

DOCTRINE AND OBEDIENCE

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1. Church and Seminary¹

If seminaries are necessary, they are necessary only because churches do not have adequate teaching ministries. Of course, even when a church has an adequate teaching ministry, a seminary might still have certain advantages, such as a larger community of scholars, a larger library, and so on. However, if the church is serious about its teaching ministry, then the difference between its resources and a seminary's resources will only be one of degree. A church could have its own community of scholars (teaching elders, etc.), a good-sized library, and other resources for teaching and research, so that a seminary, even if useful, is still not absolutely necessary for ministerial training.

The training model of Christ (Jesus and the Twelve) and the apostles (Paul and Timothy) is more than sufficient. If it seems insufficient, it is only because churches have not really adopted it. The leaders of a church should be able to train their own partners and successors, instead of having to send their people to seminaries to be taught by people that nobody in the church knows, or worse, to hire someone from the outside with whom the church has never had a relationship.

Some seminary graduates are stupid and arrogant, and unworthy of ministry. Most cases are not even examples of "knowledge puffeth up" (1 Corinthians 8:1), but it is the belief that they have knowledge that puffs them up, since they in fact know very little. It is impossible to tell whether a person knows anything just because he has a degree.

I started to exhibit an interest in biblical matters when I was in elementary school, and as this continued for a number of years, my parents wanted to make sure that I was not misled in my studies. So they brought me to several seminary-trained pastors and gave me the opportunity to discuss theological issues with them. They could not answer my questions. When our positions differed, they could not refute what I said. And they did not know the biblical passages we discussed half as well as I did.

I knew very little, and some of my beliefs were false. In fact, I was not even converted at the time. But these pastors, who were trained in seminary and had spent much time in ministry, could not properly instruct or refute even a child like me. It was not because I was especially clever, but they were especially incompetent, despite their years of training and experience. Of course, not all seminary graduates are like this, but the point is that just because a person has a seminary degree does not mean that he is capable.

If I were to hire a seminary graduate from outside of my circle, instead of promoting someone that I have known and trained for years, there is no chance that I would allow him to teach my congregation or my audience right away. First, although he has a seminary degree, I still have no idea if he knows anything or if he is good at anything, because a degree never proves knowledge or competence. Second, knowledge and competence are

¹ Adapted from email correspondence.

not the only qualifications for ministry, but a minister must be above reproach in his character.

So I might put him on probation for a while, and make him do all sorts of menial work. I would make him haul boxes. I would make him scrub toilets.² I would make him serve coffee to janitors and secretaries. I would make him help in the nursery so that he can change diapers and mop up vomit. If he thinks that he is too good for all of this, then he is no good to the ministry. If, fresh out of the seminary, he thinks that he is already some "man of God" that is too important to do anything other than teaching and writing, and to have people sit at his feet to hear his wisdom, then he is a useless piece of trash, and he is so stupid that he does not know it.

Nobody in the organization would be intimidated by his seminary degree. The more he talks about it or tries to impress people with it, the more we will look down on him and humiliate him. If he ever introduces himself as "doctor" so-and-so, then he might as well walk right out the door and never come back (Matthew 23:7-12). If he has the goods, then he can show us by his humble and excellent service.

There are numerous other details that I could notice. I would take him on errands and meals, and I would watch how he treats the waiters and the doormen. I would casually suggest that we meet at a certain time, and then see if he arrives early (I always do). If he is married, I would watch how he interacts with his wife, to see whether he selfishly lords it over her, or whether he uses his authority to serve her with sacrificial love.

When someone is applying for ministry, all of these things are relevant, and then he must also meet the proper intellectual and doctrinal standards. If it is someone that I have trained, I would have all the information I need about him, but a seminary degree tells me none of these things. Consider the lessons and tests based on Luke 14:7-11, Proverbs 29:5, James 1:19 (also Proverbs 10:19), and others.

So what if he has a seminary degree? Even if he comes from one of the best seminaries, it might still mean that he is more likely to be full of pride, unbelief, false doctrines, and the traditions of men. It is easy to train up someone more spiritually and intellectually competent in several months to a year. If he is too "holy" or educated to mop up vomit or scrub the toilet, then I do not want him to even lick stamps for my church or ministry. He is not good enough to be the speed bump on the church parking lot, and he can forget about being a teacher. On the other hand, nothing that I have described should pose a problem to a genuine servant, one who is not trying to be a master or a celebrity to God's people (Matthew 20:25-28).

All of this applies to me as well – the day that I consider myself too much of a "man of God" to scrub the church toilet is the day that I have become as a filthy toilet to God. And it would not be enough to do a half-baked job – if I scrub a toilet, I am going to make it

² Cleaning toilets ought to be a joy – the stuff that you scrub off the toilet is much less stubborn and much more fragrant than many of the people that you will deal with in ministry. If you cannot even handle toilets – and what you find in them – how will you handle people?

shine. I will not pretend that I have had as many opportunities to perform menial work as many other people, but whenever the demand was placed upon me, I did a good job with a good attitude.

To illustrate from an early experience, all the students at my high school were required to work in the kitchen for one year. I was placed under an elderly supervisor who was accustomed to handling spoiled and grumbling students – kitchen work was considered the worst on campus. Probably expecting another lazy and whiny worker, the supervisor was very harsh and critical at first. But I worked so hard and so well that her attitude toward me was changed after several days, and she even started giving me preferential treatment.

I was promoted from the smelliest and most disgusting tasks in the kitchen (like dumping leftovers from people's dishes and trays into a hole where all of this mixed discarded food had been for many hours), to repetitive tasks like peeling potatoes (thousands of small red potatoes!), and finally to the front of the kitchen to arrange the items on the counters and to serve food to the students.

My favorite tasks were the disgusting and the repetitive ones. People stayed away when I was doing the disgusting tasks (I did not think it was that bad, but others did), and I did not have to think about what I was doing for the repetitive ones, so that while I was working, I would spend all those hours thinking on Scripture, and on the sermon that I would preach that week.

On the last day, when the year was over and it was time for me to leave, the full-time adult workers at the kitchen were in tears – they were weeping and trembling. This is the power of the normal biblical work ethic. I was not like this because I was born this way, but because I was a Christian, sovereignly changed and nurtured by God.

Jesus left us an example. Since our Lord and Teacher was willing to perform a servant's work, we dare not consider ourselves greater than our master (John 13:14–17). It would be unbiblical to require a minister to do menial work as part of his regular duties (Acts 6:2), but he should never consider himself above it, and he should gladly participate whenever he is needed. In fact, a leader should make a point of humbling himself and setting an example by helping with the lowly tasks at church, without neglecting his main duties.

If I were to train or test someone that I have hired from the outside, then I will have to pay him a reasonable salary while he is on probation, and meanwhile he would not be doing the work that I hired him to do in the first place. Moreover, I have been using humility and work ethic only as examples – there are many other things that I need to test and teach him. But if I were to promote someone from within my own church or ministry, he would have already been trained and tested for a long time.

There are some things that a seminary can do to train and test their students when it comes to humility. For example, it can make the students do all the janitorial work. But seminaries might consider this unfeasible for various reasons, and those that are willing to implement something like this cannot make it work as well as a church can. Also, if the students do

this sort of work as a school requirement, then they might not perceive its significance and would just go through the motions, and the work would be much less humiliating to the proud (which makes the training less meaningful and effective) than if they were in the minority, as would be the case if someone is trained and tested in a church community. In general, a church is the better environment for raising up its own workers and leaders.

2. Seminary and Elitism

I have never been to seminary, and for various reasons, I do not plan to. I have friends who went into seminary believing the Bible, but then came out with all sorts of stupid ideas, saying that the Bible is "ambiguous" and "not clear" even on issues like how a person gets converted to Christ! What is that? Maybe I am just too naïve, but I thought that seminaries are supposed to teach the Word, not undermine its authority.

I guess what I am looking for is advice. How do I deal with people who are my friends, but who are now very antagonistic...? They are hard to reason with, because there is an arrogance – unless I know the original languages, and have put in my time in seminary, well, then I do not "belong," I do not really "know the issues," and I am not "nuanced" enough. Then, when I attempt to question a point in their doctrinal system, they get really upset.

This is elitism. The elitists often offer no arguments against their opponents, and when they do, their arguments often fail. The real issue is that they are usually not the elite at all, but only arrogant fools, driven by their pride and delusion.

Elitism is related to Pharisaism. The Pharisees demanded proof of divine authority from John the Baptist, Christ, and the apostles, but by this they had in mind human credentials, because they confused or equated the two. Human approval was the nature and extent of their own credentials, and their qualifications amounted to only this – mere men approving one another.

This is the nature of a seminary degree. It does not indicate divine approval, but only human approval. This does not mean that a seminary degree is evil, since human approval can sometimes coincide with divine approval. Nevertheless, human approval remains what it is, so that we must never think of a seminary degree as more than a badge of mere human approval, and we need more than human approval if we are to be God's messengers.

There are always people who have greater credentials than the elitist, and who affirm a different view. It is unnecessary to bring in people with greater credentials. Just cite from their books. Does the elitist surrender? Is he reduced to silence? If he is a consistent elitist, then he should; however, he is probably going to fight on, although he might suddenly lose interest in comparing credentials.

Most seminary graduates are incompetent. They have learned enough to look down on others, but not enough to know what they are talking about. This is easy to understand. If you have been to college, you might have realized that after graduation, you still knew relatively little about your major – you were still far from being an expert. And if you had

obtained an advanced degree, even a doctorate, you might have realized that although you have gotten better, you were still not very good.

The most competent thinkers are those who diligently study, train, and reflect outside of, after, and sometimes without college or seminary. Paul writes that one must work hard to become a workman that can rightly handle the word of truth. In my writings, I have offered numerous examples of the foolish mistakes made by even seasoned professors. Anyone who thinks that he is something special when he comes out of a seminary, even if he has earned a doctorate degree, is to be dismissed and despised.

There is no formula in dealing with these people, since their personalities and responses vary. You should pray for God to give you wisdom and for the Spirit to work. But I can suggest several options.

(1) Tell them what you think.

Make all your criticisms and complaints explicit, and confront them with these, then keep pressing the point and refuse to relent. You should tell them what you said to me about them:

They are hard to reason with, because there is an arrogance – unless I know the original languages, and have put in my time in seminary, well, then I do not "belong," I do not really "know the issues," and I am not "nuanced" enough. Then, when I attempt to question a point in their doctrinal system, they get really upset.

(2) Use their credentials against them.

Since they have seminary degrees and you do not, then they should know what they are talking about even when you do not. According to their standard, if they defeat you, this is the way it should be, and it is no great achievement, so that they should not gloat and you should not feel ashamed. But if you defeat them, what is their excuse? They went through a program of specialized training and they are still not as good as you? Are they complete idiots, totally stupid and useless? They have lost all authority and credibility. Make this clear to them, then point your finger at them and laugh, and laugh, and laugh. Mock them. Humiliate them.

Moreover, once a person claims a private right to discuss certain matters because he has the proper human credentials, then it follows that he has no right to discuss all other matters on which he does not have the proper human credentials. You have not affirmed this premise, but he has, so other than his specialization he must now be silent about everything else, whether it is physics, politics, sports, accounting, cooking, parenting, the weather – everything. Push the issue further, so that if he has a degree in New Testament studies, he must be silent when it comes to the Old Testament, theology, apologetics, ministry, and all other biblically related subjects.

Once a person appeals to his degree to silence you or to avoid discussion with you, then he is stuck with this. If he claims that he has a right to address a topic and you do not because he is the one who has the relevant degree, then by his own standard he can no longer address the topics outside of his specialization. So from now on, anytime he speaks outside of his specialization, even if it is only a sentence or a clause, and even if it is only a casual mention of the traffic or weather, confront him and criticize him. Crush him under his own standard. Keep at it for the rest of his life, or until he surrenders.

(3) Take the humble position.

Sometimes it is strategically advantageous to first take the lowly position when dealing with an arrogant person. Timidly ask him, since he knows so much, to explain his position and the reasons for it. If he understands the subject so well, he should be able to explain and defend himself. If he cannot, then wonder aloud if it is because he does not understand the subject after all. So take the low position and let him speak, and speak, and speak. As he does this, consider what he says and record all his errors, no matter how small. Then, when it is your turn, list all the mistakes and bury him with them. Make each error a whole new topic and challenge him to defend it.

(4) Hurt their pride.

Arrogance makes people vulnerable, because you can hurt their pride. To one, you could deride his seminary, and say that you would rather not go at all than to go to that one. To another, you could insult him and incite him to debate with you, and then take him down hard. The purpose is not only to win, but you might be saving him from a sinful life and futile ministry.

(5) Expose them to the audience.

Sometimes there are people listening to the conversation. If your opponent attempts to bully you by appealing to his human credentials, you can seize on that and expose his pride and incompetence to the audience. If someone tries to bully me like this, then he is trapped. I would pound on that again, and again, and again, and again. He will never hear the end of it. I will make it so embarrassing and unbearable that he would regret having gone to seminary.

Every time he makes a mistake, I will speak directly to the audience and point out how stupid he is even when he has a seminary degree – the more advanced the degree, the worse it makes him look. Every time he cannot refute me or defend his view, I will turn to the audience and point out what a failure he is even when he has superior credentials. Then I will laugh, and laugh, and laugh in his face, and I will invite all the other people to laugh at him with me. This is not only to vindicate myself, but the audience needs to hear this, so that they would learn to see through the elitists and stop being intimidated by them.

(6) Explore non-rhetorical options.

You can call their professors, and tell them about the situation. In the unlikely scenario that the professors are responsible believers and not worthless hirelings, they might acknowledge the problem and do something to help you. They might even rebuke their former students or make them discuss the topics with you.

If I find out that someone I have trained has become an elitist, I would rebuke him and make him ask forgiveness from those he has offended. If he refuses, then he is a piece of spiritual garbage, and I would denounce and humiliate him. Elitism is sin, and the teachers who do not correct this in their students partake in their sin.

Elitism is sin, but it is also a tactical error in debate. It is a suicidal stance when confronting someone who is not intimidated by it and who knows how to expose and exploit it.

3. Tai Chi and Chi Gong

Christians often ask me whether it is wrong to practice Tai Chi. I usually explain that it has its roots in Taoism and the martial arts, and that it has to do with the "chi" force in the body. If they are filled with the Holy Spirit, why do they need to learn to control this "energy"? Do you have any thoughts on this matter?

When it comes to the martial arts, it is acceptable to learn certain combat techniques. In fact, this is sometimes necessary even for Christians, as when they are members of the military, the police force, and security guards. It is also acceptable for Christians to learn fighting techniques for self-defense. We can make numerous qualifications, but this would distract us from the main point of your question. Let us assume for now that it is at least sometimes acceptable to learn certain kinds of fighting techniques.

However, when a system is more than a physical and practical form of self-defense, then there are problems. Although Tai Chi Chuan can be a fast, flexible, and powerful fighting method, it is not only a system of self-defense, since it is often practiced for health reasons. It consists of more than physical movements, but it is often taught with an aim to harness the internal and mystical "chi" force that is based on non-Christian theories of metaphysics and anthropology.

Tai Chi was deliberately developed by Cheung San Fung as a system that would be consistent with, and that would be an expression of, Taoism. It is almost certain that one could not practice Tai Chi without adopting beliefs, movements, and practices that are derived from Taoist philosophy and that remain inseparably linked to it.

Some advocates attempt to present Tai Chi from a scientific perspective, so as to demystify it and make it appealing to those who would otherwise consider it too esoteric. Teachers of the occult have been doing this for a long while, but they have not abandoned the mystical perspective, so the same beliefs and practices are taught from both the mystical and scientific angles, ensuring both kinds of followers.³

Tai Chi is unacceptable because it is not only tied to an anti-Christian philosophy in its origin, but it is still tied to it. Also, it seeks to achieve peace and health without an explicit and exclusive dependence on Jesus Christ. Thus it stands in competition against the Christian faith.

³ Of course, some would call these kinds of teachings "pseudo-science." However, until they debunk them, this is an assumption formed by prejudice. Also, I have argued elsewhere that all empirical sciences are in fact irrational, and one type of nonsense is not essentially better than another type of nonsense. The most rational approach to the "scientific" Tai Chi advocate is to refute science itself. See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, and Captive to Reason*.

4. Occult Science

Teachers of the occult have been increasingly promoting their ideas from a scientific perspective. Even instructions on necromancy, including the conjuration of demons, are couched in scientific language.

By exploiting men's idolatrous and delusional reverence toward science – men's own abilities and methods to discover knowledge and to manipulate the world – even the darkest demonic doctrines are adopted by those who would otherwise reject them as superstitious, impractical, or evil.

This scientific version of the occult also provides an excuse for those who claim to be Christians, but who worships science, to embrace all varieties of divination. The thinking is that if something is scientifically explained as natural, then in itself it is probably neutral or good, even though it could be abused and used for evil.

From this perspective, clairvoyance, astral projection, and the like, are innate abilities from God – they are not spiritual or demonic, but natural and scientific. Trances have nothing to do with the spiritual or the demonic, but they are explained in terms of enhanced alpha and delta brainwaves. Astrology and Feng Shui are nothing more than the investigation and exploitation of the "natural laws"⁴ that God has installed in the universe, similar to studies in physics and chemistry.

Of course, even with this way of thinking, those who claim to be Christians cannot escape the numerous biblical prohibitions against magic and the occult.⁵ But however illegitimate and fallacious, it offers them an excuse to ignore God's commands, whereas they might not have this before.

Those who worship science – that is, those who worship themselves, since science refers not to some objective and external power, but to men's abilities and methods that they superstitiously consider reliable – are not all taken by this deception. However, their reason for rejecting it is just as irrational. They dismiss the scientific explanations of the occult as "pseudo-science." This dismissal is often done upon hearing the very mention of the topic, without consideration of the theories, experiments, and statistics.

Nevertheless, if by a rational investigation they manage to refute the occult, they should find that their own theories are just as easily destroyed under the same kind of scrutiny. Those who worship science are too intellectually biased, dishonest, and hypocritical to exercise the same level of skepticism toward science itself.

⁴ I deny that there are such things as natural laws, and would tolerate the term only in the sense that they are descriptions of the way that God ordinarily acts to sustain and control his creation.

⁵ For example, Deuteronomy 18:10–11 says, "There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer."

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, all science is superstitious and irrational – all scientific reasonings are logically fallacious.⁶ Since science itself is pseudo-rational, genuine science is not essentially better than pseudo-science. Both are annihilated under rational analysis, and must kneel before divine revelation. I can refute any scientific theory just as easily as I can refute any occult teaching, so that science has no right to speak when I am discussing these things. I do not have to refute the science of the occult, because I would directly refute science itself.

When it comes to the occult, many Christians, and especially the cessationists, live in denial and dismiss the entire category as superstition. But then they must also condemn the Bible as superstition when it acknowledges the reality of occult powers. Many who claim to affirm biblical supernaturalism affirm it just enough to permit supernaturalism during biblical times, but not so much that they have to live as supernaturalists today. They affirm it just enough so that they could affirm the creation of the world and the inspiration of Scripture, but not so much that they have to confront the reality of demonic activities today. They affirm it just enough so that they could pass themselves off as doctrinal supernaturalists, but not so much that they could no longer live as practical deists. They are religious frauds and hypocrites.

The occult constitutes a tremendous problem in the church. Those who claim to be Christians often fail to perceive any conflict between their faith and the occult. Church leaders must address this topic so that the people will understand the biblical position and punishment.

When warning them about the occult, do not attempt a scientific refutation, as if to sanction the worship of science. If the idol remains in their hearts, then they would be exploited by the next wave of scientific claims. It would be counterproductive to warn against ideas that people believe to be Buddhist by showing that the ideas are not in fact Buddhist, as if it would be acceptable to embrace truly Buddhist ideas.

Destroy the idol. Rationally demonstrate to them that science itself is always fallacious, that men can never obtain knowledge apart from God's revelation. Explain to them that the true wisdom is not found in science, and the highest power is not found in the occult. Rather, wisdom and power are found only in the Great Book, so that by the Holy Spirit we can have intimate contact with the very wisdom and power of God, the Author and Ruler of all things (Galatians 3:5).

⁶ See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, and Captive to Reason*.

5. Occult Items in the Home

During a phone conversation some time ago, you said that the occult items in our homes or in places that we stay should not have any effect on a Christian, that is, unless the Christian has willingly acquired them. I am in a situation where I am not the owner of the house so that I cannot just discard these occult items, since they belong to other people in my family.

The Bible forbids the worship of idols and the use of occult items, and there is no reason for believers to own these things. Christians sometimes acquire various religious statues and occult objects as decorations and for their cultural significance. This is spiritual adultery.

When Paul saw that the city of Athens was "full of idols," he was not struck with artistic and cultural admiration, but he was "greatly distressed" (Acts 17:16). Any other reaction indicates a spiritual defect and sickness in the person. It is also sinful to travel to places that are "full of idols" for entertainment or to satisfy one's curiosity. If looking at demonic objects is your idea of fun, then there is something severely wrong with you.

This includes books on the occult and false religions (Acts 19:19) – Christians must not study them or practice their teachings. This might pose a problem for those who wish to research them in order to refute them, so I will address this also.

First, from a biblical perspective, it seems unwise and even impermissible for a ministry to specialize in refuting the occult and false religions. Christian ministry should focus on the positive presentation of the whole counsel of God. Granted, this sometimes entails a direct refutation of non-Christian ideas, the occult, and false religions. But when this becomes the focus instead of a reinforcement to biblical teachings, then this ministry is defective.

If a minister or scholar wishes to perform an extraordinary amount of research into the demonic, which includes all non-Christian religions and occult materials, even if this is permissible, he should maintain constant fellowship with faithful believers and do this work in association with others whose focus is not in this area, but on the positive advancement of biblical teachings. He ought to spend much more time with the Bible and Christian literature than with demonic materials. Even as he supposedly performs his research for the sake of Christ, he should realize that his studies put himself and others at risk.

One who disregards these principles is irresponsible with his faith. He is testing God's grace and protection. Occult materials offer a similar temptation as the one that plunged our first parents into the depths of spiritual darkness. Many who claim to be Christians have been taken by the promise of forbidden power and knowledge. Scripture warns that we must not think more highly of ourselves than we ought, but we must exercise our gifts according to

the measure of our faith. We must be sober-minded, and understand the devices of the devil.

Second, the biblical method of argumentation is sufficient to destroy any occult teaching or false religion without intensive research. It would become cumbersome to refute every occult teaching or false religion that we might have to deal with if we must first research it in detail every time. The approach seems ridiculous especially since most Christians have not even learned the most elementary things about biblical doctrines.

I can refute all occult teachings and false religions when I encounter it, including those that I have not heard of, because biblical revelation is my intellectual foundation and biblical reasoning is my spiritual weapon. God has imparted to us the mind of Christ when he granted us faith to understand and believe his word. And the mind of Christ is impossible to defeat.

Counter-cult ministries might not always be illegitimate, but they are often driven by an unbiblical focus and an unhealthy obsession. They often become even more dangerous than the doctrines and organizations that they attempt to destroy. Sometimes they become possessed with rage and envy, and direct their efforts against Christians who demonstrate superior faith and power, and thus appear different from the self-appointed watchmen. As they are obsessed with the demonic, these ministries sometimes become possessed by the demonic. It is possible to avoid this. In fact, if we will maintain a biblical focus and be obsessed with Jesus alone, we would be a stronger voice against the occult and false religions than a ministry that focuses on researching and refuting them.

Returning to the matter of occult items and non-Christian religious objects, if you are not the one who brought them into the home and it is beyond your power to remove them, then it seems that you have not sinned against God, in the sense that you are not directly culpable for other people's adulterous relationships or the many sins of the people in the community. It will not affect you in the sense that no direct judgment will come upon you, since you would remove those items if the situation were under your control.

However, the sins of other people and the ill effects of these sins might indirectly affect you. The people of Israel sinned and delayed Joshua and Caleb from entering Canaan for forty years, although these two had not sinned. It was not a direct judgment against them, but a natural consequence of belonging to that community. If you are suffering the consequences of living with a sinful community, then consider leaving it. If this is impossible, then pray to God for strength and protection, as you continue to intercede for the people, confronting their sins, so that they would turn to God.

6. What's Wrong with "White" Magic

I would like to know whether or not there is something wrong with white magic. I know that it exists, otherwise God would not have warned us against it, but what could be wrong with helping people?

Many people are in rebellion when it comes to the occult, and ministers should not assume that their congregations are free from it. This question comes from one who claims to be a Christian, but it shows that wickedness has taken root in him.

First, he affirms an unbiblical distinction on magic.

Scripture does not distinguish between "black" magic and "white" magic, and then forbid one or the other or both. It forbids "magic" – any and all magic. The illegitimate distinction arbitrarily concedes that some kinds of magic are to be condemned, but maintains that other kinds of magic should be allowed. Of course, this is especially convenient for those who practice "white" magic.

However, since Scripture condemns magic itself, inventing a distinction between "black" magic and "white" magic is like inventing a distinction between bad sin and good sin, between bad adultery and good adultery, or bad devil worship and good devil worship. Sinners attempt to excuse themselves, and even some who claim to be Christians tell "white" lies. But God will condemn to hell all adulterers, all liars, and all who worship the devil.

Second, he assumes an unbiblical standard of good.

Disregarding what the Bible says about magic, he suggests that good is defined by "helping people." No wonder there is confusion. The Bible defines good one way, but he favors a different meaning. He is in fact asking, "How can God define something as evil when it contributes to what I consider as good?" or "How can God call something evil, when it is good according to my standard? How can God be right, when he disagrees with me?"

The Bible indeed teaches that it is good to "help" people, as it defines help, and at the same time it forbids magic. Thus we must consider what it means to "help." From God's perspective, do you "help" someone when you use magic for this person? Is it "helpful" to rebel against God and spit in his face, so that we can produce an effect that we desire? According to Scripture, one who uses magic commits an abomination, and the one who requests or assents to its use is also guilty. This is not helpful.

The more we think about it, the more sinister this man seems. He demands: What is wrong with a "good" evil, if it attains what I need? What is wrong with "good" rebellion against God if it achieves what I desire? Or, to illustrate: What is wrong with the Tower of Babel if it promotes unity among men? But they were united in defiance against God. One Baha'i

woman said to me, "Isn't religion supposed to promote unity?" – as if human unity is the ultimate end. That is the religion of Babel. The Christian religion aims to unite the good around the truth against the evil, and not to unite the good with the evil against the truth.

Third, he accepts an unbiblical basis of power.

Let us assume that magic indeed produces the effects that it claims. Our present concern is not whether magic "works," but the basis of the power, or the object to which the practitioners appeal.

God is not the basis of this power (Isaiah 8:19; 2 Kings 1:3).⁷ Many magic books freely designate the devil as the basis of power, including what is called "white" magic. Others claim only to unleash man's natural potential. Thus in one book on using the pendulum for supernatural guidance, the devil is designated as the basis of knowledge, but in another one, the subconscious mind is said to be the basis.

Since God condemns magic, we know that whatever the practitioner thinks or claims that he is doing, he is not seeking God for his power. Samuel associates witchcraft and divination with rebellion (1 Samuel 15:23), because at the root of magic and the occult is not a selfless desire to help people, or even a godly motive to preserve oneself for humble service. Rather, at the root of magic and the occult is rebellion. It is an attitude that says, "If God will not let me have my way, then I will make a deal with the devil."

Therefore, God declares that someone who practices magic deserves to burn in endless hellfire: "But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death" (Revelation 21:8).

⁷ Of course, God is the one who causes and sustains all things, so that even Satan has no power of his own. Here we are not discussing ontology, but the object to which the practitioner appeals.

7. Pentecostalism and Cessationism⁸

Some of the criticisms against the charismatics from Reformed and Evangelical people are indeed justified. However, their own doctrines and policies regarding the spiritual gifts are much worse than the charismatic errors and excesses, and amount to a conspiracy against God's power. The heresy of cessationism is more dangerous and destructive than the heresies of the charismatics.

Some cessationists admit that God might still perform miracles, but he no longer performs these feats through spiritual gifts or endowments granted to believers. Then, some cessationists insist that God has completely stopped performing miracles. This position claims that all the reasons for God to perform miracles have been fulfilled and are now inapplicable, especially since the Bible has been completed.

Cessationism in either form is unbiblical, blasphemous, and demonic. The cessationists allow God only several reasons to perform miracles, but the Bible indicates a number of other reasons. God performs miracles not only to authenticate his messengers and to confirm new revelations, but there are other reasons, such as his desire to confirm old revelations and to show himself to people, as well as his compassion to the suffering and oppressed in every age. Moreover, God could perform miracles for reasons unknown to us. He does not need our permission or understanding. It is foolish and dishonest to claim that God would no longer perform miracles or that God would no longer grant miraculous abilities to his people because the Bible has been completed. The doctrine is demonic because it resists God's purpose, and because cessationists not only refuse to walk in God's power, but they also forbid others to walk in it.

God does whatever he wants. The Bible shows us a God who often wants to perform miracles, such as healing the sick, and he often does it in answer to prayer and through the hands of men. On the other hand, some people think and behave as if this has become a deistic world after the death of the apostles. A deist is much worse than an unrefined charismatic. Christians should affirm that God's power is active in this world, and that he does whatever he wants, including miracles, for the glory of his name and for the good of his chosen ones.

Christian life should be characterized by spiritual power. Charismatics sometimes make a lot of noise without an actual demonstration or experience of this power, but cessationists make unbelief their creed and rebellion their orthodoxy, and in the name of Christ they persecute those who live otherwise.

⁸ Adapted from email correspondence.

8. Territorial Spirits⁹

There is the false teaching that certain evil spirits are especially associated with a geographical area and influence it from the air.¹⁰ They put up such stubborn resistance against the gospel that Christians find it difficult to evangelize or to achieve significant spiritual progress in their ministries. Thus Christians should "discern" the evil spirits (probably by extra-biblical revelation) that are "ruling" over the area (in the sky above the area), and pray against them (by exercising spiritual authority over them) so that they would depart. Once they have departed, there will be a sudden change in the spiritual "atmosphere," and from that point, evangelism and other Christian work will become easier and more effective.

The doctrine has no actual biblical support, but it is derived from misapplications of references to demonic "strongholds," Daniel 10, and Jesus' teaching about the "strongman."

The Bible relates the effects of evil spirits with the minds of people, who then carry out evil actions. A city that is especially bound by sexual sins, more so than other cities, may have become a strategic location for demonic influences of this sort. The Boston area is filled with intellectual pride (although not necessarily intellectual competence), having so many prominent universities.

These demonic influences are not in the sky above the area, but in the minds of the people. They induce people to think anti-biblical thoughts, and to adopt non-Christian worldviews. It is an intellectual operation, and not an indefinable something "in the air." Likewise, the "strongholds" mentioned in the Bible are not little castles in the sky, but they refer to the stubborn mindsets and dispositions that these evil influences have installed in the minds of men. Paul says that they consist of "pretensions," "arguments," and "thoughts."

Therefore, it is unbiblical to ask God to reveal the kinds of spirits that are dominant over an area's atmosphere, and it is futile to combat demonic "strongholds" by screaming at the sky, calling the evil spirits by name, and commanding them to depart. As for Daniel 10, it records what happened in the spiritual world when Daniel prayed to God. It does not teach that we should directly address demons in the atmosphere, but that we should speak to God, and trust him to do what needs to be done.

Jesus dealt with the "strongman" first by preaching. He counteracted false ideas in the mind (not in the air). We participate in the spiritual conflict by preaching the truth and refuting false beliefs.

Since our spiritual weapons come from divine wisdom, we do not fight non-Christian ideas with non-Christian ideas. The biblical approach is not to argue against secular science with

⁹ Adapted from email correspondence.

¹⁰ For example, "greed," "lust," "pride," "the occult," and so on. Sometimes it might have a name, like "dragon" or "legion."

better secular science, or to argue against false religions with a better application of the same false religions. Rather, the biblical approach is to declare the superiority of divine wisdom over all non-Christian ideas.

Instead of naming the spirits and commanding them to leave the sky, we ought to preach the whole counsel of God. If we perceive that a mindset or worldview is strongly held by people in our area, then we could become familiar with it to better handle the resistance in our sermons and discussions (see Acts 17:22; Titus 1:12–13).

Then, Jesus dealt with the "strongman" also by healing the sick (Luke 13:16; Acts 10:38) and casting out demons from people (not from the sky). Those who affirm the misguided doctrine of territorial spirits are also eager to preach the word, heal the sick, and cast out demons, but those who deny the continuation of miraculous healing and the casting out of demons have renounced the ministry model of Christ. Thus they are worse than those who affirm the doctrine of territorial spirits.

9. "Command Ye Me"

In the KJV, Isaiah 45:11 reads, "Thus saith the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker, Ask me of things to come concerning my sons, and concerning the work of my hands command ye me." People are often confused by the words, "command ye me," and some have derived false doctrines from them. For example, John Avanzini teaches what he calls the "memorial prayer."¹¹ According to him, this form of prayer is effective "when all else fails." He claims that this verse is God's direct invitation for believers to command the works of his hands. You are to command God to do what you want, and he will obey you.

Avanzini claims that when this was first revealed to him, it appeared so incredible that he "checked" it, and verified that this is what the verse teaches. However, when we observe the context of the verse, it becomes obvious that it asserts the opposite of what Avanzini says about it. Modern translations of the verse are better, and leave no room for the distortion.

Isaiah 45:5–13 (NIV)

"I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.

"You heavens above, rain down righteousness; let the clouds shower it down. Let the earth open wide, let salvation spring up, let righteousness grow with it; I, the LORD, have created it.

"Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground.

"Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'He has no hands'?

"Woe to him who says to his father, 'What have you begotten?' or to his mother, 'What have you brought to birth?'

"This is what the LORD says – the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands? It is I who made the earth and created mankind upon it. My own hands stretched out the heavens; I marshaled their starry hosts. I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness:

¹¹ John Avanzini, *Moving the Hand of God* (Harrison House, 1990).

I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the LORD Almighty."

In other words, God says, "I am the only God. Whether prosperity or calamity, I am the one who causes it, and there is nothing you can say about it. What? Are you going to question me about my plans? Are you going to give me orders?"¹² Thus verse 11 declares that no one can command God and tell him what to do. He is the one who decides what will happen, and no one can resist him.

¹² See Vincent Cheung, *The Author of Sin*.

10. Real Spiritual Power¹³

When Paul refers to "the eyes of your heart" in Ephesians 1:18, this is just another way to say, "the understanding of your mind." He is praying for Christians to receive an intellectual grasp of spiritual things, especially the doctrines that he mentions in this letter. As Psalm 119:18 states, "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law."

There are crucial implications for Christian life and development. As long as Christians think that the spirit or heart is a part of man that is different from the mind, and that spiritual wisdom has to do with something "beyond" the intellectual, they will keep trying to grasp spiritual things with this non-mental part of their being. The problem is that the spirit, heart, mind, and intellect all refer to the same part of a person, and the spirit or heart does not exist as something separate and non-mental, so that these people is striving to accomplish something that cannot be done, with a part of their being that does not exist.

Rather than chasing after mystical fantasies, we should embrace the simple biblical model, that spiritual progress has to do with the mind or intellect, and it happens as we learn and follow what God teaches us in the Bible. The biblical approach consists of intellectual understanding and faithful obedience, not some nonsense about transferring knowledge "from the head to the heart."

Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1 also suggests that spiritual enlightenment comes from petitioning God, who is a personal intelligence, and using the means that he has ordained. It does not come from harnessing one's own abilities or manipulating impersonal or demonic forces. In fact, Scripture rejects the idea that we have any inherent abilities to attain true spiritual enlightenment, and of course, to cooperate with impersonal or demonic forces could lead only to spiritual bondage and disaster.

The biblical way to spiritual growth opposes all deistic and cessationist tendencies, and all mystical and occult means. Although God has ordained various means for us to gain spiritual knowledge and progress, and although they are all founded on an intellectual understanding of his revelation, they continue to require God's direct participation to make them effective. Rejecting mysticism and anti-intellectualism should not result in deism and cessationism. Biblical intellectualism assumes God's immanence – his power at work in our minds and our lives. Therefore, while we utilize the means that God has provided for our spiritual progress, we also petition him for spiritual enlightenment.

Biblical intellectualism opposes the occult and counterfeit spiritual teachings and practices. Instead of emptying one's mind and repeating a mantra in "meditation," and focusing on the self or the world, biblical meditation is not passive non-thinking or thinking on unworthy objects, but it is active theological thinking. It trains the mind to focus on God's

¹³ Adapted from Vincent Cheung, *Commentary on Ephesians*.

word and interpret all things through the mind of Christ. The purpose is not to deify the self or to identify with deity, but to honor God and define ourselves in relation to him.

Non-Christian attempts at spiritual enlightenment are absurd and destructive. One young man sought to improve his intellect and attain spiritual power through a studious lifestyle of occult study and meditation. Instead of gaining what he desired, this so crippled his mind that at times he had trouble with even ordinary mental functions.

Then, God suddenly converted him, and inwardly moved him to read through the entire New Testament. Although he did not understand all that he read, by the time he reached the end of Revelation, his mind was completely healed, and made better than before it was damaged. Since then, God has continued to grant him greater spiritual wisdom by his word.

The process was not mystical but simple and intelligent. There were no elaborate rituals, chants, and grueling tests. It was by this seemingly mundane practice that true spiritual power was finally unleashed in this man's life. The God-ordained means of reading the Bible provided the occasion for divine power to work, resulting in deliverance and true enlightenment. The severe mental damage that had accumulated over many years was wiped out in a matter of days by just "reading a book."

Many have declared a cessationism of faith for God's power, but those who are more faithful in their attitude have sometimes exchanged true spiritual power with counterfeit spiritual power, and true wisdom with mystical nonsense. Instead of wielding intellectual weapons inspired and energized by "divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:4), they have exchanged them for mystical practices inspired and energized by their own flesh. The Bible teaches that the strongholds we must demolish consist of intellectual "arguments" (v. 5). But some misunderstand the nature of this spiritual conflict – that we are to "take captive every thought" – and so they spend their time screaming commands at demons in the sky.

We ought to examine our priorities in prayer and in life, and see if they are consistent with the apostle's thinking. What are our priorities in prayer? What do we emphasize in life? Where do we invest our money? How do we spend our time?

Many people are most concerned with wealth, health, comfort, popularity, and achievements that build up their pride. How do we pray for our friends, relatives, and children? Do we focus on their jobs and prospects, and that the children may do well in sports? Whereas "the pagans run after all these things" (Matthew 6:32), we must turn our attention to higher things. Like animals and infants, non-Christians mainly react to and are driven by their felt needs. On the other hand, Christians must mainly react to and be driven by God's precepts and purposes.

How do we pray for spiritual progress? Do we pray with a wicked heart of unbelief, rejecting God's miraculous power for today? But if we are more faithful and affirm God's power, do we pray for true spiritual power, or for strange feelings and experiences? And do we yearn to transcend our minds, rather than to build it up by the doctrines of Christ?

Paul prays for spiritual wisdom that is consistent with what God has revealed through Scripture. He is unlike those who ask for spiritual enlightenment, but then think that just about any idea that they come up with must be a revelation. Therefore, we do not only pray "open my eyes," but we pray, "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law" (Psalm 119:18).

11. Real Spiritual Revival¹⁴

As for spiritual revival, there are several passages in the Bible that relate to our discussion:

When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes. He gave these orders to Hilkiyah the priest, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Acbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king's attendant: "Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in *this book* that has been found. Great is the LORD's anger that burns against us because our fathers have not obeyed the words of *this book*; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us."

Hilkiyah the priest, Ahikam, Acbor, Shaphan and Asaiah went to speak to the prophetess Huldah, who was the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem, in the Second District.

She said to them, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Tell the man who sent you to me, 'This is what the LORD says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people, according to everything written in *the book* the king of Judah has read. Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and provoked me to anger by all the idols their hands have made, my anger will burn against this place and will not be quenched.'

Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, 'This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people, that they would become accursed and laid waste, and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the LORD. Therefore I will gather you to your fathers, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.'"

So they took her answer back to the king.

Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the temple of the LORD with the men of Judah, the people of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets – all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of *the Book* of the

¹⁴ Adapted from email correspondence.

Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the LORD. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the LORD – to follow the LORD and keep his commands, regulations and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in *this book*. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant. (2 Kings 22:11–23:3)

They read from *the Book* of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law.

They stood where they were and read from *the Book* of the Law of the LORD their God *for a quarter of the day*, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the LORD their God. (Nehemiah 8:8-9, 13, 9:3)

These passages describe the revivals under Josiah and Nehemiah. They demonstrate that true revival involves a revival of *a book*, namely, the Bible. It entails a renewed interest in the Bible and a renewed obedience to its teachings. Revival could occur without manifestations of the miraculous, especially before the Holy Spirit was poured out in Acts 2. Today, a limited revival might occur without such manifestations, especially when there is unbelief and defective theology among the people. However, revival of manifestations without a revival of the book cannot be considered a true revival, since that which we are revived about would remain undefined. We might feel revived, but we would not know what we are so revived about. In reality, it would be only a revival of emotions.

If the people do not have a renewed interest in studying and obeying the Bible, then it cannot be a genuine or enduring revival. The people's hearts have not turned back to him. One cannot turn back to God without turning back to "the book," since even the meaning of turning back to God is defined by "the book." Sometimes it is said that a revival stresses repentance but not doctrine, but this is impossible, because repentance is a doctrine (Hebrews 6:1, etc.), and it also remains undefined unless we turn back to "the book."

God's power is not unleashed by stomping, yelling, barking, crying, falling, and foaming at the mouth. It is released as a Christian reads the Bible, "making it clear and giving the meaning," and as he proclaims Jesus Christ to the people (Acts 8:5). This provides the occasion and the means by which the Spirit of God performs all that he pleases, changing the people's hearts, healing their diseases, and working various kinds of miracles.

12. The Ching Ming Festival

What is the Bible's stance on "respecting" the dead? In particular, I am considering how a Christian should behave toward the Ching Ming Festival.

On the day of this Chinese festival, multitudes of people visit the graves of their relatives to perform acts of cleaning and worship. The worship might include bowing at the tombstones and praying to the deceased. They also offer gifts to the dead by leaving food and flowers, and by burning incense, money for the dead, and paper models of objects such as cars and houses. They believe that these items are transported to the afterlife where the deceased would receive them.

When thinking about how a Christian should regard the Ching Ming Festival, we should first summarize a few relevant doctrines.

The Bible teaches that a man consists of soul and body. The soul is the "inward" and incorporeal part, and the body is the "outward" and corporeal part. The human person is identified with the soul and not the body.

Some Christian theologians insist that the Bible consistently refers to man as a unity, or as one unit. From this, they derive the false doctrine that we should not make a sharp distinction between the soul and the body, or to identify the soul as the "person." For example, in one lecture, Greg Bahnsen opposes a sharp distinction between the soul and the body, and declares that the human person is "not a ghost in a machine."

However, at death the soul is separated from the body, but if a "person" must consist of both the soul and the body as one unit, then how is the identity of the "person" maintained after death, when the soul is separated from the body? According to this heretical theory, it would seem that the person ceases to exist, or that whatever still exists, it is no longer a human person.

By implication, the false doctrine aims to destroy the heart of the Christian faith, because God said, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," even after these patriarchs had died and their bodies had returned to dust. Jesus declared that God is the God of the living, and not of the dead, so that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob continued to exist as living souls without their bodies.

Bahnsen's doctrine could not accommodate this, and so when he mentions the obvious question of how one's identity is maintained between death and resurrection, he shrugs it off as a "mystery." This cowardly evasion is popular with Christians, and it is a favorite of Reformed theologians, as a license to affirm false beliefs that they cannot defend. When the Bible clearly teaches something, it is not a mystery but a revelation, but anything will

appear incomprehensible when men suppress it in wickedness, by their false assumptions and religious traditions.

The doctrine that makes a sharp distinction between the soul and the body, to identify the soul as the person, and to consider the soul as superior or more important than the body, is often castigated as the Gnostic or the "Greek" view. However, it is often foolish to label something as "Greek," since the Greeks held all sorts of positions that contradict one another. Perhaps a position could be called Plato's view, Aristotle's view, and so on, but unless there is a context that narrows down the meaning, it is misleading and irresponsible to just call something "Greek."

In any case, these theologians oppose the view, which we will call the "Gnostic" position for the sake of convenience, that regards matter as evil, or that evil comes from matter and not spirit. Therefore, when the soul leaves the body at death, the soul is liberated from the fleshly prison. This view is indeed unbiblical, but it is not the necessary result of a sharp distinction between the soul and the body. One can even affirm that the soul is superior to the body, and still not end up with the Gnostic view, because one good thing can be superior to another good thing, and so both the soul and the body can be regarded as good.

It is true that many passages in the Bible address the human person as a single unit, but this contributes nothing to the discussion. One can examine the context of these passages and see that the Bible is not discussing the constitution of the human person in these instances. In ordinary language usage, when we are merely mentioning an object and not discussing its constitution, we would usually refer to it as a single unit even when it consists of multiple parts.

Even theologians might not say, "Here comes Tommy and his pants," even when Tommy is wearing pants, and even when they believe that there is a sharp distinction between Tommy and his pants. They would say, "Here comes Tommy." But when the occasion calls for it, they would acknowledge the distinction, and say, "Tommy lost his pants." He took them off because he was trying to prove to the stupid theologians that he could still be Tommy without his pants.

Likewise, when the Bible addresses the constitution of man, or when it draws attention to the constitution of man in order to make some other point, it speaks of the human person as consisting of two parts – the incorporeal (mind, spirit, heart, etc.) and the corporeal (body, flesh, etc.). Although Bahnsen intends to deride the biblical doctrine with the expression, man is indeed "a ghost in a machine" – he is a spirit living in an organic contraption. In fact, the analogy of Tommy's pants is entirely appropriate. Paul refers to the body as a tent, as clothing that he can take off, and a building that the man lives in (2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10).

Samuel, after his death, appeared as himself to Saul, and Moses also appeared as himself to Christ. This demonstrates that the identity of a person is associated with the incorporeal soul without a necessary connection to the body. Then, Jesus said that we should not be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. This demonstrates that the

two are different and separate, and that the soul is more important (see Matthew 10:28, Luke 12:4–5, 1 Corinthians 5:3, 7:34, and James 2:26). Anyone who teaches otherwise positions himself directly against the Lord Jesus Christ and the Christian faith.

The Bible requires us to insist that there is a sharp distinction between the soul and the body, that personal identity is associated with the soul, and that the soul is superior and more important than the body. At the same time, we do not slip into the Gnostic position, because we also insist that the body is important. For the Christian, it is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), and it is the same body that will be resurrected and transformed (1 Corinthians 15:35–58). "Therefore," Paul writes, "honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:20).

In fact, we ask God to perform miracles to heal the bodies of men and women as a regular part of Christian ministry. On the other hand, religious hypocrites make a big deal about how man should be regarded as a single unit, and how God deals with the whole man, but when the sick call for help, they rush them to the non-Christian doctors. The Bible teaches that the prayer of faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. God regards the body and the soul as different, and he will heal both the body and the soul.

The false doctrine is unnecessary to secure respect for the body, and the theologians who affirm it apply God to the body only when it is convenient for them and when it justifies their lifestyle. If they have so much respect for the body, and if they truly believe that the gospel applies to the whole man, then they should all the more lay hands on the sick for God to heal their bodies just as readily as he forgives their sins. The truth is that these hypocrites favor their doctrine because they wish to unspiritualize the Christian faith, and even secularize and politicize it. As Jesus said, they mind the things of men instead of the things of God. The doctrine is an attempt to legitimize their carnal-mindedness.

Without embracing the heretical doctrine that man is a single unit, there are biblical reasons for treating a person's body with respect after his soul has departed from it. Given what the Bible teaches about the present and future roles of the body, we do not just throw a dead man's body into a dumpster or feed it to animals, which might seem more convenient and practical. Instead, we treat it in a way that is consistent with the body's importance in the present life, and with our anticipation of the future resurrection and judgment. God can produce a body at the resurrection even if it has been cremated, so the intention is not to make it easier for him to raise the dead. The proper treatment of the body serves only an expression of faith.

It is possible to respect the body, care for the grave, and mourn for the dead out of faith instead of idolatry and superstition. We can do these things in memory of the person and in true worship toward God, without violating the teachings of the Bible. However, it remains that we must take care to avoid unbiblical thinking and behavior. Errors in this area can quickly spiral into the idolatrous and the demonic.

For example, there is a vast difference between speaking fondly *of* the deceased person and speaking fondly *to* the deceased person – it is the difference between holy conversation and necromancy. While we mourn for the dead, we must not directly address the deceased person, or speak as if the deceased can hear us. And we must not direct to the deceased any semblance of worship, such as bowing at the grave, or offering gifts, incense, and sacrifices.

It follows that the Catholic veneration of Mary and the saints is necromancy. The Catholic is a necromancer, and abomination must be condemned in the most extreme terms. Consider also the practice of requesting forgiveness from or granting forgiveness to the dead as a psychological exercise. This is recommended even by some Christian counselors as a way to address "unresolved issues" with the deceased for the psychological benefit of the counselee. But it is also necromancy. Perhaps it is a milder form of necromancy, without immediate demonic displays and effects, but the principle is the same. A Christian must never talk to the dead, but he should address unresolved issues with God.

By now most questions on the Ching Ming Festival have been answered. It remains for us to consider some applications.

We must not behave in any way that implies our agreement with idolatrous, superstitious, and unbiblical beliefs. The issue is not always about what you think and do, but also about the impression that you give, and the inference that you allow people to make (1 Corinthians 8:4–13; 10:19–33). It seems impossible to participate in Ching Ming and avoid giving the wrong impression at the same time. The only way is to constantly declare your opposition to all unbiblical beliefs and actions throughout the day.

You must not help carry the idolatrous items to the grave, or help light the fire for burning the sacrifices. You must not stand beside others as they offer worship and speak to the dead in order to avoid the appearance of approval. You must, in fact, constantly berate them throughout the day and testify against their sins. This would incite offense, and probably retaliation.

To illustrate, you must never behave around a statue of Buddha as if you have respect for it or as if you believe in its reality and power, such as taking off your shoes or bowing down to it. Likewise, you must not attend to someone's grave in a way that implies an agreement with non-Christian beliefs. However, consistent with the biblical doctrines that we have mentioned, in itself there is nothing wrong with attending to someone's grave, such as pulling weeds around it and cleaning the tombstone. But if you do this on Ching Ming, it would appear that you are performing more than a practical procedure. Therefore, unless you are prepared to maintain a constant opposition throughout the day, and in the process publicly offend and embarrass your family – I would heartily approve of this – it is best to abstain from all participation.

It is a noble thing to criticize one's relatives for their abominable beliefs. As a Christian, you are authorized to denounce their sins, and to cut them off if they refuse to listen. You are in a position to do this especially if you have moved away from your parents and have

become the head of your own household. Many men cower before their parents and in-laws even when it comes to religious matters that affect their wives and children. Cowards! As the head of the house, you have authority to establish a Christian home and to keep out every abomination. Your parents and in-laws must now interact with your family on your terms – that is, on biblical terms – and if they refuse, cut them off. Do not whine and grumble when relatives and friends vex your soul, oppress your wife, and mislead your children. You can stop all of that – TODAY.

13. Personality without Corporeality

The Bible says that after their deaths and without their bodies, Samuel appeared to Saul and Moses appeared to Christ. There is a question on whether these appearances serve as proper examples for the biblical doctrine that personal identity is associated with the soul and not the body.

When Saul went to the witch to conjure Samuel, it was said that she had a "familiar spirit." So some people assume that she did not in fact have the ability to call up the dead, but that when she appeared to talk to the dead, she was communicating with this familiar spirit. The issue is whether it was truly Samuel who appeared. Then, some think that the Bible never said that Moses died, and so we are uncertain whether his soul was separated from his body, or whether he was taken up like Enoch and Elijah.

According to 1 Samuel 28, it was indeed Samuel who appeared. We have no reason to think otherwise. The fact that the witch had a familiar spirit is irrelevant since the Bible explicitly states that it was Samuel who appeared. She did not need the ability to call up Samuel – God used the occasion to send Samuel to deliver the message.

When the woman *saw Samuel*, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!"

The king said to her, "Don't be afraid. What do you see?"

The woman said, "I see a spirit coming up out of the ground."

"What does he look like?" he asked.

"An old man wearing a robe is coming up," she said.

Then *Saul knew it was Samuel*, and he bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground.

Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?"

"I am in great distress," Saul said. "The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has turned away from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do."

Samuel said, "Why do you consult me, now that the LORD has turned away from you and become your enemy? The LORD has done what *he predicted through me*. The LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbors – to David. Because you did not obey the LORD or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites,

the LORD has done this to you today. The LORD will hand over both Israel and you to the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also hand over the army of Israel to the Philistines."

Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of *Samuel's words*. His strength was gone, for he had eaten nothing all that day and night. (v. 12–20)

As for Moses, the Bible declares that he died, and that Michael contended with Satan over the body.

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them – to the Israelites." (Joshua 1:1-2)

But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!" (Jude 9)

Samuel and Moses continued to exist, live, think, and speak as Samuel and Moses, but they were disembodied. They remained who they were without their bodies. Therefore, the identity of a person is associated with the soul and not the body.

14. A Great Cloud of Witnesses

(1) What do you think about the popular belief that we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses and the people in heaven are looking over the banister cheering us on or watching us?

(2) I asked one of my teachers if there is a possibility that my dad or other members of the family that have died saw me preach one of my first sermons. He said it is possible because we are the body of Christ and they are not really dead. They are in heaven alive and can see the activities here on earth.

(3) I heard a well-known theologian say that he gets nervous sometimes because he realizes that he is not just preaching to the congregation, but also a great cloud of witnesses, which is the body of Christ on earth and in heaven.

~ 1 ~

This notion about "a cloud of witnesses" came from Hebrews 12:1. It says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." We need to consider in what sense these past believers are "witnesses" to our race of faith.

A "witness" often refers to someone with direct contact with a subject, and so some people interpret the verse to mean that the believers in heaven are aware of our activities. Some even imagine that they are watching and hearing all that we do, so that when we preach, they are listening to the sermon, and when we sin, they are watching our transgression. However, this is not a necessary implication of the verse, and it is not even a probable interpretation.

Consider Matthew 12:41–42:

The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.

The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.

Jesus is addressing the Pharisees and the unbelieving people of "this generation," or the Jews. The men of Nineveh will condemn the unbelieving Jews, not because they were

direct witnesses of their unbelief, but because they (the men of Nineveh) repented at Jonah's preaching. The Queen of the South (Sheba) will also rise to condemn the unbelieving Jews, not because she personally witnessed their unbelief, but because she came to hear Solomon's wisdom.

They made the Jews look bad. First, the men of Nineveh and the Queen of the South were Gentiles, so they lacked the spiritual privileges that the Jews enjoyed, such as God's revelation, miracles, prophets, and so on. Second, Jesus is greater than both Jonah and Solomon, and he is the one speaking to the Jews. If a wicked nation repented at the preaching of Jonah, if a foreign queen came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and if they listened and believed even though Jonah and Solomon were inferior to Christ, then how utterly odd and evil it is for the Jews to resist the Son of God himself? In this sense, Nineveh and the Queen will witness against the Jews. They will condemn the Jews not because of their knowledge about the Jews, but because of what they did in contrast to the Jews.

Returning to Hebrews 12:1, the previous chapters offer the context that defines the sense in which the past believers are witnesses to our race of faith. Hebrews 10:32–39 says:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a very little while, "He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him." But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

The Jewish Christians are experiencing persecution. They are tempted to abandon the faith, and backslide to their former religious profession. Weaving together a doctrinal treatise with threats and pleas, the writer of Hebrews admonishes them to persevere in their faith.

Then, in Hebrews 11, the writer recounts the faith, courage, and endurance of numerous believers in the past, often as they faced tremendous dangers and threats. This is what he means in Hebrews 10 when he calls his readers "live by faith" and not "shrink back."

It is in this sense that these past believers are "witnesses" to our faith. They have completed the race that these Jewish Christians are tempted to abandon, and they serve as "witnesses" to the promises of God and the power of faith. Still, "God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect" (Hebrews 11:40);

therefore, we should not allow their examples to condemn us but encourage us to complete the race, looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (12:2).

The point is not, "You better run well because they are watching you," but rather, "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart...Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees" (12:3, 12). Hebrews 12:1 does not tell us whether these past believers know what is happening on the earth. It only tells us what we should do in the light of what they did. We cannot infer more than this from the verse.

~ 2 ~

It is possible that your father and other deceased relatives in heaven saw you preach, but only if God had decided to show them.

The reasons that your teacher gave are poor: "He said it is possible because we are the body of Christ and they are not really dead. They are in heaven alive and can see activity here on earth." I am also part of the body of Christ and I am not dead, but I have never seen you preach, so this is not enough. Then, the fact that they are "in heaven alive" does not imply that they "can see activity here on earth." If he did not mean to connect the two, then he has offered no reason as to why people "in heaven alive" "can see activity here on earth."

There are passages like Luke 16:24–25 and Revelation 6:9–11.

Luke 16:24-25 says:

So he called to him, "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire." But Abraham replied, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony."

This does not tell us how and when Abraham knew about the rich man's life. It does not indicate that Abraham knew this by watching and hearing him. It is possible that the information was revealed to Abraham after the rich man's death.

And Revelation 6:9–11 says:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.

Again, this does not say that the martyrs were watching and hearing the activities on earth. Rather, it tells us that they were "watching" God and speaking to him about the earth. We cannot infer more than this from the passage.

In any case, examine the motive behind the question. If you are worth anything in the ministry, you preach in order to serve God, not to make your father proud. So forget about it.

~ 3 ~

The theologian probably wished to sound pious, as religious hypocrites often do, but he failed to impress. A man is grossly perverse who, if he is to be nervous at all, is not nervous enough because God is watching him, but because he thinks that dead people are watching him. This is another form of necromancy, a mental interaction with the dead, even if it is not as blatant.

Moreover, it makes no sense to become nervous if dead people are watching. If I am not nervous that God is watching me, because he is the one who has ordained and empowered me, then I would not care if ten billion people are watching me, because my esteem for God is more than my esteem for ten billion people. On the other hand, if I am nervous that God is watching me, because I lack the boldness of Christ and the power of the Spirit, then ten billion people would not make me more nervous, since I would already be a complete wreck. There is something defective in this theologian's faith, and the fact that he said this probably to impress people with his piety makes him more contemptible.

The Bible's faith is "simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3, NASB). Many false interpretations result from the desire to make religion more exciting, adventurous, and meaningful from the carnal viewpoint, often by making it more esoteric and complicated. The simplicity of biblical faith should more than satisfy the believer, that is, unless he has lost his first love.

15. Human Cloning and the Soul¹⁵

We are considering the matter of human cloning and the soul. Assuming that the procedure is truly successful, the human clone would possess a soul; otherwise, we cannot say that it is indeed successful. In systematic theology, and under the doctrine of man, "creationism" holds that God creates each new soul probably at the time of conception and associates it with the new body, and "traducianism" holds that both the soul and body are inherited from the parents.

Creationism is the biblical view, but for our purpose, there is no need to discuss which one is correct. Either position would allow a successfully cloned human person to have a soul. Given creationism, it would mean that God creates a new soul each time a person is successfully cloned. Given traducianism, it would mean that there is little technical difference between what happens in cloning and what happens in natural conception, since the soul would be propagated from the original to the clone. The clone would have a different soul, with characteristics inherited from the original.

Whether something works has little to do with whether it is ethical. To illustrate, only God has the right and power to end a life. Still, murder "works" – the murderer could indeed kill his victim. This means that God has foreordained the event and he ends the victim's life when the crime occurs. But God's precepts teach us that it is unethical to commit murder.

As with many things (murder, rape, the crucifixion of Christ, etc.), what God has decreed to happen is often different from what God has defined as ethical. What is made according to God's *decree* might at the same time be made against God's *precept*. A child may be conceived because of rape. The rape is against God's precept – it is sin – but both the rape and the child have come about because of God's decree, because nothing can happen other than what he decrees and causes to happen.

Therefore, even if cloning "works" in that it results in a human soul, this would not make it ethically acceptable. Since each successfully cloned person would have a soul, this means that God has all along decreed the success of cloning and the existence of the clones. Again, a decree is different from a precept, so that even if God has foreordained the success of cloning, it does not mean that he morally approves of it, but if it is sin, then it would mean that he has ordained that the sin should occur.

Whether we are considering the problem of the soul relative to cloning, or whether we are considering the sovereignty of God relative to something that is against his moral precepts, there is no problem for Christian theology. Successful cloning, even if sinful, poses no rational challenge against the Christian faith. If human cloning is successful, it would not

¹⁵ Adapted from email correspondence.

violate anything that the Bible teaches about reality, even if it would violate what the Bible teaches about morality.

16. Christian vs. Non-Christian Meditation¹⁶

When non-Christians practice meditation, they often try to blank out their minds, erase their inner selves, merge with the universe, achieve an altered state of consciousness, or they try to somehow unleash their human potential.

Christians mean something different by meditation. To us "meditation" is just another word for thinking. So we meditate by engaging God's word and applying it to our hearts. This is not a mystical procedure, and we do not repeat God's word as a mantra without thinking about its meaning.

Instead, we think through the meanings and implications of the biblical passages, relating it to other passages, and then apply it to our beliefs and actions. This involves serious intellectual effort, and it is often uncomfortable to face one's own defective thinking and lifestyle. Therefore, Christian meditation is not a way to escape from the self, to lose the self, or to accept the self, but to confront it by the only power that can transform it.

Do not be deceived – even those seemingly gentle Buddhist monks are corrupt to the core. Some of them make a superficial acknowledgement of this, and have written about it. But their writings and exercises lack the truth, and the converting and transforming power that is available only from God through Christ, conveyed by the Scripture, and applied by the Spirit. Non-Christian religions are frauds and failures, and non-Christian meditation is a snare of Satan.

Eastern religions want you to lose yourself. Psychology urges you to accept your wicked self. In contrast, the Christian faith teaches you to confront and examine yourself by the word of God, and it is by means of this word from God that he will empower and transform you (see Joshua 1:8, 1 Corinthians 11:28, 2 Corinthians 13:5, Philippians 2:12-13, and James 1:21-25).

¹⁶ Adapted from email correspondence.

17. Making, Keeping, and Breaking Promises¹⁷

Here are some biblical principles when it comes to making, keeping, and breaking promises:

1. Do not make unconsidered or unnecessary promises.
2. If you have made a promise, then keep it.
3. If the promise turns out to be unfavorable to you, you should still keep it (Psalm 15:4).

These are sufficient to cover many cases, but there are others that cover additional scenarios:

4. If a person has authority over you in a situation, he has the right to prevent you from making a promise, or to annul a promise after you have made it.
5. If a promise violates God's word (so that you should not have made it), then depending on the nature of the promise, there are times when you would still have to keep it, while at other times, you would be forbidden to keep it.

Many people already know principles 1 to 3 and their biblical basis, so I will elaborate on 4 and 5.

Some biblical passages are "case laws," similar to the idea of precedence in our legal system. Their applications are not limited to the immediate context, but they establish the principles on how similar cases should be judged.

For example, Paul cites "Do not muzzle an ox" as a case law and uses it to declare that a minister has the right to receive money from the people who are exposed to his spiritual labor:

Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they

¹⁷ Adapted from email correspondence.

ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? (1 Corinthians 9:7–11)

Principle 4 is rarely taught. One relevant passage is Numbers 30:1-16:

Moses said to the heads of the tribes of Israel: "This is what the LORD commands: When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.

"When a young woman still living in her father's house makes a vow to the LORD or obligates herself by a pledge and her father hears about her vow or pledge but says nothing to her, then all her vows and every pledge by which she obligated herself will stand. But if her father forbids her when he hears about it, none of her vows or the pledges by which she obligated herself will stand; the LORD will release her because her father has forbidden her.

"If she marries after she makes a vow or after her lips utter a rash promise by which she obligates herself and her husband hears about it but says nothing to her, then her vows or the pledges by which she obligated herself will stand. But if her husband forbids her when he hears about it, he nullifies the vow that obligates her or the rash promise by which she obligates herself, and the LORD will release her.

"Any vow or obligation taken by a widow or divorced woman will be binding on her.

"If a woman living with her husband makes a vow or obligates herself by a pledge under oath and her husband hears about it but says nothing to her and does not forbid her, then all her vows or the pledges by which she obligated herself will stand. But if her husband nullifies them when he hears about them, then none of the vows or pledges that came from her lips will stand. Her husband has nullified them, and the LORD will release her. Her husband may confirm or nullify any vow she makes or any sworn pledge to deny herself. But if her husband says nothing to her about it from day to day, then he confirms all her vows or the pledges binding on her. He confirms them by saying nothing to her when he hears about them. If, however, he nullifies them some time after he hears about them, then he is responsible for her guilt."

These are the regulations the LORD gave Moses concerning relationships between a man and his wife, and between a father and his young daughter still living in his house.

This is directly applicable to Christians. Moreover, although it refers to "a vow to the LORD," the principles are true for all kinds of promises, because the passage is God's command "concerning relationships between a man and his wife, and between a father and his young daughter still living in his house." Thus this is not only applicable, but it is even more obviously applicable than some of the case laws.¹⁸

Let us consider an illustration.

Suppose a relative or a friend of a married woman wishes to borrow money. The woman has no right to promise a loan without first asking her husband. If the woman nevertheless promises the loan and the husband is present, then he has the right to immediately nullify the promise. The husband has not sinned by nullifying the promise illegitimately made by the wife, and the wife would not sin by withholding the loan that she has initially promised, since the husband has nullified the promise. Still, the wife has sinned by making the promise without asking her husband. If the woman promises the loan and her husband is not present, then he has the right to nullify the promise once he hears about it.

If the husband says nothing when he hears the promise, then it is as if he has given his approval and confirmed the promise. Both the husband and the wife are then obligated to fulfill the promise and grant the loan. If the husband changes his mind and decides to withhold the loan once he has confirmed the promise, then he commits sin, and it is as if he has personally made and then broken the promise. In this case, the wife should obey the husband and withhold the loan – she does not sin by doing this, but the blame falls on her husband. But if the wife decides to fulfill the promise even after the husband has changed his mind, then both the husband and the wife commit sin – he sins by breaking the promise, and she sins by disobeying her husband.

The husband has the right to promise the loan without first discussing it with his wife. However, to show love and respect for his wife, to maintain the trust and intimacy in the marriage, and to maintain order in the home, he should discuss it with his wife anyway, and he should usually make the promise only if they both agree to it. The final decision rests with the husband.

The husband carries tremendous authority, but also a corresponding degree of responsibility. It is up to him to assess whether the family can afford to offer the loan, and to ascertain the spiritual and social consequences of making the promise. If he makes or confirms the promise, and then if the family suffers because the needed money has been lent out, the blame falls on the husband, not the wife.

Some wives are better than their husbands at analyzing the family's financial situation. In these cases, the husbands should acknowledge this, and discuss the matter with their wives, and then make their decision. But whether or not the husbands consult their wives, they must make the final decision and assume the moral responsibility for it. They have the

¹⁸ Concerning the relevance of the law to Christians, see Vincent Cheung *Commentary on Ephesians* and *The Sermon on the Mount*. For more on the authority structure in the home, see Vincent Cheung *Commentary on Ephesians* and *Renewing the Mind*.

greatest authority in the home, and they bear the greatest responsibility for what happens in it.

We have used the marriage relationship and a loan in the example, but the principle applies also to the relationship between a father and an unmarried daughter, and to other kinds of promises.

Principle 5 is easy to explain and illustrate.

One of the main issues is whether we should always keep every promise that we make no matter what. The answer is that we should not, because some promises are nullified by a higher authority, and some are morally wrong to keep. However, this does not always mean that we do not sin when we must break a promise for a legitimate reason. In many cases, we have already sinned in making the promise, but to keep that promise would be to commit another sin, and we cannot undo one sin by committing another one.

If I promise to commit robbery or murder for someone, then of course I must not keep that promise. It would be a sin to make the promise, and then it would be an additional sin and a greater sin to keep it. Rather, I should repent for making the promise, and then I should not carry out the promise.

Suppose you make a promise in the name of your company when you have no authority to make that promise, then you have already done wrong by making the promise, but it would be an additional and a greater wrong to steal the company's resources to keep a promise that you have no right to make. The company has authority over whether you could carry out the promise, and to protect its reputation, it might honor the promise anyway, but it is not morally obligated to do so.

God has authority over every promise. He tells us his judgment in the Bible; therefore, the Bible has authority over every promise. Then, in various situations, some human figures might have authority over our promises, such as parents, husbands, fathers, pastors, and employers.

Nevertheless, it does not follow that you should break every promise that you have no right to make. For example, it is an abomination for a Christian to marry a non-Christian, but it would be an additional sin for the Christian to divorce the non-Christian once the two are married. Although God denounces the sinful marriage from the spiritual and ethical perspective, he is the author of all things and he is still the one who oversees this marriage, and what he has joined together, let no man put asunder (1 Corinthians 7:12–13).¹⁹

Principles 4 and 5 should not complicate things so much that 1 to 3 become obscured. In fact, 1 and 2 are sufficient to address most situations.

¹⁹ See Vincent Cheung, *The Sermon on the Mount*.

Then, some promises might not be outright sinful, but they are unwise, and the Bible says that you should beg to be released from them. One example is when you co-sign someone's loan:

My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor, if you have struck hands in pledge for another, if you have been trapped by what you said, ensnared by the words of your mouth, then do this, my son, to free yourself, since you have fallen into your neighbor's hands: Go and humble yourself; press your plea with your neighbor! Allow no sleep to your eyes, no slumber to your eyelids. Free yourself, like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the snare of the fowler. (Proverbs 6:1-5)

My father frequently dealt with contracts and documents in his profession. And since I was only several years old, he told me repeatedly that I must never guarantee someone's loan. He was speaking from experience, but in this instance he did something that was biblical – he taught me a correct principle, and he did it when I was very young.

In Proverbs, the writer teaches his child some of the basic lessons of living, and this is one of them – never guarantee someone's loan, and if you have already done it, beg to get out of it. It is never too early to warn your child against drunkenness, adultery, co-signing, and other things that people often regard as "adult" lessons. Start to teach your child these things when he is three or four, and repeat them often.

18. Sin and Foolishness²⁰

All sinful decisions are unwise (Proverbs 6:32, 7:7; Ecclesiastes 7:25), and many unwise decisions are sinful, but it seems that not all unwise decisions are necessarily sinful.

To commit sin entails breaking a divine commandment. To love God with all our minds is indeed a commandment, but what this commandment implies must be defined by the Bible. It does not seem to mean that we will never make unwise decisions, just as to love God with our bodies might not mean that we will never physically fail, or that we must have unlimited physical strength. Moreover, some individuals are naturally sharper about some of these things that we are talking about, but this does not automatically make them morally superior.

Therefore, to love God with all our minds does not mean that you must get a perfect score on every math test, or that you are morally forbidden to make any mistake. Failing to always get a perfect score might be a result of the noetic effects of sin, but it might not be sinful in itself. On the other hand, it would be sinful for you to neglect your duties and thus underachieve.

To love God with all our minds does not mean that we must be all-wise, but that we must use all our mental resources to obey his commandments. Co-signing is unwise, but for it to be sin, there must be an actual commandment that states or implies a prohibition against it. It does not seem justified to call co-signing an outright sin. One's motive should also be taken into account. If it is done out of defiance to the Bible or out of a belief that it is wise even when the Bible says it is not, then it is a sin.

In fact, there is a scenario where it might be neither sinful nor unwise to co-sign. If the man approaches the matter as if he is taking on the whole loan, or as if he is taking out the loan for himself, then in effect, he is borrowing money in order to lend to the one he co-signs for. Since the person might be unable to pay, the co-signer should think of it as borrowing the money and giving (not lending) the whole sum to the other person, never to be repaid.

This is almost never what people have in mind when they co-sign. Nevertheless, if one thinks of the transaction this way when he co-signs, then for him there is little difference between co-signing for the money and giving away the money. If he can afford it, then it is his money to lose, and there is no sin. Proverbs 6:1-5, the passage on co-signing, would cease to apply exactly, because it is warning about an unexpected outcome. The co-signer is foolish when he fails to anticipate such an outcome, that is, to be burdened with the whole loan.

²⁰ Adapted from email correspondence.

19. Slave to the Lender

This is a question about buying a house with a large mortgage. Is it unbiblical to buy a house with any mortgage at all? Some teach that when you borrow, you become a slave to the lender.

Those who teach this derived the expression from Proverbs 22:7, which says, "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender." So they did not invent the phrase, but they have distorted it.

The verse is making a factual statement, but it does not tell us whether it is wrong to borrow. It does not tell us not to borrow, and it does not say that it is a sin to borrow, but it tells us what happens when we borrow by describing the relationship between the borrower and the lender. If you take out a loan to buy a place, then in a sense you will be working for the bank until you pay off the loan. And if the price of the place falls below the amount you borrowed, then you really will be a slave working for the bank!

A similar relationship is established when borrowing in other contexts. Consider the college students who spend too much on their credit cards, or consider their college loans. Many of them take years to pay off their debts after graduation. They have become slaves to the lenders. This might make you think twice about borrowing, but the verse does not forbid you to do it. It only tells you what will happen.

There are some who teach that because the atonement has redeemed believers from "the curse of the law" (Galatians 3:13), when appropriated by faith, the atonement effects deliverance from all the effects of the curse described in a passage like Deuteronomy 28. It follows that one who walks in faith should not experience or should always overcome the troubles described in the curse.

Then, they cite Deuteronomy 28:44 against borrowing: "He will lend to you, but you will not lend to him. He will be the head, but you will be the tail" (Deuteronomy 28:44). This is spoken as part of God's covenant curse against those who would break his law. They have distorted this, interpreting it as if it says, "If you borrow, then you will become cursed. If you borrow, then you will become the tail and not the head." The verse does not say this, but given the context it must mean something like, "If you disobey me, then I will put you under a curse, and then you will have to borrow." The need to borrow is one effect of the curse, and not the cause of the curse.

We can take an illustration from the relationship between the curse and banishment from the land. If we were to imitate the false interpretation, we would declare, "God's word says that if you are banished from the land, then you will come under a curse, so do not leave the land." The cause and effect are reversed. The correct interpretation is, "Do not break God's commandments; otherwise, he will put you under a curse, and as a result of the curse you will be banished from the land."

If a man is under God's curse, then he will probably need to borrow. On the other hand, if he needs to borrow, that in itself does not indicate that he is under a curse, since some people are poor even if they are right before God (James 2:5). Then, there are those who borrow large amounts not because they must do it to survive, but because they are carnal and desire to live beyond their means.

20. "Money is the Answer"

A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything. (Ecclesiastes 10:19)

Based on this verse, some false teachers have declared that God himself admits that money is the solution to every problem and the way to achieve any goal. If this is true, then to them it follows that the Bible encourages us to devote an extraordinary amount of effort to attain wealth. This soon turns into the claim that to "seek first the kingdom of God" is to seek first the wealth of the world, and to place money before every else.

This is not a hypothetical distortion or slippery slope – there are people who believe this. They make it their lifestyle to seek wealth on this basis, and assure themselves that they are in agreement with biblical teaching. In fact, from their perspective, they are the responsible and obedient ones, because while the other Christians work hard to spread the gospel through preaching, these people have a larger vision and a smarter approach.

They think that, if they become rich, then they will not have to reason with the non-Christians – they can buy them. The non-Christians do not respect the gospel, but they respect money, so if we have more of it than they do, then they will listen to us. Money is the key to capturing people's attention and making an impact in the world. After all, the Bible itself teaches that "money is the answer for everything."

This is a close paraphrase to the statements that some of these people have made. One of them said that Paul failed in his ministry because he was never as rich as Solomon, and so he never wielded the resources and blessings that God has given to every Christian. Once we have attained the level of prosperity that Solomon enjoyed, then the non-Christians will come and bow down to us. According to him, this is the true gospel ministry.

However, this verse in Ecclesiastes is teaching something different. It offers a contrast between "money" and "a feast...and wine." A feast and wine have some uses and effects, but in contrast, money has many uses and effects. This is a statement about the reality of things, but the verse does not say what to do with this information. It would be wrong to immediately infer, "Therefore, you should regard money as the most important thing in your life, and you must seek it with all your might."

To ensure the correct interpretation, one must take into account the immediate context of the surrounding verses, and also the broader context of the book. For our purpose, it is enough to direct our attention to the end where the author explains what he wants us to get out of Ecclesiastes: "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: 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" (12:13–14).

Fear God and keep his commandments, for there will be a judgment. This is "man's all" (NKJV), and this should be our whole concern. From the beginning, the author has been showing that all the things and the ways of this world are "meaningless." Then, after an extended discourse on the things and the ways of this world, the conclusion is that our whole duty is to fear God and keep his commandments, for there will be a judgment.

Therefore, he is not urging his readers to pursue the things and follow the ways of this world, or to be enamored with all that he has described in Ecclesiastes. His point is precisely the opposite – these things are vain, futile, and meaningless. The meaning of life is stated in the conclusion, that is, we are to fear God and keep his commandments, knowing that he will judge all men. Since this is the point, any inference from Ecclesiastes that is inconsistent with this must be a false inference.

We must seek God, not Mammon (Matthew 6:33). According to the false teachers, it is as if God himself has commanded us to seek Mammon, so that we are to seek God by seeking Mammon. This is condemned by verse 24, where Jesus declares that the seeking of the two are mutually exclusive, not mutually supportive.

Nevertheless, Jesus adds that the seeking of God would be followed by the gaining of Mammon (v. 33). This is contradicted by an even more sinister group of false teachers and heretics. Driven by demons, they often exploit the errors of others to advance their far more destructive program of unbelief, tradition, and phony piety.

21. Doctrine and Obedience²¹

There is a positive relationship between doctrine and obedience. However, we must make a distinction between mere profession of a doctrine and true faith or belief in it.

True faith results from a work of the Spirit in the heart by means of the word of God. According to James, this faith will always produce good works; in contrast, mere profession has no necessary relationship to holiness. You can say anything you want. You can say that you understand and believe something, but you might not really understand and believe it. You can say that you affirm a doctrine, but whether this is a product of the Spirit's grace and power is a different matter. If you profess the doctrine because the Spirit has changed your heart through the doctrine, then good works will necessarily result.

Therefore, the principle "right doctrine leads to obedience" in fact means "true faith in right doctrine leads to obedience." One who professes right doctrine does not necessarily understand and believe what he says – he might be parroting it. An atheist can recite the Bible, so that he physically says the right things, but he does not do it out of sincere belief or a transformed heart. Professing Christians who do not act like Christians at all are not really Christians, and true Christians who affirm a doctrine that they do not obey still do not truly believe it. In the first case, conversion is needed; in the second case, sanctification is needed.

There are times where one appears to act against a doctrine that he truly believes. Sin leads a person to rebel against what he should know to be true, because sin is both rebellious and irrational. We must use the means that God has given us, such as the word and prayer, to train ourselves in holiness and to petition him for grace. Still, even if this person truly believes it in a general sense, it is doubtful that he believes all the implications of the doctrine that he disobeys, because the decision to disobey it, when stated as a proposition, would surely contradict the doctrine itself.

As for those who seem to have little knowledge but demonstrate great obedience, this might be because they truly believe the little that they know, and the Spirit of God has worked in their hearts through the little that they have learned. This is often enough to produce a generally righteous lifestyle. Then, there are those who lack biblical knowledge and still happen to do some things right as if by "accident" and not by conscious obedience toward God. This does not count as holiness.

Moreover, remember that to affirm right doctrine is in itself part of a holy lifestyle. It is a righteous thing to affirm the truth, and it is sinful to neglect, reject, or distort it. Thus the people that you consider holy but very theologically flawed are not as holy as you think, because they are sinning in their ignorance and false beliefs. God judges our thoughts as well as our actions.

²¹ Adapted from email correspondence.

22. Some Sins Greater Than Others²²

Every sin generates infinite guilt and subjects the offender to everlasting punishment, because every sin is a transgression against the infinite God. James says:

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. (James 2:10–11)

If you break even one law, then you are a sinner. Some people had insisted to me that they were not sinners, but when they were pressed about it, it becomes clear that they meant they had never committed what they regarded as gross transgressions such as rape and murder. Telling "white" lies, harboring ill will toward people, practicing divination, and hundreds of other things condemned by the Bible did not count as sins to them. For them "sin" designates a special category of actions that they assume they would never commit. If they have done it, then it must not be sin. They considered themselves sinless by definition.

James rejects this way of thinking, but he declares that any transgression of God's law is sin. A person is deceived if he thinks that he has never sinned, and that God will welcome him into heaven for this reason.

However, within God's system of moral commands, some sins are indeed more severe than others. As Matthew 23:23 says, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

In addition, the amount of our knowledge also has something to do with how the sin is judged:

"That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." (Luke 12:47–48)

The amount of knowledge affects the level of responsibility. Nevertheless, even the one who "does not know" will be judged and punished, only that the punishment will be less severe. Therefore, there is never an excuse for disobedience.

²² Adapted from email correspondence.

23. The "Good" Works of the Wicked

On the doctrine of divine predestination, I am still puzzled about some of those who would be sent to hell. What about those Catholic nuns who care for needy people – someone like Mother Teresa?

Although the context is predestination, it is possible to direct this question regarding the "good" works of non-Christians to the whole biblical faith, and especially to the doctrine of justification by faith. All Christians believe that man cannot be saved by works, but your question implies a rejection of justification by faith. If you think this way, then the doctrine of predestination is the least of your problems.

Just because a nun appears to have done some good works does not make any difference unless she truly trusted Christ for salvation. To assist or unite humanity without God and without true religion is only an attempt at building Babel. It is a man-centered attempt at building up humanity. It is rebellion disguised as righteousness and compassion. The "good" works of non-Christians are not designed to promote faith in Christ and obedience to God, but to maintain men's defiance, so that they will not trust or worship God.

If we declare our works as the point of reference for good and evil, then we have already succumbed to the original temptation of Satan, making ourselves equal with God. This is the wickedness that underlies your question, and the wickedness that is in your heart. A "good" work is truly a good work only because it is so on God's terms, and not because it has the approval of men.

As long as they remain non-Christians, their so-called "good" works are still sinful, and incur God's wrath. The difference is that these "good" works, since they demonstrate a superficial agreement with God's precepts, are often considered less wicked than their other deeds. Still, it is not necessarily true that the "good" works of the non-Christians are always less wicked than their other works, because God also takes into account their motives and attitudes.

If a non-Christian performs what seems to be a "good" deed, such as feeding a beggar, but if he does it out of a wicked motive (admiration for his own compassion, asserting humanity's independence from God, etc.), then it is probably counted as even more wicked than if he performs an obviously wicked deed, such as kicking the beggar in the face.

Paul writes: "As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!" (Galatians 1:9). Once a person accepts a false religion or worldview, it becomes irrelevant whether he still appears to do good works, because "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). These are not really good works, and the person is headed straight to endless suffering in hell.

24. When Other People Fall Away²³

The Bible teaches us about sin. It records the apostasies of professing believers and ministers. It tells us that some have false faith, so that they "believe" for a while and then fall away. Therefore, the fact that some professing believers and ministers turn from the Christian faith is what we should expect, since the Bible teaches us to expect it, so that the falling away actually illustrates the truth of the Bible.

If you are affected by people converting away from Christianity, then what about the many people who are converting to Christianity? It is irrational to be affected by other people's conversion in either direction, but you could at least be consistent and be affected both ways, instead of being affected only by those falling away. You allow something to affect you in one direction while you do not allow the same thing to affect you in another direction. Your doubt is selective and arbitrary. You must doubt your doubt.

Those who fall away from the Christian faith are extremely stupid people. They defect for irrational reasons, and we can easily crush them in debate. It makes no sense to be affected by them.

²³ Adapted from email correspondence.

25. He Blesses Us to Bless Us²⁴

Some preachers say that God blesses a person mainly or even solely because this person should bless other people, and because those will in turn bless others, and so on. They often assert this with no biblical evidence, but sometimes they might refer to a verse like Genesis 12:2: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."

This is often applied not only to blessings in general, but also to salvation, so that these preachers would say that God saves you only because he wants you to help save others. The purpose of this teaching is to encourage selflessness, evangelism, and a lifestyle of blessing others. Sometimes the purpose is to defend the moral propriety of desiring blessings from God, because one receives from God only so that he can bring blessings to other people.

The teaching is false, and in fact silly and stupid. If God blesses you only to bless others, and if he blesses these other people only because he wants to bless others still, then it means that God wishes to bless no one at all. If God saves you only because he wants you to help save others by preaching the gospel, and if he wants to save those who would believe your preaching only because he wants them to help save others still, then it means that God wishes to save no one at all. The whole chain of people are only means to an end, but the blessings never attain their end, or the one that they are meant to reach, not even once.

The false doctrine says that God saved me so that I could preach to others, so that they could be saved. And he saves these other people through me so that they could preach to others, so that these others could be saved. But this means that he really wants to save no one, since everyone's salvation is only the means to another's salvation, who is also the means to still another's salvation, and so on forever. Such means have no ends, so that God has no "end" in mind, meaning that he wants to save no one. The whole process makes no sense, because if God wants to save anyone, he can save him directly by the gospel, without going through another person, and without saving anyone that he really does not want to save.

It is self-defeating to adopt such a ridiculous doctrine in order to encourage selflessness and evangelism, or to justify our desire to receive blessings from God. The truth is that God saved me to save me, and then he uses my preaching to save others whom he also wants to save, and so on. All those whom God blesses and saves could be both means and ends, or rather, both ends and means. A Christian should desire blessings from God, so that he himself can benefit from them and also so that he can help others.

²⁴ Adapted from email correspondence.

26. Praying for Yourself and Others

There is a teaching that we should spend most of our time praying for others, since blessings will come back to us. However, this seems like a silly argument in that the focus has never been the other people, since the point is that if the person prays for others, then he will be blessed even more.

This false doctrine stems from a perversion of the virtue of selflessness. Some of the teachings on "forgiveness" and on "sowing and reaping" exhibit the same error, so that we forgive others because of its benefits to us, and we are generous to others because of the rewards that will come to us. The distortion at times results in a selfishness that corrupts all good works, and at times in rebellion and sinful neglect of oneself.

For example, when a man dedicates himself to feed the hungry, it is not selfless or heroic for him to feed others and not himself, even when the food is there in front of him. It is stupid and sinful to needlessly starve himself and feed others instead. The "sacrifice" is artificial, and he is a self-righteous phony.

We are not only responsible to serve others, but also to care for ourselves. We belong to God, so that when we care for ourselves in a manner that is consistent with God's word, we are not being selfish, but being faithful with God's property. The Bible teaches that God gives us good things to enjoy (1 Timothy 6:17). If we do things in moderation, then it is not sinful to partake of food, drink, material goods, and the blessings of God beyond that which is necessary for survival.

I understand my needs better than other people understand them, and it would be sinful for me to neglect these needs. Moreover, it would be foolish and dishonest for me to pray for others as a method or with the intention to address my own needs. God's word instructs me to pray for myself:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Philippians 4:6)

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. (Mark 11:24)

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:7)

The prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus often prayed for themselves. This is not always a sign of selfishness, but it can be an expression of dependence on God as the ruler of all things and the source of all blessings, and an expression of confidence in God's eagerness to do all that is favorable to his people and his kingdom.

To pray for others as a method and with the intention to address our own needs is just a hypocritical way to pray for ourselves. We might as well be honest about it and pray for ourselves, and then pray for others. There is no reason why we cannot do both. In fact, one of the best things that you can do for a man is to teach him to pray for himself. This is different from telling him to be selfish and disregard other people's needs. Rather, this teaches him to maintain fellowship with God, and to call upon God in faith. It represents a spiritual and mature lifestyle.

Some people think that inward focus is always wrong, and that the only proper focus is outward, in intercession and evangelism. This is blatant rebellion against what the Bible teaches:

A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. (1 Corinthians 11:28)

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)

You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:5)

Again, the false doctrine is a perversion of biblical virtue. It is self-righteousness, arrogance, and hypocrisy hidden under a show of piety and heroism.

When I was converted, I believed Christ for myself, not for anyone else. I was a sinner, and I needed God to save me. By believing the gospel for myself, one more person was saved – me. It would have been absurd to refuse conversion and start to evangelize instead. In the same way, I have access to God through Jesus Christ, and it would be absurd not to pray for myself. I have needs, so I will talk to God about them. It is that simple. We insult God's grace if we do not regularly petition him for our own needs and desires. Of course, we should also pray for others, and rejoice when God meets their needs.

27. The Biblical Approach to Evangelism²⁵

Evangelism should be done by taking time to declare the whole counsel of God, instead of by the "hit-and-run" method and with a limited message. There is a strong teaching aspect to it (Matthew 28:19-20), so that when there is time, we should imitate Paul's procedure in Acts 19:

Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. (v. 8–10)

As J. I. Packer writes, "Evangelism must rather be conceived as a long-term enterprise of patient teaching and instruction, in which God's servants seek simply to be faithful in delivering the gospel message and applying it to human lives, and leave it to God's Spirit to draw men to faith through this message in his own way and at his own speed."²⁶

However, when there is very little time, or when the person is already sufficiently informed, God might perform a quick work, as in Acts 8:26-39:

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

²⁵ Adapted from email correspondence.

²⁶ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Crossway), p. 163-164.

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

Of course, to preach the whole counsel of God, you need to know the whole counsel of God. Therefore, you must constantly improve in your understanding of the Christian faith, and in your ability to explain it.

28. A Career in Science

I was convinced that I was called to go to college and become a creation scientist, and I chose to study biology and geology. However, I now realize the futility of empiricism – the best I could do to defend the faith as a scientist is to defeat the theory of evolution using its own flawed methods. And even if scientists overturn the theory of evolution, some evil-minded fool will invent some other anti-biblical theory. I hope you could give me some guidance on this problem.

You have accurately understood my position on scientific arguments: "The best I could do to defend the faith as a scientist is to defeat the theory of evolution using its own flawed methods." I would not say that no one should be a scientist, or that scientific arguments are completely useless in apologetics. But I would say that science can never arrive at any positive knowledge or justification for any claim, because scientific reasoning is always fallacious, doomed by empiricism, induction, affirming the consequent, and so on.²⁷ As a scientist, the most that you can do is to employ scientific arguments better than the non-Christians in order to prove them wrong. Scientific arguments can perform only a negative function in apologetics, since it cannot positively prove any claim. Therefore, even if scientific arguments are not always useless, they are always optional.

This is relevant, since in considering whether to become a scientist, it is better to understand the nature and place of science. Many Christians place it almost on the same level with Scripture, and for this reason we must be suspicious of their faith, because it is impossible to serve two masters. Science is not a second revelation from God, but it is man's own methods and conclusions. To worship both God and science is to worship both God and self. Since God will not share worship with another, this means that to worship both God and science is in fact to worship only the self. Then, many others place science below Scripture to serve as confirmation, but since science cannot prove anything, it cannot even perform this function. It is important to understand this because if you think too much of science, you will expect too much from it, and then you will be disappointed and disillusioned.

Suppose a Christian wonders if he should become a policeman. This career is a legitimate option, and it is possible to honor God in it. However, if the Christian thinks that he can destroy all crimes by becoming a policeman, and that he can even turn people's hearts toward good, then he has an unrealistic expectation of what this work can do, and he will be disappointed and disillusioned.

Likewise, if you choose to pursue a career in science, you should find a realistic reason for it. Since science cannot prove anything, it cannot provide positive vindication for the biblical worldview, and so it follows that you must not pursue a career in science for this

²⁷ See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, Apologetics in Conversation, and Captive to Reason*.

reason. You were planning to pursue a career in science not only because you would be good at it, but you thought by it you could promote and vindicate the Christian faith. However, you thought science was something that it was not, and you thought that it could do something that it could not do. It is better that you realize this now.

There is no need to eliminate science as a career option, but you should also consider other possibilities. You should better define your goals, and then consider how you could achieve them, keeping in mind God's providence, your interests and abilities, and any practical issues. We are not only talking about apologetics, but a career, and so you need to consider all relevant concerns, such as making a living. You do not have to choose a career that would make a lot of money, but you should understand what you are getting into when you make a decision. You might still want to become a scientist. There is nothing wrong with this as long as you have a realistic view of science.

29. Rational Faith and Nagging Doubts²⁸

This issue is common, and it might take some time before it is resolved. Gain a firm grasp of a coherently formulated system of Christian theology.²⁹ If you are misinformed about the Christian faith, then naturally there would be oppressive questions. If there are indeed logical doubts, overcome them by praying about them and by studying biblical apologetics.³⁰

However, it appears that your problem is not mainly rational in nature. You would still doubt even if you perceive that the Christian faith is rationally perfect. This is because you are not perfectly rational even though the Christian faith is perfectly rational. Sin impedes rationality. Faith is not something that comes only by arguments, even though God often uses them to produce faith. Faith is a gift from God.

Jesus said, "But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:26–28). If one does not finally believe, it is not because the Christian faith is not rational, but he does not believe because he is one of the reprobates, chosen for damnation. Nevertheless, if you have persistent doubts, this does not necessarily indicate that you are one of the reprobates. It could be a struggling phase in spiritual growth. You must continue to pray for God to show you the truth, and to fill you with assurance.

Mark 9:24 says, "Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'" You might be in a similar position – it is not that you have no faith, but you have a weak and wavering faith. Ask God for help. He is the author and perfecter of faith.

²⁸ Adapted from email correspondence.

²⁹ See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*.

³⁰ See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, Apologetics in Conversation, and Captive to Reason*.

30. Reckless Recreation³¹

Ordinary precautions do not indicate a lack of faith. For example, it would not indicate a lack of faith to lock the door when you leave home. In fact, the best reason to think about home security comes from faith in God's word, because the Bible teaches us about human depravity, and what acts of greed, cruelty, and violence that men are capable of doing. If you believe what the Bible says, you will take measures to protect yourself. To neglect home security would not be a sign of faith, but it would be a case of testing God. Faith believes not only what the Bible teaches about divine protection, but it believes all of the Bible, including what it says about the dangers of living in this sinful world.

For this reason, it is not only acceptable for Christians to buy insurance, but it is often irresponsible to do without it. When you purchase insurance, you are taking advantage of an ordinary measure that is there to care for yourself and your family if something naturally damaging happens. As long as you are acting on the basis of what the Bible teaches and not what the world says, or out of fear or greed, then it does not contradict faith.

However, your question is whether a Christian should purchase insurance when participating in activities that involve risks and dangers, such as skiing. While Christians should find it acceptable to purchase insurance in general, the real issue is whether they should participate in these activities. We cannot assume that something is acceptable just because it is part of the culture. Skiing is nothing more than plummeting down a mountain on two sticks at high velocity for mere entertainment. It is one thing to risk martyrdom for the gospel, but a very different matter to risk injury or death for recreation. The Christian must consider whether this is a worthy use of his life, or whether his life is worthy of a better use.

The point is not that a Christian must refrain from skiing, but that it involves risks that a Christian should not accept without justification. It is a foolish evasion to answer that every activity involves some risks, since skiing involves a deliberate effort to remove oneself from his regular circumstances in order to embrace greater risks of injury or death, and usually for the rather lame purpose of amusement. The Christian should take measures to preserve himself for the service of God. His life is not his own, and he should have good reasons for accepting risks.

Consider a more obvious example. It is often regarded as noble and heroic to climb Mount Everest, but in fact it represents the height of arrogance and irresponsibility toward God and family. One documentary showed a climber who left his pregnant wife at home. As he was trapped and about to die, he managed to call his wife, who had just given birth, and they barely had time to name the baby while he was expiring on Mount Everest.

³¹ Adapted from email correspondence.

He was a monster – he left his wife behind and went to climb some mountain just so he could prove something. One day the child would ask, "Why did father leave us?" If the woman would be honest, she would answer, "Your father left to climb a mountain because he was a piece of trash who wanted to feel like a big man. He was a stupid and selfish man, knowing that he might die and leave us behind. He wanted a sense of achievement for accomplishing nothing useful more than he wanted to be a husband to me and a father to you. We are better off without him." Money could not replace a husband and a father, but in this case some insurance money was probably more useful than to have such a man around.

People climb Mount Everest for all the wrong reasons. How many people are on Mount Everest waiting to hear about Jesus Christ? And how many Christians are there waiting for someone to help them build a church? No, they climb for foolish reasons like self-satisfaction, self-realization (whatever that means), or to demonstrate the triumph of the human spirit over a seemingly impossible challenge. You triumph over a mountain by blowing it up, not by climbing it and dying on it.

When I met my wife many years ago, I became more conscious about the unnecessary risks that I was taking. Since then I have altered some of my habits to better maintain my health for her sake, so that I would be able to serve her better and longer in this life. Nevertheless, there is an important point that qualifies all that I have said – that is, I do not trust in my own carefulness, as if it can prevent all calamities. Rather, I acknowledge my responsibility to God and to my family by exercising ordinary precautions and avoiding unnecessary risks, and then I trust in God's providence to perform all that he wills. There is no reason to be reckless even if you are single or childless, since your life belongs to God, but he shows us more grace, and sends other people into our lives to awaken our love and duty.

31. Dress Code at the Church

One of the rules at this church is that one must dress well when coming to church. They argue that since one usually dresses his best for an important function, the same principle should apply when meeting the Almighty.

My church also teaches the same. However, I do not always follow it for several reasons:

- (1) It is legalistic.
- (2) Romans 14:5 says "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind."
- (3) The Bible never says that Jesus and his disciples had to dress in a noble manner when attending the synagogues.

The Bible does not require one to dress really well to church, and the argument you mentioned is wrong. A similar argument states that Old Testament worship prescribes beautiful clothes and ornaments for the priests, and since Christians are now God's priests in Christ, we should also dress well at church. However, this is a misapplication of the ceremonial commands, for if these command apply, it would be arbitrary to derive the principle that we ought to dress well to church and not to dress exactly as the Old Testament priests. The Old Testament does not tell the priests to wear nice clothes that they choose for themselves, but to wear exactly what is prescribed.³²

There is no direct command to dress well at church; nevertheless, there are a few factors to consider.

First, you should seek to edify other people.

Romans 14:5 indeed says, "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." However, you must not neglect verses 15-19:

If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

³² For more on the law, see Vincent Cheung, *The Sermon on the Mount and Commentary on Ephesians*.

You should strive to facilitate worship, and to avoid drawing attention to yourself. When attending a church consisting mostly of poor people who do not have nice clothes, you should not dress too well, so you would not stand out. And you should not dress too badly to a church where most people dress well, again, so you would not stand out. Of course, there are reasons why people dress differently besides economic factors, but the point is to avoid drawing attention to yourself for no good reason.

One who walks in love does not insist on his rights, but thinks about how he can contribute to the edification of other people. However, we should oppose any accommodation that amounts to an ideological compromise or an implicit approval of unbiblical thinking.

For example, a man does not have to dress like today's teenagers or to use their expressions to preach to them. It is sufficient to dress and talk in a way so as not to allow these things to hinder the message. If wearing baggy pants and talking like a barbarian will make the difference between heaven and hellfire for them, then I will accommodate, but this is usually unnecessary. Those who are obsessed with looking and sounding like those they attempt to reach often end up compromising the message.

The church should influence culture instead of letting culture influence it. We can accommodate people only to a certain point, after which we must demand that they follow us as we follow Christ. If they refuse to abandon their unbiblical and brutish ways, then it means that they are reprobates, foreordained to damnation.

The truth is that those who accommodate the secular culture often do so because they enjoy it – the clothes, language, music, etc. – and this is their excuse to embrace the world and still call themselves Christians. Those who are more theologically inclined use their version of "the cultural mandate" to accomplish the same thing, so that they can become completely engaged in sports, politics, drinking, and so on.

Some people say that they go to parties and dinners, and associate with non-Christians in various settings, so that they can reach these people "just like Jesus did." However, most of the time they do not mention the gospel, even after an extended relationship with the unbelievers. The truth is that they enjoy living like the non-Christians, and their former lives as sinners. Now while they are having fun, they lie to themselves and to others about their true motive. This is carnality with a mission, only it is more about the carnality than about the mission.

Second, you should obey the church leaders.

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.
(Hebrews 13:17)

This verse alone should settle the matter. On practical issues such as the dress code, if the pastor says that you should wear nice clothes to church, then wear nice clothes to church. Do what the pastor says to make his job easier. It is that simple. Although there is no direct biblical requirement to wear nice clothes at church, it is a pastor's legitimate desire to develop a decent, disciplined, and organized people. And there is nothing wrong with his wish to present Christians to outsiders as clean and orderly individuals, not slobs and bums. Then, of course, women should never dress like whores even when they are not in church.

32. Lobsters and Homosexuals

In *The Philosophy Gym*, Stephen Law offers the overused argument that if Christians oppose homosexuality because of what the Bible says, then they must also avoid eating lobster, because Leviticus forbids both homosexuality and eating shelled seafoods.

This is another example that non-Christians are stupid. Even if the prohibition against shelled seafoods applies, the argument still fails. It could only show that Christians are still prohibited from eating lobster and other shelled seafoods, and that those who eat sin against God. Thus even if Stephen Law is right about the lobsters, he would prove only that many Christians continue to sin. There is still no argument in favor of homosexuality.

Suppose an argument demonstrates that if I oppose murder, then I must also oppose lamb chops. If I continue to eat lamb chops, that would not make it acceptable to commit murder, but it would only mean that the murderer sins in his killing, and I sin in my eating. Even a child could understand this, but a non-Christian philosophy professor does not.

Nevertheless, the argument cannot even demonstrate that Christians are inconsistent when it comes to lobsters. This is because Stephen Law makes the amateurish mistake of failing to interpret the opponent's position on its own terms before turning it against him. The error exposes Stephen Law as a total moron.

The prohibition against eating shelled seafoods was a ceremonial distinctive that ended with the death and resurrection of Christ, when God commanded that the true faith would now be actively preached to all nations (Acts 10:9-16). On the other hand, God's law regards homosexuality as both a ceremonial and a moral abomination. He does not revoke this condemnation against homosexuality in the New Testament, but rather reinforces it in the strongest terms (Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Therefore, instead of refuting the Christians, Stephen Law exposes himself as a stupid, careless, and dishonest lunatic. He has a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Oxford, and he lectures on the subject at the University of London. Thus he becomes another example that even the best non-Christian scholars are the most incompetent morons of this world. Even an elementary school student could have avoided this error by looking up the verses in a commentary, but a philosophy professor writing a book for commercial publication could not even do this.

All non-Christians are morons. Many Christians refuse to say this because they have an evil respect for non-Christian scholars, and a false concept of Christian gentleness. In refusing to declare that all non-Christians are stupid, they have denied an important aspect of the Christian faith. The biblical message is that man is both sinful and stupid without Christ. Thus those who deny that non-Christians are stupid also deny that Christ saves us from both our wickedness and our foolishness. This implies that we were intellectually

sufficient without salvation from Christ, and that we needed his salvation only from our sinfulness. This is a denial of the saving work of Christ, and amounts to blasphemy.

33. Errors on Sanctification

Most books on sanctification are full of mistakes and nonsense. They are characteristically sloppy, imprecise, unbiblical, mystical, and anti-intellectual. Let us consider some examples from one of the better works, Joel Beeke's *Overcoming the World*.³³ Some of them might seem trivial, but they are not, because they reinforce common errors that severely distort the understanding and development of Christian readers.

In spiritual life, in interpersonal relations, in all of our work, this principle holds true: the path to gain is through pain. (13)

This is an unbiblical generalization and emphasis. Beeke probably wishes to universalize and legitimize his own experience, negativity, and unbelief. The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Gain in the spirit comes from faith, hope, love, knowledge, cooperation, grace, mercy, holiness, victory, and many other wonderful things. Instead, Beeke stresses pain. This is what he thinks of the Christian faith, and of Jesus Christ. He also applies this to interpersonal relations. So this is what he thinks about his wife, his children, and his friends.

In their book *In His Image*, Paul Brand and Philip Yancey show how pain is a necessary ingredient to growth. That's why we speak of growing pains and repeat the saying "No pain, no gain." (13)

This is an unbiblical generalization. It is a sign of unfaithfulness and incompetence to offer non-Christian slogans as Christian teaching. Why should I learn non-Christian lessons from a Christian book? What a deceiver. What a disgrace.

Calvin's piety is biblical, with an emphasis on the heart more than the mind. Head and heart must work together, but the heart is more important. (42)

The first sentence contrasts the "heart" with the "mind," and the second contrasts the "heart" with the "head." Thus like many others, for Beeke the "head" refers to the "mind" – but then what is the "heart"? If the "heart" is not the mind, then it must be non-mental. If it is non-mental, then Beeke urges a non-mental emphasis on piety. What is a non-mental piety? And how can non-mental piety interact with Scripture?

If the heart and the mind are both mental, then how can we speak of them as if they are different parts of a human being? Where is the biblical justification for making this distinction between the heart and the mind? Also, why is the "mind" referred to as the "head"? Is Beeke a naturalist or evolutionist? The Christian view is that the mind is

³³ Joel Beeke, *Overcoming the World* (P & R Publishing, 2005).

incorporeal, so that a man continues to exist and think even after his soul leaves the body at death.

The Bible never considers the mind and the heart as separate parts of a person. The above is an example of using unbiblical language to make an unbiblical distinction, and then impose it by force upon Christian theology and experience. Many of the anti-intellectual teachings on sanctification are founded on this distinction. We must condemn and discard this false doctrine.

As Gordon Clark writes, "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."³⁴

In the sacraments God accommodates Himself to our weakness. When we hear the Word indiscriminately proclaimed, we may wonder: "Is it truly for me? Does it really reach me?" However, in the sacraments God reaches out and touches us individually, and says, "Yes, it's for you. The promise extends to you." (56)

The Bible does not teach this. Beeke made it up. It is unlikely that a person who doubts God's word like this would really come to believe God's promises through the sacraments. Moreover, one can doubt the sacraments and whether they apply to him just as easily as he doubts the word. In fact, he could more easily doubt the sacraments, since the sacraments do not use words to tell him that he is included.

The rich man wanted to be raised from the dead to warn his brothers, but Abraham said that if they would not hear God's word, then they would not hear one who is raised from the dead. So if a man who comes back from the dead could not make a person believe, how can the sacraments do this? Whether one believes depends on the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit works with the word. And if one has any faith in the sacraments, it is only because he believes God's word about them.

But as Robert Bruce put it, "While we do not get a better Christ in the sacraments than we do in the Word, there are times when we get Christ better." (88)

There is no biblical evidence for this. Also, what kind of Christians get Christ better through the sacraments than God's word? If they are Christians at all, they must be very bad Christians. Bruce is saying that sometimes Christians would rather deal with mere symbols of Christ than the very words that come from this Christ. Beeke approves, and does not condemn such people. What kind of man would encourage such an evil doctrine?

³⁴ Gordon Clark, *The Biblical Doctrines of Man* (The Trinity Foundation), p. 87-88.

Holiness and prayer have much in common...Both are learned by experience and through spiritual battles. (90)

This is the voice of a deceiver. No, holiness and prayer are learned through the word of God.³⁵

Holy living influences and impresses as nothing else can; no argument can match it. (98)

This is a common error, and an expression of anti-intellectual spirituality. The word of God, or a biblical argument, is always greater than the holiness of man. Beeke again insults the word of God, as if he is determined to belittle it.

As Spurgeon wrote: "...All our libraries and studies are mere emptiness compared with our closets..." (126)

Now Spurgeon blasphemes God's word as Beeke cites him with approval. If there are Bibles in "our libraries and studies," then this is an attack against the Bible. He even calls God's word "mere emptiness" in comparison to our prayers. And if he does not have Bibles in mind when he refers to "all our libraries and studies," then is he even a Christian? It is sufficient to say that we must both study and pray without resorting to pious exaggerations. The truth is that if a person neglects the study of God's word, it is his prayer closet that will become mere emptiness.

Because [Paul] knew what anxiety was, he could teach believers how not to be anxious. Because he had personally battled fear and sin and disappointment, he could preach on those matters to other believers (2 Cor. 1:3–7). (129)

This is a common mistake derived from non-Christian thinking. Our competence to address a matter comes from knowledge of God's word and not from experience. Paul also speaks to idolaters, homosexuals, drunkards, thieves, women, slaves, Gentiles, and many other sorts of people. Beeke either believes that the apostle had been all of these things – including a drunk heathen lesbian slave woman – or he believes that the apostle was wrong in speaking to these people, and thus denies the inspiration of the Bible. Look up 2 Corinthians 1:3–7. It teaches something else. Paul shares God's resources with the people, not insight from experience.

Remember, you are known more for your reactions than your actions (Prov. 16:32). (146)

This is a blatant abuse of Proverbs 16:32, and it sounds like something that comes from a secular leadership seminar or a self-help book. It is a non-Christian slogan, and it is ridiculous. Hitler is known more for his actions than his reactions. Serial murderers are known for their actions rather than their reactions.

³⁵ See Vincent Cheung, *Prayer and Revelation*.

[When it comes to handling criticisms...] If your conscience is clear, a simple, straightforward explanation may be helpful in certain cases, though respectful silence is often more appropriate and effective (Mark 14:61). (147)

This is a perversion of Mark 14:61, which is referring to something else. It is not mainly about how to handle criticisms.

At all costs, don't strive to justify yourself; your friends don't need that, and your enemies probably won't believe you anyhow. (147)

The advice seems to come from popular psychology. He must offer biblical support for this, and to reconcile it with the examples of the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus, who often attacked their critics. Otherwise, this becomes a criticism against them, and no one can do this without endangering his soul.

If one of Jesus' handpicked apostles betrayed Him for a paltry sum, and another swore that he did not know Him out of fear of a servant maid, why should we expect to carry on our ministries without ever being betrayed or deserted? (149-150)

Peter might be applicable, but Jesus knew that he would be restored. Judas is a different matter. Christ was not surprised by his treachery, but he knew that Judas was a "devil from the beginning," foreordained to betray the Lord, so that the Scripture could be fulfilled. By saying that Christ was betrayed even though he handpicked his disciples, there could be the implication – probably unintended – that he made a mistake, and so the statement could include an element of blasphemy.

Pray with your critic. If he visits you, always begin with prayer, and ask him to close in prayer. (152)

Where is the biblical support for this? Are there biblical examples from the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord? Did Jesus ask the Pharisees to pray with him, and then ask them to close in prayer? Or is this just more pious sounding advice that is in fact false and foolish?

The Lord delivered Job from his hard feelings toward his judgmental friends when he prayed for them. (152)

Where does the Bible say that Job had hard feelings toward his friends? And where does it say that God delivered Job from those feelings when he prayed? This is speculation. It is a deception, because a reader might think that he is receiving sound advice based on a biblical example when this is not the case.

34. Kingdom First

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:33)

Many people think that they are doers of the word when they are merely hearers of the word (James 1:22). Sometimes they think that they have done what is required, and feel good about themselves for it, just because they agree with what they have heard from God's word. Sometimes they misunderstand a verse to demand something lower than what it does, and so they think that they have satisfied it. Or, when they fail to fulfill even this lower standard, they still think that it is close enough. The result is that they perform far below what God's word demands, and enjoy far less of the life and power that God has promised.

There are those who exhibit unabashed rebellion, and blatantly make wealth their chief pursuit. They are non-Christians, headed toward everlasting suffering in hellfire. They are accustomed to doing the opposite of what God commands (v. 32). All of their thinking reflects the fact that they love "Money" and despise God (v. 24). Their aim in life is to attain financial abundance. This often translates into an emphasis on the means to attaining this, such as secular education and business relationships.

We expect this from non-Christians, but those who claim to be Christians are often no better. They would admonish their children to focus on school work, but they lack the same urgency when speaking to them about church work. They tell their children to work hard at school, be admitted to excellent colleges, so that they will find high-paying jobs. However, their agenda is not nearly as specific and ambitious when it comes to the children's theological studies and progress in ministry. For them, God's kingdom does not come first.

Then, there are those who make seeking God's kingdom the way to obtaining material things, and wealth is still the end of all their seeking and striving. Jesus means that we should seek God's kingdom instead of material things, and we will not need to worry, because when we do this the material things will come. However, they take the verse as a teaching on how to obtain material things from God.

The attitude is essentially the same as the first. The difference is that instead of seeking wealth directly and apart from any Christian context, they convince themselves that they are seeking after material things "the right way" by seeking the kingdom of God. This is a deception, and it contradicts the point of the passage, which is to direct our focus to God's kingdom and away from material things. Jesus does not say, "Seek first the kingdom of God, *so that* you will obtain wealth and things."

After this, there are those who make wealth the means by which they seek and promote God's kingdom, but they do this in a way that really makes wealth the direct object of their

seeking and striving. They claim that they ultimately have God in mind, but they center their lives around wealth and other things, so that if they pay any attention to God's kingdom, it is obviously an afterthought.

Some of them are rather bold about this. I have heard several people declare that although the verse tells us to seek first the kingdom of God, the best way to seek first the kingdom is to become as rich as possible! So what if you study, pray, and preach? A rich man can use his money to train up a hundred people like you!

They say that the way to see first the kingdom of God is to refrain from doing anything for the kingdom at this time, but to have a larger "vision," which means to become extremely rich first so that you can make large donations to churches and ministries. They are so deceived that they think this is the right, and that this is what the verse teaches. From their perspective, those who seek God's kingdom through study, prayer, and ministry, demonstrate inferior vision and ability.

Of course, this is only an excuse for rebellion. It claims that the best way to obey the verse is by doing the opposite of what it says. Jesus makes it clear that to seek God's kingdom means that we would not run after wealth and the things that non-Christians consider most important. His point is that we should not worry about these things because God will give them to us as we seek his kingdom first.

Another way to distort the verse is to represent it as teaching a chronological order, in the sense that we should first seek the kingdom, but then seek wealth and things. However, Jesus is not telling us to make the kingdom merely the first thing on an agenda of many items. He clearly wants us to make the kingdom the "first" in the sense of the only item on our agenda. In verse 33, he does not say, "You must serve God and then Money" or "You must serve Money so that you can serve God." Rather, he has said in verse 24, "You cannot serve both God and Money," and therefore in verse 33 he must mean, "You must serve God and not Money at all."

The verse says, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." The first part tells us what we should do, but the second part tells us what God will do, and not something else that we need to do. Jesus is not indicating that we should give the kingdom of God mere chronological priority, but that we should make it the sole focus, and make all other things subservient to it.

You have not done what it says just because you meditated on a Bible verse for two minutes "first" thing in the morning, but then cast out all spiritual matters from your mind for the rest of the day. Rather, to seek first God's kingdom would mean to think on his words all day and all night (Psalm 1:2), even while you are doing other things. Many things compete for your attention throughout the day, and each time you must put the kingdom "first." You must let it dictate your agenda, your thinking, and your behavior every time.

This does not mean that you must neglect all other things in life. The Bible teaches that it is your duty to attend to your family, your work, and the matters of life that are needed to

sustain a normal lifestyle and to function in society. Nevertheless, even legitimate things must be done in the context of seeking God's kingdom, and the kingdom must come first even at their expense. It is often because of these legitimate things that cause people to neglect spiritual things.

In a sermon on the same verse, Warfield writes:

How many think it would be unreasonable in God to put His service before their provision for themselves and family? How many of us who have been able to "risk" ourselves, do not think that we can "risk" our families in God's keeping? How subtle the temptations! But, here our Lord brushes them all away in the calm words, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." Is this not a rebuke to our practical atheism?³⁶

We have so many reservations. Of course we should care for our families, and we are disappointed when they must do without certain things because of our service to God's kingdom. Those who in many ways appear to measure up to the verse still fall short when it comes to this point.

Jesus tells us to seek first the kingdom, and first means first. As Warfield observes, it is practical atheism to think "that we cannot trust God for our earthly prosperity but must bid Him wait until we make good our earthly fortunes before we can afford to turn to Him."³⁷ God demands our attention now and not later, and he requires us to serve him continuously and not intermittently. He commands us to put him first every time.

What is our ambition? Is it worldly or spiritual? Is it centered around the kingdom of God or our own little empire? It is easy to deceive yourself (James 1:22), and to think that you are a doer when you are only a hearer. It is easy to think that you are doing what Jesus says when you are falling far short of it. Some theologians even invent an interpretation of "the cultural mandate" that makes it a duty for Christians to be worldly. Why? They want to be worldly, but they want to appear spiritual and obedient. But God is not deceived.

Matthew Henry comments that obeying this verse means "making religion your business," and to "mind religion as your great and principle concern."³⁸ Is this what you are doing? Is this what you are enforcing in your family? Does the way that you spend your money and your time suggest that you are "making religion your business"?

What do you teach your children? Do you keep telling them to study hard so that they will earn a lot of money, or do you tell them to focus on growing in spiritual knowledge and character in order to honor God? Do you ever tell them to stop doing their homework to

³⁶ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Faith and Life* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), p. 46.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), p. 1642.

pray a while, to read a commentary, to write a theological essay, or to preach the gospel and heal the sick?

Jesus says that we must seek first the kingdom, and first means first. We must believe that even the needed things concerning the children's education will be "added to them" if they will seek first the kingdom of God. In any case, there is no excuse for our children to know more about algebra than theology, to know more about the theories of physics than the letter to the Romans, or to perform better at sports than casting out demons.

Some parents have their children's academic career all planned out by the time they enter elementary school, but few seem to plan their theological training and character development, so that they will become productive citizens of God's kingdom. Of course, parenting is not the only aspect of our lives that we need to be concerned about. We use it only as an example, and as something that might expose our true priorities and concerns. We must examine every aspect of our lives to make sure that we are indeed seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.