of contentment. But it is not *Christian* contentment unless its source is the same as that of Paul. He says he can be content in any situation because "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." Whereas contentment designates a *self*-sufficiency in Stoicism, biblical contentment is one produced by the empowerment of God.

That is, a believer is able to be content in various circumstances because God has strengthened his soul. Thus, contentment is by no means a sign of weakness or resignation, but one of spiritual strength and maturity. Conversely, a lover of money is also one who is weak, immature, and ignorant.

Saying that this type of contentment prevents one from doing well at one's career or business presupposes that greed and dissatisfaction are the only effective motivations for work. Christian contentment does eliminate financial gain as the primary objective, and thus will not sacrifice time with God and family for the sake of vocational success; however, biblical precepts provide ample reasons to be diligent at one's labor.

A believer is more motivated by the virtues of piety and excellence than the prospect of monetary gain. He desires to please God in whatever he does, to provide for his family, and to help finance the gospel. The Christian work ethic considers factors such as the omnipresence and omniscience of God, present and future rewards, and the moral obligations to obey divine commands. One who believes in these biblical truths works to honor God, not to earn the favor of men, and thus becomes a conscientious and loyal worker who pursues excellence without constant supervision and threats. Rather than dampening the motivation to labor, biblical teaching creates the ideal worker.

Paul's explanation of contentment also cautions us against some forms of modern ministry models. In recent years, the power of "team work" has been heavily touted. The emphasis is often placed on how feeble each believer is when left alone, but how he may contribute when joined with other equally powerless people. The "lone ranger" mentality is condemned, and biblical examples to the contrary are dismissed as Old Covenant exceptions.

Again, this resembles principles from popular psychology and modern business management theories than divine revelation. It exaggerates and distorts the biblical precepts concerning Christian community and mutual edification to the point of threatening the sufficiency of God. Another manifestation of this is the teaching that every Christian requires emotional support from others; this too comes from modern psychology, and not the Bible.

Most readers, when they encounter something disagreeable to them, tend to read even more carelessly than usual, and come away with a twisted understanding of what is being said. I do not deny the biblical teaching on mutual edification and even some sort of team ministry, but I reject the view saying that such is always necessary. God has the prerogative to so instruct and strengthen a believer that he is in need of no one else, and the verses we are studying indicate that it is our duty to attain this inward strength and stability.

Due to the incompetence of most believers, it is often more effective to designate one able worker for a given task, or at least limit the numbers of those involved to a smaller group, as in the case of Gideon (Judges 7:1-7). Most people are deficient in skill and intellect, whether at the church or the office. Of course, if they are willing to be trained, we should welcome their participation. But many are reluctant to learn.

1 Corinthians 12-14 encourages respect for the spiritual gifts of others, and teaches the need for them in the body of Christ, but it does not predict that *no one* will succeed as a

Christian if left by himself, as some of these advocates of team ministry tend to suggest. Admittedly, most professing Christians never attain inward sufficiency in their lifetimes, nor do they even try to learn. And I grant that a believer who is without help or instructions from others requires greater grace to persevere, but this only serves to illustrate the point that God's grace is sufficient. If God is willing to endow one with such an ability to operate and develop by himself, who are we to object, especially when there is no biblical precept that prevents such from happening?

Paul writes, "What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church" (1 Corinthians 14:26). This is the way it ought to be. But as is the case with many congregations, if a hymn only means words from a greeting card sung to contemporary rock music, a tongue only means two or three syllables repeated in rapid succession, a revelation only means the expression of one's subjective and ill-informed opinion, and if, perhaps fortunately, no one even bothers offering a word of instruction, then what we have is a team, but no ministry. Similarly, there may be a team at the office, but very little work is done. Having a team does not always mean there is going to be any "team ministry" or "team work."

Those who advocate team ministry, and the impotence of the individual believer, may quote a verse such as, "If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!" (Ecclesiastes 4:10). Good! I answer with Jude 24-25: "*To him* who is able to *keep you from falling* and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen." Of course the believer needs help, but who says that it must come, without exception, from other human beings? The aim here is not to advocate a "lone ranger" mentality, but to affirm the sufficiency of God.

Paul writes to Timothy, saying, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (2 Timothy 4:16-18).

The argument is often made that Paul worked with a team. He did, but passages where Paul stood steadfastly even when he was alone are often neglected. On the other hand, the argument saying that even Jesus had a team of disciples helping him is *not* true, since it often appears as if the disciples hindered him more than they helped him. They were a constant annoyance, slow to grasp doctrinal issues, and the Lord was visibly irritated with them a number of times. He was teaching and training them for their future ministry, and did not require their assistance. Then some object that even Jesus requested the disciples to support him in prayer before his arrest. But they fell asleep, did they not?

Jesus demonstrates biblical inward sufficiency when he says, "But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me" (John 16:32). If we have "received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'" (Romans 8:15), then what prevents us from also saying, "You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me"?

To serve God as a community, combining our spiritual gifts and resources, is scriptural. On the other hand, an incorrect emphasis on team ministry denies the sufficiency of God and becomes a humanistic doctrine. Paul says, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances" (Philippians 4:11). To be content in the biblical sense is "to be completely detached from circumstances,"²³ rather than being needy and desperate. It is a manifestation of spiritual knowledge and maturity.

The verse says that this is something we must learn, indicating that we are not born with it, so let us not escape the need to develop such a virtue by pretending that it means something else. It is a total intellectual and psychological independence and sufficiency learned by the believer and sustained by the power of God. And just because a believer is independent does not mean that he is arrogant and obnoxious. He may be very willing to cooperate with others in achieving common goals, but he does not *need* them to function as a human being or as a Christian.

The jaw-dropping ignorance and incompetence of professing Christians can only be remedied through sound theological instructions. Likewise, only forceful and persistent biblical preaching can replace the love of money with godliness and contentment in the church. So "To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me" (Colossians 1:29).

Relating all of this to wealth, the Bible says that godliness is great gain, and an inward sufficiency produced by the knowledge and power of God within a believer is able to set him free from the love of money, along with all its destructive consequences. The contented believer is inwardly satisfied through the strength that God provides, and no longer lusts after material riches; nevertheless, this does not prevent him from finding success in his career or business ventures, only that he is psychologically independent from these external factors. He exhibits a serenity and calmness unmatched by the gurus of pagan religions, and does not have to segregate himself from society in order to attain this mental state.

Christian contentment is not of the Stoic kind; it is not founded on the sufficiency of the self, but the sufficiency of divine power made available to us through Christ. No believer immediately exhibits this kind of maturity and strength at first, but it is a learned virtue, integral to the process of sanctification that began when we first believed. Even a rich man, who has known no security except for his wealth, may learn to become a contented Christian. Jesus says that "it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven"

²³ *Practical Word Studies in the New Testament, Vol. 1*; Chattanooga, Tennessee: Leadership Ministries Worldwide, 1998; p. 401.

(Matthew 19:23), since the worship of God and Mammon are mutually exclusive, and it is difficult for the rich to give up his idol. But Jesus then assures us that, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (v. 26).

3. BIBLICAL GUIDANCE AND DECISION-MAKING

Many Christians desire to find "the will of God." There are numerous books written to show them how to discover or discern what God wishes them to do in a given situation. The trouble is that most writers begin from an unbiblical framework or understanding of the nature of God's will so that the methods they suggest to the readers cloud the issue rather than being truly helpful. In the following study, we will briefly outline the biblical teaching on divine guidance, beginning with an explanation on the correct meaning of finding the will of God – that is, the nature of what we are trying to discover in the first place.

Now, the Bible says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29). Based on this passage, we may distinguish between the two senses or meanings that may be meant by the term, "the will of God."

First, the "will" of God may refer to his sovereign will. This is what God has decided or decreed to happen from all eternity. Since the Bible teaches that everything has been foreordained by God, this means that all events, including human decisions, come under this category. Everything that is within God's sovereign will (which is everything about everything), will surely happen just as God has determined, and is not influenced by any factor external to God himself.

The content of God's sovereign will is known to us only through revelation, as in biblical prophecies, or by observing the past. Either God tells us his sovereign plan beforehand, or we come to know it after the fact. Since most of what comes under this category of God's will remains hidden from us, it is not the basis from which we make our everyday decisions. God's sovereign will is usually known to us after the fact. Due to its nature, this aspect of God's will is called variously by theologians as his sovereign, hidden, decretive, or secret will.

On the other hand, the passage above mentions that "the things revealed belong to us." What are the "things revealed"? The verse goes on to say, "...that we may follow all the words of this law." While the first meaning of "the will of God" refers to his decrees as to what will and must happen, this second sense of the term refers to his revealed precepts that dictate how we must think and act. Thus, the latter is often called his revealed, preceptive, or moral will. Since it is revealed to us in the form of the words recorded in Scripture, God's preceptive will is the basis from which we make our decisions.

Taken together, the verse means that the things kept secret to us belong to the mind of God alone, and we are not to speculate as to its contents while making our decisions, but we are to conform our thinking and behavior to "the things revealed to us," namely, "the words of this law." For example, while God has already determined the exact political

and economic climate of this country ten years from now, it is impossible for you to make plans based on this part of his decretive will, since you do not possess this piece of information. Rather, you must learn and apply the precepts taught by the words of Scripture in deciding what to do.

The above is contrary to what many have been taught. Instead of adopting this framework in understanding "the will of God," they mean by the term what God wants for us regarding the specific and unique details of our lives, such as our residence and vocation. Many seek to discern the will of God as used in this sense as they try to decide whether to talk to a specific person about the gospel, what to order in a restaurant, or where to go for vacation. But such information is usually extra-biblical, being part of God's sovereign will, and therefore those who seek it must devise ways of receiving such information apart from studying Scripture.

One way we may answer this is to show that when the term "the will of God" (or its equivalent) is used in the Bible, it often does not refer to God's sovereign will, and in instances when it does, it is either implied as unknowable (James 4:13-15), or it is being revealed through special revelation¹ (such as visions and dreams) not to be expected in everyday decision-making.

Some examples that may indicate this include the following: "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3); "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18); "For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men" (1 Peter 2:15). The will of God is that Christians should shun sexual sins, be joyful, be fervent in prayer, give thanks, and do good.

When Christians use the term to indicate special directions from God instead of biblical precepts, they miss the meaning of the scriptural passages where this term is used. Many of them, then, would take such passages to mean that they should live in the will of God in the sense that they should be constantly listening for the subjective, intuitive, and "supernatural" leading of the Holy Spirit, when the Bible explicitly teaches that "God's will" is for us to be progressing in sanctification in Christ – that is, to live as those separated for God's glory and make wise decisions that comport with his righteousness.

Paul writes to the Colossians saying that he is "asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Colossians 1:9). Applying what has been established above, this verse does not mean that Paul prays for the Colossians to receive special guidance in the form of prophecies, visions, and dreams in order for them to make decisions in accordance with God's sovereign will. Instead, Paul

¹ In theology, the terms "special revelation" and "special guidance" may refer to Scripture itself, since in it, God provides explicit verbal revelation that renders his will unambiguous to the human mind, whereas his self-disclosure in nature or in man's *a priori* knowledge may be called his "natural revelation." However, in the present discussion, we will use these terms as referring to extra-biblical forms of revelation such as visions, dreams, prophecies, audible voices, or inner impressions.

is asking God to give them "wisdom and understanding" regarding spiritual things so that they may intellectually grasp the content of his preceptive will as recorded in Scripture.

The desired result for this prayer is that they may live their lives in a way that is pleasing to God: "And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God" (v. 10). It also follows that it is impossible for those who are ignorant of Christian doctrine to be certain of God's will, no matter how many visions and dreams they claim to see.

Since the Bible explicitly says that such things as thanksgiving and sexual purity are the "will of God," if we are not progressing in sanctification, we are already in violation of the divine will, even if we are working the right jobs, residing in the right place, or wearing the right clothes. The truth is that most people do not care to live holy and committed lives, but they wish to be in God's "will" to find success, or to at least avoid suffering. They want to know God's will so that they may be in the right place at the right time, and meet the right people; they wish to make the right (as in profitable) investments and always be out of harm's way. But they want little to do with right beliefs and holy conduct.

One is lying who claims to desire God's will, but do not do the things he commands. As Jesus says, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46). He does not truly want to please God. This admonition will strangely "solve" a problem that distresses many professing Christians, namely, the fear that they are out of the will of God. If one is not obedient to Scripture, there is no need to wonder about this – he can be certain that he is out of the will of God already. A return to God's will consists of repentance, a diligent study of biblical doctrine, and obedience to the words of Scripture.

Now, when "the will of God" is meant in the sense of God's sovereign will, we are referring to his hidden and decretive will – and whatever he has decreed will surely happen. But when "the will of God" is meant in the sense of God's laws, we are referring to his revealed and preceptive will – and his precepts are often violated by human beings. God's sovereign decrees will always occur, but his precepts are often disobeyed.

The relationship between God's decretive and preceptive will is such that in instances where his precepts are violated, it is because his decrees caused it to be so. His decrees never fail, although he often decrees that his precepts be broken by human beings, who will then be responsible for their sins. This is just another way of saying that nothing happens without God as its ultimate cause, while as secondary agents in carrying out God's decrees, human beings are morally responsible for obeying his precepts as revealed in Scripture.

I will offer an illustration. The example will be extreme and not common to everyone's experience, and the correct option will be obvious, so that there will be no unnecessary obstacles to understanding the decision-making process. Suppose that Tim is entertaining the idea of killing John. God has already determined whether the killing will occur or not,

but since the divine decree on this issue is unknown to Tim, it is impossible for him to base his decision on it. However, Tim will discover the content of this hidden will after the fact – that is, if he ends up killing John, then this is what God has determined; if he decides against killing John and allows the opportunity to pass, then it means that God has decided for Tim not to kill John.

Since God's decree is hidden from Tim, it cannot be the guiding factor in his thinking as he makes his decision. But biblical precepts include the teaching, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13), and this is to be a guiding principle for him in this situation. However, it does not automatically mean that Tim should not kill John. If murder is participation in an unjustified killing of a human life, then knowledge of additional biblical precepts is required in order to determine whether killing John is justified. John may have been found guilty of a crime deserving of capital punishment, and Tim happens to be the executioner. In this case, for Tim to kill John is not murder, but is rather his moral obligation.

Similar qualifications apply for soldiers at war defending their nation, or for someone to kill in self-defense. However complex the situation seems to be, Scripture provides sufficient directions as to whether one should kill or not. No special guidance in the form of visions, dreams, prophecies, or inner impressions are necessary. What is required is knowledge of biblical teaching on the subject, and the ability to correctly apply it. Whether Tim obeys the moral law of God in this situation has been determined by God's hidden will. It is not clear what will happen before the fact, but there is no doubt as to Tim's moral obligations. It is important to note that Tim has sufficient information to make a decision that is in perfect accordance with God's will without any knowledge of what he has decreed.

In the biblical procedure for decision-making, after having eliminated the options that the Bible declares to be sinful, we proceed to discard those that the Bible says are unwise; we will then usually be left with very few options to choose from, and often only one legitimate choice remains. We should also prefer the options that best edify the church and ourselves spiritually. But if more than one permissible options exist after that, then Scripture allows us to choose based on convenience or our preference (Psalm 37:4); what we choose at this point will be acceptable to God. Besides applying divine precepts in eliminating sinful options, Scripture also prescribes positive duties that Christians are called to perform, such as generous giving and diligent study of the Bible.

We should also keep in mind that God may influence a person's thoughts and desires, as well as manipulate his surrounding circumstances, so that as he applies biblical precepts to his situation, the resulting decision will correspond precisely to God's unique plan for his life. In this manner, God's specific will for this person may be accomplished without the use of special guidance. Although God may grant special guidance to cause the same decision, whether to do so is his prerogative and not for us to demand. We must trust that God's word in the Bible is sufficient to guide us to a perfect decision, whether in general situations or in highly specific and personal cases.

If I were to order dinner at a restaurant, I must first eliminate options that are immoral (if any), and then I must eliminate options that are unwise (such as due to health considerations). After that, if there is more than one item left, as is likely, I may order whatever I want, and it will be within the perfect "will of God" in the moral sense. And after placing the order, I will also come to know that this has been God's decretive will. The example with killing John may be unusual, and the present example may seem trivial, but this is only to avoid giving complex examples that obscures the decision-making process being advocated. Once understood, this biblical procedure for making decisions may be applied to the whole range of various simple and complex situations that everyone must face in life, such as choosing a school, a home, a church, a career, a marriage partner, as well as various financial decisions.

Contrary to the opinion of many, even the apostles, who were especially inspired in a manner not shared by anyone today, so that they were even able to write Scripture, appear to have made most of their decisions by applying divine precepts, instead of depending every step of the way on special guidance.

Let us acknowledge that the Acts of the Apostles indeed contains a number of instances where God directs his people supernaturally, as when he instructed Peter to go and preach to Cornelius in Acts 10. We do not deny this, but gladly admit that God may guide us this way whenever he wishes, and that special guidance may occur even nowadays. However, what we would like to show is that even the apostles did not always operate this way, that even for them, special guidance was the exception and not the rule.

Early in the letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you" (Romans 1:9-10). Paul does not say that God told him to visit them, but the apostle is praying that "by God's will" (that is, his sovereign will), he may be permitted to go.

And Paul's reason for his desire to visit these believers is not that God specifically told him to, but he says, "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (v. 11-12). He wishes to edify his fellow-believers in Christ, which of course is in line with biblical precepts.

He continues, "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles" (v. 13). It is Paul who "planned many times" to visit the Romans, but so far have been hindered in doing so. There is no mention of God telling him to go, nor is Paul aware of the impending obstacles as he plans his visit. Evidently, the apostle here is operating not by special guidance, but through responsible human reasoning governed by divine precepts.

Then, in 2 Corinthians 2:12-13, we read, "Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia." Paul says that the Lord had opened a door for him to preach, but because Titus, who had agreed to meet Paul, did not appear, this apostle turned away from this opportunity for ministry and went to Macedonia.

Did God tell him to leave Troas? Paul himself says that it was "the Lord" who created the opportunity for preaching the gospel there. Even without the historical background for this passage, one can readily see that Paul left not because of special revelation, but simply because "I did not find my brother Titus there." There are a number of similar passages in the Bible where it shows that the early church, although blessed with many miracles and instances of special guidance, did not operate solely on such, but depended on the precepts of God in their decision-making.

To quote the homiletics professor, Haddon Robinson, "Many people look back at the first century as a time of unique spiritual unity between God and man. Some see God mysteriously directing each action of the early believers and their congregations. But when we look at most of the decisions the apostles made, we find a surprising thing; they made decisions the way we make them. They looked at their circumstances and came up with the best solution available."²

He goes as far as to say, "We must face the fact: 'How do you know the will of God in making life's decisions?' is not a biblical question! The Bible never tells us to ask it. The Bible never gives us direction in answering it. And the pursuit of some personalized version of the 'will of God' often leads us toward disobedience. When we find ourselves facing the tough choices in life – those day-in, day-out decisions that make up the very fabric of our existence – we shouldn't seek special messages from God. Instead, we should ask, 'How do we develop the skills necessary to make wise and prudent choices?'"³

God does have an individual will, a "blueprint" if you will, for each person – and his plans for the elect are always good (Romans 8:28). We do not attempt to belittle this fact, but only to point out that the details of this blueprint are not always revealed to us, and therefore we are not to make decisions based on information we do not have. Rather, we are to live our lives following the directions provided through biblical precepts.

As the late James Montgomery Boice writes, "...God does indeed have a specific (though usually hidden) will for us...God does sometimes reveal that will in special situations...We may not know what that specific will is. We do not need to be under pressure to 'discover' it, fearing that if we miss it, somehow we will be doomed to a life outside the center of God's will or to his 'second best.' We are free to make decisions with what light and wisdom we possess. Nevertheless, we can know that God does have a

² Haddon W. Robinson, *Decision-Making by the Book*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Discovery House Publishers, 1998; p. 123.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

perfect will for us, that the Holy Spirit is praying for us in accordance with that will, and that this will of God for us will be done – because God has decreed it and because the Holy Spirit is praying for us in this area."⁴

Needless to say, we must affirm the biblical doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty in order to have the confidence that his unique plan will be fulfilled in our lives. Many who advocate dependence on subject guidance instead of the objective standard of Scripture do not believe that God exercises exhaustive control over every human event and decision, and thus inherent in their doctrine is the possibility that one may fail to hear God in a particular situation, and become trapped forever in his secondary or "permissive" will.

Within the biblical scheme, however, there is no such thing as God's permissive will – he does not bargain with us. A decision is either in accord with holiness and righteousness, in which case it is pleasing to him, or it runs contrary to his prescriptions for our thought and conduct, and is therefore sinful. God does not "permit" anything, but he actively decrees all that occurs. And under the power of his decrees, our decisions are either sinful, or they are not. Those who insist on human autonomy, the very reason for the fall of our first parents, resist this doctrine. But they could not even protest against God's sovereignty except by the power of his decree. On the other hand, the elect company delights in it, saying, "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns" (Revelation 19:6).

A major difficulty that many people have against this scriptural approach is that they do not believe the Bible provides enough information for them to make the "right" decision in every situation. There are several things that we may say in response.

First, what many people mean when they desire to know "God's will" in making their decisions is that they wish to discover the route by which they will achieve success according to worldly standards. Their primary interest is not to find the way of obedience that leads to God's pleasure, but rather the path that will bring them to fame, wealth, and comfort. The "right" decision in a business situation for them is not only one that pleases God in the sense of being a moral and wise decision, but must be also one that generates profits. One that leads to financial losses is assumed to be "wrong," even though it may not violate any of God's precepts. Not all who misunderstand the nature of God's will think this way, but many do, and this is the reason they are not satisfied with the biblical approach for walking in God's will.

For example, the Bible may not teach us what numbers to choose in order to win the lottery, but it gives us enough information so that we may make decisions concerning our relationship to the lottery that will be in perfect accordance with God's will. We may come to the conclusion that biblical precepts prevent us from participating in the first place, but that belongs to another discussion. The point is that the Bible contains all that we need to be perfect Christians, meaning that if we follow its teaching completely, we will never sin or depart from God's plan.

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Renewing Your Mind in a Mindless World*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1993; p. 124-125.

The Bible teaches that when we obey scriptural guidelines, we will not only be making moral decisions, but also wise ones, which will often result in success (Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1). The point is that motives stemming from greed and self-preservation should not be allowed to influence the definition of a "right" decision. Material success should not be considered a necessary product of making a correct decision, so that without it we consider ourselves to have made the "wrong" one, although many times this type of success will indeed be a natural consequence of making a biblical choice. Any decision that is in perfect accord with God's precepts, which include the principles of holiness and wisdom, is one that is pleasing to God.

Another way we may answer the objection against this biblical approach to decision-making is that the Bible itself claims to be sufficient for all of life; therefore, one who argues against the sufficiency of Scripture in providing comprehensive guidance is in fact casting doubt upon the integrity of God's word, which is blasphemy.

Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." And Peter says, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3). If we can be "equipped for every good work," and have "everything we need for life and godliness" through the knowledge the Scripture provides, it follows that if we always make decisions in strict compliance with the Bible, we will always be making the correct decisions, or ones that are in accordance with the will of God, and that we will not sin. It is when we make decisions that contradict the Bible that we go against God's will and commit sin.

Third, we answer that the deficiency is not in the Scripture, but in the ignorance of the person who considers the Bible to be insufficient for giving directions to all of life. The claim that the Bible does not give us enough information for making every decision and in discerning God's will is of necessity an unjustified assumption, rather than a conclusion reached by having searched through and comprehended the whole of Scripture.

At this point, there are some who suggest that special guidance (such as visions and prophecies) are still necessary for decision-making precisely because they do not know enough of what the Bible says. But the problem can only be solved by obtaining more biblical knowledge. It makes no sense for God to give us the Bible and tells us to base all of our decisions upon its precepts, and then inquire of him as to what we must do when we do not know what it says. It is our duty to make decisions in accordance with God's will, and the way to do that is first to learn what the Bible says, and then submit to its precepts when making decisions.

Granted, due to our deficiency in understanding, the right choice is not always immediately apparent, but this only means that we must become more diligent in our study and more careful in our reasoning. Not knowing what the Bible says about a certain

subject, or not knowing enough of the Bible to evaluate a certain situation, does not mean that the Bible itself lacks such information, or that the decision-making process is flawed.

The fact remains that the Bible claims to be sufficient, and if we profess to be Christians, we must accept this claim. Note that Peter teaches it is through the "knowledge of him" that we have "everything we need for life and godliness." We need to gain knowledge from the Scripture to make moral and wise decisions. There are no shortcuts. All decisions, from what one should have for dinner to his life vocation, are to be made through this same procedure. This is true even if special guidance has been granted, since visions and prophecies themselves must be judged by biblical precepts.

It is said often that God desires to communicate with his people "directly" in the sense of providing special guidance, such as in the form of visions, dreams, prophecies, an audible voice, or an inner impression or intuition. I do not argue that such things indeed happen, but my concern is that much of what is taught to Christians in this area gives undue attention toward special guidance instead of placing the emphasis on the sufficiency of Scripture.

One false teaching that contributes to misunderstandings on the subject of biblical guidance is that prayer should be a dialogue, or conversational in nature. Those who teach from this point of view say that God speaks most often when we pray, so we need to develop a listening type of prayer. However, nowhere does the Bible teach that prayer is a dialogue. Where prayer is taught or recorded in Scripture, it is most often a monologue, with the person addressing God with no response of the same kind.

If we recall the instances when God speaks to people in the Bible, we will notice that there is no direct and necessary relationship between prayer and hearing God in the sense that it is not true that God speaks to people most often when they are praying. In fact, it seems that the reverse is true – in most instances when God speaks, it is he who initiates the event, and not while the person is praying or even requesting to hear from God. One may object that there are examples to the contrary, but it is not my contention that God never speaks to people, or that he never speaks to someone who is praying. Rather, the assertion being made is that in and of itself prayer is not a dialogue with God, but consists only of man addressing God.

Often the argument is made that if God is our Father, then prayer should be a dialogue, since when we speak to our earthly father, it is never a monologue addressing him, but a dialogue involving interaction with him. This is true, but the problem is that we do not fall down to worship our earthly fathers as we do God, nor do we sing songs of praise to him, nor do we call our conversations with our earthly fathers as "prayer." Neither do our earthly fathers write down his will for our lives in a book, or better yet, doing so through prophets he has sent. In addition, we do not approach our earthly fathers through mediators, while our relationship to God is only possible through the mediational ministry of Jesus Christ (John 14:6; 1 Timothy 2:5).

Obviously, our relationship with God is not exactly like the one with our earthly fathers. Those who use this analogy to argue for a dialogical prayer life commit the error of applying it indiscriminately. A negative side effect of this teaching is the pressure it generates upon God's people to hear him speak directly when they pray. And when God does not speak, they either imagine that he does and thus suffer delusion, or they become disappointed or worried about their relationship with God, when there may be nothing especially wrong with their spiritual condition except for the common deficiencies Christians have as they develop in maturity.

Professor Jay Adams, responding to a Sunday school lesson he once heard on the subject, writes, "In his explanation...the teacher failed to rightly tell us the place of prayer in the process of receiving guidance from God. His idea – a very common one, unfortunately – was that when you pray, you must be still and listen for some sort of answer from God. This error echoes J. Oliver Buswell, who wrote, 'Our conversation with God is reciprocal. God speaks to us while we pray, though we do not always recognize his voice.' Is God's revelatory guidance so hard to recognize? The New Testament examples of guidance do not give us any indication that this is so. Moreover, where does the Bible speak of prayer as conversational? Conversations, of course, are reciprocal. But prayer in Scripture is always represented as man addressing God; never are we told to listen for an answer in prayer."⁵

Adams here mentions an issue that we have not yet addressed, namely, those who teach that we should constantly be listening for God's voice, whether in the context of dialogical prayer or not, also portrays it as difficult to hear clearly. Usually, they may say something akin to what Buswell says above, that "we do not always recognize his voice." Or, they may say that, "God is often speaking, but we are not always listening."

But where in the Bible are we instructed to be always on the lookout for God's voice in special guidance? In addition, God's voice is never described as ambiguous, requiring inner stillness and much concentration to hear correctly. In the Bible, God never fails to get his message across. This teaching results in many who claim to have heard God speak, but are still not sure about the path that they should take, since in reality they are not sure if God spoke at all, or what he said if he did.

What is said here may sound so unusual to some readers that, lest anyone mistake me for being a cessationist, I need to affirm that I believe God still speaks in the form of special guidance (such as visions, prophecies, and an audible voice), but the present point is that he speaks clearly, and in whatever way he chooses to speak, he is able to overcome the distortion and resistance in our minds to the point that we should be able to grasp the message he is communicating.

In fact, this is why God's voice is heard most loudly from Scripture, since it consists of written documents that are open to public examination, so that an entire community of God's people may come together and carefully exegete the biblical passages to learn

⁵ Jay E. Adams, *The Christian's Guide to Guidance*; Woodruff, South Carolina: Timeless Texts, 1998; p. 32-33.

God's will and precepts. This decreases the distortion resulting from the noetic effects of sin, and makes the Bible a far superior form of guidance than any form of supernatural manifestation – if we will only submit to its own claim, that it contains sufficient information for all of life.

As Robinson observes, "This God-breathed book is not only inspired, but when we understand and apply it correctly, it is all-sufficient, giving us all we need for all life's decisions so that we might be all that God wants us to be. For us to live according to the Scriptures is to live in the will of God."⁶

The "voice" of God does not always refer to his audible voice or special guidance. For example, Exodus 15:26 says, "If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you." That we must listen to his "voice" is said in the context of admonitions to "do what is right in his eyes," to "pay attention to his commands," and to "keep all his decrees." To listen to God's voice here simply means to obey the Scripture, and indeed the Law of Moses was received through the audible voice of God. The Bible is God's voice for us today.

Another verse sometimes used to encourage an active search for God's special guidance is John 10:27, where Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." But here he refers to coming to God for salvation. Jesus says that the only way one may come to God is through him, and his sheep – that is, those whom God has chosen beforehand to be saved – will hear his voice, and thus come to be saved by faith in him. In theological terms, he is saying that through the gospel of Jesus Christ, the effectual calling or summon of God is extended toward the elect company, who is regenerated by the Spirit, and will then respond in repentance and faith, resulting in justification and sanctification. The verse has nothing to do with special guidance.

What about Psalm 46:10, which says, "Be still and know that I am God"? Many distort the text to say that Christians should practice being still inwardly, especially during times of prayer, so that they may receive guidance from God. However, the verse does not say, "Be quiet so that you may hear from God"; rather, judging from its context, the intended meaning is closer to, "Shut up! Stop! And realize that I am in charge!" The NLT translates, "Be silent, and know that I am God!" And the GNT has it as, "Stop fighting and know that I am God."

The surrounding verses provide us with the proper context from which to understand verse 10: "Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire. 'Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.' The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress" (Psalm 46:8-11). The verse does not have special guidance in view, nor does it intend to provide instruction for prayer.

⁶ Robinson, p. 31.

The view we are currently combating teaches that even though visions and other spectacular forms of guidance are relatively rare, receiving directions through what is often called the "inward witness" or "still small voice" should occur quite frequently – that is, an inaudible voice of the Spirit communicating information intuitively to our inner man. But look at the text from which this concept comes: "And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:11-13, KJV).

Unless one reads the passage with the "inward witness" teaching already presupposed, it is unlikely he would conclude that the "still small voice" refers to an *inaudible* voice or an inner impression. Rather, most people would naturally, and correctly, understand the expression to be referring to an *audible* voice, only that it is "still" and "small." Verse 13 plainly states that "a voice" spoke to Elijah.

The matter becomes more obvious when we read from two other translations: "And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing" (NASB); "After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper" (NIV). There is no reason to understand what Elijah received as an inaudible voice or an inner impression.

This is a common difficulty encountered by those who teach this form of special guidance, namely, the texts that they use for support teach a form of special guidance that is more spectacular and unambiguous than what they are attempting to promote. The present passage indicates that Elijah heard an audible voice, not an inaudible one. If we are to follow his example, we should be expecting to hear an audible voice to guide us, and not inner impressions.

Then, there are areas in which some teachers instruct Christians to hear from God when the Bible explicitly tells us to decide based on certain principles. For example, in the area of giving: "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). It is common to hear some ministers say, "Let the Holy Spirit tell you how much to give," but the Bible says, "Each man should give what *he* has decided."

This does not mean that whatever one chooses to give will be the correct amount, since there are relevant biblical precepts that govern proper giving. Among other things, Paul emphasizes cheerfulness (9:7), generosity (v. 11), and gratitude (v. 11). If one decides to be stingy, or if he gives reluctantly, he is already out of God's will – there is no need for

special guidance to tell him how and what to give, or whether his giving has been pleasing to God.

Proverbs 3:5 is a favorite verse for those who teach that we should receive special guidance on a regular basis: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." According to them, this verse teaches us not to trust our own reasoning, and therefore instead of thinking about what constitutes a moral and wise course of action in a given situation, we should quiet our minds and listen to God for special guidance, usually received in the form of an inner voice or impression.

However, there is nothing in this verse that would indicate this. In the context of Proverbs, the verse simply means that instead of making decisions independent of biblical precepts, we should reason according to God's words – such as what is written in Proverbs itself.

Later in Proverbs, we read, "Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise; apply your heart to what I teach, for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart and have all of them ready on your lips. So that your trust may be in the LORD, I teach you today, even you. Have I not written thirty sayings for you, sayings of counsel and knowledge, teaching you true and reliable words, so that you can give sound answers to him who sent you?" (22:17-21).

Note that as we "pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise," and become so proficient with them that we "have all of them ready on [our] lips," our "trust" will then "be in the LORD." The exhortation to trust in the Lord means, therefore, to rely on and reason in accordance to the words of Scripture rather than the ideas we would otherwise base our lives upon, perhaps those based on human customs and our own invention. To trust God is to think and act in conformity with the Bible; in the context of Proverbs, it has nothing to do with special guidance.

It is not possible for us to cover all the passages that have been distorted regarding this subject, so I will put an end to this section by reminding the reader to examine the context and background of those passages being used to support common but erroneous teachings on biblical guidance, and see if they intend to say what the teachers claim that they do. We will conclude with a brief discussion on the role of God's sovereign will in decision-making.

God's sovereign will does not interfere when one tries to make a decision based on scriptural teaching. However, the Bible does teach that we must acknowledge the operation of his sovereign power even as we make our own plans: "Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that'" (James 4:13-15). That is to say, if it is within God's sovereign will for it to happen, then we will live and do this or that. But from our perspective, we still plan what the "this or that" will

be, while the planning process itself is also governed by God's sovereign will, since nothing can occur independent of it.

I may decide that I should go to New York tomorrow. Although I need not always state it explicitly, it should be assumed that, if it is within God's sovereign will, then I will live and be able to carry out this plan to visit New York. Acknowledging God's sovereign will is a matter of piety and humility. Although the operation of his divine power is a constant reality, it does not interfere with the actual direction of my planning. My reasoning and decisions are to be governed by biblical precepts, but how things will actually turn out depends on his sovereign plans and purposes. Therefore, the acknowledgment of God's decretive will is more than a meaningless gesture, but a humble recognition of something that is real and powerful.

We find in the New Testament that an explicit acknowledgment of God's sovereignty is an integral aspect of Christian culture and language: "But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have" (1 Corinthians 4:19); "But as he left, he promised, 'I will come back if it is God's will.' Then he set sail from Ephesus" (Acts 18:21); "When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, 'The Lord's will be done'" (Acts 21:14); "...so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed" (Romans 15:32). Sincere recognition of God's sovereign power over all that exists and obedience to his holy precepts are what must be restored to the church in our day.

4. THE DEATH OF A CHRISTIAN

Speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Scripture says in Hebrews 2:14-15, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

If considered carefully, it is not difficult to perceive that the motive behind many of the thoughts and actions of unbelievers is precisely this – a "fear of death" translatable into an uncertainty on how to handle the seeming finality of physical demise, or worse yet, the uncertainty of whether such spells the termination of one's existence in the first place, controls the philosophies, pursuits, and plans of those who do not have the Christian hope. On the other hand, our text explains that those whom our Lord has saved have been set free from slavery, which in this context apparently means a bondage of the soul resulting from the fear of death.

As surprising as it may sound, there are those who misconstrue the Bible's teaching regarding the believer's relationship with death such that they assert that Christians need not die at all due to the redemptive work of Christ. The fact that Christians die – well, that all Christians in centuries past had died – only demonstrates a failure to appropriate the promise of God, perhaps due to a lack of faith or understanding.

Those familiar with my writings will know that I would be the first to discount experience and empirical data in favor of biblical revelation. This is not due to a naïve fideistic outlook that ignores evidence and arguments, but a realization that experience by itself teaches nothing and that pure empiricism results in epistemological skepticism.

Knowledge comes from divine revelation and valid deductions from it, and can never come from purely empirical research. In apologetics, our argument is that unless *Christian* theism – that is, the entire Bible as a unit – is presupposed, one cannot prove or even know *anything*. Rationality, knowledge, ethical absolutes, and empirical science become void of any justification or authoritative basis. By skillfully demonstrating this point alone, the Christian is able to stifle all arguments against him from every existent or conceivable non-Christian worldview and religion.

The reason unbelievers are able to know any truth at all, such as the law of noncontradiction or their own names, is because they already presuppose Christian theism as an innate *a priori* assumption, although at the same time they refuse to admit it, even to themselves, thus resulting in eternal damnation as their punishment (Romans 1:18-32). Genuine intellectual illumination is only possible by a humble submission to God's revelation in Scripture, and this in turn only occurs through the regeneration of the soul sovereignly initiated and granted by God. Without going into the details of such an epistemology, this is the foundation of the worldview we have received from Scripture.

Accordingly, I agree that just because every Christian dies (so far) does not mean that every Christian *should* die. However, the view asserting that the redemptive work of Christ prevents the physical death of believers is indeed a distortion of biblical teaching. It is the purpose of what follows to set forth, albeit briefly and incompletely, the biblical teaching on the nature of death, and the Christian's relationship to it.

Although the work of Christ in purchasing redemption for the elect has been completed, the application of redemption is not. For example, although he has obtained new life for everyone who would be saved, all the elect have not yet been regenerated, and many have not yet been born. Likewise, while immortality belongs to the Christian, its full application has not yet been realized or manifested. Theologians, for this reason, speak of the "already" and the "not yet" in the fulfillment of God's purposes and plan in history.

The Bible refers to death as "the last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26) even when it says that Christ has conquered all through his death and resurrection. Hebrews 9:27 says, "man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." The apostle James also reminds his Christian readers of their mortality: "Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that'" (James 4:13-15).

The false teaching here spoken of, namely, one that says Christians do not need to die physically, is not common; therefore, let the above suffice as a refutation, and we will continue to examine further the nature of death. A major error committed by those who hold to the false position is that they have confused the different senses with which the word "death" may be used. It may of course refer to physical death, but it often indicates a spiritual separation and estrangement from God. And so the Scripture says Christ saved us while we were "dead in transgressions" (Ephesians 2:5).

Physical death is the result of sin: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). The question then is, if the Christian has been saved from sin, why must he still go through physical death? As mentioned above, although the act of obtaining redemption for his people has been completed, the full application of redemption has not yet occurred.

In any case, the redemptive work of Christ has so altered the meaning of death for the Christian that we must not consider it as exactly the same experience as that of the unbeliever. Of course, the physiological aspect may be the same, and the souls of both groups continue to exist after the bodies have expired. But from the point of conversion, death has been robbed of its oppressive power in the mind of the believer, so that his entire outlook and purpose for the rest of his life is no longer subject to or governed by the fear of death, as is the case with unbelievers. His life takes on real and lasting value, and his priorities and expectations have been drastically altered. All this can only occur if

death is no longer perceived as final or damning; otherwise, everything that one does remains meaningless and fleeting.

The above is to point out that even though the Christian does not possess physical immortality until God consummates his redemption, in a very real sense, he has eternal life at the moment of conversion: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24); "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness" (Romans 6:13); "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death" (1 John 3:14).

Those who believe in Christ have passed from death to life. We have eternal life now, and we have been made alive in Christ so that the "death" that means spiritual separation and estrangement from God has been abolished. We may have fellowship with God now. The full application of redemption to our bodies will occur at the resurrection of the saints, when Christ returns. Meanwhile, God provides us with physical healing (James 5:15) as a token of the greater things to come.

It is true that not all Christians will die, since many Christians will be alive when Christ comes, and they "who are still alive and are left will be caught up" (1 Thessalonians 4:17) to meet the Lord. At this time, they will receive their resurrected, immortal body. Paul writes, "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:51-53).

In another place, Paul explains, "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life" (2 Corinthians 5:1-4). Note that we will retain, in a sense, the same body that we have now, but it will be transformed into one of immortal and indestructible substance, no longer subject to sin and corruption. Our mortality will be "swallowed up by life," and we will be clothed "with the imperishable."

The apostle is careful to note that those who have already died will not be at a disadvantage at the coming of Christ. He says, "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven,

with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-16).

Those who have already deceased when Christ comes will be resurrected first, and then those who are alive will follow. Scripture speaks of the resurrection of Christ as the guarantee that believers will also be raised. Since Christ was raised, we know that it is possible, that it has been done, and that God has promised it to all those who love and believe in his Son. We may still lament the lost of believing loved ones, but we realize that they have not perished, and that our separation is only temporary. Therefore, although we may grieve at the death of a Christian, it is unlike what "the rest of men, who have no hope" experience. Our sorrow is at the same time infused with hope and a sweetness that is beyond the grasp or attainment of unbelievers. "Therefore encourage each other with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

How tragic and final is the fate of one who dies without Christ! Surely he will yearn for his own annihilation in order to escape the punishment God will inflict on him. But while in this life he may consider himself the captain of his own soul and the master of his own destiny, in death he does not even have the power to destroy himself, and must forever suffer the infinite vengeance of the wrath of God.

Death for the Christian is no longer a punishment for sin, although it means precisely that for those who do not believe. Therefore, the death of a Christian is not inconsistent with the redemptive work of Christ on his behalf. Paul says, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). To "go on living in the body...will mean fruitful labor" (v. 22), while "to depart and be with Christ...is better by far" (v. 23). Thus, for the Christian, neither this life or the one to come punishes, but one consists of "fruitful labor" for the kingdom of God, while the other is to be with Christ, which is even better.

Death means the turning over of the unbeliever to a permanent state of torturous suffering for a life lived in rebellion against God, but death for the Christian is simply the *means* by which God translates him to a permanent state of blessedness and rest. Revelation 14:13 says, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord...they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them."

If "to die is gain" for the believer, this means that every Christian should *want* to die eventually – that is, after a life of fruitful labor for Christ. As Calvin says when commenting on 2 Corinthians 5:8, "True faith begets not merely a contempt of death, but even a desire for it."¹ To the extent that the fear of death lingers in our minds, generating the desire to endlessly delay it, we have not fully understood the gospel message. 2 Corinthians 5:5-8 says, "Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord."

¹ J. Graham Miller, *Calvin's Wisdom*; Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992; p. 73.

When we come to understand what God has in store for the Christian, we will also "prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." Meanwhile, we do not desire to die one moment before what God has appointed, since we know our lives belong to him wholly, and as faithful Christians, we treasure the opportunity for study, evangelism, work, and caring for others for as much time as God gives us on this earth.

Do not think of death as if it is something to be avoided at all costs. Surely the weakness of our frame might cause us to shrink from pain and danger, but spiritual maturity implies an increasing confidence in God's promise, and that our understanding of the death of a Christian will rule and anchor our souls in peace – "We live by faith, not by sight." When the time comes, the Christian should embrace death as a means to take them immediately to Christ's presence.

It is the unbelievers who should constantly seek to avoid death, since death to them is indeed something that they would want to avoid, given the great horrors that are in store for them. But Christ has conquered death for us, not so that we will not have to die, but that we will not fear death but welcome it as we will then be with the Lord. We should focus on fulfilling our purpose on this earth, serving him with our whole being, and then look forward to die and be with Christ. In other words, death is good – very good – if you are a Christian.

To prevent a misapplication of this doctrine, I should observe that even though death is to be desired for the Christian at the right time, our transition to the next life should not involve a willing violation of God's moral precepts on our part. Since God's moral precepts are to be enforced at all times and on all occasions, it is applicable regarding the way one is to die. This means that the basic Christian position is against suicide and euthanasia. I will not devote space to discuss these sensitive and often complex issues at this point, but let it suffice to say that our understanding of the goodness of death for the Christian must be applied correctly, that is, consistent with the divine precepts of Scripture. Since the Christian's life has been infused with purpose and meaning by God even before death, it is only natural that he desires to live the full duration of his life in service to God on this earth.

Unless Jesus comes before the time, we will all go through death one day, but either way, our time on earth is limited. We must therefore heed the words of Christ in John 9:4, "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work." Commenting on this verse, one writer remarks that it contains "a good argument to persuade every Christian to work while the time of his life lasteth, for the night of death will come, when no man can any longer work out his salvation; but as the tree falleth, so it must lie..."²

Not everyone thinks like this. In Luke 12, Jesus tells the following parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say

² *Matthew Poole's Commentary on the Holy Bible, Vol. 3*; Hendrickson Publishers, p. 325.

to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (v. 16-20).

Many think that religion and life's ultimate issues are for old and retired people to consider, and those who are younger should spend their time pursuing wealth, relationships, and greatness. And once they have all these, they should go get more. But Jesus says that anyone can die *today*, if God so wills. All the plans and labor of the unbeliever then result in futility. Jesus concludes the parable saying, "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God" (v. 21). If death is inevitable, and we continue to exist after death, then we better make it our life's goal to become "rich toward God," and not just accumulate material assets. Our understanding of death carries tremendous implications for how we conduct our present life.

Jesus warns, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions...Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes" (v. 15, 23). In their fierce pursuit for social status and financial riches, the modern man does not stop to think about life and death, nor does he understand these ultimate issues. All he knows is to build bigger barns. God calls such a person foolish; his failure to reckon with his mortality and the spiritual dimension of life has blinded him to what really matters. He has no answers to the ultimate questions that everyone must ask and settle. As a rational creature, he nevertheless lives as a beast, with the lowly concerns and priorities of an animal.

In contrast, Christians "have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10), so that insofar as we abide in Christ, we are able to live with a divine perspective that renders the present time meaningful, while preparing our hearts to meet the Lord when it ends. Paul says, "But you, brothers, are not in darkness...But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him" (1 Thessalonians 5:4, 8-10).

Let us be sober-minded, and pray that God would "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). Christians need to contemplate death; it is wise to do so. Yet, we do not think about our mortality in a fearful way, since Christ has set us free from the fear of death (Hebrews 2:15). Death does not plunge the Christian into despair, but the idea is exciting and fulfilling, for "to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Although it is no longer oppressive to the faithful believer, death reminds us that our time is limited on this earth, and therefore every moment lived in rebellion to God is a moment lost, gone forever.

Perhaps the KJV has confused some readers in this regard. Ephesians 5:16 says, "Redeeming the time, because the days are evil," and a parallel verse in Colossians 4:5

reads, "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time." There is a teaching saying that God will give wisdom to one who has wasted his life, so that he may "buy back" lost time, and through wisdom, reach the place where he would have been if he had not squandered past moments.

This makes very little sense, since it implies that if I had not wasted any time, God might not have then given me wisdom to speed my progress. Would it not be better if I had pursued the right priorities from the start, and still receive wisdom from God to pursue them efficiently? We should stop deceiving ourselves; lost time is lost forever. Unless by the special grace of God, one who has been striving after the knowledge of God and a life worthy of his calling in Christ, will always go further spiritually than one who delays through rebellion and sin. But God is very merciful indeed, so we do not always suffer the full effect of our negligence.

In any case, it seems that this teaching would not have arisen if someone had simply examined other translations. The NASB renders the verses as, "Making the most of your time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:16), and "Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity" (Colossians 4:5). Likewise, the NIV translates, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity" (Colossians 4:5). More than a few false doctrines have originated from such negligence. Paul is not saying to his readers that God will help them make up for lost time, but seeing that they are already Christians, he is saying, "Walk in wisdom! Make the most of your time *now!*"

Let us also take into account the surrounding verses from Ephesians 5: "Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is" (v. 15-17). We must live our lives wisely, making the most of our time. This is an evil generation, therefore do not be foolish, acting as unbelievers, but let us understand and obey the divine precepts of God. Life on this earth should consist of "fruitful labor" (Philippians 1:22) for God.

Some people may think that since we will live with God forever once we die, it is reasonable to focus on material things now, and only begin to focus on spiritual matters as we near death, or even after death! A consistent application of biblical truth demands the opposite conclusion – since our existence continues after death, and since we cannot carry any material possessions or accomplishments to the next life (Job 1:21), let us focus on divine matters and accumulate spiritual riches.

The Bible also indicates that what we do in this life will influence our station in the next (Matthew 25:14-30; 1 Corinthians 3:11-15), since there will be a judgment when we go through the transition into the new creation; therefore, let us be wise and live *coram deo*, as before the face of God – now, and not later. Christians who live as atheists now, and plan only to live the faith they profess after they have achieved some carnal goal, reached some worldly plateau, or when they near death, are deceiving themselves. Such thinking may indicate that the life of God is not in them; they have never been regenerated. God

may well grant them genuine conversion at a later time (2 Timothy 2:25), but meanwhile we must evaluate them in the light of the words of Christ: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21).

Now the conclusion of the whole matter is this: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).