

Blasphemy *and* Mystery

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Preface

Most of the articles in this collection are written in response to objections raised against various aspects of Christianity. Although some of these objections come from unbelievers, several are from professing Christians who have been critical of the consistently God-centered system of theology, philosophy, and apologetics expounded in my writings. The truth is that they resent God and the Scripture, but are too proud and dishonest to admit it.

As these articles demonstrate, the objections from professing believers against our biblical system exhibit patterns of reasoning that are remarkably similar to those found in unbelievers, including some of the intellectual habits and assumptions that underlie atheism.

In connection with this, several of the articles examine some of the most treasured and ingrained doctrines that professing believers have invented in order to soften or even subvert the teachings of Scripture on the sovereignty of God and the coherence of Scripture. They show that these traditional doctrines are not only unbiblical, but nonsensical, irrational, and often even blasphemous. Therefore, rather than submitting to the pressure to conform, we must denounce these doctrines and condemn them in the harshest terms possible.

Because these are supplements to the core body of writings previously released, they often do not repeat but rather assume materials and arguments that have been presented elsewhere. For this reason, a careful reading of several works is recommended. They include my *Systematic Theology*, *Ultimate Questions*, *Presuppositional Confrontations*, *Apologetics in Conversation*, *The Author of Sin*, *Captive to Reason*, *Commentary on Ephesians*, and *The Sermon on the Mount*.

1. Atheism as Non-Belief

I debate many atheists.... Some of them insist that atheism is just non-belief in God. And they deny that man is inherently religious. But my main obstacle is to prove that atheism is not simple non-belief.

If it is not settled after some initial attempts, it could be misdirected effort to insist on arguing out whether atheism is one thing or another. Whatever they wish to call it, just let them tell you what they believe and then refute it. An accurate description of the belief is essential, but the name is not. If you are stuck on arguing about what they should call their position, or given what they call it, stuck on arguing what their position should be, then you might never engage what they believe. You will be spending all your time trying to match their position with the appropriate label.

The relevant issue is the claim that their position is mere "non-belief," or a lack of belief in God as opposed to a definite assertion that there is no God. This is what you must address. Their tactic might be that if they could turn their position into a phantom, into something nebulous, then it will become difficult for you to attack. However, what they affirm is in fact definite and concrete – you only need to take one step closer. In reality their position is that non-belief in God is rational or correct. In other words, even if there is such a thing as mere non-belief about God, underlying this is a positive belief that this non-belief is the correct position. This is something that you can confront and refute with ease.

Of course, one response is to argue that their position is not mere non-belief about God in the first place, but we do not need to mention this right away. We can begin by taking them at their word for the moment, and deal with them from that angle. What is their reason for non-belief? Is this non-belief rational and justified? If the non-belief is justified based on a lack of evidence, then what is evidence, and why is this kind of evidence correct or relevant? And since they claim that there is a lack of evidence, a lack of rational justification, they must also refute all the arguments that Christians present to them. Once they commit themselves to the stance that atheism is mere non-belief, seize it and beat on it again and again. Rain fire and brimstone on it. Kill it, resuscitate it, then kill it again. Analyze it from every angle, so that even they become sick of it. And then do it some more.

We can go further. Besides confronting their position that non-belief is correct and justified, you may also attack *them* for taking such a position. After so many centuries of philosophy and science, including thousands of guesses, speculations, and random musings, this is as far as they got? As the people of God, we have been sure of the truth for thousands of years – indeed, since the beginning of the world – and there was never any need to change our answer.

What unbelievers call "progress" is just a nice word for revising previous answers. Such progress does not denote advance in knowledge, but it indicates that they never had any to begin with. Continual "progress" in this sense means only that they are moving from one error to another. But with God, truth is one, constant, and forever. So what is wrong with them? Do they lack the intellectual courage to commit to a position? Do they lack the competence to attain an answer to anything at all? And is atheism nothing more than non-belief in God? Good, then it also means that atheists are nothing more than cowards and idiots. They have been so since the beginning, and by their admission, nothing has changed after all these years.

Logic textbooks will tell you that personal attack is a fallacy. However, if Christians accept this without qualification or a proper understanding of why and when it is a fallacy, then they must also call the Bible itself a book of fallacies, since it constantly accuses and attacks sinners in its arguments. In fact, in teaching apologetics, many Christians have blasphemed Scripture on precisely this point because they have accepted an anti-biblical standard for debate and discussion. And so they urge believers to never employ personal attacks. But this is to betray a vital aspect of preaching, of evangelism and apologetics.

Personal attack is a fallacy only if the person is irrelevant to the topic. The fallacy (when it is a fallacy) is not in attacking the person, but in saying something irrelevant to the debate. However, when confronting non-Christians, we are indeed interested in talking about who and what they are before God. So at some point in the conversation, we must make it our topic to talk about them. Once we have done this, personal attacks are not fallacious, that is, if the attacks are accurate.

Of course, in saying this, we also open ourselves to being attacked by them. We welcome this, since if they fail to make accurate accusations that they can support with sound arguments or to use rationally justified standards in making these accusations, then their attacks will backfire against them, and serve to illustrate what we assert about their competence and character.

It is inadvisable to insist that atheism is "religious" or to say that man is inherently religious, although this language is sometimes used by both Christians and non-Christians. Rather, Scripture declares that every person has an innate knowledge and awareness of God, with enough content to condemn him as a sinner to everlasting extreme torture in a fiery hell. This is different from saying that man is inherently "religious" – such language is rather weak and imprecise. In our intellectual confrontations with unbelievers, we should charge ahead with a bolder and more specific thrust. The Christian system is able to back it up and put down all oppositions against it.

2. The Easter Bunny Trap

I have been talking with an atheist and he brings up an issue that I am not sure how to answer. He asks if I can show that the Easter Bunny is not real. It seems that there are problems with any answer that I could give. If I say that it is not real, then he will ask me how I know this. So how should I reply?

Since I lack the context, it is difficult to guess where he intends to go with this. There are several possibilities. Perhaps if you are unable to prove that the Easter Bunny is not real but nevertheless consider it rational to believe that it is not real, then he will say the same thing about God. That is, he can then take the position that, although he cannot disprove the existence of God, it is still rational to disbelieve in his existence simply because of a lack of empirical evidence. This way, he gets you to commit to the idea that it is irrational to believe in something that one cannot see or has not seen. At this point, it does not matter whether there is indeed a lack of empirical evidence for God's existence, or whether we can know anything by empiricism, since we are just speculating about the kind of argument that this atheist is setting up, and this might be what he is attempting.

As with many objections against Christianity, this one suffers from irrelevance. Although this lack of relevance is not as obvious as some of the other objections, it is still easy to perceive. Metaphysically, God is in a class by himself. Unlike the Easter Bunny, whose existence would not necessarily affect other things that are equally insignificant to the construction and operation of the universe, God is necessarily related to everything in the universe, for he is the creator and sustainer of them all.

With this in mind, consider classical and evidential apologetics. Forgetting about their fatal deficiencies for now, their proponents claim that they could reason to God from their contact with creation as the starting point. But no such claim is made for the Easter Bunny, since the Bunny does not have such a metaphysical status that I can reason to it from a rock I find on the street or from my self-consciousness. Therefore, it is irrelevant to the debate about the existence of God as to whether the Bunny is real or not, or whether I can prove that the Bunny is real or not.

There is a wrong way to answer the challenge. Many Christians might insist that the Easter Bunny is not real even though they cannot rationally justify this denial. But this is to fall into the trap that, as we speculate above, the atheist is setting up. The worst response that you can offer is to insist that the Bunny is not real even though you cannot prove this, nor do you know that it is not real. In fact, this might be the reason why you have difficulty with the question – you are stuck on thinking that the Bunny is not real, but you cannot provide rational justification for this. So, do not fall into the trap. Instead, you could just tell the truth – say that you do not know if the Bunny is real or not real, and you cannot prove it either way. But this has nothing to do with the debate, since your claim is that, unlike the Bunny, you can argue for God's existence. And if the Easter Bunny exists, God is also its creator and sustainer.

The power of a biblical approach to apologetics, which I call biblical rationalism, is that as long as you possess a sound and coherent understanding of the Christian worldview, and as long as you have a basic ability to apply logical thinking, you can blast through any trap in debate. Whether or not you realize that the opponent is setting you up, you can jump right into any trap and it will turn against him. Since biblical revelation is infallible and invincible, as long as the contents and the patterns of your thinking remain synchronized with it, you will naturally win any debate. Any trap that the opponent sets up can only expose your soundness and coherence as well as his ignorance and inconsistency. However, this is not true with all other approaches to apologetics, including pseudo-presuppositionalism, which makes empiricism its own epistemological precondition. Regrettably, this is also the predominant school of presuppositional apologetics.

In any case, from the perspective of biblical rationalism, you have him right where you want him. One can hardly expect a more helpful opponent. This is because his question provides a shortcut to the foundational issues of epistemology and metaphysics, and commits him to deal with you on this level. A wide range of options has opened up to you.

In fact, you can seize the Easter Bunny by the throat and throw it right back at him. Make it his problem. Make him deal with it. How can he deny that there is a Easter Bunny if he cannot disprove it? Maybe he can just reserve judgment on the Bunny, but he cannot do the same with God, because he must deal with your positive arguments for the rational necessity of biblical revelation. So God is not in the same position as the Easter Bunny. Further, if he cannot show a clear relevance between knowing about the Easter Bunny and knowing about God, then why does he bring it up in a debate about God's existence? This undermines his intelligence, and calls into question his assumption that his denial of God's existence is rational.

And what if, for the sake of argument, you say that you have met the Easter Bunny? Is he going to believe your testimony, or to disbelieve any testimony that he has not directly verified? If he chooses the former, then why does he not believe your testimony about God? If he chooses the latter, then he must also disbelieve everything else that he has not directly verified, including evolution, most if not all other scientific theories, the daily news, and so on.

The above is a negative argument – it would be wrong for the Christian to then say that we do believe human testimony without direct verification. Both options are wrong. Here is where classical, evidential, and pseudo-presuppositional apologetics get dragged back down to the unbeliever's level. The pseudo-presuppositionalist is especially eager to assert that without the biblical presuppositions, the unbeliever cannot account for the things that he takes for granted. But who says we should take any of these things for granted? Even with the biblical presuppositions, there is still no rational justification for them.

We cannot limit the application of rationality by mere preference or convenience, exempting those things that we would like to retain for ourselves. Many of the things that people take for granted are outright false in the first place, such as the reliability of sensation and the scientific method. Who really needs to believe the scientists and the news, especially in this context where we require certainty? We believe the testimony of God, which is the topic of debate. Contrary to its claim, rather than maintaining an antithesis between biblical and non-biblical thinking, pseudo-presuppositionalism is in fact the great compromise, the grand surrender, to anti-Christian principles.

By now you have answered his question about the Easter Bunny, and now it is his turn. He has not answered it, for indeed he cannot. So press the point again and again, and again and again. Be as gentle as you can, but as harsh as you need. Your aggressiveness should in part depend on his attitude. We know that all unbelievers are sinful and defiant, but some are more blatant in their arrogance.

There are times when a hardened scoffer should be humiliated, even in front of other people, or especially in front of other people. If this is what needs to be done, then give him no rest and show no restraint. Question him about it from every conceivable angle. Bring it up again and again even in future conversations. Make fun of him, as Elijah mocked the false prophets. Send him a chocolate bunny when Easter comes around. Ask him to gather all his non-Christian friends, then challenge them with only this question and defeat all of them with it at the same time. Make that Bunny haunt his dreams. Make him see and admit that he has been the irrational fool all along, and that the Christian faith is the only spiritual light and rational hope for mankind.

3. The Hitler Ad Hominem

The other day I was talking to someone at work, and he told me that no one should judge another person's belief or religion. In response, I said that if that were the case, then Hitler was justified in what he did. He answered that Hitler believed he was right, so to him it was right. Please comment on this.

A person must be careful when he tries to reduce his opponent's position to absurdity or to deduce from the position an implication that even his opponent will not accept. We call this the ad hominem argument, that is, a logical ad hominem rather than an ad hominem of irrelevant personal attack. When used incorrectly, the tactic can backfire.

It is best to reduce an opponent's position to logical absurdity rather than just cultural absurdity. You can bring out the implications of a position such that someone from a particular background or culture would consider it absurd and thus unacceptable, but this does not refute the position. It tells us something about the person and his culture, but the position itself is unharmed. Only something that is logically absurd is truly wrong, refuted, and indefensible.

If we confine the discussion to a narrow context, excluding biblical premises or any other moral standard, then there is nothing logically absurd in what Hitler did or in the position that what he did could be considered right. So if you press a position only to a point where it is culturally unacceptable, then the argument backfires when your opponent breaks with culture and accepts it anyway.

You must never rest your case on an ad hominem, or give the impression that you do. To rest on an ad hominem can mean that you really have no positive reason for your faith. Then, if you give the impression that you rest on an ad hominem and it backfires, your opponent will think that he has surprised you and that he now has the upper hand.

In preaching the gospel and defending the faith, it is insufficient to show only that you are less wrong. You must show that you are right, and that your opponent is wrong. Even an ad hominem that shows logical absurdity in your opponent can prove only that he is wrong. And an ad hominem that shows cultural absurdity, if it works on the opponent, can prove only that he is inconsistent. It does not even show that his basic position is mistaken.

When used carefully and correctly, an ad hominem can be an effective way to begin a conversation, to stun your opponent in debate, or sometimes even to refute a position (without necessarily proving the opposite). Perhaps the most important and useful purpose of an ad hominem is to drive the debate toward the deeper questions of metaphysics and epistemology. These are the purposes for which I would sometimes use ad hominem arguments, but I would insist that my own position does not depend on

them, especially when the conclusions of these arguments do not demonstrate logical absurdity in my opponent, or when refuting his position this way does not prove my own.

Given your opponent's point of view, his answer was correct, in the sense that it was consistent with what he said. Unless there is an absolute moral standard, there is no rational justification for condemning Hitler. So you cannot say that because we condemn Hitler, there must be an absolute standard – this reverses the correct order of reasoning. You might soften this and say that because we condemn Hitler, it implies that we believe in an absolute standard. But whether this is effective still depends on how your opponent responds. He might say that then we are wrong in having a standard, so that we should abandon it.

You might insist that, without an absolute standard, we cannot account for ethical principles. Your opponent could answer that we should therefore have no ethical principles. From here you can still win the debate, but you have already complicated matters too much. It is useless to argue by saying, "Unless X is true, you cannot account for Y," unless X is really true, and unless it is really necessary to account for Y. So by complicating the debate, without proving or refuting anything, you have only delayed at least by one step the need to discuss the real questions, which concern metaphysics and epistemology.

Here is also where pseudo-presuppositionalism errs. It habitually demands the opponent to account for things that are inherently irrational, that cannot and should not be defended in the first place. Then it claims that the biblical worldview can account for them, but never succeeds in showing how. It further compounds the problem by making what is inherently irrational the very precondition for knowing the biblical worldview, thus also shutting itself out of it. So in the end it only sets up another school of irrationalism. In contrast, we acknowledge that the biblical worldview is perfectly rational, so that it excludes all things that are not. What we take away from the unbelievers, we do not embrace but throw away.

4. In God We Trust

When I use your approach to debate atheists, they keep hitting me with this question: "If human reasoning is so faulty, then why do you fly on planes, drive in cars, and go to medical doctors?" We literally put our lives in the reasoning ability of the unregenerate. Do you have an article that directly deals with this problem?

As far as I can recall, I have not directly addressed this objection, and I will tell you why. If I am going to bring up non-Christian objections and answer them, then it is only fair that I present them in the best possible light, and deal with their strongest proponents and arguments. But the problem is that non-Christians have no intelligent representatives and arguments. And it is impossible for me to imagine something intelligent that an unbeliever can say against Christianity, because there is nothing intelligent that anyone can say against Christianity. It is often difficult for me to make up examples of what unbelievers would say against Christianity, because every conceivable possibility seems so stupid that, even with what I understand about the foolishness of unbelievers, I do not want to put in their mouths such stupid things if they would not actually say them.

This explains why I have been unable to write a book of dialogues between believers and unbelievers to illustrate the principles of biblical apologetics. It is no longer possible for me to stoop to that almost subhuman intellectual level, even in my imagination, in order to ascertain what they would say – they will have to tell me. So I usually deal with only those arguments and objections that I come across in published materials, personal encounters, and questions from readers and students. And sure enough, all of them are so stupid that I could never come up with them, or imagine that these are things that any sentient being could say. Here you have given me another example of something so stupid, so easy to answer, that it never crossed my mind as something that could be used as an objection against Christianity.

Now, if we reason validly from and about God's revelation to us, this is "human" reasoning in a sense, since we are human, and we are doing the reasoning. There is nothing wrong with this, and it is how God commands us to worship and to function. A human who receives and follows God's revelation is also one who reasons according to truth.

We oppose not human reasoning as such, but empty speculation, which is what the unbelievers call reasoning. Apart from divine revelation and his innate constitution, man has no epistemological power or principle to discover any truth. So all non-Christian thinking amounts to false assumptions about reality processed by either valid inferences from these assumptions, which produce false conclusions, or invalid inferences from them, which also produce false conclusions. Therefore, all non-Christian thoughts are

false, foolish, and futile. Christ is the savior of man's intellect and sanity. Without Christ, man is stupid and insane.¹ This is the condition of every unbeliever.

There are three parts to my answer. The first two do not directly answer the objection, but make observations that neutralize it. The third part is a direct answer, and it is followed by some comments on apologetics in general.

First, the objection does not refute or even attempt to answer our arguments. It is directed at the part of our apologetic method that destroys several elements of non-biblical epistemologies, including empiricism, induction, and science. But the objection does not refute our arguments against these things, nor does it provide positive justification for them. In fact, there is no direct relevance between the objection and our arguments against non-biblical epistemologies.

Even if the objection succeeds, the most that it can do is to show that Christians do not practice what they believe, that they are inconsistent – that is, we argue that non-biblical epistemologies are false, but then rely on their conclusions anyway. Again, this would not prove that non-biblical epistemologies are correct. And in fact, it does not even show that Christians are inconsistent, for who says that we do not like to live dangerously? Maybe this is the reason we use inventions and technologies produced by the unbelievers.

Therefore, even if Christians are made speechless by this objection, it still does not mean that the Christians are wrong and the non-Christians are right. But as we will see in the third part of our response, we indeed have an answer for it. So this objection accomplishes nothing. On the other hand, it implies that they have no rational response against our attack on non-biblical epistemologies. If they have a proper response, and if they can provide positive justification for empiricism, induction, and science, then why do they even need to mention this irrelevant objection?

As for those Christians who defend non-biblical epistemologies, it is significant that they also use this type of objections. For example, they would argue that by denying these elements of non-biblical epistemologies, it becomes impossible for us to perform even mundane tasks, like reading a book or changing a tire. Such a disappointing argument has the stench of non-Christian incompetence all over it. For one, it begs the question, since without even arguing against our epistemology, it assumes that theirs is necessary. Moreover, they make this objection without showing that they can perform these tasks based on the non-biblical epistemologies. They cannot get out of the pit by taking others

¹ Name-calling is not a fallacy in at least two types of situations. First, if the derogatory name or label appears in the context of a valid argument, and is the product of this argument, then the name or label is in fact a logical conclusion, not a fallacy. Second, if it is part of a person's worldview to apply this name or label, then he must be permitted to express it just as he is permitted to express any other part of his worldview during the course of debate, so that his beliefs can be discussed and examined, and so that he can tell his opponent what he affirms and wishes to defend. For someone to commit a name-calling fallacy, he must commit some logical error in his application of the name or label. For example, if the name or label is irrelevant to the debate, or if the person uses the name or label instead of an argument, then it is a fallacy. But if the person who applies the name or label can show that it fits his opponent, then it cannot be a fallacy, no matter how insulting the name sounds.

down with them, that is, even if they can take others down. So the effect of the objection is that they are the ones who cannot perform these mundane tasks, since they claim that these elements in their epistemologies are necessary, but fail to provide justification for them or answer our arguments against them. And what about the biblical epistemology that we provide? They offer no successful refutation.

Second, non-Christian inventions and technologies indeed fail very often. Thousands of problems related to planes, cars, computers, medicines, and so on occur every day. Thousands more are caused by human error that have to do with scientific reasoning, inductive inferences, and unreliable sensations. These errors not only result in various inconveniences and financial losses, but they cost hundreds upon hundreds of human lives.

So their objection serves only to reinforce our point – they have no idea what they are doing. That they will even bring this up as an objection against Christianity and as an answer to our arguments against non-biblical epistemologies is another illustration that these are indeed extremely stupid people. They actually think that this is an effective retort against us, but it is only an occasion for us to recall their failures, and the millions of people that they have killed.

Of course, they will claim that their methods have made many positive contributions and saved many lives. The third part of our answer takes care of this. But even now we can point out that, in a debate about the ability to know reality, to argue from effect is to commit the fallacy of asserting the consequent, which is also one of the fundamental fallacies of the scientific method. So effect is irrelevant. And to bring it up here is also to beg the question, since there must be a reliable epistemology to even detect and measure the effects.

Third – this is our direct and positive response to the objection – the biblical doctrine is that all non-Christians and their activities are under God's control, and it is in God that we trust, not the non-Christians. God is sovereign and powerful. If he wishes, he can cause a paper plane to carry us thousands of miles to our destination, or cause what is usually a deadly poison to exhibit healing properties.

There is no independently constant nature inherent in anything that God has created. In other words, a created object does not possess an inherent power to sustain its own existence and properties apart from God, but it is God who continuously maintains its existence and actively prescribes its properties, moment by moment. This is why Calvin writes, "Indeed, not even an abundance of bread would benefit us in the slightest unless it were divinely turned into nourishment." There is nothing inherent in bread that can nourish. Rather, on each occasion that bread is consumed, God acts on the bread so that it becomes nourishment to the body, and acts on the body so that it receives nourishment from the bread.

Since this view rests upon omnipotence and exhibits no self-contradiction, right away it is at least possible by definition. Then, given that it is the only position that does not

crumble under analysis, and given that it is also what Scripture teaches and implies, it is also the only biblical, rational, and indeed the only possible position. This is a form of metaphysical occasionalism – every other view, whether or not it claims to be biblical, cannot withstand the simplest scrutiny. Then, since all of reality operates under God, including knowledge acquisition, a true epistemology must be derived from and consistent with this view of metaphysics. Therefore, biblical occasionalism is the only true metaphysic and epistemology. Given this understanding, there is no difficulty in affirming that even a plane designed by non-Christians just might fly, although we have zero confidence in their intellectual abilities.

The point of their objection is to allege an inconsistency in our position, and our answer shows that there is no such inconsistency. In other words, given our knowledge of God and our dependence upon him, it raises no problem for us to interact the way we do with the inventions and technologies produced by non-Christians, since all the processes and effects of what they do in fact rest in God's plan and power, for his glory and for our benefit. So, those who deny that there is a God, or that he is the absolute controller over creation, must attempt to refute our position from an altogether different angle. It is unspeakable stupidity to think that we are inconsistent just because we use cars and planes.

Of course, non-Christians might not believe that there is a God, or that God is the sovereign active controller over every person and every object in his creation. However, their objection removes God from the discussion without addressing this, and then poses a challenge against us on that basis. Our refutation of all non-biblical epistemologies is done in the context of proclaiming a God who is sovereign over all, including the thoughts and activities of all unbelievers, and the effects of their inventions and technologies. How then, can they defend these non-biblical epistemologies by claiming that we rely on them? Without providing a refutation, the objection ignores what we proclaim about this God who is sovereign over all. Where did they get this idea that we rely on their reasoning abilities? The whole debate occurs in the first place because we affirm faith and dependence on a sovereign God who controls everything. So their objection begs the question.

Here we find an instructive illustration for the apologist in training. The non-Christian objection takes God – the God that Christians affirm, and the very God that we are having the debate about – altogether out of the equation. The only way that a Christian could be stumped by this objection is if he does the same thing. The apologist might be doing very well throughout a conversation, but all of a sudden, he comes up against a question, argument, or objection that returns him to a non-Christian way of thinking. When this happens, of course he does not know how to proceed. He probably thinks that biblical apologetics, even if it can answer the objection, does not equip him to come up with the answer. Perhaps he needs to ask someone who is more knowledgeable. Perhaps he needs to consult someone more experienced. Perhaps the best thing to do is to run down a long list of objections with an expert apologist and memorize the answers. But in fact the only problem is that he has stopped using biblical apologetics.

There is no essential deficiency in the system of theology and apologetics that we teach, but for the moment he has laid it aside. This is the only possible cause of failure for anyone who has been taught the biblical method – that is, the only way he can fail is if he stops using it. The only way a person can lose to a moron in debate is if he begins to think like one. Now he sees things from the unbeliever's false perspective, and so he thinks, "Why, yes, I do depend on their reasoning abilities. How do I get out of this one now?" A Christian might stop thinking like a Christian in the middle of debate because something is said that puts pressure on a part of his belief system that has not been sufficiently renewed by biblical teaching. In that area of his mind, on that particular subject, he still disagrees with God – maybe not entirely, but his thinking fluctuates.

This is why, although we can prescribe some techniques, and although we offer direct answers to many questions, we have always emphasized that the biblical method is not just a list of prepared answers to standard objections. Rather, it is a way of thinking – holding to divine revelation as the only infallible body of knowledge, it then processes information and interacts with opposition through a precise application of logic.

Holding fast to God's revelation to us means that we affirm all that it teaches, including what it says about the intellectual incompetence of unbelievers. The unbelievers are always wrong, and their objections are always easy to answer. In fact, their intellectual powers are so thoroughly diminished that every objection that they utter is thoroughly foolish. It is not only something easy to answer, but also something that we can use to destroy their belief systems.

Therefore, unlike non-biblical approaches to apologetics, we do not play a game of block-and-punch with unbelievers. We do not block each objection, back off, take our stance, and then advance our own strike. And we know better than to expect them to stand still while we recite our twelve-part presentation, as one popular course in classical apologetics teaches. No, non-Christian objections themselves already show how stupid they are without the illumination of Christ, and each one provides us with the occasion to totally annihilate their belief systems and demolish their intellectual credentials. Everything that an unbeliever says is something that we can use to hurt him.

So when the non-Christian throws us a punch, we do not just block it and wait for the next attack, but we grab his arm and pivot our body, using his momentum to pull him in while we snap his arm and crush his windpipe with our elbow – all in one motion.² And we do this again, and again, and again. This is spiritual vigilance. This is biblical apologetics. Until Christians accept the biblical truth that non-Christians – those without Christ – are constantly and pervasively sinful and stupid, they will never become faithful and effective apologists for the faith.

² Many Christians are not foolhardy enough to oppose Paul's vivid military metaphors, but although ours are similar in principle, they are criticized and misrepresented out of sheer hypocrisy by those professing believers who disagree with Scripture on the subject, but who lack the audacity to directly oppose it. Let us make it clear that we are not urging physical violence, but using these metaphors, we are referring to what happens in the spiritual/intellectual realm as we perform biblical apologetics. In fact, we are not even encouraging Christians to defend the faith in a harsh or offensive manner, although that is sometimes acceptable and even necessary, but we are mainly referring to content, attitude, method, and strategy.

Let us broaden our subject for a moment. Unbelievers assault our faith not only from an intellectual perspective, but they also use political and other kinds of pressure in the attempt to wipe out our influence, or even our very existence. In the face of this, we are certain of victory, not because of our effort, and not even because of their incompetence. But we know that unbelievers will never succeed in destroying the church because God has established his people on the earth, and he has promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against us. In Christ, we are invincible, we are indestructible. And we need not grit our teeth or prime our emotions as we say this, since the flesh possesses no power to enforce divine promises. God's word holds true by his omnipotence, and we rest in him.

We are confident of our enduring intellectual dominance, not because of our inherent superiority, but because the intellectual opposition against Christianity is in reality a struggle against the mind and the wisdom of God. And this is the clash that we arrange in biblical apologetics. When we learn to perceive the conflict from this proper perspective, all fears and worries melt away, and we become amused at the non-Christians' foolishness and presumption – they are so stupid that they would even try to overcome infinite wisdom in debate.

In a similar way, every other kind of opposition against Christianity is in fact an assault, not against the believers as such, but against the Lord. And how does he respond? Is he worried and fearful? Scripture says that he scoffs at them, that is, at those who think that they could conspire against him. Are they going to outlaw the Almighty? The Lord laughs about this (Psalm 2:4). In faith, may we all learn to laugh with him.

"Only rebel not ye against the LORD, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us: their defence is departed from them, and the LORD is with us: fear them not" (Numbers 14:9, KJV).

5. Graded Absolutism³

There are those who believe that ethical dilemmas can occur within the divine command system of ethics. This is when we face situations in which two divine commands appear to demand contradictory responses. That is, in an ethical dilemma, one divine command appears to demand one response, but at the same time this response appears to be forbidden by another applicable divine command, and which demands a contradictory action. The question is, when two divine commands appear to contradict, which one should we obey?

Here is a favorite test case or mental experiment: Suppose a person comes up to you with a deadly weapon demanding you to disclose the location of another person, whom he intends to murder. It appears that two moral duties apply in this situation. There is the duty to preserve the life of another, but if you lie to divert the man from his target, then it seems that you would be violating your duty to tell the truth. To put this negatively, on the one hand, you are forbidden to contribute to the unjust death of another person, and on the other hand, you are forbidden to lie.

A number of solutions have been proposed. Among them, a favorite one is "graded absolutism." It affirms that there is an absolute standard of ethics, and this standard is revealed to us in God's commandments. To transgress God's law is to commit sin; however, some moral duties are greater than others. Then, it acknowledges that there are situations in which moral duties genuinely contradict one another. In these cases, a person must choose the "greater good," and when he does so, he is acting in a righteous manner, and the fact that he violates the lesser commandment in order to fulfill the greater one does not count as sin.

According to graded absolutism, the duty to preserve life is somehow above the duty to uphold truth. Therefore, when applied to our test case, in order to fulfill the duty to preserve life, you would be morally obligated to lie. In fact, it would be a sin not to lie. It is amazing that many Christians consider this line of thinking a good solution to moral dilemmas. But there are several major problems with it.

First, graded absolutism is unbiblical, and permits men to sin. Although it claims to be a form of absolutism, in reality it is just a form of relativism. Moreover, it avoids sin by redefining it, and not by obeying God's commands. Scripture acknowledges that some

³ The following is adapted from my *Commentary on First Peter*, in a section that discusses graded absolutism in relation to divine command ethics. Graded absolutism assumes that God's commands often contradict one another, and attempts to provide a solution. It is tragic that some of the most popular and respected scholars adhere to this view, including Norman Geisler in his *Christian Ethics*, and John Jefferson Davis in his *Evangelical Ethics*. As I will complain below, this view of God's commandments makes him out to be an idiot, and the proposed solution is nothing more than creative rebellion. Therefore, it is paramount for Christians to perceive the impiety and danger of such a view. In place of most works on ethics, I recommend John Murray's *Principles of Conduct*.

commandments are greater than others, but it never acknowledges that they could ever contradict one another, nor does it say that we are to follow only the greater ones when they seem to contradict. When Jesus speaks of "the more important matters of the law," he adds, "You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (Matthew 23:23). And when he refers to the first and second greatest commandments, it is not to make the point that they are to be obeyed instead of the lesser ones. Rather, he adds, "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:40). In both cases, he acknowledges a ranking among God's commandments only to insist that we must obey all of them.

Second, graded absolutism is unnecessary, because it deals with false dilemmas. Using the above test case as an example, there are many more options other than to lie or not to lie. By the biblical precept that permits one to defend himself and to defend others, the person faced with the decision could try to subdue the would-be murderer. Or, he could refuse to disclose the location of the intended victim and accept the consequences – whether injury, torture, or death. Depending on the situation and the many variables that are at play, a number of other options could be open to the person confronted with the decision. Of course he could even choose to lie! But instead of defining it away, let us still call it sin.⁴

Third, graded absolutism is unbelieving, in that it doubts the wisdom of God's revelation and providence. Many situations appear to be moral dilemmas only because we insist on usurping God's role. This is when we judge for ourselves the best outcome and then manipulate the situation to attain it. Rather than obeying God's commandments as they have been revealed to us, we attempt to predict the consequence of obeying each of them, judge the desirability of each outcome, rank our moral duties accordingly (that is, not according to revelation but according to the projected outcome), and then make the one on the top of our list the highest obligation, excusing ourselves from obeying the rest. This is the essence and method of graded absolutism.

There are numerous occasions in which I would give someone a set of clear instructions only to find him do something quite different because he thought that his way was better or that it produced a better outcome. Someone like this often expects to be commended for his creativity and resourcefulness, but what I see is someone who is rebellious, and who cannot follow simple instructions. What I see is someone that I cannot trust, since I can never know whether I will get what I ask for from him.

Whereas I know precisely what I want when I make the instructions, I might not tell the person everything that is on my mind. And why must I exhaustively explain every request to a person, if he could perform the task perfectly just by doing what he is told? If I ask for a kitchen knife, I do not want someone to give me a gun just because he thinks that it would make a better weapon – perhaps I just want to make dinner. And if I ask for a gun, I do not want someone to give me a nuclear bomb just because it could cause greater destruction – perhaps I just want to hunt a bear. If I ask to have my photograph taken, I do not want someone to paint my portrait just because it has more artistic value.

⁴ See my *Commentary on First Peter* for a footnote that addresses the example of Rahab.

Perhaps I do not care about artistic value – perhaps I just need the photograph to renew my passport. I could also regard this behavior as an insult. The person disregards my instructions, seemingly because he thinks he knows better as to what I need or want, and that he knows better at how to attain it for me.

A person who gets "creative" with straightforward instructions sometimes puts great effort into performing the task – his way, that is – but in reality he is useless and unreliable. He takes great pride in his work, partly because he gets creative with it and invests himself into it, but he fails to perform what has been asked of him. So he is reprimanded, but because he is thoroughly self-centered in his perception, he considers himself unjustly accused and becomes indignant.

Likewise, graded absolutism is nothing but creative rebellion. Scripture indicates which moral duties are greater and lesser, and therefore provides an objective (God's viewpoint) way to determine moral priorities – not to excuse us from the lesser duties, but to determine the degree of guilt and the severity of the punishment deserved when we disobey. But graded absolutism always takes more than this to make a decision when confronted with what it perceives to be a moral dilemma. It relies heavily on the person's private ability to predict the outcomes of his actions, at times far from his immediate control and involvement, then to relate these outcomes to the applicable commandments, and then to choose the appropriate actions based on the ranking of the commandments. It has no confidence in God's wisdom in giving these commandments, and it takes his providence out of the picture. In other words, it assumes that we are smart and God is stupid, and that we are in control while God is helpless.

The correct solution is simple. Rather than predicting the outcomes of my actions and then choosing which commandments to obey on that basis, my immediate responsibility and attention is to God's commandments, and I leave it up to the Giver of these commandments to take care of the outcomes. He knew what kind of world we live in and he knew what he was doing when he gave these commandments. It is not up to me to make things come out "right" when I might not even know what he wants out of the situation or why he wants it. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29). Our duty is to "follow all the words of this law," and not to follow what we determine to be the right course of action by predicting what would happen if we indeed follow all the words of this law.

Even when we follow this biblical and straightforward principle, there will still be difficult moral decisions. However, they will be difficult not because we must resolve moral dilemmas generated by divine commands that contradict one another – that never happens. Rather, one difficulty lies in the continual effort to attain a faithful and precise understanding of God's commandments and their implications for our thoughts and behavior. And the other difficulty is in the continual struggle against sin, exhibited in the tendency to think that we know better than God (as in graded absolutism), as well as in the tendency to refuse to do what we know is right and to insist on doing what we know

is wrong. Moral decisions are often difficult not because there are so many dilemmas, but because there is so much sin and rebellion.

6. Double Graded Absolutism

Regarding the article "Graded Absolutism," his criticism is interesting, but the proposed solution is poor. It does not work out an answer for the problem and does not make a lengthy and careful exposition on how to "obey the commandment" and trust in God for the rest. What commandment or commandments? Or does he think the dilemma does not exist here?

I prefer the solution presented by Charles Hodge, in which he examines the question of a person's right to demand an answer to the question (in this case, the man with the gun). If he has no right to the answer, then to deceive him cannot be classified as a lie. I suspect that Cheung will say this is Christian sophism, but the evaluation of the person's right is something that should be done.

"What commandment or commandments?"

If he is asking which commandment applies, then I would say that at least in principle, all of God's commandments are in force at the same time. I say "in principle" because, although "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" is always in force, if the entire scenario has nothing to do with anyone's wife, then it is not directly relevant in that situation. But still, this does not mean that it is not in force – it just means that there is no wife for anyone to covet at the moment.

But if he is implying that we must select a commandment to apply, then he is arguing in a circle, since he assumes the type of reasoning used by graded absolutism without answering my objections against it. So if this is what he means, then he is not doing anything to defend graded absolutism, but he is merely asserting it again.

"Or does he think the dilemma does not exist here?"

Correct. I already said this in the article, and he should know this if he pays attention to what he reads. Asking about it again does not change anything. It certainly does not explain how the test case actually contains a moral dilemma.

There are no dilemmas, paradoxes, or contradictions – ever – in God's commandments, and in any situation. No one has ever shown that there is in fact a dilemma in the above scenario, or any other scenario. And asking this rhetorical question does not create a dilemma where there was none.

The truth is that the tension in any so-called ethical dilemma is never between two or more of God's commandments, but between God's commandments and the person's own opinions and desires.

"It does not work out an answer for the problem."

Actually, I did answer it, but he does not say what is wrong with my answer. Also, as indicated above, there is in fact no "problem" at all, and this is also part of the answer. It begs the question for him to simply assume again that there is a "problem" when I have already explained why there is no problem at all. If he wishes to insist that there is a dilemma, he will have to show it, rather than just assume it and disregard what I said.

"...and does not make a lengthy and careful exposition on how to 'obey the commandment' and trust in God for the rest."

In fact, I did this as well, and in more than adequate detail. Again, he does not interact with what I said, but simply disregard it.

"If he has no right to the answer, then to deceive him cannot be classified as a lie."

WHY? Who made up this rule? Where is it in the Bible? "Thou shalt not bear false witness unless the person does not have a right to the truth"?!

If this is the accepted principle, then we must now examine the Bible to tell us who has a right to the truth in each situation. And are there ever dilemmas, paradoxes, and contradictions when it comes to this? That is, are there situations in which a person seems to have the right to the truth according to one portion of Scripture, but then does not seem to have that right according to another part of Scripture? How is this resolved when that happens? So this is just double graded absolutism. Now we need a third principle to determine who has the right to the truth in each situation. And if that ever produces a dilemma, then we need a fourth, and so on.

If someone does not have the right to the answer, why not just refuse to say anything? Or, why not say, "You have no right to the answer"? And what about the other possible options that I suggested in the earlier article? But somehow the idea is that when someone does not have the right to the answer, then we should go ahead and lie to him. In fact, he says to deceive is not to lie in this case, which is nonsense. Perhaps he intends to say that to lie is not to sin in such a situation.

"...but the evaluation of the person's right is something that should be done."

Again, who says? Is his God Jehovah, or Charles Hodge?

"I suspect that Cheung will say this is Christian sophism."

No. The truth is that I will just call this person a liar, and I will probably never believe anything he says. If he is so prepared to lie, then in his heart he has already done it, and that is the kind of person he is.

This is the state of Christian theological reasoning. God have mercy on us all.

7. Blinded by Atheism

"O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (Matthew 17:17)

Our ministry received a message from an agitated reader who, in very dramatic language, urged me to answer an objection against my epistemology. As I can no longer take time to answer most of the messages calling for my attention, especially ones with the problems that I will mention below, ordinarily this one would have been ignored. The main reason that I have chosen to respond is because of the instructive value in examining the message. That is, there are other points to be made besides answering the objection.

The sender's message appears below in blockquote format. His words are highlighted in blue, and the objection that he quotes is highlighted in red. Also, note that in my response, I will sometimes speak to "you" – that is, the sender of the message – and since this is now adapted for public consumption, I will sometimes speak directly to "you" the readers. The difference should be obvious, so that this should not result in any confusion. And sometimes it makes no difference as to how the "you" is understood.

I appreciate your ministry and have all your books and most of them read. However, you **MUST FACE AND SQUARELY ANSWER THE FOLLOWING ISSUE OR YOUR MINISTRY WILL WILT AND FADE AWAY!!!**

One of your critics has summarized the issue as follows (I am not your critic but I think it is more than a crucial point):

"Herein lies a vicious circle. Unless he already knows, apart from Scripture, that Scripture is an object of knowledge, how can he ever know that the Bible is his source of information? Likewise, unless he already knows that occasionalism is true, how can he ever know that this is the true mechanism which puts his mind in contact with the propositions of Scripture?"

"You see, for Cheung, Scripture is like a safe. Occasionalism is the combination. But there's one little snag: the combination is locked away in the safe. Cheung is telling us that he gets the combination (occasionalism) from the safe. But he can only open the safe if he already has the combination in hand. How does he know that occasionalism is the correct combination to open the safe if the combination is written on a piece of paper inside the safe?"

"So this is his dilemma: if he can open the safe without knowing in advance what's inside, then his knowledge is not limited to what's inside the safe. But if he can't open the safe without knowing in advance what is inside, and if the contents of the safe are his only source of knowledge, then he can't know anything at all.

"So, you see, Cheung is cheating. He is tactically assuming an insider's knowledge which he, as an outsider, can never enjoy. That's his secret fudge-factor."

I HAVE read all your responses but they really are NOT adequate. For the sake of the kingdom and God's people, I request, plead...BEG! that you make a full and formal and THOROUGH reply to this objection.

It is not right that you unwittingly allow your students to enter into the world of argument as cripples because I opine that probably most do not know how to adequately answer the above objection. And if you know the answer then you are obligated to make it known to your students. I am not a stupid fellow, but if I do not understand how your current replies are adequate, I am sure that most others do not understand as well.

I am not your critic. I do not have a blog against you or any such thing. I am desperately trying to make sense of your arguments and for the glory of God, so would you please stop riding this objection out, ignoring it as if it has already been met?

This is the most critical issue your apologetic ministry faces – your Achilles heel *perhaps* – so please PLEASE make a formal, in-depth, article LENGTH, totally comprehensive, public response which breaks it all down Barney style so that the stupidest among us can defend it.

Please do not shrug this email off as just another crazy critic who has not bothered to think through or read your articles. But in the end, it's your ministry that's on the line and not mine. However, God's name is on it and, as your brother in Christ, I am calling you out to take responsibility for what you have started.

The Critical Issue

Before I answer the objection, I must talk about the tone and content of your message.

First, if you are going to be a half-decent apologist, you will need to calm down. Stop being so dramatic. This emotional flair is irritating to me, degrading to yourself, and not conducive to rational thinking. If you think that something like this can threaten my ministry's survival, I seriously question your intelligence and wonder how much

confidence you can have in Christianity itself. I had no respect for you by the time I finished the first paragraph of your message. You are a weakling.

Second, it is unacceptable to insult my readers. Whether or not I "allow" it, I take great offense that you call many of them "cripples" when it comes to argumentation, and reduce all of them to your level of incompetence. Speak for yourself. I certainly did not allow you to "enter into the world of argument" with this bad attitude. It got my attention this time, but not in a good way, and only so that I could make an example of you.

Third, if you are going to insult me, at least get your facts straight. I have mentioned several times that I do not read most of the things written about me on the Internet. This is not because I deliberately avoid them, but mainly because I do not read anything much on the Internet at all. I do not read blog articles and discussion forums. I cannot even read many of the emails sent to me. Printed publications keep me busy enough. So it is not that I have been "riding this objection out," since I was unaware of it until you sent it to me today. God knows all things – I am not lying – I have never come across this objection. Call me a liar first before you call me a coward.

Fourth, you are not qualified to name "the most critical issue" in my "apologetic ministry." By "apologetic ministry," you are either referring to apologetics as the main mission of this ministry, or you are referring to the apologetic aspect of this ministry. I have said several times that the main focus of this ministry is not apologetics, but theological and biblical exposition. Do not think that this ministry is mainly about apologetics just because we are very good at it – there is no simpler way to put this. And if you are just referring to the apologetic aspect of this ministry, then you are still not qualified to say that this is its "most critical issue." You say that unless this ministry answers the objection, it will "wilt and fade away." Really? How about our systematic theology, commentaries, books on prayer and spirituality? They will all count for nothing? Right now your attitude seems a bigger problem than the objection.

You are right about one thing – I am the one who must take responsibility for this ministry. And this is why I am going to operate it on my own terms. I do not take orders from you or my critics. This ministry will not be bullied. It will not sway from its mission due to pressure from you or any critic. Because I am responsible, humanly speaking, I am also the only one who sets the agenda for this ministry. If I think that this ministry needs a commentary on First Peter, this ministry is going to get a commentary on First Peter. If I think I will become a better minister by taking more time to read and pray – guess what? – I am going to take more time to read and pray. You and the critics can wait in line, and I am going to be responsible for this decision. Of course, we consider comments and suggestions, but you are in no position to make demands.

The Secret Atheism

As for the objection, I could protest the analogy, but for now let us work with it anyway. As usual, there is a whole list of things wrong with this one. Here I will take time to mention only the most crucial error. This alone is sufficient to refute the objection, and to do a whole lot more.

Read the entire objection again. I will repeat a portion of it here: "You see, for Cheung, Scripture is like a safe. Occasionalism is the combination. But there's one little snag: the combination is locked away in the safe. Cheung is telling us that he gets the combination (occasionalism) from the safe. But he can only open the safe if he already has the combination in hand. How does he know that occasionalism is the correct combination to open the safe if the combination is written on a piece of paper inside the safe?"

What is wrong with this picture? Do you see what is missing? THINK! Do not assume this person has it right. Whether or not you agree with my epistemology or occasionalism, recount in your mind the process or all the factors involved in my exposition. Then, read the analogy again and see what is missing. Please take at least several seconds to do this before reading on.

Here is the problem: Where is GOD in this analogy? In my exposition of biblical occasionalism, I refer to God's constant and active power again, and again, and again, and again, and again. It is the defining factor in both my metaphysics and epistemology. So, although I put God before him over, and over, and over, and over again, this critic completely blocks God out in his thinking, and in his representation of my epistemology. If the critic is an unbeliever, then he has simply disregarded my belief in God – the very thing we disagree about in the first place – in order to refute my knowledge of God. If the critic is a professing believer, then it is even worse, for this betrays the irreverence – even secret atheism – in his thinking.⁵ How is it possible that I can put God before the face of a "Christian" again and again, and then he answers me as if God is absent from the conversation, as if I never mentioned him? This is his "secret fudge-factor" – atheism.

He writes, "He can only open the safe if he already has the combination in hand." This might be true in his atheistic analogy, but in my Christian worldview, where there is a God, the Almighty tears open the door – or any other barrier – and imparts to me his knowledge. Biblical occasionalism is God-centered and God-empowered. But just as an atheist often makes the mistake of removing God out of a believer's worldview when interacting with it, this man-centered critic assumes that his opponent is man-centered as well. Whereas the most crucial factor in my occasionalism is God, in his representation of my view, he puts everything into the analogy except God. He refers to occasionalism as if it is an independent and impersonal thing or a method that is operated by the human person, which is the very opposite of what I affirm, although this might be how a self-centered empiricist think about his sensations.

"Cheung is cheating"? But who is really cheating? This person removes God from my epistemology when this is the crucial factor. And in fact, from the metaphysical viewpoint, God is the only necessary factor in my position. This relates to another problem with the analogy that I will not discuss in detail – it represents my entire position in physical terms, even though my occasionalism is such that it can work in a dream, in a purely spiritual world, or in heaven, and the Bible is the physical representation of that portion of God's mind that he has revealed to us. That is, if you destroy all physical

⁵ I have subsequently discovered that the critic is indeed a professing believer.

copies of the Bible, you have not destroyed the "word of God" that is in my epistemology. I have said this a number of times in different ways.

If you take out God from my epistemology, then of course it is going to fail. There is no shame in admitting this. In fact, if you remove God, then Christianity itself fails. Yes, if Christianity becomes atheism, that is indeed a problem. But if you remove God by force and rule him out of the conversation, then there is really no point to this debate at all. For me, if God is gone, then all is lost. You might as well take it all, since it will no longer matter to me what epistemology is right or wrong, or which approach to philosophy and apologetics is best. Still less will I care about what this critic has to say.

I have laid out my case for biblical occasionalism in metaphysics and epistemology in several places and in different ways. I have responded to attacks a number of times. But how about my critics? Where is the case for empiricism? If there is no proof for it, then who is riding this out? And now that I have answered this objection, I ask again: If my critics cannot defend empiricism, then how are they able to read the Bible, and how are they able to read my works so as to criticize them?

So you slandered me when you said, "Would you please stop riding this objection out, ignoring it as if it has already been met?" Of course this objection has already been met long before this. Every time I answer a specific objection, it is only an application of the biblical system expounded in my works. It is important for my readers to realize this. I might be more proficient at it, but once you have learned the system, you possess the same equipment as I do to handle any intellectual opposition against it. But you judge my materials by your incompetence. If you are going to let this critic remove God from your thinking, and if you are going to block out all mention of God from my writings – although I refer to his role again and again – then of course you will regard them as "not adequate." I am happy to confess that my occasionalism is unable to defend atheism.

It is not my fault that you let someone completely remove God from the picture. On the other hand, it is entirely your fault that you did not even notice when God himself was taken away from you. And then you turn around and blame me? And you dare say to me, "I am calling you out to take responsibility"? What kind of person are you? Do not lecture me about my "responsibility" if you claim to be a believer but cannot even remember God while thinking about Christian apologetics.

The same goes with the critic – if you indeed claim to be a Christian but your reflex is to block out God from your mind like this, my occasionalism is the least of your problems. Actually, it is the cure.

The Road Ahead

The good news is, if this is already my "Achilles heel," then I think I am going to be around for a while and will not "wilt and fade away." In fact, I wonder if these objections are meant to destroy me by flattery rather than by argument, because if this is my Achilles heel, and if to misrepresent me as an atheist is one of the best objections, then I am pretty much invincible.

The above illustrates why I do not rush to answer every objection against me.

First, it is because there are so many, and they are all so stupid. Sometimes in legal battles, lawyers do not necessarily have to win all the advantages by sound arguments, but they can buy time or neutralize their opponents by filing motion after motion, thus drowning them in paperwork, so that they cannot make any progress. Likewise, the most straightforward tactic against the biblical system is of course to refute it, but since this is impossible, the devil can incite people to raise one stupid objection after another, drowning a ministry in frivolous controversies so that it cannot pursue its mission. We refuse to be so easily deceived. Also, consider that it takes less effort to raise objections (especially stupid ones) than to answer them in a presentable and satisfying manner. I could have answered the above objection just by saying, "What about God?" or "He left God out," but then some people might not understand why this answers the objection, and many more might fail to perceive the atheistic assumption behind the objection.

Second, time and again, I have demonstrated how outrageously stupid are the objections against our biblical system, and how easily they are answered. There is no weakness at all in the biblical system, and therefore no weakness at all in the approach of apologetics taught by this ministry. The problem is in the anti-biblical mentality that resides in the critics and those who are troubled by them. This time it is implicit atheism. Another objection (and the failure to answer it) will reveal some other spiritual or intellectual defect. Therefore, by focusing on our teaching mission, this ministry is doing exactly what is needed to cure the root of the problem, instead of just dealing with the symptoms. We proclaim the greatness of God, the coherence of revelation, the depravity of man, the work and wisdom of Christ, and the divine commands for holy living. From this biblical worldview comes a natural and invincible apologetic.

I have spoken harshly to the sender of the message, but I still want this person to do well. I wish him to realize that it is wrong to blame me when the problem lies within himself. Unless he corrects the mentality that is so easily manipulated by the critics, he will soon come across another objection that he cannot answer, and then he will blame me again. I also appeal to the rest of you to gauge yourselves by how much difficulty you had with the above objection. When someone removes God from the conversation, or from a representation of your position, do you even notice? If I speak to you as I would a dog, you might find that obvious. If you are a man and I refer to you as if you were a woman, it is likely you will notice that as well. And if you speak only English but I talk to you in Chinese, you will probably scratch your head and think something is amiss. So how can it completely bypass your attention when someone speaks to you or about you as if you were an atheist? Perhaps these other things are more central to your identity than being a Christian. There is no need to despair, but humble yourself and do not blame other people for your shortcoming. This is the type of problem that any faithful minister must aim to fix, mainly not by giving you a list of answers to stupid objections posed by incompetent critics, but by helping you become a biblical thinker.

As a Christian, you should never make apologetics the main focus of your spiritual life. Divine providence might require some of us to focus on apologetics in our public ministry, although even then I would urge a strong teaching ministry to go along with it. But I am mainly referring to your personal life before God. Apologetics is so easy such that if it is the main focus of your life and if you become any good at it, you might become disillusioned with boredom and with a lack of purpose. Just look at the foolishness that I must deal with – there is nothing new, nothing clever, and nothing stimulating or challenging. Never confuse debates and controversies with spiritual food. Always define your life and ministry in positive terms that direct you toward right doctrine and right worship. Such a pursuit yields constant reward and never loses its attraction.

As for the critic who raised the objection, he might read this response and attempt another one. I will probably ignore him, or more likely, I will be unaware of his new attack. But this does not mean that I cannot answer him, or that you cannot answer him. The fact that he was unable to even describe my position, but left God completely out of the picture, betrayed his incompetence and irreverence. Whether he is a man of no account or one of reputation makes no difference to me, I implore him to repent of his atheism and embrace the simple reality and power of God. What he has against me is trivial and I harbor no bitterness toward him – he has a much greater problem than I can ever give him or wish upon anyone. And please, do not send me anymore objections from this person or anyone related to him. He is just not good enough. He possesses an altogether lower class of intellect. There is no competition, no comparison – I have no interest in him and no use for him.

Do I sound arrogant to you? That is a very American reaction, but not necessarily a Christian one. You still do not understand, do you? I have confidence in God's word, and it is because I depend on God's word that I can never be defeated. Because the wisdom of God is so vastly superior to the wisdom of man, I will always win any debate with almost disheartening ease. It is this confidence that I wish to impart to every Christian. Indeed, humanly speaking, it can be lonely here looking down at the rest from the top of the world – and that is where a person is when he stands upon God's word. This is a place of separation, but it is also a place of victory and rest, and an end to all struggles. Here is where we can experience constant communion with the mind of Christ. This place belongs to every Christian, will you not join me?

8. Blasphemy and Mystery in Theology

A reader sent us a discussion he had with someone. Among other things, they touched on the relationship between God and evil. This other person wrote the following – his words have been slightly edited for readability:

In this book, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*, D. A. Carson says, "It is essential – I cannot say this strongly enough – it is utterly essential to doctrinal and spiritual well-being to maintain the diverse polarities in the nature of God simultaneously. For instance, if you work through the biblical passages that bluntly insist God in some sense stands behind evil, and do not simultaneously call to mind the countless passages that insist he is unfailingly good, then in a period of suffering you may be tempted to think of God as a vicious, sovereign thug."⁶ This view allows for the mystery of this doctrine to remain rather than trying to follow it out to its perceived logical end. Where Scripture does not go we must not also.

Introduction

On this subject, faithful readers already understand my stance and my reasons for it. What we have here is another instance of a popular and traditional position, which has been demonstrated as not only unbiblical, irrational, but also blasphemous, even if not by intention. Thus we must issue a harsh condemnation of what is said. Since the discussion involves respected biblical scholar D. A. Carson, I wish to offer a broader perspective on the person before I proceed.

Carson is one of my preferred Christian writers. His works are characterized by sober exegesis and readable style. In a number of places, he is unafraid to break free from traditional fallacies in order to affirm alternatives that are more biblical and rational. Although I must disagree with a number of details, I offer a general endorsement of his works with two major exceptions. The first exception is the book mentioned above, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*. The second is *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*. Rather than carrying the subtitle, "Biblical Doctrines in Harmony," which would sound like something that I might write, it reinforces the tiresome assumption that Scripture contains internal "tension," a pretty word for contradiction.

The point is that, in general, I do not challenge Carson's orthodoxy, piety, or competence; however, on this topic, he fails to break from the traditional unbiblical and irrational position, and as a result commits himself to a position so profane and sinful that, if not

⁶ D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Baker Books, 1990), p. 225. The statement appears in a chapter in which compatibilism is expounded and defended. I have reviewed the chapter to make sure that we are not taking this statement out of context. As for compatibilism itself, I have refuted it elsewhere.

for the sake of education, I would hardly dare to repeat it. This person who cites Carson also echoes some traditional slogans, so we will examine his statements as well.

How shall we proceed? Almost every clause in the paragraph contains some theological abominations. The most thorough method would be a phrase-by-phrase analysis, but it would also be inefficient and repetitious, since along with each phrase, we will have to examine its relation to other phrases that come before and after it. So, instead, we will go through the paragraph and highlight several topics for discussion.

Blasphemy

Carson writes that it is essential to "maintain the diverse polarities in the nature of God." To the careless reader who is accustomed to this kind of talk, the statement appears rather innocent, and the word "polarities" may even seem classy and intriguing. But "polarities" refer to opposites – this is what the word means. And "diverse" refers to variety or multiplicity. These words are applied to "the nature of God."

In other words, Carson says that it is "utterly essential" to say that there are many opposites in the very nature of God. He does not say many facets, but many opposites. Satan himself can hardly come up with blasphemy worse than this. It reaches into God's very nature and tears him apart from within.

But this only sets up what is to follow.

As an example of the need to maintain the idea of opposites in the very nature of God, Carson writes, "...if you work through the biblical passages that bluntly insist God in some sense stands behind evil, and do not simultaneously call to mind the countless passages that insist he is unfailingly good, then in a period of suffering you may be tempted to think of God as a vicious, sovereign thug."

Again, to an unthinking person who is accustomed to this kind of nonsense, this sounds innocent, and even reverent. But consider what he is saying here. Keep in mind that Carson is speaking of polarities – opposites – in God's very nature. There is no wiggling out here – he does not say that these are merely apparent contradictions, which would be bad enough, but polarities in the nature of God. Then, the above offers an example of one of these polarities. Therefore, according to Carson, the fact that God sovereignly "stands behind evil" is the opposite of being "unfailingly good." In other words, when God "stands behind evil," he is evil, or he is doing evil. If this is not the implication, then there is no polarity here.

I get nervous even when just pointing out what Carson's statement implies, but many Christians are proud to proclaim this blasphemy. And when someone thinks this way, no wonder he is tempted to consider God a "vicious, sovereign thug." Carson suggests that we must also remember that God is unfailingly good. However, if God is good when he sovereignly "stands behind evil," then where is the polarity? And if the polarity is maintained, then it must mean that he is evil at those times when he sovereignly stands

behind evil, while he is good at all other times. But if so, then how he is unfailingly good?

And what kind of person would think that God is a "vicious, sovereign thug" when he reads the biblical accounts of God's sovereignty over evil? Does the Bible itself suggest this idea? If the Bible does not suggest it, where does it come from? A non-biblical standard has been used to judge God's sovereign control over evil. The false notion is not inherent in the biblical passages. And if it is not inherent these passages, then no polarity is needed to balance it out.

Against Carson, the biblical position is that God is good by definition and is the sole standard of goodness. It is nothing less than shameless rebellion to bring in an anti-biblical standard of goodness and see if God measures up to it, saying that he seems to be a thug sometimes, while at other times he seems to be good. Rather, we discover the meaning of goodness by God's words and actions as recorded in Scripture, and from this perspective, we see that God is "unfailingly good" even as he sovereignly controls evil. There is no polarity in his nature.

Carson's statement does not permit this harmony, since he offers this as one instance of the "diverse polarities" in God. Therefore, to him it must mean that one set of biblical passages pulls us toward the direction of thinking that God is a "vicious, sovereign thug," and this is balanced by another set of biblical passages teaching an opposite part of God's nature, that he is "unfailingly good." I am happy to assume that this is not what he intends to assert, and that it is an oversight, but this is indeed what his statement implies. Here I bring no charge of deliberate blasphemy, but who can blame me for accusing him and others of unclear and unbiblical thinking? Who can blame me for standing up against this "orthodox" sacrilege?

Let no one be so foolish as to accuse me of misrepresentation. If I have misrepresented him, then what is his true position? Any suggested understanding of his position must maintain his insistence of "diverse polarities in God" and his use of two sets of biblical passages that exhibit these polarities, and this view must still avoid the problems that I have specified. But there is no misrepresentation – although some versions are better formulated than others, Carson's is a popular view taught in Reformed and other theological traditions, and it is blasphemy.

Mystery

Then, the person who cites Carson comments, "This view allows for the mystery of this doctrine to remain rather than trying to follow it out to its perceived logical end. Where Scripture does not go we must not also." Again, different people might state it in different ways, but this represents a popular attitude. Continuing with our topical analysis, here we must discuss the ideas of mystery, of logical implication, and of the extent of biblical revelation.

If mystery means something that we do not fully understand, and indeed cannot fully understand in this life, then broadly speaking, it has not been shown that there is any

mystery at all regarding God and his sovereign control over evil. As I have demonstrated in several places, Scripture plainly tells us that God controls evil, how he does it, and why he does it. It is true that we do not know everything about the subject, if for no other reason than that Scripture does not grant us omniscience. But this limitation is irrelevant, since omniscience is not the issue. Rather, it is contended that the matter remains a mystery even on the broadest level, but this is false. What we have from Scripture on this subject is full enough to answer all broad questions, as well as many specific ones, and to eliminate all logical problems in our understanding, so that there is not even a hint of contradiction, paradox, tension, or any such thing.

The so-called mystery, then, does not exist because God withholds information from us, nor is it because the matter is so complex that our so-called "finite human mind" cannot grasp it (indeed, that we even need to have this discussion indicates that some minds are vastly more finite than others). But the mystery exists because these people refuse to accept what God has clearly and coherently revealed. There might be a problem of theological aptitude, but along with that is a strong rebellion against divine revelation. The matter is very simple in itself.

They claim that they appeal to mystery where biblical revelation terminates, but this is a lie. Scripture provides an elaborate doctrine on the subject, much more complete than they are willing to acknowledge. The truth is that for them mystery does not begin where revelation ends, but it begins where their position becomes so obviously false and incoherent that they appeal to mystery to stop the discussion by force. For them, mystery begins where their acceptance of Scripture ends.

This person says that we should call the matter a mystery even before we follow what Scripture reveals to its logical end. To be fair, whether or not he is being intentionally precise, he writes "perceived logical end," allowing for the possibility that he is objecting only to false inferences that are regarded as true. We readily agree that false deductions are just that – false. But what about true inferences, valid deductions?

The common resistance to follow what Scripture teaches to its logical conclusion represents the misunderstanding that the logical conclusion of a set of premises can produce something different from or disallowed by the premises. But this is only true of induction. With deduction, the reasoning process by definition derives a logically necessary conclusion from the premises, that is, one that is already contained in the premises. The deduction does not manufacture new information, and the conclusion produces nothing in addition to or different from the premises. This conclusion is not invented as a best estimation based on the premises; rather, it is merely pointed out and made explicit. Therefore, refusing to make or accept a deductive inference from what Scripture asserts is the equivalent of refusing what Scripture asserts, since the conclusion of such a deduction is what Scripture asserts.

He writes, "Where Scripture does not go we must not also." Good! However, this should be the least of his worries. His problem is his refusal to go where Scripture plainly and explicitly goes. This popular slogan is true in itself, but as it is often used, it is nothing

but a smokescreen to cover up a blatant refusal to accept what God reveals. Let us first go where Scripture takes us before worrying about going beyond it.

Conclusion

It is excruciating to bear the constant blasphemies that our brothers in Christ level against God, all the while thinking that they are doing him a service. But blasphemy is not a lesser sin than even murder or adultery – in principle it is much worse. Therefore, as painful as it is to deal with, we must boldly condemn their false teachings and stubborn rebellion in the harshest terms possible, urging their repentance and correction.

The few of us who affirm the obvious perfect coherence of God and his revelation are often accused of teaching rationalism. If the accusation is that we exalt reason above revelation, I am puzzled as to how this is possible, since I affirm that only revelation is rational. And often we are just expounding on what Scripture directly teaches, even in its explicit statements, whereas our opponents create problems where there is none. They seem to love the idea of mystery even more than they love the God who has spoken so clearly to us. They would rather murder God, tearing him apart from within, than to sacrifice their mystery.

A more accurate description of non-biblical rationalism is that it exalts a non-revelational epistemology of human speculation in order to judge the content of revelation. Certainly I do no such thing. In fact, by this definition, our opponents are more readily labeled rationalists, since as we have seen, they judge God's sovereign control over evil by their non-biblical standard. Applying this term to them is, of course, confusing, since they are not at all rational. The truth is that their rejection of revelation, of valid deduction, and their illegitimate appeal to mystery combine to produce a form of anti-Christian irrationalism.

In any case, if to affirm that God is clearly and perfectly harmonious in his nature and in his revelation is to teach rationalism, then THANK GOD FOR RATIONALISM. May the Lord of Reason send forth many more laborers to teach this kind of rationalism! This rationalism is not of a humanistic or anti-supernatural variety, which is not rational at all, but it is of a biblical kind – a biblical rationalism, acknowledging the perfect coherence of God and his revelation.

9. A Culture of Irreverence

We will first revisit some of the previous articles. Then, we will draw some conclusions from them about the tendency of the popular theological mindset and how we must address the problem.

In "Blinded by Atheism,"⁷ I deal with an objection against the metaphysic and epistemology of biblical occasionalism.⁸ Although the most central and obvious factor in my position is the constant and active power of God, the critic completely removes God from his representation of it. The error is identical in principle to the one found in "In God We Trust." There I confront an objection from an atheist who alleges an inconsistency in our approach, only that his accusation also fails to factor in our trust in the constant and active power of God.

Such an oversight certainly betrays the incompetence of our critics, but the problem is deeper than that. We are reminded of Paul's words in Romans: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them" (1:18-19). The difference is that our critics are even more blatant. We repeatedly speak of God to them, but they have already suppressed all thoughts of him by the time they answer us. Incompetence is reinforced by deep-seated irreverence.

We expect this kind of incompetence from unbelievers – the Bible tells us that their minds are darkened, foolish, depraved, and without understanding. Their stubborn prejudice against belief in God also plays a part in such an oversight, in that they assume their atheism so strongly that they cannot even entertain his existence in other people's worldviews. However, the same objections could have easily come – and indeed sometimes have come – from those professing Christians who oppose the doctrine that God works to sustain and control all things.

The main character in the story of our philosophy is a God who is always present and active, knowing all things, sustaining all things, and controlling all things. But our critics revise our story so that this main character – the only one who truly matters – is altogether absent. Thus, whether these are unbelievers or professing believers, it is atheism that dominates their thinking and perspective. This atheistic tendency is so strong that they cannot keep God in the conversation even when he is the topic of the conversation.

⁷ I have not taken the time to read any critical responses to "Blinded by Atheism." The following comments are not directed to any critic in particular, but address possible responses, actual responses to similar statements in previous writings, and actual responses to the article that I have not read but that have been mentioned (not quoted) to me.

⁸ Other names that I favor include biblical rationalism and biblical foundationalism.

The objection raised in "Blinded by Atheism" exhibits a number of errors, so that it could be addressed from several angles. Indeed, several readers have sent in their own responses to it, all dealing with the objection from a more technical viewpoint. But I have chosen the most central, the most obvious, and the most simple answer, because it strikes at two of my primary concerns at the same time. First, of course, it exposes the critic's intellectual incompetence, and most readers probably understand how irrational thinking irritates me. But what irritates me even more than intellectual incompetence is irreverence, here revealed in the critic's audacity to exclude God in a conversation in which he is the central figure.

Of course we do not expect unbelievers to exhibit any degree of reverence. But compare this ministry's publications with the writings of those critics who claim to be Christians. Without fear of contradiction, it is obvious that our concern is to exalt God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, along with the Holy Scripture, infallible and inerrant, through which they reveal themselves. Every aspect of our philosophy stresses the greatness of God, and every section of our commentaries exalts his wisdom. In responding to objections, whether they are directed at us or to our faith, we consistently weave into our answers the power of God, the work of Christ, and the perfect coherence of divine revelation. On the other hand, our critics exhibit a self-centered attitude that seems to care about whether they are in the right rather than whether they are in the right *about God*, and whether they are doing their part to exalt him before all men. This is a generalization, and it might be that not all of our critics are this way. But read for yourselves.

Soon after "Blinded by Atheism" was released, it was indicated to me that the article was attacked because of what I claimed about myself in it. I was aware of the criticisms that those statements would incite when I wrote them, and as usual, the answer is already embedded in them. I certainly said that I can never be defeated in debate, but in the same sentence I also said that this is "because I depend on God's word." And of course I said that I stand on top of the world looking down at the rest, but in the same sentence I also said that this is "where a person is when he stands upon God's word." Moreover, I insisted that "This place belongs to every Christian," and earlier I mentioned that any Christian could possess the "same equipment" as I do even if I might be more proficient at using it.

Any critic who wishes to attack these statements faces three problems. First, since I give all credit to the word of God, to attack me would be to attack the word of God. Second, if he attacks me without any recognition of how all my "boasting" is in fact an exaltation of God's wisdom, it means that he has excluded God from the conversation again – yes, again. Third, either he disallows this exalted position to the wisdom of God, or he insults all Christians everywhere by implying that none of them could attain this height of intellectual enlightenment even when they depend on the word of God. But I say that all Christians could and should attain to this. The most arrogant and self-centered person here is in fact the critic.

Why did I make these statements – and numerous others like them in my writings – knowing that they would invite criticisms? Nowadays false humility characterizes Christian expressions to the point that we are either lying or blaspheming, and those who personalize the truths of Scripture are persecuted. Am I supposed to say that the wisdom of God is above all human wisdom, but it does not lift me above all the foolishness of this world when I rely upon it? That would be ridiculous and contradictory, and an insult to God's grace in redeeming my mind from the effects of sin. Am I supposed to quote the verse, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" and then turn around and say that I might lose in a debate? No, because I depend on God's wisdom, and because I have the mind of Christ, of course I will win every debate. It would be dishonest to say otherwise.

So why did I say these things? I did it, and will continue to do it, for you. I want to show Christians someone who actually possesses the confidence that God's word ought to inspire, so that they in turn might possess this confidence. Only this level of confidence is consistent with reverence toward God and his revelation. On the other hand, by their false humility our opponents show that although they honor God with their lips, their hearts are far from him. There has been much talk about "humble apologetics" recently. Of course we ought to be humble in ourselves and about ourselves, but it is not our place to be humble *for God*. In fact, it is the very zenith of arrogance and impiety to say that we might be wrong when we believe what God has revealed, for then we are really saying that he might be wrong.

I do not make great claims about myself in and because of myself. But when it comes to God and his word, I am going to make the boldest claims that he enables me to come up with. If his mind is closed to me, and if his wisdom is withheld from me, then of course there is no basis to make great claims. But if he has revealed himself to me, and if we have the mind of Christ as Scripture says, then as a Christian I must personalize this wisdom and tell about the difference that this has made in me. I have the mind of Christ, and the eyes of my understanding are enlightened. My Father is greater than all, and if I believe what he says, how dare I not say that I stand on top of the world? Scripture tells me that I am now seated with Christ in heavenly places. I am a child of the light, a son of the God of Heaven. Unlike some people, I do not just argue for Christianity – I actually believe it. Am I boasting about myself, in what I have attained? But we proclaim that this is a sovereign gift and work of God.

I express this faith – knowing that I would be attacked for doing so – so that other believers might be inspired to do the same. Only when a person realizes this can he correctly understand and interact with my writings. And someone who answers me by excluding God altogether or by mistaking my bold statements as self-exaltation clearly fails to grasp my meaning and my motive. And lest anyone fails to notice, even this article is not about answering critics, who are used as examples and then dispensed with, but it is about teaching reverence toward God and confidence in his revelation.

Let us now turn to two articles that are more theologically involved. They provide richer materials as illustrations, since at least God is back in the conversation. But, alas, just because some people remember God in their discussions does not mean that they respect him much more than those who forget him. They mention him in order to abuse him.

To begin, in "Double Graded Absolutism," I am presented with the astounding statement, "If he has no right to the answer, then to deceive him cannot be classified as a lie."

Now, some people enjoy controversy so much that they would probably lose interest in their faith if there were no opposition against it. The devil is more like a sparring partner to them than an enemy of the soul. They love controversy more than they love knowledge. Their works almost exclusively consist of polemics – it is error, not truth, that defines their purpose. They enjoy trying to sound learned and clever, only that they are usually neither. And most of the time they are inept at even simple argumentation.

Christians should not be this way. I can refute false doctrine – it is easy – but I do not enjoy it. Of course I delight in upholding the truth against error, but I do not enjoy reading things that dishonor the Lord. Here is a good example. "If he has no right to the answer, then to deceive him cannot be classified as a lie." The statement grieves me deeply. How can a Christian say that with a straight face and a clear conscience?

Imagine teaching this to a child. Do not be surprised if he grows up to be a deceiver, but of course, according to that statement he would not be a "liar" as long as he deceives only those who have no right to the truth. In principle this can mean a hundred percent of the people that he will come across in his lifetime.

Imagine telling this to an unbeliever. Do not be surprised if he never believes another word we say after that. Now he thinks that we can deceive him whenever we want, and as many times as we want, since we claim that when he has no right to the truth, the things that we say do not count as lies. And then we have the audacity to claim that we have the most pure, superior, and authoritative system of ethics possible. In fact, we affirm that our ethical principles come from divine revelation.

And imagine if the Lord Jesus had practiced this principle when he was on the earth. Did anyone really had the right to demand the truth from him? In principle, he could have deceived people left and right, over and over again, hundreds and even thousands of times. But according to double graded absolutism, no matter how many times he did it, these could not be classified as lies. The person thinks that I would call this sophism, but it is blasphemy by implication.

When we insist on simple obedience to God's commands, we are not proposing a solution to a problem in or produced by God's revealed system of ethics – this is something that graded absolutism claims to do. Rather, our insistence on simple obedience is first a denial that there is a problem in God's system to begin with, and second, it is a solution to the problem that graded absolutism has created by its creative rebellion. That is, graded absolutism is not a solution to a problem – it *is* the problem.

Graded absolutism is just one of several such ethical theories produced by rebellion. At the root of this rebellion is the insistence that God's revelation often contradicts itself, and all ethical systems that attempt to resolve this non-existent problem is also founded on this abominable assumption. It makes no difference whether the idea is that Scripture contradicts itself in itself or whether it contradicts itself when applied to a fallen world, as if God did not know that this world was fallen when he gave the commandments. Both lines of thinking blaspheme the wisdom of God. The bare suggestion that there is a problem of such a nature makes him out to be an idiot, only that because he is our master, we must still figure out how to make sense of his commands and obey them, or at least construct an artificial and unbiblical theory by which we can say we obey him even when we do not. Now, if it takes Charles Hodge to figure out how to resolve a problem that God has supposedly created for us, then the uneducated believer is pretty much doomed to either indecision or immorality. But God's commands are clear and simple.

The widespread belief among professing Christians that God constantly contradicts himself relates to the problem that I discuss in "Blasphemy and Mystery in Theology." There it is said that one set of biblical passages appears to contradict another, thus indicating "polarities" – or opposites – in the very nature of God. With great zeal and eagerness, professing Christians insist that such contradictions pervade the Bible, so that it has become a test of orthodoxy to say that God contradicts himself, and some of them go to great lengths to persecute those who show otherwise, that God's revelation is not only self-consistent, but that it is apparently and obviously so. Those who refuse to blaspheme are treated as heretics.

Of course, the matter is not often stated so explicitly. The alleged contradictions in Scripture are said to be only apparent, and alternate terms such as "tension," "paradox," and "mystery" are used to cover up the blasphemy. That is, there are only apparent contradictions in Scripture, not actual contradictions. No matter how contradictory they appear to us, all biblical doctrines are in fact perfectly consistent in the mind of God. Our responsibility is to affirm both sides of the contradiction.

But this is nonsense. If one proposition contradicts another, whether or not the contradiction is only "apparent," then for a person to affirm one proposition is to deny the other – this is what a contradiction necessarily entails. Therefore, when a person attempts to affirm two contradictory propositions, he is in fact denying both of them in reverse order.

That is, if X contradicts Y, then to affirm X is to deny Y, and vice versa. To affirm both X and Y, then, would be to affirm not-Y and not-X. But because to deny one is to affirm the other, to deny the two propositions is to affirm both of them in reverse order again, and so on. That is, to affirm not-Y is to affirm X, and vice versa. So to affirm not-Y and not-X is to affirm X and Y. But to affirm both X and Y is to deny Y and X yet again. The result is that it is impossible and meaningless to affirm two contradictory propositions. Logically speaking, we must say that a person who affirms allegedly contradictory propositions in the Bible does not affirm or deny anything in the Bible at all.

"Apparent" contradictions are subjective. Assuming that there is no actual contradiction between two propositions, then the fact that a person perceives a contradiction only tells us something about him instead of the two propositions. Perhaps he possesses an inferior intellect, or he lacks the needed background information. Then, often two propositions appear to contradict each other only because the person is assuming a third proposition through which he processes these two.

For example, as cited in "Blasphemy and Mystery in Theology," Carson writes that one set of biblical passages gives some people the impression that God is a sovereign thug, while another set of biblical passages indicates that God is unfailingly good. But nowhere does the Bible itself say that God is a sovereign thug, or even appears to be one, when he exercises his right and power to control evil. A premise foreign to the Bible has been smuggled into the discussion, one which the Bible has no responsibility to adopt, integrate, or harmonize with its actual teachings. Thus the fact that professing Christians perceive such a contradiction tells us something about them – their incompetence, prejudice, and rebellion.

Since apparent contradictions are private and subjective, professing Christians who think that they perceive a contradiction in Scripture should never immediately disbelieve or persecute someone who claims to have the solution, or better yet (since in fact no solution is necessary), who rebukes the people that perceive a contradiction where there is none. For these people to say that Scripture only contains apparent contradictions and not actual contradictions is an admission that they are perceiving something that is not there – it is a blunder and an illusion. Those who see apparent contradictions in Scripture are in hermeneutic fantasyland. It is wicked for them to then turn around to attack those who can perceive truth and reality, that is, the perfect coherence of Scripture.

The usual explanation for perceiving contradictions in Scripture even though there are no actual contradictions is that our "finite" human minds cannot fully understand and thus harmonize all that God has revealed. Now, the teaching that human minds are finite is true, and I gladly confess that these people are superior examples of this. These masters of intellectual finitude live what they preach, often more than they realize. They are living epistles of mental retardation.

However, their finite minds permit them to entertain at least two false assumptions. First, they assume that all human minds are as finite as theirs, on the level with bumbling idiots, and so they rule out the possibility that some people's minds are less finite, and are able to perceive the perfect wisdom and coherence of God in Scripture. Second, they seem to think that God's mind is almost as finite as theirs, so that they rule out the idea that God knew he was giving his words and his commands to a fallen world, and that he was communicating to minds even as finite as theirs. It is as if they assume that God's mind is retarded as well, so that he could not speak with clarity and coherence, or establish moral commands that remain consistent with one another even when applied to this fallen world by very finite minds.

If we are God's witnesses before the world, then the least that we can do is to show the world that we respect him. But when Christians talk about God's majesty and man's finite mind in the usual manner, what the world hears is, "Yes, our whole system of belief is self-contradictory, but it only appears that way because we are stupid." And then we expect them to become like us. But if we are to think correctly, and speak of God reverently, we should tell the world, "No, Scripture is perfectly coherent, and obviously so. If anything in it appears contradictory to you, it is because *you* are stupid. There is something wrong with you, the unbelievers, and not with God or with those of us who believe in him."

This biblical stance enrages our "Christian" opponents, who take the attitude that says, "Our minds are finite, and somehow this results in seeing contradictions where there is perfect harmony. And if we cannot see this perfect harmony, then neither can you." Then they have the gall to call us arrogant for affirming the apparent and actual coherence of God. What is it then? All this "finite mind" nonsense is nothing but dishonest self-abasement. If they are so humble, let them remain silent and learn.

There is a culture of irreverence among professing Christians. This is a culture that has become proficient at embedding insult in praise and blasphemy in worship. And this is all covered up with a cloak of self-abasement: "Because we are finite, God appears to us as a thug and a fool." This deep-seated contempt for God cripples their ability to process truth. Even when it is clear and simple, these people refuse to acknowledge it, and gather to devour those who affirm the obvious perfect coherence of God. While claiming to be guardians of the truth, they have become servants of the devil.

Irreverence and irrationality thus reinforce one another. "Blinded by Atheism" and "In God We Trust" offer examples on how implicit atheism and intellectual incompetence bind together to produce the most inexplicable and idiotic objections against biblical doctrines. Then, "Double Graded Absolutism" and "Blasphemy and Mystery in Theology" offer examples on such scathing sacrilege against God covered in false humility that one wonders if it is much better than atheism itself. Therefore, because people are this way, it is both insufficient and inefficient to provide only narrow and fragmentary correctives. Even though these are legitimate in themselves, they can treat only the symptoms of a much greater problem.

The true solution is the consistent articulation and application of the biblical system. But even this is just one of the necessary steps. Those who are accustomed to irreverence and blasphemy possess a character that is incompatible with such a system, and thus cannot sustain it. Those who seem to agree with the biblical system but at times have trouble defending it suffer under the same problem. The system is perfect and invincible, but their character falls too far short of it. For this reason, in promoting our biblical system of theology, we must also aim to produce a people whose character corresponds to it, so that they can process it and practice it. This approach is alone able to help extricate professing Christians from the double abomination of irreverence and irrationality. In the end, of course, how each person turns out depends on the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, for even reverence and rationality are gifts from God.

10. God's Holiness and Evil Thoughts

A friend of mine raised two related questions about your view of divine sovereignty. He does not use email, and so I thought I would ask you these questions on his behalf: (1) How can God actively cause and control the evil thoughts of unregenerate men without nullifying his holiness? (2) That is, isn't God thinking the evil thoughts before he causes men to think them?⁹

First, I am guessing this person implies that my view is foreign to the Bible, so that the questions are raised against my view in particular and not against the Bible itself. Coming from a Christian, this indicates ignorance and prejudice. I am not using these words as insults but to label the problem areas.

There are numerous passages in the Bible indicating that sin is God's idea – not that he condones it, but that he decrees it – both in general and in particular instances.¹⁰ Given the fact that it is the Bible that teaches this, the person who asks these questions against my view is ignorant of and/or prejudiced against those passages teaching that it is God who devises evil against people and that he decrees that people should commit certain sins so that they would be judged and destroyed, or otherwise be disciplined or to further some other purpose. People often disassociate a teaching in the Bible that they dislike from the person who teaches it from the Bible, and then they make the pretense of attacking the person for the teaching, when in reality they are attacking the Bible itself.

Relative to these questions, it would make no difference even if God were to "passively" cause evil (whatever that means) – since the idea of evil would still originate in God. The only way out is to say that God has no concept of evil at all, and that evil must be wholly attributed to another entity. This is the heresy of dualism – the logical conclusion that God is not the author of sin.

Second, the questions are incomplete. They make an assumption that the person fails to justify or even mention. Since it is so ingrained, he is probably unaware of it. He asks, "How can God actively cause and control the evil thoughts of unregenerate men without nullifying his holiness?" But what is the problem? The question does not tell us. The assumption seems to be that to directly control evil is to commit evil – to cause sin is to commit sin, and to author sin is to be a sinner. But where does the Bible teach this?

Evil is defined by God, not by man, and unless God says that for him to directly control evil is to commit evil, then for him to directly control evil is *not* to commit evil. It is not up to man to say otherwise. In fact, the person who asks the question has placed himself above God. To paraphrase, the question is really, "How can God remain holy if he does

⁹ Anyone who has read much of my writings should be able to answer these two questions, since I have discussed this topic so many times and in so many ways. These two questions are no different than those that I have addressed in *The Author of Sin* and other books.

¹⁰ For biblical examples, see my article, "The Problem of Evil."

something that is against my standard of what it means for God to be holy?" I shudder at the idea that someone would dare think this way, but this is what the question implies.

Then, as for the question, "That is, isn't God thinking the evil thoughts before he causes men to think them?" My first reaction is, "So what?" The same is true with foreknowledge (here the word means prescience, and not the biblical meaning of foreordination). Are we now saying that God cannot foreknow any evil in order to remain holy? If so, does God know about evil after someone has done it? Would not that taint his holiness as well?

Imagine all the thoughts of murder, rape, perjury, theft, and countless other sins that are in God's mind! From this perspective, God has more evil thoughts in his mind than even Satan himself. Scripture and I do not think that this is a problem, but the question implies that it is. Do you see how unbiblical and sinister this line of reasoning is? But this is the common way of thinking. People do not realize how inconsistent and wicked it is to disallow to God something that he never forbids to himself.

Of course, with foreknowledge, when God thinks thoughts of murder and rape, it is because he possesses information about how his creatures would violate his laws in these ways. It is certainly not that God would commit murder and rape.¹¹ But if this is a satisfactory explanation for foreknowledge, then it is also satisfactory for the active ordination and causation of sin. It is not that God would commit these sins, but that he would actively cause his creatures to do them. And – here is the important point – there is no revealed moral law and no revelation about his nature saying that he could not or would not do this. The problem occurs only when man invents the premise and imposes it on God, and in doing so, actually thinks that he is protecting God's holiness.

Third, if we are against the idea that God actively causes evil, what does it mean when we say that he passively decrees or causes it? Yes, you can say it, but does it mean anything? Or is it nonsense? Ask someone to explain it and prove it. Bust through the standard slogans, go deeper, and see what you get. How is it metaphysically possible to infallibly ordain something and not cause it? And how is it metaphysically possible to unfailingly cause something, but do it passively? How is it possible to ordain the precise types and numbers of all sins, and the ways that they would be performed, so that all things must turn out as he has ordained, without using any active power to bring it about? How is it possible for God to merely permit evil without causing it when he is the one who sustains all things, moment by moment? Either we must attribute to man a metaphysical status and power that the Bible says he does not have – that is, the power of self-existence and self-causation, thus making man into God – or we must say that God actively causes all things.

¹¹ If murder is to kill someone without God's approval, then God could kill anyone without committing murder, since he always has his own approval, so that the concept of murder does not apply. As for rape, God is non-corporeal and non-sexual, so neither does it apply. See Vincent Cheung, *The Sermon on the Mount*.

Not everyone is oblivious to the inconsistency, but instead of deducing their theology from the Bible, they appeal to "mystery" in order to hold on to their nonsense. The view that I espouse has no mystery and no inconsistency. People do not like it just because it is against what they have imposed upon God. Moreover, if they can appeal to mystery whenever they want, then I should be allowed to say mystery, mystery, mystery over and over until the critics leave me alone. But somehow their mystery is superior to my clarity. What the Bible clearly tells us is not mystery, but revelation. The appeal to mystery is often a diversion from the fact that a person sinfully refuses to accept what the Bible plainly reveals.

In short, the answer is that causing evil is different from committing evil. To cause evil refers to a metaphysical relationship, while to commit evil refers to a transgression of divine moral law. For it to be wrong for God to cause evil, he must establish a self-imposed moral law stating that it is wrong for him to cause evil. If he does not do this, then he has not defined it as evil. Rather, precisely because God is righteous, all that he does is righteous by definition. Therefore, it is righteous for him to cause evil whenever he wishes. And it is evil to oppose or to question him in this. In other words, the question skips a premise – or, it assumes a premise that is either unjustified or unmentioned. This is the assumption that for the creator to cause a creature to perform evil is for the creator himself to perform evil. This view is both irrational and blasphemous.

The topic is very educational and revealing. It exposes how common it is for us to dictate to God how he must behave – he must adhere to our standard in order to remain what he says he is! Just look through all the theological publications in church history. It is almost unanimous that God cannot be "the author of sin" – but none of them can tell you why, even if some of them mention the unjustified and unbiblical assertion that for him to cause evil would be the same as to commit evil. No one in church history has ever been able to prove this premise, and few even try.

11. God Passive Only Relative to Himself

I read your article on free will offerings, and once again I thank the Lord for using you to refute the false doctrine of human freedom relative to God. As one who is in total agreement with your teachings on this subject (having already studied many of your works), I thought that perhaps when time permits you could address Acts 14:16 where Paul, speaking of God, says, "In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways" (NASB). This is the verse I have been confronted with the most by free will advocates.

Although I have not yet written anything that directly addresses Acts 14:16, I have written an extensive exposition on Acts 17, which contains a similar statement. I suggest that you look this up from my *Presuppositional Confrontations*.

Then, in my *Commentary on Ephesians*, I mention the correct interpretation for verses that seem to speak of God's actions in a passive way ("hand them over," "pass them by," etc.). I show that they are passive only relative to something that God has already actively established. That is, God is never passive relative to men – his decrees are never fulfilled by bare permission, nor does he "pass them by" for anything, as if men could even decide or perform evil by their own power. Rather, whenever Scripture speaks of God's action as passive, it invariably refers to something that God has already actively established, only that he is allowing to stand what he himself has done.

In other words, whenever Scripture says that God "allows" Y (or any equivalent expression), invariably we find that Y is the necessary consequence of X, and that other passages would say that it is God who directly causes X. And like everything else in creation, even the relationship between X and Y is something directly established and sustained by God. Therefore, it is really God who actively and directly causes both X and Y.

Again, this means that, metaphysically speaking, we must not distance God from evil (and thus assign to some other power a degree of control over creation on the metaphysical level), since this necessarily results in dualism, which is pagan rather than biblical. I regret that this pagan tendency is strong even in Reformed theology and popular Calvinism, and perhaps stronger still in other theological traditions. In connection to this, the unbiblical and incoherent doctrines of compatibilism, passive reprobation, conditional reprobation, and so on, must also be rejected.

It must be remembered that, when I refer of God's direct control over all things evil, I am speaking of metaphysics, not ethical approval. While metaphysics has to do with power, ethics has to do with precept. When these two are confused, then one would think that what God forbids to man by precept, he himself cannot then cause by divine power. But these two things are in different categories altogether.

12. Whosoever Will May Come

When I speak to my parents and pastor, it is typical for them to bring up the line "whosoever will may come" as the statement that somehow proves man's free will and refutes the idea that salvation comes from God alone.

One of the most frequent fallacies that people commit is the fallacy of irrelevance. Therefore, whenever we come across an argument or objection that supposedly refutes what Scripture teaches, sometimes it suffices to simply ask, "So what?"

Like many of the objections from Arminians, this one entirely misses the point. Perhaps they have in mind Revelation 22:17, which says, "whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (KJV). Since this is what God says, we readily agree with it, but then what? Who will actually come? It does not tell us. Or, to be more precise, why does anyone decide to come? What is the metaphysical and spiritual cause behind the person's decision and his change in disposition? That is the question. The statement from Revelation, or any other "whosoever" statement for that matter, tells us only about what is available to or what will happen to the person who comes. It does not tell us why anyone would come, or why a person comes when he does.

Here is something that I wrote in *Born Again*, my exposition of John 3:

I can say, "Whoever becomes a fish can breath under water." The statement is true, but it does not mean that a person can become a fish anytime he wishes. In fact, any inference about one's ability is strictly invalid, since the statement contains no information about ability except for the fish's ability to breath under water. Whether or not it is possible for a person to become a fish, one can infer nothing about it from the statement itself, but it only informs us as to what would happen to a person who turns into a fish.

Moreover, even if it is possible for a person to become a fish, the statement says nothing about how this is possible, or whether it is within the person's own power to do so. God is certainly able to turn a man into a fish, but a man "cannot make even one hair white or black" (Matthew 5:36). A statement like the one that I have made tells us nothing about a person's ability, but information about ability must be obtained elsewhere.

Whenever we are talking about something that is impossible with man – such as for a man to turn himself into a fish – it means that it will either never happen, or God must make it happen by his omnipotence.¹²

¹² I then offer an illustration from Matthew 19:23-26.

Arminians have no respect for the actual language of the text, which means that they have no respect for its author. They are determined to infer from it whatever they want, even when a passage does not address the topic at all.

In answer to the question of why anyone comes to Christ at all, the Bible says that it is God who chooses the person, changes his nature, and controls his mind, and that is what causes him to "come." We have established this from Scripture again and again, so we will not repeat it here.

Anyway, this is the biblical teaching that the Arminians must refute. As it is, their objection amounts to saying, "Calvinism is wrong because the Bible teaches that anyone who believes in Christ will be saved." But this does not even apply to the debate, since Calvinism does not assert that some people who believe in Christ will nevertheless be condemned. No, Calvinism agrees that all believers are saved. The question is and has always been who will believe in Christ, and what causes these people to believe in him.

Whenever you are confronted with an objection against the Christian faith, it is always advisable to question the relevance of what is asserted and make the opponent demonstrate the relevance. In this case, sometimes without being aware of it, it seems that the Arminians assume that God's command, which incurs human responsibility, also presupposes human ability or freedom. But as I often mention, although God's command and man's responsibility are inseparably related, there is no biblical or logical relationship between divine command (or sovereignty) and human freedom (or ability), or between human responsibility and human freedom.

To say that we are responsible has nothing to do with whether we are free, but only with whether God has commanded and whether he will judge. The assumption that connects these unrelated things has never been proved and seldom even defended in all the history of philosophy and theology, and it is directly contradicted by Scripture. Nevertheless, this unbiblical premise is also shared by many inconsistent Calvinists, leading to an incoherent and embarrassing theological formulation, and the invention of misleading doctrines such as compatibilist freedom.

13. Typical Reformed Theology

In *Godliness with Contentment* (p. 33), you write, "Since the Bible teaches that everything has been foreordained by God, this means that all events, including human decisions, come under this category." I am unsure if typical Reformed teaching espouses this. If it does, then it would be inconsistent for them not to embrace active reprobation. On the other hand, when I mentioned that God foreordains everything, my friend expressed the concern of many Christians when he responded, "If God foreordains everything, does that mean that he also wills us to sin?" Of course, we have already discussed this issue and you have already addressed it, but it seems a very difficult concept to embrace.

I am unsure if typical Reformed teaching espouses this. If it does, then it would be inconsistent for them not to embrace active reprobation.

Typical Reformed teaching, or what I call popular Calvinism or inconsistent Calvinism, disagrees with me on some points. It does teach that God is sovereign over human decisions, but it is inconsistent in saying that these human decisions are still somehow free. See what I say against "compatibilism" in *The Author of Sin*. Note chapters 4-10, 15, 18, and 19. Also see relevant sections in my *Systematic Theology* and *Commentary on Ephesians*.

A special section from *Commentary on Ephesians* has been released separately as *Chosen in Christ*. It has its own table of contents to aid comprehension. In it, I cite liberally from Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*, showing that popular Calvinism is in fact far weaker than Luther's view regarding God's sovereignty over all things, including sin and evil. In fact, several of the harsh rebukes that Luther unleashes against Erasmus can be directly applied to popular Calvinism without any modification. I also argue against passive reprobation there.

Yes, you are right in that they are inconsistent, and Arminians often correctly exploit this in debate. When inconsistent Calvinists are challenged on this, they often say that we must not judge God's word by "human reason" or to speculate beyond what God has revealed. But they use logic only when it is convenient for them, and it is not speculation just to state exactly what God has revealed, that he is the righteous direct ruler over all things, including sin and evil.

On the other hand, when I mentioned that God foreordains everything, my fellowship leader expresses the concern of many Christians when he responded, "If God foreordains everything, does that mean that he also wills us to sin?"

Of course. Many biblical passages explicitly teach this, only some of which are included in my article, "The Problem of Evil," and our other publications.

Of course, we have already discussed this issue and you have already addressed it, but it seems a very difficult concept to embrace.

It is definitely difficult – the sinful or unrenewed mind never naturally agrees with God. But logically speaking, and to the extent that the doctrine has been revealed in Scripture, it is one of the easiest to understand and defend. Mystery appears only beyond what God has revealed. But what he has revealed on this subject is clear, understandable, substantial, and undeniably true.

When you say that it is "a very difficult concept to embrace," you are referring to a subjective resistance that has little relevance to whether something is true. It has no bearing on the force of an argument or position. Some people find it hard to accept that God would create a hell and send people there. Some people find it hard to accept that there is a God in the first place. But both rationally and emotionally, I find it difficult to believe that anyone would resist these teachings, including the doctrine of hell. But Scripture tells me why they resist, and it is because of sin.

14. The Arminianism Within

I have been thinking about Hebrews 6:4-6, and I am still struggling to be more impartial with it.... I recall that you have talked about these verses, but I am still struggling...

Besides my own remarks, there are a number of commentaries that adequately address Hebrews 6. It is good to read and review them. After that, the struggle is not in attaining exegetical precision with the passage, but it is in the part of you that still tends to read it as an Arminian – as a self-centered rebel – when there is no warrant for it.

Consider the example of John 3:16. It says that whoever believes will not perish but have eternal life, which both Calvinism and Arminianism affirm, but it does not say who will believe or why they will believe. Thus the verse affirms only salvation by faith, and has no relevance to the disagreement between Calvinism and Arminianism until you bring other biblical passages into the discussion.

However, many people read it as Arminians, and so they think Arminianism is what it proves. They take the words "whoever believes" to mean something so different as, "Every man has free will, and anyone can by his free will believe in Christ apart from God's foreordination and direct control." I might as well deduce the entire Alice in Wonderland when someone says "Good morning" or "Have a nice day." The same goes with the word "world" in that verse. Somehow they think that it must refer to every individual in all of human history.

Likewise, Hebrews 6 says that whoever attains the listed items and then withdraw from the faith cannot repent again. Since this is what it says, then this is what it means. We can dispute whether these items completely define a believer. We could argue from the example of Judas, who exercised the very powers of the world to come, but Jesus knew from the beginning that he was "a devil." He was never truly converted.

However, even this discussion is unnecessary, since it is irrelevant to the main point of the passage. Even if it describes a believer, does a believer actually withdraw? Does it ever happen? The passage does not say. The only mention of this topic points toward the other direction: "Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case – things that accompany salvation" (v. 9). The writer is convinced that these original readers would not suffer the fate that he describes. So the passage cannot support Arminianism, since it is not even relevant.

I could say, "If God dies, then the earth will also disappear," or something to that effect. The statement is true. But will it ever happen? Is it even possible? It would be pure lunacy to infer from the statement, "Therefore, it is possible for God to die." The statement does not address the topic at all.

Now, we could argue that the words "if God dies" contain a categorical error, rendering the phrase meaningless, but other than that, the statement makes an important point, that God is the sustainer of all things, and that all things continuously depend on him. This is what it implies, but one cannot read more into it unless he does so by force. Likewise, the passage from Hebrews makes an important point, but not the point that the Arminian wishes to wrest from it.

Part of the difficulty in confronting Arminianism, then, is to overcome your own Arminianism – whatever of it that remains in your heart.

15. Association with Unbelievers

As a recent convert to Christianity, I find your writings extremely helpful in understanding my new faith. As I find myself agreeing with the Calvinistic outlook and abandoning my lifelong humanistic/liberal outlook, I realize this shift in worldview is the work of God, since my past beliefs were in complete opposition to Scripture. One cannot simply reverse their way of thinking on a mere whim or even a determined decision.

But now I have a question. One of my neighbors is a homosexual. Before my conversion I considered him a friend, but now I know that his lifestyle is wrong and repugnant, and I am confused as to how I should regard him. What should I do? Do I stop associating with him? Do I pray that he will repent and believe in Christ? How should I conduct myself in social settings with unbelievers?

A Christian's life is in constant opposition to the non-Christian outlook and agenda, and as long as a person is a non-Christian, he lives every moment of his life as a rebel against God's kingdom and his people. Therefore, on this spiritual level where things really count, the Christian and the non-Christian maintain a constant hostility against each other. Although this should not translate into physical violence, this does not reduce the enmity between the two. Unthinking people regard physical violence as more dangerous or more worthy of attention, but the conflict on the spiritual/intellectual level runs much deeper, and carries greater long-term influence and significance.

This does not mean that you have to be constantly abusive toward unbelievers. However, there must always be a clear awareness of what they are, so that when you interact with them, you will not operate on false assumptions about what kind of people they are and where they stand. Many Christians are often tempted to allow a sense of solidarity with men to override their obligation and allegiance to God. But God is pleased with those who will put him front and center in all that they think and do (Exodus 32:25-29; Numbers 25:3-13; Deuteronomy 13:5-16; Deuteronomy 33:8-11).

A number of hurdles in theology and apologetics exist for many believers because of this – on those issues they stand with men rather than God. Otherwise, there is no reason that a Christian should have any hesitation or difficulty in answering a challenge such as, say, the so-called problem of evil. It has never been a rational problem for Christianity, but when the objection is raised, believers sometimes sympathize with men's bitterness against God, and allow a problem to take root where there should be none.¹³

You are generally permitted to associate with unbelievers, but there are biblical restrictions and exceptions, which I cannot enumerate here. In any case, you must no longer behave toward them the way you did before, and you must abandon the idea of maintaining intimate and meaningful relationships with any of them. Since your deepest

¹³ See Vincent Cheung, "The Problem of Evil."

commitments are now vehemently hostile to theirs, it is no longer possible to have the deepest kind of communication and comradeship with them. Even the closest relationships between Christians and non-Christians must remain superficial. Anyone who disagrees with this either compromises their Christian commitment, or fails to understand what it is to have a truly deep friendship.

This reality finds its most acute expression in the marriage relationship. Now, of course a Christian must not marry a non-Christian, so we are considering a marriage in which one of the two unbelievers converts, or in which a Christian marries a non-Christian in defiance against God's command. Since the marriage relationship is supposed to be the closest possible relationship between two human beings, this is also the closest possible relationship between a believer and an unbeliever, but because such a relationship is doomed to come far short of what marriage is intended to be, it is also the most tragic. In fact, in a relationship where two people are supposed to become one in spirit and in body, these two individuals are divided at the deepest level, torn apart by the vast gulf that separates heaven and hell. This separation is already present and manifest in their daily life, and unless the other person also converts, one day it will become complete and permanent.

In contrast, the marriage vow between two believers is taken from God's own word (Genesis 2, Ephesians 5, etc.) and taken before God as their witness. Their ability to fulfill this vow comes from their constant contact with God's power in sanctification, and their confidence in each other is also derived from this. Just as a Christian relies on the Holy Spirit to sustain his spiritual life, and to grow in knowledge and holiness, he depends on this same power and grace to make progress in his marriage. On the other hand, there is no power and no promise for the non-Christian who takes the marriage vow. He relies on his own moral integrity and ability, and since he has neither of these or at best only an appearance of these, his marriage and all his relationships – like all his thoughts and activities – are without meaning and substance.

The question of how much we are to interact with unbelievers is frequently mishandled. People err toward both extremes. There are those who think that we must deliberately disassociate with unbelievers as much as possible, but this extreme is not common in our circle. Rather, there is sometimes a need to correct a misapplication of the teaching that believers are to be "in but not of the world." Some Reformed and Evangelical believers carry this very far, riding on their version of the "cultural mandate," their denial of any "sacred vs. secular" distinction, and the false doctrine of "common grace." This line of thinking is sometimes used to excuse their licentiousness, and their lust for worldly culture, amusements, and associations. But to be "in" the world, or even to be very involved in it, does not mean that we are to embrace and befriend it.

I have addressed this topic elsewhere with illustrations from various biblical passages. For example, Christians often justify unbridled socializing with unbelievers on the basis that Jesus associated with sinners. Of course he did that, but he seized control of each situation to accomplish a spiritual purpose, and if these Christians would do that, then there is no reason to oppose their interactions with unbelievers. But the truth is that most

of them are liars when it comes to this, deceiving themselves and attempting to deceive the rest of us. At any rate, this time we will consider the following passage from Paul:

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you." (1 Corinthians 5:9-13)

The context of this passage is church discipline. Paul had written to the Corinthians on the subject, instructing them "not to associate with sexually immoral people" (v. 9). This first entails an intellectual evaluation of a person's lifestyle based on God's revealed moral precepts. Then, if it is determined that he stubbornly persists in immoral conduct, he is to be expelled from and shunned by the community of believers – "With such a man do not even eat."¹⁴ To pursue this biblical procedure is to "judge" someone. Contrary to a popular misconception, Scripture does not teach a simple "judge not," but it forbids only inaccurate, superficial, and hypocritical judgment.¹⁵ Our passage is one of many that command and require Christians to judge people.

In this context, judgment demands both an evaluation of a person and a corresponding action against him. This helps us understand what Paul means when he says, "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church?...God will judge those outside" (v. 12-13). He does not mean that Christians must not evaluate the character and behavior of non-Christians – he just got through calling them immoral, greedy, swindlers, and idolaters (v. 9-10). In fact, he says that if we refuse to associate with all such people, even when they are unbelievers, then we will have to leave this world altogether (v. 10). The implication is not that it is good and harmless to associate with unbelievers, but that the world is full of these immoral people, so that it is impossible to avoid contact with them. Therefore, the passage does not teach against being "judgmental" at all – rather, it is one of the most judgmental passages in Scripture, requiring the Christian to acknowledge that the world is full of immoral unbelievers.

The passage says that we are not to "judge" those outside the church because to "judge" *in this context* means more than an evaluation of a person's doctrine and conduct, but it also includes the execution of disciplinary action against him that involves an entire body

¹⁴ Blessed is the man who knows even one church that obeys this biblical command. Is there among us someone who "calls himself a brother," but who is "sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler" (v. 11)? Is there anyone among us who calls himself a Christian, but who is a homosexual or an adulterer, or who is dishonest in his business, or who gets drunk? Scripture commands us to throw him out. I suggest that any church leader who refuses to teach and enforce this command should himself be thrown out of the church.

¹⁵ See Vincent Cheung, *The Sermon on the Mount*.

of believers. To "judge" someone in this context means to "Expel the wicked man from among you," but the non-Christian is not "among" us in the first place, so this kind of judgment does not apply. So this – corporate and official disciplinary action *against unbelievers* – is not the business of the church, but Paul adds, "God will judge those outside." On the other hand, when the context is such that "judgment" refers to an accurate and non-hypocritical evaluation of belief and conduct based on biblical revelation, then there is no doubt that Scripture requires us to "judge" every non-Christian (Romans 3:23). To deny this is to deny the whole spectrum of Christian doctrines, including the depravity of man and the necessity of redemption.

Our interest here is whether Christians should shun all immoral non-Christians. Paul gives a negative answer, but this comes within the above context and cannot be universally applied without discrimination or qualification. Also, what reason does he offer? And what does his explanation imply? Again, Paul states that it would be impossible to shun all immoral non-Christians, because all non-Christians are immoral people, and they are everywhere. The only way to avoid them is to leave this world. At least in this passage, he does not say that to shun non-Christians is morally wrong in itself – he states only that it is practically impossible to do so. And at least in this passage, he does not say that to associate with non-Christians is in itself a desirable thing, but only that it is a practical necessity. Therefore, based on this passage, one cannot assert that the opposite of not shunning non-Christians is to befriend them and to have intimate and meaningful relationships with them.

Of course there are other reasons to associate with unbelievers. Besides the practical impossibility of avoiding them in social and business transactions, God has commanded us to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ before all people by our words and deeds, through which God will summon to faith those whom he has created and chosen for salvation, and harden those whom he has created and chosen for damnation. But nothing in the entire range of our activities before the world requires us to become intimate friends with unbelievers. And in fact, it would be a spiritual, intellectual, ethical, and practical impossibility to do so – again, unless either the Christian or the non-Christian compromises his deepest commitments, in which case either the Christian is no longer a Christian, or the non-Christian is no longer a non-Christian. Therefore, although it is indeed possible for a Christian to be on friendly terms with a non-Christian on a superficial level, an intimate and profound communion is out of the question.

16. Internal Change and External Conduct

I have written to you before on this matter of temptation, and of course, the best thing to do is to fight it through prayer, biblical meditation, and extensive reading of the word. Negatively, we can get rid of some of the external things that tempt us, although my friend said that something must be resolved from the inside out and not outside in.

There is some truth to saying that holiness is worked from the inside out rather than from the outside in. However, without knowing more about what the Bible says, this can become misleading, so let us take some time to consider it.

Jesus says in Matthew 12:33-35, "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him." That is, you do not change the fruit to affect the tree, but it is the tree that determines the kind of fruit that is produced.

Then, he says elsewhere, "Are you still so dull?... Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean'" (Matthew 15:16-20). By themselves, rituals, ceremonies, and religious traditions cannot make a person spiritually clean or unclean. If a person's heart is full of unrighteousness, a mere washing of the hands will do nothing to improve his condition. Thus growth in holiness cannot consist in reforming one's outward behavior alone.

On the other hand, the Bible refers to a put off/put on aspect of Christian sanctification. The believer casts away the bad and takes up the good. As he resists temptations and pursues holiness, he must perform the appropriate external actions.

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in

Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:17-32)

Note the various contrasts in this passage. First, there is a fundamental difference between non-Christians and Christians. Non-Christians are characterized by "the futility of their thinking." They are "darkened in their understanding." But Christians have been enlightened with "the truth that is in Jesus." Biblical sanctification, then, also aims at this fundamental level, so that Christians are to put off their old self, and to be made new in their minds, so as to put on the new self (v. 22-24). Therefore, the work of the Holy Spirit in the mind, causing believers to conform and develop more and more into the image of Christ, is the essence of sanctification.

But Paul does not stop here. This principle of sanctification works in believers to produce changes in their behavior, enabling and moving them to adopt new actions and habits. So they do not only "put off falsehood," but now they "speak truthfully" (v. 25). They do not only avoid "unwholesome talk," but now they speak "what is helpful for building others up" (v. 29). They do not only "get rid of...every form of malice," but now they become "kind and compassionate to one another" (v. 31-32).

An especially illustrative contrast is Paul's instruction to put off stealing (v. 28). To paraphrase Jay Adams, who applies this principle in counseling, "When is a thief no longer a thief? It is not when he stops stealing, since no thief steals constantly. He might be taking a break. He might even be trying to stop. But he is still a thief, and he will steal again. A thief is no longer a thief only when he stops stealing and starts working, sharing, and meeting other people's needs. Only then can the change be genuine and permanent." The act of stealing stems from the heart, perhaps out of covetousness or some other evil motive. Therefore, the essence of change certainly lies in the work of the Holy Spirit, applying God's power and precept to the heart. But then the thief must actually stop

stealing and start working, and he cannot start working without performing some appropriate external actions.

Since this is integral to the process of sanctification, and not just the final result, these external actions are to be implemented even at the very beginning. Here is a corrective to the misunderstanding that may arise from an incomplete view of sanctification. Although sanctification is in a sense worked from the inside out, holy actions are required at the beginning as integral to the process of change. An important implication is that there is never an excuse for continuing to sin or neglecting good works.

Applying this to our own struggle against temptations, besides the inner work of the Holy Spirit, there is to be a change in our external behavior. The external change is not purely negative, but there is to be a corresponding positive development. Our focus and energy are not directed only at stopping something negative, but also at starting and continuing something positive. We do not only "put off" evil words and actions, but now we "put on" holy words and actions. So wickedness is not only abandoned, but it is replaced with righteousness, both in our thinking and in our conduct. The same principle applies when we are counseling and correcting other Christians. We must do more than to tell them to forsake sin, but we must also urge and help them to replace it, and to pursue righteousness. This will often entail some concrete external actions.

Of course, there is also the danger of bypassing inner transformation in favor of reforming the outward conduct alone, in which case no true and lasting holiness is attained, resulting in self-deception and hypocrisy. The problem occurs, however, only when we ignore part of the biblical teaching on the subject. In our passage from Ephesians, Paul contrasts the basic spiritual/intellectual difference between Christians and non-Christians. His instruction to reform outward conduct is based on this foundation. We make these changes because we have come to know "the truth that is in Jesus."

Therefore, in speaking about this principle of sanctification to someone, we first assume regeneration, which is a sovereign act of God by which he changes the basic disposition of a person from evil to good, from a sinner to a saint, and from a child of Satan to a child of God. Of course a good tree will produce good fruit – the problem is how a bad tree can become good. Scripture teaches that this cannot be done by making the fruit good, since it is the tree that produces the fruit, and not the other way around – somehow a bad tree must become a good one. How can this be done? Can a tree change its own nature? Or, as Jeremiah 13:23 says, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil."

On the other hand, "What is impossible with men is possible with God" (Luke 18:27). What is it then? True holiness becomes possible only when God sovereignly – apart from human decision and effort – chooses to change the nature of a person. And thus true holiness belongs to Christians alone, to those whom God has chosen for himself and foreordained to perform good works (Ephesians 2:10). All non-Christians remain in futility and darkness.

17. Love and Emotion

In speaking about loving our enemies, you have made a distinction which is pretty clear (volition vs. emotion), but here is a question: If loving our enemies is doing good to them and this includes praying for their salvation, shouldn't this prayer come about because we have compassion for their condition and a heartfelt concern for the well-being of their souls? Does not this involve emotion and is this not love? Does this contradict your position?

One other question. This one is not about love. When the Bible says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice," is it saying that we should volitionally rejoice as opposed to emotionally rejoice? I don't remember you addressing this one, but it is a different "affection" and I am wondering if you take the "volitional as opposed to the emotional" position with all these types of words?

When I made the distinction, I derived it from Scripture, and then provided reasons for it. These reasons must either be refuted, or else assumed in all relevant questions. And once assumed, some of these questions are automatically excluded. Here I will address your several key points.

Shouldn't this prayer come about because we have compassion for their condition and a heartfelt concern for the well-being of their souls?

This begs the question at least three times. Is "compassion" necessarily an emotion? Is "heartfelt concern" an emotion? The question assumes that these are emotions without argument, although this is the point disputed. Then, are these the main reasons that we should pray instead of the bare fact that God has commanded it, whether we feel like doing it or not? The question assumes emotions as the basis or motive for the action, when first, compassion and concern might not be emotions, and second, the *primary* basis or motive for the action might not be compassion and concern at all.

Compassion is the disposition to have thoughts that the Bible defines as compassionate thoughts, and to perform actions that the Bible defines as compassionate actions. These thoughts and actions are sometimes associated with certain emotions, but they are compassionate regardless of these emotions.

One can exhibit these thoughts and actions without the emotions, in which case he proves himself an obedient man who follows the Lord regardless of his fluctuating feelings. On the other hand, one can experience these emotions without exhibiting these thoughts and actions. In this case, the person would not be a compassionate person, although he might think that he is. An emotional ethic allows much self-congratulation, and at other times self-condemnation, to those prone to intense feelings, but it does not produce true compassion or obedience.

A Christian who regards emotions as essential to love, compassion, and such things is therefore trapped in a delusional state. He deceives himself because he at least in part measures his own level of love and compassion by the intensity of his feelings, and not how his thoughts and actions measure up to God's commands. So he might be more or less loving and compassionate than he really is, but he has no way of knowing, because in enthroning his emotions, he has denied the word of God.

Does not this involve emotion and is this not love?

Again, this begs the question. The first part begs the question as explained above, and the second part begs the question by assuming what is disputed in the first place. If I am correct, then no, this is not love. Whereas I have argued for my position, this question is merely rhetorical, and does not support what it asserts.

Is it saying that we should volitionally rejoice as opposed to emotionally rejoice?

Of course. Just imagine commanding someone to have an emotion! To feel a certain way on demand! We rejoice by faith and not by emotion, or any feeling of the moment. The feeling might or might not be there, and at the moment might or might not be consistent with our resolve to believe and follow God's precepts. The emotions are just as undependable when they seem to contribute to our faith and obedience as when they seem to oppose them.

The biblical ethic functions by volitional agreement and obedience, with emotion (or a disturbance of the mind, a fluctuation or state of feeling) as an optional addition. This does not suggest a hard, cold approach (the idea again begs the question), but its glory is in the fact that we can perform what God commands, to think and act in righteousness, whether or not our emotions or feelings agree at the moment.

Emotions go up and down, and feelings can come and go, but we can always believe and perform what is right if we follow God's precepts. In contrast, those who oppose this argue for an unbiblical, non-precept based, self-deceiving, and unstable faith and ethic.

18. Pragmatism and the Curriculum

In *Preach the Word*, you mention that we should "read the classics." Do you have a particular list of works in mind? If there is not a full list, are there some must-reads?

I do not have in mind a specific collection of works. There the context is the philosophy of education, and I make the point that if we allow pragmatic concerns to drive education, then the curriculum would become extremely narrow, since our lives are indeed very narrow when compared to all the subjects and skills that we could learn. Under a pragmatic philosophy, it is hard to justify putting into the curriculum anything that the students will not need.

The student who complains that he will never need calculus is very likely correct. It is true that he might not know what vocation he will pursue in the future, and so he cannot know for certain that calculus will be useless to him. But then the only pragmatic reason for him to learn it is the mere possibility that he will need it in the future. This reason is rather weak, since the possibility is remote. It is certainly not worth the time and money to learn so many things that will turn out to be useless. Many people will not need physics, or biology, or the classics, or most of the things that they learn in school. Given a pragmatic philosophy, a student could skip most of the materials in high school and college, and go straight to a specialized vocational school where he is taught only what he needs to know.

This is the point that I try to raise against the "learning for doing" model proposed by Jay Adams. Like many authors I have read, he is under the popular impression that biblical "wisdom" is mainly practical rather than intellectual and abstract. This is outrageously false. Biblical wisdom deals with both the intellectual and the practical, the abstract and the concrete, but those who hold to the popular theory are blinded to the abstract aspect of it. Even though it is everywhere, they do not see it because they do not want to see it. They are trapped by the notion that Hebrew (biblical) thinking is practical, and Greek (pagan) thinking is theoretical. But this simplistic distinction is false.

On the other hand, we cannot object to the pragmatic theory in favor of another just so we can justify a wider curriculum, for then we would still be driven by pragmatism, only that we have changed the intended goal from professional need to intellectual breadth. Here we notice that the pragmatic theory does not tell us which goal to select. It is chosen by some other standard or even arbitrarily. And after that, it cannot provide a rational justification for the choice.

The biblical model for a full education must be driven by the inherent value of knowledge, and not by pragmatic concerns. There is value in learning itself, in knowing itself. The most important application of this principle pertains to theological and biblical knowledge. The knowledge of God is valuable in itself, a rare commodity that he gives to

his chosen ones (John 15:15), whom he calls his friends. Of course his friends would do what he says, putting into practice what he discloses to them. But the pragmatic philosophy would regard God's revelation as something that is only for practice and obedience – something to be used – and not a valued treasure in itself. Which is the higher view of God and Scripture?

So I oppose the cliché that we should not study "theology for theology's sake." Of course we must study theology for theology's sake! Theology is a systematic and coherent understanding of God's revelation – to deny its inherent value is to spit in God's face. His thoughts are wonderful, intriguing, even mesmerizing. But the pragmatic perspective repudiates the inherent beauty of divine revelation. Of course we must implement this revelation in our lives, and we must obey his commands – I assert this in stronger terms than the pragmatic writers. The error is in thinking that just because something is meant to be put into practice, it is therefore something that has no inherent value, or that its value is only in its intended effects.

One underlying conflict of the debate is between intellectualism and anti-intellectualism. Even those authors who are well-known for fighting against anti-intellectualism often commit the above error, that is, to argue from a pragmatic perspective, or to think that biblical wisdom is primarily practical.

19. Not in Word, but in Power

"But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord will, and will know, not the speech of them which are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power." (1 Corinthians 4:19-20)

"And Jesus answering said unto them, Do ye not therefore err, because ye know not the scriptures, neither the power of God?" (Mark 12:24)

I heard a pastor claim that it is the "power" and not the "words" that Paul evaluates. He then said that this "power" is something we ought to practice since we have been given authority to do so. Supernatural feats seem to be more of a priority to him than the "words" (gospel or doctrine). But if I am not mistaken, "the word of the cross... is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18-31).

So here is my question: Is this pastor's application of the verse correct?

Reformed and Evangelical Christians frequently neglect the miraculous power of God, and charismatic excesses scare them off even more. Many of them seem to believe only in God's "hidden" activities, such as conversion and providence. Some of them speak as if this has become a deistic universe since the days of the apostles. I am making a generalization – this complaint does not apply to everyone. In any case, several key aspects of the Reformed and Evangelical theology of miraculous power need to be revamped, because they are unbiblical and prejudiced. Yes, we can denounce the Charismatics all we want, but just because we say that one group is wrong does not mean that the other is right, and just because we talk about miraculous power does not mean that we are required to use the Charismatics as our model. But we still need a truly biblical theology on the subject.

That said, the passage from 1 Corinthians is referring to something else. Notice the context. To paraphrase, "The kingdom of God is not just talk, but it carries actual power." Or, as the NIV has it, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power." This is said against the boasting of the Corinthians, who challenged Paul's authority. Verse 19 refers to "the words of those who are arrogant" (NASB). So, Paul is not saying, "The kingdom of God is not a matter of doctrine but of power," since he is not making a contrast between God's word and God's power, but he is referring to the arrogant words of the Corinthians. Nevertheless, the statement affirms that the things of God's kingdom are powerful and effective.

The verse from Jesus means what it says. We should know both "the scriptures" and "the power of God." Again, observe the context. He is speaking to those who deny the doctrine of resurrection, and thus deny God's word and God's power. So they know neither.

As for, "the word of the cross... is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18-31) – yes, but let us not equivocate. We must admit that there are miraculous manifestations of the Spirit, and even if they are used to vindicate "the word of the cross" at times, they are not themselves "the word of the cross." Even a cessationist must believe that at least some people in the Bible wielded divine power according to God's will, and that this is not the same as preaching. Using this passage to refute that pastor would be to take it out of context just like he took the passage from Corinthians out of context.

In summary, although they have a very developed theology of conversion, sanctification, and providence, Reformed and Evangelical Christians tend to neglect the miraculous power of God and fail to understand its operations. Their deficient theology on the subject makes them unable to make sense of many biblical passages, and frequently compel them to even distort these passages in order to maintain their view, or to consign them to an irrelevant ancient past so that they no longer have to deal with them.

So there is the need to abandon some traditional but unbiblical lines of thinking, but this does not mean that we follow the Charismatics, since they do not provide a good model of biblical interpretation and implementation. In fact, in constructing a biblical understanding on the subject, there is no need to mention them at all, but many people have so inseparably connected the two in their minds that they are no longer able to perceive what the Bible actually teaches. The whole subject has been tainted for them. And so we are left with bad exegesis, faulty reasoning, and much unbelief.

In fact, many of those whom we regard as heroes of the faith in church history did not affirm the rigid and extreme cessationism that has become so popular today, and that has become a test of orthodoxy in some circles. Consider Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Spurgeon, Edwards, and Lloyd-Jones. A number of other significant individuals might be mentioned as counterexamples, but even then you might be surprised if you will read their biographies and journals. Sometimes this is written off as just one of their imperfections, but I suggest that it is their sober faith in God's present and active power – yes, even miraculous manifestations – that made their character strong and their work effective.

For example, both Spurgeon and Lloyd-Jones talked about an "anointing" to preach. It is something so real that the minister is conscious of it when it is present, and when it is stronger or weaker. But many have thrown out the entire concept, chalking it up to charismatic mysticism. A number of these respected preachers and theologians also talked about a calling to the ministry after the pattern of those we read about in the Bible, although it is agreed that the written revelation has been completed. But this has been thrown out as well. Perhaps people think that *this* ministry operates with a sense of authority and direction just because of my natural character or even sheer arrogance? Their thinking cannot rise above their own spiritual impoverishment.

There is often a double standard. If Spurgeon says something about the work of the Spirit in his ministry, then it is pure genius. If Mueller relates how God answered his prayer in a spectacular or even miraculous manner, we are awed and inspired. But if someone who

has not yet attained idol status – or if he is still alive – makes a statement like Spurgeon's or tells a story like Mueller's, then he must be a charismatic heretic. As long as those uncomfortable things stay in the past, even the recent past, we are content, but God is now forbidden to do the same things that he did in Scripture. How dare he act sovereignly and upset our tradition?

Charismatic mysticism is certainly unbiblical and destructive, but to conspire against God's power is not much better. It is a testament to God's grace and faithfulness that the church has survived under so much unbelief – now, that is a sign and a wonder.

20. Acupuncture, Dim-Mak, and Science

[What is your view on acupuncture? Do you have anything against it?](#)

I have not done enough study on the topic to make a definitive verdict or to accept someone else's verdict. Right now I have a generally negative view toward it. One reason is that it is based on theories of "chi" flow and energy points in the body. Related to acupuncture is "dim-mak," which is based on the same theories but can be used to inflict injury, death, and other effects. Although exaggerated in the movies, it is an actual teaching in the martial arts.

The question brings to mind a broader issue that is relevant to all other related questions, and that is the standards by which Christians use to determine whether a given practice, exercise, or treatment is spiritually and morally acceptable. In what I have come across, it seems that Christians have a surprisingly accepting attitude toward acupuncture just because it is said that there is scientific data to support its effectiveness, so that one does not have to accept the chi theory (or other theories related to mysticism and false religion) to embrace the treatment itself.

However, if we have made science the standard by which we judge whether something is allowed by God, then our Christian identity has already suffered tremendous devastation. Since when is the approval of western medical science the standard by which Christians must operate? If this way of thinking is permitted, then the floodgates are opened to almost all the practices that are either originally associated with false religions or that are in other ways spiritually dubious. These would include yoga, meditation, hypnosis, mind control, subliminal therapy, and all sorts of psychic and occult practices. Even necromancy is given a scientific explanation by some people who claim to possess this kind of data to support their view. In fact, it is precisely because Christians have accepted this way of thinking that many churches today are centers for the occult. They would have been stoned to death under Moses.

One response is to make the distinction that the science connected with some of these things are pseudo-science, so that science does not in fact justify all of them. However, even given the accepted standards of science, there is pseudo-science in every area of investigation, not to mention fraud in the most serious areas of study. Refuting some claims does not refute all claims, especially when some of these scientists carry credentials that are just as legitimate as that of their critics, and work with the most reputable universities and institutions.

Also, at least in my own research, many attempted refutations are based on the prior assumption that the theories and claims under investigation are impossible. Of course, one can always refute the scientific method and scientific reasoning themselves (as I do), so that the claims using such method and reasoning are refuted all at once. This puts

science in its place and renders it impotent to make any pronouncement regarding the nature of reality. But here we are referring to disputes among scientists who do not doubt their own method and reasoning.

We are not interested in destroying science, but we are interested in humbling it, and to put the discipline and its practitioners in their place. And in their place, they have no authority to make any pronouncement regarding the nature of reality. This authority belongs to divine revelation alone. This is not because we are fideists in the sense that we think faith and reason contradict each other, and that we must side with faith against reason. But it is because we are rationalists in the literal sense of the term (not the historical or popular sense), and we know that the biblical is also the rational. On the other hand, we must dismiss the idea that science represents rationality. In fact, we have repeatedly demonstrated that science is systematic irrationalism, committing the triple fallacy of empiricism, induction, and asserting the consequent. Therefore, it should be the last in line to raise objections against Christianity.

Moreover, even if we ignore the above for a moment, in this context it does not matter if a claim is supported by pseudo-science or "real" science, since our complaint is against the kind of thinking, so common among Christians, that uses science as the final standard, looking to it for permission on moral issues and to settle spiritual questions. So, the point is that just because western medical science claims that acupuncture might work does not automatically make it acceptable for Christians. In fact, it does almost nothing in bringing us closer to that conclusion.

Perhaps the common way of thinking is partly due to a self-centered bias – it is to think that whatever we are relying on must already be morally and biblically acceptable. Many professing believers not only trust science (human investigation and speculation – in other words, they trust themselves) more than revelation (God's pronouncements and disclosures), but they allow science to determine how they interpret revelation.

There are at least two reasons why so many are eager to reconcile faith and science. They suppose that science is the very picture of rationality and precision, but we have shown elsewhere that it is pervasively and exhaustively fallacious. Some suppose that the scientific method follows from the cultural mandate – but it does not. Just because there is a cultural mandate does not automatically mean that the scientific method follows from it, or that scientific investigation is the way to carry it out, or that the scientific method is rational, or that scientific theories and conclusions have anything to do with the true nature of reality. Again, this is the supreme arrogance of defining spiritual, moral, and rational perfection by our currently accepted beliefs and practices.

This is analogous to how many western believers think when it comes to politics and economics – that is, whatever is American must be Christian as well, so that we proceed to judge whether a theory of politics or economics is moral by whether it is American, which we assume to be Christian. It is also common for some western believers to read the Bible in such a manner, so that they tend to see democracy and capitalism, in the

exact form that they are accustomed to, everywhere in Scripture. Grudem's *Business for the Glory of God* is one example of this error.

21. Corporal Punishment

I support the use of corporal punishment in parenting, but one of my acquaintances said, "How can you teach a child against what is wrong by doing what is wrong?" Others have said that violence against children is never justified. But can we say that using corporal punishment in parenting is violence? I would appreciate your thoughts on these concerns.

Right or wrong, "corporal punishment" (or corporeal) sounds more pleasant than what it means. It means to punish the body, the "corporeal" part of the person, so that he experiences physical discomfort, strain, pain, injury, or even death. Of course, when it comes to parenting, we are not interested in injuring or killing the child, but depending on the severity of the misconduct, we are interested in causing discomfort, strain, and pain.

The heat of the debate surrounds the practice of hitting the child. Make no mistake about it – hitting the child is what we are talking about. If we use the word "violence" in a general sense, as in to physically strike or attack someone without a moral connotation attached to the word or the act, then we admit that hitting a child comes under this category. The word is general enough so that there is no need to reject it from the start. The question is whether this kind of violence is morally wrong.

A thorough treatment of the corporal punishment of children would consider the relevant biblical verses and the practical aspects of implementing the teaching. The latter would deal with questions such as the parts of the child's body to strike, the proper tools with which to strike, and so on. Since we cannot address any of this in detail, we will summarize the biblical teaching as follows: (1) Corporal punishment is a moral and practical requirement in parenting; (2) This kind of punishment is called for on occasions when the child defies or deviates from biblical or parental authority; (3) The tool for implementing corporal punishment is the "rod" or an equivalent object; and (4) The "rod" is applied by striking the back side of the child. These four points can be derived from Proverbs 10:13, 13:24, 14:3, 22:15, 23:13-14, 26:3, and 29:15.

The objections against this biblical teaching do not get into the details, but they have to do with the principle of the practice – that is, they arise from the position that corporal punishment is morally wrong. So we will address the topic on this level.

The problem with our opponents is that their thinking is man-centered, or otherwise centered on the wrong reference point. If violence itself is wrong no matter what, then of course corporal punishment is wrong. However, they cannot justify the assumption that violence is wrong *in itself*. All non-Christian arguments are easily defeated using our regular approach of biblical apologetics. But once we have established that Scripture is to be the first and final authority, we have also established that corporal punishment is a moral and practical necessity, since this is what Scripture teaches. On the other hand, a man-centered ethic produces implications that even our opponents might find

unacceptable. We are speaking of violence, but what about abducting and incarcerating a person without his consent (e.g. kidnapping)? If this is wrong *in itself*, then our opponents must also oppose the prison system, that is, except for those criminals who desire to be imprisoned. In fact, from this perspective, our opponents must not even "ground" their children, but for some this is a preferred method of punishment in parenting.

If violence is wrong in itself, then one cannot apply all kinds of exceptions, qualifications, and contexts to limit the application of this premise. It would be wrong to hit a wall, kick a rock, or cut vegetables into hundreds of pieces. Unless our opponents avoid doing all these things, then their own premise implies that they are mass murderers, even constantly killing large amounts of germs and bacteria with every breath that they take. Every limitation that they place on the principle that violence itself is wrong must be justified. Why does it apply only to humans? Some indeed believe that we must do no violence against animals. But then, how about insects, vegetables, and germs? Why the arbitrary standard? When a virus wrecks havoc in a body, why kill it? Why must we counteract violence with mass murder? If these questions appear ridiculous, it is because our opponents hold a ridiculous position, and these are just some of the absurd implications of the assumption that violence itself is wrong. Thus our opponents are not only unbiblical, irrational, and impractical, but it is also hypocritical for them to insist on the general principle that violence itself is wrong but arbitrarily limit the application of this principle, in order that they do not appear to transgress it.

On the other hand, the biblical ethic is God-centered, with divine revelation as the reference point for thinking about moral questions, and for defining right and wrong. Our opponents assert that it is hypocritical to punish a misbehaving child by hitting the child, since hitting people is wrong, and it is something that we tell the child not to do. Again, this would be true only if violence itself is wrong. However, from a biblical perspective, a child has done wrong not because he has done a certain act that is wrong in itself, but because by performing the act he has in some way violated biblical precepts. He has done wrong because he has deviated from God's instructions and defied his authority, whether expressed directly in Scripture or by the parents. The non-Christian standard exists on a much lower level, almost on the level of the act itself. And there it stands in mid-air – there is no justifiable principle behind it.

It is true that we must not teach against what is wrong by doing what is wrong. But *what* is wrong? It is a violation of God's precepts. It is not wrong in itself to hit someone, even to hit a child, but it is wrong to hit someone in contexts, for reasons, and with motives that are not approved by Scripture. According to Scripture, it is permissible and sometimes even morally necessary to hit or to kill someone. I would have no moral hesitation against killing someone with my own bare hands provided Scripture approves or demands it in that situation (self-defense, execution of a criminal, and so on). I will not give it a second thought afterward, and will not feel guilty about doing it. This is because my conscience submits to God's precepts rather than stands as judge over them. To hesitate on moral grounds when Scripture approves or demands it exposes a person's rebellion against the Lord, and against that which is right. It is to think that our private and unbiblical moral standard is superior to God's own holiness and revealed precepts.

Although very few of us will face situations in which our commitment to a God-center ethic is tested in this manner, it is indeed an excellent way to discover where our true allegiance rests. Do we honor God with our lips, but then draw a line in our hearts and forbid him to cross our moral sentiments? If so, may our moral sentiments burn in hell, for if our moral sentiments are in fact different from God's moral precepts, and if we follow the former rather than the latter, then we are hypocrites when we call him Lord. Any obedience that we demonstrate is rendered only because God's demands so far agree with our own private standards.

Therefore, it is the refusal to exercise corporal punishment – the refusal to hit a child in the right contexts, for the right reasons, and in the right places – that is immoral and hypocritical. We can apply our opponents' objection against them: "How can we teach against what is wrong by doing what is wrong?" The child has done wrong in violating God's precepts. Are we now to teach this child by also violating God's precepts – that is, by withholding the rod of discipline? Moreover, since "he who spares his rod hates his son" (Proverbs 13:24), and it is the rod that could "save his soul from death" (23:14), it is much more appropriate to charge our opponents with child abuse than those who practice corporal punishment.

Of course, not every situation requires the rod, but if you withhold this kind of punishment even when the situation calls for it, then you are a wicked and abusive parent, and you have a deep hatred for your child, so much so that you would rather let him perish, body and soul, than to violate your own false sense of morality or to burden your own feelings. Oh, what a despicable piece of human garbage you are! Why do you hate your child with such passion? Why do you wish destruction upon him? Why do you want him to burn in hell?

Some acts are always forbidden. For example, no context or reason can justify blasphemy. Likewise, murder is never justified. But killing is a more general term, and it is often justified. Violence is even more general. When teaching our children about violence, we must make the proper distinctions and avoid communicating the idea that violence is wrong in itself. It is not always wrong even for a child to strike someone. For example, in the confusion of a kidnapping attempt, or when cornered by a child molester, if a child could strike his assailant hard enough to stun him for even a split second, he might be able to break free and call for help. Whether it is always wise or possible to do this is a separate question, one that parents should consider and then discuss with their children – a child probably should not try anything if the attacker has a knife to his throat.

So it is true that when we teach a child that violence is sometimes acceptable, we must also consider the details surrounding the proper use of violence, such as when it is necessary, how to carry it out, what to do afterward, and so on. But right now we are focusing on the morality of the issue, and the point is that in these situations, there is nothing wrong for the child to strike or even kill the attacker.

On the other hand, to teach a child that violence itself is wrong is to narrow his options and to doom him in these situations, possibly even to his death. It is to rob him of the tools that he might need to survive. At the crucial moment, he will hesitate, and then the opportunity might be gone forever, or the situation might cross a point of no return. When that happens, the parents have in effect become the attacker's accomplices to destroy the child.

And do not forget that one who withholds the rod also refuses to save his child's soul from death (Proverbs 23:14). This is how much our opponents hate their children, and they demand that you treat yours the same way. This unbiblical position against corporal punishment is nothing but man's pride and depravity dressed up as progress and compassion. The price for their self-satisfaction is their children's lives, and to them it is well worth it.

22. Suicide

I think that a person who commits suicide can be saved, but do you think that 1 Corinthians 10:13 presents a problem to this view? The verse says, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

To begin, we can say two things about suicide. First, since the biblical definition of murder is the deliberate termination of a human life without God's preceptive approval, this must mean that suicide is equivalent to murder. Second, for the one who commits this act, it is even more final than if he were to murder someone else. Since the murderer is also the one who is murdered, not only is the life terminated, but there is no opportunity for repentance and restoration. Therefore, suicide entails much spiritual danger.

Now, I have no personal aversion to the idea that all those who commit suicide are in fact non-Christians, regardless of what they claim to believe. If all those who commit suicide are sent to hell, then so be it. My emotions do not make me prefer one position or the other. That said, at this time I am unconvinced that this is indeed the case. In other words, it seems that it is possible for a genuine believer to kill himself.

The reason for suicide might be a factor. Is the person insane? Does the person suffer from extreme depression, or constant and prolonged sexual or physical abuse with no apparent way of escape? Is he facing a kind of pressure or danger so extreme that he thinks suicide is the only option? Or, is he a soldier or government agent who is captured by the enemy, and who thinks he must resort to suicide rather than to risk revealing secret information that might jeopardize his country?

I do not assert that these factors grant moral permission for suicide, but only that these are relevant questions on the way to the answer, and that even if most cases of suicide are sinful, it is possible that some cases are not. Perhaps an insane man is just as guilty as anyone. This is something that we need to discuss. It is sometimes difficult for outsiders to judge. However, it seems that the situation with the soldier or agent comes under a different category of reasons, and much more likely to be acceptable, if it is indeed acceptable. It could be considered an act of willing sacrifice in a warfare situation, and as such, it is very different from a person who kills himself just because he is depressed, or because he is a confused teenager, or because he owes people too much money.

As for 1 Corinthians 10:13, it does not contradict the view that a believer could commit suicide and be saved. This is because any sin is a sin against 1 Corinthians 10:13. It just means that there is never an excuse for sin, including suicide. But we still often sin, and we receive forgiveness for it through faith in Jesus Christ. Likewise, insofar as it is sinful,

it might mean that suicide is never necessary, and it is wrong for a person to think that it is his only option. But again, no sin is ever necessary, or a person's only option. And if there is a distinction between sinful and non-sinful suicide, then the verse means that sinful suicide is never necessary.

Some attempted biblical arguments are far from conclusive. For example, the suicide of Judas is insufficient to establish its sinfulness. He sinned in betraying Christ, sinned again in failing to repent, and then sinned once more in murdering himself. But there is nothing here to tell us that suicide itself is sinful – we know that it is sinful from other parts of Scripture. There is nothing here to tell us whether a person who commits suicide is necessarily exposed as an unbeliever and condemned to hell because he commits suicide. Although Judas is reprobate, there is nothing here to tell us that only a reprobate person, destined for hell, will commit suicide.

On the other hand, neither can we say that Samson's example justifies suicide, for the reason that it might not be suicide at all. By his final demonstration of strength, "he killed many more when he died than while he lived" (Judges 16:30). In other words, he did more to fulfill his mission in this one act, which he knew would kill him as well, than in his previous exploits. Would he have killed himself if he knew that no Philistines would have died because of it? And if he had really wanted to commit suicide as such, why did he not do it much sooner? He was in captivity long enough for his hair to grow long again. He could have killed himself at any moment during this period just by biting his tongue and bleeding to death. Yes, he knew he was going to die (v. 30), but he stated his intention two verses earlier when he said, "O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes." His main purpose was to kill the Philistines. He died in combat, fulfilling his mission better than anything that he did before. Thus it is difficult to call this suicide as such.

We should continue to examine biblical arguments on the topic. In any case, even if we say it is possible that a genuine believer might commit suicide, we must insist that it remains a spiritually dangerous act, so that we must warn people against it and turn them from it. Of course, the best long-term solution is not for a person to wait until he reaches the point of suicide, but for him to daily exercise in faith and godliness, and to obtain the assistance, counsel, and encouragement of a Christian community.

When counseling those who consider suicide, we must have compassion regarding the problems they are facing; however, we must also deal with them firmly about their attitude.

To illustrate, abortionists ask, "Should not women have the right to decide what to do with their own bodies?" Rather than saying, "Yes, but....," we must answer, "Of course not!" God is the one who dictates what they must do with their bodies, and how they must treat their children's bodies in their wombs. The truth is that we do not have absolute authority over our own bodies even relative to other people, since God has also specified various principles that govern human relationships. For example, parents have

the right to physically punish their disobedient children, and those who are married possess conjugal rights over their spouses, whether men or women.

Accordingly, those contemplating suicide must learn that they have no final rights over their own bodies, since they are God's property. This is true for believers in a special sense, since Scripture calls them God's treasured possession. But whether they are Christians or non-Christians, unless they have God's preceptive permission – that is, unless Scripture approves – they have no moral right to kill themselves.

Moreover, if a certain person who commits suicide is nevertheless saved, it is solely due to the sovereign grace of God, who chose him for salvation, and the atoning blood of Christ, who paid for all his sins, including what seems to be a final act of rebellion and unbelief.

Whatever we do, we must not minimize the danger associated with suicide, for even if there are exceptional cases in which "suicide" is permitted, these are indeed exceptions (war, sacrifice, perhaps extreme insanity, and so on). We can say with confidence that even if suicide is not sinful in all cases, it is sinful in most cases. And even if suicide is sometimes committed by genuine believers, most of those who commit suicide are unbelievers. Therefore, most people who commit suicide are sent to hell, and there they will suffer everlasting conscious extreme torture. This time there will be no escape.

23. Extraterrestrial Life

I have come across some materials on the evidence for aliens, UFOs, etc., and I wonder if the Scripture says anything on the topic. Some Christians argue that because the Bible does not explicitly deny the existence of extraterrestrial life, we can at least regard it as a possibility. But how can this be reconciled with the Bible? Maybe it cannot be reconciled with the Fall of man in Eden, but is this a strong argument against the existence of UFOs?

As far as I can tell, the existence of extraterrestrial life does not contradict anything in Scripture, so there is nothing to reconcile, since there is no conflict and no contradiction. The existence of extraterrestrial life has no direct relevance to Eden and the Fall, so again, there is no contradiction, and nothing to reconcile.

Just because someone connects these things does not mean that they are in fact related. For example, I have read the argument that if there are creatures on other planets, then they would fall into sin just like man did in Eden, and God would have to send his Son to die for every group that has sinned. Since God would not make his Son endure such humiliation and agony over and over again, this must mean that there are no creatures on other planets. There are variations of this argument, but the line of reasoning is the same. In any case, it is absurd, since every premise is a groundless assertion, and every step involves a logical leap. Why would all life necessarily fall into sin? Why would God necessarily want to save any or all of them? Why would God necessarily refuse to allow the Son to endure repeated suffering?

We already know that there are other types of creatures besides man and other earthly creatures (animals, insects, etc.), since we know that there are angels and demons. We also know that God does not choose to save all kinds of creatures that fall into sin, since he has provided no salvation for fallen angels.

Then, Scripture does provide an indication that there might be other types of life besides angels, demons, man, and other earthly creatures. One possible example is in Revelation 4:6-8:

Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."

If these creatures are not to be classed with angels, and if they are not symbolic, then they belong to a distinct class of creatures. But what we still cannot say for sure is if they ever visit earth or get involved in man's affairs on earth.

Then, there are those who allege that UFOs are transportation devices for angels (both elect and fallen), and that there are references to them in the Bible, such as the chariot that took away Elijah (2 Kings 2:11), or the "whirling wheels" in Ezekiel (10:13, also 1:16-17). However, the arguments are unconvincing. It seems that they are reading their conceptions of extraterrestrial technology into Scripture, and they also fail to answer sensible alternative interpretations. But again, even if these are references to UFOs, they do not upset any traditional Christian doctrine.

Therefore, at this time my position is that (1) We cannot be sure whether there is or is not life elsewhere besides earth (other than angels and demons, etc.), and (2) Whether there is life elsewhere or not, it presents no problem for Christianity and no contradiction against the Bible, so that there is nothing for us to reconcile. I remain open to biblical arguments for or against extraterrestrial life, but those that I have examined so far are either inconclusive or fallacious.

Although everything about God's creation deserves some of our attention, this topic is comparatively insignificant. So what if God has created other creatures? And so what if he has not? It might be interesting to know, but it has no direct relevance to any central doctrine or ethical issue. We would believe and behave the same way as Christians either way.

The stakes are raised when we are dealing with UFO cults, that is, cults whose teachings are centered around the existence of extraterrestrial life, and mankind's relationship with them. But the solution is not to attempt a refutation of the very existence of extraterrestrial life based on flimsy arguments. Empirical arguments are especially useless – we cannot refute what other people claim to have seen on the basis that we have not seen the same thing. Instead, the biblical solution is to proclaim the sovereignty and superiority of Christ, for even if there is extraterrestrial life, Christ is the creator and ruler of it. Therefore, the existence of extraterrestrial life would not validate the teachings of UFO cults, since whether or not there is extraterrestrial life, all Christian doctrines remain intact, including God's demand for faith and repentance, so that man may receive salvation through Jesus Christ.