

SERMONETTES VOLUME 7

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CONTENTS

1. MOSES IS DEAD	4
2. ACCORDING TO GOD'S PROMISE	6
3. WHERE IS THE LORD?	9
4. I WILL NEVER LEAVE YOU	11
5. BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS	13
6. PROGRESS IN GOD	14
7. THE DEVIL ALSO PREACHES.....	16
8. UNLESS YOU SEE SIGNS AND WONDERS	21
9. LORD, BEHOLD THEIR THREATS.....	23
10. ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA	26
11. WEAK, SICK, AND DEAD	29
12. THEY HAD BEEN WITH JESUS	31
13. CLOTHED WITH POWER.....	33
14. A SUPERIOR SPECIES	34
15. DESIRE SPIRITUAL GIFTS.....	35
16. JESUS AND MISSIONS	37
17. THE PROMISE OF THE SPIRIT	38
18. THE SPIRITUAL VISION OF CHRIST	42
19. ACCREDITED BY GOD.....	44
20. CURE FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA	48
21. I AM ANANIAS	50
22. FAITH TO BE HEALED.....	53
23. BRING HIM TO JESUS	55
24. TRANSPORTED BY THE SPIRIT	57
25. WHICH IS EASIER?	61
26. THE STAMPEDE OF DELIVERANCE.....	63
27. SICKNESS AND THE DEVIL	66
28. OUR DAILY BREAD.....	71
29. I THINK I CAN	74
30. A TRIFLE IN THE SIGHT OF GOD	76
31. SATAN FALLS LIKE LIGHTNING	77
32. THE ANGRY HEALER	79
33. BLASPHEMY AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT	81

1. Moses is Dead

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 1:2)

God worked mighty signs and wonders through Moses and granted him special experiences and revelations. By him, God announced his Law and constituted Israel as a nation. Through it all, Moses remained humble and reverent. He never abandoned God and turned to idols. He was, indeed, a great man.

As great as he was, he was still a man. He was mortal, and could not lead God's people forever. And now he was dead. His body was lost. I think he even took his staff with him. Still, God does not say to Joshua, "Moses is dead. Get ready, because things will go downhill from here." But he says, "Moses is dead. Now then, you and these people move forward!"

Christian theologians often define entire epochs by human personalities. When Abraham died, this and that changed forever. When Moses left, it concluded something else. When they buried David and Solomon, they took half of God's kingdom down with them. Then the prophets died, and such and such vanished forever. Things were a little better when Jesus arrived, but then he left, and when the apostles perished, it was as if all the powers of heaven were shut down! This kind of thinking marks the difference between spiritual winners and losers, those who could lead and those who could barely see their way clear to follow.

God was unfazed by the death of Moses. And in Joshua he has found – no, he has made – a leader in touch with the mind of God. While God's weaker people were wailing and complaining, Joshua said, "Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them" (Numbers 14:9). Now Joshua has to know God for himself, and follow God for himself. This has always been the case, but now it has become more obvious than before. And he is ready for it.

Moses had a unique role. God revealed the Law through him. However, the Law was not really the words of Moses, but the words of God, and God is not dead. So God spoke his words through Moses, and even though Moses is now gone, God's words remain, and the God who spoke them remains. So Moses split the Red Sea? Joshua will split the Jordan at flood stage (3:14). So Moses performed signs and wonders? Joshua will vanquish tens of thousands, subdue entire nations, crush the wall of Jericho, and command the planets to pause for him (10:12-13)!

The message of Jesus Christ is one that goes from faith to faith and from glory to glory, and not from faith to unbelief and tradition, from glory to darkness and defeat, or from

miracles to a cessation of power. The prophets are dead, but God sits on his throne. The apostles are dead, but Jesus Christ is alive forevermore. The Church Fathers are dead, but the Holy Spirit is active and endues us with power. The Reformers are dead, but I am not dead. The faithful servants of God of the past are dead, but you are still here. Men of unbelief and tradition tell us that God's mighty gifts and powers have ceased. But Jesus Christ calls us to move forward and perform even greater works by the power of his Spirit.

2. According to God's Promise

I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. (Joshua 1:3)

God's promise is something that God says. It is something that he says he would cause to happen, that he would give, or that he would enable one to receive, obtain, or perform. He had made promises to Abraham, but as the promises themselves indicated, Abraham was never intended to fully live out these promises in his lifetime. God has ordained that those who follow Abraham would inherit these promises and continue their fulfillment, and to live out these promises. Thus Abraham was promised the land of Canaan by conquest, but he was not to be the one to do this. Yet he started the fulfillment of the promises made to him by leaving his home land, giving birth to Isaac, and so on. Then, Jacob inherited the promises and became Israel.

God's promises to Moses built on the promises made to Abraham. The calling of Moses and the deliverance of Israel were based on the covenant that he made with Abraham (Exodus 2:24). And he commanded Moses to lead Israel to the land that he promised to Abraham some centuries ago (Exodus 6:8, 33:1). God also made promises to Moses, but Moses himself did not fully live out these promises in his lifetime. Rather, Joshua and the people now inherit these promises and continue to live out their fulfillment.

Thus although God made the promises to Abraham, it did not mean that only Abraham could live them out. In fact, he was never destined to live them out to their fullness and completion. Then, although God made the promises to Moses, it did not mean that only Moses could live them out. Again, he was never destined to live them out to their fullness and completion. God had ordained that those who followed him would continue the work.

Moses is dead, but God is not dead, and his promises are not dead. Joshua and the whole nation must now live life and wage war on the basis of these promises. They would have whatever it takes to be successful – divine apparitions, angelic assistance, miracle power, and superhuman wisdom and courage. They would perform greater works than Moses, not because they are greater than Moses, but because God continues to fulfill his promises.

All the promises concerning the possession of the land were considered fulfilled by the end of Joshua 21 (v. 43-45). To maintain the possession of this land would be a different matter. God promised that if the people would worship him only and follow his commands, he would defend them and prosper them in this land (Deuteronomy 28:7-8). But he also said that if they would forsake him to worship other gods, which were no gods at all, and that if they would disobey his commands, then he would throw them out of the land (Deuteronomy 28:63-68).

Israel indeed rebelled against the Lord. So more than once he exiled them from the land, and more than once he allowed them to return. This painful history did not produce a new

heart and true faith in them; instead, they became hardened in a self-righteous, hypocritical, and deadly system of religious tradition. So when God himself arrived in the person of Jesus Christ, they murdered him. As a result, God permanently ejected them from the land. In rejecting the Son of God, the Jews testified that they were the successors of those who murdered the prophets. Jesus told them that they filled up the measure of the sin of their forefathers, and all the blood of the prophets would come upon that generation (Matthew 23:32, 36).

This political/religious system would be destroyed and never again be established. Of course, men can band together to form a nation and call it anything they wish, but there is no more promise for the constitution of a national Israel and there is no more promise for the possession of the land. Thus Israel's system of state and worship can never be restored on the basis of God's promises to Abraham and Moses. These promises were already fulfilled in Joshua's time. After that, God said, the people's ownership of the land could be revoked forever.

Jesus announced this death sentence. As he said, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again" (Mark 11:14), and the tree dried up from the roots. Then, as he predicted, the nation was disbanded and the temple destroyed in that same generation, in AD 70. Yet God had always preserved for himself a remnant of faithful people within Israel – the Israel of faith and not of blood – and this same remnant would now continue in the form of the church and expand to all nations, even more aggressively incorporating individuals from every race and class.

Although God's promises concerning the land have been fulfilled, some of the promises to Abraham continue to apply. For example, Abraham was told that his descendants would be numerous like the stars. By this, God did not mainly mean natural descendants, since he intended to give Abraham true children, or people who would resemble him in the truest sense, that is, in his faith. Thus the promise becomes a basis for our Christian labor – for the spread of the gospel and the conversion of the nations.

Many centuries after Abraham, Jesus miraculously healed a woman on the basis of God's promises to Abraham (Luke 13:16). Abraham was God's covenant friend, and it was appropriate for his descendant to receive deliverance on the day of rest. Later, Paul would say, "Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham" (Galatians 3:7). God's promises to Abraham constituted a basis for miraculous healing, and these promises have been passed on to all those who have faith like Abraham. But there are those who refuse to understand.

In another place, Paul explains that the blessing to Abraham comes to us through Jesus Christ, and that is the promise of the Spirit (Galatians 3:14). This was the thing that Moses desired when he said, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29). When Moses said this, the effect of the coming of the Spirit was prophecy. Standing on the shoulders of Abraham and Moses, Joel announced that God would indeed pour out his Spirit on all his people, and the effects would include prophecy, visions and dreams, and signs and wonders (Joel 2:28-32).

Then, in Acts 2, Peter refers to Joel and declares that God would now carry out the promise. And he says, "This promise" – the same promise whose effects include prophecy, vision and dreams, and signs and wonders – "is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call" (v. 39). Peter does not pull a bait-and-switch scam on the people. The same promise, described in Joel's words, would continue as far and as long as the gospel call extends.

Jesus commanded the apostles and the first believers to preach the gospel (Matthew 28:19-20), but he did not mean for them to survive and preach to every individual that would hear the gospel before his second coming, and he did not mean that the gospel would only be preached in their lifetime, so that all who lived after the apostles would be condemned to hell. Rather, as those who follow the faith of Abraham, the faith of Christ, and the faith of the apostles, we have inherited the command to preach the gospel to all men and to make disciples of all nations.

Jesus made promises to the apostles and the first believers, but he did not mean for them to exhaust these promises in their lifetime. He said, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). He did not intend that those who come after would inherit the command to preach but not the promise of his presence! Rather, as those who follow the faith of Abraham, the faith of Christ, and the faith of the apostles, we have also inherited the promises made to Abraham, to Christ, and to the apostles.

Let no one rob you of the promises that God made to all believers. The apostles are dead, but God and his promises did not die with them. Be empowered by the promises that Jesus gave to the apostles and the first believers, and that they conveyed to others in their generation. We possess these same promises, and now we believe, labor, and succeed based on the same promises that they received. They are dead, but we are not; therefore, do the work of the living, and declare the Christian faith to our generation with the same boldness and power.

3. Where is the Lord?

As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. (Joshua 1:5)

God's power is not bound to the times and titles of men, but it is grasped by faith. Moses is dead, but God does not say, "Alas! Now no one can do the works that he did." Joshua would move forward and perform even greater works. When Joshua faced the Jordan, he did not say, "But Moses is not here to lift his staff." No, he said, "Take up the ark of the covenant" (3:6), and the river parted. When he battled the Amorites, he did not say, "But Moses is not here to raise his hand." No, he said, "O sun, stand still over Gibeon, O moon, over the Valley of Aijalon," and the heavens paused until he attained victory.

Compare this to the heathen spirituality that thinks the giant orbs dictate our lives. Worthless men and women follow after this counterfeit wisdom, this teaching of superstition and surrender. But the Lord said by Jeremiah, "Do not learn the ways of the nations or be terrified by signs in the sky, though the nations are terrified by them" (Jeremiah 10:2). Behold the overwhelming superiority of the religion of Jesus Christ, where faith in God can move mountains and command the planets. This is our wisdom. This is our spirituality.

You say, "But that was Joshua!" This is loser talk. People did not say, "But that was Moses!" when the old man first started. For years afterward they continued to confront him and complained about him to his face. God had made him a great man, but those who were out of touch with God were slow to catch on. Joshua followed Moses so that he could be like him. And when Moses passed, he did not have to say, "But that was Moses!" Your preachers and theologians want you to say, "But that was Jesus! But that was Peter! But that was Paul!" And this is why they are nothing like them. Faith teaches us to say, "Yes, I will be like Jesus. Yes, I will be like Peter. Yes, I will be like Paul."

When God had received Elijah into heaven in a whirlwind, the little prophets said, "Where is Elijah? Let us look for Elijah!" But Elisha said, "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" He picked up the mantle and struck the water, and Jordan parted for him as it parted for Elijah. Those who looked for Elijah after he was gone could not continue his work, and the one who followed Elijah most closely was in fact after the Lord, the God of Elijah. He was the true successor. He was the one who inherited the power and the ministry.

Life is too important to be molded by those who have no spiritual power and keep making excuses. The death of the apostles did not mark an end to any era, because they did not define any era. But Jesus Christ does, and he is still alive. Peter did not say, "It is by our apostleship that this man has been made whole." But he said, "Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?...By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see"

(Acts 3:12, 16). If it was all about faith in the name of Jesus in his day, how come it is all about apostleship in our day? Later, Peter did not walk in to a man's room and scream, "I am an apostle!!!" But he said, "Jesus Christ heals you" (Acts 9:34). If it was never about Peter when he was alive, why would it be all about Peter when he has died? Peter is dead, but what difference does it make?

Where is Jesus, the Christ of the apostles? I do not need Moses to be with me. I do not need Elijah to return from heaven. And I do not need the apostles to come back from the dead. God is with me as he was with Moses and Elijah. Jesus Christ is present with his grace and power as he was with Peter and Paul. God has always commended the boldness of faith when men approach him, not on the basis of confidence in themselves, but of confidence in Jesus Christ. He is displeased with those who hold back because of their unbelief, tradition, and false humility.

4. I Will Never Leave You

I will never leave you nor forsake you. (Joshua 1:5)

When Moses was about to die, he summoned Joshua and said to him, "The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:8). Then the Lord said to Joshua, "I myself will be with you" (31:23). After Moses was dead, the Lord again said to Joshua, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Joshua 1:5).

Even as the Lord declared this promise to Joshua again and again, he had already said it to all of Israel. He said by Moses, "The LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6). So it was not Joshua alone who could claim God's presence and support, since when God said to him, "I myself will be with you," he also said, "You will bring the Israelites into the land I promised them on oath" (Deuteronomy 31:23). God made his promise through Abraham and Moses to all of Israel.

Turning for a moment to Psalm 118, verses 1-4 call God's people to declare, "His love endures forever." And verse 5 begins a section that seems to be a personal testimony or exhortation. As verse 6 says, "The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

Then, in admonishing those who suffered persecution for the faith of Christ, Hebrews 13 directly applies these statements associated with Joshua, the Psalmist, and Israel to all Christians: "God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'" (v. 5-6). But when did God say this to Christians? And when did the Psalmist say this to believers in Jesus Christ? There is no need for complicated hermeneutics to justify the application. God had always been making all those promises to all his people, and the Psalmist, although speaking in terms of "I" and "me" had always believed that he held the divine blessings in common with all the people of God.

Paul illustrates this principle when he writes, "Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' we also believe, and so we also speak" (2 Corinthians 4:13, ESV). This is the proper way to apply the Bible. It is astoundingly simple, and it is astounding because there are many who do not share the sentiment. They do not share it because they do not have the same spirit of faith. But for those who possess this same spirit of faith, when we see that God said to Joshua, "I will never leave you nor forsake you," we can say, "He will never leave me nor forsake me." And when we see that the Psalmist said, "The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid," we realize that he believed, and so he spoke – we also believe, and therefore speak the same thing.

There is continuity from the faith of Abraham to the faith of Moses, from the faith of Moses to the faith of Christ, and from the faith of Christ to the faith of all Christians. Just as the promises God made to Moses belonged to Joshua, and the promises he made to Joshua belonged to all of Israel, the promises that Jesus Christ made to the apostles belong to all Christians. When he said to them, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20), he promised all of us that he would remain with us to the very end.

There are those who make sophisticated distinctions to cut away the promises and powers that belonged to the apostles until we are left with a faith small enough that our preachers and theologians are no longer threatened by it. That, they say, is the post-apostolic era. However, the apostles did not define an era, and the promises that we possess reach as far back as those made to Abraham, to Adam, and even to Christ before the world began. Why would the death of the apostles end anything for us?

No, the trouble is that they do not possess the same spirit of faith. When Jesus left instructions to the apostles, he said to the Father, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message" (John 17:20). It is in this context that he said, "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:12-14).

This leaves so much for our preachers and theologians to answer for. Perhaps all of us must answer for our failures, and suffer the haunting rebuke that echoes down the ages: "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" But what these others have to answer for is the fact that they do not even try. They do not acknowledge the teaching, and they even attempt to hide it and deny it, and to turn the whole world against it. They do not enter into this realm of faith, and they forbid others to enter. This is not the spirit of faith, but the spirit of the Pharisees, the spirit of the antichrist. It is the spirit that ended in perjury, murder, and damnation.

Is this not enough? Must God repeat every promise specifically to you before you believe? Is that your excuse? You fool! In Christ, all the promises of God are "Yes!" and "Amen!" You do not inherit a line of promise here and another line of promise there. You have been made a co-heir of Jesus Christ, and you have inherited an entire covenant relationship, an entire set of exceeding great and precious promises – even an entire Christ, an entire God. In the light of all this, how dare you whimper to his face, "But...but I am not an apostle"? If you have such an audacity to trample the blood of the covenant, it would be far better for God to transform it into a holy courage, so that you would defy the devil and his servants instead.

5. Be Strong and Courageous

Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous....Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:6-7, 9)

Moses is dead, but Joshua is not, and he has inherited the mantle to continue the work. God reaffirms the promises he made to Abraham, Moses, and Israel. And he assures Joshua that the divine presence and power would remain with him.

Now Joshua must lead the people forward in a mission of military conquest. Courage that arises from God's promises is indispensable to any believer, and indeed all of Israel was told, "Be strong and courageous" (Deuteronomy 31:6). But the necessity of courage is especially pronounced in a leader. He would encounter not only violent opposition from the enemies, but he must also endure criticisms from his own people. When both enemies and friends turn against him, he must persist in his mission. When his own people are afraid and discouraged, he must overcome their despair and restore them to faith. So God says to Joshua, "Be strong and courageous. Be strong and courageous. Be strong and courageous."

Those who are supposedly on your side are often your greatest enemies. They would criticize you when they do not know what they are talking about. They would force their counsel upon you, although their suggestions are frequently unintelligent and contradictory. If you do not listen, they will call you arrogant. Indeed, "in the multitude of counsellors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14, 24:6); however, and in the context of Proverbs, the Bible refers to wise counselors, but most of those who pressure you to accept their ideas will be very, very stupid people, and they will be as aggressive as they are stupid.

An excellent Christian leader or scholar would listen to people of faith, knowledge, and obedience, and take their words into account, but then he must follow God for himself and learn the truth for himself, so that he may become confident and self-possessed, and not easily swayed. He must be clear on his mission and doctrine, and then move forward no matter what, bulldozing over obstacles and oppositions.

Joshua's generation indeed appears more faithful than the previous one. The people pledge their support to him, and they also say, "Only be strong and courageous" (1:18). There are those who do not think this way. They will criticize and complain, and they will say that your courage is arrogance, because they do not know courage for themselves. But God may also arrange for a different kind of people to come to you. They will be like Caleb, who had a different spirit in him and wholly followed God (Numbers 14:22), and who faithfully fought alongside Joshua all his life.

6. Progress in God

Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go.

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. (Joshua 1:7-8)

For non-Christians, progress means change. This is because they have never been right about anything. Whether it is science, politics, religion, or any other topic, change means something better, until they find out that it makes things much worse, and then they change again. Their worldview is in constant flux because they do not know any truth and have no way to learn any truth.

The rhetoric of progress is to disguise the fact that non-Christians are intellectual and ethical failures, total losers. They warn against dogma, because they have never come up with dogma that is true and enduring. All their beliefs are always refuted. All their theories are always revised, at times even to their very opposite. Thus to them dogma is almost untrue by definition. Dogma stifles creativity and innovation. It imprisons the mind. Do not be trapped by dogma! So they shake off one dogma only to arrive at another, including the dogma that we should never embrace dogma. The rejection of dogma is at the same time an admission of an uninterrupted history of failure. They are ever seeking, or pretending to seek, and never arriving at the truth about anything. Their lives are wasted.

The one who thinks that he does not need God to teach him anything is imprisoned by the worst dogma of all. He is trapped in ignorance. His gear is stuck on "STUPID." He is in a place where there is no truth, no reason, and no way out. But he resolves to remain in it and considers himself some sort of freethinking revolutionary. If you refuse the wisdom of Christ and persist in unbelief, then you will search all your life and not begin at all. You are, my dear dum-dum, the punch line of a cruel joke that never ends. You are the laughingstock of the devil.

Christian dogma is true and perfect from the moment that God revealed and recorded it, so that it establishes us on the path of truth from the start. We are stuck on wisdom and truth, and held captive by reason. Unlike the non-Christians, we begin with knowledge, and what we believe will not be revised again and again, even to its opposite, then to something else entirely new, and then to its opposite again.

Therefore, progress means something very different to us. We are not searching for the truth, and we are not constantly revising our theories. We are already set on the path of absolute and undeniable truth. Thus to make progress is to continue further down this same path in knowledge and obedience. We must not turn to the left or to the right, because we

are already on the perfect path, so that to turn anywhere is to turn to falsehood. We look straight ahead, because to look anywhere else is to behold something foolish and inferior. Through Jesus Christ, we move from faith to faith, and from glory to glory.

How do we make progress in God and in the knowledge of the truth? How do we improve as individuals and as a community? There is a concrete prescription. Moses is dead, and instead of telling him to innovate, God commands Joshua to continue on the same path that has been established. Therefore, we take what God has revealed and we study it, think about it, live with it, and achieve with it. Move forward with the dogma of Jesus Christ "that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3) – it is perfect and complete. "For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success" (Joshua 1:8, ESV).

7. The Devil Also Preaches

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. (Acts 16:16-18, ESV)

The girl has an evil spirit, but she speaks as if she endorses the Christian faith. This might be a curious case, but not an altogether puzzling one.

Perhaps it is an involuntary confession compelled by the presence of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus taught the people, demons would cry out, saying, "You are the Holy One of God!" and "Jesus, Son of the Most High God!" Some of them would say, "Have you come to destroy us?" and "Have you come to torture us before the appointed time?" He did not covet the endorsement of demons, but he commanded them to be silent and then cast them out.

This is a side of Jesus that is seldom mentioned. The Bible depicts demons as wicked and insane entities that drive men to foam at the mouth, to throw themselves into fire, and to exhibit superhuman strength such that chains could not hold them. But Jesus is stronger than the demons. He shouted at them and commanded them to leave. The Lord is both a gentle shepherd and a fierce warrior. He breathes life and beauty into sin-wrecked souls, but he also leaves a trail of blood and destruction in his path as he punishes those who oppose him. As the gospel continues to spread and witness against the stubborn rebellion of men, his terror would only increase more and more.

As the Psalmist warns, "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment" (Psalm 2:12), and "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery" (v. 8-9). Jesus is the tormenter of demons. He is the destroyer of nations. If you love him and follow him, he will be your brother and your best friend. But if you do not, he will become your worst nightmare forever. He will be to you the single scariest entity in the universe.

However, if the evil spirit is compelled to acknowledge these preachers, why does the girl follow them around and keep doing this? Why not stay away from them? Something else could be happening. Perhaps the demon intends to take the offensive and cause disruption to the gospel ministry. It is not uncommon to encounter milder instances of this in our work, as when some repeatedly exclaim "Amen!" or "Praise the Lord!" or other such things

at the most inappropriate times, or when they stand up to "prophesy" or attempt to "help" in some way. The words appear agreeable, but the effect is counterproductive.

These are often attempts from immature members to contribute or to make themselves feel useful and important. Some of these individuals are open to correction. On the other hand, there are those who follow around preachers to do these things in their gatherings over and over again, so that it practically amounts to persecution and a severe undermining of the work. When there seems to be an obsession that drives them to do this, and especially when attempts at correction trigger fits of despair and rage, it is possible that the behavior is demonically inspired.

It is also possible that this is a deliberate strategy to force an association between the demonic activity and the gospel ministry. If the girl can appear as a partner to the Christian preachers, then she could ride on the impressiveness of their work, making her business in fortune-telling more credible and making it easier for her to lead men astray from the gospel. If she is very successful at this, she could even make the preachers appear to operate under the umbrella of this local fortune-teller.

This is reminiscent of the earlier case of Simon. His sorcery captivated the people, who regarded him as someone special. When the Christian faith entered the city and displayed a far greater power, he offered to purchase the ability to lay hands on people so that they would receive the Holy Spirit. This could probably ensure his reputation as someone great in association with the gospel ministry, so that he could hijack the credibility of the Christian preachers for his own gain.

This is not uncommon, whether or not it involves the demonic. Some people might try to borrow your credibility by fabricating an association with your ministry. They will find excuses to add your name on their work, and they will use flatteries to insinuate themselves into your circle. Do not be tempted by this. Do not covet associates and supporters for the sake of having more associates and supporters. Most of these people are unstable and incompetent, of inferior intellect and character. They will not contribute to your ministry or reputation, but will leech from your work and contaminate your message. Their loyalty is often fragile, because they do not truly grasp or believe your mission or your message, but they are looking out for themselves. They sometimes rise to prominence because they are zealous in self-promotion and skilled in attaching themselves to respected leaders. The fact that these leaders allow this to happen also exposes a significant flaw in them. It shows that they are vulnerable to flattery and other tactics.

I do not want people to be associated with me or claim to be my students, and then demonstrate a lack of competence and resolve when confronted by opponents, so that they would abandon their position and even become my critics. I would not beg such useless people to remain in agreement with me. If they would turn against me, then it would be better for that to happen speedily, and it would be even better if they would not claim to support me in the first place. Be careful, and do not easily acknowledge an association, because there are many such people. They are tossed back and forth by the newest argument that they come across, and they are eager to attach themselves to celebrities. These people

are useless as supporters and as believers. The best thing that could happen is if they would become your enemies. Fickle enemies are good. Fickle supporters are bad. And most people are fickle.

Therefore, be careful of your associations. Do not easily associate yourself with a church, seminary, or denomination. Do not easily associate yourself with a person, endorse a book, or any such thing. If you are in the habit of being strict and clear about your associations, then it would be more difficult for someone to hijack your credibility. When someone who is unworthy fabricates an association either by declaring his support for you or claiming your endorsement, it would be easier for you to say, "I do not know him. I have not trained him. I do not endorse him. He acts and speaks on his own, and his achievements and failures have nothing to do with me."

When you associate yourself with someone, or when you endorse him or even send him out, make sure he is faithful and competent, and that he can adapt what he has learned from you against new arguments and circumstances. Suppose you say of him, "He is a loyal brother, an able defender of the faith, and represents the learning and position of this ministry," and then an opponent crushes him or even turns him against you, then you will have disgraced yourself as well as the gospel. But if this happens with someone you have never acknowledged, then you can say, "He is weak in intellect and character, and an inferior specimen of a man and believer. He has gone from me because he was never with me. He has always belonged to you." Rejoice when an unworthy and unstable person rejects you or turns against you – God has delivered you from trouble.

The girl speaks by an evil spirit, but her words agree with the Christian faith: "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." Some Christians delight in reminding us that Satan also performs miracles to distract and mislead people from the truth of Jesus Christ. This is a legitimate issue when it is discussed among those who continue to believe and operate in God's power, and the issue has been settled. However, those who are so zealous to declare Satan's ability often mention this to devalue or undermine the continuing manifestations of the Holy Spirit, or even as an objection against them. When the matter is raised from this perspective, it seems very nonsensical, and it prompts us to become suspicious of their motive and their intelligence.

The idea that Satan could perform some miracles cannot be used to promote cessationism or to devalue or undermine a Christian ministry of miracles in any way. Jesus himself was attacked from this angle. His opponents said that he was demon-possessed, and that he cast out demons by the prince of demons. There are some today who would more readily insist that a healing miracle is performed by Satan than to admit that cessationism is a false doctrine. Jesus replied that Satan would not cast out Satan, and warned them concerning the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. In another place, many people said of Jesus, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" (John 10:19-20), but others knew better and answered, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?" (v. 21).

The idea that Satan could perform miracles has no direct relevance to whether or not the miraculous gifts of the Spirit continue today, but it is an issue to be discussed after this other has been assumed or settled. If it is assumed that there is no longer a Christian ministry of miracles, this means that all contemporary miracles performed through men are of Satan, that there are no miraculous countermeasures to these miracles, and that our chief response is verbal condemnation, and where applicable, church discipline. But if it is assumed that there is still a ministry of miracles today, then the fact that Satan could perform some miracles, even through men, is an issue to be addressed under the assumption that the Holy Spirit continues to perform miracles through the disciples of Jesus Christ.

Thus our response would include sound teachings on the matter of spiritual gifts, policies on regulating the use of these gifts and on testing spiritual manifestations, and also the possibility of miraculous countermeasures against demonic powers. One answer to demonic supernatural power is a greater divine supernatural power. The Bible portrays numerous power encounters, where the miracle-working power of God overwhelmed the power of Satan. Consider the confrontations between Moses and the magicians, Elijah and the false prophets, Jesus and the demon-possessed, Philip and Simon, Paul and Elymas, and Paul and this girl with the evil spirit in our text. Paul cast out the spirit of divination, and the girl lost her ability. This is the biblical answer to the miracles of Satan. The solution is not denial, but discernment and domination.

When we refer to the ministry of preaching, these same people do not become skeptical and warn, "You know, Satan also preaches." But he does, and in our text his words entirely agree with the Christian faith. What about it? The ministry of preaching is much more regular and widespread than the ministry of miracles, so how come these people do not raise the issue about demonic preaching and do it in a way that devalues and undermines the ministry of preaching? How come we do not challenge preaching itself? It is not enough to test the content for false doctrine, since what the fortune-teller said exactly agreed with the apostles. So how come we do not reject preaching itself, or get paranoid about how to test preaching, including preaching that exactly agrees with the Christian faith? It is because these people have their own theological and personal agendas. They are not interested in preserving the integrity of a ministry of miracles, but in undermining all miracles because they do not have the power for such a ministry. They are a brood of faithless hypocrites.

If the idea that Satan could perform miracles is in any sense raised against the Christian ministry of miracles itself, then the idea that Satan could preach must in the same sense be raised against the Christian ministry of preaching. That is, if they say, "Satan also performs miracles" in a sense that devalues or undermines the ministry of miracles, then they must also say, "Satan also preaches" in a sense that devalues or undermines the ministry of preaching. If it cannot in any sense challenge the ministry of preaching itself, then it cannot in any sense challenge the ministry of miracles. And if they admit that the point should not undermine preaching, but only raises the need for discernment, then the same must apply to the ministry of miracles.

The Bible is complete, sufficient, and final, and it asserts that there is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit that enables one to discern or distinguish between spirits. Therefore, in the face of demonic preaching and miracles, the complete, sufficient, and final answer is that there is a supernatural gift from God that enables the Christian to perceive the truth, to expose deception, and to cast out the evil powers. Cessationism is a much greater threat than the demon that possesses and speaks through the fortune-teller, because it is a rejection of God's complete, sufficient, and final answer on the matter. By the Holy Spirit, we have the power to deal with the demonic, but cessationism attempts to neutralize God's solution.

The fortune-teller speaks words that agree with the Christian faith, but she does so by a demonic spirit; likewise, the cessationist claims that he defends sound doctrine, but he speaks by a spirit of unbelief and tradition, and often a spirit of hatred and murder. He affirms that the Bible is complete, sufficient, and final, but when he asserts that the ministry of miracles has ceased, he introduces a new doctrine, because the Bible does not teach it. In effect, the cessationist claims that he has a new revelation that overturns the existing one.

When Paul writes that "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14, ESV), he is warning his readers about false apostles. Yet by this statement he does not undermine the ministries of the apostles or the manifestations of angels. Rather, because Satan thus disguises himself, we ought to exercise discernment when we encounter those who claim to be apostles or when we experience visions of angels. But look! He writes that the agents of Satan also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (v. 15). Christians, watch out! For here comes Satan as a cessationist theologian.

8. Unless You See Signs and Wonders

"Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe." (John 4:48)

Cessationists often use the verse to disparage those who seek miracles and those who have faith in the continuing manifestations of the Holy Spirit. This is a shameless misuse of the verse, and demonstrates their theological prejudice and inaptitude.

Jesus' statement cannot apply to those who ask for miracles in order to benefit from those miracles. The official's son was sick and close to death. He asked for a healing miracle not because he demanded proof that Jesus was the Messiah or even that he was a healer. He just did not want his son to die, and he came because he already believed that Jesus could heal.

Likewise, those who petition God for miracles today in order to receive the benefit of these miracles are not looking for proof that God is true and able. They already believe that God is true and able, and they are asking him to help them. And of course they need to seek from God – it is not as if the cessationists will do anything for them besides lecturing them to suffer with a good attitude.

Then, Jesus' statement cannot apply to those who ask God to perform miracles through them in order to benefit those who need these miracles. They are not demanding proof that God is true and able before they would believe in him. Rather, they expect God to work miracles through them and for them because they already believe in Jesus Christ, and because they already believe that God is true and able. And of course they need to be stubborn about this and persist in their petition – with the effort they put into undermining people's faith in miracles, it is not as if the cessationists will pray with them to bring miracles to those who need them.

Jesus was referring to the Galileans. Although the text says that the people welcomed him, it seems that they did so only because "they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, for they also had been there." His displeasure was not directed at the official who asked in faith for a miracle, but at those who demanded to see signs and wonders, over and over again, before they would believe.

Therefore, his statement could by extension or analogy apply to the cessationists who demand miracles from the charismatics as proof that the manifestations of the Holy Spirit continue today. Instead of helping them petition God for miracles for the glory of Christ and the good of the people, they are constantly doubting them, interrogating them, and even persecuting them, just like the Pharisees in the Gospels and the Jews in the Acts of the Apostles.

They often subject those who have benefited from the miracles to invasive scrutiny and public embarrassment. And they would twist the Scripture beyond all recognition to accomplish this. The church would be far stronger and the world would be a much better place if they would use such tactics on the non-Christians instead. Why not scrutinize the unbelievers? Why not embarrass their science and religion? It is because Jesus Christ is a much greater threat to their theological agenda and tradition, and the respect and position that they have established for themselves.

As Christians, one of the most urgent tasks before us is to spread suspicion and hostility against those who would hinder us from believing and seeking miracles from Jesus Christ. We believe that God performs signs and wonders because the Bible says so. And we believe that God continues to perform miracles through his people because the Bible says so. We are not those who demand God to prove himself before we believe, but because we believe, God will prove himself through us according to his will.

9. Lord, Behold Their Threats

When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said,

"Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed' – for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:23-31, ESV)

God had healed a man by the name of Jesus Christ. Peter and John then testified that the miracle happened on the basis of the faith of Jesus Christ. He was the Son of God who came as a man to redeem sinners by his death. The Jews rejected him, and so they worked with the Gentiles and murdered him. But they did not defeat him, because this was God's plan all along. After this, Jesus rose from the dead and showed himself to hundreds of people. Now he continued to testify about himself by his disciples and by his miracles.

Jesus declared that his message would not unite families and societies, but would divide them to the point of totally tearing them apart (Matthew 10:34-36). The Christian faith maintains that Jesus Christ is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords – he is the absolute power, greater than all nations, states, and laws, and all the customs, standards, and assumptions of all cultures. And he is the only way to salvation – all non-Christian religions, philosophies, and scientific systems are scams.

The political and religious authorities were intimidated by this. Such a doctrine limits their control and shifts men's allegiance from their rulers and nations to the Lord Jesus Christ. Miracles are especially disturbing to the religious authorities, because it exposes their lack of faith and power, their false doctrines, and their man-made rituals and traditions. It shows that they are not as divinely endowed and illuminated as they would like people to believe.

Christians face similar circumstances today. Our doctrine is castigated because it is exclusive and divisive, and sometimes it is even regarded as criminal, or as hate speech. The teachings and testimonies on miracles continue to shame the religious establishment, including many church leaders and seminary professors who are entirely out of touch with God's power because of their unbelief and false doctrines. And like the Jews who murdered Jesus, these religious leaders and church members continue to persecute those who believe and operate in the manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

Peter and John returned to their friends and told them what happened. Their response was a model of true faith and vision. They did not turn to politics. They did not try to vote Jesus Christ into acceptance. (At times they did take advantage of existing laws for the sake of self-preservation and the preaching of the gospel.) And they certainly did not resort to violence and insurrection. The apostles insisted that believers must submit to the authorities.

They turned to God in united prayer. First, they saw the matter from the proper perspective. They were right in saying that the political and religious leaders, consisting of both the Jews and the Gentiles, have come together to conspire against Jesus Christ. These people were cooperating to make regulations and threats in the attempt to silence the Christians' teachings and to forbid their miracles. This has continued to this day, because the sinful nature has not changed. There is no need to investigate conspiracy theories, because since the Garden of Eden there has always been a conspiracy against Christ, and as always many of his greatest enemies are church members and leaders. The details of the conspiracy are unimportant because we do not respond on their level or through the political process.

They understood God's perspective on the matter. Their prayer cites from Psalm 2. There it is said that the nations, the peoples, the kings, and the rulers conspire against God and the Anointed One (v. 1-2). They do this because they wish to be released from God's authority: "Let us break their chains and throw off their fetters" (v. 3). This is the same motive for the political and religious opposition to the Christian faith. But God sits on his throne, and he laughs and scoffs at them (v. 4). He is not into gentle dialogue with unbelief – he makes fun of it. Then he rebukes and terrifies these people (v. 5). He is not into compromise – he punishes disagreement. The Psalm proceeds to say that God has established his Son, who rules with an iron scepter that could destroy the nations. The conclusion is that the authorities ought to serve the Lord and appease the Son.

The disciples adopted this perspective and prayed to God about the opposition. They did not ask God to intervene on the political and ecclesiastical level, even though that was not forbidden, but they asked for empowerment to continue in the same spiritual work that they had been doing: "And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." The answer was the preaching of the Christian message with signs and wonders and healing miracles.

As the conspiracy against Jesus Christ continues in our generation, we must meet it with the same perspective and the same prayer: "Father, behold their threats. The people

continue to conspire against the Lord Jesus. Therefore, infuse us with boldness to keep on preaching this message, and stretch out your hand to perform signs and wonders, and healing miracles."

10. Ananias and Sapphira

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. (Acts 5:1-11)

The Christians were contributing what they had to establish and advance the faith of Jesus Christ, and they were helping one another. Properties were sold and the money brought to the apostles to be distributed to those in need. Barnabas was one of those known for having sold his field and brought the money to the apostles. Ananias also sold his property; however, he did not wish to offer up the entire sum that he received, and at the same time he wanted the people to think that he gave all of it. Sapphira, his wife, consented to this.

They did not think that others would discover this, but Peter knew the truth. His response shows us that the Christians had not renounced the private ownership of goods and properties. The property belonged to Ananias, and he did not have to sell it. Then, after he sold the property, the money belonged to him, and he did not have to offer up all of it or any of it to the church. To relinquish one's wealth to the church was never a requirement for one to become a member or to remain in good standing. All of this was voluntary. The believers were supposed to be moved by sincere generosity, compassion, and reverence for the Lord when they distributed their wealth to others.

It is important to grasp the nature of the offense, because it will help us appreciate the response – both from Peter and from God. The couple did not steal anything. They did not rob anyone. They did not cheat other people out of their wealth. And they did not legally owe anything to the church. Rather, they kept part of the money for themselves, but they wanted the people to think that they gave all of it so that they would appear to be as selfless

and generous as someone like Barnabas. This was a moral transgression that seemingly did not inflict direct damage on anyone; in fact, the people would have been helped by the money that was offered.

But Peter reacted strongly to this. He said that Satan filled their hearts, and that they lied to God and tested his Spirit. And then God killed them for it. Nowadays Christians might scoff at the attempt to impress, but might not regard it with such seriousness as Peter and God did. Certainly, Ananias and Sapphira were wrong, but did they deserve a harsh rebuke and instant execution? Peter and God thought so. We must not become desensitized to sin just because transgressions are rampant and the unbelievers around us hold to a much lower intellectual and ethical standard. God would have us recover that sense of alarm and indignation that Peter exhibited.

Ananias, it seems, was the main culprit, but Sapphira went along with his scheme. In Eden, the woman sinned first and then the man sinned with her. The lesson was not learned, so here the man sinned first and then the woman sinned with him. Our allegiance must first be toward God, and not to our parent, spouse, friend, gender, race, church, nation, or any other person or group. We must each face God first as an individual, and not as a community; in fact, we should readily break with our community or even oppose our community when the people rebel against the Lord. Your allegiance to God must be stronger than your allegiance to any man, woman, or group; otherwise, your faith is a sham. And the truth is that your relationship with a person or group can flourish in purity and righteousness only when it is founded upon a common allegiance to God.

Jesus had taught the Christians how to address sin in the church: confront, escalate, excommunicate (Matthew 18:15-17). We first confront the offender, and if he refuses to repent, we escalate the situation by inviting additional witnesses, and then by presenting the matter before the whole community. If he remains obstinate, he is expelled from the church and removed from all association with its members. The final stage is excommunication, not execution. Cutting off fellowship is the most severe response that Christians can deal to an offender. The apostles insisted on peaceful and non-violent ministry as well as submission to the government and its laws. God has called us to use our intelligent discourse and righteous behavior to promote the truth of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, God can kill anyone he wants, at any time or place, and he does not submit to any government. Paul explains, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:18-19). It is not our place to inflict harm on anyone, not because God does not want anyone to be harmed, but because he wants to be the one who does it. If someone should be hurt, God wants to be the one who hurts him. If someone should die, God wants to be the one who causes him to drop dead.

Christians must be a peaceful people. The non-Christians should have nothing to fear from us in this respect – we will talk to them, sometimes harshly, but we will not lift a finger to harm them. This does not mean that the non-Christians have nothing to fear at all; rather,

they have even more to fear, because God himself might hunt them down and kill them. Ananias and Sapphira were church members, but God did not spare them. As Peter writes, "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4:17). The non-Christians argue with us, mock us, and persecute us, and we do nothing to harm them. But they will answer to God. He might make them suffer much in this life, and even if not in this life, he will torture them severely and endlessly in hell, where there is no escape.

Peter reminded them that they did not lie to men, but they lied to God and tested his Spirit. Herein was their fatal error. They were trying to impress men, but they were not conscious that they were living before God – all their thoughts and actions were plain to him. We must never make this mistake when we practice and present the Christian faith. This is not a religion of the apostles. This is not a fellowship of mere men. The Christian faith is a revelation from the one true God. The community of Jesus Christ is not just another organization for social good and the mutual benefit of men or their shared ideology. It is a community of saints, chosen before the creation of the world, for the worship and service of the only deity.

The world needs to see that the church will not tolerate sin and abuse, and that the church will not harbor hypocrites and criminals in its own community. This happens when we follow the Lord's prescription for teaching people and confronting offenders. God killed Ananias and Sapphira to signal his displeasure. Obviously, he does not right away kill everyone who sins, or there would be no place for church discipline and excommunication. We can, however, expect him to do it from time to time as a testimony to his righteousness and judgment, especially when his presence is strong with the church.

Pray that God would return to our churches in his power and might, so that he would perform all his will to judge and punish those who transgress and refuse to repent, to the end that people would fear him and perceive that their lives are not their own, and that there are severe consequences to their unbelief and defiance. Christians are a peaceful people, and this ought to make the Christian faith all the more frightening. This is because when Christians do not avenge themselves, God comes to avenge them and to vindicate his own honor. And what a dreadful thing it is to fall into the hands of the living God.

11. Weak, Sick, and Dead

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:27-32)

To understand what it means to sin against the body and blood of the Lord, we need to grasp the nature of the Lord's Supper.

Various human traditions have said that even if the bread and wine are not the actual body and blood of Jesus, there is at least a "real" or "spiritual" presence associated with the items. What this means has never been stated in terms that are intelligible and defensible. The doctrine is nonsense, and represents an incomplete break from the abomination of Catholicism.

There is no biblical indication that the body, blood, or presence of Jesus is associated with the elements of bread and wine in any literal, or physical, or spiritual, or mystical, or any special sense. And there is no indication that to participate in the Lord's Supper is to "feed" on Christ.

John 6 refers to feeding on Christ's flesh and blood, but there no reference is made to the Lord's Supper, and there are reasons to exclude the Lord's Supper from its context. First, Jesus was addressing people who would not have understood a reference to an ordinance that he had not yet instituted. Second, he was talking about salvation. It is impossible that, to attain salvation, Jesus required participation in an ordinance that he had not yet instituted. And in fact, the biblical teaching is that a person attains salvation before he participates in the Lord's Supper, and not that he attains salvation because he participates in it. Third, the context stresses hearing and believing his words, so that the eating of his flesh and the drinking of his blood are best understood as metaphors for faith and for the acceptance of his doctrines.

With John 6 out of the way, we restate the fact that there is no biblical indication that the Lord's Supper is for one to "feed" on Christ for spiritual nourishment. Rather, all the other passages that refer to the topic, including our text from 1 Corinthians 11, represent the Lord's Supper as a memorial for the sacrifice that Jesus made to save us and the elements as mere symbols of his body and blood.

When an item is a clear and known symbol for a person, to insult the symbol is to insult the person. Suppose someone calls out the name of Jesus and utters blasphemy against him. No distinct physical element is involved, but he has sinned in that he has verbally insulted the Lord. Now suppose someone writes the name of Jesus on a piece of paper, and then he throws it on the floor and spits on it. The piece of paper is not associated with the presence of Jesus in any special sense, and writing and spitting are in themselves not sinful acts. But this person has committed blasphemy against the Lord as if he has verbally insulted him because he has made the piece of paper into a symbol for Jesus and then insulted it.

Although the bread and wine are mere symbols, and nothing more than symbols, they are nevertheless symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Therefore, when someone disrespects these symbols, especially knowing that they are symbols of the Lord, he insults the body and blood of the Lord, just as if he verbally blasphemes. The Corinthians had shown disrespect for the body and blood of the Lord in that they would become disorderly and drunk when they were supposed to come together and remember Jesus Christ. They had sinned against the body and blood of the Lord.

As a result, Paul said, many of them were weak, sick, and even dead. This was not the natural or passive consequence of their behavior, but the active and deliberate judgment from God. Paul did not say that Satan inflicted this upon them or that God merely removed his protection from them. He said that if we would judge ourselves, then God would not judge us. When we judge ourselves, we are not passive, and we do not merely remove protection from ourselves. We confront, criticize, and correct ourselves. We make ourselves change so that we would think and behave in a different way.

If we refuse to do this, then God would do it, and this is something active and deliberate that he does: "When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined." Thus many of the Corinthians were weak, sick, and dead, because God made them weak, sick, and dead. And God did not do it only to some of them, but many of them. Thus here is the apostolic teaching: God would make people sick and even kill them because they disrespect Jesus Christ.

Their sin was not necessarily bound to the elements of the Lord's Supper, since there are many other ways that people could insult the body and blood of Jesus. There are many other ways that people could incite the Lord to anger and invite judgment on themselves. We ought to restore this perspective in teaching and practicing the Christian faith. God is in the church and in the world. He is ever watching and weighing, and although he is patient, we cannot expect him to delay judgment forever. If we do not judge ourselves, he will discipline us. This is why many of our people are weak, sick, and dead.

12. They Had Been with Jesus

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. (Acts 4:13, ESV)

The verse is often used to teach on the importance and benefits of prayer. There was something different about the disciples because "they had been with Jesus," and through prayer, we can also be with Jesus. Although we do not dispute the value of prayer, such an application of the phrase is too shallow and figurative.

These disciples spent time with Jesus not only in prayer, but in a comprehensive program of apprenticeship. They listened to him, prayed with him, ate with him, lived with him, and traveled with him. They performed numerous kinds of tasks under his supervision, including preaching, healing, making arrangements for meetings and celebrations, and distributing food and money to the people. They modeled after his doctrine, character, and lifestyle, and then they were empowered by his Spirit. This is highly significant because it explains why most Christian leaders are nothing more than winsome wimps no matter how much they have studied and no matter how much they have prayed. They have never been with Jesus – they have never received comparable training that imparted the spirit of Christ.

The religious leaders were impressed by the disciples' courage and eloquence in declaring the message of Jesus Christ. These disciples were uneducated, but it was for the best because the religious establishment had an education system that produced murderers. They had a superior grasp of the things of God than all the approved theologians. These disciples were common men, but they were only common by the standard of these religious hypocrites, a standard that they made up and that was affirmed by their traditions and customs. But these were the students of Jesus, because of this they had the courage to speak the truth and the power to perform miracles. That made them truly educated and uncommon. None of the religious leaders and hypocrites could measure up to this.

Refuse training that would make you a lackey of the religious establishment or a mere echo of man-made and denominational traditions, and that would impart to you a spirit possessed by those who murdered Jesus. When you have been with Jesus, you become truly educated and truly spiritual. You become filled with his Spirit, with faith, power, and wisdom. You become filled with courage to speak the gospel and with power to perform miracles. Those who interrogate you could not learn these things from their schools, and you will make them look foolish and useless. The ministry of the gospel shatters their delusion, and shows that men's learning and approval amount to nothing. What happens? Your very existence exposes their vanity and destroys their meaning in life. They will get angry, and they will say that you are a fanatic, a heretic, or even a criminal.

There is no need to follow Jesus in the flesh to receive the same benefits. Through the Scripture, we can receive the same wisdom that he gave the apostles, and through the Holy Spirit, we can receive the same power that energized their lives and ministries. Then, we can adopt the same model of apprenticeship that Jesus used to train his disciples, to learn from those who possess the same spirit of faith and power, and to impart it to others.

Does your church leader or seminary professor speak and behave anything like Jesus Christ or is he just another denominational drone? I am not referring to the Jesus that he presents to you – that Jesus is probably an idealized projection of this man. Human tradition and unbelief diminish the Lord so that men can measure up. No, I am referring to the Jesus that we see in the Bible. Read the Gospels again slowly, and notice the kinds of things that Jesus actually said and did. Is your teacher a reflection of *that* Jesus? Do you notice any resemblance at all? Could he be an apprentice of the Lord? You will probably discover that he is not. You must not follow him, because he will make you into another religious drone. Follow someone who really has been with Jesus, who is full of courage and power. Then you will become educated in the school of Christ, and made uncommon by the Holy Spirit.

13. Clothed with Power

But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:49, ESV)

Jesus never suggested that power is a threat to our piety, humility, or sanity. He talked about spiritual and miraculous power as something beneficial and necessary. He never cautioned us about having power, but he taught on how to have more of it. He never warned against faith, but he warned against the lack of faith. He did not rebuke anyone for believing too much or hoping for too much, but he rebuked people for believing too little and expecting too little. He calls his people to have a deeper faith, a higher faith, and a wider faith, to believe for more things and greater things, even miraculous things. Paul told the Corinthians to desire the miraculous gifts of the Spirit even as he rebuked them for abusing the power.

Many Christians have a very different and even opposite perspective toward spiritual power. They have a conception of Christianity, what it is, and how it operates, that is fundamentally antagonistic to Jesus' philosophy of Christian life and work, and Jesus' view regarding the qualifications for ministry. Will we follow Jesus Christ, or will we agree with those who have strayed from him, and who have set up their own theologies and institutions in order to conspire against the Holy Spirit? On the one hand, we have faith, power, life, and success. On the other, there is defeat, bondage, death, and punishment.

The neglect of spiritual power has contributed to many of the enduring problems in our doctrines, in our churches, and in our societies. It is naïve to think that we can oppose the Lord on anything with impunity. God's power demands our acceptance and emphasis more than ever before. Jesus has commissioned us to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins to all nations, but he said to do it as we are clothed with power from heaven. Therefore, be zealous for God's power. Talk about it. Exercise it. Encourage others to believe in it. We shall always desire power – more and more power – and run over those who would hinder us with their unbelief and trickery.

14. A Superior Species

But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:49, ESV)

Christians are still human. Faith in Jesus Christ does not transform us into gods, and in many ways, we remain similar to the non-Christians. We still get sleepy, and we go to sleep. We still get hungry, and we eat. Like the unbelievers, we go to school and to work. We marry, buy and sell, and die.

However, these are only superficial similarities, because Jesus Christ has made us into something more and something better than the non-Christians. We remain human, but we are superior. We are infused with the same divine energy that powered the works of Christ. This is the same power that came upon the prophets and the apostles.

Of course, we are not superior in ourselves, just like any man is not superior to another in himself. But Jesus is superior to any man, and he has regenerated our spirits and predestined us to conform to his image. The Holy Spirit is superior to any earthly thing, and his power clothes each believer with a heavenly quality that cannot be matched or mimicked by the non-Christian. The Christian is a superior kind of human because God is superior to any man or woman, and God indwells the Christian in all his fullness.

The Bible never suggests that power is a threat to orthodoxy and godliness. In fact, the Bible knows no orthodoxy and godliness without this otherworldly power. But there are those who claim to be Christians, but who insist that your theology is orthodox only if you reject this power, and you are godly only if you refuse to seek it.

What has happened? Satan cannot fight this power in head-on confrontation – he is no match for it – but he would gain the upper hand if he could talk us into thinking that this power is not for us, that it is not good for us, and that we would be heretics for wanting it and claiming it. Then he could keep the church in bondage without lifting a finger. And this is why believers are weak and defeated.

You might not seem like anyone special. You think that you have no talents, and that there is not much you can contribute to the cause of Christ. You doubt that you can contend for the faith and stand up against the onslaughts of unbelievers. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, you can. Perhaps you have very little education – certainly many people have more than you. Perhaps you do not have much money. In many ways, you appear less than others. But by this power from heaven, you can be something more than the rest of men. You can be more. You can be better, stronger, more useful. You can live a more meaningful and significant life. Believe the promise, and receive the power.

15. Desire Spiritual Gifts

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. (1 Corinthians 14:1, ESV)

Paul instructed the Corinthians to desire spiritual gifts, even though they were already desiring them strongly and constantly, and were exercising them in selfish and abusive ways. Of course we ought to desire God, and to desire him for his own sake. But Paul did not tell them to desire the Giver, or to desire the Giver instead of the gifts, or to desire the Giver more than the gifts. Rather, he said to desire the gifts, to desire these abilities to perform special works by the power of the Spirit.

How much do you desire the Giver when you refuse to desire the gifts that he tells you to desire? If I do not desire the Giver, I would want nothing to do with his gifts, but if I desire the Giver, I would want everything that he has for me, including his gifts. I would want all of them. I would want as many as I can get, because I would want anything that has to do with him and that comes from him.

Although it is possible to make a distinction between a Giver and his gifts, a healthy personal relationship is holistic, and not heavily segmented and prioritized. Thus the Bible does not teach something like, "Do not desire what God can do, but desire God himself." It teaches us to want all of him. The error is similar to the one that says it is selfish to pray for yourself. The Bible teaches us to constantly pray for ourselves. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches that we should pray for our forgiveness, and also to say "Give us today our daily bread." That is, we ought to pray for ourselves every day, even for our material needs. This does not show selfishness, but faith in God and a continuous consciousness of God. Likewise, the Bible teaches us to desire and pray for God's power to work through us.

Therefore, earnestly desire spiritual gifts. More and more, desire and pray for the manifestations of power. The Bible is God's complete and sufficient revelation, and this final word commands us to desire spiritual gifts, including prophecy, healing, and many others. Because this is God's final word on the matter, there is no chance that this will be overturned before the coming of Christ.

There is no excuse for unbelief and disobedience on the matter. Stand firm, and become suspicious and outright hostile against those who adorn a cloak of religious scholarship and piety, but who try to lead you away from God's commandments. Deuteronomy 13 says that if a prophet comes with signs and wonders, but tries to lead us away from the true God, then do not follow him, because God is testing us to see if we love him with all our heart and with all our soul. How much more, then, should we pass the test, when a false teacher comes to spread rebellion against the Lord without signs and wonders!

The spiritual gifts come from God, and they give you the abilities to perform the work that God has called you to do and to edify the church. Satan's agents would try to take them away from you by their false teaching, and they would persecute you even in the name of Christ. Their aim is to neutralize your ministry by directing your trust and attention to resources that are powerless against the principalities and the demonic strongholds that enslave the minds of men.

Let any suggestion that the Spirit's powers and manifestations have ceased remind you to react against the false doctrine, to stir up the gifts of God, to repent of unbelief and inaction concerning them, to desire them even more, to talk about them and pray about them even more, and to exercise them even more for the glory of God and the good of his people.

16. Jesus and Missions

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

The study of missions often becomes an investigation in sociology and anthropology, emphasizing cultures and traditions, comparative religion, intercultural and interracial communication, and so on. Although it could be helpful to consider these issues, Jesus' own theology and method are often ignored, and even opposed. Power is basic to his view on missions. This is the power to speak, the power to act, and the power to perform extraordinary feats. In the biblical record, this power is the equipment even for regular preaching, defense before the authorities, and debates with scholars.

When it comes to the worldwide promotion and establishment of the Christian faith, Jesus places his emphasis on power. Power is basic to the missionary enterprise. Power is necessary for all ministry activities. A theology of missions that does not offer power a supreme position represents a drastically different concept of the Great Commission – what it is and how to do it. It is a theology that disagrees with the one who issued this Commission. If we wish to become faithful missionaries at home and abroad, we must come into agreement with Jesus Christ, and return to an emphasis on power.

17. The Promise of the Spirit

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call." (Acts 2:38-39)

The Bible often speaks about faith and baptism together, and sometimes refers to them interchangeably; however, its doctrine is that faith is necessary for salvation, but baptism is not. We know this because the man who was crucified next to Christ was accepted by a simple confession of faith without baptism. Then, Cornelius and those with him received the Holy Spirit before water baptism. Peter realized that they had received the Spirit because they spoke in tongues, and since the Spirit was given only to those who were regenerate, he inferred that these Gentiles had received faith and salvation while he was still speaking. It was after this that they were baptized with water.

Thus in this sense water baptism is not necessary for salvation, but they are often mentioned together or even mentioned interchangeably because there is often no reason to sharply separate the two. The apostles did not entertain long delays between faith and baptism. If a person understood and confessed faith in the gospel, then he was to be baptized with water as soon as possible, even within the same hour or the same day. Although there is no reason to insist that a person could be spiritually damaged if there is a delay, the early disciples saw no point to such a delay, and so confession of faith and baptism with water are often mentioned together, because chronologically speaking, they are closely positioned.

Peter instructed the people to believe in Jesus Christ, to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Salvation is associated with faith and baptism, and after this they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, whose outpouring was the reason or platform for this sermon to them. The context defines what Peter meant by the gift of the Spirit and what he thought were the manifestations of this gift. As he cited from the prophet Joel, "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18).¹

In Peter's thinking, when people received the Holy Spirit, they would prophesy, they would dream dreams, and they would see visions. Luke's thesis is that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit makes the church not only a kingdom of priests, but also a company of prophets. It

¹ Whether the signs in verses 19 and 20 are taken in the literal or symbolic sense, we also accept them as relevant. If taken in the literal sense, these could refer to visible signs in the sky, earthquakes, tsunamis, and other events. If taken in the symbolic sense, these could refer to wars, political upheavals, and so on. Of course, the verses could be speaking of both kinds of signs.

is impossible to force this gift of the Spirit into something that is synonymous with salvation. Faith is for the forgiveness of sins. The Spirit is for the endowment of power. Just as faith and baptism are two different things that are often mentioned together, the gift of the Spirit is different from the gift of Christ for forgiveness, but are often mentioned together because there is no reason to so sharply separate them. One who has received Christ by faith should also receive water baptism and then receive the Holy Spirit.

On this matter, controversy surrounds 1 Corinthians 12:13, which says, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." One side of the debate argues that the verse refers to the same baptism of the Holy Spirit as mentioned in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, and since it states that all believers have been baptized in the Holy Spirit, the conclusion is that the baptism of the Holy Spirit cannot be a different and subsequent event to conversion or regeneration. The other side maintains that the baptism of the Holy Spirit, as Luke consistently portrays it, is an event different and subsequent to conversion or regeneration, and that this verse does not contradict such a position.

There are detailed theological and grammatical arguments on both sides of the debate. However, the complicated controversy is a complete waste of time. When it comes to this specific item, all the arguments are futile and unnecessary, because the matter does not hinge on this verse and cannot be settled by it. This is because, for our question, it is totally irrelevant for Paul to mention regeneration in Christ and the baptism in the Spirit together, or interchangeably, or to declare or assume that all believers have received both of them.

As stated before, the Bible often mentions regeneration in Christ and baptism with water together, or interchangeably, or declare or assume that all believers have both of them. For example, Paul writes in one place, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:4). And in another place, he says, "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:11-12; also Galatians 3:26-27).

The apostles took it for granted that the believers were baptized with water, although we know that they did not regard baptism as necessary for salvation, or that they were the same thing, or that anyone who was converted to Christ was automatically and simultaneously either drenched with water or thrown into water. In addition, despite the assumption, it is conceivable that at least one believer in the audience had not been baptized with water. Perhaps he was converted only a few minutes before the letter was read to the congregation. Thus just because a letter sounds as if all believers had been baptized with water does not necessarily mean that all believers are in fact baptized with water. It is an operating assumption.

Many verses in the apostolic letters assume that all those in the audience were believers – because they were addressing believers! – but it is conceivable that there was at least one

unconverted person who heard at least one of these verses as they were read. For the purpose of these letters, the operating assumption was entirely proper. I suppose even an unbeliever would not think that he became a Christian just because he was exposed to a letter that assumed it was speaking to a group of believers. Nevertheless, seminary-trained morons are capable of just this extraordinary feat when they are motivated enough to transform their prejudice into orthodoxy.

Therefore, it means nothing if there is a biblical verse that mentions regeneration in Christ and the baptism in the Spirit together, or if it refers to them interchangeably, or if it declares or assumes that all believers have the baptism of the Spirit. Rather, just as other parts of Scripture portray water baptism as not necessary for salvation, and portray conversion and water baptism as distinguishable events, we must derive our doctrine of the baptism of the Spirit by how it is portrayed in other parts of Scripture.

In fact, if other parts of Scripture portray the baptism of the Spirit as something distinct from conversion, but if 1 Corinthians 12:13 assumes that all believers have received it, then the verse becomes a damning commentary on those who are without it and who oppose it. It would mean that there is something defective in their faith and character. It would mean that these people do not have what all believers should have, and they even fight against it and try to prevent others from receiving it. This is the hypocritical and murderous spirit of the Pharisees. They would kill Jesus himself before they would admit that they are wrong or that there is something lacking in them.

Then, there is the objection that it is impossible for those who are truly converted to be without the Holy Spirit. In reply, the baptism of the Spirit and the fullness of the Spirit are only terms used to designate a specific promise or event, and it does not exclude the Spirit's presence in other settings or in other aspects of the application of redemption. Although conversion and baptism with water are distinct events, we do not say that one who is converted has never been touched by water and has never taken a bath or a shower until after he has been baptized with water. So of course all Christians have the Spirit in a sense, and of course the Spirit summons and converts anyone who comes to faith in Christ, but this has nothing to do with the issue of whether the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a distinct and subsequent event.

After this, there is the objection that Luke's doctrine – that the baptism of the Spirit is a distinct and subsequent event to conversion – results in a two-class system in the Christian community. It makes those who are without the Spirit baptism into second-class members of the church. First, to some this sounds more like an admission than an objection. Second, even if not an admission, this could be a description instead of an objection. If the further objection is made that the church is not divided into two classes, the answer is that this doctrine could be evidence that it is indeed so divided. Third, the language is loaded, and the matter does not have to be presented this way. Fourth, one could make a similar objection about water baptism, but we know that the new birth and water baptism are distinct events. Someone who has been converted may not be baptized with water for a period of time. Is he a second-class believer? And does he have to remain this way? Fifth, even the most zealous proponents of the doctrine that Spirit baptism is a distinct event

would just as strongly insist that it is available to all who believe in Christ. So if it divides the church into a two-class system, who is at fault but those who refuse to believe and receive? But religious hypocrites tend to blame others for their own unbelief and deficiency.

Peter was explicit in defining who could receive the promise – the promise that would result in the manifestations mentioned by Joel. He said that the promise was for that generation and subsequent generations, and that it was for the kind of people present as well as those people far away. Then he added that it was "for all whom the Lord our God will call" – not all those whom God would call to become apostles, but since the promise of the Spirit is here associated with the promise of forgiveness of sins, he meant that the promise of the Spirit would be for all those whom God would call to repentance and salvation. It is for all Christians. Thus Peter destroyed any possibility that this promise of the Spirit and its manifestations would be restricted by times and titles.

Just as significant is the fact that Peter declared this promise of the Holy Spirit as part of the gospel, and not as something added on top of it. This promise – and the Bible knows no promise of the Spirit different from the one described by Joel – is basic and integral to the message of Christ, and to what it means to be a Christian. Therefore, to deny or alter it, or to explain it away, is not only to attack a secondary doctrine, if there is such a thing, but it is a direct assault against the core of the gospel. The offender is thus in danger of coming under the curse of Galatians 1: "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).

In order to erode sound doctrine and to excuse themselves, men often attempt to redefine the nature, scope, and possibilities of the Christian faith, not according to the promises of God, but according to their own deficiencies and evil intentions. They would reduce the Christian faith into something that they can live with, into something that they can attain, and then they would impose this on you so that you would not exceed them and make them look like spiritual losers and hypocrites. Men of true faith and love would urge you to reach for greater heights according to the promises of God, even if this means you would exceed them. Do not be cheated out of the inheritance that Jesus Christ has won for you by his own blood. Hold on to all that he has for you, and regard all contrary doctrines with contempt.

God remembers his promise, and he would destroy entire nations to fulfill his word. It is nothing for him to topple a few thousand denominations and a few million preachers and theologians in order to deliver. But do we forget his promise? Do we wallow in unbelief? Do we surrender to human tradition and popular opinion? Do we excommunicate God from our churches and seminaries so that he would not disturb us as we serve him like hypocrites? Although others may pursue this path, we are free from their power, because God's promise is beyond the regulation of human policy and immune to the suppression of human establishment. It is "for all whom the Lord our God will call." If God has called you to himself, then you do not need any man's approval, but you are free to receive from him with faith and thanksgiving.

18. The Spiritual Vision of Christ

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:6-8)

God's word is the absolute and public standard of truth; therefore, it is the only sound basis for policies in government. However, this does not mean that the Christian vision is a political one, and it does not mean that the Christian cause is well served by deep involvement in the political process. The doctrine that Christians have a mandate to become entangled in society and to develop culture is often used as an excuse to carnalize spirituality.

A tremendous amount of resources has been devoted to discussing how Christian theology applies to politics, how we could secure our rights and enforce our ideals by the political process, and how to vote out non-Christians and vote in our own people. Indeed, the Christian faith has a place for politics, and when possible the apostles took advantage of existing laws to facilitate their work. In fact, it would be foolish not to take advantage of rights that we already possess to maintain a measure of safety and convenience in the gospel ministry.

That said, many have lost sight of the true vision and power of Jesus Christ. Their goals and means have become heavily political. But to trust in politics is to trust in men, and men will always disappoint. The fact is that, unless we are referring to insurrection, advancing the Christian cause by politics only works as far as the non-Christians tolerate it. The laws of a democracy is not enforced by the immediate miracle-working power of God, but by ordinary providence working through men's cooperation and compromise, and men do not always cooperate or compromise.

Suppose members of a weaker group protest for their rights, and members of the more powerful group compromise. The weaker members then declare victory – the movement has overcome! But they did not really win; rather, for whatever reason, those with greater power showed generosity. Of course, it is likely that those with more power felt pressure and compromised due to self-interest, but they did not have to compromise, and could have suppressed the entire movement and bore the consequences.

So a large group of youngsters can occupy a huge square and protest for democracy. The government could tolerate it, but after a while it could also send tanks and soldiers to slaughter the people and shut down the whole thing. In another part of the world, a group

might protest for their rights and for political change. No harm comes to them, not because they are so mighty and frightening, but because the government tolerates them. They are deluded if they think they really have the power. Yet the movement could be worthwhile, because the people are taking advantage of the existing tolerance of the authorities to make additional demands.

The power of Jesus Christ at work through the gospel is the only power that does not on the one hand depend on violence and insurrection or on the other hand depend on the tolerance of those in authority. An inordinate interest in politics is indicative of the loss of spiritual vision and power. Many would disagree with this and throw out all kinds of arguments to justify their emphasis, precisely because this criticism applies to them. They have lost the true power, and now they cling to a human substitute. In a sense, they have forsaken the spring of living water, and have dug for themselves broken cisterns that cannot hold water. It is a form of idolatry.

Cessationism is a chief culprit. It is more harmful than many other heresies, and stands as one of the greatest evils in the history of mankind. To differing degrees, it denies or reduces the spiritual power that is believed to be available to God's people. The void is then filled by human and demonic counterfeits. On the other hand, "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:4). To the extent that Christians have abandoned the divine weapons, they frantically grab at substitutes for the sake of self-preservation. Then, it becomes a doctrine. Then, it becomes a way of life.

The cure is a renewed consciousness and reactivation of God's power in our lives through repentance, prayer, and teaching. Jesus' vision is the spread of the gospel by spiritual power. His strategy is effective in any generation and under any political system. You do not even need to be a citizen of the nation. If you are a citizen of heaven, then you have the right and ability to effect change in any nation.

The world will not be saved by contending with the non-Christians on their own terms and by operating under the rights that they offer us in the first place. And it will not be saved by violence and insurrection. Rather, the gospel is the power of God that will save everyone who believes. And the Bible knows no other way of preaching the gospel than by the power of the Holy Spirit.

19. Accredited by God

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. (Acts 2:22-24)

An important function of miracles is to confirm God's messengers and their ministries. But contrary to unbelief and tradition, the Bible never suggests that God performs miracles only to authenticate new revelation and that, even after Pentecost, he would perform them only through a few special believers. In fact, even before Pentecost, Jesus permitted a man to perform miracles on his own without direct association with his ministry or that of the apostles (Mark 9:38-41).

If you wish to help people in the name of Jesus, even if it takes a miracle, you do not need permission from the preachers and theologians, or the seminaries and the denominations. Just go ahead and do it. Jesus endorsed it. He said, "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us." But what would he say about those who oppose you? Never allow mere men to replace the authority of Jesus in your life. Curse them all to hell before you let that happen.

The Bible never suggests that God would not perform miracles to authenticate old revelation. Moreover, an old revelation could demand continuing miracles in all future generations. Suppose the Johnson patriarch declares, "I promise that members of the Johnson family would lend money to members of the Harrison family in all future generations." This promise would entail lending money to someone of the Harrison family more than once and in more than in one generation. To issue one loan, or five, or ten and for only a century or two would not fulfill the promise. The promise is so broad that it could entail lending money to thousands of members in the Harrison family for hundreds of generations, all the way to the extinction of the Harrison family or the end of human history.

Accordingly, Jesus said that he healed a woman on the basis that she was a descendant of Abraham (Luke 13:16). Even if authentication of his ministry was included in the broader picture, his explicit reason was to make good on an old revelation, and not to confirm a new one. And the basis for the miracle was not that God made a promise to heal this particular woman, but that he made a much broader promise to bless the children of Abraham. Thus since this was a valid basis to heal this particular woman, and since God's promise to Abraham stands forever, it was and it is a basis for the healing of all who are included in the same category.

Now, the promise is not restricted to the natural descendants of Israel. In fact, it is not mainly intended for the natural descendants of Israel. As Paul writes, "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel" (Romans 9:6). Rather, "Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.' So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Galatians 3:7-9, ESV).

Therefore, each one who has faith in Jesus Christ stands on the same basis as this woman who received healing and has the covenant right to possess the same blessing without alteration. Anyone who denies this rejects the very foundation of the Christian faith, and should be condemned as a heretic. The Bible is complete and sufficient. This means that it is the definitive word on the matter, and since God is true to his word, the blessings to Abraham that we receive through Jesus Christ by faith could never be annulled. Since the Bible is complete and sufficient, there remains no excuse to deny that healing by faith in Jesus Christ should not be a regular occurrence in the church.

It is futile to spiritualize this healing. Both physical and spiritual healing were needed as different blessings and supplied as different blessings throughout the history of mankind. It is not as if those who lived before Christ received physical healing but then all went to hell. Physical and spiritual healing are discussed as related but distinct blessings throughout the history of revelation – throughout the Bible. Physical healing cannot be spiritualized so that it becomes only the forgiveness of sin.

Some make the challenge, "If healing is promised to faith, then why is not everyone healed?" This is a most stupid and hypocritical objection. Jesus Christ has purchased with his own blood complete holiness for those who believe, then why do believers still sin? The same people who make the objection against physical healing would rattle off lengthy expositions about the progressive application of the benefits of redemption, but when it comes to physical healing, somehow the doctrine must be mistaken if everyone is not completely healed right now. What a brood of vipers. What a bunch of religious hypocrites and whitewashed tombs.

There are a number of reasons for God to perform miracles other than authenticating old and new revelations. A most significant one is that he has compassion to meet our practical needs and wants.

A wealthy man could donate a hundred million dollars to an orphanage to show that he is rich, and that such an amount is nothing to him. Man is only a servant, and it is not for him to boast of his riches or to covet the approval of others. But for God to demonstrate himself is entirely proper, because he is inherently worthy of praise and worship. It is right for a being who ought to be worshiped to demand worship. Thus it is good for God to show his glory, although it is not good for a man to do so. The wealthy man is only an analogy.

That said, it could be that the man offers so much money because he has compassion on orphans. To those who have no concept of compassion, that possibility would not come up

when they theorize about his motives. On the other hand, to those who are in touch with the heart of God, and who have compassion on the suffering of others, this is a most obvious and enduring reason that undergirds their faith. The Bible teaches that Jesus healed people because he had compassion on them. If we cannot see that, or if in our murderous zeal to suppress modern miracles we become blinded to the fact that he still has compassion on people, then it is because we do not have any. It is because we do not know him. It is because we are nothing like him.

Always be highly suspicious and contemptuous toward those who present the miracles of Christ as if they were only to confirm his ministry. Their narrow conception of the miracle ministry is very likely an indication of their narrow spiritual life and motives for serving God. Their spiritual blindness is then reflected on their interpretation of Christ, and they invent restrictions on the miracle ministry, imposing unbiblical periods and reasons upon it, in order to justify themselves and to explain their failures.

But unbelief complains, "Why does he have to perform miracles? Why doesn't he always meet us through ordinary providence? And if he performs miracles, why does he so often do it by endowing his people with supernatural gifts?" These questions are irrelevant to whether or not God performs miracles, but only relevant once the subject is accepted and a deeper understanding is desired. We could just as easily ask the opposite: "Why doesn't God always help us through miracles? And when he performs miracles, why does he often do it apart from human involvement, and without using the supernatural gifts that he has given to them?" Thus as to the issue of whether God performs miracles and whether he does them through supernatural gifts, these questions are red herrings and excuses.

God could choose to perform miracles at times because he wishes to demonstrate in a more pronounced manner his power, presence, and compassion, or when they are miracles of judgment, his holiness and severity. He could choose to work miracles through his servants in order to secure respect for the church and unity among his people. But at times he could choose to perform miracles without human instruments to remind us that all miracles come from God alone, and that he does not require our assistance and cooperation. There are so many explanations that we can provide, but these are, again, irrelevant to the issue of whether or not God performs miracles today, and whether or not he performs them through his people.

God will do what he wants in any age he wants in any way he wants. To demand answers in this context betrays unbelief and rebellion. You ask these questions as if you challenge another person's theology, but they constitute an attack on God's sovereignty. If you wish to dethrone God and take his place – and I know you do because you speak like this – then take it up with him. Challenge him yourself and seize his throne. Until then your disapproval means nothing.

Having said all this, it remains that one function of miracles is to confirm God's messenger, and he accredited Jesus Christ with mighty miracles, signs and wonders. Jesus healed the sick, cast out demons, raised the dead, multiplied food, walked on water, calmed the storm, cursed a tree to death, and performed other miracles, too many to be fully recorded. In

addition, God endorsed him by sending his Spirit upon him in the likeness of a dove, sent Moses and Elijah to speak with him, and thundered from heaven, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

Peter said that the Jews knew about these miracles, but they still conspired against him. In fact, their hate for Christ was even stronger than their contempt for the Gentiles, so that they used the Romans to murder him. They conspired against Jesus, and they thought they had succeeded. But they played right into God's hands in that Jesus was destined to suffer the death of a criminal in order to make atonement for us. They could not defeat him, for God raised him from the dead, and now by believing in him, we are saved from our sins and from the corruption of this world.

Today, religious people continue to conspire against Jesus Christ, even as he continues to vindicate himself through his Spirit and even as his people continue to testify about his power and compassion. But they play right into God's hands in that, by their opposition to the truth, their unbelief is unmasked. They could not help but express their dissatisfaction with Christ and their condemnation of the continuing power of his Spirit. Their own testimony reveals God's dissatisfaction with them and his condemnation of their unbelief and tradition. Jesus Christ cannot be defeated. He will do as he pleases, and he will perform his mighty works through anyone he pleases, in any generation he wishes to do them.

Therefore, we preach Jesus Christ – the same yesterday, today, and forever. He still has mercy on those who needs forgiveness. He still has compassion on those who needs healing. And he is here to perform a mighty work even when men are unable and unwilling. There is always hope in Jesus. Never allow people to tell you that it is futile to seek the same Jesus that you see in the Bible. They are not his friends, and they are not yours. Look to the Scripture and witness for yourself the real and only Jesus Christ. Trust in him, and tell others to do the same.

20. Cure for Psychological Trauma²

There are three elements to recovery: doctrine, counsel, and power.

Doctrine is essential. A continuous review of the truths about God's sovereignty, his unconditional selection and acceptance of his people, Christ's work in redemption, his death by which he purchased deliverance from all sin, condemnation, and evil principalities, and so on, will all contribute to recovery, even if they are not studied to deliberately target your psychological problems. God's word can comfort you, heal you, and set you free. Do not read the Puritans on psychological issues, on doubt, melancholy, and such things. Their works would probably increase your troubles because they could analyze even a lively soul to death with their tedious prose, speculative categories, and endless artificial divisions.

Counsel in the form of extended conversations on the basis of God's word can help you specifically address your problems. However, all non-Christian counselors are harmful and dangerous, and most Christian counselors are also harmful and dangerous, if not more so. Do not trust most counselors. They do not know what they are doing or what they are talking about. They will more likely than not offer you false and anti-Christian advice. There is a biblical approach to counseling, but it is difficult to find one who uses this approach and who does it well. But God does not leave us at the mercy of men. If there is no man to help you, or even if there is, God himself can become your counselor by his Scripture and his Spirit.

Power is what will finally deliver you. No matter how much men insist that cessationism is not a denial of God's power, the fact is that they reject God's power as he teaches it in the Bible. They are selective about what they accept about it. The result is a chain and a curse. You will not find true deliverance and full recovery from most Reformed and Evangelical circles. You will not find it because they do not have it and they will not allow you to have it.

"Have faith in God" (Mark 11:22). Open up to the possibilities of God's power at work in you. Think in terms of faith that moves mountains. Think in terms of power that can work miracles. Then persist in prayer. Ask God to deliver you and change you by his power. Renew your mind by knowing the Jesus of the Gospels and the Acts, and not the Jesus of unbelief and tradition. That Jesus, filtered by false doctrine, has ceased to exercise his power to help you like the Jesus in the Bible.

I offer you this advice even though it might invite criticism from those who have ceased believing in God's power as he teaches it in the Bible, because I have compassion on you and desire to help you. There are "Christians" who would rather see you suffer than to accept that God's power continues to be evident and his gifts continue to work through his

² Adapted from email correspondence.

people. They want God to cease and desist in anything that upsets their false theology and tradition.

Like the Pharisees, they are filled with a spirit of murder instead of a spirit of faith, love, and power. Jesus was angry with them because of the hardness of their hearts (Mark 3:5). Therefore, first be delivered from them! Why serve their unbelief, and why submit to their tradition, when you are the one who suffers? Instead, look to Jesus Christ, the Jesus of the Bible who is always compassionate, and always generous with his help and his power.

21. I am Ananias

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 9:17)

Saul, or Paul, was heading toward Damascus to arrest the Christians. But before he arrived, Jesus appeared to him in a blinding light from heaven. He identified himself and confronted Paul about what he was doing. Then he told Paul to wait in the city. For three days he was blind, and he fasted and prayed, finally realizing that the Christians were right about Jesus.

Unspiritual men think in terms of times and titles, that God would do certain things then, but not now, that he would do certain things through the apostles, but not others. For this reason, they strive hard to earn human recognition. They measure themselves according to the titles that they have received from human institutions, and they compare themselves to others by them. And this is how they think of you. You could be Jesus Christ himself, but they would say, "Which seminary did you go to? Which denomination ordained you? By whose authority do you do these things?" You could be filled with a legion of demons, but if you have the human credentials they respect, they will curtsy and call you "reverend" and "doctor." It is a worldly and pathetic culture.

Who could be qualified to lay his hands on this Pharisee, a Hebrew of Hebrews, and this soon-to-be apostle, missionary, defender of the faith, and writer of Scripture? If we think like the carnal man, who could do this, except Peter, John, or James? Perhaps even Matthew was not good enough. But Jesus sent a regular disciple – a man who had no special title.³ He was not called an apostle, a prophet, a teacher, an elder, or even a deacon. We are not told about his pedigree and education.

What Simon tried to purchase from Peter – the ability to impart the fullness of the Spirit by the laying on of hands – Ananias could do as a regular Christian. He was a "disciple"! He was a student of Jesus Christ. There is no need for a greater title. You cannot buy this ability. You cannot study to get it. You cannot graduate into it. You must have an actual relationship with God and a commission from Christ to operate in this kind of ministry. This makes some people very angry, angry enough to kill, that Jesus would dare work around their ecclesiastical structure. All your schooling and networking are futile if you deny that Jesus would use any disciple to perform his greater works, because you have rejected his vision for his people.

³ When Paul made his defense before the Jews, he referred to Ananias as a respected man among the Jews in Damascus (Acts 22:12). But this does not tell us anything about his position in the Christian community, and it does not suggest that he was an apostle, or a prophet, or anything more than a regular Christian.

Paul was familiar with the Christian message before this. He had heard Stephen's powerful testimony and vision of Christ. Stephen was not an apostle, but he was filled with the Spirit and worked mighty signs and wonders among the people. Under interrogation, he expounded on the works of God and showed that they led up to the coming of Jesus Christ, and he declared that the Jews had always been rebellious, culminating in perjury and murder against their own Messiah. The Jews were furious, but he looked up and saw Jesus at the right hand of God. Paul was a witness to all of this, and he approved when the Jews stoned Stephen to death (Acts 7).

So Paul knew the Christian message, and he must have heard and examined it many times since, but he did not believe it. But now he had seen this Jesus in a blinding light, and he finally realized that Stephen was right all along. The Christian faith was true all this time he had been fighting it. And for three days he fasted and prayed with this in mind.

Still, there are theologians who will tell you that Paul was not yet converted. Why? Because Ananias would come so that Paul could be filled with the Spirit, and despite all the biblical evidence to the contrary, the theologians insist that conversion to Christ is the same event as the filling of the Spirit. They insist that the two are the same so that they would not have to admit that they are deficient in their Christian pursuit. Thus they readily acknowledge that the criminal who was crucified with Christ was saved by his confession of Christ's kingdom, but somehow Paul remained unsaved for three days after extensive exposure to the Christian message and seeing the resurrected Christ in a blinding light, with fasting and prayer afterward.

This is how low some preachers and scholars will sink in order to protect their pride and their tradition. These religious hypocrites press hard for their theological agendas regardless of what the Bible actually says. When the Bible contradicts them, it is somehow an "exception" to their doctrine. Oh, sweet exceptions! May God shower exceptions upon us in this day of theological hypocrisy. May God, as he does every time in the Acts, make an exception every time without exception, so that no one who believes and hungers for him is excepted from his grace and power. And may he make us exceptions to the snakes and scorpions who teach our people, so that we would handle his word with faith and integrity.

Christians revere the Reformation heritage. However, when people do not cling to Jesus Christ with a simple faith, then they will only turn from Catholicism to Pharisaism. But is that the point of all this? Do we turn from idolatry, only to become murderers? What is it then? The religious hypocrites who look to human approval and human authority rather than the Lord Jesus will say to me, "Who are you? Where do you come from? Which man authorized you to do these things? Which institution approved your doctrine?" I will answer, "I am Ananias. I am Vincent Cheung, a disciple of Jesus Christ. Now you and what legion of demons will stop me from following the heavenly vision?"

Fight for your identity, liberty, and ability in Jesus Christ. Do not escape from slavery to unrighteousness only to come under slavery to unbelief and tradition. Serve Christ alone with confidence, and defy all those who would cheat you of your place in him. May God

fill us with his Spirit, a spirit of boldness and of power, so that one by one, we will stand up to an impotent, faithless, and hypocritical religious establishment – to our preachers and theologians, our churches and seminaries, our denominations and other ecclesiastical authorities that conspire against God's power and his Spirit – and say, "I am Ananias. But who are you? Tell me! WHO ARE YOU?!"

22. Faith to be Healed

In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. (Acts 14:8-10)

Numerous preachers and theologians insist that it would be wrong to say that if a person has faith to be healed, then he would be healed. This is like saying that if I have faith to move a mountain, that mountain might still not move. In other words, these preachers and theologians insist that Jesus lied to us, because Jesus was the one who said that if a person has faith, he can command a tree to be plucked up and a mountain to be thrown into the sea, and it would happen.

A better explanation is that the person has faith in God to save him, but has no faith in God to heal him. He has no faith for healing, even though he has deluded himself into thinking that he has it. Since faith is a sovereign gift from God, and since Jesus said that faith could even move a mountain, then for one to have faith for healing necessarily means that he would receive healing.

There is no room for the objection that this denies God's sovereignty, because we have first acknowledged that faith is a sovereign gift from God. On the other hand, it means that those who insist that one can have great faith for healing and still not receive healing have made faith a matter of man's will and have denied the sovereignty of God. And the fact that they have failed to resolve this subject in this manner, which requires only the simplest inference from Scripture, means that their pride in their own intellect and scholarship is unfounded.

Jesus associated healing with the people's faith. Again and again, he said to those who received healing, "Your faith has healed you" and "According to your faith will it be done to you." When he did not perform many miracles, what was the explanation? "And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith" (Matthew 13:58). And when his disciples failed to perform miracles, what was the explanation? "Because you have so little faith" (Matthew 17:20).

Here we have also arrived at the real reason for this reluctance to associate faith and healing – it is a conspiracy against the biblical doctrine to mask and excuse unbelief. As in the days of Jesus, religious scholars would use their training to invent extended explanations for their lack of faith in God's grace and power, and to justify their persecution against those who had such faith. But their complicated theories and formulations are unable to stand against the plain statements of Scripture. And they are exposed and embarrassed by anyone who would believe in the power of Jesus Christ and dare to proclaim it. God's power has never ceased, but it is faith in God's power that has ceased.

Perhaps you have been placed under a theology of unbelief for so long that you have become a spiritual cripple. The preachers and theologians have smashed your legs and snapped your spine. They put you in a wheelchair and assure that you have great faith. You will be fine as long as you do not get out of line or do anything to upset them. But as you read the Bible for yourself, you cannot help but wonder if the power has really passed away. An expectation begins to stir within you. This is the voice of the Spirit of God, awakening your faith to the truth about Jesus Christ. But then the oppressive darkness of the preachers and theologians come rushing back, and so you quench the Spirit and submit to the doctrines and traditions of men. Now, although they have more degrees than you have underpants, unless these people encourage you to have more and more faith – not just enduring, suffering faith, but miracle-working, mountain-moving faith – your underpants are more useful, because these charlatans are misleading you.

This is your life. This is your faith. Do not allow anyone to cheat you of the blessings of Jesus Christ, and then use you to mask their own unbelief and rebellion. They will have to answer to God, but why let them drag you down with them? Why should you suffer because they cannot believe that Jesus still works miracles today and that the manifestations of the Spirit continue in great power? Hear the words of faith and power straight from Jesus in the Gospels.

Even if you do not have faith for healing or for whatever the theologians say you cannot have, begin by adjusting your perception of Jesus from the one that unbelief presents to you back to the one that faith presents to you, to the Jesus that the Bible presents to you. Open up your mind to the possibilities of God's grace and power. Let faith be revived. Do not let unbelief keep you down. If you cannot stand up with your legs, then stand up in your spirit. Believe! Have faith! And stand up! This man had never walked, but when he had faith in Jesus Christ, he walked. When you have faith in God, he will give you power to break through your limitations and do what you have never done before. And then all the unbelief and tradition of men will come to nothing.

23. Bring Him to Jesus

One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick.

Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. (Luke 5:17-19)

Hardened hypocrites would hinder us from approaching Jesus for ourselves. Experts who are so full of themselves and their opinions that they have no room for Christ would offer you a filtered version of the Lord, one that is filtered by their unbelief, tradition, shame, and their party line. These people are neither your friends nor the friends of Christ. They are looking out for themselves and they wish to keep you under their control, so that instead of pressing on to the fullness of Christ, you would become a good dog for the religious establishment and help build their little kingdom.

A good minister of the gospel, or even just a good friend, would help you approach Jesus Christ for all that he has for you. He would tell you to go all the way. One who has true faith in Christ would tell you about all the blessings of Christ, and all of his saving and healing power. Whatever your situation, he would not tell you only to suffer with patience and endure in silence, and he would never tell you that it is a false hope to expect this Jesus to heal and to bless just like the Jesus in the Bible. No! I tell you, it is never a false hope to entrust yourself to Jesus Christ.

The religious hypocrite preaches a Christ of his limitations, a Christ of his denomination and theological tradition, a Christ of his restricted experience, a Christ of his small expectation. He would even conspire with unbelievers to murder a Christ that dares to exceed his false theology. This is the spirit of the Pharisees. This is the spirit that would not come to Christ, and who would prevent others from coming to him.

As for us, let us bring people not to our narrow vision of Christ, not to the Christ of our small faith, not to the Christ that only makes us look learned and established, but to the Christ of the Bible, to the actual Jesus Christ who lived and walked on the earth, and who is now seated at the right hand of God, ruling and doing even greater works through his people. Let our expositions present Jesus Christ in all his glory and power and all his blessings. Let those who hear us believe and attain even more than we can. For if we do not preach ourselves but preach Jesus Christ, who is beyond us, then he might lead some of our hearers to advance beyond us in faith.

Here is the difference. A friend of Christ and a friend of men would be happy about this. While he presses on to learn all of Christ and receive all his blessings, he would want you and help you to do the same. But a religious hypocrite would never let you have a Christ that is beyond his own learning and achievements. He claims to serve Christ, but he wishes to keep the Lord in line like a good little dog. He is afraid and jealous, and filled with murderous rage. But Jesus Christ is greater than he, and he cannot keep the Lord in a cage. Therefore, break free from the chains of religious unbelief, from the hindrances of tradition, over the crowd and through the roof, and come to know Christ in all his fullness and power.

24. Transported by the Spirit

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. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea. (Acts 8:39-40)

God would perform a miracle not only when there is a desperate need, and he often does it not only to prove himself. It is foolish to always try to come up with a reason behind a miracle or to state one reason to cover all of them, such as to say that he does it to authenticate new revelation. If the Bible tells us the reason, then accept it. If the Bible does not tell us and it is impossible to infer one, then accept that. And he may often have more than one reason for performing a miracle.

God could perform a miracle because he wishes to authenticate a new revelation or to keep his word concerning an old revelation. Or, he could have compassion and decides to provide practical help to someone. Nobody can fault him when he does it in style. Perhaps he would do one, not directly but by a gift of the Spirit, and not by an apostle or church leader but by the lowest and least trained believer, just to rub it in the face of the theologians who tell people that he would not. If God wishes to do something, he will do it, and you cannot stop him, even when he does something or through someone that your religious bias disapproves. Let your bias burn in hell, so that you will not have to.

This miracle seems unusual, but it is not unheard of. Enoch walked with God, and he did not experience death, because God took him away (Genesis 5:24; Hebrews 11:5). Elijah probably experienced this miracle so many times that he was known for it, so that people assumed that it would happen to him. When he said that he would wait for the king, Obadiah was worried and answered, "I don't know where the Spirit of the Lord may carry you when I leave you" (1 Kings 18:12). Then, like Enoch, Elijah was carried up to heaven and did not experience death (2 Kings 2:11-12). The company of the prophets did not realize that he had been taken up to heaven, and so they said, "Perhaps the Spirit of the LORD has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley" (v. 16).

It is possible that John 6:21 describes one such miracle associated with Jesus: "Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading." This could mean that the boat arrived without further incident, but if this refers to a miracle, then it means that when Jesus stepped in, the boat and all its passengers were miraculously transported to the shore. This would be consistent with the fact that some of the people regarded Jesus as the return of Elijah, although there were a number of other things regarding Jesus that could have reminded them of that prophet.

Some of the greatest or most significant feats were not performed through the apostles or even in association with the apostles. One of the most glorious and pivotal chapters of the

early church focused on Stephen as he confronted the non-Christians with a brilliant account of God's dealing with his people, and as heaven opened up to him and he saw Jesus Christ at the right hand of God. Here Philip was transported by the Spirit of God. He disappeared before witnesses and appeared in another place.

Although Philip is always portrayed in a positive light, some theologians attempt to undermine his ministry in Samaria. This is not because the Bible says that there was anything defective in Philip's work, but because Luke, as he does in other places, represents the conversion to Christ and the reception of the Spirit as distinct blessings. "When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit" (Acts 8:14-17). This is a tremendous threat to the theologians of unbelief, and they refuse to allow this. No matter what the Bible says, they are determined to have it their way.

So they claim that Philip's ministry was so deficient that the Samaritans were not in fact converted until the apostles arrived. What? Did the apostles convert the people by laying their hands on them? But Luke insists that the people "had accepted the word of God" and had "been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus." This satisfied Peter's demand in Acts 2: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." And after this, Peter added, "You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (v. 38). The Samaritans were undergoing the same process that Peter described. It is nothing less than a demonic prejudice to suppose that they were not converted under Philip's preaching.

But theologians still refuse to accept the word of God, and they insist that being converted to Christ and being filled with the Spirit should be identical and simultaneous. Holding this assumption constant against all contradictory evidence, the two-stage experience of the Samaritans must have occurred because God wanted to show them that they were formally accepted into the church by sending the apostles and by delaying the filling of the Spirit. They are blinded to another possibility. Perhaps God sent the apostles and delayed the Spirit to make a point of showing future generations and these theologians that these are indeed two distinct blessings.

The text itself suggests that it is a separate ability or ministry to lay hands on people for the reception of the Holy Spirit, so that Simon tried to purchase it (Acts 8:19). "If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Corinthians 12:17-18). So Philip preached to the people, and then Peter and John laid hands on them to receive the Holy Spirit.

The theologians insist that this was a privilege of the apostles, and that the reception of the Spirit was separated from conversion to Christ only as exceptions. That is, all the biblical

passages that disprove their theory are exceptions. Perhaps the non-Christians can learn something from these scholars, because by this method they might be able to prove atheism from the Bible. In any case, the very next chapter says that Ananias, an ordinary believer, laid his hands on Paul so that he could be filled with the Holy Spirit three days after his conversion. Just as Peter and John laid hands on the Samaritans to impart the Holy Spirit and to initiate their Christian lives, Ananias laid hands on Paul to impart the Holy Spirit and to initiate his astounding ministry as an apostle.

God leaves testimonies for himself throughout Scripture as obscene gestures against the scholarship of the theologians. He says, "Take that!" over and over again to their unbelief, prejudice, and personal agenda. We ought to remember that God can transport people straight to hell just as easily as he can transport them to heaven. And indeed hell would be one big middle finger against unbelief. As for us, we do not regard God as obscene, for all his blessings are gestures of wisdom, power, and love. Those who are perishing consider the aroma of Christ "the smell of death" (2 Corinthians 2:16), but to us his wrath to destroy them are instructive and glorious (Romans 9:22-24).

Your preachers and theologians boldly proclaim the priesthood of all believers. But they are liars – they do not believe it. They will assert the doctrine against those they consider too restrictive or authoritarian, but then they will turn around and undermine your liberty in Jesus Christ. They will limit the application of the doctrine to press you down and fence you in, not according to biblical principles, but according to their own traditions, codified as orthodoxy in their creeds.

But the Bible teaches the priesthood of all believers, so that if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, then you are a priest under him. You have direct and complete access to God, and you possess the authority and the ability to dispense the grace of God to any person and in any place. More than this, Luke teaches the prophethood of all believers. Moses had said, "I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29). His dream was at last realized on Pentecost when Jesus Christ received the promise from his Father and poured out the Spirit upon all his people.

To think that the Spirit's miraculous power only belonged to or was only associated with the apostles, and that it passed away with them, represents a fundamental estrangement from God's heart and a thoroughgoing defective understanding of Scripture from Numbers to the Gospels and the Acts. Yet this is the position of multitudes of preachers and theologians who purport to be reliable guides in the way of Christ. They are frauds. Do not believe them. They have rejected the privilege and they wish that you would reject it too. But the Bible teaches that all of God's people can be prophets. They can be channels not only of his saving grace, but also of his mighty power.

The Spirit of God can do great things through you regardless of your title and regardless of which century you live in. The issue has never been whether the apostles are dead, but whether God is dead. If God lives, then all things are possible to him who believes. We can advance in Jesus Christ, even as far as our faith takes us, and the doctrines and institutions

of men cannot hold us back. Of course, we ought to have realistic aspirations, but we ought to be realistic not according to a doctrine of unbelief, but according to our measure of faith.

25. Which is Easier?

Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?" (Luke 5:22-23)

Biblical theology – not just theology that is biblical, but that approach to interpretation that is called biblical theology – interprets the text of Scripture in the context of God's plan of redemption through Jesus Christ. This is appropriate, but in the hands of unbelief it becomes an excuse to neutralize what the individual passages actually assert, because one can always – illegitimately, of course – appeal to the overarching purpose of redemption to destroy the narrower significance of a text.

One recent book on biblical theology describes an incident in which the author was speaking to some children at church. He taught on a biblical account of miracle healing and practically bullied a child into confessing that the miracle was not the point of the text, but that it was really about some broader concern regarding Christ and his work of redemption. However, to that sick man in the text, healing was very much the point, and Jesus did not tell him that the healing was not the point, but he granted him the healing, so that he thought it was enough of a point to do it for the man. And to a sick man who reads the Bible today, healing is also very much the point, even if it is not the only point or the most important point.

When there is a larger point to be grasped from a text, what is stated by the text does not suddenly become a non-issue. When Jesus talked about sparrows, his main point was not about sparrows, but what he said about the sparrows remains true to this day, so much so that we could make an independent point out of it. We can make the point that God regulates the lives of sparrows without mentioning what this implies about his relationship with us, because that point about sparrows is true by itself and can stand by itself (Matthew 10:29). If a biblical account of miracle healing advances a larger point about Jesus Christ, the passage is still intelligible in itself. It is still about the miracle healing, and miracle healing is still a legitimate topic that can be discussed on the basis of the text.

Although it may take churches and seminaries several years to exorcise basic reading comprehension out of a person, these institutions are persistent and successful in making people unlearn intellectual skills so that they could accept total nonsense. Indeed, it is strange that when the Bible refers to healing of the body and salvation of the soul as if they are bundled together and as if they fulfill the same prophecies (Matthew 8:17; 1 Peter 2:24; James 5:15-16), the preachers and theologians wish to separate them and even spiritualize the healing of the body into the salvation of the soul, and then force healing to be absorbed into salvation. And when the Bible refers to conversion to Christ and reception of the Spirit as distinct blessings and events, the preachers and theologians wish to combine them and force the reception of the Spirit to be absorbed into conversion.

They keep separate what the Bible bundles together, so that they could disguise their opposition to the healing power of God, and they bundle together what the Bible keeps separate, so that they could disguise their opposition to the fullness of the Spirit. Then, with the tools of their scholarship, they bully and shame people into going along with their theological and ecclesiastical program. Even little children are not spared. They would not be allowed to run to Christ for all his blessings. Their faith to receive the Christ of the Gospels and to receive the Spirit of the Acts will not be tolerated. Whatever it takes, their faith will be educated out of them.

Against all of this, if you will cling to Christ alone, you will find liberty in him from the doctrines of men and from the pressure to conform to unbelief and tradition. As for how we should answer them, which is easier: to say, "Turn from your unbelief," or to say, "May your unbelief burn with you"? But so that all would know where unbelief leads, let us say, "Turn from your unbelief, lest you burn with it."

26. The Stampede of Deliverance

Elisha said, "Hear the word of the LORD. This is what the LORD says: About this time tomorrow, a seah of flour will sell for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria."

The officer on whose arm the king was leaning said to the man of God, "Look, even if the LORD should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?"

"You will see it with your own eyes," answered Elisha, "but you will not eat any of it!" (2 Kings 7:1-2)

Samaria was under siege, and on top of that there was a famine. This lasted so long that food – including dove's dung – became scarce and expensive. The people were starving so severely that they ate their own children (2 Kings 6:24-29). When Elisha announced that deliverance would arrive in a day, and that the price of food would come down, an official expressed unbelief at the prediction. Thus Elisha declared that he would be punished for this: "You will see it, but you will not eat it."

God is annoyed when people doubt his ability or willingness to work miracles. He was angry with the Israelites in the wilderness, because they heard the gospel but did not combine it with faith (Hebrews 4:2), and he said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest" (v. 3; Psalm 95:11). God left them to die in their unbelief.

If some people do not enter into God's rest, it is not because God has ceased performing mighty works, and it is not because he has ceased manifesting his power through his people, but it is because they have ceased combining faith with the gospel. It is because they have ceased in their faith, and God will leave them to die in their unbelief. They can fight us all they want, just as the Israelites resisted the leadership of Moses and contradicted the faith of Joshua and Caleb. God will see to it that they die in their unbelief, but those who have faith will enter into his rest.

When Gabriel announced the "good news" (Luke 1:19) that John the Baptist would be born, Zechariah doubted him, and so the angel said, "And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words" (1:20). His speech was restored when he aligned himself with God's program and named the child according to Gabriel's message (Luke 1:13, 63-64).

Peter was already experiencing a miracle when he doubted and began to sink. Jesus held him up and said, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31, ESV). Peter was told that he could come walking on the water, so it was demanded of him that he would have the faith to do it.

Even a little hesitation irritated Jesus. A man came seeking healing for his child and said, "But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us" (Mark 9:22, ESV). Jesus returned the burden for the miracle back to faith and exclaimed, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes" (Mark 9:23, ESV). This approach to faith and miracles is the very thing that many mainstream preachers and theologians condemn today, but they do not have the forthrightness or demonic courage to blast Jesus himself, and so they attack those who agree with him and teach the same thing.

The disciples had learned the lesson, and so James wrote that when a man prays, he must believe and not doubt, and that a man who doubts should not think that he will receive anything from the Lord (James 1:6-7). Again, this is the exact doctrine that numerous Christian leaders oppose today, and those who expound on it are often castigated as false teachers and heretics. And James said, "The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well" (5:15). This is also fiercely opposed, and those who agree with James are mocked, criticized, interrogated, and persecuted.

Sometimes cessationists complain that they are misrepresented. They claim that they do not reject God's power, but as long as they are cessationists, it remains that they reject God's power and the Spirit's operation as these are taught in the Bible. If the Bible teaches it one way, and they teach it another way (making adjustments so that the doctrine becomes something that their feeble faith can live up to), then they reject God's power and the Bible.

Cessationists, hypocrites! If you truly believe the Bible, then stop making excuses. Go out and pray for the sick in faith like James told you to, so that they may be healed and offer thanks to God. But you offer all kinds of reasons to explain why you are not doing it. And when you are finally shamed into going through the motions, you offer all kinds of reasons to explain why it does not happen for you. So you are still arguing, and still making excuses.

The truth is that you are weak in faith, if you have any faith at all, but you are too proud to admit it, and it seems easier to argue and delay, argue and delay, than to face your own unbelief and tradition. You are angry with us, because we are on to you, and we are telling people about it. You want people to think that you are scholarly and spiritual, but no matter what you say, we know that you are not, and we are going to tell it to the world. We realize that this makes you very angry, probably angry enough to conspire with unbelievers to crucify Jesus Christ.

For a long time, churches, seminaries, and denominations have conspired against the power of God and spread hostility against the manifestations of his Spirit. They have systematized their doctrines of unbelief and codified them in their creeds, so it has become a test of orthodoxy to affirm unbelief and tradition. Nevertheless, God is sovereign. When he decides to unleash his power, it will happen even when his enemies fight it. If you doubt that something will happen by God's miracle power, it will still happen, but he will rub it in your face when it does, and he will stampede you to death as his people rush out to embrace his deliverance.

God would not endlessly contend with the unbelief of this official. After a while, no argument was necessary. The refutation was their feet on his face. Just as he has never ceased performing miracles, and never ceased endowing his people with gifts and powers, he has never ceased rebuking and punishing unbelief. To preach the gospel is also to condemn unbelief in the name of Jesus Christ. The claim that God's power as it is taught in Scripture and enjoyed by the early Christians has ceased or changed is not a topic that should be restricted to detached and polite academic discussion. It is a demonic doctrine, one of Satan's most effective schemes, and we must incite God's people to despise it and condemn it.

Christians, take the side of faith and power. If you listen to those who teach unbelief and rebellion, you are the ones who will continue to suffer a lack of God's power, who will continue to starve for his Spirit, who will have to endure needless failure and frustration. Therefore, heed the good news of God's power and his Spirit, and rush out to embrace his deliverance. That keeper of the gate, that defender of the faith, might not believe, but what is that to you? Why should you care what he thinks? What is he to you, that you should share in his unbelief and suspicion? Why do you owe him any respect or allegiance? Do not let his sophistry tarry you. Answer him with your words, but then answer him with your feet as you trample his face and body. Go! Seize the spoils of war that Jesus Christ has won for you. God can deliver you in a day. Pray, believing, so that you may receive. And the God of peace will soon crush critics under your feet.

27. Sickness and the Devil

And you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. (Acts 10:38, NLT)

Christians are unclear on the relationship between God, Satan, and sickness, and how they ought to respond to sickness in the light of God's sovereignty over all things. This results in confusion, unbelief, and unnecessary controversy and suffering.

Those who claim to believe what the Bible teaches about God's sovereignty might say that sickness is the will of God, and therefore saints ought to endure it with patience for his glory. But those who claim to believe what the Bible teaches about God's healing power through faith and the gifts of the Spirit might counter that if sickness is the will of God, then why do they call on the doctors to fight the will of God? Why would they call on the doctor to help them get rid of the will of God, but they would not believe and receive healing directly from God, or lay hands on the sick for their healing?

As stated this way, each side offers an incomplete understanding of the topic and an unfair assessment of the other. For the discussion to move forward, we must recognize the distinction between God's decree and God's precept. Both are called the "will of God" in Scripture, but in different contexts and with different meanings. When God's will designates God's decree, it refers to his decision concerning what he would do. When God's will designates God's precept, it refers to his definition concerning what we should do.

God's decree determines all things, and nothing happens except by God's decree, including men's thoughts and actions, and even the fall of Satan and of Adam. On the other hand, God's precept does not determine what occurs, but it is only a definition of what is right or wrong. Therefore, God's decree can determine that a creature would transgress God's precept. For the sake of clarity, in what follows we will often refer to the decree and the precept of God instead of the will of God.

The Bible often declares that it is God's decree for certain people to sin, that is, to transgress God's precept and then be punished for it. He himself would never tempt anyone to sin, for he is not the tempter (James 1:13), and if he were to tell someone to do a certain thing, by definition it could not be a temptation to sin, since it would then become a precept for righteousness, because righteousness is to believe and obey what God says. Thus God commands Satan and the evil spirits to tempt men.

Contrary to the theologians, this does not mean that Satan is a "secondary" agent or any silly thing like that, because God is the one who directly controls him. The alternative is that Satan possesses the power to exist in himself and to control himself apart from God, which would make Satan into another God. Those who deny that God is the direct cause

of all things, that he is the only real cause of anything, and that he directly controls Satan and all men – those who deny any of this – are in fact declaring Satan as deity, equal with God.

The Bible says that God himself sustains all things (Colossians 1:17). It would be unintelligible to say that he sustains a thing apart from its properties, because a thing's properties define that thing, and a thing that is without properties is nothing at all. If God sustains a thing – all its properties – moment by moment, this means that he sustains a man's evil thoughts and actions from this moment to the next moment. And if it is not the man who sustains his own thoughts and actions in this moment or in the next moment, then he is not the one who continues or transitions the thoughts and actions from this moment to the next moment (the man in this moment does not sustain or create the man in the next moment), nor can the thoughts and actions exist apart from his mind and body to sustain and transition themselves. Thus there is no inherent and necessary relationship between the man or the thoughts or the actions in this moment and the next moment. Rather, God must be the one who sustains, and in this sense even create, the man and the thoughts and the actions continuously, or moment by moment.

Therefore, God is the direct cause, even the only actual cause, of all things, including evil thoughts and actions; otherwise, evil thoughts and actions simply cannot exist. In this metaphysical or ontological sense, God is the author of sin, because he is necessarily the author of all things. Christians who wish to protect their own tradition or agenda sometimes complain that this biblical doctrine amounts to pantheism. However, although God directly controls Satan and evil, it does not mean that he is Satan or evil or that he becomes Satan or evil. Just as God can directly and completely control a rock without being or becoming the rock, he can control Satan without being or becoming Satan. The foolish accusation shows that these people either believe that God does not control anything, or that they themselves are the pantheists.

To illustrate the relationship, that God often causes Satan to carry out the divine decree, he sent Satan to destroy everything that Job had, but not to harm the man himself (Job 1:12). After a while, God sent Satan to inflict Job with sickness, but to spare the man's life (2:6). Thus it was God who sent Satan and gave him precise instructions on what to do. One might say that it was God who inflicted Job, and another might say that it was Satan who did it. Both could be considered correct, but not in the same way.

Then, 2 Samuel 24:1 says that God in his anger incited David to sin by taking a census. We know that God did not incite David by divine command or persuasion, because if he had, the census would be an act of obedience. Thus 1 Chronicles 21:1 says that it was Satan who "rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census." Both verses are correct, but they refer to the same event from different perspectives. It was indeed God who was angry and incited David to sin, but he did it through Satan, so that the census would be an act of sin and not obedience.

Micaiah told Ahab in 1 Kings 22, "And the LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?' One suggested this, and another

that. Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before the LORD and said, 'I will entice him.' 'By what means?' the LORD asked. 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets,' he said. 'You will succeed in enticing him,' said the LORD. 'Go and do it.' 'So now the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours. The LORD has decreed disaster for you'" (v. 20-23).

God is the one who controls evil spirits, lying spirits, the false prophets and their messages, to entice people to sin and to make harmful decisions, in order to fulfill his decree. As Ezekiel explains, when an idol worshiper goes to a prophet, "I the LORD will answer him myself. I will set my face against that man and make him an example and a byword. I will cut him off from my people. Then you will know that I am the LORD. And if the prophet is enticed to utter a prophecy, I the LORD have enticed that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him and destroy him from among my people Israel. They will bear their guilt – the prophet will be as guilty as the one who consults him" (Ezekiel 14:7-10).

God himself would entice the prophet to do wrong and then punish the prophet for doing wrong. This is because moral responsibility is measured not by God's decree (his decision on what would happen) but by God's precept (his definition on what is right or wrong). Thus God's decree could be that a man would transgress God's precept so as to incur guilt and then be punished. That this would occur only because God decrees and causes the transgression is irrelevant, because guilt is measured only by God's precept or command, not by the decree or the cause.

The Spirit of God had departed from Saul, and instead God had anointed David with the Spirit and with power. And we read in 1 Samuel 16: "Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him... Whenever the spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take his harp and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him" (1 Samuel 16:14, 23).

Just because something occurs by God's will (decree) does not mean that it is not in some sense of the devil (we will say the same about sickness), since God would even send evil spirits to torment people. And just because something occurs by God's will (decree) does not mean that we should embrace it and endure it, since it might be God's will (precept) for us to fight it – it depends on what it is and what he says to do about it.

A father may throw a ball to this son, but just because he is the one who throws it does not mean that he wants his son to be smashed in the head by it – it depends on what the father has told the son to do about the ball. Perhaps the point of throwing the ball over to the boy is so that he would hit it away with a baseball bat – HARD!!! But theologians are not known for understanding simple things.

By God's decree and power, an evil spirit tormented Saul. But David, anointed with the Holy Spirit, countered the evil spirit and drove it away. And David did not sin or rebel against God's "will" by this. It was God's decree to send that evil spirit to torment Saul. And it was God's decree to send David so that he could carry out God's precept in driving out that evil spirit by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Although the evil spirit came from God, from the perspective of God's precept, David was not fighting God when he played the harp, but he was fighting the evil spirit. From the perspective of God's decree, which explains all that occurs, it would be wrong to say that the evil spirit did not come from God. And from the perspective of God's precept, which defines what we ought to do, it would be wrong to accept the evil spirit without fighting it by the power of God.

God is also sovereign over all sicknesses. He causes them and controls them. He inflicted people with barrenness, with boils, and he would strike them dead. He told the Israelites that if they disobeyed him, "The LORD will afflict you with the boils of Egypt and with tumors, festering sores and the itch, from which you cannot be cured. The LORD will afflict you with madness, blindness and confusion of mind" (Deuteronomy 28:27-28). God could – and would – afflict people with both bodily and mental diseases. And the same God is the Lord who heals their sicknesses (Exodus 15:26). All things are in his power.

However, God's sovereignty over sickness does not in itself suggest what we should do about sickness. Paul said that many of the Corinthians were weak, sick, or even dead because God was disciplining them (1 Corinthians 11:30-32). But his point was not that they should endure this; instead, he wanted them to repent and change so that they would no longer be weak, sick, or dead.

At least some sicknesses are said to be of Satan. On one occasion, Jesus said, "Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?" (Luke 13:16). Is no one bound by Satan in the form of sickness today? What are our preachers and theologians doing about it? Are all the people today sick because of "God's will"? So what? All the people who were ever sick in the history of mankind were sick because of God's will, as in his decree, but what does his precept say we should do about it? Are these preachers and theologians doing it? Or do they use God's sovereignty to excuse their unbelief and failure, just as some use God's grace to excuse their licentiousness?

Jesus said that a daughter of Abraham ought to be set free, and Paul wrote that we are the children of Abraham by faith in Christ. Then, James said that the prayer of faith will heal the sick. God's precept instructs us to believe for healing, to pray for it and to receive it, and to pray for others so that they will also receive healing. Regardless of where sickness comes from, or where a particular instance of sickness comes from, God's precept is that we should fight it by prayer and faith, so that a miracle could occur by God's power. Are the preachers doing this? Are the theologians teaching this? How about you? What are you doing about God's instructions on sickness? What do you do for someone who is sick because he is disciplined by God? What do you do for someone who is sick because he is oppressed by Satan?

Again, the fact that something is God's will does not mean that it does not come from Satan in some sense, and where something comes from, whether God or Satan, does not automatically tell us what we should do about it. Both sides that we mentioned in the

beginning are wrong. The first is wrong in that although sickness may occur because of the decree of God, it is the precept of God that instead of endlessly enduring it, we should be fighting it in faith, even by repentance, by prayer, and by miracle power. The second is wrong in that although it is the precept of God that we fight sickness with repentance, prayer, and miracle power, sickness indeed occurs by the will and decree of God, because all things occur by the will and decree of God. Thus both divine sovereignty and the healing ministry are maintained.

When it comes to receiving and preaching salvation from sin, we would never tolerate someone who consigns the whole matter to some unknown will of God, as in his decree. We would realize that someone like this is using divine sovereignty as an excuse for his rebellion against God's command to believe and to preach the gospel. This is because we have the precept of God that tells us to believe in Jesus Christ and to preach him to all nations, even though according to the decree of God, not everyone could believe when he hears and not everyone is converted when we preach.

Likewise, when it comes to receiving and ministering miracle healing, there is no reason to tolerate someone who consigns the whole matter to the unknown decree of God. We should realize that someone like this only pretends to respect God's sovereignty in order to resist God's instruction and to cover up his own unbelief, rebellion, and spiritual deficiency. He is a failure and a hypocrite. Whatever the decree of God is concerning a specific case, we have the precept of God that tells us to seek and to minister miracle healing through faith in Jesus Christ.

28. Our Daily Bread

Give us today our daily bread. (Matthew 6:11)

God is interested in meeting our material needs. Jesus talked about this a number of times. He told us to have faith in God not only for spiritual things like the forgiveness of our sins, but also for material things like food, shelter, clothing, and health. He went about, not only declaring spiritual freedom through faith in him, but also demonstrating God's interest and power when it comes to our material needs as he multiplied food, obtained money from a fish's mouth, and even more prominently, brought health to multitudes as he healed the sick.

He associated God's material provision to our faith. "O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them" (Matthew 6:30-32). If we worry about material things today, many of our preachers would comfort and encourage us, and tell us how they understand that life is difficult. They take this approach because most preachers are out of touch with the doctrine and attitude of Christ, and in fact disagree with him. And they also oppose those who teach the same thing he did.

Jesus would rebuke us. While the lack of faith is the last accusation that some preachers level against worry for material things, Jesus repeatedly came back to it. To worry about material things indicates a lack of faith. He said the pagans run after these things, so we should not be worrying about them. His point was not that we should not have material things, but that "your heavenly Father knows that you need them."

Then he said, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (v. 33). This does not mean that we should think only about the kingdom, because when he taught the disciples how to pray, although he mentioned the kingdom first, he went on to say, "Give us today our daily bread." He was defining the proper priority. Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, but then have faith for material things and ask God for them. As Paul wrote, "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). God will meet all our needs, not according to what we need, but according to what he has in Christ Jesus.

Many Christians are zealous in opposing the so-called "health and wealth gospel" or the "word of faith" movement. It is true that some serious errors and heresies are taught by these "faith teachers." They are far from ideal models, and many of their doctrines and practices are excommunicable transgressions. However, as much as some Christians hate Jesus for it, and as much as they fight and distort the Scripture, the gospel indeed includes health and wealth, and the gospel indeed relates the receiving of material blessings to faith.

Jesus said, "According to your faith be it done to you" (Matthew 9:29, ESV), and "You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it" (Matthew 21:22, NLT).

The Bible's message is simply not one of sickness and poverty. It insists that we should exercise patience when we suffer these things, but it does not glorify these things, and it does not condemn health and wealth. Just as the faith teachers often ignore and distort the biblical verses and doctrines that do not suit their purpose, their critics refuse to take seriously those texts that these faith teachers draw attention to. The critics cannot make good sense of these texts because they have rejected what they teach from the start. Both sides are selective about what they admit into their idea of the Christian faith and lifestyle.

Thus although many of the objections against the faith teachers are well-deserved, the critics are also using them as a scapegoat to disguise their own unbelief and their resentment against the faith teachings of Jesus. The Lord often sounded exactly like the faith teachers, only even more literal and extreme, and these critics despise him because of it. The Bible's teachings on faith and power make them look very bad, exposing their unbelief, tradition, and numerous spiritual deficiencies. Instead of repentance, they harden their hearts and conspire to redirect people's attention to the faults and dangers of a movement that emphasizes faith, power, and our covenant provisions. As a result, all those who are carried along by this diversion become impoverished and fall into disobedience.

Does your preacher boldly declare the faith teachings of Jesus, or does he avoid them or hide them from you? When he deals with them, does he tell you that Jesus meant what he said, or does he bury you with reasons for why it might not happen for you? Preacher, if you are going to be faithful to the gospel, you will have to talk more about the power of God, not in the larger sense of how he rules his creation, but his power in how he helps us in our circumstances, how he heals our bodies and meets our needs.

There is a concern to avoid a man-centered focus in our sermons, but even this legitimate point has become an excuse in despising the teachings of Christ, who taught that "the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matthew 10:30). He was not worried that this statement was too man-centered, because when we relate all things to God, even our daily bread becomes a revelation and a confirmation from him about his love, his power, and his care. When a preacher thinks that it is too man-centered to talk much about healing, our daily bread, and so forth, it shows that he is already too man-centered, since Jesus could talk about these things and make them draw attention to his Father.

The truth is that it is such a preacher who becomes man-centered when he talks about God's blessings of health and wealth, and how these relate to faith, so that he must either avoid the teaching or attack it. Perhaps he has no idea how to think about the matter at all. He does not grasp it. He cannot process it. And he resents Jesus for having taught it, because of all the characters in Scripture, the Lord was the one who most strongly and frequently stressed this aspect of the faith, and in the most explicit and extreme manner. The preacher does not want someone like this as his Lord.

The hypocritical opposition and self-righteous neglect of this aspect of the Christian faith has contributed to the turning of the world and the church to truly man-centered solutions, where self-help gurus convince people that they could achieve their goals and satisfy their needs, not by faith in God, but by realizing their human potential. Thus the Christian crusade against Jesus' teachings on faith and power, including what he said about health and wealth, has done little other than to drive the world and the church away from faith in God and right into the arms of Satan. And then they think God owes them for dealing with the heretics.

29. I Think I Can

For by you I can run against a troop, and by my God I can leap over a wall. (Psalm 18:29, ESV)

The non-Christian's doctrine of positive thinking believes that a strong optimism even in the face of contradictory circumstances result in greater happiness and attainment in life. Confidence in one's self releases human potential and dissolves mental blocks to success, and empowers one to seize his dreams and achieve desirable outcomes.

However, this optimism is unfounded and results from delusion. The non-Christian man is depraved through and through. He is dead on the inside. He is a walking corpse, and all his faculties are defective. His optimism makes himself into an idol, and blinds him even more to the God who is the master of his fate and the Christ who is the only savior of the soul.

On the other hand, the Christian has more reason for positive thinking and an extreme optimism than any non-Christian. The Christian has been regenerated, and the Spirit of God infuses life and power into him, healing and renewing him from the inside out. So it is ironic that much of Christian teaching, in opposition to Jesus Christ, advances a deadly pessimism that drains the life out of God's people, and rots their bones and their very souls.

Yet a Christian's confidence is not in himself, but in God who is without limit in his ability and wisdom. As Paul wrote, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13, ESV). This does not mean that a man of faith never faces hardship, for in this statement Paul referred to his ability from Christ to remain content in any situation, even when he had to endure hunger and poverty.

Although this suffering faith has been disproportionately emphasized, God's people in general remain feeble and whiny. This is the case because most preachers and theologians cannot teach anything right, so suffering faith is taught in a way that produces people who suffer without much faith at all. And perhaps the people remain feeble and whiny precisely because suffering faith has been disproportionately emphasized, and an entire realm of faith has been unexplored.

A Christian's faith is not only a suffering faith, but it is also an overcoming faith. It does not only put up with things, but it also changes them. It is a faith that acts. It is a faith that wins. Just as Paul wrote that by Christ he could suffer hunger and poverty, David said that by God he could go against an army and leap over a wall.

Human tradition lulls people into a loser piety, so that while wallowing in self-pity and defeat they could congratulate themselves for being so spiritual. Then they would not know to interrogate their church leaders and the theologians as to why believers do not have more power and victory in their lives.

But Jesus introduces us to all the possibilities of faith. He said, "For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20, ESV). If you have faith, nothing will be impossible for you. Nothing will be impossible. You can even command a mountain to move, and it will happen.

This is far more than a matter of human potential. It is positive thinking on a whole different level, because it reaches into the realm of miracles, into the realm of God and the powers of the coming age. Jesus talked about this over and over again. He wants us to know that this power does not belong to the apostleship or to a certain century, but it belongs to faith. And it belongs to you, if you believe.

30. A Trifle in the Sight of God

This is only a trifle in the sight of the Lord. (2 Kings 3:18, NRSV)

Moab had decided to rebel against Israel, and so the kings of Israel, Judah, and Edom joined forces to attack. As they marched through the wilderness of Edom, they ran out of water and feared that the campaign would end in defeat. Then they found Elisha the prophet and consulted with him. The Spirit of God came upon him, and Elisha instructed the kings to dig ditches in the valley, because God would send water without wind nor rain, and he would grant them victory over Moab. He added, "This is only a trifle in the sight of the Lord." And it happened as Elisha predicted.

The kings were desperate. From men's perspective, they were in great trouble. But God's power broadens our minds to all kinds of possibilities and enables us to take up a different perspective. May Elisha's words resound in our minds as we experience our own wilderness march. God could send total deliverance and victory, and "This is only a trifle in the sight of the Lord."

Elisha did not say, "This is a trifle because I am a prophet" or "This is a trifle because we are so lucky that miracles have not ceased." He did not say, "This is a trifle in this dispensation." For many of those who oppose the false schemes of dispensationalism would themselves butcher God's revelation and redemptive plan into different eras in a way that exempts them from the faith of an age of miracles, and so that they could fling everything that they have ceased to believe in into ancient history. It is a conspiracy to legitimize unbelief.

Elisha was not weak in faith, and he did not make excuses. He said, "This is a trifle in the sight of God." He was the best friend you could have in the wilderness, because he believed and declared God's power. God despises the dispensations that theologians impose on him. He laughs at the boundaries that preachers put up to fence him out. He does not need to be a prophet, and for him signs, wonders, and spiritual gifts have never ceased. It is an easy thing for God to deliver us and cause us to triumph through Jesus Christ, but we must have faith to seek a release of God's power, and stand against the conspiracy of unbelief.

31. Satan Falls Like Lightning

The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name."

He replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure." (Luke 10:17-21)

It was never true that the apostles exercised a kind or level of supernatural power out of the reach of other believers. That is a myth invented by preachers and theologians to explain why they have no power at all, and the people of God are rather satisfied with it because it also appeases their own conscience.

The majority of these disciples were not apostles, but Jesus sent them out to preach his message and to heal the sick. They came back and reported that even the demons submitted to them in his name. One man was not even with Jesus, but still used his name to cast out demons, and the Lord allowed him to continue (9:50). What right do church leaders have to criticize Christians who do this today, Christians who follow Jesus and have received the full written legacy of the prophets and the apostles? Cessationism is one big middle finger in the face of Jesus Christ.

Under Jesus Christ, even what the world and the church regard as ordinary people can exercise the powers of prophets. This was the reason for Jesus to command his disciples to work miracles, and for him to pour out his Spirit upon them. But the world's philosophers and the trained scribes were unable to wield this power. The theologian boasts, "I have been teaching unbelief in the seminary for forty-five years." And the preacher gloats, "Hundreds of members had their enthusiasm dashed under me." They should not celebrate these accomplishments.

When the disciples spread out to preach the message and perform the works of Jesus, Satan fell from the sky like lightning. They dealt a decisive blow to his hold on men and his influence on affairs. Yet Jesus said that even this was nothing to rejoice about, not that it was something bad, but because relatively speaking, the ministry of miracles should not be a big deal, but it is a normal aspect of the gospel ministry. The marvelous thing is that our names are registered in heaven through faith in Jesus Christ.

All these things, from authority in his name to salvation by faith in him, were hidden from those who were expected to know the most about them. Father, as Jesus praised you for this, we also praise you for this, because you have hidden these things from preachers and theologians who despise you and who decide to have their own way. But you have revealed them to little children, the unlearned and the unauthorized, because you delight in rubbing it in the face of men's unbelief and self-righteous arrogance, and those who regard themselves as the elite of the church but who have not an iota of power. This seems good to you, and therefore it seems good to us as well.

32. The Angry Healer

When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. "Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him."

"O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me." Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment.

Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "Because you have so little faith." (Matthew 17:14-20)

Jesus had brought Peter, James, and John up to a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as the light (17:1-2). When he came down, he was not greeted with faith, but with unbelief and failure, for a man told him that the disciples were unable to cast a demon out of his son.

Centuries ago Moses ascended a mountain to meet with God, and when he descended, he saw that his people had turned to idolatry (Exodus 32). He called them an unfaithful and perverse generation (Deuteronomy 32:20). Likewise, Jesus answered, "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" Earlier he had called the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the scribes "a wicked and adulterous generation" (Matthew 12:39, 16:4), for they met his messages and miracles with unbelief. Now he issues a similar rebuke against his disciples, and afterward he told them that they failed because of their weak faith. In Mark's account, he also admonished the father to have faith, and said, "Everything is possible for him who believes" (Mark 9:23).

Thus the indictment applies to all kinds of unbelief – to those who worship idols, to those who resist the messages and miracles of Christ, to those who fail to perform miracles in his name, and to those who waver in their confidence as they seek miracles from him. Moses and Jesus demonstrated that it is entirely fitting to display annoyance and indignation against such people. Like many of our church leaders, preachers, and theologians, the Pharisees were more eager to defend their status and tradition than to have Jesus heal the sick and alleviate their suffering.

In one place, we read, "He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored" (Mark 3:5). They were not concerned about the man, but they wanted to catch Jesus in the act of violating their doctrines and policies. Jesus looked around at them, seething with anger, and healed the man anyway. My brothers and sisters,

what should we teach, and how should we behave, when the religious establishment has outlawed the faith and love of Jesus? We must always regard this hardness of heart with anger, and do the works of Christ anyway.

33. Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit

And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. (Matthew 12:31-32)

Jesus had healed a demon-possessed man. The people were astonished and wondered if he was the Son of David, whose coming was predicted by the prophets. When the Pharisees heard this, they said that Jesus drove out demons by Beelzebub, the prince of demons. However, since Jesus in fact drove out demons by the Holy Spirit, the Pharisees had indirectly insulted the Holy Spirit by calling him Beelzebub, the prince of demons.

In reply, Jesus first set forth a theological refutation to their assertion, and then added a warning – anyone who speaks against Christ could be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit could not be forgiven. Most explanations on the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit stress how difficult or even impossible it is to commit this unforgivable sin. But since Jesus intended his statement as a realistic threat, we shall consider how easy it is to commit this sin, a sin for which there is no forgiveness.

Blasphemy against Jesus Christ is categorized as the same kind of sin as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Even if we can think of the latter as another level of blasphemy, although the text does not suggest this, the thoughts and actions involved are similar. The main difference is the object that receives the insult. To commit blasphemy against Jesus Christ is to speak against Jesus Christ. To commit blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is to speak against the Holy Spirit.

Christians scholars are professionals at neutralizing biblical teachings that they dislike, and they dislike this very much. So they scramble to define this sin as so difficult and remote that it is practically impossible to commit. But in the same context, Jesus added, "But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (v. 36-37). The sin is not difficult or impossible to commit, but it might be so easy to commit that even a careless word could do it.

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is often portrayed as only a more stubborn or a final rejection of Jesus Christ. But this does not fit the context, which has to do with the ministry of miracles and the casting out of demons. And it does not fit the explicit teaching, which distinguishes blasphemy against Christ and blasphemy against the Spirit as two different offenses. The objects that receive the insults are different. Jesus said that speaking against the Son is forgivable, but speaking against the Spirit is unforgivable. So it is possible to speak against the Son instead of the Spirit, and it is possible to speak against the Spirit instead of the Son.

The effort to merge the two so that the different offenses become only different points on a scale seems intended to doom Jesus' teaching to irrelevance. The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit would become less frightening if it could be absorbed by the blasphemy against Jesus Christ. But Jesus himself distinguished the two. Using words against Christ is not the same as using words against the Spirit. The teaching is intended to be frightening, and as a warning against committing this unforgivable sin. To weaken its fearfulness would only heighten the possibility of committing it.

It begs the question to place the two sins on the same scale in a way that they become only different degrees of the same sin. Speaking against the Holy Spirit could very well be considered a worse sin, but this does not necessarily mean that it becomes only a more stubborn and final rejection of Jesus. He could have said, "Whoever speaks against the Son could be forgiven, but whoever litters the street with chewing gum could not be forgiven." The statement is entirely intelligible, and the latter would be the unforgivable sin, but the two would not be only two different points on the same scale, or different degrees of the same offense.

Another attempt to render Jesus' teaching irrelevant suggests that this unforgivable sin was possible only during the ministry of Jesus, because only he demonstrated the truth and power of God without mixture, ambiguity, and imperfection. This argument is unintelligent and self-defeating, since God sends millions upon millions upon millions to burn in hell because they have rejected our imperfect preaching of Christ. God does not think that rejection of the truth is possible only when the truth is perfectly presented. Although we might not preach Jesus Christ with perfect clarity, force, and accuracy, it still counts as blasphemy when someone speaks against him.

Thus although we do not manifest the Holy Spirit with perfect faith, power, or order, it must still count as blasphemy when someone speaks against him. But we are becoming more and more suspicious that the theologians are setting up an excuse for their own disobedience. In addition, when Jesus stated the teaching on blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in another place (Luke 12:10), he had in mind a time when the disciples would be ministering on their own and suffer persecution (v. 11-12). Therefore, it is not true that the sin is possible only during the ministry of Jesus.

Scholars insist that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit must be an informed and deliberate offense. However, this is not the nature of blasphemy as the Bible describes it. Paul indicated that although he acted in ignorance, he was still a blasphemer (1 Timothy 1:13). He did not truly perceive the identity and deity of Christ, but what he said about Christ still counted as blasphemy. And as mentioned, in the same place where Christ taught about this, he warned that "every careless word" would be judged. Therefore, it is possible to commit blasphemy that is not informed and deliberate. Otherwise, an atheist, or almost any non-Christian, could never commit blasphemy against God or Christ, but only an informed believer could do it. But Paul blasphemed when he was ignorant and an unbeliever.

It is possible for a man to blaspheme Christ even if he does not know or admit that Christ is the Son of God. To say or imply anything negative about Christ would count as blasphemy. In fact, one does not even have to strictly suggest anything negative. Jesus himself was accused of blasphemy because he said something that suggested he was equal with God. And if he had not been telling the truth, it would have counted as blasphemy. It was not blasphemy only because he was indeed equal with God, and that God was indeed his Father. But this shows that it is easy to commit blasphemy.

Then, it is said that if one fears that he has committed this unforgivable sin, then it is the strongest indication that he has not committed it. This is based on the assumption that the sin can be committed only by an incurably hardened individual, and in an informed, deliberate, and malicious manner. Thus someone who commits this sin is entirely given over to unbelief and has no fear of the wrath of God. However, by now we have destroyed this assumption. The biblical texts on the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit do not suggest any of this, and even demons are afraid of God, although they cannot be saved. Moreover, the fear that one has committed this sin is no indication that he has not committed it, because this fear could very well be nothing more than worldly sorrow that leads to death (2 Corinthians 7:10).

A man has not committed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit only if he has not committed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The way to ensure that you have not spoken against the Spirit is to ensure that you really have not spoken against the Spirit. And if you have spoken against the Holy Spirit, then you have spoken against the Holy Spirit, and you have committed the unforgivable sin. There is no way around this or to avoid the issue. The solutions of the theologians – to make the sin harder to commit, to merge it with the rejection of Christ, to designate fear or guilt as the sure indication of innocence – offer false comfort.

The Pharisees called the work of the Holy Spirit the work of a demon, thus indirectly calling the Holy Spirit a demon. This indirect insult was sufficient to incite Jesus' teaching on this unforgivable sin. But it is likely that even less specific or extreme insults would count as blasphemy against the Spirit. Consider what would count as blasphemy against Jesus Christ. Of course it would be blasphemy to directly or indirectly deny his deity. But it would also be blasphemy against him to deny the necessity or the success of the atonement, or to suggest that he was dishonest when he made a certain statement or that he made a mistake about something. It is easy to commit blasphemy.

The Bible instructs us to test spiritual manifestations, and it is conceivable that after careful examination, we would conclude that some manifestations are false or even demonic. Jesus' teaching cautions us to test spiritual manifestations with knowledge and integrity, and not to oppose something just because it threatens our theological and ecclesiastical traditions. Now, what if a man truly speaks in tongues by the Holy Spirit, and someone mocks him for it? What if, without an irrefutable biblical basis, he states that the Holy Spirit no longer does something like this? What if he calls all speaking in tongues gibberish and nonsense? What if he declares that the gifts of the Spirit such as prophecy and healing have ceased, so that whatever happens now cannot be genuine? If he is mistaken, then he has insulted

all such manifestations of the Spirit since the passing of the apostles up to the future coming of Jesus Christ. He has slapped the Spirit across all the centuries.

Cessationists are in imminent danger of committing the unforgivable sin of speaking against the Holy Spirit. They regard themselves as watchers of the cults, defenders of the faith, and guardians of orthodoxy, heading the charge against heretics and fanatics. So did the Pharisees, but they were blaspheming the Holy Spirit left and right, because what they considered as orthodoxy was in fact their own theological tradition and ecclesiastical heritage. Jesus Christ came in the power of the Holy Spirit, and threatened to take away their respect from the people, their status as scholars, and their place as authorities of the faith. So they called Jesus a deceiver, and they called the Spirit a demon.

Do we not need to test the spirits? But how can you test the spirits, when you do not even believe in the true manifestations of the Spirit? You say, "I believe God performs miracles when he wills, but I believe that the sign gifts have ceased, or this and that have ceased." But the Bible does not separate some powers as "sign gifts," and most of the Bible does not even refer to the miraculous powers given to believers as spiritual gifts. Gifts or no gifts, Jesus said anyone who has faith can command a mountain to move. And if one can command a mountain to move, he can command a fever, a cancer, or a demon to leave. All this talk of gifts is just a subterfuge, a "divide and conquer" tactic against the power of God.

Jesus said that the Pharisees were like vipers on the inside, and out of their evil hearts they spoke evil words (v. 33-35). You also speak against the Holy Spirit because your heart is full of unbelief and poison. Like the Pharisees, you call yourself a defender of orthodoxy, but you are a liar, because yours is not the biblical orthodoxy of the Spirit. You take what pleases you, and you reject what threatens you. You exalt what makes you look good, and you oppose what makes you look weak.

When someone mentions the Holy Spirit's power at work today, you say, "Yes, but even Satan works miracles." Why is this your reaction? Why do you say this as if to dampen the significance of the Holy Spirit's work? The Bible teaches that even Satan can appear as an angel of light, and I realize that he can appear as a cessationist theologian as well. Rather, when I hear you say that Satan works miracles, I say, "Yes, but the Holy Spirit works miracles! And he can defeat the power of Satan." In any case, instead of calming the miracle claims, now we end up with miracles all over the place, with you in praise of Satan's power, and I in praise of the Holy Spirit's power.

Just as theologians have for centuries undermined Jesus' teaching on blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, of course I expect opposition when I repeat the Lord's teaching. But I am more afraid of Jesus' warning than I would ever be afraid of some nobody like you. What you are going to do, do quickly. As for me, I will see to it that I revere the works of the Holy Spirit, including his mighty manifestations of power. "For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." Come on, let us be witnesses to the words that you will speak and write. Show the world what is in your heart. Perhaps to this

point you have not blasphemed the Holy Spirit, and this is God's way to incite you to do it, so as to fill up the measure of your sins and to seal your damnation.