

SERMONETTES VOLUME 8

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1. A Thorn in the Flesh

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. (2 Corinthians 12:7)

A popular claim is that the "thorn in the flesh" refers to an illness that God declined to heal. The application is that our prayers for healing may be unanswered, but he will provide the "grace" for us to endure the suffering. However, this interpretation is fraudulent.

The Bible uses similar expressions in a number of places, and they refer to persons, not objects or conditions, such as diseases:

But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. (Numbers 33:55)

Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you. (Judges 2:3)

But if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, then you may be sure that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the LORD your God has given you. (Joshua 23:12-13)

Some verses lack the full expression, but still use "thorns" to represent people, not objects or conditions, and not diseases:

But evil men are all to be cast aside like thorns, which are not gathered with the hand. (2 Samuel 23:6)

And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house. (Ezekiel 2:6)

No longer will the people of Israel have malicious neighbors who are painful briars and sharp thorns. Then they will know that I am the Sovereign LORD. (Ezekiel 28:24)

Our verse shows that Paul follows this usage of the expression. He calls the thorn "a messenger of Satan" (v. 7), not an object, condition, or disease.

He also calls it his "weakness" (v. 9). That is, when he prayed that it would be removed, the Lord answered, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9a). So Paul says that he would therefore boast about his "weaknesses" (v. 9b). To understand what he means by this, we need to look at the larger context.

Paul has been defending his ministry against the influence of false apostles (2 Corinthians 10-12). Although these characters portray themselves as "super-apostles" (11:5), Paul calls them "deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ" (11:13). Still, they have been accepted by the Corinthians: "For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough" (11:4).

In order to assert their authority, they have made great claims about their credentials and experiences. Paul complains that this is "foolishness" (11:1, also v. 16-21), but he says that even if such standards were used, he is still not inferior to the false apostles (12:11). Are these people Abraham's descendants? "So am I" (11:22). Are they servants of Christ? "I am more" (11:23). He lists some of the things that he has suffered, and which show that he is more of a servant of Christ than the imposters:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (11:23-28)

The false apostles make boastful claims that portray themselves as "strong," but they do not exhibit traits that mark an apostle. Paul points out that the Corinthians would tolerate "anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face" (11:20). He sarcastically admits, "To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!" (11:21). In contrast, he preached to the Corinthians "free of charge" (11:7), at his own expense and at the expense of other churches (11:8). So it is strange that the Corinthians would turn from one who has been a father to them, and follow those who would exploit them and abuse them.

As for experiences, no matter what the false apostles claim that they have had, Paul has them as well, and more of them. He writes, "I must go on boasting. Although there is

nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know – God knows. And I know that this man – whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows – was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell" (12:1-4).

Although he distances himself from the experience, he is obviously talking about himself, because he proceeds to say, "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh" (12:7). In fact, the thorn in the flesh was sent to him because of these "surpassingly great revelations." So whether we are talking about human credentials or divine experiences, Paul's answer is that only a "fool" asserts apostleship by these things, but even if we do, "I am not in the least inferior to the 'super-apostles'" (12:11). He distances himself because he prefers to boast about his "weaknesses" instead (12:5) and so that no one will think more of him than is warranted (12:6).

Miracles are not the things that mark a true apostle in the first place; otherwise, Paul's focus would be to refute the claims made by others rather than to match or exceed them, and then say that this is "foolishness" (11:1) and that "there is nothing to be gained" (12:1) by all the boasting. It is a mistake to think that 2 Corinthians 12:12 teaches that the power to work miracles is the mark of an apostle or even that the power to work miracles belongs exclusively to the apostle. Some translations practically prescribe this interpretation by their renderings. The KJV and ESV are better: "Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds"; "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works." On the day of Pentecost, the apostles were a mere ten percent of those who received power to work miracles (Acts 1:8, 15), and Paul himself declares, "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7).

The claim that miracles are "signs of an apostle" or even the exclusive signs of an apostle would backfire against Paul. We know that many believers other than the apostles worked miracles. Some of the most spectacular visions and miracles recorded in the Bible happened to other disciples such as Stephen (Acts 6:15, 7:55-56) and Philip (Acts 8:39-40). The claim is then made that even if miracles were performed by others, they were done by those who were associated with the apostles and approved by the apostles. The Bible contradicts this (Mark 9:38-39); moreover, once this is added to the original claim, 2 Corinthians 12:12 would become irrelevant as an assertion of Paul's apostleship, because it would mean that he could be nothing more than an associate of an apostle. In fact, it seems that he sometimes had to refute precisely this charge, and when he did, he did not focus on his miracles as if they were signs of an apostle, but he related the history of his calling, appealed to God as his witness (Galatians 1:11-2:10), and as he does in this letter to the Corinthians, referred to the manner and the fruit of his ministry (Matthew 7:15-23; Galatians 2:7-8; 2 Corinthians 1:12-14, 3:1-3, 4:1-2, 5:11-20, 6:3-13, 7:2-7, 10:1-12:10).

Rather than listing the things that would make a person appear strong and accredited, but that could not show one to be a true servant or apostle, Paul writes, "If I must boast, I will

boast of the things that show my weakness" (11:30). Again, what does he mean by "weakness"? He tells us immediately: "The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands" (11:31-33). This is an example of the things that he lists in 11:23-28.

Therefore, by "weakness," he refers to the difficult and embarrassing situations that he frequently faces. These events often make him look defeated, and take from him all traces of dignity, perhaps in sharp contrast to the impressive showmanship of the false apostles and false teachers. While the false apostles dined at the best restaurants with wealthy businessmen, Paul was trapped in a filthy prison cell next to robbers and murderers, and treated as if he was one of them. While the false teachers were networking with leaders of the church establishment, Paul was shipwrecked, drifting on the open sea. Then, when he got the chance to visit some of his spiritual children, they had turned against him. They looked down on him because he was not refined enough, not eloquent enough, not entertaining enough.

It is disappointing that our text has been so often used for the purpose of assuring people that God regularly refuses to heal the sick. Sick? Are you joking? Paul received thirty-nine lashes five times (11:24). They did not use cotton towels to whip people. It is amazing that he still had a back to be whipped the other four times. He was beaten with rods three times (11:25). Instead of having to stay in bed for the rest of his life with a broken spine and crushed legs "for the glory of God," he is still walking around – more than those who have never been whipped or beaten – and preaching the gospel.

Sick? With an eye disease you say? This is hilarious. This is foot-stomping, wall-punching funny. He was stoned (11:25). The Jews did not fool around. When they stoned someone, they stoned to kill. They knew how to do it. They were good at it. Stephen was killed this way (Acts 7:54-60). They were not throwing cupcakes at him. They were throwing rocks, as hard as they could, seething with anger and intending to kill – on his head, on his face, and all over his body. They did it until they were satisfied that he was dead (Acts 14:19). Then "he got up and went back into the city" (v. 20). The disciples did not pull him up or carry him back. He got up. He went back into the city. Forgive him if he had to limp for a few days! And now that you are down with the flu, you think you are just like him! Sick? This is like saying that a spiritual man was feeling "under the weather," even wobbling all over the place, so it is fine if we are sick too, when the truth is that the man was recovering from having his head cut off a few days before.

An appeal to our passage is a strategic error for those who wish to undermine God's supernatural power, especially when they are so eager to take the Lord's answer to Paul and apply it to all Christians. It is a landmine of healing miracles and charismatic experiences. It can only serve to drastically increase our faith in God's healing power and our expectation of what kinds of miracles and experiences are possible for those who trust in him.

This is what Paul means by "weakness." If it has anything to do with physical ailments, it is referring to something that ought to have been incapacitating, even fatal. Accordingly, he writes, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties" (12:10). All the items come under broadly similar categories, and none of them mean sickness. This is another indication that the weakness does not refer to sickness.

Paul says, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (11:30). We see what this means now. And why would he boast about his weakness? He continues, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me....For when I am weak, then I am strong" (12:9-10). When a Christian trusts in Jesus Christ and not in human credentials, eloquence, or showmanship, the Lord's power is "made perfect" in him. The more people oppose him, the more they embarrass him, and the more they strip him of his dignity, the more the power of Christ manifests.

In this context, this power cannot only refer to an ethical power, as in a strong integrity, or to emotional endurance. If it refers to endurance, it must include a supernatural endurance that enables one to survive stoning, whipping, beating, and shipwrecks. It is also a power that enables one to receive "visions and revelations" (12:1), since the thorn in the flesh came because of these in the first place (12:7), and the Lord's statement, "my power is made perfect in weakness" (12:9), refers to the same. This is power in a thoroughgoing charismatic sense. Even if it means more than this, it cannot mean less. If the passage has any application for the Christian, this is it. This application cannot be denied, and it is surely treasonous to assert an opposite application, as most scholars appear to do.

While we are on the subject, we should take a look at Galatians 4:13: "As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you." If some Christians are so obsessed with limiting God's healing power in Paul's life, so that they may excuse their own unbelief or find solace in defeat, this verse is more plausibly twisted for this purpose than 2 Corinthians 12:7.

First, there are some who do not think that the verse must refer to a sickness. Many translations assume that it does and state it as such, but some say "weakness of the flesh" or "infirmity of the flesh." Adam Clarke thinks that Paul was only overworked, but this seems to be speculation, like the theories that assign specific sicknesses to the verse. In any case, he apparently disagrees with these other theories.

John Gill suggests a number of possibilities, of which a physical ailment is only one among several options, "Meaning either their infirmity, to which the apostle accommodated himself in preaching the Gospel to them, ...or his own infirmity, respecting either some particular bodily infirmity and disorder, as the headache, with which he is said to be greatly troubled; or the weakness of his bodily presence, the mean outward appearance he made, the contemptibleness of his voice, and the great humility with which he behaved; or rather the many reproaches, afflictions, and persecutions which attended him."

Although it seems possible that Galatians 4:13 refers to a sickness, we cannot be sure that it does. No one can prove that it does, no matter how hard he tries. And if the "weakness of the flesh" is not a sickness, then nothing more needs to be said about it relative to our subject. Nevertheless, in order for the discussion to continue, and so that we may consider the implications for the doctrine of healing, in what follows we will pretend that the verse indeed refers to a sickness. We will pretend that Paul was sick when he first preached to the Galatians.

If this "weakness of the flesh" is a sickness, then contrary to many commentators, it is certain that Galatians 4:13 is not referring to the same thing as 2 Corinthians 12:7. This is because we have established that the thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12:7 cannot refer to a sickness. Since Galatians 4:13 refers to something else, and not the thorn in the flesh, this means that the Lord's answer in 2 Corinthians 12:9 does not apply to the condition in Galatians 4:13. One cannot say that the Lord refused to heal Paul in Galatians 4:13 on the basis of what he tells Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9.

Then, even if we identify the two by force, although every indication is against this, it would still be only one case of sickness that was not healed. General application would be impossible, since it is obvious that there are many cases of healing in the Bible, and also broad promises for healing (James 5:15). Thus even if we were to abuse the passages like this, it would be possible to make only slight progress toward the direction of sickness. But again, this would be an abuse of Scripture, and thus it cannot in fact be done.

We will continue with the assumption that Galatians 4:13 refers to a sickness. Is there any indication as to what kind of sickness it could be? Commentators often like to suggest malaria because of the local situation, or ophthalmia because of several expressions that Paul used.

Biblical scholars like to act like detectives, but they often end up more like the Pink Panther than Sherlock Holmes. The clumsy investigator rushes into a crime scene. He inspects the ground with a magnifying glass, and finds foot prints formed by a brown substance. He scoops up some of it and puts it in his mouth... "Hmm, officer, record these footprints. The criminal was wearing boots of this size, and judging from the taste of manure, he came from a farm nearby." The officer replies, "Sir, you just walked in after stepping on some dog poop outside. Those are your prints."

The Bible includes no actual indication of the local situation, and even if it does, it contains no indication that Paul contracted what was common in that area. It is total speculation. So other scholars read, "What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me" (Galatians 4:15). Aha, eye disease! However, like "the thorn in the flesh," which has nothing to do with an actual thorn, this could be just an expression for the people's strong concern and willingness to sacrifice for the apostle.

One could say, "I would take a bullet for him," when no one is shooting at his friend. Or, "He is such kind gentleman, he would give you the shirt off his back at the drop of a hat,"

when no one needs a shirt from him and no one is dropping any hats. If Paul had an eye disease, verse 15 would be consistent with it, but the verse in itself cannot indicate that he had this issue. Then, 6:11 is just his signature. I know someone who has such a big signature that his wife has to leave extra room for him on every greeting card they send. If he wishes to be emphatic, he might make his signature even bigger than usual. It has nothing to do with the condition of his eyes.

Another possibility is that Galatians 4:13 refers to the effects of his stoning. This would have to mean that a significant number of his readers first heard him after Acts 14:19, or the order of events would not fit.

There are several advantages to this theory. It is the only option that can be connected to something actually recorded in the Bible, and that occurred at around the time and location where Paul first preached to his readers. The stoning would have left him severely disfigured, with injuries throughout his body. His appearance would have been much worse than if he had ophthalmia. This would make it even more impressive that the Galatians did not treat Paul with contempt because of how he looked (4:14). The suffering was intense and memorable to him: "You, however, know all about... what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured" (2 Timothy 3:10-11). Christians love to identify with these things, but Paul adds, "Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them" (v. 11), so let us identify with that as well.

However, if this is what Galatians 4:13 refers to, then what appears to be a record of sickness becomes a testimony to God's healing power. We have such a testimony in Acts 14:19-20 anyway, but the question is whether this verse in Galatians refers to the aftermath of the same event. In Acts 14, the Jews stoned Paul until they thought he was dead (v. 19). Even if he was not dead, he was apparently so injured that the Jews thought that he was. If there was any sign of movement, of speech, of breath, or any other sign of life, they failed to detect it. If he was dead, God raised him from the dead. From such a condition, Paul got up and went back into the city. By the following day, he was well enough to travel (v. 20). Then, either immediately or soon after, he was well enough to preach, to appoint elders, to pray and fast, and to travel some more (v. 21-25).

This is a frightening measure of healing power. The man refused to die, and if he did, he recovered from death itself. This happened regardless of what Galatians 4:13 is talking about. Nevertheless, since there is nothing definitive that would connect Acts 14:19 to Galatians 4:13 in this manner, it remains only a possibility that the "weakness of the flesh" refers to the remaining injuries of stoning.

Pay attention to what is in the verse, and what is just not in there. We can say for sure that Paul had a condition that he calls a "weakness in the flesh." This could have been an illness or injury. Its exact nature is unknown. The condition existed when he first preached to these readers. Although the Galatians could have regarded him with contempt because of it, they did not.

We cannot say that this was a chronic illness, because the text does not say it. We cannot say that he never recovered, because the text does not say it. We cannot say how long the condition remained, whether ten hours or ten years, because the text does not say it. He says that he had this condition when he first preached to them. He could have recovered during his time with them or by the time he left them, or perhaps he never recovered. On the basis of the text, no one can know, because it does not tell us.

Therefore, the text by itself does not strengthen or undermine an expectation for healing, because it does not say that he received healing, and it does not say that he never received healing. It shows that a Christian can be attacked with sickness, but this is not new information. The Bible tells us what to do about it: "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven" (James 5:14-15). Many other passages encourage an expectation for healing.

The Bible also teaches that healing can be instant, but it can also take a little time. Jesus himself ministered to a blind man twice before he was completely cured (Mark 8:22-25). James refers to Elijah's prayer in the context of praying for healing, and Elijah prayed seven times before the answer came (James 5:17-18; 1 Kings 18:41-46). Elisha had to pray and stretch himself upon a child more than once before the child was raised from the dead and fully restored (2 Kings 4:32-35). Many have testified that, although sometimes it took hours, days, or weeks of prayer, even incurable and terminal cases have been healed. Thus even if Paul had not recovered by the time he first preached to the Galatians, it does not mean that he never recovered. Rather, his point is not that he was ill, but that his readers did not look down on him.

Some people go to great lengths to show that Paul was sick and did not receive healing, or that he prayed for someone and that person did not receive healing, but this does nothing other than to expose their idolatry. Their arguments are wrong, but putting that aside for the moment, the issue is why we should care in the first place. "Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?...What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe" (1 Corinthians 1:13, 3:5). We look to Christ for healing, not Paul, and the apostle himself had to look to Christ.

When I pray for someone to receive healing, I do not pray to Paul or in the name of Paul, but to God in the name of Jesus Christ. So I look to God's promises concerning faith, healing, and prayer. If God says healing belongs to us, then I can receive it whether or not Paul ever received it. If God says that we can pray for the sick and they will recover, then I can expect him to heal them, whether or not Paul was ever successful at it. When people look to Paul for healing, or when they base their belief on theories about his experience, they are already defeated. These people look to men, and this is why they are failures. They are sick in spirit, and it is the worst kind of sickness. Satan has a grip on their hearts, but Jesus can deliver them even from this.

The truth is that those who undermine healing in the life of Paul do not want to learn from him. They want to use him. They want to twist his words, step on his back, and use him to exalt themselves. They want to make their useless and pathetic lives look like beacons of glory.

The thorn in the flesh is sent to one who has had the most extreme charismatic experiences, who has lived through the most dramatic miracles, visions, signs, and wonders. It cannot be used to dampen charismatic expectations, because it is applied to one who has already realized charismatic expectations far beyond the average charismatics, and even beyond the stories that the false apostles invented.

If you claim that you have a thorn in the flesh, then I want to hear about all the visions and revelations that you have received, even "surpassingly great" supernatural experiences. If you claim that you have an infirmity that God refuses to remove, then I want to witness the extreme measure of supernatural power that rests upon you – his power is made perfect in weakness. What miracles of healing, of nature, and of judgment God must have performed through you!

I do not want to hear how you remained reverent during the many hours of earthshaking diarrhea you suffered after some bad Thai food. No, I want to hear how you were preaching at some unknown corner of the world, and a native shaman chopped your head clean off. You went up to heaven, played dodgeball with the angels, and Jesus was the referee. Then you returned from the dead, reattached your own head, and still managed to walk around preaching the gospel as local warlords chased after you with bazookas aiming at your behind, because the healing power that God unleashed through you remained the greatest threat against their biological weapon business. I would accept that as a modern version of what Paul experienced. Now if you claim that you have a thorn in the flesh, I would not utter a word.

If you have nothing, then you do not have a thorn in the flesh. You have a lot of excuses, unbelief, false doctrine, and religious pride. You do not have a thorn in the flesh. You are a thorn in the flesh to those who trust God for deliverance. You do not have infirmities. You have minor annoyances in your life that you exaggerate in order to make yourself look like someone great. You are a religious hypocrite.

The false teachers of cessationism and tradition come to us preaching a different Jesus (one who does not baptize with the Spirit; Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16, John 1:33), a different Spirit (a Spirit who does not grant miraculous power; Acts 1:4-8, 2:1-4, 17-18, 1 Corinthians 12:7), and a different gospel (a gospel that does not include healing and miracles; Matthew 8:17, Galatians 3:5, James 5:14-18). Are we going to put up with it? Rather than venturing out into the world with faith and power, and risk facing the dangers that Paul encountered, the doctrine of sickness allows one to suffer at the comfort of his own home and feel like a hero at the same time. He is praised just for being sick. This is a religious scam. The Bible teaches a doctrine of healing, power, and miracles. When this results in relief and comfort, we give thanks to God and testify to his goodness, and we use our renewed strength to fulfill the Lord's commission.

They complain that a gospel of healing and power promises men that faith in God exempts them from all problems. If some people teach this, so that it is not a misrepresentation or statements taken out of context, it must be so rare that I have never heard it in more than twenty years, not even from those who are considered the most zealous "health and wealth" teachers. In fact, even with the most heretical ones, no one could hear them very long before they warn against the misunderstanding that faith in God implies a life without problems, not even little ones. The criticism is a straw man, and slander.

Rather, they often refer to the verse, "A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all" (Psalm 34:19). They insist that Christians would face problems, but they also preach deliverance, because the Bible promises it. Christians might come under attack, but they can overcome by faith in God. On the other hand, and of course I have not studied every sermon in the world, I do not hear their critics use this verse. The first part would offer them comfort, but the second part would be a thorn in the flesh. They avoid passages in the Bible that promise healing, provisions, and answers to prayer. If they mention them, it is to smother them under a thousand qualifications, and to denounce those who believe them.

They portray faith as deception for itching ears, but unbelief as a defense of the gospel. God wants us to have a faith that can move mountains, and that can receive answers to prayer (Mark 11:22-24). If there is the danger of misguided or presumptuous faith, the heresy of unbelief is much worse. It is the satanic delusion that pain equals piety. But we are under no delusion that we will never encounter problems, because we know that when we go forth to perform the works of Christ, even if the heathens rejoice at the gospel, the cessationists are there to oppose us. God can remove them, but he often just turns up the power (Acts 4:29-31, 2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

2. The Miracle Majority

The Bible says that Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" (Luke 4:1), and after overcoming temptations, he returned "in the power of the Spirit" (4:14), announcing that he was anointed to preach and to heal (4:18-21). Later, we read that "the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all" (6:19; also Mark 5:30). As Peter said, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power...he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him" (Acts 10:38). God performed "miracles, wonders and signs" through him (2:22).

The Gospels testify that Jesus would baptize his people with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16, John 1:33). What does this mean? In Acts 1, Jesus calls this baptism with the Holy Spirit "the gift my Father promised" (v. 4). He said, "For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (v. 5), and "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you" (v. 8). He also refers to "what my Father has promised" in another place, and again he says that when it arrives, the disciples would be "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49).

The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus, and he had the "power" to preach, to heal, and to work miracles. Now he would pour out the Holy Spirit on the believers, and they would receive the same "power" to preach, to heal, and to work miracles. There is no other meaning for the fullness or baptism of the Holy Spirit, and there is no other meaning for this "power" that results from it. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is not for repentance, conversion, or justification, but for power – power for preaching, healing, and miracles.

This is the way the Bible usually talks about the power to work miracles. Cessationists often claim that the "sign" gifts have ceased, but the Bible does not distinguish some gifts as "sign" gifts. The distinction has been invented in order to separate some spiritual manifestations into their own category to be targeted.

In fact, the Bible rarely uses the language of "gifts" to talk about God's miraculous power at work through men. Paul uses it in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14, and Ephesians 4. In almost all other instances – hundreds of them – the Bible uses terms like "faith," "grace," "power," "the Spirit of the Lord," "the hand of the Lord," or it describes what happened, like "Then God said to Abraham," "The word of the Lord came to me," "The LORD heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him," "Your faith has healed you," "The Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away," and so on.

Comparatively speaking, the Bible almost never uses the language of "gifts" when referring to the miraculous power of God working through men. To impose the "gifts" terminology upon the whole debate contrary to the biblical pattern and proportion makes it easier to employ a "divide and conquer" strategy against God's power. It cuts up what God has never divided, so that what is undesirable could be discarded without appearing to reject the

whole thing. However, the way the Bible talks about God's power prevents this abuse. When this is taken into account, the issue is not whether this or that gift has ceased, but whether God has ceased, whether the Holy Spirit has ceased, whether power has ceased, whether grace has ceased, whether prayer has ceased, and whether faith has ceased.

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come upon the disciples, and they would receive miraculous power (Acts 1:4-8). When it happened on the day of Pentecost (2:1-4), Peter explained that it was a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy: "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). So the Holy Spirit infuses believers with power, not only to preach and to heal, but also to receive visions and dreams, and to prophesy.

Thus this also becomes the fulfillment of Moses' wish that all of God's people would become prophets: "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). This cannot be satisfied by all of God's people being saved – they had always been saved by faith in the coming of Christ. Moses wished that they would become "prophets" – to have the powers of prophecy, healing, miracles, like he did.

Are the cessationists jealous for the apostles? Is that why they want to make God's power exclusive to them? But they are working against the apostles. Peter said, "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 2:39). He refers to "the gift of the Holy Spirit" (v. 38), which as we have demonstrated, entails the power to preach, to heal, to receive visions, dreams, prophecies, and to perform miracles.

The Bible says that this baptism of the Holy Spirit comes directly from Jesus – not from the apostles, and not through the apostles. Jesus is the only baptizer. There were about a hundred and twenty people praying together in the upper room (Acts 1:15). They received the Holy Spirit directly from Jesus and at the same time. Each person received independently from the others, and independently from the apostles. The apostles did not receive the Holy Spirit first and then transmit the blessing to the rest of the people. They received at the same time and in the same way as the others.

Moreover, the apostles were a mere ten percent of the group. The ninety percent did not need the apostles' assistance or permission to receive the Father's promise. Since Jesus is the one who directly baptizes with the Holy Spirit, and since the Holy Spirit grants power to work miracles to those who receive him, this means that, compared to the number of apostles, there were nine times as many believers who could wield the power to work miracles from the first day Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit. If the apostles had never shown up, they still would have received the power, because they were receiving from Jesus, not from the apostles.

The Bible liberates us to look to Christ alone, and not to men. But for many people, the implication is frightening, even damning. The cessationist doctrine that exalts the apostles into exclusive super-believers in order to shut up God's power to the first generation in effect makes them into idols. It makes them into mediators that stood between Jesus and his people, so that without them one could not reach the other, or at least the believers could not receive Jesus in all his fullness. It is a wretched reality that some of those who most forcefully castigate Catholic idolatry are also those who most jealously enforce it. Oh, the irony of religious hypocrisy! "In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again" (Hebrews 5:12).

Thus what is at stake is not only the place of healing and prophecy and such things, but the place of Jesus Christ. Men baptize with water, but Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit. The apostles are dead, but men never needed them to receive the Holy Spirit in the first place. On the other hand, Jesus is not dead. If the cessationists suggest that Jesus has been ousted as one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, then they cannot be Christians, for they would be anti-Christ. However, if Jesus is still who he has always been, then he still baptizes with the Holy Spirit, and the only baptism with the Spirit that the Bible knows is one that results in power to work miracles.

3. A Cascading Avalanche of Horse Manure

~ from email ~

It has been said that we ought to believe that the gifts of the Spirit continue unless the Bible states that they have ceased. One cessationist answered, "So where in the Scripture did the gift of apostleship cease? Where in the Scripture did the gift of writing Scripture cease? Where in the Scripture did the method of deciding the Lord's will by the casting of lots cease? Unless they want to literally do those, Charismatics should stop thinking that they are just like the first century church. Charismatics do believe certain things have ceased also, and it is disingenuous for them to pretend that they are just reading the Scripture."

"Gift" of Apostleship

One common argument for cessationism claims that the "gift" of apostleship has ceased and that the cessation of the other gifts follows from this. It has been called a "cascade" argument, or as I call it, the Loser's Slippery Slope of Unbelief (LOSSOU).

A major reason that the poor apostles are dragged into the discussion all the time is because of the assumption that they were unique, possessed supreme authority, constant infallibility, and that their office was inseparably connected with the writing of Scripture. So if the cessationists assume that the Scripture is complete, they must terminate the apostles.

However, they have misunderstood the apostles, and have made little gods out of them. They never possessed supreme authority, so that even the believers and elders could hold them accountable, and compel them to offer a defense for their actions, as when they preached to the Gentiles. They were not constantly infallible – Peter compromised the gospel in a way that even some new believers would refuse to do today, and Paul had to scold him in front of everyone (Galatians 2:11-14).

This is no problem for the inspiration of Scripture unless we assume that the apostles – not God -- were the authors of Scripture, or that they had such a decisive role that even God could not have produced an infallible Scripture through them unless the men were also infallible. The cessationist idolatry actually hurts the inspiration of Scripture. The main task of the apostles was not to write Scripture, and most of them did not write Scripture. Moreover, just as much of the Old Testament was not written by prophets, much of the New Testament was not written by apostles.

Although we make the usually harmless generalization that the apostles and prophets wrote the Bible, significant portions were not written by them, or not known to be written by them. To address this, some people invent the principle that these documents were

nevertheless written by those who were closely associated with the apostles and prophets. However, they arbitrarily dictate this principle without warrant, and they also arbitrarily decide how closely associated with the apostles and prophets these other authors need to be. In addition, the relationships of these authors to the apostles, and the scribes to the prophets, are often uncertain, and offer a weak foundation for something as weighty as divine inspiration. The entire difficulty is self-inflicted due to the false assumption that every word in the Bible must be written or approved by apostles and prophets.

Once we point out that God is the author, even the only actual author, then it becomes evident that the matter of human authorship is unable to undermine the inspiration of Scripture, because it has no decisive relevance in the first place. God can write on tablets of stones, speak in a voice from heaven, cause a donkey to talk, make stones cry out, or move a man to write his words. God is the one who speaks and writes. Although he often used the apostles and prophets, he could cause anything to happen through anyone he chooses. By his Spirit, he took hold of various men and caused them to write out his words. Then, by his providence, he secured these documents and compiled them into one final volume.

The traditional evangelical theory of inspiration is flawed, and it is based on an idolatrous view of the apostles. When we throw out the whole thing and place the Bible on God, and God alone, all the problems disappear. Thus inspiration applies to all of the Bible, not because the whole thing was written or approved by apostles and prophets, but because the whole thing was written by God.

All Scripture was written by God, even breathed out directly by him (2 Timothy 3:16). It makes no difference whether he used apostles or chipmunks to write it. Therefore, to terminate the apostleship does not terminate the possibility of additions to Scripture. If the cessationists wish to accomplish what they need with their line of reasoning, it would not be enough to kill off the apostles, but they must kill God as well, because he is the real author, even the only author, and he can make apostles and chipmunks out of anything, at any time in history.

If it is enough to say that God has completed the Bible according to his providence, then it makes no difference to say that there are still apostles today. But if it is not enough to say that God has completed the Bible, then neither is it enough to say that there are no more apostles. They must destroy God himself to guarantee the completion of the Bible, and I would not be surprised if many of them are willing to do it.

Likewise, all of the miracles in the Bible came from God, not the apostles, and all the gifts of the Spirit came from God, not the apostles. For miracles to die, God must die. So the LOSSOU must begin with God, not with the apostles. As long as God is alive, apostle or no apostle, gift or no gift, "Everything is possible for him who believes" (Mark 9:23).

Even if apostleship has ceased, even if all the gifts of the Spirit have ceased, and in fact, even if no one in history has ever performed a miracle by the power of God, it would still be possible for me to experience all the things represented by the gifts of the Spirit – even

if I must be the first and only one – because my faith in God has not ceased. The doctrine of the cessation of miracles is nothing other than an excuse for the cessation of faith. The debate on the "gifts" of the Spirit is a red herring and a scam.

"Gift" of Writing Scripture

By demanding an answer for "the gift of writing Scripture," the idea is that if writing Scripture is a spiritual gift, and if it is agreed that the Scripture has been completed, then the gift has ceased, and this would be a basis for the LOSSOU.

But who says that it is a gift? Does he think that we are stupid, so that he can make this into a gift, and then trick us into saying that a gift has ceased? Or is he stupid, so that he categorizes something as a gift when there is no basis for it? His challenge is loaded. We do not have to fall for it.

Even if writing Scripture is a gift, it would be more accurate to say that it comes under prophecy, or that it is one of the many manifestations of prophecy. There is some basis for saying this (2 Peter 1:20-21), but even then we cannot know if this covers all the writing of Scripture.

If writing Scripture comes under prophecy, it would be circular to argue that a spiritual gift has ceased on the basis that the writing of Scripture has ceased, since the continuation of prophecy is one of the things debated. It would not work to say, "Prophecy has ceased because prophecy has ceased."

Then, even if writing Scripture comes under prophecy, and even if writing Scripture has ceased, it does not follow that prophecy has ceased, because even while it was in operation, the writing of Scripture would have been only a rare manifestation of the gift, and does not cover all that the gift entails.

In any case, it is uncertain that writing Scripture is a spiritual gift, or that it comes under any spiritual gift.

Again, if the end of writing Scripture must mean the end of the gifts, or at least this one gift, then it does not go far enough, because it was not the gift that wrote Scripture, or even the men who exercised the gift, but it was God who wrote Scripture. The completion of Scripture cannot be secured by killing the gifts. Given the cessationist assumption, the end of writing Scripture must mean the end of God – he must die – but this would mean that there is no salvation for the cessationist.

Casting of Lots

Just how many times does the casting of lots appear in the Bible compared to guidance from Scripture, wise counsel, visions, dreams, circumstances, spiritual perceptions, and

several other means? Even if the practice continues, it still might not be a regular part of our lives.

When the apostles cast lots to choose a replacement for Judas, they started with Scripture (Acts 1:15-20), then stated a principle (1:21-22), then narrowed the candidates down to two people (1:23), and then they prayed (1:24-25). Only after all of this, they cast lots to choose between the two men, who were both qualified anyway (1:26). They did not wholly depend on casting lots.

Still, some theologians wonder if they did the right thing, and if God had chosen Paul instead. If God's choice was Paul, then they should not have cast lots to choose a replacement, and we wonder how many other instances of casting lots were wrong. The more times that the casting of lots were wrong, the less we are to blame if we do not adopt the practice, and the less relevance this challenge from the cessationist possesses in this debate.

Nevertheless, we are able answer head-on even if all the instances of casting lots in the Bible were appropriate.

The casting of lots, even if not the best way to receive guidance, was a form of observing providence, because the Bible says that God is the one who determines the outcome of lots: "We may throw the dice, but the LORD determines how they fall" (Proverbs 16:33, NLT). The cessationists continue to observe providence as one form of guidance. In fact, they much more readily accept circumstances as "God's will" than the charismatics.

Some people, both cessationists and charismatics, have mentioned instances in which they opened the Bible at random and found definite guidance in time of need. Again, whether it is advisable to expect guidance this way is one thing, but it is true that some have testified of obtaining help in this manner.

Then, I wonder if this cessationist knows what casting lots means. It is like flipping a coin, and this is still done when the options are equally acceptable. For example, we might flip a coin to decide who makes the first move in an athletic competition, and we might pick names out of a hat to decide who become partners in a class project. God is the one who decides the outcome in these instances.

In any case, find out if the Christians used this method after Acts 2, that is, after God had fulfilled his promise to grant his people visions, dreams, and prophecies (2:17-18). In the past, the Spirit was given to certain people for service, such as kings and prophets, but Moses said, "I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them" (Numbers 11:29). This happened on the day of Pentecost, and Peter said, "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).

From then on we read: "Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God" (7:55), "The Spirit told Philip" (Acts 8:29), "The Lord called to him in a vision, 'Ananias!'" (9:10), "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (15:28), "He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied" (21:9), and numerous instances like these.

So this challenge from the cessationist in fact serves to reinforce our position.

Point of Agreement

He complains that we should not think that we are like the first century church. Indeed, it is true that the cessationists are nothing like the believers in the first century. There is barely any resemblance. Sometimes it is difficult to tell if they are even Christians. They give the impression that they have a different religion, a different gospel, even a different God. This is apparently what they aim to achieve, and they are rather happy about it. On the other hand, charismatics remain unconvinced that it is an improvement.

4. Ezekiel 18:23 and 33:11

Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? (Ezekiel 18:23)

Say to them, "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11)

When it comes to God's sovereignty and its relation to election, reprobation, and human choice and responsibility, it is strange that people have had more trouble with these verses than many others in the Bible. They are some of the easiest verses to integrate into a coherent understanding of God's sovereignty. This is because their context is so elaborate, and the context defines the meaning of a text. Here the context is so complete, so emphasized, and so repeated, and then placed into a fuller context of the mission and message of the prophet Ezekiel, that it requires extraordinary effort to disregard.

Both the Arminians and Calvinists have made ridiculous uses of the text. The Arminians present to it a topic that it has no interest in, and they often frame the issue by narrowing the debate to only one verse in Ezekiel 18 and one verse in Ezekiel 33. The Calvinists are just as foolish when they respond to the Arminians or when they formulate their own doctrine on the basis of these verses. They also present to it this topic that the text has no interest in, or at least they do not challenge the Arminians for doing so, and then they also narrow their consideration of the text to only one verse in each chapter.

The result is that the Calvinists resort to blasphemous theories like installing a complex personality in God, turning the gospel into a sincere offer, and even claiming that there are "two wills" in God. Given all of this rubbish, even if the Calvinists arrive at a better theology at the end, it is only slightly better than the Arminians' theology. In fact, the product is arguably more heretical. The Arminians twist the text for their own purpose, and the Calvinists respond by blaspheming God, and then they congratulate themselves for their orthodoxy, for being heroes who champion the paradoxical sovereignty of a schizophrenic God.

To illustrate the madness, suppose I send you a letter that says, "Tommy was hungry, so he went out to lunch. He had a chicken salad that included many ingredients, but since he disliked eggplant, he avoided it." It would be unfair for you to ask the letter, "What is Tommy's purpose in life?" and then insist that the answer is, "To avoid eggplant." My letter has no interest in Tommy's purpose in life. It is talking about his lunch, and only about his lunch.

Let us consider a biblical example. When Abraham demonstrated his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, God said, "Now I know that you fear God" (Genesis 22:12). It would be wrong to deny God's omniscience on the basis of this verse, because it is not talking about

how much God knows. It has no interest in that topic. The statement serves to acknowledge Abraham's display of obedience. Moreover, when the Bible turns to the topic of how much God knows, it says that he knows everything (Hebrews 4:13, Job 37:16, Isaiah 46:10, etc.).

You would think that there is no need to remind people of something like this, but when it comes to theology and biblical interpretation, it seems that people become supernaturally stupid. Now imagine two groups of thugs starting a huge brawl over Tommy's purpose in life on the basis of my letter, and that is like the absurdity of the Arminian and Calvinist arguments over these verses in Ezekiel.

Precept vs. Decree

In order to understand these verses from the correct perspective, we should acknowledge the distinction between God's precept and God's decree. We have selected these words to talk about the distinction for the sake of convenience, but the distinction itself is necessary because it comes from the Bible. God's precept is his definition (of what is right), and God's decree is his determination (of what will happen). This is seen throughout the Bible, and sometimes both appear in the same text.

Genesis 50:20

As for you, you meant evil against me, **[precept]**
but God meant it for good, **[decree]**
to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

For Joseph to be correct in calling their intention or action "evil" (to be rid of him by selling him to slavery, and doing so out of hatred and jealousy), it would have had to be defined as evil by God. The same intention or action in them that was "evil" as *defined* by God, was meant to be good as *decreed* by God.

Even Calvinists often say that God "used" it for good, but the text does not say this. It was not as if God was confronted by the people's evil action and then figured out how to manipulate it for good. No, the Bible says God meant it for good – he did not respond to their sin with his own action, but he intended their sin for his own good purpose. Both parts of Joseph's statement refer to the same action. It was evil according to God's precept, but good according to God's decree.

1 Samuel 2:25

His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, **[precept]**
for it was the LORD's will to put them to death. **[decree]**

Eli rebuked his sons for their sins, but they did not repent. This refusal to repent was against what God had defined as right, so they were wrong according to God's precept. Then, the explanation for this refusal to repent was that it was what God had decided to happen, so that it turned out according to God's decree. His decree was for them to remain in sin, so

that he could determine to kill them (his decree) according to his own standard (his precept).

God's decision to kill them was not a response to their refusal to repent, but the same action that was against God's precept in fact followed God's decree. He did not say, "Do not repent, because I want to kill you." If he had told them to refuse, then it would have been his precept for them to remain in sin, and it would have been right by definition for them to refuse. Rather, God issued the precept for them to repent, and he issued the decree for them to refuse. He caused them to perform what he defined as wrong, so that he could kill them.

Acts 17:30

He commands all people everywhere to repent. **[precept]**

2 Timothy 2:25

God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth **[decree]**

Paul made both statements. First, God commands all men to repent. This refers to God's precept, in which he defines right and wrong, so that all men ought to repent, and it would be wrong for them to refuse. Then, the same apostle said that God is the one who grants repentance, and he might or might not grant it. This refers to God's decree, in which he decides what would happen, so that some men would obey the precept to repent, and other men would not obey it.

The "Will" of God

Next, we must also acknowledge that the Bible sometimes uses the same words or ideas to refer to different things. Our present interest is that the word or idea of the "will" of God is used in two different ways in the Bible that correspond to God's precept and decree.

Mark 3:35

For whoever does **the will of God**, he is my brother and sister and mother. **[precept]**

Romans 12:2

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is **the will of God**, what is good and acceptable and perfect. **[precept]**

Romans 15:32

...so that by **God's will** I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. [**decree**]

1 Peter 3:17

For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be **God's will**, than for doing evil. [**decree**]

The "will" of God in Mark 3 and Romans 12 refers to God's precept. It refers to what God defines as right, and not what he decides will happen. On the other hand, the "will" in Romans 15 and 1 Peter 3 refers to God's decree. It refers to what God decides will happen, and not what he defines as right. This shows that the Bible uses the term or the idea in two different ways, with two different meanings. However, there is no confusion, because even reading only the clause or the sentence offers a context that makes the meaning unmistakable.

Some Calvinists claim that there are two "wills" in God. Perhaps there is no one so stupid as to say that there are two "apples" – whose meanings are so close but the characteristics are so different that they generate a paradox – because on the one hand there is a fruit by that name, and then on the other hand there is a company by the same name. But these Calvinists are exactly this stupid. No, they mean such different things that they are in effect two different words, and indeed they can be represented by two different words, such as "fruit" and "company." The same is true with the Bible's use of God's "will." We can call one God's "precept" and the other one God's "decree."

To use Abraham's example again, God said, "Now I know that you fear God" (Genesis 22:12), but when the Bible talks about how much God knows, it says that he knows everything (Hebrews 4:13, Job 37:16, Isaiah 46:10, etc.). It would be ridiculous to say that God has two divine minds, where one knows something only after it has been informed, and the other one knows all things.

The Bible also says, "Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save" (Isaiah 59:1), but when it talks about God's nature, it says that God is spirit (John 4:24), and that he had no form when he manifested himself to Israel (Deuteronomy 4:12, 15). It would be ridiculous to say that God has two divine natures, where one is physical, able to wield his power as far as his arm can reach, and the other one is spirit, having no corporeal form or dimension.

Again, it would be ridiculous to say that Henry goes to two churches every Sunday, because there is the "church" that refers to the people, and then there is the "church" that refers to the building. No, they mean such different things that they are in effect two different words, and indeed they can be represented by two different words, such as "people" and "building." Henry meets with the "people" in the "building."

What in the world are we doing? Why do we need to explain this? How stupid can a person get and still breathe? It is amazing that such stupid people can survive to adulthood. How can anyone be a cessationist, when we see theologians everywhere who are too stupid to live, but still do not die? They are walking miracles, signs and wonders. Can this be what Jesus meant by the "greater works," because no one was so stupid while he was on the earth?

Back to Ezekiel

Now we return to Ezekiel. The discussion on how the Bible refers to God's "will" is relevant because it is comparable to how it refers to God's "pleasure." In fact, it is just another way of saying his "will." Nevertheless, there is a major difference between the above verses on God's "will" and the verses in Ezekiel. The difference is that rather than having only a clause or a sentence as in some of our examples, Ezekiel 18 and 33 offer **over 30 verses – in each chapter** – to show us the context.

Read the two chapters. Both of them obviously refer to God's precept for people to repent, that his "will" or "pleasure" is not for the death of the wicked but for their repentance. They do not talk about what God causes, but they talk about what he defines as right for the people. They do not talk about God's sovereignty, especially as it relates to salvation or repentance. The topic is not metaphysics, ontology, determinism, or such things.

However, when the Bible talks about what God causes in relation to repentance, it says that some men did not listen because God wanted to kill them, that God chooses whom to love or hate, that God hardens the hearts of some, that God made the reprobates because he desires to display his wrath and his power, and that he would grant repentance to only some people. These other passages are the ones that discuss the topic the Arminians and Calvinists force Ezekiel 18 and 33 to address, but Ezekiel 18 and 33 do not address the topic.

Suppose I am the CEO of Hello Theology Corporation, and you are my employee. My "will" or "pleasure" (my precept) is for you to work hard (but I am not causing you to work), but because you do not work hard, then my "will" or "pleasure" (my decree) is to remove you (now I am causing you to leave). Same words, big difference. Although the context is not elaborate, it is still obvious, so that there is no confusion, no mystery, no paradox. However, when it comes to theology, all of a sudden people lose their minds and all of this becomes a huge puzzle that requires centuries of debate. Why? As Luther said, when people confuse the indicative (precept) with the causative (decree), it is because they are stupid.

Application to Doctrine

Context is essential. Calvinists often introduce confusion because they set out to address a topic that belongs to metaphysics or ontology, but then they address it from the perspective of soteriology, or some other category that is logically secondary. Everything is first a

matter of metaphysics or ontology, or theology proper. It is, for example, futile to discuss the origin of evil before we either establish or assume that this universe is such that there can be such a thing as evil. What kind of universe this is determines what evil means, whether there can be such a thing, and how it operates. Once we arrive at the fact that there is a God who creates, sustains, and causes all things, and that it is he who then calls some things good and some things evil, we cannot suddenly alter this presupposition when we begin to investigate the topic of evil.

For this reason, Calvinists often manage to do very little more than infuriate their opponents. We could speak of God's being and power, obviously from the perspective of metaphysics or ontology, or theology proper. Then, a person asks, "So does man possess freedom?" The Calvinists all of a sudden offer an answer from soteriology: "True freedom is found in righteousness and service to Christ!" This is true in its own context, but the statement belongs to another topic altogether. But the Calvinists remain self-righteously oblivious.

Once we have settled the matter of metaphysics or ontology (Is there a God? What kind of God? What kind of universe is this?) – once we have constructed theology proper – soteriology comes as a subsidiary topic. Once things like being and cause have been established, soteriology deals with what the "causer" does with his power in relation to salvation. It is a more specific and narrow consideration. Metaphysics, ontology, or the matter of God's bare sovereignty can be discussed even if there is no such thing as sin or salvation, but salvation cannot be discussed apart from metaphysics or ontology, as in what kind of God there is and what kind of world this is. Some might think it is pious to sling christology and soteriology in every direction regardless of the context or topic. This is a phony piety. They are hiding behind soteriology to avoid having to address metaphysics, ontology, or theology proper.

God is Power – the Almighty. He is a universal power, without which nothing can exist and nothing can happen. However, this power is not an impersonal force, but an intelligent power – a spirit or mind – and this means that everything that exists and everything that happens does so because he decides and causes it to be so.

With an impersonal force like electricity, few people would have a problem with the fact that it can both save and kill, both help and harm. But since God is an intelligent being, it is assumed that he cannot have such a relation to evil, or else it would mean that he *is* evil. Thus it has been creedal orthodoxy that God is not the "author" of sin. However, this in fact relegates God to the level of an impersonal force, only that he would be aware of what he is doing. That is, electricity that is sentient is still electricity, and electricity that *decides* to kill would be a killer, not just a force that kills. So it is assumed that if God causes evil, he would *be* evil.

This is, in fact, an insult to God, because he is not just a force that happens to be sentient. He is GOD – an intelligent and all-pervasive power that is in a class by himself. He is not just a force that can cause both good and evil that happens to know what he is doing, so that theologians must explain how he is distant from evil, but his own nature and will *define*

what is good and evil. Something like electricity that happens to be sentient would still be unable to do this. He has explained a lot more to us in the Bible, but even if he has not, this fact alone should dispel the notion that he must not be the author of sin from the metaphysical or ontological perspective. As long as he has not defined something as evil for him to do, and as long as he approves of himself, then anything that he does is righteous by definition, because he makes the definition. For this reason, those who avoid calling him the author of sin, or whatever equivalent term, does so not because of an abundance of reverence, but because their view of God is too low.

I often would have spent less time on this aspect of God's sovereignty if not for the fact that so many people are obsessed with denying it, even to the point of blasphemy. The bare doctrine is just "God is sovereign." This is the entire doctrine, and there is no need to qualify it or to list the things that he is *really* sovereign over. It would be unnecessary to even mention good and evil if not for the fact that those who claim to believe the doctrine are so interested in restricting it. To those who accept God for who he is, or at least who are not obsessed with the doctrine of divine sovereignty with a demonic passion – some are obsessed with debating it, even though they do it poorly, and not receiving it or enjoying it – we deliver the message of Scripture in its wholesome proportion. This is the theology that God is sovereign over all things without restriction, that he is full of compassion, that he always keeps his word, that he is eager to forgive our sins and heal our diseases. In fact, it is obvious that many of those who represent themselves as defenders of God's sovereignty and goodness by denying that he is also the sovereign author of sin acknowledge these divine qualities only on paper. In reality, they do not believe them – any of them; otherwise, they would expect God to manifest himself in glory and power in their lives.

They say that they believe in God's sovereignty, only that he is not the author of sin. But I say that God is sovereign over all things, and he uses his sovereignty to fulfill all his promises – converting sinners, healing the sick, answering prayers for deliverance in the face of seeming impossibilities, rescuing people from hunger, poverty, disasters, by reforming their lives as well as by working miracles in their midst. He pours out his blessings and miracles in such abundance that they often spill over to affect unbelievers, so that even they are healed of blindness, paralysis, and terminal diseases, just as dogs consume the crumbs that fall from the children's table. (Nevertheless, reprobates are confirmed in their damnation when they do not convert and offer thanks to God.) Since God is sovereign over all things, then he can overturn sin, evil, sickness, poverty, hatred, lust, jealousy, and all such things *now*, according to our faith and his power that is at work in us. So who truly believes and honors God's goodness? And who is just a religious hypocrite whose doctrine consists of what God does not do, who is just a deist in disguise, or whose orthodoxy amounts to practical atheism?

Application to Preaching

We affirm that God is sovereign in an absolute sense, and when the topic is metaphysics or ontology, he is the direct cause and power of all things. This view of divine sovereignty avoids the categorical error made by those who address the topic mainly on the

soteriological level. It acknowledges God as the absolute metaphysical or ontological power, even before anything can be logically regarded as good or evil. (An event, before it can be logically called good or evil as defined by God's precept, or even before it can be called an "action" as if performed by intention, is just an event. What causes this event, or any event?) Then it is applied to other topics of theology and philosophy, including soteriology.

That said, most of the time the Bible does not speak from the perspective of metaphysics or ontology, and neither do we. All statements like, "Adam named his wife Eve" and "Amy had eggs for breakfast" refer to relative or perceived "causes," that is, the apparent relationship between Adam and Eve, and between Amy and the eggs. They describe the relationship as if it is one of cause and effect only because of a perceived correlation, and not because one produces an actual effect on the other. They do not intend to say that Adam had sovereignty over Eve in the metaphysical sense, or that Amy had this kind of sovereignty over the eggs. The statements have no interest in metaphysics, ontology, or divine sovereignty, although a person who makes these statements might assume the correct view of the doctrine, whether or not he has it in mind as he speaks.

Therefore, there is nothing wrong with saying something like Abraham gave birth to Isaac. Indeed he did, although Abraham did not create Isaac out of nothing, and did not make his spirit and body out of existing materials. There is nothing wrong with saying that the devil is the father of lies (John 8:44). He is a liar, and the father of lies. This does not contradict God's sovereignty. We are not talking about a cause or power, but a relation. There is nothing wrong with saying that sickness comes from the devil, and that Jesus came to set us free from this oppression (Luke 13:16; Acts 10:38). In fact, seeing how the Bible talks about this subject, it would be false doctrine to say that sickness comes from God rather than the devil, so that we should endure it "for the glory of God" instead of regarding it as an enemy and resisting it by faith. So many people suffer "for the glory of God" in defiance to all his promises for deliverance. And then they tell us all about it, so that we may admire their heroic unbelief. They are religious scammers.

As long as it is not intended as a rejection of God's sovereignty, it is not wrong to preach, "God wants you to repent. Believe in Jesus and be saved!" There is no denial of predestination, and there is no "sincere offer." There is confusion only because people have been making the mistakes I mentioned. They wrongly frame the issue when they discuss it. Also, they are obsessed with their favorite doctrines so that they think the Bible is talking about them even when it is referring to something different, and they think everyone must be speaking in relation to those doctrines all the time or they are heretics.

If a crazy man who is obsessed with sushi tries to order it everywhere, even when he goes to restaurants that serve only burgers, tacos, curry, and other items that have little to do with sushi, he will think that he is getting some strange sushi. If he wants sushi, he should go to restaurants that serve sushi. Just because he likes sushi does not mean that every restaurant in the world is a sushi restaurant. This is so simple, but it seems that when you are talking about theology, you need to talk to people like they are little kids. They are so stuck for no good reason.

The confusion has been manufactured by force, by men's theological machine. Some have wrongly condemned others for preaching like this. When I say "God wants you to repent" or even "God's will is that you trust in Jesus to save you," I declare God's precept or command to you. The Bible usually speaks on this plane. We have seen an example where it refers to "the will of God" in this sense in Romans 12. Or, as Peter preached to the people, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation" (Acts 2:40). Since the Bible can speak like this, and sometimes switches from one sense to the other, without a denial of divine sovereignty, there is nothing wrong when I do the same. If our application of a doctrine prevents us from believing and speaking as the Bible does, and if it results in oppression instead of liberty and power in its presentation, then our application must be defective.

We can make the same point about those who have been criticized for preaching, "God wants you well. Healing is God's will. Believe in Jesus and receive healing!" The Bible says that Jesus "took up our infirmities and carried our diseases" (Matthew 8:17). It says, "And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up" (James 5:15). Opposition against this kind of preaching arises from a rejection of Scripture and an evil heart of unbelief. In fact, we ought to criticize those who do not preach this way.

Is there a difference between Ezekiel 18:23 and James 5:15, except people have faith in one and have no faith in the other? As Jesus put it, "Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?" (Matthew 9:5). Now do you understand? James does, and so in the same verse he says, "If he has sinned, he will be forgiven" (James 5:15). God has always put the two things together (Psalm 103:3).

Application to Prayer

While we are at it, there might be nothing wrong even with saying, "Prayer changes things." James says as much in verse 16: "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." Although it is assumed that God is the one who performs the work (v. 15), James sees nothing wrong with speaking as if the effect is attributed to prayer. This is not a denial of divine sovereignty, because he is the same one who writes, "You ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that'" (4:15). However, he does not apply this to prayer, but he says it to rebuke those who "boast and brag" (4:16) about themselves.

He brings up divine sovereignty, and he uses words like "if" and "the Lord's will," only to those who trust in themselves. He focuses on the Christian's responsibility in the rest of the letter. He begins with faith that has no doubt (1:6), and continues to one that does not blame God (1:13), to one that reveals itself in actions (1:19-26), to one that resists the devil and chases him off (4:7). And he ends with faith that heals the sick, that is powerful and effective to work miracles (5:15-18).

It is true that the slogan can sound crude. Most people who glibly utter it have little understanding – but so do those who criticize them. They often have a defective view of divine sovereignty – and so do those who criticize them. The two groups are both deficient,

only in different ways, and the differences are often not too great. The issue really depends on what one means by the statement. It would certainly be wrong to suppose that prayer itself changes things. If there is no God to pray to, then prayer would not change anything. The statement would be acceptable only if it means that God would change things in answer to prayer.

Perhaps the worst thing that one can do is to dismiss the statement outright, because then it would be difficult not to dismiss James 5:16 also. A popular response is that prayer changes yourself, even if nothing else. It has become another slogan, and one that has caused much more damage than "prayer changes things" can ever inflict. When it is said that prayer changes yourself, it is not meant that prayer will change anything about your situation, including your body or your health, but it refers only to the condition of your soul. In this context, this is a cop out. THIS...IS...A...COP...OUT! James disagrees with it. He says that the prayer of faith will "make the sick person well" (v. 15). He is not talking about improving yourself, or your spiritual condition, but praying to change a "thing," a physical body, even someone else's body. He says that the prayer of a righteous man is "powerful and effective" (v. 16). Then, he uses Elijah to illustrate his point, and his prayer changed the weather. The weather is very much a "thing," is it not? And he was a man "just like us" (v. 17).

The slogan is sometimes stated like this: "Prayer does not change God, but it changes you." This is loaded rubbish, and a red herring. There is no need to change God in order to change things. In fact, I am counting on him to stay the same – always – because this means that he will continue to keep his word and fulfill his promises, including his promises to change things when I pray. God is sovereign, and this is why there is nothing that can stop him from keeping his word to me.

The cop out is often used to attack Christians who trust God for "things," but who supposedly lack an emphasis on repentance, holiness, and so on. However, if these Christians have itching ears for one kind of teaching, this cop out is just a theology for a different kind of itching ears, this time to satisfy an audience of unbelief. It assures those who are weak in faith that there is nothing wrong with them, and that they do not need to repent of their unbelief. If others are lacking in some ways, this does not excuse you for lacking in other ways. For many people, what they think they are doing well is the most important part of the word of God, and what they are not doing well is always heresy. But Jesus wants us to believe and follow all of it: "You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone" (Luke 11:42).

5. Are Arminians Saved?

~ from email ~

I think that most people who claim to be Christians are not saved, whether they call themselves Calvinists, Arminians, or something else. So we need to examine the people, and not only the labels. Most people who call themselves Christians, including real Christians, have never considered or even heard of Calvinism and Arminianism. It is true that the proper way to preach the gospel is to present the whole spectrum of Christian theology (albeit not necessarily in a technical or academic manner), but a person can be saved with much less information.

Many false converts have entered the church because the gospel that they heard was superficial and promised salvation to anyone who would repeat a prescribed prayer or slogan. However, many people have been saved this way despite the imperfect method. Just as the thief on the cross was indeed saved, if someone truly believes that Christ saves him apart from his own works and merits, but only on the basis of grace – he does not even have to think about it in these words – then he is saved even if he only looks up to heaven and says, "Jesus!" It does not take more than the "sinner's prayer" to be saved -- it takes much, much, much less. Jesus paid the price for salvation – all of it – and we do not pay part of it by much learning and seeking. On the other hand, one can have a doctorate in systematic theology and remains unsaved, because he does not truly believe.

The typical Christian repeats the doctrines that he has been taught. He would do this even if he believes something else in his heart, and he might not even realize that he believes something else. This disunity is possible, as the Bible says, "They draw near to me with the lips, but their hearts are far from me." An Arminian can repeat doctrines about free will and so forth, just because that is what he has heard, so he thinks that is what he is supposed to say. Meanwhile, he might sincerely believe in his heart that he was saved entirely because of grace, so that he contributed nothing, not even his choice. He might even feel uncomfortable repeating the Arminian doctrine, but he does not know why. This is because if he is truly saved, then the Spirit of God is in him, teaching him the truth (1 John 2:27). Someone like this might immediately, or at least very quickly, change to believe in the Bible's teachings about divine sovereignty, grace, and so forth, once someone presents these to him. He might even exclaim that he has believed all of these in his heart all along, and that now everything finally makes sense. I would say that this person has been saved all this time, even though he has been an "Arminian." He has always believed in God's grace, but now finally someone comes and gives him the liberty to affirm it explicitly.

This illustrates why the teaching ministry is so important, even after a person has become a Christian. It will eliminate confusion, and make the heart and the mouth consistent. It has this effect on unsaved church members as well. They say that they believe in Christ, but in their hearts they do not. Many will change their tune and curse God once they realize what he really teaches in the Bible. So their hearts are revealed.

On the other hand, many Calvinists are in love with their Calvinism, and the idea that they affirm Calvinism, much more than they are in love with Jesus Christ. They take up the doctrines about God's grace just because they have been taught this way, or because these doctrines better satisfy their intellectual tendencies, or some other worthless reason. They enjoy debating about them, harassing people with them, and winning arguments with them. They could not care less about God, but they care about their Calvinism -- not as doctrines about God, but as their own personal philosophy. They are repeating these doctrines about grace just like some Arminians repeat the doctrines on free will. They are very proud of their Calvinism, but in their hearts they are stubborn, arrogant, and cruel people.

They claim to believe in divine sovereignty and grace, but whenever they run into problems in debate or in life, they compromise these assumptions to make room for things that are more important to them at the moment. You will see this sometimes when Calvinists criticize me. It is strange and funny to watch. In attacking me, one Calvinist even argued against the idea that God is "in control" of everything, and so he made his doctrine even weaker than the theism of many Arminians. He did this because a consistent application of divine sovereignty obviously endorsed my position in the context of the disagreement. You see, he hated me more than he loved God, and he wanted to defeat me more than he wanted to defend the truth. Is such a person better than an Arminian, or more likely to be saved? He is probably less likely to be saved.

This is why I do not identify with Calvinists or Reformed Christians. Their doctrines of divine sovereignty, election, reprobation, and so on, are in fact weak, unbiblical, often heretical, and poorly formulated. Much of the time they cannot even distinguish between theology proper and soteriology, or between metaphysics and ethics. This is one reason they messed up the whole "author of sin" business. Utterly shameful and incompetent. Yet they pretend to be the champions of orthodoxy and intellectualism. They are usually not more saved than the Arminians, just much more hostile and hypocritical. Of course this is a generalization, but it is a true generalization, and I would not like to be one who comes under it.

So most people do not know or think about these doctrines. This does not tell us whether they are saved or unsaved. What makes a person less likely to be saved is when biblical doctrines are presented to him, and he continues to resist. The more these doctrines are explained to him, and the more he continues to resist, the less likely that he is saved. Jesus said that his sheep would follow his voice, but this person hardens his heart against God's word more and more. I am not saying that he changes from being saved to unsaved, but that by this we discover how likely he is a real believer in the first place.

This does not apply only to the doctrines about divine sovereignty and grace, but on a number of other doctrines. How about the doctrines concerning the Holy Spirit, faith, prayer, healing, and miracles? Cessationists harden their hearts more and more each time they are confronted with the Bible's clear teachings on these things. They make up fancy theories and impose them on the Bible. They explain away the words of Jesus and they make the apostles into idols. They hide behind creeds and traditions, also made up by men.

Cessationism is a chief heresy. It is a most alarming issue. Cessationism attacks part of the gospel, even the very start and center of it (Acts 2:38-39, Galatians 3:1-5), so that it is many times more harmful and reprehensible than errors in other areas. When it comes to salvation, it is not that cessationism itself might mean that a person is unsaved (just like an "Arminian" could be saved, for reasons stated above), but I wonder about the kind of person who would believe such an abomination. Is he a person who wishes to protect the Bible as a finished revelation? No, come on, that is a scam. He is more in love with the idea that the Bible is a finished revelation – and even more in love with the idea that he is in love with it as a finished revelation – than actually believing and obeying what this finished revelation tells him. It tells him to desire spiritual gifts. It tells him to pray for the sick and expect miracle healing. It tells him a number of other things that he outright condemns.

Thus to answer your question, you need to get to know the person to form your opinion about him, instead of letting his label settle the issue. If you pick out random Christians, I do not think that any "Calvinist" is more likely to be saved than any "Arminian," because both of them are most likely unsaved, and even the real Christians are just repeating what they have been taught. We should be disappointed if we are making Calvinists or Arminians or Pentecostals out of people instead of Christians. Nevertheless, it might be true that the Calvinist cessationist is less likely to be saved than the Arminian Pentecostal. Both are just as unlikely to believe in God's grace, but the second one is at least more likely to believe in God's power.

6. The Unceasing Downpour of Bull Dung

~ from email ~

Both the charismatics and the cessationists tend to engage the debate in terms of spiritual "gifts," but it is unbiblical to rest the issue on the terminology of "gifts," because the Bible almost never uses this language to address the topic. We see major passages on the topic in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14, and Ephesians 4...and that is about all of it. There is one tiny place in Hebrews and one in Peter that talks in terms of "gifts," but Paul is practically the only one who does it.

All the other authors in the Bible and all the other instances -- hundreds, and depending on what you regard as relevant, even thousands of passages -- use terms like "faith," "grace," "power," "the Spirit of the Lord," "the hand of the Lord," or they describe what happened, like "Then God said to Abraham," "The word of the Lord came to me," "The LORD heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him," "Your faith has healed you," "The Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away," and so on. Yet so many people, including the charismatics, get stuck talking about 1 Corinthians 12 and several other passages, and then always in terms of "gifts." This skews the entire discussion.

Then, the debate has further narrowed to the "sign" gifts, and the charismatics go along with this, when the Bible does not make this distinction. So the whole discussion is pretty much rubbish from the start. The Reformed and the cessationists are the ones who are most proud of their "redemptive-historical" approach to Scripture, but how come they do not mention this, and treat the topic this way? It is fraudulent scholarship.

Rather than engaging this foolishness, I examine what the Bible teaches about God, about faith, about healing, about prayer, and so on. If God continues, then faith continues. If faith continues, then miracles continue. Since faith is in men, miracles continue through men. Some of these instances are manifestations of what people call the "gifts," although the Bible almost never calls them this. People think that the "gifts" have ceased -- they want the gifts to have ceased -- not because they have really ceased, but because these people have ceased having faith in God.

Let us talk about these things without the word "gifts" for a thousand times before we use the word "gifts" one time. Then, we will be talking about these things slightly closer to the biblical proportion. Does God continue? Does faith continue? Does prayer continue? Does God continue to fulfill his covenant -- his old, old, old revelation (Luke 13:16)? It is deceitful to assume that God works miracles mainly to confirm new revelation. Again, although the Bible teaches that God confirms new revelation by miracles, it is rare in comparison. He has made promises that entail him working miracles -- for men, to men, and through men -- until the end of human history.

In fact, that is not when he will stop working miracles, but it will be when those acts would no longer be called miracles, because his manifestations of power would become commonplace. At this time, they are called the "powers of the coming age" (Hebrews 6:5). The manifestations of the gifts constitute a taste of the future. They would "cease" only in the sense that these powers would no longer be limited to particular instances, but there would be a constant current of wisdom and power to us and through us. That is, the gifts will "cease" only in the sense that they would increase to the extent that they can no longer be isolated (1 Corinthians 13:9, 12).

The "gifts" terminology makes this a loaded discussion from the beginning, and to refer to "sign" gifts makes it even more meaningless, since now we are debating something that the Bible does not even know about. In fact, the very topic of the "continuation" of these "gifts" makes this a loaded discussion on an even more absurd level. There is insufficient warrant for the topic to come up in the first place. Christians affirm the existence of God, and against atheism they defend the existence of God. But they do not usually need to affirm or defend the continued existence of God, that he continues to exist. Perhaps even unbelievers are smarter than to load the debate with the issue of whether an eternal being is an eternal being. Why argue about whether God continues to do special works through men, unless there is enough warrant to make this a topic? What they artificially consider special and temporary abilities have always been the way God interacts with people and through people. The matter hinges on his nature, not on dispensational peculiarities.

In fact, the "gifts" terminology is so non-essential that even if all the "gifts" have ceased, nothing would change. God can still heal people when we pray for the sick, even laying our hands on them in the name of Jesus, only we would not call it the gift of healing. God can still speak to people whenever he wants, only we would not call it prophecy. As long as God himself does not cease – as long as he does not die – there would be no practical difference whether there were ever any gifts or whether or not they have ceased.

Cessationists have not proved to me that there is sufficient reason to even make this into a topic for discussion. They must show that something has changed that makes this into a legitimate issue, one that cannot be dismissed. They have failed to show that the completion of the Bible has anything to do with whether God continues to work miracles, and continues to work miracles through men.

Most of the time, God works miracles because it follows from something that he has said in his old, old, old revelation, or simply because he shows compassion. God said that he would deliver Moses and Israel with a mighty hand because he remembered Abraham -- that old, old, old revelation -- not because he wished to confirm a new revelation, although he also intended the miracles to have that effect. Then, even though the miracles of Jesus indeed confirmed him (Acts 2:22), he explicitly said that he healed a woman on the basis of Abraham's covenant (Luke 13:16). It had no necessary relationship to spiritual gifts. Healing was the children's bread (Matthew 15:26) – their regular and rightful provision. Then, even the "crumbs" were enough to heal someone who had no apparent claim to it, except the claim of faith (Matthew 15:27-28).

The basis for miracles is old revelation. The completion of the Bible has nothing to do with whether miracles continue, except a full revelation provides even more basis for more miracles. The topic itself has insufficient reason to even justify its existence. At this time, I am not aware of anyone in the history of theology who could get beyond this point to legitimize the topic. So far the very existence of the topic has been founded on fraud. If I choose to discuss it at all, it is an act of condescension.

I am a Christian. Although I will call the unbeliever a non-Christian, I will not call myself a still-Christian. And even though I sometimes encounter atheists, I do not call myself a non-atheist or my doctrine ongoing-theism. Likewise, even though I sometimes perform these feats of theological charity and tolerate the topic of cessationism, I do not call myself a continuationist or my doctrine continuationism, because I regard the terms as unnecessary concessions to this continuing loaded pile of manure. I believe in God, therefore I believe in miracles.

7. Depression: P is for Pervert

~ from email ~

I understand depression. I will not undermine the suffering that a physical sickness can bring, but in a way this is worse than a physical sickness. With a physical sickness, you feel like you are in hell; with a psychological sickness, you feel like hell is in you. Whether the sickness is in your body or in your mind, healing belongs to us through Jesus Christ.

Watch your spiritual diet. Avoid teachings that tend to make people more depressed, often disguised as manifestos on God-centeredness, holiness, repentance, suffering "for the glory of God," and so on. Avoid teachings that merely comfort you in your unbelief and defeat. They will not get you out of the pit. There are teachings that focus on repentance in a way and in a proportion that ironically make it into a meritorious thing. An improper emphasis on repentance is destructive, because it is in fact unbelief toward the blood of Christ. If you have repented, you are forgiven through Christ. You can march into the throne of grace without fear and without shame, not to beg like one without a covenant, but to talk and ask like one who belongs there – like a son, like a prince.

There are teachers that, over and over again, beat you with how unworthy you are. They say that they are God-centered, but they keep talking about themselves. They are so proud that they are not like the shallow preachers on television, and they keep reminding you of it. They mock the biblical gospel of joy, power, and blessing, and make the Christian life as bleak and depressing as possible. These people are not preaching the gospel. They are not better than the "charlatans" that they criticize – they are just running a different scam. They are charlatans as well, only a lot less happy, and they wish to drag you down with them.

Tell them, "Look, I don't know what kind of weird fetish you are into, but I am not an idiot. You are trying to pass off pessimism as profundity, condemnation as consecration. And then you want me to believe you're some great prophet of righteousness, suffering for the glory of God. All hung up with tradition but think you're not because you play sports or something. 'Oh, look how free I am, I'm so engaged with non-Christian society. I've got a cultural mandate to drink lots of beer, but I'm persecuted because I'm misunderstood, and the prosperity preachers are drawing all the people and taking all the money. That's why I'm such a failure.' Well, boohoo! Go sell that trash somewhere else. I'm not buying. Pervert."

You already know that you are unworthy. This is an elementary doctrine of Christ, an entry point for this life. Now is the time to acknowledge the surpassing excellence of Christ -- credited to your account by grace. The Bible teaches that Jesus has overcome the world for you (John 16:33), that he has left us his peace (John 14:27), that we have been seated at the right hand of God with Christ (Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 3:1), that we are co-heirs with Jesus Christ (Romans 8:17), that we are a new creation, and that all things have become

new (2 Corinthians 5:17), that we are the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:21), that greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4), that if you will abide in him and if his word abides in you, you will ask what you will, and it will be done for you (John 15:7), that if you have faith, you can command a mountain to throw itself into the sea, and it will obey you (Matthew 21:21), that if you ask for anything in prayer, if you believe that you receive it, you will get it (Mark 11:24), that it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom (Luke 12:32), that if you ask, you will receive, and if you seek, you will find (Matthew 7:7), that God is for us, and no one can be against us (Romans 8:31), that God is the rewarder of those who diligently seek him (Hebrews 11:6), that we can approach the throne of grace for help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16), that we should cast all our cares upon him, because he cares for us (1 Peter 5:7), and on and on and on.

Turn your attention to doctrines of faith and blessings. Your "God-centered" preachers try hard to hide them from you, because they are so "centered" on God that they refuse to believe him, listen to him, or look at his many promises of grace and power. (Yes, it is a scam.) Paul prayed that his readers would receive a spirit of wisdom and revelation, and that the eyes of their hearts would be enlightened, so that they would know all the blessings that belong to them through Jesus Christ. Some only preach what we don't have, and not what we have in Christ. Condemning health and wealth, wellness and victory, even when God's promises must become collateral damage, is a shortcut to make themselves look spiritual and righteous. This is anti-gospel. They are anti-Christ. When you are suffering, you cannot afford to play their religious games, or you will just become another stepping stone on their path to self-glorification.

In myself, I have the worst self-esteem in the world, but this is why I can be bold, because I have given up on myself long ago, and now I act on the basis of the worth and power of the one I represent. Those who think I am arrogant have never given up on themselves. Their confidence may partly come from Christ – I hope! – but a lot of it comes from their self-worth, and they imagine that someone who speaks like I do must be a megalomaniac, because they themselves would have to be megalomaniacs if they were to speak the same way. But I know my own business. I was the most stupid, fearful, depressed, talentless, pathetic loser I have ever known, who had barely accomplished anything and could barely put a sentence together. So what? If I minister out of myself or if I preach myself, I would not be a servant of Christ. He saved me. Now I work for him. And he owns the whole world. So when I am doing the King's business, I am bigger than any professor or president, any corporation or denomination. I will rebuke Satan himself.

Some people would speak boldly if they work for a prominent company or if they represent some powerful politician, but if someone is bold because he works for Christ, he is a monster. It is all holy and hallelujah when we are talking about how poor and sick we are, but if you dare bring up God's promises concerning healing and prosperity, blessings and miracles, you are a heretic. You are a wolf in sheep's clothing. You preach a cheap gospel. Don't you dare quote Jesus on his many promises on faith and power or they would "redemptive-historical" the devil out of you. They can RH any Bible passage to oblivion, so if you want to keep your Jesus, you'd better shut up. You cannot surrender to this if you

wish to get out of depression. This kind of theology is a religious fetish. The name plaque says "Pastor" but the P is for "Pervert." It is not humility. You have to feed on God's word on victory, on what Jesus has accomplished for you, on what you have and who you are in Christ. You are the righteousness of God in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21). You are more than a conqueror in him (Romans 8:37). The Bible says, "As he is, so are we in this world" (1 John 4:17). Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But cheer up! I have overcome the world!" (John 16:33).

Think on verses like these (Philippians 4:8; Romans 12:2). Turn them over and over and over in your mind, day and night (Psalm 1). Talk in line with what God teaches. Pray with faith, not false humility. I did this continuously. I did this so much I wanted to throw up. Then I did it some more. I did not socialize, watch television, or play video games. I did not use "for everything God created is good" (1 Timothy 4:4) as an excuse to indulge in entertainment and drink buckets of beer and smoke cigars "for the glory of God." God's word was my only companion. Then I cried myself to sleep every night. Then the next day it was the same thing all over again. But then I stopped crying. And then I grew strong. And then I became happy, unmovably happy. From that time forward I have never been fearful or depressed. I have peace and joy all the time. There are pervert preachers who think there is something wrong with this, but Jesus said he gave me his joy, and I am not going to let some half-way Catholic take it away from me.

Now I can walk into a place and lift a whole group of people out of depression, fear, unbelief, and sickness. I can fight these things in all of them at the same time. Sometimes I have to fight all the people while trying to help them because they are all against you -- you know how people can be. I can bring them the healing that Christ brought me: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope." I preach repentance, much stronger than the half-way Catholics ever could -- so strong that even they criticize me for it -- but then I preach real deliverance, a deliverance that produces actual effects in the people. God is not just a psychological crutch.

You can do this too. You need to talk to yourself, rebuke yourself, encourage yourself, with the word of God. He said, "In this world, you will have trouble," and some perverts only preach this far. But he continued, "Cheer up! I have overcome the world!" He has given you his joy. You can be happy by the power of Christ, when you are facing trouble, and when you are not facing trouble. This is true piety.

8. Half-Way Catholic

~ from email ~

Based on my understanding of that theologian, I think that if he had not committed himself to the Westminster Confession of Faith, or if he had stated his beliefs in his own words without constraint, he would have contradicted the WCF on at least several points. If I am correct, this goes to show the powerful hold that man-made traditions can have in the minds of even the clearest thinkers. He struggled to harmonize the truth that he saw and the tradition that he loved, but it was impossible. Since I cannot presume to speak for him, and since this is a hypothetical scenario (pretending that he had not committed himself to the WCF), it is only a guess.

On the other hand, I have no such loyalty to the WCF, not even a little bit. I could not care less if I contradict Westminster, or Dort, or Calvin, or whoever or whatever. I find the very idea that I should care to be puzzling to me, and everyone who presses me to side with a tradition always seems like a pathetic loser, just a rubbish believer. There are people who consider this attitude sacrilegious, but this is because their orthodoxy is human tradition, and it is this kind of attitude that crucified Jesus Christ. Human religious tradition, when it grows strong, becomes the spirit of slander, and when it grows stronger, becomes the spirit of murder -- not always the physical act of killing, but a hatred that wishes to get rid of someone, often by dishonest means. We see this with every Christian tradition, and it is strong in the Reformed. There is something alarmingly wrong, defective, and broken in the person who insists that we ought to subscribe to a human tradition such that we must submit our conscience to it and then judge other people by it. When he does this, he becomes anti-Christ.

This is why, although I would admit that much of my theology agree with the Reformed, I do not call myself Reformed. On many things, the Reformed are not unique, so when I agree with the Reformed, I also agree with many others. Agreeing on these things would not make me Reformed. Then, on other things, I clearly contradict them. Some people call me Reformed and then attack me for not fully agreeing with the Reformed, but this is a strawman, because I prefer to do without the label, and have said so. This tactic is absurd and desperate. In fact, given what I have seen in the Reformed, including their doctrines, attitudes, and actions, I would be ashamed to be identified with the Reformed. Given how awful some of these people are, both intellectually and ethically, I am embarrassed that some people would think that I am one of them. Although I sometimes appear to accept this label in my writings -- if I have done so, it was not done eagerly, but grudgingly for the sake of convenience -- in all the years of my life and ministry, I have never introduced myself as Reformed. I also do not introduce myself as a Calvinist.

My doctrine is that God is sovereign, and that he causes and sustains all things as the Bible teaches. I have no special interest in emphasizing that God is sovereign over evil, but my interest is in saying that God is sovereign in general, sovereign over all, and sovereign in

salvation, and to respect the biblical emphasis and proportion. In fact, I would mention his sovereignty over evil less often if not for the fact that Christians, even the Reformed, deny it, often contradicting themselves as they do so. Moreover, I have no special preference in using the term "author of sin," and might have favored some other expression if not for the fact that this is the expression used to deny God's sovereignty over evil.

Sometimes I use their expressions even if I do not prefer them, so that I can throw them back in their faces. If they claim that God is not the "author of sin" contrary to what the Bible teaches, then I will show them that the Bible teaches that God is indeed the "author of sin," in the metaphysical or ontological sense. If they bully Christians for affirming a "health and wealth" gospel, but in the process also ridicule and overthrow much of what the Bible teaches -- as they always do -- then I will show them that the Bible indeed teaches a gospel of "health and wealth," lots of health and lots of wealth. Health and wealth. Health and wealth. Health and wealth. What are you gonna do? Huh?! WHAT YOU GONNA DO?!! Are you going to ban me from your mystical snack, and take your tiny crackers from me? I prefer real oyster crackers in my clam chowder anyway, not that bland cheap stuff you serve. By the way, are you making your church members go on a diet, or do you think you are feeding baby pigeons (1 Corinthians 11:34)?

They persecute people who do not fight back. They are often nothing more than self-righteous bullies who vastly overestimate their intellect and faithfulness. In any case, I do not believe that those who deny that God is the author of sin is interested in defending God's integrity. No, I think they are more interested in defending the notion that they are interested in defending God's integrity, even if they must impose a moral standard on God that the Bible does not teach – this makes them the heretics. They are defending themselves, not God, since what they say about God adds to what God says about himself, and contradicts what God says about himself. It is a deviant fetish, a religious scam.

As for your point, I suppose you are correct. A person who agrees with the very words of the WCF would technically commit blasphemy, not only on this point about the author of sin, but on several other points as well. For example, it claims that certain things should only be performed by those who have been lawfully ordained. The Bible does not teach this, but it teaches the priesthood of all believers, which the Reformed also hypocritically teaches. The doctrine amounts to an indirect blasphemy against Jesus Christ as the only mediator between God and man. If we are going to be strict about this, to indirectly reject Christ as the sole mediator is also to indirectly preach another gospel, and the message ceases to save. One leading Reformed theologian declared, "God is our father. The Church is our mother." If the church is your mother, do a paternity test, because God is not your father.

The WCF and the Reformed commit multiple blasphemies. I sometimes refer to the Reformed as "half-way Catholic," and that is a good way to summarize what they amount to. And what about the master heresy of cessationism? And what about the false doctrines of passive reprobation, of free will, of compatibilism, of the covenant of works, of common grace, of the sincere offer, of the church, of the mystical presence in communion, and others? It is a big mess. Why would I ever sign my soul away to the WCF? Why would I

ever want to be called Reformed? And if I contradict them on all these things, why would it be fair for anyone to call me Reformed, and especially for the purpose of accusing me for not being Reformed enough? By the way, if you are ordained by people like these, are you really "lawfully" ordained, or somehow less ordained than before?

Limit the time you spend in arguing with people on this matter, since many of them are hardened. Jesus taught us not to cast pearls before swine. Do not waste your life on people who would never listen. There are many people who have not been instructed. They want to learn, and might listen. Part of the reason I mentioned several other issues is to show you that the WCF and Reformed are not defective only in the area of divine sovereignty, so it would be a mistake to focus too much on this area. You could argue endlessly with them on this, and never get anywhere. They are broken people. And even if you change their minds after years of debate, you have only fixed one thing. What they need is a "conversion" in their way of thinking, in their very way of being followers of Christ, and not just doctrinal correction on one issue. A Catholic who abandons one Catholic doctrine is still a Catholic. He has to stop thinking like a Catholic completely. Otherwise, he just ends up a half-way Catholic, awfully ordained.

9. Prayer and The Word of Faith

~ from email ~

Both the Reformed / Evangelical / Cessationist (REC) and the Word of Faith teachers (WOF) are not completely correct. They both teach heresies, and the REC heresies are often as severe as the WOF heresies. The WOF heresies receive more attention partly because the charismatics, unlike the REC, are not so obsessed with persecuting Christians or with thinking of themselves as guardians of the faith. On many occasions, I have shown that REC heresies are at least as blasphemous, but they rarely have to pay for it, since other Christians tend to mind their own business.

When we bring up the WOF, some people immediately rant about how this preacher swindles money, what that preacher spends on his lavish lifestyle, and on and on. This tactic might work if you are talking to something like, say, a cat, since it is easily distracted. No one can get away with that when talking to me. Your Presbyterian pastor was fired for committing adultery last week, and your Baptist professor turned into a Catholic. I am not going to dismiss all the Presbyterian and Baptist doctrines because of that. Maybe some of these doctrines happen to agree with the Bible. And if you start to rant about WOF heresies, I can bury you with REC heresies several times over. So let us not play silly games.

We will focus on the ideas, and the ideas that relate to the present topic, and not become distracted because of prejudice. Moreover, it is acknowledged that we are making generalizations for the sake of convenience. So not every characteristic that we assign to a group would apply to every individual that belongs to that group. But when it applies, it applies. There is no running away from it by complaining about generalizations.

On this matter of faith and prayer, the WOF is clearly more biblical. There is no contest.

God's Will

Let us take a look at three passages that people have distorted to endorse a prayer that says, "if it is your will." If there are other passages, you will see that they are also similarly abused in order to reach a conclusion of unbelief and uncertainty.

First, Jesus said something like this when he prayed, a short time before he was arrested (Luke 22:42). However, it is outrageous when the REC applies this to many of our prayers. Jesus was making a prayer of dedication, committing himself to his mission. The REC applies this to praying for things like healing or other things that we want. They claim you do not know if it is God's will to heal you, so you say, "If it is your will, heal me." But if it is applied this way, this would have to mean that Jesus did not know if it was God's will for him to perform the atonement, even though he mentioned it several times to his disciples. In other words, this interpretation becomes a denial of a basic and core doctrine

of Christ. This demonstrates either utter incompetence or how far some people will go to annihilate God's word in order to protect their unbelief.

Second, James instructs his readers to say, "If it is God's will, then we will do this or that" (James 4:15). However, he is talking about our plans in life, not about things that God has already said that we should have, like healing (James 5:15), our daily bread (Matthew 6:11), and so on. He is talking about what we will do, not what God will do, or what we ask God to do. Also, James is referring to people who "boast and brag" (James 4:16) about their future and their plans. Therefore, this interpretation implies that if I accept the Bible as a revelation of God's will and pray with confidence, then I am sinfully boasting, so that I become the target of this rebuke. In other words, the REC interpretation implies that it is sin to accept God's will, that it is sin to accept the Bible. It is an attack on the authority of God and the inerrancy of Scripture.

Third, John writes, "If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us" (1 John 5:14). So God's will is important to prayer. But John does not tell you to say it, as in, "God, if this is according to your will, give me this." He tells you to do it -- you should pray according to his will. He says, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us -- whatever we ask -- we know that we have what we asked of him" (v. 14-15). Many people would pray, "God, do this if it is your will," and then if it happens, they would think it is God's will. On the other hand, John says we can know that something is God's will before we pray, so that we can approach him with confidence as we pray, and as we ask for something that we know is in line with God's will, we can know that we have what we ask. Here there is no "if" when it comes to God's will -- you know before you ask, and because you know as you ask, you know that you have what you ask.

This contradicts many people's theology and practice of prayer. The REC makes God's will a basis for doubt, appealing to a secret will in God that they do not know, but the WOF makes God's will a basis for faith, appealing to a revealed will that they learned from Scripture. As Jesus said, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (John 15:7). Since this is exactly the WOF doctrine, the WOF is right, and the others are wrong. Unless you are making a prayer of dedication, it is often wrong to pray "if it is your will," as if you do not already know his will. In a prayer of petition, it can be an indication of unbelief and rebellion.

When you came to Christ, how come you did not pray, "God, I am a sinner. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and he came to this earth to die for sinners. If it is your will, save me, but if not, let me burn in hell"? Now when you sin, how come you do not pray, "God, I have sinned. If it is your will, forgive me, but if it is not, then revoke my salvation and damn me to hell." How come? Because you know Jesus already suffered for your sins and paid for your forgiveness. God tells you this in his word. You knew God's will before you asked, and you received by faith. Well, Jesus paid for a whole lot of other things, and God also tells you about them in his word. Why don't you find out about them instead of attacking other Christians who take advantage of these benefits?

Words

The WOF is correct on Mark 11:23 and the REC is wrong, if you can even get the REC to talk about it.

And Matthew 17:20. And Matthew 21:21. And Luke 17:6.

You can make up funny labels for it. You can call it "name it and claim it." You can mock it, and mock it, and mock it. Jesus still said what he said. And he meant what his words meant. You can criticize what the WOF infer from them, add to them, or build around them, but if any of your jeers so much as scratches those verses, you are attacking Jesus himself.

And that's not funny.

Once Scripture becomes collateral damage -- and it always does when the REC attacks, because they are really using the WOF as a pretext to move against Christ -- the greater guilt falls on the heresy hunters. When that happens, it is better to drop your weapons and "name and claim" the forgiveness that you know belongs to you through the blood of Christ. This is one reason I am so harsh with the REC. They are flying their plane straight into a mountain, and they are too stupid to know or too stubborn to care. Some people even make it their profession to commit spiritual suicide.

Oh, you better name it and claim it!

Now, it is wrong to say that our words in themselves contain the power to go out and make things happen. Although their general teaching is correct, this particular detail is a false inference from some of the verses they use. Without dealing with these, we can instead illustrate the truth by one passage:

On the day the LORD gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the LORD in the presence of Israel: "O sun, stand still over Gibeon, O moon, over the Valley of Aijalon." So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jashar. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the LORD listened to a man. Surely the LORD was fighting for Israel! (Joshua 10:12-14)

Note: "There has never been a day like it before or since" (v. 14) does not mean that no miracle like this or greater than this has happened or can happen after Joshua. It only says that no miracle like this happened again up to the time of the writing of this verse.

Verse 12 is one of the clearest examples of a teaching like Mark 11:23. Although Joshua's statement addressed only the sun and moon, the verse says that he spoke to the Lord. And verse 14 says it happened because the Lord listened and carried out the words, not that the

words themselves went forth and fulfilled themselves. Therefore, the command of faith is merely one form of prayer, spoken in faith before God. This makes Mark 11:23 come into harmony with Mark 11:22 and 24.

As a side point, Joshua 10 makes the REC total criminals when it comes to their position on the "greater works," or works greater than those Jesus performed (John 14:12). It is arguable that Joshua already performed greater works than Jesus did, or at least the same works. Elijah and Elisha also raised the dead. It is stupid to be nervous about the greater works, because they are all the works of God, not the works of men. The REC has their eyes on men, and so the greater works become a problem. Their eyes are fixed on men, and they cannot see how men can perform greater works than God. However, I see God working miracles with Moses, God working miracles with Elijah, God working miracles with Jesus, with the apostles, and with us. God performs miracles at certain times greater than the ones he performs at other times.

What the John MacArthur is wrong with this?! God receives all the glory. But no, you have to explain it all away. So you cannot do greater works, you cannot do even the same works, you pretty much cannot do any works. You cannot move mountains, unless we are talking about your ever-increasing pew-splitting behind. And forget about moving trees, because even the bushes are slapping you around. This is our Christianity now. This is, you tell us, better. This is resurrection power! This is Christ ruling on the throne! Hallelujah!

Tense

Some of the WOF seem to think that it is better or even necessary to speak in faith only in the present or past tense. Again, Jesus offers the best example. He went to a dead girl and said to the people, "Stop wailing. She is not dead but asleep" (Luke 8:52). Then, the Bible says, "They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead" (v. 53). The girl was indeed dead. His "faith confession," to use the WOF expression, was not only positive, as in "She shall live" or "She is asleep," but he denied the present reality and said, "She is not dead." He was not using sleep as a metaphor or a cultural expression for death, since he explicitly denied that she was dead, and because the mourners laughed at him. They understood him to mean sleep, not death.

When Lazarus had died, Jesus told his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up" (John 11:11). They really thought that he was only sleeping, so they said, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better" (v. 12). So Jesus explained, "Lazarus is dead" (v. 14). This exchange tells us several things. First, Jesus knew that Lazarus was dead. By the time he arrived, Lazarus would have been dead for days. Thus he was literally denying the reality. Second, when Jesus said that Lazarus was asleep, he did not intend it as a metaphor for death. His disciples understood him to mean that Lazarus was merely sleeping. This prompted him to change his statement to say that Lazarus was dead. Again, this shows that he was literally denying the reality. Third, when Jesus needed to clarify the situation, he was not afraid to acknowledge the natural reality, that Lazarus was dead. He was not worried that this would nullify the miracle. In other words, although he denied the reality, he also freely acknowledged it when needed. Fourth, Jesus did not

think of his words as things that possessed independent power -- independent of his person and intent -- once they were spoken. Otherwise, he would not have changed his statement from saying that Lazarus was merely asleep to that he was dead.

The first and second points are consistent with WOF doctrine, but the third and fourth points contradict at least some teachers and practitioners of WOF doctrine. The WOF should learn that one does not necessarily doom the situation by speaking according to the natural circumstances, and that words are not things that possess independent being and power once spoken. That said, there is no biblical justification to fault a Christian who claims healing by saying, "I am not sick. I am healed." (I have addressed the matter of medication in another place. Briefly, healing comes not because we take away something, but because we add something. But I wish to stay on topic here.) Nevertheless, he should do this only if he truly believes it on the basis of the word of God, and the sickness should indeed leave -- what he says should actually happen. Otherwise, it is not faith, but presumption. There is no power in simply going through the motions, but there are many people who identify with the WOF who operate on this level. They do not believe any of it. Their words and actions do not naturally proceed from faith in their hearts. They are mechanically performing what they have been taught. The doctrine is not wrong. These people are wrong.

Faith is expressed in a command. Faith is expressed in a present or past tense statement, even in contradiction to reality, not as a way to deceive, but as a form of prayer to alter reality -- performed by God, not by the words themselves. And it is fine to speak according to the present reality when it is needed to eliminate confusion. In some circles, this is a bizarre discussion, because the people never speak in faith. Faith itself is foreign to them. Thus they think it must be heresy. In any case, it is certainly not wrong to express faith as a command, or as a present or past tense statement. If it is a natural expression of your faith in a given instance, then speak accordingly, as a form of prayer.

Faith can also be expressed in a future tense statement, although the WOF is often wary of this. This is partly because they think that the words themselves create or alter reality, so that a future tense statement and the repetition of a future tense statement would indefinitely delay its realization. This would also apply to a prayer of petition. Instead of receiving by faith, the future tense keeps pushing the fulfillment into the future, and "tomorrow never comes." Instead of an expression of faith, it is probably an expression of wishful thinking.

The reasoning is understandable, but not entirely sound. First, a faith statement is only a form of prayer. The words themselves do not go forth to create or alter reality; rather, when our prayers are so full of certainty that they are spoken as a statement of fact or command, God hears and honors them. He performs the work. Second, although the literal meaning of the statement matters, the intention of the heart also counts. Let us take an illustration from Mark 11. When Jesus cursed the fig tree, he said, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again" (v. 14). He did not specify how this would happen, and for the tree to wither up was not the only way the statement could be fulfilled. Another way would be for humanity to perish, so that no one could eat from the tree again. Evidently Jesus meant to destroy the

tree, not all of mankind, when he spoke the statement, and the intention determined the manner of fulfillment.

Therefore, although it is true that a future tense statement might be selected because of a lack of faith, this is not necessarily the case. One can make a future tense statement by faith with an intention that does not suggest mere wishful thinking or an indefinite delay. Perhaps it is just a more natural way to express his faith on that occasion, and he fully expects what he says to happen.

Repetition

The WOF frowns upon certain types of repetition, especially prayers in the form of requests and future tense statements. It seems that if you ask God for something the second time, it implies that you did not believe when you asked him the first time. This reasoning would be correct given WOF assumptions, but their assumptions are not completely correct.

In my encounters, most of the people who identify with the WOF do not in fact grasp their teachings, and they do not practice them, or they practice only the mechanics, and usually not in the way taught by the WOF. In such cases, any failure cannot be used as evidence against WOF doctrine. However, since we are a culture of slanderers, these are pretty much the only kind of cases cited against the WOF. A recent one describes a woman who refused medication and died. Some examples are cited in which WOF teachers criticize medical science, but I have heard medical doctors make the same criticisms. The reality is that medicine is not omnipotent, but God is: "She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse" (Mark 5:26). Do you know how many people have died under medical science, sometimes because of medical science and not in spite of it? For some reason, if you die trusting medicine, it is a tragedy, but if you die trusting God, it is heresy. Hypocrite.

They found that the woman wrote in her journal: "God heal me. God heal me. God heal me." But she withered away and died. This is supposed to invoke indignation against the WOF. However, what the woman did was precisely what the WOF says could get a person killed. According to the WOF, you are supposed to know God's word on the matter, and then receive by faith. You are supposed to take it. There is no indication that the woman ever took anything by faith. It was all wishful thinking. She did not do what the WOF taught. So whether the WOF is right or wrong, an anecdote like this cannot be cited against them or their doctrine. A person could repeat, "God forgive me. God forgive me. God forgive me." There is no faith there, but only a worldly sorrow that leads to death. He is supposed to believe in the blood of Christ, and receive his forgiveness by faith. We should not even make up charges against the devil. If he is so bad, you would not need to make things up to discredit him. When the REC resorts to slander, they have joined forces with Satan, the father of lies, and they are no longer in position to criticize anyone.

Again, prayer cannot be judged only by the outward mechanics, but the intention of the heart counts. Repetition can come from unbelief, and indeed for most people it does, but it can come from faith. Jesus also spoke against meaningless and mechanical repetition, but

repetition is not always meaningless and mechanical. Elijah offers one example that illustrates how faith can be consistent with repetition. James refers to him as an example of praying with faith, and also applies it to healing (James 5:17-18). He prayed repeatedly, and seven times he told his servant to go back and check for rain. Then he stopped when there was an indication of rain (1 Kings 18:41-44).

So asking for something repeatedly and checking if it is coming does not always suggest a lack of faith, but it can be an expression of faith in that the person keeps on believing instead of giving up. Elijah kept praying, but look what he was praying for! Elijah kept checking, but look what he was checking for! He expected a miracle of nature that overturned a weather condition that had lasted for more than three years. Even before he prayed, he said to the king, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain" (1 Kings 18:41). No one can accuse him of unbelief. He fully expected it to happen, and his persistent prayer was his expression of faith.

Jesus wondered if he would find faith on earth when he comes, and there he referred to a woman who persisted with a judge to hear her case (Luke 18:1-8). This is faith -- keep asking, never giving up, and expecting God to perform what you ask, even if it takes a miracle. Faith is not crippled by the mechanics of expression. As long as the expression comes from certainty, and not chosen to mask unbelief, there is some freedom in the form that it takes.

10. Occasionalism: A Matter of Metaphysics

~ from email ~

When I refer to occasionalism (I speak only for my version), I am first talking about metaphysics, not epistemology. When I apply it to epistemology, it is the metaphysics of epistemology, or the metaphysics aspect of epistemology.

It seems too infrequent for a philosopher to include a metaphysics of his epistemology -- not his metaphysics apart from his epistemology, but the metaphysics of his epistemology. However, the metaphysics is essential, because knowledge does not happen without reality (by definition, nothing happens without reality), so a view of knowledge is incomplete and in fact impossible without a view of reality, and this view of reality must cohere with the view of knowledge. We can argue over which one we need to talk about first, but eventually we need both, and they need to agree with each other and support each other.

The empiricist claims that knowledge comes from sensation, but metaphysically, how can it happen, and how does it happen? What kind of world is this, in which what he says is possible and true? This must be a reality in which his theory of knowledge is possible and true, and his theory of knowledge must be able to discover and explain this view of reality. If he fails at either metaphysics or epistemology, or if he fails at relating the two, then both his metaphysics and epistemology fall apart.

This is straightforward. There are two things. They are two big things, and they are two different things. However, even this seems too much for some people, so they take it upon themselves to pontificate, although they cannot even distinguish and keep track of these too-big-to-miss topics. There are even some people who, thinking themselves clever, declare that my occasionalism is like empiricism, or just empiricism in disguise, since I sometimes talk about what can happen in the mind when a sensation occurs. Now, if occasionalism is foreign to them, it seems they are ignorant about empiricism as well, because if they understand either occasionalism or empiricism, it would be impossible for them to make this criticism.

Under empiricism, knowledge comes from sensations, and the sensations are basically reliable (whatever that means). Under occasionalism, nothing comes from the sensations, and what comes to the mind has nothing directly to do with the sensations, and may be completely different from, independent of, and even contrary to the objects and events that occasioned the sensations. In fact, a thought can occur in the mind without corresponding sensations, or ten thousand sensations can occur without any thought coming into the mind. How is that empiricism? Perhaps they have difficulty with this because the matter of metaphysics or the metaphysics of epistemology never even occurred to them, and so whatever I say, they are stuck thinking about knowledge acquisition and evaluation, when

I am talking about a different topic. I am offering something they do not realize that they need.

Under empiricism, if you see a red car, you are supposed to think you see a red car, and you think that because you have the sensation that you see a red car. Under occasionalism, if you look at a red car, on the occasion this happens, the thought can occur in your mind that you see a green elephant, or that you smell coffee, or that you indeed see a red car, or no thought might occur at all. It has nothing to do with whether the thought is true or false, and it has nothing to do with judging whether the thought is true or false. God causes two independent events, but on the same "occasion," so that they appear to be related, but that are in fact not related in themselves. How is this empiricism?

You wonder, if it has nothing to do with how I judge a thought, then what good is it? Again, we are not talking about that topic. This is metaphysics. I am talking about being and cause. It is a description of how something happens, how anything happens. This is the same description that I apply to human choice, the collision of objects, the digestion of food, and everything that happens in reality. God causes each thing that happens, and each thing is unrelated to another thing except by the apparent relationship that God arranges as he causes the two things to occur on the same "occasion." It is not epistemology as such, but it must be applied to epistemology, because reality includes knowledge, and knowledge has to "happen" in reality, just as anything has to happen in reality.

Occasionalism has nothing immediately to do with whether something is true or false, good or evil. It only has to do with the fact that something happens. We can take an analogy from the difference between physics and ethics. Physics can describe a person taking up a knife and pushing it into another person. Even "person" and "knife" do not strictly come under physics, but if we will tolerate the verbs, we can say, "A takes up B, and pushes B into C." This has nothing to do with good and evil. It is only a description of an event. You cannot even call it "killing" unless you bring biology into it. One would miss the point if he complains that this statement of physics is a defective theory of ethics because it does not tell him whether the event is good or evil. Any theory of physics would be immune to such an absurd criticism, since it would be a categorical error. You can call it a murder only under ethics, and you would make this judgment according to the moral principles in your worldview.

The physics and biology are necessary for this case in ethics, and assumed even if not mentioned, because a case of murder must happen in reality. Occasionalism describes, from the perspective of metaphysics, why you might have a thought when a sensation occurs, but it does not directly address the issue of whether the thought is true. It is talking about metaphysics. Truth is evaluated by another set of principles, such as the laws of logic and the axioms of the system. If you cannot judge something as true by the epistemological principles of your worldview, then you do not know it as true according to your worldview. You might, however, still hold it as your opinion.

For some reason, it appears that many people lack the mental ability to consider events as events. Murder, as murder, is ethically wrong, but it is possible to talk about murder as an

event only from metaphysical, physical, and biological perspectives. Thus I refer to God as "the author of sin" from the perspective of metaphysics or ontology, because he is the author of every object and every event in this sense. Somehow people cannot wrap their minds around it. However, this is not some theological sideshow, but the foundation for everything. If you do not acknowledge this point, then in principle you cannot proceed to anything else in your system.

Like those people who cannot distinguish metaphysics and epistemology, or conceive of the necessity of metaphysics for epistemology, it seems Christians lack the mental ability to distinguish between theology/metaphysics and soteriology/ethics, and conceive of the necessity of theology/metaphysics for soteriology/ethics. People ask them a question about metaphysics, such as whether man has free will, and they answer with something from soteriology, like saying that true freedom is obedience to God. This does not at all address the topic. They lack the intelligence to make basic categorical distinctions. Such individuals are not qualified to pass judgment on what I say.

11. Twisting Scripture on Spirit Baptism

~ from email ~

You said that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is not repentance, conversion or justification, but it is for power for preaching, healing, visions, dreams, prophecies and miracles. Then how do you interpret these verses? 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, Ephesians 1:13-14, Ephesians 4:4-5, and Galatians 5:22.

People have twisted these passages in order to attack the biblical doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. However, these passages do not contradict the doctrine, and they are not even relevant to the specific point of dispute about the baptism of the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. 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.

It has been competently argued that this refers to the action of the Spirit, who baptizes us into one body, and not the action of Jesus, who baptizes us with his power. If this is true, then this is actually evidence for the doctrine that the baptism of the Spirit is not the same as conversion. The baptism of the Spirit has always been credited to Jesus, and this text refers to a different operation. To bring this as a refutation of the doctrine is not only a misuse, but it is blasphemy against Jesus Christ, rejecting his role as the baptizer with the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, for the sake of argument, let us throw out this first point. Let us pretend that Paul is talking about the baptism of the Spirit, and let us pretend that it says that we are all baptized with the Spirit, and let us pretend that this means conversion and the baptism of the Spirit are the same thing (although even if we pretend the first two are true, third point does not logically follow). That said, Paul sometimes speaks as if he assumes that all believers have been baptized in water. This means that we must also use this interpretation on those verses where he mentions faith and baptism at the same time, or where he refers to them as interchangeable. This must mean that when a person believes in Christ, water comes down from heaven and drenches him, or that person is miraculously thrown into water when he believes. Bravo.

2 Corinthians 1:21-22

Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

It betrays ignorance and it begs the question to use this text against the biblical doctrine that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is distinct from conversion. It betrays ignorance because those who teach that the baptism is distinct also insist that a person receives the Holy Spirit in a sense at conversion (Romans 8:16), only that the baptism of the Spirit is a subsequent operation of the Holy Spirit that grants power for ministry. It begs the question because for verse 22 to apply, it must already assume that conversion and the baptism are the same thing, because otherwise this could just be talking about the Spirit's operation in conversion as distinct from a subsequent operation.

Then again, it is irrelevant even if Paul is talking about the baptism of the Holy Spirit, since he also assumes that believers have received water baptism. The issue is whether there is any basis anywhere in the Bible that conversion and the baptism of the Spirit are in fact two things, and there is clear basis for this, just as there is clear basis that faith and water baptism are two things.

Moreover, even if all these texts are referring to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, even if all these texts teach that all believers have received this baptism of the Holy Spirit, and even if all these texts teach that conversion and the baptism of the Holy Spirit are the same thing, it remains that the Bible teaches that the baptism of the Holy Spirit confers miraculous powers on the Christian (Luke 24:49, Acts 1:4-8, 2:17-18).

Therefore, one who claims to be a believer and who claims that conversion and the baptism of the Holy Spirit are the same thing should manifest and experience this power. Otherwise, he is defective, unbelieving, or as required by his own doctrine, reprobate, and headed toward endless torment in hellfire.

Suppose Paul and Henry are always together, and suppose Paul and Henry are in fact the same person, and then suppose it is certain that Henry always have a dog with him. Now if there is no dog, you are not Paul or Henry! If there is no dog, the only way that you can be Paul is if Paul and Henry are two different people, and if Paul and Henry are not always together.

Thus those who use this text suffer a quadruple backfire: 1. It shows ignorance of the opposing position, 2. It begs the question, 3. It must also make faith and water baptism identical, and 4. It implies that these people are spiritually defective, unbelieving, or even unsaved and reprobate. The first shows that these people are lazy and unfair. The second shows that they are stupid and irrational. The third shows that they are incompetent and sacrilegious. The fourth shows that they are powerless, faithless, or reprobate.

Ephesians 1:13-14

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession -- to the praise of his glory.

The text shows that there is an operation of the Spirit at conversion, but does not show that there is only one operation of the Spirit that is identical to the operation called the baptism, or the one intended to confer power. Just showing that there is an operation of the Spirit at conversion, or that all believers have received the Spirit in a sense, means nothing to the debate.

In fact, the Pentecostals that I know tend to teach the Spirit's operation at conversion much more strongly and much more frequently than these other people. Then after that, they teach an additional operation of the Spirit that confers power. This text does nothing to contradict this.

If the text is indeed referring to the baptism of the Spirit, and if it is indeed assuming that all believers have it, then again we have the same situation as those texts that assume all believers have been baptized in water, or that refer to faith and water baptism as if they are interchangeable. It does not mean that faith and water baptism are the same thing.

In addition, there must also be some evidence of the kind of power that the Bible says must accompany the baptism of the Holy Spirit. If there is no such power, if this power follows the baptism, and if the baptism is the same as conversion, it must mean that the person is unconverted, headed for hell.

The quadruple backfire applies again. Lazy and unfair. Stupid and irrational. Incompetent and sacrilegious. Powerless and faithless, or reprobate.

Ephesians 4:4-6

There is one body and one Spirit -- just as you were called to one hope when you were called -- one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Same thing. The quadruple backfire applies again. Lazy and unfair. Stupid and irrational. Incompetent and sacrilegious. Powerless and faithless, or reprobate.

So what if there is only one Spirit? I have never heard anyone teach that we receive one Spirit at conversion, and a different Spirit when we are baptized with the Spirit. The doctrine claims that these are two operations of the same Spirit. So what if there is one Lord? So what if there is one baptism? There could be three trillion operations of the Spirit, and still one Spirit.

What in the world am I doing here? Why do I have to explain something like this? Where am I? Is this real life? Am I being pranked? Where are the cameras?

Galatians 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Again, everyone that I have ever heard teach that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a different thing from conversion, also insists that anyone who believes in Jesus has the Holy Spirit in a sense.

They use different expressions to distinguish. For example, one might say that the Spirit comes into a person at conversion, but comes upon a person at the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The same person might say that conversion results in fruit, and the baptism of the Spirit results in power. Another one might use slightly different expressions to teach the same doctrine, but he would also say that one has the Spirit in a sense in conversion, just not what the Bible calls the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

Using this text against the doctrine that the baptism of the Spirit is distinct from conversion means that one must assume this doctrine denies any operation of the Spirit at conversion. This is foolishness, ignorance, and the sin of slander. The doctrine does not make any such denial. It affirms an intense operation of the Spirit at conversion. The Spirit changes the person's nature and even dwells in him, and witnesses to him that he is a child of God. Rather, the claim is that, on the basis of other biblical passages, the baptism of the Spirit remains a distinct and subsequent operation.

Whether or not one agrees with it, this is what the doctrine teaches. A text that describes an operation of the Spirit that applies to all believers is irrelevant. Many operations of the Spirit apply to all believers, but that does not address what the doctrine claims about the baptism of the Spirit. Both the charismatic and non-charismatic teenagers in my high school understood this, but professional scholars do not. Most of these students had never been taught the doctrine directly, but they inferred the main points from listening to what some of the others said. In some churches, even the kids in nursery know the difference, but seminary theologians do not, and they write whole volumes to refute the doctrine, and some even become famous for it. Huh.

The quadruple backfire applies again. Lazy, unfair, stupid, irrational, incompetent, and sacrilegious. Powerless and faithless, or reprobate.

Therefore, the use of these passages against the biblical doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit betrays ignorance of the opposing position, dishonesty in scholarship and engagement, incompetence in basic reading comprehension, inability to make elementary inferences and linear arguments without begging the question, and the possibility that I am being pranked on television. The abuse often results in slander and blasphemy. The

arguments are not only invalid or irrelevant, but they also backfire, exposing unbelief, prejudice, and lack of intelligence and integrity.

The people pretend to be experts in the Bible, but they lack honesty in dealing with their opponents and in dealing with the things of God. They should be cast out of discussions on the matter. If they are not going to become honest about this, we have no obligation to let their trash scholarship waste our time.

If you cannot contribute something intelligent...that is asking for too much...if you cannot contribute something at least relevant to the topic, then shut your mouth. Quit. Retire. Your trash scholarship ends up getting back to me and wasting my time. Stop grabbing verses here and there and throwing them in every direction to see if you can hit someone or win by accident when they are not even relevant to the disagreement about the distinction in the doctrine.

If you disagree with something, then punch it in the face -- but you have to find the face first -- instead of flailing your arms around aimlessly like an idiot. Stop being a bunch of theological brats. Get serious. Grow up.

12. One Person, Two Natures

~ from email ~

When we construct the formulation of a biblical doctrine, we are not attempting to "make it work." The doctrine works no matter what we do. It works because it comes from God and because it describes God. It works because it is true. It is what it is, and it is true regardless of whether we can come up with a proper formulation for it. The purpose of theological formulation is to find a way to communicate the doctrine. At no point is the Scripture itself at risk, because its truth does not depend on our formulation. Of course, a heretical formulation endangers its adherents, but the Scripture itself can never suffer damage.

Person

Christ is one "person." He is never said or implied to be a "they," and he is never portrayed as one person communicating with another person. There is no instance in which Christ the man prays to God the Son, or anything like this. Based on the way that he is referred to, the way that he refers to himself, and the way that he behaves, there is no reason to think that he is not one person.

We add to this "one person" premise the idea that Christ must have two natures, one human and one divine, and then the idea that each nature must include a "mind" that accords with such a nature, one human mind and one divine mind. But on top of all this, if we add the idea that a mind or center of consciousness is necessarily a "person" in itself, we would end up with two persons. However, there is a formulation that retains the view that Christ is one person, with two centers of consciousness. As indicated, the need to arrive at this formulation is not arbitrary, but necessitated by the biblical data.

This formulation begins with the definition that a "person" is a "system" of consciousness, not a "center" of consciousness. Each system can either contain only one center of consciousness or multiple centers of consciousness. At the incarnation, God the Son took up a human mind in such a manner that the human mind is contained by the divine mind, but not mingled or confused with it. The divine mind would have access to and control over the human mind, but not vice versa. Since there is nothing inherently impossible about this, and if it accommodates the biblical data, this would make it a good formulation.

Analogy

Let us consider an analogy. We caution that the analogy is limited, appropriate only for a narrow purpose, and grossly misleading when taken out of context, because it refers to a condition that is a mental dysfunction in humans, and there is no dysfunction in Christ. That said, consider the case of multiple personality disorder in a human person. There are

indeed multiple centers of consciousness, but it is still one person. The analogy is especially fitting if there is in fact an overarching or prime personality.

My mind "contains" memories of my childhood, among other things, but only one center of consciousness. My mind can "contain" a whole other center of consciousness, with its own memories, and in man this would be a mental dysfunction. The original center of consciousness is the prime figure. What is "contained" is dependent on what contains it, not vice versa.

Christ has a human mind that is contained by the divine mind, the Logos. There is no dysfunction, because the analogy breaks down at this point to such an extent that the two cases become categorically divergent. The prime personality in Christ is the divine mind, and unlike the prime personality in man, this prime personality is God – perfect in power and intelligence. God the Son, the divine mind, in full control and with full awareness – there is no dysfunction – took up a human center of consciousness, without mixing or confusing with it, but containing it in a way that Christ in his incarnate form can say "I" and fully refer to either or both.

This formulation enables us to affirm that Christ has a human mind and a divine mind, two centers of consciousness, that the two minds are neither mingled nor confused, and that he remains one person.

System

We can return to the case of a man with multiple personalities to illustrate why it makes sense to define a person as a mental system. He has more than one center of consciousness, but he is still one person, because the multiple centers of consciousness come under one overarching one. (We are speaking relatively, because the only reason that counts is that God regards him as one person, and saves or damns him as one person.) The personalities do not exist independently, and they could be destroyed without killing the man and without erasing the prime personality, and so his personalities should be taken as a whole -- thus a "system."

The Trinity is not this way, since the members of the Trinity could be and must be distinguished in a different way than multiple personalities within one human person. The three are presumably not dependent on one another in the way that the secondary personalities of a person with multiple personalities would depend on the original personality.

There are three systems working in unison, each possessing the fullness of deity. Each of these systems presumably has only one personality. God the Son took up a human center of consciousness, but without it confusing or mingling with the divine consciousness. So in the Trinity as such, there remains only three centers of consciousness, since the human nature of Christ was never deified.

In this way, the definition of a person as a system at the same time accommodates the nature of the Trinity and the nature of Christ -- one essence, three persons, even though the person of the Son has both a divine nature and a human nature.

13. Divine Mercy and Natural Benefits

~ from email ~

When you talk about Matthew 5:43-45, you mention a parallel verse in Luke 6, but do not explain the entire passage, and there is something there that I do not understand. When Jesus says, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36), what does he mean by "merciful"? This Greek word only appears in James 5:11 where James talks Job and his perseverance.

The most important and also the most neglected rule of Bible interpretation is this: Read the words. In fact, this is the secret to decipher any text. If you learn this, you will instantly become a superior interpreter, unrivaled by the best minds of any generation.

Even professional theologians often refuse to read the words. They are always itching to pull their scholarly moves on the text, so that they go shooting off into space somewhere at the first opportunity, leaving the words behind. Then they publish their inconceivable findings in expensive volumes, to the praise of the common people, who lack the imagination to come up with tales so remote from what the biblical passages say.

One of the most absurd practices in Bible interpretation is when people investigate every little thing about the original language, the culture, the history, and the archaeology, but flatly refuse to read the whole passage to grasp the context, often not even the entire verse. If you acquire this bad habit, you end up doing "dictionary exegesis," where you study particular words, but never really read the sentences and sections. It will not help you to look up all the places where a word appears if you refuse to read the passages.

My exposition of Matthew 5 is more than enough to help you understand Luke 6 also. You should not need me to discuss every detail about a parallel passage. You need to read the words.

With Matthew 5, I show that the "love" in "love your enemies" refers to natural and practical benevolence, because Jesus uses things like sunlight and rain to illustrate what he means. Therefore, we are to extend natural and practical benevolence even to our enemies. Paul also teaches this in Romans 12:20: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." See also Exodus 23:4-5 and Proverbs 25:21-22.

With Luke 6:36, if you had read even one verse before this -- verse 35 -- you would have seen that Jesus explains it explicitly: "But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back" (v. 35). If you have seen my explanation of Matthew 5, you would not need to go beyond "love you enemies" in Luke 6:35 to know what Jesus is teaching in Luke 6 -- he is teaching the same thing. Then he becomes more

specific: "do good to them." And then he tells you what he means by that -- he says, "lend to them."

There is so much more to provide the context. How about verses 32-34? "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full." He tells you directly. You did not read that? He talks about money. Since he seems to be using money as an example -- have you read verses 27-31? -- he is referring not only to money but a natural and practical benevolence.

As for Job, there is also no difficulty. The passage tells you everything directly. You do not need Greek, or Hebrew, or any seminary training, or any reading skill beyond the children's level. You can see it yourself. Do not launch your Bible study software. Close your concordance. Throw your commentary across the room. Do not overthink. Do not try to be a scholar. Just read the words.

James says, "As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (James 5:11). If you want to know what he means by the Lord's "compassion and mercy," then you go read about "what the Lord finally brought about." See? It tells you where to look.

Flip over to Job 42, and read the words. God made him twice as rich as before (v. 10), and gave him long life (v. 17). God gave him wealth and health -- double the wealth and a lot of time to enjoy it. James refers to this even after his earlier condemnation of "rich people" (5:1-6). Read the words. James does not condemn wealth itself, or even rich people as such, but their lifestyle of oppression, licentiousness, and murder.

Great wealth and health came to Job from God, and James has no problem with it, even using him as our model. When he mentions this example, he also has in mind the natural and practical benefits that we can receive from God through faith, such as miraculous healing (James 5:15) and other miraculous answers to prayer (5:16b, 17-18). We are talking about something similar to Matthew 5 and Luke 6, the natural and practical benefits that come from God, but James focuses on those who have faith in God.

Although there has been a cessation of faith among so-called Christians, and unbelief has become official church doctrine, the mercy of God has never ceased. If God would shower food and rain upon even the reprobates, and if he has not ceased to do this, so that he might bear witness to himself and so that humanity might continue for the sake of his people (Romans 9:22-24), how much more would he bless his chosen ones with these natural benefits?

Heresy is the notion that it is wrong to believe that God is good, even when it comes to natural things. Apostasy has already occurred when people think that, because God no

longer has anything to prove, he also no longer has any mercy for us -- no more healing, no more abundance, no more natural blessings and benefits. Strange fire, you say? But how is this kind of unbelief better than tribal voodoo? This is not the God that the Bible teaches.

His word will never pass away, and his mercy endures forever (Matthew 8:16-17, James 5:15, Psalm 91:16, Matthew 6:32-33, Mark 8:17-21, Philippians 4:19). Those who restrict the benefits of the gospel to only forgiveness and sanctification, and other hidden operations so that their unbelief is not exposed, in effect reject the gospel and trample the blood of Christ, because the biblical gospel comes with natural benefits delivered by miraculous power immediately when it is introduced (Psalm 103:2-3, Matthew 9:5, Acts 14:9, Galatians 3:5). Therefore, at least in principle, those who oppose this come under the same condemnation as those who preach a different God, a different Christ, a different Spirit, a different gospel, and a different salvation (Galatians 1:8-9).

The teaching of God's natural benefits, especially to those who have faith, is so pervasive in the Bible that no one can just "Greek" it away. Some theologians Greek themselves into a fantasyland, an alternate reality in which the Bible does not mean what it says, so that they would not have to believe it. The Bible is still here, it still says what it says. People can see they are liars. They are making excuses. They are religious frauds and charlatans. The words of faith haunt their dreams. This God of mercy and power is the bane of their existence. It is their job to have faith, but they do not have faith. It is a total nightmare. And they are stuck in it.

The people still have the book, and they are reading it. They are reading all about God's promises, and God's nature to heal and to bless. So the preachers and theologians say it means something else in the Greek. When God says he will do something, in the Greek it means he will never do it. Once you have studied so much theology that you have finally become illiterate, you would see that they are right. And when you read it from the redemptive-historical perspective, the verse means the exact opposite! A text about a miracle is not really about the miracle. A text with a promise is not really about the promise. This is advanced scholarship, super-seminary level. Of course, it is just a scheme to allegorize everything so that it refers to redemption in Christ, so that they will not have to believe what the text actually says and apply any of it to their lives. Theologians have a big bag of tricks to neutralize the Bible and blame Jesus for it. But the people still have the book, and they are reading it. Many of them are "already" suspicious, but "not yet" outraged. If they will really read the words, then the jig is up.

When Jesus walked the earth he healed the sick because "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases" (Matthew 8:17). Now that he has been seated at the right hand of God, he has unloaded all infirmities and diseases back on his people. When Jesus walked the earth he would have compassion and feed the people (Matthew 15:32). Now that he has been raised from the dead, he would burn down your house with all your cats in it "for the glory of God." For people who claim to be so concerned about the glory of God, they sure make him look really bad. And they make themselves look like long-suffering heroes. Who does all this Coram Deo business really glorify?

God respects faith more than anything. You do not have true orthodoxy until you have faith. Many people will be astonished at the judgment, when after they have policed the whole world with their publications and conferences, they themselves are rejected and thrown into the darkness: "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:10-12).

14. Beginning in Healing Ministry

There are many ways to minister and receive healing. As long as it is not against biblical principles, any method is acceptable. Anointing with oil is one approach, but it is not necessary. Even here, James says that it is the prayer of faith that heals the sick, and it is the Lord who raises him up (James 5:15). People have different preferences, and although there is only one God, there are different operations (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). In every aspect of ministry, I minimize the use of means, tools, and rituals, so whenever it is up to me, I do not use oil.

When I first started, I would almost always lay hands on the sick. Jesus appeared to prefer this method as well (Luke 4:40). Both Jesus and Paul probably considered it the most reliable approach (Mark 6:5, Acts 28:8). However, when people started to receive healing in their seats while I preached, and when they started to receive healing while standing close to me as I interviewed them about their conditions before laying hands on them (Acts 5:15), I stopped touching them as often. If the healing begins as I talk to them, then I either stand back and tell the people that God is healing, or I rebuke the sickness and command the body to be healed. This is more common in public gatherings. When praying for the sick in private, my main method would still be to lay hands on them.

God can heal in unusual ways. Elisha told Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan (2 Kings 5:10). Later, a dead man was revived when he was thrown into Elisha's tomb and touched the prophet's bones (2 Kings 13:21). Paul could send out fabric that had touched his body, and the sick were healed (Acts 19:11-12). Jesus used spit on the sick, and they would be healed (Mark 7:33, Mark 8:23, John 9:6), but he did not do that all the time.

The Bible includes these examples, but God can heal in so many ways. A man with stomach cancer, accompanied by his doctor, was taken on a stretcher to an evangelist. The preacher punched him in the stomach so hard that the man bounced off the bed a little. The doctor thought the man had died, but a minute later, he was healed, standing up and praising God. The same evangelist threw a crippled child off a stage and the child landed on his feet, healed and walked by himself. People sometimes come with parts of their bodies bent in abnormal ways, unable to move or straighten them (Luke 13:11), perhaps due to arthritis, or injury, or something else. In some cases, we would just grab the limbs and bend them back to the proper positions, and they would be healed. This is in fact not rare, and I have done it myself.

Nevertheless, some methods are standard, and there is no need to run after the dramatic. Unless there is special direction for a specific case, select one that the Bible teaches as a standard approach (laying on of hands, anointing with oil, a prayer of petition, speaking to the sickness and the body), and that is the most consistent with your personality and level of faith. If the sick person specifies a method, then use that method unless there is a reason to refuse. For example, I might avoid touching a woman or a child when there

are no witnesses, even if asked to do it. Although I prefer to pray without means, if the sick person asks me to anoint him with oil on the basis of James 5, then I would do it.

This follows Jesus' pattern. When the sick asked him to lay hands on them, he did (Mark 5:23, Mark 7:32). When they asked him to come to their homes, he did (Mark 5:23-24). When they told him not to come to their homes, but only speak the word, he did (Matthew 8:5-13). On the way, when a woman decided that she would receive healing by touching his clothes, she went ahead and did it. She took healing from him without asking (Mark 5:25-29). She did not need permission -- faith is permission (Hebrews 11:1). By the time Jesus realized what happened, she was already healed, and he looked around to find her (Mark 5:30-34). When a woman asked him to heal her daughter, and he said he was not sent to people like her, she said do it anyway, and he did (Matthew 15:22-28).

God is sovereign -- this is a non-negotiable assumption in our theological reflection. However, although the Bible teaches a doctrine of divine transcendence, and this is the metaphysical context for everything else, it usually speaks in the language of divine immanence when it refers to God's dealings with people -- he interacts and even responds to us in time and history -- and thus we should also usually speak on this level. Of course the divine nature forms the basis of our reflection, and it is always assumed, but it would be awkward and unnecessary to always attempt to speak in the language or from the perspective of eternity and timelessness. God condescends to interact with us in time and history where we live.

So I pray, and he answers. I act, and he responds. Abraham, Moses, Hezekiah, and others negotiated with him. There is nothing wrong with this. The Bible is not all eternal decree, all the time, as if it was written for God himself to read. Once certain truths are assumed, we can talk freely as creatures living in time and history without compromising those truths. For example, although nothing happens apart from God's will and power, it is not wrong to say that sickness comes from the devil, and that we should fight it by faith and prayer (Acts 10:38). In fact, the Bible would require us to think and speak this way.

God is sovereign, but Jesus did not attribute healing to God's sovereign will. He made a point of crediting people's faith (Matthew 9:22 and 29, Mark 5:34 and 10:52, Luke 8:48, 17:19, 18:42). The same is true with Luke, Paul, and James (Acts 14:9, Galatians 3:5, James 5:15). And on many occasions, he was practically dictated by what the people's faith wanted him to do. This is the opposite of what many people believe. I refer to those who are unlearned in spiritual operations (1 Corinthians 12:1). If they believe healing happens at all, they tend to attribute all of it to God's sovereignty, and rarely to faith. This is the opposite of how the Bible represents the situation.

God is sovereign, and there are so many people who exploit the doctrine to excuse their unbelief and to justify a victim mentality. Since God is sovereign, they think it means that we never know what he will do, or what terrible tragedy he will send upon us next -- for his glory and pleasure, of course, and for some reason he seems to derive so much glory and pleasure from our suffering. On the other hand, the Bible uses the doctrine of divine sovereignty to assure us that God's purposes will always come true and that he will always

fulfill his promises, not only when it comes to the grand scheme of things, but also our individual lives. God's sovereignty is the basis for knowing what he will do and believing that we will receive good things from him.

Once God promises to do something, he does not "sovereignly" do something else. If he was going to do something else, he would have sovereignly said something else. However, it seems that most people who embrace the doctrine of divine sovereignty believe that, in effect, God sovereignly breaks his promises, and that he does it regularly. The doctrine excuses his capriciousness, and excuses our faithlessness. If this is how a person applies the doctrine, then it would be better for him not to have learned it in the first place. God will do exactly what he said he will do. Since he is sovereign, no one forced him to say it. And since he is sovereign, no one can stop him from doing what he said.

The Bible teaches us to take responsibility for our faith and our lives. This is true of holiness. James says, when you are tempted, do not say that God is tempting you, but consider your lusts (James 1:13-15). He also says, submit yourselves to God, but then resist the devil, and he will flee from you (James 4:7). Resist him. You do it, not God. And Satan will flee from you, not God. The Bible takes the same stance when it comes to healing. Do not throw God's sovereignty back in his face and pretend that it is humility. Many people surrender to circumstances, thinking that by this they are submitting to God's will. But the Bible tells us to fight! And because God is sovereign, we will win.

15. Advancing in Healing Ministry

The first time I preached was also the first time I prayed for the sick. I was sixteen, a high school student. Someone was able to secure the basement of a bank for me to preach to a group of adults every Sunday. Most of the people were middle-aged, probably older than I am now. If any of them looked down on me because of my age, they no longer did after the first night.

In the message, I declared that God still performed miracles and that he commanded all believers to heal the sick. After I finished, I invited anyone who was sick to come forward, and I would pray for healing in front of everybody. Before that time, although I had heard about it, I had never prayed for the sick, never seen anyone pray for the sick, and never seen any miracle of healing. I went ahead by faith, because God told me to pray for the sick in the Bible.

Only one person came up, although after she was healed, others streamed forward. She had an abnormal curvature of the spine for some years, and was frequently in pain. I asked her to name her condition, if she had been to the doctor, and to tell us what the doctor said about it. I asked her to describe what had to be changed physically in order for her to be healed. And I confirmed that she was in pain at that moment.

Then I placed my hand on her back and was going to command her spine to become straight in the name of Jesus. I hardly went further than "In the name of Gee..." when I felt a blast come down through the ceiling (Isaiah 65:24, Matthew 6:8). I say that I could "feel" it, but it was not the same as a sensation on the body. A sensation on the body occurs when something interacts with our body, so that something that occurs beyond the space that our body occupies would not produce such a sensation. But I could feel this definitely. It was so much like a physical sensation that I would have mistaken it as one if not for the fact that it started very far from my body, even from the level above us. The Bible might be referring to something similar when it says, "At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him" (Mark 5:30).

This blast of power or energy took the shape of a sphere, about four to five feet in diameter. It crashed down through the ceiling at an angle, struck the woman on the head, and went down her spine to my hand. She fell to the floor. When we picked her up, she no longer had any pain, and she could bend down to touch her toes, something that she could not do before.

When it happened, although the whole place gasped, I was not surprised, because I really believed. I told the people to thank God, and asked if there were other sick people present, and waved them forward. Now, I am just telling you what happened, but special sensations are in fact unnecessary for healing, and more powerful cases have occurred when I did not feel anything.

So I had success the first time I prayed for the sick. On the other hand, there was one person who prayed for over a hundred people before the first healing happened. He continued, because the Bible told him to pray for the sick. Then, once the miracles started, they never stopped. He had a worldwide ministry of healing for decades. Another person prayed for many people over a year and a half before the first healing happened, and he has been a strong proponent of the healing ministry ever since on an international scale. I cannot speculate on why it happened this way for them, especially since I did not know them personally, although I might be able to offer some theories if I knew more about their personalities and circumstances.

My point is that you should pray for the sick because the Bible teaches it, and do not give up if people do not receive healing right away. Even if you are not successful the first time, or the first fifty times, it does not mean that you will never have a ministry of healing. It does not happen the same way with everybody. Do not think that you do not have the "gift" of healing. Forget about the gifts – relatively speaking, the Bible almost never talks about spiritual operations in such terms. All you need is faith in God and compassion toward the people. God has all the gifts.

One evangelist said, "Don't put the pressure on me just because someone pushed a wheelchair through the door." He was making the point that God is the one who heals, so it does not matter when someone brings a seemingly difficult case into the meeting. In himself, he could not heal anybody, regardless of the kind of sickness a person had. He said, "If I am the one who heals, then I better get the credit for it. But if God is the one who heals, then he can get the credit for it!" He was exactly right. Don't let people put the pressure on you, because God is the one who heals. And don't put pressure on yourself, as if you can do anything in yourself. Put your faith in God.

If you are having difficulties with faith, resort to a prayer of petition. You do not have to be commanding things to happen all the time. There is nothing wrong with asking God to perform the healing. Just don't make it weak like, "God, help this person to remain patient in this terrible disease that you have inflicted upon him," or "God, if it is your will, heal him, but if not, then let him suffer and die a horrible death and decay into a stinking mess for your glory." This is rubbish. Say, "God, heal this man and remove the cancer." If it does not happen, the man has lost nothing. And there is no need for this to be the end of it. You can pray for him again, or let someone else pray.

The potential disadvantage of a prayer of petition is that it can sound less definite, and so it might be used to mask doubt. However, it is a legitimate form of prayer (Genesis 20:17, Numbers 12:13), and there is no disadvantage when it is offered in faith, so that you really expect God to act, and you really expect something to happen. One advantage of a prayer of petition is that it is more easily integrated with a case of gradual healing, in which the healing does not happen immediately, or it is not completed right away. Healing is sometimes gradual, but if a case of blindness or terminal cancer is healed over the course of a week or so, we should hardly disdain it as a second-rate miracle. Using a prayer of petition, it is also easier to show the people that God is the one who heals, since you mention and address him explicitly. That said, I do not wish to oversell this approach.

When the faith is there and it comes naturally, it is right to command the healing to happen (Matthew 21:21-22, Mark 11:22-24). God is pleased when his people move forward with faith and authority in the name of Jesus (Exodus 14:15).

I was in a church in Hong Kong, and the usual guitarist could not play because his hands were injured. The church had heard about some of the things that were happening in my meetings in the United States, so after the pastor finished his sermon, he asked me to pray for the guitarist. Those Christians knew how to do it themselves, but he wanted me to do it. When the guitarist stood in front of me, his upper body began to tremble. So I asked him if the pain was leaving, and he said it was. I realized that God had already started, so instead of touching him I pointed to his hands and said loudly, "You have to be healed. You don't have a choice!" And he was healed.

My preferred method was the laying on of hands. When people started to receive healing before I could touch them or pray for them, I adjusted my approach. I reduced physical contact, so that I could take advantage of this phenomenon by telling the people that God is the one who heals, that he is healing without me, before I could start praying, or even before I realize that it is happening.

It is interesting how this began. I was very young, probably not even eighteen. Someone in Hong Kong who heard about the things that God was doing in my meetings prophesied to me and said that I was not giving God the glory. Looking back, I could see that he was wrong, and he said it out of jealousy. It was a false prophecy. I actually knew enough about these things to see through him, but I tried to be "humble" and forced myself to listen. Thus what he said bothered me for days. I was thinking about it all the time. I thought I was doing everything I could to give God the glory. I told the people that God was the one who healed, and that they could do the same thing that I was doing. And I meant it. I did not claim to have some special gift, but pointed them to the Scripture. I told them to have faith in God, not in me. I could not figure out what I was doing wrong, or what else I could have done.

What man intended for evil, God intended for good. I asked God to teach me, and to help me give him the credit for the healing miracles. When I returned to the United States, some people started to receive healing in their seats and when they came close to me. The first time it happened, a woman testified that an abnormal growth on her shoulder disappeared while I was preaching, and I was not even speaking on healing. So I seized on that and told the people, "See! See! This person was healed and I didn't even know it. This other person was healed, and I wasn't even done asking him about his sickness. I wasn't even ready. God is the one who heals, not me." This does not happen with everybody, but it happens often enough for me to use as indications that I am not the one running things.

This was one of the episodes in my walk with God that taught me, that if my heart is right toward God, then when I have a problem, even if I was doing something wrong or not doing something well enough, he would give me something to address it, and not take away something from me (Luke 19:26). And what he gives me, stays with me (Romans 11:29). Thus this has become a permanent aspect of my ministry. When I asked God to receive all

the glory, instead of taking away the healing power, he increased it to the point that it became easier to show that I was not the one healing the people. He is a God of grace. "But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'" (James 4:6).

There are some who think that I lack grace in dealing with people, but they do not realize that I am harsh mostly against those who are faithless, hard-hearted, and cruel. If they feel the hostility, it is likely because they are such people. They believe in a grace that speaks a soft word in a kind tone. But I believe in a grace that cures cancer and heals cripples. I believe in a grace that, by an act of violent divine power, drags people out of the depth of decapitating terror and depression. I believe in a grace that delivers people from all kinds of addictions, sometimes in an instant. I believe in a grace that restores marriages and rescues orphans. And I believe in a grace that stands up to religious hypocrites and oppressive leaders.

What you call love sweetens your conversations, so that even your foes marvel at your discretion. Excellent. But what I call love raises the dead. Your approach makes people want to talk to you. My approach makes people want to talk to God. When have I broken a bruised reed? When have I snuffed out a smoldering wick? You were the ones who bruised the reed in the first place, and you were the ones who nearly snuffed out the wick (Isaiah 42:3, Matthew 12:20). Let me drop the poetry -- hypocrites, you are the ones breaking the people's backs with the burden of your unbelief and tradition.

How dare you accuse me of anything? They come to me, so that I can tell them about Jesus, and he liberates them from people like you (Matthew 11:28-30, 12:20, 23:23-24). Am I deficient in grace, or love, or humility, and am I really such a big problem, or are you just trying to distract your own conscience? Grace? Love? Come on, you don't know anything about that. I doubt you even care. What you have is nothing more than etiquette. You are a whitewashed tomb. If you have so much love, your people would not be half dead when they come to me, begging to be delivered from your oppression. "I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and thou hast followed Baalim" (1 Kings 18:18). I have been fixing the damage you caused.

But God gives more grace. Once that started to happen in healing, it also started to happen in preaching. I had a friend whose sister attended my high school. She introduced me to one of the two faculty advisors of her Christian group. After speaking with him, I was invited to preach at my high school for the first time. I was under a lot of pressure because I had always operated outside of the school. Prior to this I had preached only to adults probably two to four times my age. Now I had to preach to people my own age, and they were students that I would see every day. On top of that, there were some internal politics happening with the faculty advisors. The one I talked to said that he was taking a risk by inviting me, since it could have aggravated the situation. I also knew that I would be saying some things that would offend the other faculty advisor and some of the student leaders.

But God gives more grace. The moment I opened my mouth, I felt the same power that came when I first prayed for the sick. This time it filled the entire room. The atmosphere

became thick. As I paced the platform, it felt like I was walking through a cloud. There was a Wiccan girl in the audience who had been attending their meetings for a while, even singing their songs about Jesus. Apparently, their seeker-friendly approach meant that she never felt threatened or contradicted. This ended that night. As I was speaking, she felt a foreign power come upon her. It took hold of her and physically shook her. This continued throughout the night until the morning. She was terrified. When she went to the faculty advisor and told him about this, he was able to seize the opportunity to give her a more serious explanation on Jesus Christ. I did not know any of this until he told me the next time I saw him.

God can convict someone of sin with healing and prosperity as easily as he can with suffering and condemnation. As appropriate as it is to preach repentance, and some people need to do much more of it, the missing ingredient is often not that, but it is the Spirit of God. The problem is not only in the message, but it is often in the preacher, who is so filled with tradition that he has no room for faith. When Jesus gave the fishermen a great catch of fish, so that it filled two boats and they began to sink, Peter did not scream "Jackpot!" and suddenly started to see God as a money machine. He was convicted of his sin and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8).

What kind of people would be ruined -- ruined! -- by healing and prosperity that come from God, instead of moved to a life of service? People who suggest this are not making a correct theological claim, but a covert autobiographical confession. When the preaching comes in the power of the Spirit, a message of healing, or ten thousand messages on healing, will not make the people forget about God. They will be convicted of their sins, how they have fallen short of his grace, and they will become engrossed with the goodness of God and redemption in Jesus Christ. Among other things, I told the students about the reality of creation, the truth of Scripture, and the ministry of miracles. It was not a message of condemnation but a message of faith, but they were filled with a sense of reverence, because God is real and God is good, and the heathen was shaken to the core.

16. Contending in Healing Ministry

Here are some of the assumptions, principles, and practices that I implement in the healing ministry. These come to mind due to our context, but there are others. For example, I could also say something about demons and insanity, the relation of prophecy and healing, healing and evangelism, the sin of competition in ministry, apprenticeship, teamwork, and the use of extended prayer.

I have not been one who takes a long time to pray for a sick person, but there are some who regularly engage in protracted prayer over the sick -- hours, days, and weeks -- and they see remarkable results. This type of ministry has its own guidelines. Once you have been involved in praying for the sick, you will learn more about the kind of ministry you should have, and develop your own way of doing things.

Some are biblical principles and must be enforced, but some are only practical guidelines. The practical ones should not complicate the ministry, and cannot be imposed on the conscience, but they are implemented to ensure transparency, protection, and sustained growth. In the end, if there is one iron rule that I insist everyone follows, it is to have faith toward God and compassion toward people.

Precaution

Let us first cover the most unpleasant item. Some of our guidelines are necessary especially because of this aspect of the healing ministry.

Many of those who call themselves Christians are ungrateful and dishonest people. So it is a sad reality, but you must protect yourself from the people you help. The biblical basis for the healing ministry is considerably larger than the biblical basis for several of the historically accepted doctrines combined, such as baptism and communion, but somehow it is often considered strange or even heretical. One reason is that the healing ministry demands genuine faith to produce evident success, whereas counterfeit faith in some of the other doctrines and practices is harder to detect.

Christians whose faith cannot rise above the level of confession and ceremony – they might be pretending even when it comes to these – therefore refuse to practice the healing ministry and attempt to destroy it. If you can't fake it, kill it. Like the Pharisees, who slandered and murdered Jesus, instead of using the Sabbath to show faith and mercy, and to pray for the sick, these Christians continue to use the Sabbath to attack Jesus' healing ministry (Mark 3:4, Luke 13:16), which he has never ceased to perform (Acts 9:34).

These Christians honor the Sabbath with their lips and persecute those who disagree with them about the Sabbath, but they never really practice the Sabbath. Otherwise, they would offer the people the rest that belongs to them in Christ, received by faith. And healing is one of the benefits of the Sabbath rest: "Then should not this woman...be set free on the

Sabbath day from what bound her?" (Luke 13:16). Christ has secured continuous rest for his people. They should heal the sick every day, but when they meet on the Sabbath to attack his healing ministry instead of to receive and promote it, then they condemn themselves. They are anti-Christ and anti-Sabbath.

They might also come to your meetings to criticize, spread dissension, or set up traps for you. This is their way. If they cannot find something to use against you, they will make up something. Let your conduct be above reproach. Watch the things you say, the claims you make, and who, when, and where you touch. Sometimes it is better to let the people declare that a miracle has occurred instead of making the claim yourself. Perform ministry with witnesses present. Keep records if possible. Do not claim to be a doctor or a healer. Present the situation as one where people come together to look to God alone for healing. Avoid laying your hands on a person if you perceive that there might be a problem with him. You can always pray without touching. Respect the parents or spouses and ask for explicit permission when deciding how to minister to a person. For example, if a woman wants you to lay hands on her, but the husband has a displeased expression on his face, take a step back and do not touch her.

If "Christians" will lie and set up traps for you just because they disagree on a relatively nuanced point on theology or philosophy, they will not spare you when it is said that miracles happen in your meetings. Some people would even pretend to be sick in order to set a trap for you. However, you cannot be faulted if you make no other claim than that you are praying for God to help the people.

One reporter pretended to be a cripple and limped up the stage on a crutch. His plan was that he would receive prayer, pretend to be healed and throw off his crutch, and then he would expose the healing as a hoax. A trap like this is occasionally used by "Christians" and reporters. The preacher hesitated and stepped back for a moment, then said, "According to your faith be it unto you," and the man's leg detached from its socket (Acts 5:4-5 and 9, Acts 13:9-11). When he repented, the preacher prayed for him and he was healed.

There are reasonable ways to expose a fraud, but this method makes no sense. Even if the audience thought that the reporter received healing when he was only pretending to be a cripple, it would not mean that no one was healed. This case would have no direct relation to any other case. Indeed, it might draw attention to the need for investigation before making dramatic claims. But an incident like this can show only that the "Christian" or the reporter is a fraud, not the preacher. Here the reporter was the only one who lied. The tactic to discredit the healing ministry would impress only gullible people, and sadly, this means that it has been highly effective at times, especially among those who wish to justify their unbelief.

It is likely that most of the underhanded attacks and slanders will come from the "Christians" -- the religious establishment, the watchers of the cults, the defenders of the faith. Some of them have established whole empires that receive donations and sell products in order to criticize those who receive donations and sell products. You see, if you cannot capture the stupid charismatic market, you capture the stupid cessationist market. If

you cannot defraud those who are not very smart, you defraud those who think that they are very smart. As long as you are dealing with stupid people, you get paid either way.

Apologetics can be a pretty lucrative industry if your conscience can take it. However, bogus heresy hunting might cost you much more in the end. Do you think that you would escape judgment if you say to the Lord, "Lord, Lord, have we not gone undercover? Have we not shut down healing ministries in your name? Have we not persecuted and entrapped them like the Pharisees did to you? Have we not discredited them by any means necessary?" But you fall under the same condemnation as the others: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" The Lord told you to have faith, and pray for the sick. If you do not like how other people are doing it, you do it. If you are not doing it, then you are at least as bad as the people you criticize.

"Christians" have always been the most hostile and devious enemies of Christ and of his healing ministry, but others will also interfere on occasions. You should have this in mind and develop measures to keep everything transparent and everyone safe. Do not be so ready to believe gossip and slander against a ministry. It might be someone's way to cover his own tracks.

Glory

God is pleased only when we have faith in him, believing that he is a rewarder of those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6). Yes, he wants you to see him as a rewarder of faith. He is pleased when you have the faith to "get stuff" from him. The faith that pleases God receives not only "spiritual" blessings and persecution, although it includes these, but all kinds of material blessings – deliverance, territory, children, entire kingdoms, miracles of healing, miracles of nature, miracles of resurrection, miracles of military conquest – and this is only Hebrews 11.

A person who thinks that he is too pious to receive "stuff" from God by faith is not spiritual, but a high-minded religious phony. Stupidly saying "for the glory of God" all the time means nothing. If you think that you are too good to receive from God, then you are the worst believer ever, if you are a believer at all. Why don't you step down from that religious pedestal, humble yourself, and ask for your daily bread?

You are so high on the glory of God that you have become delirious and you cannot even stick to English -- Soli Deo Gloria! But you know nothing about God's glory. You keep thinking that giving him glory has to do with how much you do for him, how much you sacrifice for him, how much you suffer for him. Jesus knew all about you. You are the prodigal son's obnoxious brother (Luke 15:25-32).

You think you are some Christian elite, some theological expert, but you are nothing more than self-righteous garbage. You pray, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men – Arminians, Pentecostals. I come to church every Sunday (but not every day like the charismatics) – I don't even go to the grocery store or touch a newspaper on the Sabbath! And I baptize my babies right." (Luke 18:11-12). You are just spiritual landfill. Even the

prodigal son, whose only talent is to take and take and take from the father, is better than you by far. At least in all his taking, he displays the father's generosity and forgiveness.

You have it all wrong. Your whole religion has been upside down. God's glory is not in how much you do for him, but in how much he has done for us in Christ, not in how much you sacrifice for him, but in how much he has sacrificed for us in Christ, not in how much you suffer for him, but in how much he has suffered for us in Christ. Indeed, God is glorified when we suffer persecution – something that you know a lot about, since you persecute so many believers – but even when that happens, it seems we get more out of it than he does (Matthew 5:10-12, Acts 5:41, Hebrews 10:34, 1 Peter 4:14).

God's glory is in healing (John 11:4). He glorifies himself by giving to us, not by receiving from us. You do not glorify God by showing how good you are to him, but he glorifies himself by showing how good he is to you. God pays his own bills. In fact, his glory is that he pays for everyone at the table. He doesn't need you to pay your share. He doesn't need you at all – like, not even a little bit (Acts 17:25).

Why don't you receive from God as a child? But no, you are better than that. You want to be a pompous ass (donkey) "for the glory of God." And no smart aleck with a Bible is going to stop you from rubbing it in, around, and everywhere "before the face of God" – Coram Deo!

Compassion

Jesus devoted so much time to the ministry of healing, sometimes performed in public to reach as many people as possible, sometimes performed in secret and not done to prove anything. He could have spent more time teaching the people, or even writing books, or doing some other kind of ministry, or performing other kinds of miracles. But he healed the sick, and healed the sick, and healed the sick. Then he healed the sick, and healed the sick, and healed the sick. Healing time is not wasted time. He had compassion on the people, "healing all that were oppressed of the devil" (Acts 10:38).

Recall a time when you were sick, perhaps with a fever or injury. Then imagine that some people feel like that, or much worse, all the time, year after year, with no end in sight. Have compassion on the people. Follow the way of love. Love can heal anything. Rather than obsessing about spiritual gifts or some special anointing, direct your attention to relieve the people's suffering and to showing God's concern for them. Do not worry about having this or that spiritual gift. God has all the gifts. Teach people to have faith in him, not in you.

Guarantee

Always speak in faith, but in general, do not guarantee that healing will come to a particular person, or that it will come at a particular time. This is not due to the fact that God is sovereign, as if this means you can never know what would happen. As one preacher said,

"I always know what God is going to do. He will do what he said. It's people I can't figure out."

You usually do not know the sick person's condition. He might have been conned by the master heresy of cessationism, or received some other false teaching. Perhaps he has experienced many disappointments, and now he is filled with doubt and cynicism that might take some time to dismantle. Even if you are confident that he would be healed, you might not know how it would happen. It might be a gradual healing, and he might be healed as soon as the next morning when he wakes up, so that a guarantee of immediate healing might needlessly lead to doubt and discouragement.

Nevertheless, there are times when you can declare that a person would be healed right then and there. And there are times when you can declare that a person has been healed, even when nothing has changed in terms of appearance. This is foolish when it comes from presumption or a desire to impress the audience, but there are genuine instances of such faith. When you know it, you know it.

Repetition

Praying for healing again and again can come from faith or from doubt. It depends on why you keep asking. Elijah prayed again and again, but he prayed in faith, and James refers to his example in the context of praying for healing (James 5:15-18). Repeat if you expect a breakthrough. Do not repeat if you do not really think that anything will change. Let another person pray, or talk things over with the sick person to see if you can discover the hindrance. The need for repetition in itself does not signal error or weakness in the ministry.

Jesus made two attempts on a blind man before the healing was complete (Mark 8:22-26). Some people are puzzled by this, because they have a defective understanding of Christ and of spiritual operations. Jesus said that he worked miracles by the Spirit of God (Matthew 12:28). If he worked miracles solely as the Son of God, then he would not have needed the anointing of the Spirit in the first place. He ministered under the same Spirit by which we receive power to work miracles (Acts 1:8). He was fully God and fully man the whole time, but as he functioned in the office of the Messiah, he ministered by the Spirit of God.

Spiritual operations on this level has much to do with faith (Galatians 3:5), among other things. Jesus did not work many miracles when there was much unbelief (Matthew 13:58). Perhaps sometimes for this reason, when a place was filled with skeptics, he removed them before he performed the miracle (Matthew 9:25), and perhaps sometimes also for this reason, he removed the person from the crowd before he ministered healing to him. A number of variables are involved in this kind of ministry, and these could result in the need for repeated attempts, counseling, and so on, before the healing is complete (1 Kings 17:21, 2 Kings 4:34).

God's sovereignty is indeed a factor, but not in the way many people think. He often sovereignly overrides unbelief and performs miracles either upon the skeptics or before the

skeptics, even those extremely hostile to the gospel and to the healing ministry. After all, one of the purposes of miracles is indeed to confirm his revelation, most often not his new revelation, but his old revelation. In other words, God's sovereignty ensures that there are many more miracles than what our measure of faith might permit us to expect (Ephesians 3:20). Instead of exploiting this precious doctrine of divine sovereignty as an excuse for failure, it becomes the basis for an assurance of success.

Failure

When someone is not healed, it has been said that we should never blame it on unbelief, because it brings a sense of shame and helplessness, when the true explanation is the sovereignty of God. Then, some claim that if we must blame it on unbelief, we must point only to the unbelief of the ministers, and never the unbelief of the people. There are also those who declare that if a person has the "gift," then it will work no matter what, because that's how it was with the apostles. Every one of these points is the opposite of what the Bible teaches. The Bible attributes failure to lack of faith in either or both the ministers and the people when healing does not happen, and not to the sovereignty of God. And it did not "just work" for the apostles.

In one case, the disciples that Jesus had directly authorized could not cast out a demon from a boy who was sick. Jesus lamented, "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" He was not worried that this would bring a sense of shame and helplessness. Then the disciples asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "Because you have so little faith" (Matthew 17:14-20). Those who ministered healing and those who came for help did not appear especially hard-hearted, but Jesus still told them that the failure was due to their lack of faith. Sometimes the Bible blames only the people for their unbelief, and not the ministers, as in the case of Jesus (Matthew 13:58, Mark 6:5-6).

This does not mean that unbelief is always the explanation, but it is wrong to dismiss it completely as some people do. If there is unbelief in you, then work on the problem by prayer, the word of God, and other means. If it is clear that a case of failure is due to unbelief in the sick person, and it is often obvious, then encourage faith in him by teaching him what the Bible says, and by showing him examples of those who have received healing. Never lie and say that any failure has nothing to do with his unbelief, but exercise patience if he is teachable. However, if he is hostile and hard-hearted, then there is no reason to hold back. Rebuke him with all authority. Regardless of his suffering, unbelief is a sin.

Another false teaching is that we must never suggest that a person's sickness has something to do with his sin. This is wrong (1 Corinthians 11:29-30). And another false teaching is that when healing comes from God, it will be always instant, always complete, and always permanent. All three assumptions are wrong (Luke 17:14, Mark 8:24, John 5:14).

Falling

Sometimes God's power comes upon people and they fall to the floor (1 Kings 8:11, John 18:6). Some preachers have developed the habit of pushing the people down to make it appear that God's power is at work. And the people have developed the habit of leaning and falling backward to make it appear that they are receptive.

This is grotesque. Do not push. Do not allow the people to pretend. Do not make it easy for people to think that God is at work when he is not. If you are going to do anything, make it harder for God, not easier. When Elijah asked God to send fire on his sacrifice, he did not first add gasoline to it, but he poured twelve jars of water on the sacrifice before he prayed. The wood was all wet, and the trench was filled. Then God sent fire and burned up everything (1 Kings 18:30-40). If you make it harder for misunderstanding to arise, God will increase the power, and there will be no mistake when he answers.

There is no need for someone to fall down to receive healing. When someone deliberately leans back and begins to fall, I would grab him and make him stand. When God is the one doing it, the person is struck down. There is no drifting or floating, or looking back to see if anyone is catching. If the person keeps leaning back, I would put him in a chair, and would usually not touch him when I pray. If God wants him on the floor for some reason, he can throw him off the chair. He can hit hard and break the chair if he wants. He does not need me to make it easy for him.

Medicine

Operate within existing laws. Do not offer medical advice. Do not make any medical diagnosis, or prescribe any medical substance or procedure. Do not take it upon yourself to remove any medical apparatus, such as a neck brace.

If it is not dangerous, suggest that a person do something that he could not do before. For example, a person who has been crippled can leave his wheelchair and walk, but watch him closely. There might be nothing wrong with your faith or ministry, but if the sick person doubts, he could sink like Peter (Matthew 14:28-31). Do not insist on a course of action if the sick person refuses to cooperate.

If my advice appears too safe, it is in part because we are focusing on someone who is beginning in the healing ministry. One would see plenty of results even if he adheres to these practical guidelines. God can override them whenever he wishes, but he will back it up with divine power. When it happens, there will be no guesswork, and there will be certain success.

Do not tell someone to stop taking his medication. Peter said to a crippled man, "What I have I give you" (Acts 3:6). You do not get a person healed by taking away something. You get him healed by giving him something. With some conditions, one might have an adverse reaction to his medication when he keeps taking it after he has been healed. When a person comes with such a case, tell him to watch out for this possibility. If he thinks he

has been healed, he should let his doctor examine him, so that the doctor can take him off his medication.

Money

Do not let people associate giving money with receiving healing. Do not ask for money in exchange for or in connection with prayer for healing. When people can see that God is at work, if you ask for money, they will give -- do not ask. Do not take advantage of the people or exploit them. Do not buy and sell when healing ministry is occurring. Do not open the book table or conduct business. If you must offer products during healing ministry, give them away. Do not allow the people to form a false impression of how this works, as if it has to do with anything other than the grace of God and faith in the name of Jesus.

When people see that the sick have received healing or when they have received healing for themselves, some of them would come up to me and stuff cash into my pocket while I am talking to others. Some people would reach out to shake my hand, and when I take my hand back there would be a wad of cash in it. Others would throw money into my bags and containers while I am not looking, or they would hide money in places for me to find later. At first I did not realize people would do that, so I did not know to anticipate it or regulate it. This would happen even if you only preach, but it tends to happen more when there is also healing.

It is fine to receive financial support for a ministry (1 Corinthians 9:14), but do it in a context and in a manner that will not allow people to perceive it as an exchange. "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). As much as possible, encourage the people to give when they are not emotional, or taken up with the shock of witnessing the healing miracles. Set up a system for people to give to the ministry, but disassociate it with the immediate environment of receiving prayer for healing. This is especially important when there are unbelievers or immature believers in the crowd (2 Kings 5:15-16, 26), who lack understanding in "the matter of giving and receiving" (Philippians 4:15).

Teaching

Our topic is the healing ministry in the form of praying for the sick, but an essential aspect of the healing ministry is to teach the people to pray for themselves and receive healing that way. God would heal a non-Christian when a believer prays for him, but all Christians have full access to God. They can enter the throne of grace directly, without any mediator other than Jesus Christ, and receive healing by faith. However, they either need someone to teach them the word of God about healing, or study the topic for themselves (Romans 10:17, Galatians 3:5).

Although it is less immediate and glamorous, this is an essential work in the healing ministry, because it offers the people permanent access to healing, and also opens the door to their own ministry to pray for the sick. They will learn that healing comes from God

through faith, and they will not have to look to you as someone special (Acts 3:12, 16). The word of God will enable them to pray for themselves, to pray for others, and to teach others how to receive healing.

17. Faith and Ministry

~ from email ~

As for your question, in terms of making the decision itself, the Bible teaches us to obey our parents, but only "in the Lord" (Ephesians 6:1). If your parents are not excellent Christians who are full of knowledge and confidence in God, then it is wrong to listen to them when it comes to decisions about faith and life. If they are non-Christians, or if they call themselves Christians but are ignorant or ungodly, then they cannot teach a Christian. You are the one who should teach them, because you would be the voice of God to them. If you want to be in the ministry, you will face much greater problems than your parents. If you cannot even handle your parents, then you are not strong enough for the ministry. You should be able to easily handle a hundred pair of parents combined at the same time. One set of parents is nothing. Build up your inner man to be strong in the Lord, filled with his power and might.

All Christians are in the ministry in a sense, but we are referring to ministry as a vocation, making a living from it. You need only God's calling and ordination. Respect only the advice of Christians, and Christians who know and believe God's word. Never trust "Christians" who do not trust God. Never take advice from cessationists. They are the worst religious charlatans, because they have disowned God's word, but they present themselves as those who are most zealous for God's word. They cannot offer sound advice, because they have rejected an entire category of possibilities as to how God may interact with you, bless and deliver you, and communicate with you. They have rejected the very nature of God, that is, God himself.

Your greatest enemies in the ministry will likely be "Christians" like these. If God has called and ordained you, then their disagreement means nothing. Feel free to despise them. But if God has not called and ordained you, then you must not enter the ministry even if these people drag you into it. Even those who seem to be Christian parents sometimes hesitate, because they are worried that you will not be able to make a living as a minister. I understand this concern, but if they are godly people, then they should have faith in God and encourage you to have faith as well. Their greater concern should be to help you determine whether God has really called and ordained you.

There are parents who do not want you to enter the ministry not because they worry about you, but because they worry about themselves. They do not want you to embarrass them, or some reason like this. They are not good Christians or good parents. Pay no attention to what they think. There is the false assumption that we should submit to our parents no matter what. This is Confucianism, not Christianity. Much of what comes under Christian "gentleness and respect" is really pagan ethics. Throw it out. You can be polite to them, but if they are wrong, you don't have to listen to them. Sometimes you must even rebuke them for their own good. Make sure, however, that you indeed know better than they do in

those cases. Don't be hostile just because you disagree, but be as harsh as you need if you are right, and they are wrong and stubborn.

If the parents are a problem because they might withhold financial support for ministry training, then you may try to persuade them. If you cannot, you will either have to go without any schooling or you will have to study something that they approve of. It is their money. Once you are old enough or financially independent enough to leave their authority, you can do whatever you want to do or study whatever you want to study. Some people work a secular job for a time before earning enough to pay for their ministry training. Of course, it is unnecessary to follow the seminary path in the first place. Many people are better off without it, since seminaries tend to destroy faith and life. Intellectualism is not destructive, but the seminary environment is destructive when it promotes unbelief and tradition. This is the case with most seminaries.

Nevertheless, a large part of it depends on the individual. If the seminary promotes unbelief and tradition rather than Christ, as is very likely the case, then train yourself by making it your enemy rather than your teacher. Thus you will grow in knowledge and strength despite the evil that pervades the institution. The seminary ought to keep you safe before it sends you out into the world, but more often than not, the seminary is the world, and in many ways more dangerous than the non-Christian world. So make God your teacher, and the seminary the training ground, by making it the battle ground. The worst mistake you can make is to assume that you are safe in a seminary, sit back and relax, and expect the professors to make a man of God out of you. This kind of thinking will only make you vulnerable to them. As Jesus said, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are" (Matthew 23:15).

Faith in God is the most important thing. If you are going to be a minister, you will have to agree with what Jesus said. He said that if you seek first the kingdom of God, then things that come under Mammon (wealth or prosperity) -- food, clothing, and shelter -- will be added to you as well (Matthew 6:24-34). He said that if you have faith in God, you can command a mountain to be thrown into the sea (Mark 11:23), and whatever you ask for will be given to you (Mark 11:24). He said that if you lay hands on the sick, they will recover (Mark 16:18). He said that if you believe, you will perform the same works that he did, and even greater works (John 14:12). People attempt to minimize the greater works, but they are so obsessed with rejecting the word of God while pretending to defend it, that they forget Jesus first declared that believers will perform the same works that he did. Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead, and he said believers will do the same things. If each Christian performs even the same works that Jesus did, there shall be an endless stream of miracles.

All these things are integral to the gospel – faith, healing, prosperity, and works of miraculous power. However, many religious charlatans preach a different gospel – the seminaries will attack you if you believe what Jesus said – but then they should not be Christians, and still less ministers and theologians. Paul wrote that God will supply all that you need, not according to your need, which is small, but according to God's glorious riches

-- according to what he has, which is a lot (Philippians 4:19). If you do not want to be a piece-of-trash preacher or scholar, then accept what the Bible teaches about faith, healing, prosperity, miracles, the Holy Spirit, and so on. A minister is nothing more than a religious con if he does not teach faith in God -- the kind of miracle faith that Jesus taught (Matthew 21:21), and the kind of healing faith that James taught (James 5:15). Have faith in God. This must be the beginning of all ministry, because if you are going to teach others about God, this is what you must tell them anyway. You must tell them to have the kind of faith that the Bible talks about. If you preach only traditions and rituals like most ministers, then you are a piece of trash like them. Save us all some trouble and jump into the dumpster yourself.

Mere men should never have the privilege – and the burden – of owning your future in God. If you have faith, it is likely that many of the more educated and respectable "Christians" will come against you. They are the orthodox zealots, and some of the most vicious and unspiritual people in the world. Despise them! Spit on them! Trample them like worms! Do not let them take your future. Do not let them dull your spirit. Take ownership of your life in Christ. Seek counsel from those who possess faith and wisdom – especially faith – but in the end you are the one who must decide how to proceed. Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but think soberly according to your measure of faith. And if you indeed have the faith, then you have the warrant to move forward in ministry.

18. The Sovereign Liar Heresy

~ from email ~

The general principle is that we should respect the text's literary genre when interpreting Scripture. This is correct. Even though I say this, I am not on the side of Calvinists and Reformed Christians when it comes to how they handle Scripture. On many issues, they are the most zealous enemies of the Christian faith, contradicting God's word and persecuting those who believe it.

In practice, they consider no promise in the Bible that speaks to this life as a real promise, but only a vague suggestion of a possible outcome. To them, the doctrine of divine sovereignty means that God often breaks his promises, so that no promise in the Bible is a guarantee. But if a promise is a promise, then it is indeed a guarantee, and God always keeps a promise. One reason for this perversion of divine sovereignty is to hide their unbelief. When they fail to receive something from God, instead of admitting their lack of faith and hardness of heart, they blame God's sovereignty. Regardless of what the Bible promises, this and that did not happen because "God is sovereign."

God sovereignly makes his promises, and he always sovereignly keeps his promises. The Calvinist-Reformed Sovereign Liar is not the Christian God. Any Arminian who believes that God always keeps his promises, including his promises regarding healing, prosperity, deliverance, and material blessings, is by far more orthodox than any Calvinist or Reformed Christian who claims to affirm God's sovereignty, but then exploits the doctrine to justify his own unbelief. No Pentecostal should be intimidated by the Sovereign Liar Heresy. In fact, if the Word of Faith charismatics were to excommunicate the Reformed for this, I would not lift a finger in protest. I cannot, since I would have no biblical basis to defend the Reformed.

Another popular principle of Bible interpretation that they have adopted is that we must not derive doctrine from the narrative portions of Scripture, but only from the didactic portions of Scripture. This is a blatant lie, and it is against Scripture's own use of narratives. This creates a canon within the canon, and in effect becomes a denial of divine inspiration and biblical inerrancy, which in turn means that they are anti-Christian heretics. As usual, it appears one motive for this error is to sidestep some of the most explicit teachings in the Bible. An example is the biblical doctrine that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a different and subsequent experience from regeneration or conversion.

Their approach to Scripture is correct on a number of issues, but on many others they are the most sinister hypocrites and religious charlatans. No matter what you get right, once you make God into a liar, you lose everything. They are some of the worst heretics, and at the same time the most zealous persecutors of God's people.

19. Random Choice or Foreseen Condition

~ from email ~

On the matter of whether election is random, or otherwise based on foreseen conditions in us, I have addressed this a number of times and in different ways in my writings, so instead of repeating everything, I will offer a short answer.

Suppose I tell you that I am making two containers, one for precious jewelry, and the other one for trash. After I have made them, I proceed to put jewelry into one, and put trash into another. When you see this, would you ask me if I have chosen their functions at random? Pay attention! It would make no sense to ask me this. I created each one for its purpose. I decided what I would do with each before they existed.

Your question would make sense only if you present to me two containers that I did not make, and I choose one for jewelry and the other one for trash. Then you can ask me if I selected them at random, or if I perceived characteristics in one that made it appropriate for jewelry, and characteristics in the other that made it appropriate for trash.

The Bible teaches election as the basis for creation. God did not foresee individuals who would be created by some other power, and then choose to save some of them, either at random or because of certain traits that they would possess. Rather, he creates each individual with salvation or damnation in mind:

One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory -- even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (Romans 9:18-24)

God creates elect individuals as elect individuals, and he creates reprobate individuals as reprobate individuals. Given what the Bible teaches about election, your question makes no sense. It would be applicable only if God is not the creator. It would make sense only if we first reject the Christian God and reject the Christian faith, and then we can ask this question about a heathen or hypothetical deity who did not create the people.

20. Prayer and Spiritual Strength

~ from email ~

Although Jesus did not say how much we must pray, he referred to praying for one hour like it was no big deal (Matthew 26:40). Who knows how many "one hour" he prayed each day? And he sometimes prayed "all night" (Luke 6:12).

But why did you limit your question to what Jesus taught? The whole Bible is equally the word of God, not only the red letters. In one place, we see that someone prayed three times a day (Daniel 6:10, 13), and in another seven times a day (Psalm 119:164; this could mean numerous times instead of an exact number). Paul wrote, "Pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Although there is no requirement in a legalistic sense, it would not be a strange thing to pray for one, two, five, or ten hours a day.

Spiritual diet is essential to determining one's inner strength. Perhaps the most important advice is to avoid Reformed materials. The Reformed are exemplary on some things, but when it comes to the spiritual strength of the individual – personal spirituality or practical theology – their teachings are characterized by unbelief, false humility, and a defeatism that is based on a perversion of divine sovereignty.

Become established in the doctrines that the Reformed excel at, such as their soteriology and eschatology (even on these they have many flaws), then if you wish to build up spiritual strength, drastically reduce exposure to their materials. And stay far away from the Puritans. They are overrated. Their materials are characterized by soul-numbing tedium, legalism, unbelief, depression, false humility, unresolved repentance, counterfeit intellectualism, and destructive self-examination.

The Arminians are better at emphasizing individual responsibility in faith. Regrettably, this is because they have rejected the doctrine of divine sovereignty. Thus both the Arminians and Calvinists are unworthy representatives of the doctrine. The Arminians reject it to exalt themselves. The Calvinists hijack it to excuse themselves. Still, when we are talking about the spiritual strength of the individual, the Arminians are often superior.

However, only the Pentecostals, especially the Word of Faith, consistently affirm a spiritual strength that overcomes by faith, that effects victories and alters circumstances, instead of using God as a mere psychological crutch in the midst of defeat and suffering. Only the Word of Faith teachers take seriously Jesus's teachings on faith, power, and miracles, and Paul's teachings on our position and authority in Christ. All other Christians practically denounce them, and in effect declare that Jesus and Paul lied to us, and that the Bible is false.

When we are talking about building spiritual strength, wisdom, and inspiration by prayer, then there is no better way to pray than to speak in tongues. The Bible teaches that

a person who speaks in tongues edifies himself in his spirit (1 Corinthians 14:4). The effect is beautiful, often astounding. Paul said, "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you" (1 Corinthians 14:18). Cessationists also condemn the Bible on this matter, to their own destruction.

21. Miracles of Judgment

~ from email ~

As a non-cessationist, do you believe that the church today can hand over someone to Satan for the destruction of the flesh to save the spirit (1 Corinthians 5:5)? What about inflicting diseases and even "killing" people (Acts 13:11; Acts 5:5, 9-11)? It seems that most theologians say something like, "No such power as this remains in the Church of God; none such should be assumed; the pretensions to it are as wicked as they are vain. It was the same power by which Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead, and Elymas the sorcerer struck blind. Apostles alone were intrusted with it" (Adam Clarke).

I am a Christian. Just as I do not call myself a non-atheist or a non-Satanist, I do not call myself a non-cessationist. Faith is the standard. Cessationism is the heresy. Since I am a Christian, I believe in God, and therefore I certainly believe that miracles of judgment can happen regardless of who we are, or when and where we live.

I have come across a number of testimonies on this kind of miracles, including incidents that happened within the last hundred years. The Bible says that God is long-suffering, so that the miracles of judgment seem relatively rare when compared to the endless testimonies on miracles of healing, material and financial provision, and such things, just as they were also relatively rare in the ministry of the first disciples. There are indeed some testimonies, but testimonies are unnecessary, because as long as the God of the Bible lives, all things are possible.

Most theologians, and especially the cessationists, have been wrong about the apostles and about spiritual operations. They have a fundamentally anti-biblical view of how spiritual things work. To illustrate, when it comes to healing, the Bible does not teach that the apostles as such, or as men, were the ones who performed the healing. Yes, we can say it in a loose sense, like "Tom Smith got me saved" or "This book made me a Christian," but it is really God alone who saves.

This is what we mean when we say that the apostles healed the sick or that we can heal the sick in the name of Jesus. The Bible does not teach that the "gift" of healing was given to the apostles to be exercised according to their own desires and purposes. Peter explicitly denied that he could heal because of any power or godliness in him. He did not mention any gift, whether the gift of healing or the office of the apostle. He credited all of it to faith in the name of Jesus (Acts 3:12, 16).

If people cannot perform miracles of healing today, guess why? They have no faith in the name of Jesus. However, they do not want to be exposed as defective believers, or even

false disciples, and so they force upon everyone an alternate explanation and vilify those who continue to heal the sick by faith in the name of Jesus.

In another place, Peter entered a room and told the person, "Jesus Christ heals you" (Acts 9:34), and not "I am an apostle who has come to heal you." Although Jesus is seated at the right hand of God and has commissioned us to teach the nations, he is still the one who works, still the one who heals. When the theologians think that the apostles were the ones who healed, they have become anti-Christ. They have disqualified themselves from speaking further on the subject. They have committed the sin of idolatry and blasphemy. They need to shut up. The more urgent need is for them to escape condemnation.

Jesus was fully divine and fully human, but as he functioned in the office of the Messiah, he said that he worked miracles by the Spirit of God (Matthew 12:28). Thus he worked with the people's faith, and he was hindered by their unbelief (Matthew 13:58, Mark 6:5-6). The theologians are often in denial about this. Just as atheists cannot teach us about God, these theologians cannot teach us about spiritual operations and manifestations. They do not believe in them, and they cannot mentally process these things. All their theories are excuses for their unbelief and failure, and attempts to spin out arguments to convince people that they are legitimate spiritual leaders, when they are in fact spiritual frauds.

He said, "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does" (John 5:19), and "Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work" (John 14:10). He was God, but as the Messiah, he said that he could do nothing by himself, but the Father God was the one doing the work. This was how the "gifts" worked with Jesus, even though he was the Son of God.

Thus the idea that the apostles were uniquely entrusted with the power to heal or to kill whoever they wished is anti-gospel. It contradicts what the Bible teaches about how these things worked. This false idea fits into an agenda of unbelief. The religious frauds desire to exempt themselves from faith by making the apostles unique, when the apostles were never unique in the way that these people claim, and even Jesus did not operate the way they allege.

The same applies to miracles of judgment. God alone is the one who works miracles, even though he may announce them by men. No one can just go around killing whoever he wants by divine power. The apostles never could, and no one can do that now. To illustrate again, a person may have a "gift" of preaching or evangelism, but he cannot just go around causing anyone he wishes to receive salvation. God alone is the one who saves.

Jesus did not heal everybody, even when they were right in front of him. For example, there was a large crowd of disabled people at Bethesda, but he might have healed only one of them (John 5:1-15). The cessationists sometimes challenge those who pray for the sick to initiate the miracles, to go and "empty out hospitals." However, such a taunt would first strike Jesus and the apostles. They did not initiate every miracle and heal every person, and

they were hindered by the people's unbelief. Thus the cessationists' real target is Jesus Christ. They always seek to justify their unbelief, but their excuses backfire and make them look even worse.

As cited above, Adam Clarke wrote that "Apostles alone were intrusted with it," but the apostles in fact never had the power to bring miraculous judgment at their own whim. He said, "No such power as this remains in the Church of God." The only way a statement like this could make sense is to change it to say, "No such God as this remains," because it was God alone who performed the miracles. The only way that Adam Clarke could be correct is if God is dead. Like other theologians, he was entirely incompetent. He had no idea what he was talking about.

It was never the church as such, or the apostles as such, who could hand over a person to destruction. If a person has done nothing wrong, no one can touch him: "We know that God's children do not make a practice of sinning, for God's Son holds them securely, and the evil one cannot touch them" (1 John 5:18, NLT). As Balaam said, "How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the LORD has not denounced?" (Numbers 23:8). But if a church has done wrong, even a lone believer could hand the whole thing over to destruction in the name of Jesus. If it would be done, it would be God who does it, so it makes no difference if the judgment is declared by one man or one thousand men.

I believe that it is possible for me, by myself, to hand over an entire denomination to destruction. But I believe this only because I believe God can do it. Thus I also believe that no man can do that on a whim, or by his own power, or by virtue of his calling or spiritual gifts. Something like this would be a work of God, and he can do it through me or anyone else. He can also perform miracles of judgment on his own, or through an angel (Acts 12:23). Miracles of judgment are possible because there is a God, and he can perform them through any man, and we are safe from one another's capriciousness (Luke 9:54-56).

Spiritual gifts constitute only one way for miracles to happen. Miracles can be ministered and received by faith on the basis of God's word. If God has promised it, then you can perform it and you can receive it by faith apart from any spiritual gift.

God's word says, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). You do not need someone with a gift of preaching or evangelism to tell you this, and a person with such a gift cannot make you receive it. Once you have discovered this promise, you can receive it by faith without the involvement of any other person. One with the gift of preaching or evangelism can proclaim the gospel with great effect, but even without him, a person who has faith can receive directly from God.

Likewise, God's word says, "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases" (Matthew 8:17). It says, "Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits -- who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases" (Psalm 103:2-3). In connection with healing, it says, "Everything is possible for him who believes" (Mark 9:23), and "According to your

faith will it be done to you" (Matthew 9:29). The healing of the body is just as integral to the atonement as the saving of the soul. They are so tightly bound together that to deny one is to deny the other, and to preach another gospel. You do not need someone with a gift of healing to tell you this or to make you receive healing. On the basis of God's promise, you can receive healing directly from him by faith. If we must refer to a gift of healing at all, someone with such a gift could minister healing with great effect, but even without him, a person who has faith can receive healing.

Paul the apostle did not attribute the miracles to spiritual gifts, but to the faith of the people. He wrote, "Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?" (Galatians 3:5). In other words, "God works miracles among you because you believe what you heard." He demonstrated this in Acts 14: "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" (v. 9-10). Paul saw that "he had faith to be healed."

Why did God perform miracles? The theologians advance an alternate explanation. They claim that the apostles were especially gifted with the power to work miracles in order to authenticate new revelation. However, Jesus, Peter, and Paul themselves said that God worked miracles because of the faith of the people (Galatians 3:5) and in order to fulfill his old revelation (Luke 13:16). The theologians claim that miracles are exceptional, but Jesus called it the children's bread -- their daily meal (Matthew 15:26). In fact, a heathen woman suggested that healing ought to be so routine that it should spill over to those outside of the covenant, and Jesus agreed. He admitted that it was granted to faith (15:27-28). What we are saying cannot get any more "gospel" -- this is it, this is gospel. Any different view is a different gospel. It is anti-gospel, and anti-Christ.

Healing comes by faith. This is true also for the one who prays for the sick. The Bible says, "And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up" (James 5:15). We minister by faith in God's word. We receive by faith in God's word. We take by faith whatever God has promised, so that we can even work miracles by faith.

We need to grasp the distinction. When we function in the "gifts" or special manifestations of the Spirit, whether for healing or for judgment, it is as Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does" (John 5:19). When he ministered this way, he did not heal every person. Thus the cessationists point their fingers at us, but in effect condemn Jesus as a fraud because he did not "empty out hospitals."

Although Jesus did not go to everyone with the "gift" of healing, he never refused anyone who came to him in faith. He never said that it was not God's will. To the only person who ever asked about it, he said, "I am willing" (Mark 1:41). And even this person asked only if Jesus was willing to minister to him, and not whether God was willing to heal. All the others who came in faith never asked if it was God's will to heal them. By faith, they just

came and took what they wanted. This is faith. This is the kind of attitude that pleases God. Anything else is just bogus piety.

Of course there is such a thing as the gift of healing, but healing does not have to come by some special gift, just like the forgiveness of sin does not have to come by some special gift of the Spirit. The fact that there is a gift of healing should not hinder us by making us think that this is the only way that healing comes. Rather, that there is a gift of healing should add to our expectation. We can always minister and receive healing by faith, but because there is a gift of healing, there should be more healing miracles than what we can ask or think. God will do more than what our faith expects, not less.

When Jesus walked the earth, he personally commissioned some men for the ministry. If anyone desires some sort of ordination, this would be it. This would be the ultimate. But there was a man who went around casting out demons in the name of Jesus, without authorization from Jesus. The disciples, including the apostles, wanted to stop this, but Jesus allowed the man to continue (Mark 9:38-39).

Nowadays church leaders insist that you stay with a group of believers despite their errors, even severe errors – no group is perfect after all. Thus they mandate corporate worship or spirituality for its own sake. However, Jesus did not insist that the man should even follow his own group as long as he had faith. There was a perfect group right there – at least the leader was perfect – and the man was close enough that he talked with the disciples. But Jesus did not insist that he join, and did not insist that he cease operation if he did not join.

Thus Jesus declared that faith always legitimizes a ministry, even without his own earthly authorization, and even when he was within walking distance to confer it. This overturns the basis of authority for most churches and denominations, if not all of them. I do not mean that churches and denominations as such are necessarily illegitimate, but that they have been established on the wrong basis. And when you establish something on the wrong basis, everything about it becomes wrong.

Corporate worship or spirituality is legitimate only if there is faith. The strongest advocates of church life are usually not qualified to talk about it. Most of them contribute to the problem with their unbelief and phony ritualistic worship. One person who has faith is legitimate even by himself. Find two or three people who have faith and put them together, and you have a church. Many more might soon join them. On the other hand, cram together several hundred people who have no faith, but only degrees and papers, creeds and rituals, and their own mutual approval and praise, and you have a synagogue of Satan. Join together many synagogues of Satan, put a board of Pharisees on top of them, and you have a denomination. It does not have to be this way, but this is the way it is in most cases.

This man went ahead by faith without personal authorization from Jesus, but those who received this personal authorization, including the apostles, sometimes failed in the very spiritual operations that Jesus commissioned them to perform. Why? Jesus did not say, "Because it was not God's will" or "Because you did not have the gift." It could not be any more the will of God or authorized by God than to be personally commissioned by Jesus

Christ. But when Jesus talked about spiritual operations, he did not resort to the will of God or the gifts of the Spirit as an explanation. Instead, he answered, "Because you have so little faith" (Matthew 17:20).

Peter tried to walk on water, but he started to sink and Jesus had to rescue him. Why did he sink? Jesus did not say, "Because it was not God's will" or "Because you did not have the gift." Jesus was the one who said that Peter could walk on the water in the first place (Matthew 14:28-29). Moreover, Peter was at first successful. It was happening. He was walking on the water and heading toward Jesus (14:29). He was not sinking. But then he looked at the storm, and he became afraid. Only then he started to sink (14:30). How did Jesus explain this? He said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (14:31). He made no reference to God's will or to spiritual gifts. It was a matter of faith, and Peter failed because he did not have faith.

Would Jesus excuse us if we fail to heal the sick? Would he count as innocent anyone who does not even try, or who even preaches against it? Why would he agree with anyone who appeals to divine sovereignty or to spiritual gifts as an explanation for failure? Imagine someone who became irritated with you because you could not walk on water! Jesus was exactly this kind of person. He expected his disciples to perform the same works he did, not on the basis of their commission to ministry, but by faith. He would not swallow your horse \$#!& about divine sovereignty and spiritual gifts. He expects you to have faith and to succeed.

This is contrary to what the theologians claim. Blinded by their unbelief, religious hypocrisy, and intellectual arrogance, they just don't know how these things work and cannot seem to process what the Bible plainly says about them (1 Corinthians 12:1). Cessationists think they are superior to the charismatic fanatics, but the truth is that they are so inferior that they have not even approached the Corinthian crisis in their walk with God.

They have not surpassed the fanatics. They are so far behind that they ought to wish that they could be fanatics. They should look forward to it, so that one day they will be like the people they condemn. If they see what the Bible says, then evidently they just don't want to think about it, because if what the Bible says is true, it would mean that they are wrong, that they have betrayed Christ and his people, and that they are in fact very much inferior to those unsophisticated simpletons that they despise and persecute. Like the Pharisees, some of them would rather burn in hell than to admit this and turn back to faith and truth.

How do miracles come? By God, not by gifts. By faith, not by titles. If God is there, miracles can happen. If faith is there, miracles will happen. As Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (John 11:40). Like the cessationists, Martha believed in the power of Christ for the past (11:21) or for the future (11:24), but Jesus the Resurrection was standing right in front of her (11:25), and Lazarus was raised within minutes. How do miracles come? From God, through faith, right now. Anyone who holds a different view condemns himself. The issue is not whether he is a good minister or scholar, but whether he should be excommunicated.

22. Answering Objections to Corporal Punishment

~ from email ~

1. Studies show that corporal punishment makes the children not better but worse when they grow up.

(a)

A better or worse what? A better Christian? Or a better non-Christian? What is a better Christian? What is a better non-Christian? Better according to what standard? Why must we use that standard? What is better and what is worse? Who decides? How is it measured?

Let's say that those who have never received corporal punishment are more socially well-adjusted. What does that mean? Who defines this? Why is this good or important? What is good? Important for what? With whom are they more socially well-adjusted? With other criminals, adulterers, drinkers, or with devout Christians? Is one who has received corporal punishment repressed, or is he more disciplined and principled? Does the science define and then measure the morality? Why, or why not? How? And whose morality? Once you bring morality into it, is it still "scientific"? These are just several details, and we can list many more. They don't know what they are supposed to measure, what they are measuring, why they are measuring, and how they are measuring.

This point alone renders all the studies practically meaningless. Otherwise, I can win the argument by saying that whatever the children who have received corporal punishment grow up to be was what we intended all along, and that we consider the product very good. Therefore, studies show that corporal punishment makes the children better when they become adults, because we say so. This is just as "scientific," and it shows that we achieve a hundred percent success rate by corporal punishment.

(b)

If we don't care whether we are making Christians, or better Christians, then the issue becomes one of evangelism and apologetics, because we should care. If we don't care, it would mean that the studies are intended to make "better" unbelievers -- that is, to produce inferior people. But if we care to make better Christians, then we can measure only true Christians -- those Christians who have faith in God, who have the Spirit of God, and who provide a strong Christian environment for the children all the time, not only when they exercise corporal punishment.

Corporal punishment without the context of proper instruction is not what the Bible teaches. So all non-Christians and nominal Christians cannot count in these studies. This most likely makes almost a hundred percent of the sample irrelevant when considering the issue as Christians. The usual studies only observe reprobates hitting reprobates over who-knows-what problem they have. It is an impossible leap to make that a basis to pass

judgment on the Bible's teaching. They should simply admit that they reject the Bible's teaching out of sheer prejudice and be done with it.

A similar issue occurs in how people count divorce rates. They include all those who check the "Christian" box, which means that the group would include Mormons, Catholics, nominal or "non-practicing" Christians, and others. The group would have nothing to do with what the Bible counts as Christians. The result would be at best a measurement of divorce rates among non-Christians. Or, it would be like performing an experiment on whether prayer "works," but include in the group atheists, Mormons, Muslims, Satanists, Buddhists, and other kinds of people. Of course the result would show that it does not work, but it would only mean that non-Christian prayer does not work.

(c)

We are talking about minds and persons, and observing each individual over a period of time, even years. And each one is different. How in the world can you tell if a particular person – the same individual – would be better off or worse off if raised a different way? At the moment, let us forget the fact that the first two criticisms each render the studies useless. Then for the studies to be meaningful, we have to raise each person with the use of corporal punishment and observe him throughout his life, and then turn back time and raise the same person again without the use of corporal punishment and observe him throughout his life.

Raising different people with different parents? How can you compare? The observations themselves are inaccurate because of the defective and irrational method, and the impossible epistemology. However, even if we pretend that the observations accurately report the facts, the best that they can do is to provide information on what is and what has been, not what could be or could have been. But we need information on what could be or could have been in order to determine whether corporal punishment makes the children better or worse.

Perhaps one person could have become the next Hitler, but because he has been whipped from head to toe year after year, now he is only a little repressed and anti-social. Perhaps another person could have become the next Luther, but because he has never been whipped silly, now he is a drinker, a gambler, a womanizer, even if he is a socially well-adjusted businessman, whatever that means.

It is impossible to draw proper comparisons and conclusions. There would be trillions of variables in the parents, the children, and the environments in each group. The use of corporal punishment would not be the only difference between the groups. The only fair method is to compare each person with himself, and that is only possible with time travel or omniscience. And there is still no solution to the first two points.

In any case, the rod in the Bible is prescribed in a Christian context. You cannot beat a child and say nothing to him or teach him nothing, and still expect good results. Corporal punishment is one aspect of parenting. The pain has to mean something and not just come down as random aggression. The studies do not measure this. To measure this, at least the

studies must be led by preachers who agree with what I have said above, instead of led by psychologists and sociologists.

It would probably do some good for non-Christians to use corporal punishment on their children, but without a Christian education and environment the effect would be limited, and would produce undesirable side-effects, such as resentment. It might still help the children to develop some measure of self-control, of the ability to delay gratification, to stay away from crime and drugs, and so on. Nevertheless, the effect would be on a different level altogether, perhaps on the level of training animals.

2. The "rod" in the Bible does not refer to a physical instrument, but it is a metaphor for discipline and guidance.

(a)

I would not let them throw the burden of proof on me. They need to show me that this is a metaphor instead of just suggesting it. I will not just take it. They are going to have a really hard time. It will be an unpleasant experience for them.

(b)

Psalm 89:32 says, "I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging." The parallel to the "rod" is "flogging" ("stripes" in ESV, "beating" in NLT). So the rod means flogging. Now, in this verse it is indeed a metaphor! But the context is about how God deals with kings and nations, so that the metaphor refers to war, plagues, enslavement, widespread slaughter, and more. Thus just because something is a metaphor does not mean that the reality is less violent or severe. It often means that the reality is more. If the "rod" for child discipline is a metaphor, then it might mean that we should drop a car on the kid instead of caning him.

(c)

Proverbs 10:13 says, "Wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning, but a rod is for the back of him who lacks judgment." The "lips" is contrasted against the "rod." These are two approaches extended toward different kinds of people. Wisdom deals with words. It does not say gentle words or any such thing, but just words. So the contrast is not between two kinds of speech, but between the verbal and the physical.

The foolish man does not listen, and so he must be beaten. This is true even when we leave the context of parenting and talk about how society functions. A wise man listens to the words of the law, but the fool refuses to listen, and so he must be jailed, or beaten, or executed. Also see Proverbs 19:29. Then, Proverbs 26:3 says, "A whip for the horse, a halter for the donkey, and a rod for the backs of fools!" The whip and the halter are physical. You do not argue with a horse or donkey. Therefore, the rod is also physical, and there is no warrant to say otherwise.

23. Street Preaching

~ from email ~

Are you doing the kind where you stand on a box and yell, or the kind where you approach individuals to talk? Both kinds are good, and they can also work together. You can do a short sermon and then the Christians can talk to individuals. If there is an apprentice model, and there should be, then there does not need to be very high requirements to join, except that the person is a Christian, and whose doctrine and behavior raise no special concern. New helpers should follow the mentor for a while before going off on his own.

Some people hold the assumption that there must not be an instant "decision" kind of conversion. However, many of the conversions in the Bible are of this kind, and they last because they are the work of God. When this does not happen, then the long-term "seeking" model is fine, but this other kind is just as legitimate. The truth is that if you say to someone, "You are a sinner, but Jesus saves you if you believe in him. Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?" and he says, "Yes," he could be genuinely saved just like that. On the other hand, Pharisees jump through all kinds of hoops, study to become doctors of this and that, and then die and burn in hell.

One reason that some traditions are critical of instant conversion or "decision" evangelism is because their people lack the spiritual skill and power to make it happen. They prefer to argue about evolution for fifteen years, and then do some presuppositional apologetics for another fifteen years. After all that the other person is mad enough to kill, but still has not heard the gospel. And Satan has won. They preach for decades behind the pulpit and ten people confess the faith, and eight of them backslide. They have no spiritual power, and they prefer a theology that would accommodate this. But it is possible for someone to receive in minutes. Conversion is a work of God. The ministry of preaching and evangelism can be highly efficient and enduring at the same time.

Of course, follow up is important no matter what. We should always teach people to seek God, but some seek him so that they can be saved, while others are saved so that they can seek him. If the Christian senses that the person is ready, he can indeed press for a confession of faith in Christ. There is nothing wrong with that. We say that churches are filled with false converts because of careless evangelism. This is true, but it does not have to be the case. I could execute efficient evangelism correctly. Long seeking does not necessarily mean genuine conversion. It could just mean that the false converts build up more and more religious pride as they take root in the church. Many of them have become leaders and scholars in the Christian establishment.

Give the people something. We used to hand out tracks and cassettes and books. They were costly. Now we can just refer to a web site, preferably linked to some free books or recordings. Make sure they really have it though. It would annoy people to ask for their

email addresses, but if the information is printed on business cards, they will probably accept them.

As for the approach, a lot of it depends on the individual's knowledge, personality, measure of boldness, and so on. In cases where I will see someone over and over again, I might wait for a natural opportunity. But in street evangelism, I would most likely charge right into the topic. Some Christians prefer to spend several minutes or much longer befriending the people, but I get bored listening to them talk about their lives and their theories, especially when they are non-Christians. If the approach fits the Christian's skill and temperament, then in most cases the people would not (or could not) resist when you drive the conversation right into the topic that you wish to discuss.

24. The Sabbath and Graded Absolutism

~ from email ~

How would you respond to the claim that a Jewish doctor in the Old Testament would have faced a moral dilemma, to be resolved by graded absolutism, if he saw someone seriously injured on the Sabbath, and he would have needed to work to save that person?

The Bible says:

Mark 2:27-28

Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

Matthew 12:11-12

He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

This is absolute, one-track minded guidance. No graded anything. As usual, God's word never contradicts itself, but men see paradoxes and dilemmas because God's word contradicts what is in their hearts. The "dilemma" occurs because the Jews thought as if man was made for the Sabbath, but Jesus said that "the Sabbath was made for man." For all their insistence on keeping it, they have never really kept it.

The Bible also says:

Luke 13:15-16

The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? 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?"

Mark 3:1-6

Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."

Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.

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. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

God wants mercy, not sacrifice (Matthew 12:7). Christians who are very zealous for the Sabbath as a day usually still have not learned this. They use the doctrine as a weapon to attack and oppress, and on the Sabbath they criticize those who show faith and mercy, and they condemn those who pray for the sick, instead of joining them. Therefore, their doctrine of the Sabbath is anti-gospel. Their practice of the Sabbath is anti-Christ, outright satanic.

As it is, they are not worthy to mention the Sabbath, and their teaching on the subject can be completely disregarded. There is no benefit in keeping an anti-Christ Sabbath. They claim to appreciate the Sabbath the most, but in reality they appreciate it the least. They claim to be its champions, but they are really its fiercest enemies. They have missed the whole point of it. They have overturned the commandment of God by their foolish and worthless religious traditions. Otherwise, they would pray for the sick on every Sabbath, so that God would heal the people.

25. The Ultimate Anti-Christ Doctrine

~ from email ~

The Scripture is complete, and the Christian faith has been conclusively revealed and defined. False religions add to, revise, and contradict the Scripture, its words and doctrines. Charismatic revelations should never add to, revise, or contradict Scripture. If anyone says that they should, then he is a heretic. He should be confronted and even excommunicated. But this has nothing to do with the idea that God speaks to his people today. Cessationists commit exactly this damnable heresy of adding to, revising, and contradicting Scripture. They impose the doctrine of cessationism upon Scripture in their pretense to protect the Scripture. They are the worst heretics.

The Christian faith has been "once for all" revealed and defined (Jude 3). This does not contradict the Bible's own assertion that God would grant various kinds of revelations to people (Acts 2:17-18, 1 Corinthians 14:26). Rather, it "once for all" guarantees these revelations, and the certainty of various kinds of private knowledge (Romans 8:16, Revelation 2:17). This is integral to the gospel, permanently declared and promised in what we could call the first apostolic sermon (Acts 2:39). God has "once for all" declared that he would actively speak to Christians by his Spirit. He has said it. No one can change this. No one has any basis or any right to declare otherwise. Anyone who denies this has allowed tradition and unbelief to suppress the very Scripture that he claims to defend. He is a religious hypocrite and charlatan.

The doctrine that miracles in general and prophecy in particular threaten the integrity of Scripture is one of the most successful and destructive theological scams in history. It makes the cessationists look like they are heroes when in fact they are the villains. The assertion that there is no more prophecy cannot protect the idea that Scripture is complete. God alone is the author of Scripture, not the prophets, not the apostles, and not prophecy. If the notion that God has stopped writing Scripture is insufficient to ensure that Scripture is complete, then adding the assumption that prophecy has ceased would not change anything, because the writing of Scripture never depended on prophecy in the first place.

The cessationists think that God's providence in having stopped writing Scripture is not enough to ensure that Scripture is complete, but we must stop miracles and the gifts of the Spirit as well. However, God had been the only actual author of Scripture -- it came directly from his very breath (2 Timothy 3:16). Therefore, according to their way of thinking, the only way to ensure that Scripture is complete is for God to die. The doctrine of cessationism needs God to die. As long as God lives, the doctrine is entirely pointless. As long as God lives, it is irrelevant whether there ever was such a thing as prophecy or whether prophecy continues. According to their way of thinking, God is the greatest enemy to Scripture, not the charismatics. If God is dead, then of course there would be no prophecy, and the charismatics would be even less relevant to the issue. They have never been the problem.

The problem is either God, or the cessationists. Cessationism is demonic because in order for it to make any sense or carry any relevance, God has to die. This is the master heresy, the ultimate anti-Christ doctrine.