

# Doctrine *and* Obedience

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## Preface

This book is a collection of short articles that deal with various aspects of Christian doctrine and practice.

Although I hope that you will read all of them, it is not necessary to read these articles in the order listed; rather, feel free to go directly to the articles that interest you and read them first.

Many of these articles were written in response to written messages sent to me by readers, and I usually include an edited version of the original question to accompany each of my replies.<sup>1</sup> I have withheld the names of the inquirers to protect their privacy. This is not a problem since the quoted statements do not contribute to the actual substance of the articles, but they provide only the contexts for me to present my answers and explanations.

To clearly distinguish the words of the inquirers, their statements are indented and displayed using a different font. This has eliminated the need for me to always specify that a certain article was written in answer to a question, or to specify that a certain portion of text was a message from a reader, since all of this will be obvious to any reader.

At the end of this book, I have also included a previously published article, "Kingdom First." Its topic is consistent with the overall theme of the book, and therefore I consider it appropriate to put it together with the other articles in this volume.

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<sup>1</sup> Among other modifications, for some articles I have attached numbers to the other person's statements, so that you can more easily recognize the answers that correspond to them.

## 1. Church and Seminary

A pastor recently said to me, "I want to know if there is a position open in your ministry where I can come and serve directly under you for a period of three months so that you can teach me." I have received similar requests before, but there seems to be more of them this year. Then, there are those who ask me which seminaries I could recommend.

This reminds me of what a Christian professor told me when I asked him which seminaries he endorsed. He wrote:

I cannot recommend any seminaries. My standard advice to anyone seeking any advice about any type of school is this: Read widely in the field in which you are interested. When you find an author who knows what he is doing, go study with him wherever he teaches, and put up with the rest. There is a much better chance of finding a sound man than there is of finding a sound institution.

He makes a good point, but do what you will with his advice. Right now, I am only thinking about one's training for ministry.

Elsewhere, I have stated my view that seminaries are necessary only because churches do not have adequate teaching ministries. Of course, even when a church is adequate in its teaching ministry, a seminary might still have certain advantages, such as a larger community of scholars, a larger library, and so on. However, if the church is really serious about its teaching ministry, then the difference between its resources and a seminary's resources will only be one of degree, so that a seminary, even if useful, is still not absolutely *necessary* for adequate ministerial training.

Thus, for example, a church should certainly have its own community of scholars (teaching elders, etc.), a good-sized library, and other resources for teaching and research. These scholars might not be qualified to teach on every obscure topic, and the library might not have the resources to address every obscure matter. But again, we are considering only those things that are *necessary* for ministerial training.

In other words, I am saying that the training model of Christ (e.g. Jesus and the Twelve) and the apostles (e.g. Paul and Timothy) should be more than sufficient, and that it is often seemingly insufficient is only because the churches have not really adopted it. Church elders should be able to train their own partners and successors, instead of having to send their own people to seminaries to be taught by people whom nobody in the church knows or has even heard of.

Even worse than this is when a church finds that it needs to hire someone from the outside with whom it has never had a previous relationship, instead of having someone

available from its own congregation whom it has already trained, who has humbly served for years in the church without an authoritative office, and whom the church can now promote and ordain as overseer.

Some seminary graduates are very proud and stupid, and completely unworthy of ministry. Most cases are not even examples of "knowledge puffeth up" (1 Corinthians 8:1), but *the belief* that they have knowledge that puffs them up, since they really know very little.

It is impossible to tell whether a person knows anything just because he has a degree. When I was still in elementary school and then in junior high, my parents saw my interest in biblical things and were concerned to ensure that I was not being misled in my studies. So they brought me to several elderly seminary-trained pastors, and also a successful Christian businessman, and gave me the opportunity to discuss theological issues with them. None of them could answer my questions; none of them could refute anything I said; and none of them knew the relevant biblical passages half as well as I did.

Looking back, I now perceive that some of my beliefs were false, and that I really knew very little. In fact, I was not even converted at the time. Yet these pastors, who were trained in seminary and had years of experience in ministry, could not properly instruct even a child like me. In other words, it was not that I was especially competent, but that they were especially incompetent, despite their degrees and years of experience.

Of course, not all seminary graduates are like this, but the point is that just because a person has a seminary degree does not mean that he is competent. In fact, just because a person has a seminary degree does not mean that he achieved good grades in seminary – ask him to show you the transcripts. But it might not mean much even if he did receive good grades in seminary. Many of you who have been through school realize that there is a difference between getting good grades and truly learning the materials. There are techniques to scoring high on exams, but it is another matter to master the subject.

Now if I were to hire a seminary graduate from outside of my circle, instead of promoting someone whom I have known and trained for months or even years, there is no chance that I am going to let him teach my congregation or my audience right away. First, I have no idea if he knows anything in the first place, whether or not he has a seminary degree. Second, knowledge is not the only qualification for ministry, but a minister must be above reproach in character also.

So I might put him on probation for a while, and make him do all sorts of menial work. I am going to make him haul boxes. I am going to make him scrub toilets.<sup>2</sup> I am going to make him serve coffee to janitors and secretaries. I am going to make him help in the nursery so that he can change diapers and mob up vomit.

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<sup>2</sup> Cleaning toilets ought to be a joy anyway – the stuff that you scrub off the toilet is much less stubborn and much more fragrant than many of the people that you are going to deal with in ministry. So if you can't even handle toilets – and what you find in them – how are you going to handle people?

If he thinks that he is too good for all of this, then he is no good to the ministry. If, fresh out of the seminary, he already thinks that he is some "man of God" that is too important to do anything other than preaching and writing, and to have people sit at his feet to hear his wisdom, then he is really a useless piece of trash, and he is so stupid that he doesn't know it.

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

There are many other things that I would do to train and test a person; there are hundreds of details that I pay attention to. I am going to take him on errands and meals, and I am going to watch how he treats the waiters and the doormen. I am going to casually suggest that we meet at a certain time, and then see if he arrives early (I always do). If he is married, I am going to watch how he interacts with his wife, to ascertain as much as I can whether he selfishly lords it over her, or whether he uses his authority to serve her with sacrificial love.

When someone is being considered for Christian ministry, all of these things are relevant, and I have not yet even started to describe the high doctrinal and intellectual standards that should be required. If it is someone that I have personally trained, I would already have all the information I need about him, but a seminary degree tells me none of these things. Consider the biblical lessons and tests based on Luke 14:7-11, Proverbs 29:5, James 1:19 (also Proverbs 10:19), and many others.

So what if he has a seminary degree? I can train up someone more intellectually competent in several months to a year.<sup>3</sup> But if he is too "holy" or educated to mob up vomit or scrub the toilet, then I don't want him to even lick stamps for my church or ministry. He is not even good enough to be the speed bump on the church parking lot, and he can forget about being an elder or teacher.

On the other hand, nothing that I have described should pose a problem to the real spiritual servant, one who is not trying to be a master or a celebrity to God's people (Matthew 20:25-28).

Of course, all of this applies to me as well – the day that I consider myself too much of a "man of God" to scrub the church toilet is the day that I have become as a filthy toilet to God. And doing a half-baked job wouldn't do, either – if I scrub a toilet, I am going to make it shine. I will not pretend that I've had as many opportunities to perform menial

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<sup>3</sup> The academic and practical training in seminaries is not nearly as grueling as what I would offer and require anyway, so even if I were to hire a well-trained seminary graduate, I would still have to train him all over again.



work as many other people, but whenever the demand was placed upon me, I did a good job with a good attitude.

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

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

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

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

Jesus left us an example, so that if even our Lord and Teacher was willing to perform a servant's work, we dare not consider ourselves greater than our master (John 13:14–17). Although it is unbiblical to require a minister to do menial work as part of his *regular* duties (Acts 6:2), the point is that he should never consider himself above that kind of work, and should gladly perform it whenever it is needed. In fact, a leader should make a point of humbling himself and setting an example, by occasionally helping with the lowly tasks at church and also in other situations, and to do this without neglecting his primary duties.

The problem is that, unless I put him on a probation without pay, then if I am going to train or test someone I've hired from the outside regarding these things, I will have to pay him a reasonable salary even while he is on probation, and (because he is on probation) when he is not really doing the work that I hired him to do in the first place. Moreover, I have been using humility and work ethic only as examples – there are many other things that I need to test and probably teach him as well. But if I were to promote someone from within my own church or ministry, he would have already been trained and tested for a long time.

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

Also, if all the students are doing this sort of work as part of the school requirements, then they might not perceive its significance and so would just go through the motions, and it would be much less humiliating to the proud (which makes the training less meaningful and effective) than if they were in the extreme minority, as would be the case if someone is being trained and tested in a church community.

To prevent misunderstandings or misapplications of what I've said, know that my main point is not that seminaries are useless or that they should be abolished, but that churches should be much more deliberate and thorough in their teaching ministries, in training and testing both doctrine and character. If this is done, then in general a church would be the better environment for raising up its own workers and leaders.

## 2. Seminary and Elitism

I thoroughly enjoy your writings. They always edify me, and your works on apologetics have fundamentally changed the way I engage unbelievers.

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

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

To say the least, I get frustrated. I am sure you know what I am talking about.

I am glad that my writings are benefiting you.

I understand what you are talking about. There is the specific problem of rejecting Reformed theology without good arguments, and then there is the broader problem of *elitism*, which infects people of every theological persuasion.

The problem with elitists is not just that they often offer no actual arguments against their opponents, or that their arguments fail, but a major problem is that they are often not the elite at all, but just a bunch of big dummies! So there is both pride and self-deception.

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

And this is also the nature of a seminary degree – it does not imply divine approval, but only human approval. This does not mean that a seminary degree is evil, since human approval can at times coincide with divine approval. Nevertheless, human approval remains what it is, and this means that we must never think of a seminary degree as anything more than a badge of mere human approval, and we need more than human approval if we were to be the ministers of God.

It is true that even some Calvinists have exhibited this same elitism when debating Arminians.<sup>4</sup> This is a shame, because to tout one's human credentials and point out the opponent's lack thereof does not amount to a good argument, so that it is unnecessary and unproductive to make such a comparison when defending Calvinism or Christianity. And some people in the audience will rightly become impatient with this type of behavior.

To the elitist, we can point out that there are always some people (or even multitudes of them) who have greater credentials than he does, and who at the same time affirm a contrary view than he does. You don't have to bring in the people with these greater credentials – just cite from their books. Does the elitist then surrender? Is he then reduced to silence? If he is a consistent elitist, then he should; however, more likely than not, he is going to fight on, only that he might suddenly lose interest in comparing credentials.

The truth is that most seminary graduates are very incompetent. They have learned enough to look down on others, but not enough to really know what they are talking about. This is easy to understand. If you have been to college, you might have realized that after graduation, you still knew relatively little about your major – you were still far from being an expert. And if you had obtained an advanced degree, even a doctorate, you might have realized that although you have gotten better, you were still not very good.

The most competent thinkers are those who study and train hard outside of, after, and sometimes even without college/seminary. As Paul says, you must work hard to become a workman that can rightly handle the word of truth. In my books and articles, I have provided numerous examples of the foolish mistakes that even seasoned professors can make. Anyone who thinks that he is something when he just comes out of a seminary, even with a doctorate degree, is to be dismissed and despised.

There is no magic formula in dealing with these people, since their personalities and responses vary. You should pray for wisdom, and for the work of the Spirit. Nevertheless, I can suggest several options to you. Some of what follows cannot be performed at the same time, but they are to be chosen depending on the person and the situation.

(1) Plainly tell them what you think, whether gently or forcefully.

For example, what you said to me when you described the problem should be said to some elitists:

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

(2) Use their credentials against them.

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<sup>4</sup> I have in mind a prominent Calvinist who has been, probably correctly, accused of this more than once.

Since they have seminary degrees and you don't, then they should know what they are talking about even when you don't. According to their standard, if they defeat you, this is the way it should be, and it is no great achievement, so that they should not gloat and you should not feel especially ashamed. But if you defeat them, what is their excuse? They went through a program of specialized training and they are still not as good as you? Are they complete idiots?

You can boldly point this out, and then laugh, and laugh, and laugh. Or, you can gently bring up this point, and "wonder" aloud why they can't answer you if they are so much better trained and informed. Of course, you will have to know what you are talking about, and actually win the debate. No one says that you can be ignorant and get away with it.

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

That is, once they appeal to their degrees to silence you or to avoid discussion with you, then they are stuck. If they claim that they have a right to address a subject and you don't because they are the ones who have the relevant degrees, then by their own standard they can no longer address subjects outside of their specializations.

(3) Take the humble position.

Sometimes it is strategically advantageous to first take the lowly position when dealing with an arrogant person. Timidly ask him, who knows so much, to explain to you what he is saying and why. If he understands his subject so well, perhaps he should be able to at least explain and defend his basic points? If he cannot, then you can "wonder" aloud if it is because he might not understand or be able to defend his views after all.

(4) Hurt their pride.

Sometimes when people are arrogant, you will have to hurt their pride. To one, you might laugh at his seminary (if it is really a bad or mediocre one), and say that you would rather not go at all than to go to that one. To another, you could harshly insult him and incite him to debate with you, and then you must take him down *hard*. The point is not just to win, but you might be saving him from a long prideful (and thus sinful) life of futile ministry. Of course, this again means that you must actually win the debate.

(5) Expose them to the audience.

Sometimes there are people around listening to the conversation. If your opponent attempts to bully you by appealing to his superior human credentials, you can seize on that and expose his pride and incompetence to the audience.

Once someone tries to bully me like this in a conversation or debate, then I've got him. I am going to pound on that, again, and again, and again, and again. He is never going to hear the end of it. I am going to make him regret ever having gone to seminary.

I am going to point out his pride over, and over, and over again to the audience. With every little mistake he makes, I am going to point out how incompetent he is even when he has a seminary degree (the more advanced the degree, the more stupid it makes him look). Every time he fails to refute a point I make or establish one of his own points, I am going to point out how badly he fails even when he has superior credentials. And then I am going to laugh, and laugh, and laugh.

This would not be just to vindicate myself, but the audience must hear this, and again, this might even save the arrogant person from his pride.

(6) Explore non-rhetorical options.

There are other things that you might do that are not rhetorical in nature. For example, you can call their professors, and tell them about the situation.

If the professors are responsible believers and not completely worthless, they might see the problem and do something to help you. Some of them might even rebuke their former students or make them patiently talk to you about the topics in question.

If I ever find out that someone I've trained were to exhibit elitism, I would privately rebuke him and make him ask forgiveness from those whom he has offended. If he refuses, then he is a piece of spiritual garbage, and I would publicly denounce and humiliate him. I regard elitism in a believer as this serious and sinful, and teachers who do not correct this in their students partake in their sin.

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

### 3. Tai Chi and Chi Gong

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

The Tai Chi people have taken over the Queen Elizabeth Park, the most beautiful park in our city, and they are there by the hundreds, all practicing Tai Chi.

Do you have any thoughts on this matter? I value your perspective. Thanks.

When I was in the third grade, seemingly "out of the blue," I asked my mother to buy me two English Bibles (I wanted two different translations). So although no one taught me to do it, I started reading the Bible early in life; nevertheless, I was not converted until several years later.

Meanwhile, before my conversion, I read much on a variety of subjects (many of which a Christian should avoid), including the martial arts. Thus I have done a moderate amount of reading about the technical, philosophical, and esoteric aspects of the subject, but most of this was done when I was very young, while I was still in elementary school and junior high, so I cannot claim to be an expert.

At that time, my main interest in Chi Gong (also spelled "Qi Gong") had nothing to do with the promised health benefits, but rather with its alleged potential to increase one's striking power, and especially its seemingly superhuman promises, such as the ability to strike at one's opponent at a short distance without direct physical contact, and even through thin obstacles. (I took school fights very seriously!)

Some of these teachings are presented from an esoteric perspective; however, similar to how many occult teachings are being presented nowadays, Chi Gong teachings are now often presented from a scientific perspective.

My general position on the martial arts is that, given the right context and motive, it is acceptable to learn certain combat techniques. Sometimes, this is not only acceptable but necessary even for Christians. For example, it is necessary for members of the military, the police force, and security guards. I also consider it acceptable for Christians to learn fighting techniques for personal self-defense. Of course, we can make numerous qualifications about this, but this would distract us from addressing the main point of your question. For now, let us just say that it is at least sometimes acceptable to learn and practice certain kinds of fighting techniques.

However, when a system is more than a physical and practical form of self-defense, then problems begin to arise. For example, although Tai Chi Chuan can be a very fast,

flexible, and powerful fighting method, it is not just a practical system of self-defense, since it is usually practiced for health reasons today. Also, it consists of more than just physical movements, but it is often taught with an aim to harness the internal and almost mystical "chi" force that is based on non-Christian theories of metaphysics and anthropology.

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

As mentioned above, some advocates are increasingly trying to present Tai Chi and Chi Gong from a scientific perspective, so as to demystify them and make them appealing to those who otherwise would consider them too mystical or esoteric. Teachers of the occult have been doing the same for a long while now, but they have not abandoned the mystical perspectives, so the same philosophies and practices are being taught from both the mystical and scientific angles, ensuring both kinds of followers.<sup>5</sup>

What makes them unacceptable for Christians is not only that their origins are tied to anti-Christian philosophies, but that they are *still* so tied, explicitly and implicitly, to anti-Christian ideas. Also, not only is Tai Chi inseparably linked to some anti-Christian ideas, but the very fact that it seeks to achieve relaxation (peace?) and health without relationship to any explicitly Christian belief or practice (such as faith, repentance, prayer, Bible study, etc.) is unacceptable. It is in practical and often explicit competition with the gospel.

This is the general basis from which I would oppose Tai Chi and other related practices.

If it does not often come up in conversation where you need to refute it, you may not need to study it too much at this time, for there are too many false philosophies in this world to study all of them. Instead, when you find yourself speaking to an advocate or practitioner, you can just listen to what he believes about it, and then question and refute it. Of course, if the subject frequently comes up, then you should probably learn a little more about Tai Chi and Chi Gong.

In any case, remember that the biblical/presuppositional method can refute any non-Christian belief. Although you may use weaker, inconclusive, superficial, and even fallacious (such as scientific) arguments against Chi Gong, ultimately these cannot defeat the stubborn person. For example, if I like practicing Chi Gong, and somehow you can prove that practicing Chi Gong will shorten my life for 50 years, I could still say, "So what?" And that will be the end of it.

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, many scientifically inclined individuals would call these kinds of "scientific" teachings "pseudo-science." However, until they debunk them, this is just an assumption, and they are just revealing their own prejudices. Also, I have argued elsewhere that all empirical sciences are in fact pseudo-rational – that is, *irrational* – and one type of nonsense is not *essentially* better, even if *relatively* better, than another type of nonsense. They are all nonsense and unreliable.



Also, the use of scientific arguments demands that you know something about the most recent scientific research done on the subject, and that you should probably understand it better than the average advocate or practitioner. This is not easy to do and to maintain. So the easiest, quickest, and the most rational way to approach the "scientific" Tai Chi or Chi Gong practitioner is just to refute *science itself* as fallacious. This at one stroke destroys the credibility of all the scientific research that supposedly supports your opponent.

Then, proceed to examine the actual ideas and presuppositions in your opponent's beliefs, leading to a rational demonstration of the superiority and the necessity of the biblical worldview, including repentance toward God and faith in the gospel of Christ.

## 4. Occult Science

In my article, "Tai Chi and Chi Gong," I mentioned that teachers of the occult have been presenting their ideas increasingly from a scientific perspective. Here I would like to elaborate on this.

The darkest piece of literature that I have ever read was a classic manual on necromancy. This was not an ordinary occult book that you could find in the self-help, psychology, or New Age section of any bookstore; moreover, the material was not just about how to talk to your dead relatives or even the typical techniques of channeling. Rather, most of it had to do with the conjuration of demons, and for murderous intents. It was explicitly and self-consciously satanic in its teachings.

I mention this to point out that even some teachings on necromancy<sup>6</sup> are now being presented from the scientific perspective. By exploiting the idolatrous reverence that many people have toward experimental science,<sup>7</sup> even the darkest demonic doctrines are being adopted by those who would otherwise reject them as superstitious, impractical, or evil.

This scientific version of the occult provides many professing (not necessarily real) Christians, who also idolize science, the excuse to practice all varieties of divination. The thinking is that if something is scientifically explained as natural, then even though it could be used for evil, in itself it is probably neutral or even good.

From this perspective, to practice clairvoyance or astral projection is merely to exercise our innate God-given abilities – it is not spiritual or demonic, but natural and scientific. Trances have nothing to do with the spiritual, and surely never anything demonic, but they are explained in terms of enhanced alpha and delta brainwaves. And to study astrology or Feng Shui is merely to discover and exploit the "natural laws"<sup>8</sup> that God has installed in the universe, just like we do in physics and chemistry.

Of course, even with this way of thinking, these professing Christians cannot escape the many biblical prohibitions against divination and the dark arts.<sup>9</sup> But it does provide them with an excuse (however illegitimate and fallacious) to ignore these clear references, whereas previously they did not even have this.

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<sup>6</sup> Again, this is more than ordinary channeling or talking to the dead.

<sup>7</sup> This is the sinful confidence in humanity to autonomously obtain knowledge apart from God's revelation.

<sup>8</sup> I deny that there are such things as natural laws except in the sense that they are *descriptions* of the way that *God* ordinarily acts to sustain his creation and to cause every event. Here I am using the term as other people would use it.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Deuteronomy 18:10–11 says, "There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer."

Not all who worship science (that is, themselves) are taken in by this particular deception. However, their reason for rejecting it is just as irrational; that is, they dismiss the scientific claims and explanations of the occult as "pseudo-science" – not real science at all. But this dismissal is usually done upon hearing the very mention of the topic, without actual consideration of the experiments, statistics, and theories presented. Thus they beg the question and behave "unscientifically."

My answer is simpler: *All* science is superstitious and irrational – all scientific reasonings are logically fallacious. So science itself is pseudo-rational, and what is pseudo-scientific is not essentially worse (even if relatively worse) than what is scientific. Both of them are destroyed under rational analysis, and must kneel before divine revelation. I can refute any scientific theory just as easily as I can refute any occult teaching, so that science has no right to speak when I am discussing these things – it doesn't have the answer. Thus I don't have to refute the science of the occult, because I can directly refute science itself, and then demand a genuinely rational defense from my opponent.

When it comes to the occult, many Evangelical and Reformed Christians commit the error of dismissing this entire category of materials as pure superstition. But if so, then they must also dismiss as superstition significant portions of the Bible that acknowledge the reality of at least some of these things. The fact is that many who claim to affirm biblical supernaturalism affirm it just enough to permit supernaturalism during biblical times, but not so much that they have to live as supernaturalists today. They affirm it just enough so that they could affirm the creation of the world and the inspiration of Scripture, but not so much that they have to confront the reality of demonic activities today. They affirm it just enough so that they could pass themselves off as doctrinal supernaturalists, but not so much that they could no longer live as practical deists.

If you are a pastor, occult teachings and practices might constitute a greater problem in your church than you think. For various reasons (the scientific presentation of the occult being one of them), many professing Christians do not perceive any conflict between their faith and the occult. It is your duty to address this topic so that your people will understand the relevant biblical commands and prohibitions.

And when you warn your people against the occult, don't do it by trying to give a scientific refutation, while letting your people hold on to their idolatrous attitude toward science. You would be giving them a wrong reason for avoiding the occult, and the idol of science would still be in their hearts to be exploited by the next set of scientific claims.

Instead, destroy the idol – rationally demonstrate to them that science itself is always fallacious, that man can never obtain knowledge apart from God's gracious revelation. Rather, we should embrace the Word of God as the all-sufficient starting point and controlling factor in all of our thought and conduct.

Then, explain to them that the true wisdom is not found in science, and the highest power is not found in the occult. Rather, wisdom and power are found only in the Great Book,

through which we can have intimate contact with the very wisdom and power of God, the Author and Ruler of all things (Galatians 3:5).

## 5. Occult Items in the Home

There is something that I may have already asked you during a phone conversation some time ago.

You were saying that the occult items in our homes or in places that we stay should not have any effect on a Christian, that is, unless the Christian has willingly acquired them.

I am in a situation where I am not the owner of the house so that I cannot just discard these occult items, since they belong to other people in my family.

The Bible forbids the worship of idols and the use of occult items, but there is no reason for believers to own these things at all. There are Christians who acquire various religious statues and occult objects as decorations and for their cultural significance. But this is already spiritual adultery.

When Paul saw that the city of Athens was "full of idols," he was not struck with artistic and cultural admiration; rather, he was "greatly distressed" (Acts 17:16). Any other reaction indicates nothing other than a spiritual defect and sickness in the believer. It follows that a Christian should never travel to places that are "full of idols" just for entertainment or to satisfy his curiosity. If looking at demonic objects is your idea of fun, then there is something severely wrong with you.

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

First, to put it mildly, I am uncertain that it is biblically wise or even permissible to run a ministry that *specializes* in refuting the occult and false religions. My understanding and conviction is that every legitimate Christian ministry should focus on the positive presentation of the whole counsel of God.

Granted, the refutation of false ideas will almost always be a part of this, and this will sometimes include the direct refutation of the occult and false religions. However, when this becomes the *focus* of the ministry instead of a mere support and reinforcement to the positive presentation of biblical teachings, which should be the main thrust of every proper ministry, then this ministry should be considered defective.

If a certain minister or scholar wishes to perform an extraordinary amount of research into the occult and false religions, then, even if this is biblically permissible, the least that he must do is to perform this work under the supervision of or in association with other ministers or scholars whose focus is on the positive presentation of biblical doctrines. Still, he should study Scripture and reliable Christian literature *much more* than he spends

time in his research on the occult and false religions. He should also maintain constant fellowship with faithful Christians.

To ignore these principles and practices is to be foolhardy with one's faith, and might even amount to testing God. Occult materials offer a similar temptation as the one that plunged our first parents into the depths of spiritual darkness and depravity. More than a few Christians have been taken by its promise of forbidden knowledge and power. As Scripture warns, we must not think more highly of ourselves than we ought, but we must exercise our gifts according to the measure of our faith. We must be sober-minded, and understand the devices of the devil.

Second, the biblical/presuppositional method is sufficient to destroy any occult teaching or false religion without intensive and detailed research. It is cumbersome, and after a certain point impossible, to refute every occult teaching or false religion that we might have to deal with if we must first research the subject in detail every time. And the whole approach seems premature and even ridiculous in the light of the fact that most Christians have not even learned the most elementary things about biblical doctrines.

I know that I can easily refute any occult teaching or false religion when I encounter it, including all those that I have not yet even heard of, because biblical revelation is my intellectual foundation and biblical reasoning is my spiritual weapon. It is impossible to defeat the mind of Christ, which God has graciously given to us when he sovereignly granted us faith to understand and believe his Word.

Just so no one misunderstands, I am not completely against counter-cult ministries, but I think that many of them have an unbiblical focus and an unhealthy obsession. It is possible to fix these problems and still remain a strong voice against the occult and false religions. In fact, if we will maintain the proper focus and be obsessed only with Jesus, we can be an even more powerful voice against the occult and false religions than any ministry that almost exclusively focuses on researching and refuting them.

We are talking about having occult items or non-Christian religious objects in the home. If you are not the one who brought them into the home and it is beyond your power to remove them, then it would seem that you have not sinned against God, in the sense that you are not personally and directly culpable for another man's adulterous relationships, or the many sins of the people in the community that you are living in. It will not affect you in the sense that no direct judgment will come upon you for having those items at home, since you would instantly remove them if you were to have control over the situation.

However, other people's sins and the ill effects of these sins will probably indirectly affect you. One example is how the sins of the people of Israel prevented Joshua and Caleb from entering Canaan for forty years, although these two had not sinned. It was not a direct judgment against them, but a natural consequence of belonging to that sinful community.

If suffering the consequences of belonging to a sinful community is unbearable or unwise, then you might consider removing yourself from it, if it is at all possible and practical. If this is impossible, then you will have to remain in that community, at least for now, and pray to God for strength and blessings. Of course, at appropriate and strategic times, you should confront the sinful beliefs and practices in your family or community with the claims and commands of God.

In other words, I do not say that a Christian who lives with a family of devout Buddhists must remain in that home, especially if the situation vexes his soul, hinders his growth in piety, and prevents effective ministry to other people. However, before he leaves, he should have repeatedly and in various ways confronted the sins of his family members and preached the gospel to them.

Also, he will probably continue to have opportunities to discuss the things of God with his family members even after he has left the home. So this does not necessarily mean a termination of all natural relationships with the family, but only a physical separation. Now, of course, if the occultist or idolater is a spouse, then the believer must not depart, in accordance with the teachings of Scripture.

It is impossible to discuss every scenario here. In any case, it is always preferable to talk over these problems and your scriptural options with mature believers, such as your church elders, before taking drastic actions.

## 6. What's Wrong with "White" Magic

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

Someone sent me this question a long time ago. Although I find it disturbing that a professing Christian can even ask this question, this is still better than to blatantly embrace the occult, as many people do in our churches.

Pastors should never assume that their congregations are free from the occult, since many people are either uninformed or in outright rebellion when it comes to this area. Some ministers seem to think that the way to conquer superstitious beliefs is to ignore them, and maybe they feel silly to even address them. But this is the wrong approach, and it will just allow false ideas to take hold in our congregations.

There is much to say about this, but we can spend only so much time on each question, so I will just outline a basic answer in what follows.

First, the question affirms an unbiblical distinction on magic.

Scripture does not distinguish between "black" magic and "white" magic, and then only forbid one or the other, or both. Rather, it just forbids "magic" – that is, any and all magic.

The illegitimate distinction has the effect of conceding that certain kinds of magic are to be condemned, while insisting that it is acceptable or even preferable to allow other kinds of magic. Of course, this is especially convenient for those who claim to practice "white" magic.

However, since Scripture condemns magic itself, and since Scripture is the absolute moral standard, then to invent a distinction between "black" magic and "white" magic is analogous to inventing a distinction between "bad" adultery and "good" adultery, or between "bad" idolatry and "good" idolatry. What, do you think that idolatry never "helps" people? Well, except for the fact that God will condemn the idolater to endless conscious extreme torment in hell (as with those who practice magic), certain kinds of idol worship can make some people feel pretty good and relaxed.

Also consider the invented category of the "white" lie. It seems that if you first say the word "white," then it doesn't matter what comes after it.

Second, the question assumes an unbiblical standard of good.



Regardless of what Scripture says on magic, the question assumes that good is defined by "helping people." No wonder there is confusion. Scripture defines good one way, but the question favors another way. Thus to the person, the question becomes, "How can Scripture define something as evil when it contributes to what I consider as good?" or "How can Scripture call something evil, when it is good according to my standard?"

Now, in its own specific sense, Scripture indeed teaches that it is good to "help" people – but yet it forbids magic. Thus the very definition of "help" must also be examined. From God's perspective, are you "helping" someone when you use magic on his behalf? Is it "helpful" to disobey God, so that we can produce some effect that we desire? But according to Scripture, the person who uses magic commits an abomination, and the person who requests or assents to its use is also guilty. How helpful is this?

The question defines "help" from a man-centered perspective, emphasizing man's practical needs and desires, rather than the true necessities of right worship and holy living, as defined by God in Scripture.

Thus not only is the question self-contradictory, but the more we think about it, the more sinister it appears. It is as if we were to ask: What's wrong with a "good" *evil*, if it attains some man-centered practical end? What's wrong with disobeying God if I can achieve my desired purpose? Or, to give an illustration: What's wrong with the Tower of Babel if it promotes unity among men? But they were united in defiance against God's plans and purposes. One Baha'i woman said to me, "Isn't religion supposed to promote unity?" – as if human unity is the ultimate end. But that is the religion of Babel. The Christian religion aims to unite the good around the truth against the evil, and not to unite the good with the evil against the truth.

Third, the question accepts an unbiblical source of power.

For our purpose, let us assume that magic can indeed produce the effects alleged by its practitioners. Our present concern is not whether magic "works," but the source of its power, or the object to which its practitioner appeals.<sup>10</sup>

Right away, we can say that the source of this power is not God (Isaiah 8:19; 2 Kings 1:3).<sup>11</sup> Many older magic books freely designate the devil as the source of the power in magic – yes, including what is called "white" magic. In more recent times, many books on the magical arts and occult sciences claim only to unleash man's natural potential. Thus in one book on using the pendulum for supernatural guidance, the devil is designated as the source of knowledge, but in another one, the subconscious mind is said to be the source of information.

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<sup>10</sup> I cannot spend time to discuss why magic would work, if it does, and how to respond to it, but see at least Deuteronomy 13:1–5.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, here we are considering the "source" in a relative sense, for in the absolute sense, even the devil's power comes from God.

Of course, then there are those that, in direct contradiction against Scripture, claim that God is the willing and approving source of the power behind magic and the occult. But if we are seeking God for guidance, we should know that he has already given us his infallible revelation, and he has already prescribed the means by which we must petition him – that is, not from divination but from Scripture, and not by magic but by prayer.

Samuel associates witchcraft or divination with rebellion (1 Samuel 15:23), for at the root of magic and the occult is not a selfless desire to help people, or even a godly motive to preserve oneself for humble service. Rather, at the root of magic and the occult is rebellion against God. It is the attitude that says, "If God will not let me have my way, then I will make a deal with the devil."

Thus, we have given at least three reasons why any kind of magic is wrong (or four when we count the underlying motive of rebellion). From an attitude of defiance against God, (1) it performs an evil<sup>12</sup> (2) to attain one's man-centered objectives (3) by appealing to the devil.

The right punishment for such wickedness is nothing less than endless hellfire: "But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death" (Revelation 21:8).

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<sup>12</sup> A "good" *evil* is a contradiction, thus also "white" *magic* or "holy" *adultery*.

## 7. Pentecostalism and Cessationism

[Have you already written something about Pentecostalism?](#)

Although I am quite familiar with the theology and the personalities involved in Charismatic circles, I have not yet written anything detailed about Pentecostalism, or a direct evaluation of the Charismatic movement or Charismatic theology. Besides making some related comments here and there, the most relevant publicly available work that I have produced so far is *Biblical Healing*.<sup>13</sup>

From my perspective, most but not all of the Reformed and Evangelical criticisms regarding the doctrines and practices of the Charismatics are accurate. However, when it comes to a positive statement concerning spiritual gifts, their own doctrine leaves much to be desired, even though they have also made valuable contributions on the subject, compensating for the errors of the Charismatics.

Since I am against almost every distinctive that the Pentecostals and Charismatics affirm,<sup>14</sup> I would never identify myself with them. However, I am not an absolute cessationist.

There are different senses and degrees of "cessationism." Many cessationists affirm that God indeed still performs the extraordinary, only that he no longer performs these feats through "spiritual gifts" or special endowments granted to individual believers. By "absolute" cessationism, I refer to the position that God has altogether stopped performing the extraordinary. This position claims that all the reasons for which he performed the extraordinary during biblical times are now gone and inapplicable, since the Scripture has been completed and the canon closed.

One of the several reasons that I reject absolute cessationism is that there are biblically supported reasons other than those cited by the absolute cessationists for God to perform the extraordinary. In other words, God performs the extraordinary not only to authenticate his messengers, confirm his revelation, etc., but there are other reasons for which he performs the extraordinary. Therefore, even though the reasons connected with the formation of the canon are no longer applicable, this does not eliminate the possibility that God still performs the extraordinary today.

I believe that God still does whatever he wants, and sometimes he might want to do things that are out of the ordinary, including healing and other "miracles," often in answer to prayer. This is only a consistent application of the doctrine of divine sovereignty.

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<sup>13</sup> Perhaps I will write more about Charismatic theology in the future, including something about tongues, the baptism in the Spirit, and other related topics.

<sup>14</sup> There is a distinction between Pentecostals and Charismatics, but for the sake of convenience, I will ignore this distinction in what follows.

And this is consistent with mainstream and historic Reformed thinking in principle. I say "in principle" because many Reformed people would say the same thing as I do here, but then they would preach and behave as if God now absolutely refuses to do anything out of the ordinary. But there is no biblical support for this. Or, they say that God can still do whatever he wants, but that he no longer wants to do extraordinary things. But neither is there biblical support for this, although many forced and invalid inferences are sometimes presented as evidence.

In fact, some people preach and behave as if this has become a deistic world after the apostles and the close of the canon. In some cases, this might be an overreaction to charismatic excesses, but whatever the reason, it is unbiblical and unnecessary. A practical deist is not really better than a charismatic fanatic – both are wrong, and both are ignorant of true spiritual power.

Instead, we should affirm that God is free to do whatever he wants today as in the past, including extraordinary things. How often he chooses to do these extraordinary things is another question, but I would not say that he never does them anymore.

In fact, we should affirm that God's power is very active in this world, and that God does whatever he pleases for his own glory and for the good of the elect. Although Christians have no right to demand God to do anything, or to do something in a particular way, neither do they have the right to say that God has absolutely ceased doing extraordinary things, or doing things in extraordinary ways, especially when there is no real biblical evidence for such a stance.

This is my basic position when it comes to cessationism.

The normal Christian life should be characterized by real and active spiritual *power*. Charismatics make a lot of noise but know nothing of it, but most Reformed and Evangelical Christians are also ignorant in this regard.

Paul writes that he doesn't want us to be ignorant of spiritual things (1 Corinthians 12:1). When the Charismatics get done with 1 Corinthians 12–14, they come away with a false spiritual power, a fanatical imitation of the real thing, but then when most Reformed and Evangelical Christians get done with the same passage, they come away with *nothing*, since they see to it that everything described in there has passed away. Both groups end up still ignorant of spiritual things, and still destitute of spiritual power.

## 8. Territorial Spirits

[Is the Charismatic teaching about territorial spirits incorrect?](#)

This is the false teaching that certain evil spirits are especially associated with a geographical area,<sup>15</sup> and they put up such stubborn resistance against the gospel that Christians find it difficult to evangelize or to achieve any great spiritual progress in their ministries.

Thus what Christians should do is to "discern" the evil spirits (probably by extra-biblical revelation) that are "ruling" over the area (located in the sky above the area), and pray against them (by exercising spiritual authority over them) so that they would depart.

Once they have departed, there will be a sudden change in the spiritual "atmosphere" in the area, and from that point forward, evangelism and other Christian work will become easier and more effective.<sup>16</sup>

The doctrine has no real biblical support, but it is affirmed based on misapplications of Daniel 10, Jesus' teaching about the "strongman," and scriptural references to demonic "strongholds."

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

But these demonic influences work out themselves not in the air, but through the minds of people. By various means, they induce people to think in certain ways, and to adopt certain worldviews. The problem is intellectual in nature, and not an indefinable something "in the air." Likewise, the "strongholds" in Scripture are not little castles in the sky, but they refer to the stubborn evil mindsets and dispositions installed in the minds of men. The Bible teaches that they consist of "pretensions," "arguments," and "thoughts."

Thus it is unbiblical to pray that God will reveal to you what kind of spirits are dominant over a given geographical area, and it is futile to combat demonic "strongholds" by screaming at the sky, calling the evil spirits by name, and commanding them to depart.

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<sup>15</sup> For example, "greed," "lust," "pride," "the occult," and so on. Sometimes it might have a name, like "dragon" or "legion."

<sup>16</sup> Among others, C. Peter Wagner is one of the chief proponents of this teaching.

The implication for both evangelistic and pastoral ministries is that, instead of naming the spirits and commanding them to leave the sky above us, we should simply preach the whole counsel of God. If we find that a particular mindset or worldview is strongly held by people in a certain area, then we can study up on the subject so as to be better prepared to handle the resistance. Jesus dealt with the "strongman" by (1) preaching – thus counteracting false ideas in *the mind* (not in the air), and (2) casting out demons *from people* (not from the sky).

The Charismatic teaching of "territorial spirits" has no support from the Bible, nor does the Bible tell us that we must discern the particularities of certain people groups. However, if you happen to discern relevant particularities of a people group (see Acts 17:22; Titus 1:12–13), and know how to respond to it by applying biblical teachings, then by all means adjust your presentation to best impact the people.

The following is a relevant paragraph taken from my *Commentary on Ephesians*:

Daniel 10 relates what happened in the spiritual world as a result of his prayer to God. It does not teach that we are to pray directly against demons or to angels for anything. Rather, we must pray directly to God, and trust him to do what needs to be done. We then participate in spiritual conflict and wage war against Satan primarily by engaging in intellectual preaching and argumentation against demonic ideas in other people. And since our divine weapons are founded on spiritual wisdom, we are not referring to arguing against non-Christian ideas with non-Christian wisdom. The nature of spiritual conflict does not consist of arguing against, for example, secular science with better secular science; rather, by divine wisdom and power, we declare and demonstrate the superiority of divine wisdom over the entire spectrum of secular ideas. We are referring to the triumph of Christian theology over all non-Christian ideas, whether the debate has to do with science, history, politics, ethics, or any other subject. In short, our strategy is a wise application of biblical revelation, made effective by divine power.

## 9. "Command Ye Me"

In offering examples on how various biblical verses are being distorted by the Charismatics, and by teachers of the "prosperity gospel" in particular, there is an example from John Avanzini's writings that I would like to discuss.

The verse in question is Isaiah 45:11. In the KJV, it reads, "Thus saith the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker, Ask me of things to come concerning my sons, and concerning the work of my hands command ye me." In a book where Avanzini teaches what he calls the "memorial prayer,"<sup>17</sup> which is, according to him, a form of prayer to be performed "when all else fails," he claims that this verse is God's direct invitation for believers to *command* the works of his hands. That is, you are to *command* God to do what you desire, and he will obey you and perform what you command.

Avanzini claims that when this was first revealed to him, it appeared so incredible and mind-boggling that he "checked" it, and sure enough, he says, this is exactly what the verse means. However, when we read the verse in a modern translation, or when we note the immediate context of the verse by also reading the surrounding verses (in any translation), it becomes rather obvious that the verse asserts precisely the opposite of what Avanzini teaches:

Isaiah 45:5–13 (NIV)

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>17</sup> John Avanzini, *Moving the Hand of God* (Harrison House, 1990).

"This is what the LORD says – the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands? It is I who made the earth and created mankind upon it. My own hands stretched out the heavens; I marshaled their starry hosts. I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the LORD Almighty."

To paraphrase, "I am the only God. Whether prosperity or calamity, I am the one who causes it, and there is nothing you can say about it. What? Are you going to question me about my plans? Are you going to give me orders?"<sup>18</sup>

Thus verse 11 is spoken within a context and with a meaning that is directly against what Avanzini teaches.

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<sup>18</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *The Author of Sin*, chapter 1.



## 10. Real Spiritual Power<sup>19</sup>

"The eyes of your heart" (Ephesians 1:18) is just another way of saying, "the understanding of your mind." Paul is thus praying for his readers to receive an intellectual understanding about spiritual things, especially the doctrines that he mentions in this same letter. As Psalm 119:18 states, "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law." Likewise, O'Brien agrees that Paul is emphasizing a person's "thinking."<sup>20</sup>

This point has tremendous implications for Christian life and development. As long as some Christians think that real spiritual wisdom depends on something "beyond" the intellectual understanding of spiritual things, they will keep on trying to grasp biblical truths with this non-mental part of their person. The problem is that this non-mental part does not exist, so that they will always be striving to accomplish something that cannot be done, with a part of their person that does not exist.

Instead of chasing after mystical fantasies, we should embrace the simplicity of the biblical model, that spiritual progress is founded on the mind – on the intellectual – and it comes from a genuine understanding of and a sincere agreement to what God has revealed in Scripture, and then a faithful obedience to what one has learned. To say it again, the biblical way consists of intellectual understanding, sincere agreement, and faithful obedience, not some nonsense about transferring knowledge from the head to the heart.

Another implication of Paul's prayer is that true spiritual enlightenment and progress depends on petitioning the personal God, and using the means that this God has ordained; it does not come from harnessing one's own abilities or manipulating impersonal or even demonic forces. In fact, Scripture rejects the idea that we have any inherent abilities to attain true spiritual enlightenment, and of course, to cooperate with impersonal or even demonic forces would only lead to spiritual disaster and bondage.

The biblical way to spiritual growth opposes all deistic ideas and tendencies, and all mystical and occult means. In other words, although God has ordained various means to help us gain spiritual knowledge and moral progress, and although all of these means are founded on an intellectual understanding of revealed propositions, this does not at all exclude the necessity of God's direct participation to render these means effective. Rejecting mysticism and anti-intellectualism does not result in deism; rather, biblical intellectualism depends on God's immanence – his grace and power at work in our lives and our minds. Therefore, while we diligently take advantage of all the means that God

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<sup>19</sup> The following is taken from my *Commentary on Ephesians*. It is included here because of its relevance to some of the other articles in this book, such as those on the occult and on the Charismatic theology. This excerpt is found in the context of my exposition of Ephesians 1:15-23.

<sup>20</sup> Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), p. 134.

has provided for our spiritual progress, we also earnestly petition him for spiritual enlightenment.

Biblical intellectualism is also against the occult and counterfeit spiritual teachings and practices. Instead of practicing a type of "meditation" in which one empties his mind, repeats a mantra, or focuses on the self or the world, biblical meditation is not a practice of passive non-thinking, but it is a practice of rigorous active theological thinking, disciplining the mind to focus on God's word. The purpose is not to deify the self or to identify with God, but to abase the self and to glorify our God.

In light of these crucial differences, non-Christian attempts at spiritual enlightenment are not only absurd and ineffective, but dangerous and destructive.

One young man sought to improve his intellect and attain spiritual power through a studious lifestyle of occult study and meditation. Instead of gaining what he desired, this so crippled his mind that he at times had difficulty performing even regular mental functions.

But then, God sovereignly and suddenly converted him, and inwardly moved him to read through the New Testament from Matthew to Revelation. Although he could not understand all that he read, by the time he finished reading Revelation, his mind was completely cured, and made better than before. Since then, God has continued to grant him greater spiritual wisdom by means of his word.

The process was not mystical or spectacular, but it appeared rather intellectual and ordinary, and yet it was by this seemingly mundane practice that true spiritual power was finally unleashed in this man's life. The God-ordained means of Bible reading provided the occasion for divine power to work within, resulting in a great deliverance and true spiritual enlightenment. The damage that had accumulated over many years through intense participation in the occult was wiped out in a matter of days by just "reading a book." This is true spiritual power.

Most Charismatics and many Evangelicals have exchanged true spiritual power with counterfeit spiritual power, and true wisdom with mystical nonsense. Instead of wielding intellectual weapons inspired and energized by "divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:4), they have exchanged them for mystical practices inspired and energized by their own flesh. Scripture teaches that the strongholds we must demolish consist of intellectual "arguments" (v. 5). But some have altogether missed the nature of this spiritual conflict – that we are to "take captive every *thought*" – and so they spend their time screaming prayers and rebukes at demons in the sky.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Daniel 10 relates what happened in the spiritual world as a result of his prayer *to God*. It does not teach that we are to pray directly against demons or to angels for anything. Rather, we must pray directly to God, and trust him to do what needs to be done. We then participate in spiritual conflict and wage war against Satan primarily by engaging in intellectual preaching and argumentation against demonic ideas in other people. And since our divine weapons are founded on *spiritual* wisdom, we are not referring to arguing against non-Christian ideas with non-Christian wisdom. The nature of spiritual conflict does not consist of arguing against, for example, secular science with *better* secular science; rather, by divine wisdom and

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

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

When it comes to spiritual progress, how do we pray? Do we pray for strange feelings and spectacular experiences? Do we ask for mystical divine encounters? Do we yearn to transcend our minds altogether, rather than to build it up by the teachings of Christ? Paul prays for spiritual wisdom and understanding. In addition, he expects God to answer such a prayer in conjunction with divinely ordained means, that is, the teachings of Scripture. So he is unlike those who, while they do pray for spiritual enlightenment from God, think that it will come apart from the means that God himself has ordained. Instead, they imagine that after praying for spiritual insight, just about any idea that they can come up with must be correct and biblical. This is a false conception of *charismata*.

We must have a proper attitude toward the means of grace, and a proper view concerning the relationship between divine power and human instruments, and the understanding that even the human instruments depend on divine power to function. That is, although it is true that God enlightens the minds of his chosen ones while human ministers preach to them, even these preachers preach only because they have been sovereignly sent (Romans 10:15). Therefore, we do not just pray "open my eyes," but we pray, "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things *in your law*" (Psalm 119:18).

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power, we declare and demonstrate the superiority of divine wisdom over the entire spectrum of secular ideas. We are referring to the triumph of Christian *theology* over all non-Christian ideas, whether the debate has to do with science, history, politics, ethics, or any other subject. In short, our strategy is a wise application of biblical revelation, made effective by divine power.

## 11. Real Spiritual Revival<sup>22</sup>

In connection with our discussion on revival, here are several relevant passages from the Bible:

### **2 Kings 22:11–23:3**

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

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

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

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

So they took her answer back to the king.

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<sup>22</sup> The following is adapted from a message that I sent to a friend a long time ago.

Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the temple of the LORD with the men of Judah, the people of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets – all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of *the Book* of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the LORD. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the LORD – to follow the LORD and keep his commands, regulations and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in *this book*. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant.

**Nehemiah 8:8-9, 13, 9:3**

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

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

They stood where they were and read from *the Book* of the Law of the LORD their God *for a quarter of the day*, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the LORD their God.

These passages describe the spiritual revivals under the leadership of Josiah and Nehemiah. They demonstrate that true revival involves a revival of *a book*, namely, the Bible. True revival entails a renewed interest in the Bible and a renewed obedience to its teachings. It can, as in the above two cases, occur without a manifestation of charismata, although it can certainly be accompanied with it. But a revival of charismata without a revival of "the book," then, cannot be considered a true revival, since that which we are "revived" about would remain undefined. We might *feel* "revived," but would not know what we are so revived about. In reality, it would be only a revival of the flesh.

So, if in a "revival," the people involved do not have renewed interest in reading, understanding, and obeying the Bible, then it cannot be a true or long-lasting revival. It may mean that God is generous with spiritual gifts, but the people's hearts have not really turned back to him. One cannot turn back to God without turning back to "the book," since even the meaning of turning back to God is defined by "the book." No revival can even say that it emphasizes repentance but not doctrine, since repentance *is* a doctrine (Hebrews 6:1, etc.), and it, again, remains undefined unless you turn back to "the book."

Thus the power of God is not unleashed in or by stomping, yelling, barking, crying, falling, or foaming at the mouth, but it is released as the mighty hammer of God even as a

minister calmly reads the Scripture to the people, "making it clear and giving the meaning," and providing the occasion and the means by which the Spirit of God performs all that he pleases. And when the people will stand "for a quarter of the day" to hear the Word of the Lord, and "another quarter" in confession and in worship, then we shall know that the true revival we have longed for has already started.

## 12. The Ching Ming Festival<sup>23</sup>

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

On the day of this annual festival, multitudes of people visit the gravesites of their deceased relatives to perform acts of cleaning and worship. The worship performed might include bowing at the tombstones and prayers to the deceased, including updates on the conditions of the family members, and requests for special blessings and protection. There are also various offerings, including food and incense, burning a special type of "money" for the dead, or even small paper models of various objects such as houses and cars. It is believed that by burning these objects, they are transferred to the afterlife where the deceased can make use of them.

When considering how a Christian ought to behave toward the Ching Ming Festival, it would be helpful to first summarize the biblical teachings relevant to the subject.

The Bible teaches that the human person consists of the soul, which is the "inward" incorporeal part, and the body, which is the "outward" corporeal part.

Some Christian scholars, including a number of prominent Reformed theologians, insist that the Bible consistently refers to the human person as a unity, that is, as one, so that we should not make a sharp distinction between the soul and the body, or to identify the "person" with the soul.

For example, in one of his lectures, Greg Bahnsen opposes making a sharp distinction between the soul and the body, or to identify the "person" with the soul. He says that the human person is "not a ghost in a machine." But then when he brings up the obvious question of how a person's identity is maintained between death and resurrection, he shrugs it off as a "mystery."<sup>24</sup>

This evasion is popular with many Christians, and a favorite of Reformed believers, used as a license to affirm just about every false belief that they cannot defend. It is not a "mystery" if it has been clearly revealed in Scripture,<sup>25</sup> but anything will appear perplexing when it is obscured by false assumptions and the stubborn resistance of human traditions.

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<sup>23</sup> For those readers who are unfamiliar with the Ching Ming Festival, a search on the Internet will provide many short articles explaining its background and significance.

<sup>24</sup> In other words, at death the soul is separated from the body, but according to Bahnsen, a "person" is supposed to consist of *both* the soul and the body. So how is the identity of the "person" maintained after death, when the soul is separated from the body?

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion on the biblical use and meaning of "mystery," see my *Commentary on Ephesians*.

To make a sharp distinction between the soul and the body, to identify the "person" with the soul, and to consider the soul as superior or more important than the body, is sometimes considered the Gnostic or the "Greek" view. As Gordon Clark points out, it is often unhelpful to just label a position as "Greek," since the Greeks held all sorts of positions on various matters that contradict one another. So, although one may call a position Plato's view, Aristotle's view, and so forth, it is often too broad and inaccurate to just call something "Greek."

In any case, the view opposed, which we will here call the "Gnostic" position, regards matter as evil, or at least affirms that evil comes from matter and not spirit. Therefore, when the soul leaves the body at death, it is in a real sense the liberation of the soul or the person from the prison of flesh. Of course *this* view is unbiblical, but it is not the necessary result of making a sharp distinction between the soul and the body. In fact, one can even affirm that the soul is superior to the body, and still not end up with the Gnostic view, since one good thing can be superior to another good thing.

It is true that many biblical passages address the human person as a single unit, just as we all do in ordinary conversation; however, in none of these instances is the Bible discussing the constitution of the human person. On the other hand, when the Bible addresses the constitution of the human person, or when it refers to the constitution of the human person in order to make some other point, it always speaks of the human person as consisting of two parts – the incorporeal (mind, spirit, heart, etc.) and the corporeal (body, flesh, etc.).

Although the expression is a bit crude and loaded, the Bible indeed teaches that the human person is as "a ghost in a machine," that the person's identity is in his incorporeal soul, and even that the soul is superior to the body.

For example, Samuel appeared *as Samuel* to Saul after death, and Moses likewise appeared *as Moses* to Christ, implying that personal identity is associated with the incorporeal soul without a necessary connection to the body. Then, Jesus said that we should not be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul, as if the two are different and separate, and that the soul is more important. (See Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 5:3, 7:34; James 2:26.)

There are too many clear biblical passages supporting these points for them to be denied. To say that the Bible always refers to the person as one, without a sharp distinction between the soul and the body, and without speaking of the soul as the superior part, can only be the conclusion from a selective and illegitimate use of Scripture.

That said, it remains that the body is important. For the Christian, it is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), and it is the same body that will be resurrected and transformed (1 Corinthians 15:35–58). "Therefore," Paul writes, "honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:20). We can readily affirm all of this without also affirming the unbiblical view denied above. With full biblical support and without slipping into the Gnostic position, we can affirm that there is a sharp distinction between the soul and the



body, that personal identity is associated with the soul (even if there is some relation to the body), and that the soul is superior (or more important) than the body.

Thus, there are biblical reasons why we respectfully treat and bury a person's body after his soul has departed from it. Because of what the Bible teaches about the present and future roles of the body, we do not just throw a dead human body into a dumpster or feed it to animals, which might seem more convenient and practical. Instead, we treat it in a way that is consistent with its important role in the present life, and with our anticipation of the future resurrection and judgment.

It is true that God can produce a body even if it has been cremated or fed to animals, so we are not trying to make the task of resurrection easier on Omnipotence – not at all! Rather, among other biblical reasons, the proper treatment and burial of the body is a sign of the believer's anticipation of the resurrection and the judgment.

It is with this biblical understanding of the constitution of the human person, of the importance of the body, and of the anticipation of the resurrection and the judgment, that we should formulate beliefs, practices, and traditions allowed and encouraged for Christians, and also evaluate those that are related to the Ching Ming Festival.

It is possible to treat and bury the body well, care for the gravesite, and even mourn for the dead, without being idolatrous or superstitious. We can do these things in memory of the person and in faith toward God, without violating the teachings of the Bible. That said, we must be careful not to venture into unbiblical thinking and practices while we perform something that ought to be biblical when properly performed.

For example, there is a great difference between speaking fondly *of* the deceased person and speaking fondly *to* the deceased person – it is the difference between holy conversation and necromancy. So while we mourn for the dead and weep for our loss, we must not say anything that directly addresses the deceased person, or to say anything with the belief that the deceased person can hear us. In addition, we should not direct to the deceased person any semblance of worship, such as bowing at his gravesite, or offering incense and various sacrifices.

As a side note, it follows that the Catholic veneration of saints and of Mary is nothing short of necromancy. It is an abomination to be condemned in the harshest and most extreme terms. To be a Catholic is to be a necromancer.

Also, consider the practice of requesting forgiveness from or granting forgiveness to the dead as a psychological exercise. This is recommended by some psychologists and "Christian" counselors as a way to deal with "unresolved issues" between the living and the deceased for the psychological benefit and relief of the counselee. But it is also necromancy. Granted, it might be a weak form of necromancy, without spectacular demonic displays and immediate catastrophic effects, but the principle is the same. Any unresolved issues can and must be addressed between the Christian and his God.

Now that we have considered the relevant biblical teachings, it appears that the Ching Ming question has already been mostly answered. It only remains for us to make some specific applications.

In general, we must not participate in anything that even implies our agreement with idolatrous, superstitious, and unbiblical beliefs. But it seems impossible to participate in Ching Ming and avoid making such an implication at the same time, that is, unless you were to constantly declare your opposition to every unbiblical belief and practice performed throughout the entire day to your family members and to other people around you.

I agree that it is mentally and physically possible to avoid all unbiblical beliefs and practices even if you were to accompany your family to the gravesite on Ching Ming. However, the issue is not always what you are thinking and doing, but the impression that you are giving other people, and the inferences that you are allowing them to make (1 Corinthians 8:4–13; 10:19–33).

Consider the things that you must avoid and refuse. You must not even help your family carry the idolatrous items to the gravesite, or help them light the fire for burning the sacrifices, and you must not even stand beside your family members in a way that implies your approval as they offer idolatrous worship and practice necromancy. This overt defiance against Ching Ming will generate great offense, but anything less than this would be compromise.

Just as you must not behave around a statue of Buddha in a way that implies belief in its reality or power, such as bowing to it or taking off your shoes, you must not attend to someone's grave in a way or in a context that implies belief in or compromise with unbiblical ideas. However, consistent with the biblical teachings that we have considered above, there is nothing wrong with attending to someone's grave in itself – such as pulling weeds around it and cleaning the tombstone.

But it is difficult to do all of this on Ching Ming without implying that you are performing more than a practical procedure and with a biblical mentality. Therefore, unless you can find some way to clearly establish your opposition to the idolatry and superstitions associated with Ching Ming, it is best to abstain from all participation.

In some cases, this stance might lead to intense conflicts with your family members. There are some things that you can do to reduce these conflicts. For example, you might suggest that you would visit the gravesite alone or with your family on another day, so that you do not appear to be scorning the very memory of your ancestors. Of course, even then, you must distance yourself from all unbiblical practices when you are at the gravesite.

Also, you must explain the biblical reasons for abstaining from these practices, and expound the gospel to your family. Sometimes, especially after your repeated pleas against idolatry and superstition have been ignored or even rebuked, it might be

appropriate to forcefully renounce the idolatrous traditions and harshly condemn your relatives for these abominable beliefs and practices.

You are in a position to do this especially if you have moved away from your parents and have become the head of your own household. In fact, as the head of your own household, you have tremendous authority, which you must exercise to enforce biblical precepts in the home and to protect it from spiritual invaders.

Many men cower before their own parents and their in-laws even over religious matters that affect their wives and children. Oh, what cowards! Once you become the head of your house, you have the full authority to establish a Christian home and to keep out every abomination. Your parents and your in-laws must now interact with your family on *your* terms – that is, on *biblical* terms – and if they refuse, you have the full authority to cut them off. So don't whine and grumble when your unbelieving relatives vex your soul, oppress your wife, and mislead your children. You can stop all of that – TODAY.<sup>26</sup>

Whatever you do, unless you compromise your faith or unless your family converts, there will always be conflict and persecution (Matthew 10:34–39; 2 Corinthians 6:14–18). We must not fear this, but boldly confront it with joy, zeal, and hope.

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<sup>26</sup> Am I the only one who knows this or dares to speak this way? This aspect of the husband's authority and *duty* is rarely taught. It needs to be taught because the husband needs to exercise it, the wife needs to submit to it, and the couple ought to know about it before they get married in the first place. In addition, this authority and responsibility must be specified and acknowledged by both parties in the marriage vow. Now, the husband has the authority whether or not it is taught or acknowledged beforehand, but learning and acknowledging it before marriage will help to avoid problems later.

### 13. Personality without Corporeality

In "The Ching Ming Festival," I referred to two biblical examples, citing that Samuel and Moses retained their personal identities even though they had died and were without their bodies. Here is the relevant portion of that article:

For example, Samuel appeared *as Samuel* to Saul after death, and Moses likewise appeared *as Moses* to Christ, implying that personal identity is associated with the incorporeal soul without a necessary connection to the body. Then, Jesus said that we should not be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul, as if the two are different and separate, and that the soul is more important. (See Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 5:3, 7:34; James 2:26.)

There was a question about whether these two examples are applicable.

That is, when King Saul went to the witch to conjure Samuel, it was said that she had a "familiar spirit." So it is assumed by some that she did not really have the ability to conjure up the dead, but that when she appeared to communicate with the dead, she was only communicating with this familiar spirit. Thus the question is whether it was really Samuel who appeared.

Then, some people think that the Bible never said that Moses really died, and so we do not know for sure whether his soul was ever separated from his body, or whether he was taken up like Enoch and Elijah.

In reply, according to the account in 1 Samuel 28, the Bible does say that it was Samuel who appeared, and we have no reason to believe otherwise.

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

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

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

"What does he look like?" he asked.

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

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

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

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

*Samuel said*, "Why do you consult me, now that the LORD has turned away from you and become your enemy? The LORD has done what *he predicted through me*. The LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbors – to David. Because you did not obey the LORD or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the LORD has done this to you today. The LORD will hand over both Israel and you to the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also hand over the army of Israel to the Philistines."

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

It would be a very forced exegesis to say that it was not Samuel.

As for Moses, the Bible itself says that he died (Joshua 1:2), and that Michael the archangel contended with Satan over the body (Jude 9).

Elijah did not die, or at least we have no evidence to believe that his soul was separated from his body, and that is why I did not cite him as an example, but it was appropriate to cite Samuel and Moses. They were living, thinking, and speaking – but disembodied.

## 14. Real Death, Real Resurrection

I have been reading through your *Systematic Theology* and came to the passage in the Gospel of John (19:32–33) about how the Roman soldier thrust a spear into the side of Jesus, now dead on the cross.

As you say, the passage shows that Jesus had in fact died, but it seems to me that the Spirit has something more to teach than the simple medical fact that Jesus was well and truly dead.

It is a fulfillment of the Word (John 19:37), of course, but the faithful would have understood Him to be dead even if verse 34 was not in the text. But it is there.

So, is there additional truth to be learned from the verse?

Thanks for writing.

In context, John is describing what actually happened, and what happened was that Jesus died, and that he *really* died. This sets up the narrative for the resurrection that is coming up in the Gospel.

It is true that "the faithful would have understood Him to be dead even if verse 34 was not in the text," but how did they learn about this in the first place, if not through apostolic teachings? And what is the explicit and stated purpose of John? He writes, "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). There is a heavy evangelistic thrust to what John is writing, and he wishes to make the point that Jesus *really* died, and that later he *really* resurrected.

There is probably more that you can get out of this passage; nevertheless, we must not neglect its context and main purpose. "The Spirit has something more to teach" must mean "the actual words of the biblical text has more to teach"; otherwise, if we think that the Spirit is teaching something "more" than the words, we would risk falling into some kind of illegitimate allegorical interpretation or other forms of eisegesis. Sometimes the "simple fact" already produces tremendous ramifications, as is the case here, and sometimes the "simple fact" expressed is *exactly* what the Spirit intends to teach.

## 15. A Great Cloud of Witnesses<sup>27</sup>

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

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

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

What are your thoughts on this?

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The biblical verse from which people derived this idea about "a cloud of witnesses" is Hebrews 12:1. It says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

To correctly understand this verse and how it applies to our question, we should consider the sense in which these past believers are "witnesses" to our race of faith.

It is true that a "witness" often refers to someone who has had direct contact with a given subject of inquiry, and thus it appears to many people that for these past believers to be witnesses must mean that they are currently aware of our activities. Some people even believe that these past believers are watching and hearing what we are doing, so that when we preach, they are actually listening to the sermon, and when we sin, they are actually watching.

However, this is not a necessary implication of the verse, and as we shall see, it is not even a probable interpretation.

Consider Matthew 12:41–42:

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

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<sup>27</sup> The following deals with a question that a reader sent me after reading "The Ching Ming Festival." I have numbered the paragraphs in the message from the reader so that you can more readily identify the corresponding sections in my response.

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

Jesus is addressing the Pharisees and the unbelieving people of "this generation," that is, the Jews. The men of Nineveh will condemn the unbelieving Jews, not because they were direct witnesses of their unbelief, but because *they* (the men of Nineveh) repented at the preaching of Jonah. And the Queen of the South (Sheba) will also rise to condemn the unbelieving Jews, not because she personally witnessed their unbelief, but because *she* came to hear Solomon's godly wisdom.

Each of the above is a double *a fortiori*, in that (1) the men of Nineveh and the Queen of the South were Gentiles, not Jews, so they lacked the spiritual privileges that the Jews had, and (2) Jesus was greater than both Jonah and Solomon. So, if an evil nation would repent at the preaching of Jonah, and if a foreign queen would come to hear the wisdom of Solomon, then how utterly strange and wicked it was for the Jews, those entrusted with the oracles of God, to oppose the very Son of God? Thus the Jews were worthy of double condemnation.

But our focus is now on the "witnesses." They will condemn the unbelieving Jews not because of their knowledge about the Jews, but because of what *they themselves* did *in contrast* with the unbelieving Jews.

With this in mind, turn your attention back to Hebrews 12:1. The previous chapters give us the context that helps us to grasp the sense in which these past believers are witnesses to our race of faith.

Hebrews 10:32–39 says:

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

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



The Jewish believers were experiencing pressure and persecution, and they were tempted to abandon their faith, and to return to their former profession. Weaving an intricate doctrinal treatise together with godly pleas and threats, the inspired writer of Hebrews admonishes them to maintain their faith.

Then, in Hebrews 11, the writer recounts numerous deeds performed by believers of previous generations, often against great danger and opposition. This is what it means to "live by faith" and not "shrink back."

It is clearly in this sense that these past believers are now "witnesses" to our own race of faith. They have already completed that which these Jewish believers were now tempted to give up, and now they serve as "witnesses" or testimonies to the promises of God and the power of faith. But "God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect" (Hebrews 11:40), then let us not allow their lives to condemn us but rather encourage us to complete the race, looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (12:2).

So, the point is not, "You better run well because they are watching you," but rather, "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart....Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees" (12:3, 12).

Applying this to our question, the verse (12:1) does not tell us whether or not these past believers know what is happening on the earth – whether or not they do, this verse does not tell us. It tells us only about what we should now do in the light of what they had done. Relative to our question, there is no way to validly infer anything more from the verse than this.

– 2 –

Yes, it is possible that your father and other deceased family members saw you preach one of your first sermons, if this is what God had chosen to show them in heaven. But the reasons that your teacher gave are poor: "He said it is possible because we are the body of Christ and they are not really dead. They are in heaven alive and can see activity here on earth."

I am also part of the body of Christ and I am not really dead, yet I have never seen you preach, so this alone can't be enough. Then, that they are "in heaven alive" does not imply that they "can see activity here on earth." If your teacher did not mean to connect the two, then he has given no reason at all as to why people "in heaven alive" "can see activity here on earth."

Now, there are passages like Luke 16:24–25 and Revelation 6:9–11.

Luke 16:24-25 says:

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

However, this passage does not tell us *how* and *when* Abraham knew about the rich man's life. It does not say that Abraham knew this by *watching* and *hearing* the rich man's life while the rich man was still alive. It is possible that the information was revealed to Abraham after the rich man's death. Either way, this passage does not tell us how he knew.

And Revelation 6:9–11 says:

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

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

– 3 –

He probably meant it to sound pious, but this is not impressive at all.

There is something wrong with a person who, if he is going to be nervous at all, is not already nervous enough because *God* is watching him, but because he thinks that dead people are watching him.

And is this not just another form of necromancy, a form of conscious and deliberate interaction with the dead, even if not as blatant and overt?

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

## 16. Human Cloning and the Soul<sup>28</sup>

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

For our purpose, there is no need to discuss which position we should prefer here. Either position would allow a successfully cloned human person to have a soul. If creationism is correct, then it just means that God creates a new soul each time a person is successfully cloned. If traducianism is correct, then there is little technical difference between what happens in cloning and what happens in natural conception, since the soul would be propagated from the original to the clone.

But that something "works" does not mean that it is moral. If we can establish that cloning is against the moral precepts of God, then it would be sinful to practice cloning. However, since each successfully cloned person would have a soul (again, assuming for now that human cloning can ever be successful), this means that the success of cloning and the clones have all along been decreed by God.

As with many things (murder, rape, the crucifixion of Christ, etc.), what God has decreed to happen is often different from what God has commanded for man to do. That is, what is made according to God's *decree* might at the same time be made against God's *precept*. For example, a child may be conceived because of rape. In this case, the rape is against God's precept – it is sin – but both the rape and the child have come about because of God's decree.

So, whether we are considering the problem of the soul relative to cloning, or whether we are considering the sovereignty of God relative to something that is against his moral precepts, there is no problem from the perspective of apologetics. Successful cloning, even if sinful, poses no rational objection against Christianity. In other words, if human cloning is successful, it would not violate anything that the Bible teaches about *reality*, even if it would violate what the Bible teaches about *morality*.

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<sup>28</sup> The following is an edited message answering the question of whether a successfully cloned human person would have a soul.

## 17. Christian vs. Non-Christian Meditation<sup>29</sup>

When non-Christians meditate, remember what they are trying to do – they are trying to blank themselves out, or erase their inner selves, or merge with the universe, or achieve an altered state of consciousness.

The Christian, on the other hand, "meditates" by actively engaging God's word and applying it to his own heart. This is not a mystical engagement or application, since we do not repeat God's word as some sort of mantra without thinking about its meaning.

Instead, we carefully think through the meanings and implications of the biblical passages, relating it to other passages, and then apply it to our thought and conduct. As all Christians should know, this involves serious intellectual effort, and it can often be painful to work through one's sinful and unrenewed thinking.

Christian meditation, therefore, is not a way to escape from the self or to lose the self, but to honestly confront it by the only power that can transform it.

So, do not be deceived – even the seemingly gentle Buddhist monks are corrupt to the core. Some of them make a superficial acknowledgement of this, and have written about it. However, none of their writings and exercises have the converting and transforming power that is only available from God through Christ, by means of Scripture, as applied and energized by the Spirit.

Eastern religions want you to *lose* yourself. Pop-psychology urges you to *accept* your filthy self as it is. But Christianity teaches that you must *confront and examine* yourself by the word of God, and then it is by means of this same revealed word from God that he will sanctify and transform you.

### **Joshua 1:8**

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

### **1 Corinthians 11:28**

A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.

### **2 Corinthians 13:5**

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<sup>29</sup> The following is an edited message written in response to a question on the topic.

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?

**Philippians 2:12-13**

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed– not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

**James 1:21-25**

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does.

## 18. Solitude and Contemplation

I am having problems focusing on God and doing my devotions. For example, when I am reading a book or listening to a sermon on tape, I would often think about doing other things. Sometimes I would stop so that I can catch a TV episode or do some other thing. You can say that I don't stay still often.

That said, there are times when I can lay aside distractions and become very focused. However, all too often there are distractions or periods of discouragement that often take my attention away from God.

What would you suggest? Is it a lack of devotion and love (or as you put it, an obsession) toward God? If I truly love God, then shouldn't I always prefer to study the Bible or listen to a sermon?

Love for God first comes with regeneration and conversion. If you are a Christian, then you do love God, but there are still sinful urges and external distractions that hinder you. So you are not the only one who feels that he is running upstream when it comes to spiritual exercises.

But God is inherently and irresistibly attractive, and the more you understand him, the more you will become obsessed with knowing him. So, do not become too discouraged by your present performance – not that it is unimportant – but make sure that you are growing in your understanding of God, and then follow through by obeying his commands in everyday life. Eventually, Christian study and contemplation should become both work and rest to you, so that you will not have to do so many other things for relaxation. That is, entertainment for you will not consist of only those things that distract your attention away from God.

The modern man is very busy, at least partly due to his own choice (as one can always become a hermit), so I have been urging [name of common friend] to take time off every weekend to go out by himself for solitude and biblical meditation. This is to be done *in addition* to the time that he spends in prayer and study each day. He can take a walk or sit at a coffee shop, or find any comfortable setting.

During this time of at least 45 to 60 minutes, he should reflect on his relationship with God and his understanding of God. He should reflect on his thought and conduct over the past several days and consider his spiritual progress, as well as how he may improve and become more devoted to God. He should think about life itself – that is, the purpose of his life relative to the general plan of God – instead of letting his focus drift back to work or other things, things that he thinks about for hours every day.

I started to regularly practice this exercise of spiritual meditation when I was first converted, and it did great things for my spiritual life. I would remind myself of God's grace, patience, and faithfulness, and gratitude and reverence would freshly well up from

my heart. I would also spend this time to resolve any fears, desires, and other internal struggles by carefully weaving the word of God into the fabric of my thinking, and casting down every thought that would rise against the knowledge of God. This has been my practice since my conversion. Since almost all my hours are dedicated to spiritual things, I can do this throughout the day, although I wish that I could do it even more consistently. You should start doing something like this also.

This is an enjoyable practical procedure that can yield tremendous spiritual benefits when regularly performed. I should emphasize that it is not enough to allocate only a short time for this each week, but for many people, it is already much more than what they are doing, and so it is a great start for them. It is not too difficult to begin and maintain – any person should certainly be able to cut away one hour from his weekend to spend in solitude and meditation.

Some ministers are very busy. From the time they wake up every day, they are instantly taken up with administration, travelling, counseling, teaching, and other things. They are constantly interacting with people, and seldom take time away to be alone, and be with God. Very soon, the quality of their ministry suffers; they become mechanical and superficial, and their teachings become narrow and repetitive. You have also heard of those ministers who preach more than 300 times a year. They are destroying themselves, and neglecting many important things along the way.

Now, I am also busy, but I am busy only relative to the time that I allot to ministry work each day. So it is a real "busy," but not a destructive or sinful "busy." Unlike many other busy people, I refuse to allot the whole day to things that take me away from study, solitude, and contemplation, and then only give what time I have left to these necessary spiritual disciplines. Rather, I make my schedule revolve around this spiritual foundation of my life, and allot only a limited amount of time each day to administration, ministry, teaching, interacting with people, and so forth.

Of course, I allot enough hours to these tasks to remain productive in ministry, but I am not going to let ministry take over my personal spiritual life. I would rather shut this whole thing down than to do that. If I fail to pray, read, meditate, and if I do not maintain right fellowship with God and continue to improve in all aspects of my spiritual life, then my usefulness to the kingdom of God will soon plateau, if not diminish.

This affects ministry policy. For example, even if I were to become so in demand one day, I would never allow myself to preach 300 times a year. I am going to take the long-term approach, and have time each day to be alone with God, with my thoughts and my books, and also to spend time loving my wife and raising my children. This in turn affects ministry policy in another way, namely, I would refuse to commit to so many costly ministry projects (TV, radio, etc.) that I will have to preach 300 times a year just to raise enough money to pay the bills.

I understand that things are different when you are working a regular job or running a business, but the same pattern of time management can be implemented. At least don't let

your job or business take over your entire life so that you have no time to be alone with God, your thoughts, and your books.

To start, I suggest assigning a significant block of time each week – and if possible, each day – to be alone in spiritual meditation. For example, spending 45 to 60 minutes on each Saturday or Sunday, and at least 10 to 30 minutes on each of the remaining six days, in solitude and contemplation, will add much depth to your spiritual life. And again, this is time spent in addition to the time that you usually spend in prayer and study.



## 19. Making, Keeping, and Breaking Promises

I have a question regarding what the Bible says about promises, such as what we should do with promises that we made before we became Christians, etc.

Here are several biblical principles:

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

The above are sufficient to cover many cases, if not most. But there are other biblical principles that cover additional situations and conditions:

4. There may be a person who is above you in authority that has the right to prevent you from making a promise, or to annul it even after it has been made.
5. If a promise violates the Word of God (so that you should not have made it in the first place), then, depending on the nature of the promise and other relevant factors, there are times when you still have to keep it, while at other times, you are strictly forbidden to keep it.

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

Some passages in the Bible are intended as "case laws," similar to the idea of "precedence" in our legal system, so that their applications are not limited to the immediate context; rather, they set forth the principles upon which similar cases should be judged.

For example, Paul uses the law, "Do not muzzle an ox," as something like a case law and teaches from it the right of a minister to receive money from those to whom he ministers:

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

written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? (1 Corinthians 9:7–11)

When it comes to principle 4, which is rarely taught, one of the relevant biblical passages is Numbers 30:1–16. It reads as follows:

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is directly applicable to Christians. And although the immediate context refers to "a vow to the LORD," the principles applies to all kinds of promises, since the entire passage is God's command "concerning relationships between a man and his wife, and between a father and his young daughter still living in his house." So not only is it applicable, but it is even more obviously applicable than some of the case laws.<sup>30</sup>

Let us apply the above to an example.

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

But whether or not the husband is present when the woman makes the promise, if he says nothing once he hears about it, then it is as if he has given his approval and confirmed the promise. Both the husband and the wife are then morally obligated to make good the promise and grant the loan. However, if the husband changes his mind and decides to withhold the loan once he has explicitly or implicitly confirmed the promise, then he commits sin, and it is as if he has personally made and then broken the promise. In this case (that is, when the husband changes his mind after confirming the promise), the wife should obey the husband and withhold the loan – she does not sin by doing this, but the blame falls upon her husband. On the other hand, if the wife decides to make good the promise even after the husband has changed his mind, then both the husband and the wife commit sin – he sins by breaking the promise, and she sins by disobeying her husband.

As for the husband, he has the right to promise the loan without first discussing it with his wife; however, out of love and respect for his wife, to protect the trust and intimacy of the marriage relationship, and to maintain order in the home, it would be wise for him to discuss it with his wife anyway, and he should usually (practically always) make the promise only if they both agree to it. Yet, the final decision always rests with the husband.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Concerning the applicability of the Old Testament law, please see my *Commentary on Ephesians and The Sermon on the Mount*. And for more on the authority structure in the home, please see my *Commentary on Ephesians and Renewing the Mind*.

<sup>31</sup> Of course, feminists don't like this, but I don't like feminists, so we are even. But I am still right.

Note not only the tremendous authority of the husband, but also the tremendous responsibility that is placed upon him. It is up to him to assess whether or not the family can afford to offer the loan, as well as to determine all the likely spiritual, social, and financial consequences of making the promise. Whether or not he thinks that it is a good idea (and especially if he thinks that it is not a good idea), if he approves and confirms the promise made by the wife (or if he is the one who makes the promise), and then if severe hardship strikes the family because of the loan – since the needed money is not there – then, assuming that there is no moral justification for making the family undergo such hardship, the blame again falls upon the husband, not the wife.

It is true that some wives are better than their husbands at analyzing the family's financial situation. In such cases, the husbands should acknowledge this, and discuss the matter with their wives, and then make their decision. But whether or not they do this, they must make the final decision and assume the moral responsibility for it. They are the ones with the greatest authority in the home, but they are also the ones who are most accountable for what happens in and to their families.

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

Also, notice that although we have used it to illustrate principle 4, this passage also addresses other individuals and relationships, such as a man, a widow, and a divorced woman. A full exposition of the passage should not neglect these.

Then, principle 5 is easy to explain and illustrate.

When it comes to what Scripture teaches about promises, one of the main questions people wish to settle is this: Is it true, as one would initially tend to assume, that you should always keep every promise that you have made, no matter what it is? The answer is *no*, because some promises are nullified by a higher authority, and some are morally wrong to keep.

However, this does not automatically mean that you have not sinned in a situation where you must break a promise. In many cases, you have already sinned in making the promise in the first place, only that to keep the promise would be to commit another sin, and you cannot undo one sin by committing another one.

For example, if for some reason I promised to rob a bank for you or to murder someone for you, then of course I must not keep that promise. I have already sinned in making such a promise in the first place, and it would be an even greater sin to keep it.

Or, if you make a promise to someone in the name of your company when you have no authority to make such a promise, then you have already done wrong by making the promise, but it would also be wrong to keep a promise that you had no right to make. In this case, the company has prior claims over whether you could carry out the promise. In

fact, to protect its reputation, which you have now jeopardized, it might honor your illegitimate promise anyway, but it is certainly not obligated to do so. In some cases, and when possible, the right thing to do might be to honor the promise with your personal resources.

God always has prior claims over every promise. Secondly, some human authority figures may have prior claims over your promises, such as parents, husbands, fathers, pastors, and employers.

Nevertheless, it does not follow that you should always break every promise that you have no right to make. For example, for you as a Christian to marry an unbeliever would be a great sin, but it would be another great sin for you to divorce the unbeliever once you have married him. This is because although God preceptively opposes this sinful marriage, it is still God himself who oversees it, and what he has joined together, let no man put asunder (1 Corinthians 7:12–13).<sup>32</sup>

There are applicable principles in Scripture to every situation that you will face, and to every promise that you make. It will tell you what is right and what is wrong in each case, and even once you have done wrong, it will tell you the next step to follow.

Our discussion on principles 4 and 5 should not complicate things so much that principles 1–3 become obscured. In fact, principles 1 and 2 should be enough to guide most of your decisions about making and keeping promises – that is, don't make rash or unnecessary promises,<sup>33</sup> but once you've made a promise, keep it. There are exceptions, but exceptions are rare, although they can happen. Of course, then, the best thing to do is to avoid making promises that you have no right to make, or that you cannot or should not keep.

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

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

Before he retired, my father's profession had a lot to do with contracts, documents, and their ramifications. And ever since I was only several years old, he has repeatedly told me that I should never guarantee someone's loan.

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<sup>32</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *The Sermon on the Mount*.

<sup>33</sup> Many promises are unnecessary. If you intend to do something, then just do it.

He was speaking from experience, but Scripture is the only true and reliable guide. Yet in this instance, my father did something that was scriptural, namely, he taught me this correct (and what seems to many an "adult") principle at a very early age. In Proverbs, the writer is teaching his child some of the basic lessons of living, and this is one of them – never guarantee someone's loan, and if you have already done it, beg to get out of it.

It is never too early to warn your child against drunkenness, adultery, co-signing, and other things that unbelievers and irresponsible believers consider "adult" lessons. Start teaching your child these things when he is three or four, and repeat it a couple of times each month until he leaves home as a adult, and it just might stick.

In any case, from now on you should never be in a situation where you would need to be released from a guarantee, for why would you even consider co-signing someone's loan after reading this passage? Just don't do it. And if you insist on doing it, then be prepared to pay for the whole thing, for you have trapped yourself, and your family with you.

## 20. Sin and Foolishness

I recently found your writings and started reading some of your commentary on Ephesians, and I have been edified and enlightened by your godly counsel. I pray that God continues to use your diligent work so powerfully in the lives of other believers.

I have a question I've been considering for a while, and since you made a certain comment in "Making, Keeping, and Breaking Promises," I wondered if you might briefly inform me. You say, "Then, some promises might not be outright sinful, but they are unwise."

Does this mean that someone can really make a foolish decision or action and not be in sin? Shouldn't foolishness qualify as a failure to conform to God's commandment to love him with all of our minds? I've often thought that after I make a foolish (but not outright sinful) decision I should repent for it.

Thanks for your message.

I agree that *many* unwise decisions are also sinful, and *all* sinful decisions are necessarily unwise (e.g. Proverbs 6:32, 7:7; Ecclesiastes 7:25); however, I am uncertain that *all* unwise decisions are also necessarily sinful.

A sinful decision entails breaking an actual commandment. Now, the commandment to love God with all our minds is certainly a commandment, but what this commandment implies must be defined by the other parts of Scripture. Also, to love God with all our minds might not necessarily imply that we will never make *any* foolish decisions, just as to love God with all our body might not mean that we will never physically fail, or that we must have unlimited physical strength. Moreover, some individuals are naturally sharper than others about some of these things that we are talking about, but this does not automatically make them morally superior.

Thus to love God with all our minds does not imply that you must get a perfect score on every math test in your life (even as you seek to glory God in your school work), or that you are morally forbidden to make even foolish mistakes on those tests. Failing to get a perfect score each time might be due to the noetic effects of sin, but might not be sinful in itself. On the other hand, it would be sinful for you to neglect your studies and thus do poorly on the tests.

Similarly, to love God with all our minds might not mean that we must be all-wise, but that we must use everything and every part in us to obey God's commandments. But this means we need an actual commandment against something like co-signing.

In this case, I am uncertain that it is justifiable (from how the Scripture describes it) to call co-signing a loan an outright sin. I think one's motive and knowledge must be taken into account here. If it is done out of plain defiance to Scripture, or out of a mindset that

thinks it is wise when the Scripture says that it is not, then it is clearly sinful. But short of this, I am not sure, since the Bible does not clearly describe it as sin. At least on the superficial level, it is more of a practical issue than a moral one; however, many practical decisions involve moral motives, whether good or evil, and that's why I say that this is true "on the superficial level."

Or, there might be a scenario where it is neither sinful nor unwise to co-sign – that is, if the person thinks of it as if he is taking on the whole loan, or as if he is taking out the loan himself, and in effect, as if he is directly lending the money to the person he is co-signing with. And since the person might be unable to pay (that's why he needs a co-signer in the first place), the co-signer should consider himself as practically *giving* the other person the money, never to be repaid again.

Now, if the co-signer is prepared to think of the transaction this way from the very beginning (but this is almost never what people have in mind when they co-sign), then for him there is little difference between co-signing and giving the money away. And if he can afford it, then it is his money to lose. There is no sin here, except if the situation is such that, it would be sinful for him to give that money away, or to give it to this particular person. Assuming that this is not the case, the passage from Proverbs does not exactly apply, since there Scripture is describing the unexpected effects of co-signing – the co-signer is foolish because he *ought to* expect those effects, namely, to be left with the whole responsibility to repay the loan.

So, I think you are right in principle, that many foolish actions are also sinful actions, but not always. Sometimes people commit foolish actions just because of their own limitations – that would be the noetic effects of sin, but not necessarily sinful in themselves. This distinction is important.

We must take the Scripture seriously, and thus we must take sin seriously. But taking sin seriously means that we must define sin very precisely and with good warrant, so that when we call something sin, we should have ample biblical justification to do so; otherwise, we risk becoming legalistic.

In this case, I am sure that some or even *many* instances of co-signing are sinful, and I would wonder why someone would still do it after reading that passage. However, I don't think there is enough scriptural warrant to say that it is *always* sinful, as if it is like murder, adultery, or blasphemy.



## 21. Slave to the Lender

This is a question about buying a house with a large mortgage. Do you think that it is generally unbiblical to buy a house with any mortgage at all?

The Charismatics teach that when you borrow, you are essentially bowing down to the banks or the lenders.

Let me offer an explanation for the benefit of those readers who are not familiar with this aspect of Charismatic teachings.

What we are talking about here refers to the teachings of *some* Charismatics, and not all of them. These Charismatics usually belong to the "Word of Faith" or the "health and wealth gospel" crowd, but not everyone within this group completely agrees on the subject. The teaching on borrowing considered here is taught by Kenneth Copeland, Jerry Savelle, and many others. However, even within the "health and wealth" crowd, there are those who do not interpret lending and borrowing the same way – for example, the late Kenneth Hagin considered borrowing an acceptable option for Christians.

Nevertheless, since the teaching is usually found among these Charismatics and not the non-Charismatics, in this sense it is fair to say that "the Charismatics teach this."

These Charismatics that we are referring to teach that the atonement of Christ has redeemed believers from "the curse of the law" (Galatians 3:13); therefore, when truly appropriated by faith, the atonement guarantees in this life the complete deliverance from all the effects of the curse of the law described in passages such as Deuteronomy 28. It follows that a person who walks in faith should not experience (or should always overcome) the problems and calamities described in this and other passages.

I have addressed the "triumphalism" of some Charismatics in my book, *Biblical Healing*. Although the context there is healing, the same problems and principles apply to the Charismatic teachings on financial prosperity.

Now we will proceed to consider the question on borrowing.

The verse from which they have taken the expression is Proverbs 22:7, which says, "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender." So the Charismatics did not invent the phrase, but they have distorted it. The verse is making a *factual* statement, but in itself it does not tell us whether it is *morally* wrong to borrow. It does not tell you not to borrow, and it does not say that it is a sin to borrow; instead, it tells you what happens when you borrow by describing the relationship between the borrower and the lender.

The verse is literally true. If you take out a big loan to buy a place, then in a real sense, you will be working for the bank from that time forward until you pay off the whole thing. And if the price of the place falls below the amount you borrowed, then you *really* will be working for the bank!

In other settings where one borrows from another, a similar relationship is also established. Consider the many college students who go credit card crazy, and also consider their college student loans. Some of them have to keep paying their debts for years after graduation. They have become slaves to the lenders. This might make you think twice about borrowing, but the verse in itself does not tell you not to do it. It just tells you what will happen.

Then, the Charismatics also use the following verse when teaching against borrowing: "He will lend to you, but you will not lend to him. He will be the head, but you will be the tail" (Deuteronomy 28:44).

The verse is spoken in the context of God's covenant curse against those who would break his law. The Charismatics have again distorted it, interpreting it as if it says, "If you borrow, then you will *become* cursed. If you borrow, then you will *become* the tail and not the head." But instead, this verse is saying, "If you disobey me, then I will put you under a curse, *and then* you will have to borrow." Borrowing (or the need to borrow) is one *manifestation* of the covenant curse, and not the *cause* of the curse.

Analogous to this is the relationship between the curse and banishment from the land. If we were to use the same reasoning here that the Charismatics use, we would teach, "God's Word says that if you are banished from the land, then you will come under a curse, so just *don't leave*. If you leave, it means that you don't have faith, and you will suffer for it." The cause and effect are reversed. Rather, the proper teaching is, "Do not disobey God and break his commandments; otherwise, he will put you under a curse, *and then* (or as a result) you will be banished from the land."

Nevertheless, even if you have the need to borrow, that *in itself* does not indicate that you are under God's curse, since some people are just poor, even if they are right before God (James 2:5).

Of course, then there are those who are not poverty-stricken, but they just want to live beyond their means. But this is a problem that we will have to address elsewhere.

## 22. "Money is the Answer"

Ecclesiastes 10:19 is one of the relatively obscure verses distorted by some Charismatics, particularly some of the advocates of the "prosperity gospel." It says, "A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything."

Some of the prosperity teachers, John Avanzini being one example, have inferred from this that God himself is recommending money as the solution to every problem and the way to achieve any goal. If this is true, then it seems to them that to devote an extraordinary amount of attention and effort to attaining wealth is nothing other than to follow a biblical teaching on how we ought to live. After that, it is only a small step to the mindset that to "seek first the kingdom of God" is to seek first to attain wealth, to seek money before anything else.

This is not just a hypothetical distortion of Scripture or an imaginary slippery slope – there are in fact "Christians" who teach and practice this, and they assure themselves that they are in full agreement with Scripture. In fact, from their perspective, they are the only responsible and obedient ones – while all the other Christians are working hard to spread the gospel through preaching, they have a larger vision and a smarter approach.

Their thinking is that, if they become rich, then they won't have to preach to or reason with the unbelievers – they can just *buy* them. The unbelievers don't respect the gospel, but they respect money, so if we have more of it than they do, then they will listen to us. Money is the key to getting people's attention and making an impact in the world. After all, the Bible itself teaches, "...money is the answer for everything."

Again, I am not being sarcastic, but this is a close paraphrase to the actual statements that some of these people have made. One of them told me that the apostle Paul failed in his ministry because he was never as rich as Solomon, and thus he never wielded the full resources and blessings that God has given to every believer in Christ. On the other hand, once we have attained the extreme prosperity that Solomon enjoyed, then all the unbelievers will come and kowtow to us. This, according to this person, is the true biblical gospel ministry.

I have discussed this type of thinking in my article, "Kingdom First." But let's also take a look at this verse in Ecclesiastes.

To correctly understand this verse or almost any verse in the Bible, you must take into account the immediate context provided by the surrounding verses, and then also the general context of the entire book. The verse itself provides a contrast between "money" and "a feast...and wine." A feast and wine have particular uses and effects, but in contrast, money has many uses and effects. This is a statement about the true state of things, but in itself, the verse does not tell you what to do with this information. It would

be wrong to immediately infer, "Therefore, you should regard money as the most important thing in your life, and you must seek it with all your might."

In any case, right now I do not want to spend time gradually broadening our scope and to discuss everything that we encounter as we do so.<sup>34</sup> For our purpose, it is enough to go straight to the conclusion of the book and read what the author intends for us to get out of Ecclesiastes: "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (12:13–14).

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

So, the author is not persuading his readers to pursue the things and follow the ways of this world, or to be enamored with all that he has described between the beginning and the ending of Ecclesiastes. But his point is precisely the opposite, that these things are vain, futile, and meaningless. The meaning of life is stated in the conclusion, that is, we are to fear God and keep his commandments, knowing that he will judge all men. Since *this* is the point he is making, any inference from any verse in Ecclesiastes that is inconsistent with this is a false inference.

Thus we are to seek and obey God, not Mammon (Matthew 6:33). According to the teachers of the prosperity gospel, it is as if God himself has commanded us to seek Mammon, so that we are to seek God by seeking Mammon. But this perversion is condemned by verse 24, where the very point Jesus makes is that the two are mutually exclusive, not mutually supportive.

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<sup>34</sup> If you wish to study the passage in greater detail, you should consult a reliable commentary on Ecclesiastes.

## 23. Ministry Spending and Favoritism

What is your attitude toward the financial dealings of those famous healing evangelists, such as Benny Hinn and Kenneth Copeland?

They are often portrayed as crooks, as deliberately deceiving people, and that their ministries are just big moneymaking machines. This might be true regarding some ministries, but I cannot be sure if it is true regarding any given ministry. So if we are discussing these ministries from this angle, then I can neither agree with the accusations nor defend the ministries against them. I do not have the relevant information.

I was present when a big scandal broke out in a church in Hong Kong. I had some access to the leaders in that church, and had been vehemently challenging them behind the scenes (except for the time when I finally walked out under the gaze of 1200 people as a sign of protest) regarding their false doctrines for a long time before the television and newspapers started to run reports about the church.

However, the things reported in the news were not the real problems, and some of them were outright fabrications. Most of the criticisms were inaccurate and unfair. So do not trust the news when they report on church scandals, even if you disapprove of the church or ministry in question for legitimate reasons.

We can also talk about the way these ministries use money. When it comes to this, I strongly disapprove of many big ministries like Benny Hinn and Kenneth Copeland. Even if we disregard their greatest problems for the moment, which concern false doctrines, they are too extravagant and wasteful, and their ministries are not cost-effective. The personal spending of the ministers are also out of control.<sup>35</sup>

Also, many of them publicly, intentionally, and officially show favoritism to their ministry "partners" according to the amount of money that they give to these ministries. For example, ministry "partners" (especially those who give more) are given preferred seats in their gatherings. Those who give the most are permitted to sit with the ministers at partner dinners. This is exactly the kind of favoritism that James condemns in his letter (James 2:1–9; see also Luke 14:12–14), and it is precisely the kind of "honor" and preferential treatment that Jesus says we must not seek (Matthew 23:5–6; Luke 14:7–11).

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<sup>35</sup> Again, we must not form our opinion about their personal spending based on what is reported on the news. Here I am referring to *their own descriptions* of how they spend their money, since they would often boast about it.

## 24. Freely You have Received, Freely Give<sup>36</sup>

– 1 –

Why do you think that it is more "Christian" (if this is not how you would put it, please say so) to make your works available to the public free of charge?

Let me explain why I consider it a Christianity duty to offer my teaching materials free of charge.

One reason that I have been successful at my studies is because God has granted me intellectual capabilities that can handle the subjects that I must deal with. I do not claim to be a genius, but my mind "delivers" – it performs well, at least well enough to competently learn, process, and teach the relevant materials.<sup>37</sup>

But another reason that I have been successful at my studies is because, in his providence, God has provided me with the means and the opportunities to acquire an abundance of intellectual resources. This is more relevant to our present discussion.

My home library includes several hundred systematic theologies,<sup>38</sup> the complete or almost complete works of Calvin, Owen, Edwards, Clark, Schaeffer, Warfield, Spurgeon, and many other theologians and preachers. It has almost all the prominent classic and contemporary biblical commentaries, the complete works of Plato, Aristotle, and other major philosophical works, the works of the early church fathers, several sets of encyclopedias, many obscure books, and many other writings.

All of this adds up to about 15,000 volumes. This does not include all the materials that I have in electronic format, theological journals, and audio lectures and sermons. Some people probably have even more than I do, but I doubt that most people's private libraries even approach one tenth of the above.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The following includes *two* messages from two different readers, and my replies.

<sup>37</sup> What do we have that we have not received? A sound mind can be one of the gifts that God endows upon his ministers, given for the purpose of serving him and his people. It is sustained and developed through the means of grace, such as prayer, reading, and biblical meditation, by which the Spirit of God enhances a person's mental capabilities. See Daniel 1:17–20, Psalm 119:97–100, Ephesians 1:17–18, and James 1:5.

<sup>38</sup> By "systematic theologies," I am here referring to only complete theological systems, and *not* works that treat specific theological topics. For example, this includes Barth's massive *Church Dogmatics* and Berkouwer's *Studies in Dogmatics*, but excludes Laidlaw's *The Bible Doctrine of Man* or Hodge's *The Atonement*. I have more than 300 systematic theologies as complete systems, but the latter kind (works that treat individual topics) are far too many to count.

<sup>39</sup> Of course, one still has to read the books and use them well, and most people's reading comprehension is dismal, so giving them more books will not proportionately increase their theological aptitude. Possessing a mind that can perform means that I am able to get more out of the same books than many other people, and at times to go beyond the works of other scholars to form my own improved conclusions. In other words, it is not enough to have access to information, but you must also have a capable mind to work with the information.

What I wish to emphasize is that it does make a difference to have more books, or to have greater access to scholarly writings. But this also means that the poor person is limited in his theological growth, since he is less likely to have ready access to these scholarly writings. To the extent that this is due to the failure of Christian ministers and scholars to freely distribute their teaching materials, I find this extremely disturbing.

Moreover, pastors who have been to seminaries are taught to hide academic and technical information from their congregations in their sermons. The church members are almost never exposed to all that the pastor received in seminary. As I have stated in *Preach the Word*, this is the wrong approach. Even if they do not make their sermons as rich in content as seminary lectures, pastors should hold classes in their churches that offer at least the essential materials taught in seminaries.<sup>40</sup> In fact, I believe that churches should provide adequate instructions to their own members so that they don't even need to attend seminaries before taking on an office in the church. In a sense, seminaries are needed only because churches have failed in their teaching ministries.

With the above in mind, I have determined long ago that I will do my part to help by always making all of my works available for free in at least one readily accessible format. God willing, as the resources of this ministry increase, I will be publishing materials produced by other people also, so that together we can cover more topics, including those that I lack the interest or ability to write about. Most of these people will probably be trained by myself, or at least heavily influenced by this ministry's materials, so that all the materials published by this ministry will be consistent in content. In any case, no matter how gifted a person may be, if he refuses to let me distribute his materials for free, then I have no use for him. He is a disgrace to the kingdom of God, and I will tell him to GET OUT!

Jesus says, "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). Now, I do not believe that a minister should never ask for money, since Paul says, "If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?" (1 Corinthians 9:11; see also 1 Corinthians 9:13–14 and 1 Timothy 5:17–18). In fact, I believe that all faithful Christian ministers should be paid well, and that most Christians are free loaders who are practically robbing their ministers. They should be harshly rebuked. But this is different from saying that we should always charge money for our books and sermons without providing a free option; rather, we must arrange it so that those who are poor but are eager to learn may still advance in knowledge.

I would not consider it necessarily wrong to charge something for a sermon tape to defray the cost (although my policy has always been to give them out without charge), or even to make a profit for the ministry, so that the ministry can grow. However, I would always make a way for people to get it for free, so that the relatively poor will still have some

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<sup>40</sup> These classes should be opened to every church member – men, women, and even children – and they should be given free of charge.

way to access it. And if there must be a charge for the product, I would forgo all royalties, or find some way to minimize the cost.<sup>41</sup>

In other words, I understand that Christian publishing is a business, and to survive and grow, the company must make a profit. However, if it is really *Christian* publishing that they are doing, then they should make some way for the poor to obtain the same materials for free, even if it has to be in a less convenient format. This is very easy to do in today's world. For example, they could charge money for their paperback books, but offer the same materials in electronic format.

On a related note, ministers should never enforce their copyrights on their books and sermons (Philippians 1:18), unless these materials are somehow being abused by unbelievers to oppose the Christian cause. From a biblical perspective, a minister must allow people to make unlimited copies of their materials and distribute them. This is why I will never consider signing an *exclusive* agreement with a publisher for my materials, one in which I give up control over my own writings, that prevents me from freely offering them to people in the formats that I choose, and that prevents people from freely making unlimited copies.

By the way, I am aware of several instances in which my orthodoxy has been questioned precisely because I offer my materials for free. In both instances, the reasoning was that since heretics and cults would do anything to spread their teachings, the fact that I offer my books and recordings for free should immediately cause suspicion.

What does this say about the usual practice of Christian ministries?<sup>42</sup> According to these people, *real* Christians would not so eagerly spread their teachings, and *real* Christians – if they are really orthodox in their theology – would charge money for their books. If you are a real Christian, or if your teachings are sound and biblical, then you would certainly try to make a profit instead of trying to maximize distribution and to help the poor. If you don't charge anything, then you are probably a heretic. Charging money makes your work legitimate! This is how twisted things have become.

– 2 –

...This is a very strange situation. I have never even heard of such coveting.  
Am I stepping out of line by asking for a reason why he will not allow this?  
How should I approach this man? He is a very gifted teacher...<sup>43</sup>

As you know, I insist that sermons should be available for free. We should emphasize distribution, not profit.

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<sup>41</sup> For example, it costs money to purchase my paperback books, but I forgo all royalties, and all the money of the sale goes to the printing company. Of course, the printing company is a business, and has a right to charge money, but by forgoing all royalties, I have lowered the cost for those who wish to purchase my books in paperback form.

<sup>42</sup> Another problem is that these Christians who make this accusation are simply stupid. Their reasoning that legitimate ministries *must* charge money for their materials is fallacious, and there are some well-known ministries that even they would acknowledge as legitimate that also offer their materials for free.

<sup>43</sup> This reader refers to a pastor who stubbornly refuses to freely distribute his sermons.



Keeping in mind that I still have very little information about this man and your relationship with him, I will give the following broad advice.

If you are in a position to pursue the Matthew 18 church discipline procedure with him, then you may choose to do so.

If I were the head of his ministry, and he is under my authority, or if I were one of the elders, I would certainly side against him, and if he does not repent, vote to remove him, and treat him as one would regard Balaam. The situation is this severe. If upon examination, I discover that he is really doing this because of covetousness, and not because of some misguided but comparatively innocent motive (he cannot be *completely* innocent here), then I would deal very harshly with him.

Nevertheless, legally speaking, he has a right to restrict the distribution of his materials, so that unless you can pursue church discipline with him, there is not much else you can do, especially since it seems that you have already registered your disagreement with his policy by writing him a letter.

A minister must be sound in both doctrine and character, and if he is as you say he is, then it is no great loss to the church that he limits the distribution of his materials. We don't need him. Even if he is as gifted as you say, just as God could raise up children to Abraham from stones, he can raise up another like him or better. In this sense, any one of us is easily replaceable, no matter how gifted we are; therefore, let us flee from pride and covetousness, but serve with gratitude and generosity, with fear and trembling.

## 25. Doctrine and Obedience

Is the frequently asserted relationship between right doctrine and right practice biblical? Does correct doctrine really lead to greater obedience? Why is it that many people who do not know or who are not interested in solid Bible doctrines are nevertheless godly, despite their lack of knowledge? How can we explain this inconsistency?

This question receives deeper treatment in some of the great theological works on sanctification than what I can provide here. I encourage you to look into some of them, but I will try to give you a preliminary answer.

There is a positive relationship between doctrine and obedience, but when it comes to doctrine, we must make a distinction between mere profession and true faith or belief.

True faith results only from a work of the Spirit in the heart by means of the Word of God. According to James, this faith will always produce good works; in contrast, mere profession has no necessary relationship to holiness. You can always *say* that you believe something, but whether you really do is another question. You can always *say* that you affirm a doctrine, but whether this affirmation is a product of the Spirit's grace and power is a different matter. If it is the latter, then you profess the doctrine because the Spirit has changed your heart through the doctrine, and good works will necessarily result.

So, when answering your question, we should rephrase "right doctrine leads to obedience" into "true faith in right doctrine leads to obedience." Seen this way, many who *profess* right doctrine do not necessarily *believe* what they profess – they might just be parroting it. An atheist can recite the Bible or the Westminster Confession, so that he is *physically* saying the right things, but not out of sincere belief or a changed heart. This explains the instances in which professing Christians do not act like Christians at all (they are not really Christians), and the instances in which true Christians profess a doctrine that they do not obey (they do not yet really believe it). In the first case, conversion is needed; in the second case, further sanctification by the renewing of the mind is needed.

But perhaps this does not yet explain everything, since there are instances in which one acts against the doctrine that he genuinely believes. Thus we introduce sin into the situation. It leads a person to rebel against the knowledge of God that he sincerely affirms, and thus sin is not only rebellious, but irrational. Therefore, we must use the means of grace that God has given us, such as the Word and prayer, to train ourselves in holiness and to petition him for preserving grace.

As for those who seem to have little doctrinal knowledge but demonstrate great obedience, it might just be that they truly believe what little they do know, and that the Spirit of God has truly worked in their hearts through what little of the Word of God that they have learned. This is often enough to produce a generally godly lifestyle, at least

when compared to those who almost never obey what they have learned from God's Word. Then, there are those who lack biblical knowledge and still do certain things right, as if by "accident" and not according to knowledge. In these cases, we shouldn't think that they are holy at all.

Also, never forget that to affirm right doctrine is *in itself* part of a holy lifestyle. It is godly and righteous to affirm the truth of divine revelation, and it is sinful to neglect, reject, or distort it. So those whom you consider holy but are very theologically flawed, are not nearly as holy as you think, since they have already sinned in their false beliefs. God judges our thoughts as well as our actions.

Some people would teach that it is useless to learn the Bible unless you are going to do it, and that to learn the Bible is only for the purpose of doing it. They are close to making a biblical point, but this is not exactly right. James says not to be a hearer only, but also a doer; however, he never says that it would be fine if you could be a doer without first being a hearer. The hearing part is required and assumed in the context of James, but he is trying to emphasize the point that you cannot only hear and then not do.

In fact, he uses the illustration of someone looking at the mirror, but who forgets what he has seen after turning away from it. Thus if you don't do what you have heard, it is also as if you have ignored or forgotten what you have heard. So, the question is, if you hear and not do, have you really heard? Or, have you lost what you have heard even if you did hear it?

In any case, the point is that the Bible never denies that learning the Word of God is inherently valuable and godly. It only says that if you do not follow it through with obedience, then you have not really learned it, or at least it didn't stick – just like someone who forgets what he looks like after turning away from the mirror. Thus, the purpose of theology is not solely practical or ethical, contrary to what some have asserted.

## 26. Some Sins Greater Than Others

When considering whether some sins are greater than others, we must make a distinction. In absolute terms, every sin generates infinite guilt deserving of everlasting punishment, because every sin is a transgression against the infinite God. However, within the revealed system of moral laws, some sins are indeed more severe than others.

But first, James says:

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

If you break even one law, then you are a sinner. Some people have denied to me that they were sinners, but when they were pressed about it, what they meant was that they had never committed what they considered as gross transgressions such as rape and murder. So telling "white" lies, harboring ill will toward other people, practicing divination and other things did not count as sins to them. Rather, for them "sin" designates a special category of actions that they assume they would never commit. If they have done it, then it must not be sin; and thus they were sinless by definition.

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

With that in mind, Matthew 23:23 says, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former." Although transgressing any divine law would be sin, some of God's laws are "more important" than others, so that in the law of Moses, some sins are punished more severely than others.

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

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

So the amount of our knowledge of God's law makes a difference in the level of our moral responsibility. Nevertheless, even the one who "does not know" will be judged by the same law and punished, only that the punishment will be less severe.<sup>44</sup> Thus, there is never any excuse for disobedience against God's commands.

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<sup>44</sup> To learn more about the relationship between God's law and our sin, please see Vincent Cheung *The Sermon on the Mount* and *Systematic Theology*.

## 27. The "Good" Works of the Wicked

I just finished reading your "Chosen in Christ."<sup>45</sup>

For many years, I have been feeding on charismatic literature, and I have never learned about these things that you write about and that are so obvious in the Bible. I am now 50 years old and I regret how stupid I have been for so long.

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

Thank you your books. It would be a good to make your literature available to the Hungarian Reformed Church.

Thanks for writing.

Although your context is predestination, we should first note that the question regarding the "good" works of the non-Christians – the wicked, the heretics, and the teachers and believers of false gospels – applies not only to the biblical doctrine of predestination, but also to the whole biblical faith in general, or justification by faith in particular. All Christians who are really Christians believe that man cannot be saved by works.

Indeed, it can be shown that justification by faith is inconsistent with any view other than Calvinism, or biblical predestination, so that the two cannot be properly considered independently from each other. However, even if we ignore this necessary connection for now (although we can do it only by force), your question implies a hesitation not only concerning Calvinism, as if it is a doctrine of man, but also against the acknowledged common foundation of all who affirm the gospel – justification by faith apart from works.

Just because Teresa appears to have done an abundance of good works does not make one bit of difference, that is, unless she indeed trusted Christ for salvation. Trying to assist, heal, unite, or even save humanity without God, and without the true and only gospel, is nothing other than another attempt at building Babel. It is a man-centered attempt at building up humanity. It is sin and rebellion disguised as righteousness and compassion. The good works of the wicked are done not out of a motive to help humanity in obedience to God and to glorify God, but to help humanity in defiance of God so that they will not need or worship God.

Thus if we set up ourselves and our works as the point of reference for good and evil, then we have already succumbed to the first temptation of Satan. A "good" work is truly a good work only because it is so in reference to God (only because it glorifies God,

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<sup>45</sup> This is an excerpt from my *Commentary on Ephesians*, and mainly deals with the biblical doctrine of predestination.

because we do it on his say so, and because he approves), and not because it is helpful to man and judged as good by man apart from God.

On this topic, the Westminster Confession declares:

Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands; and of good use both to themselves and others: yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God: and yet, their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God.

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

So if a non-Christian performs an apparent "good" work, such as helping a beggar or feeding a child, but from an intensely wicked motive (great pride, great admiration for his own "compassion," etc.), it might just be counted as even more wicked (and certainly more hypocritical) than if he had, without hiding his true nature as a non-Christian, kicked the beggar in the face or deliberately starved the child.

Concerning the gospel, Paul writes: "As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!" (Galatians 1:9). Once a false gospel is taught and affirmed, then it is ultimately irrelevant whether one still appears to do good works, because "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). People think they are good works only because *they* think so, and not because God says so.

Of course, what I have been saying here is just basic Christianity, and to deny it is to reject the gospel and forfeit salvation. Thus I suppose that you already believe all of this, only that you need to apply it consistently.

## 28. When Other People Fall Away

...I am somewhat affected by former pastors who became atheists, Catholics, etc.

We know that faith is a grace-gift of God, but it helps to work out the intellectual issues in your mind.

The Bible teaches us about sin; it gives us examples of the apostasies of long-time professing believers and ministers. And the parable of the sower tells us that some "believe" (false faith) for a while, and then fall away. So, the fact that some professing believers and even ministers fall away from the Christian faith is exactly what we should expect, since it is thoroughly consistent with what Scripture teaches. The falling away of some believers and ministers illustrates the truth of Scripture.

Also, if you are going to be affected by people converting *away* from Christianity, then how about considering the fact that many people are also converted *to* Christianity? It is irrational to be affected by other people's conversion in either direction, but one could at least be consistent and be affected both ways, instead of being affected only by those converted away from Christianity.

Your doubt is selective. You are letting something affect you in one direction while you are not letting the same thing affect you in another direction. This is doubly irrational. If everyone in the world converts to Christianity, would that make Christianity more or less true? If anything, that would contradict Christianity, since Scripture guarantees that not everyone would be converted.

The point is that your doubt does not arise from rational thinking – it is not that you are too rational; rather, it arises from irrational and selective thinking. Thus you must doubt your doubt. Nothing other than God's Word can withstand intense skepticism, including skepticism itself. But as it is, your doubt is selective and biased against Christianity.

Also, all of those who fall away from the faith are extremely stupid people who defect for irrational reasons, and whom I can easily crush in debate. But you must learn to do the same.

You should rationally analyze the various aspects of the situation, such as the irrationality of your own doubt, the reasons why people fall away (the problem of evil, pursuit of personal lusts and ambitions, etc.), the reality of sin and false conversions, and so forth.

Meanwhile, since faith is a grace-gift, you should continue to pray and study for God to increase your faith and to grant you spiritual stability. You must continue to press hard for holiness and assurance, by using the means of grace (prayer, study, etc.) that God has given to you for precisely such a purpose.



It also helps to deal with doubt within the context of a community of faithful Christians, and under strong spiritual leaders.

## 29. He Blesses Us to Bless Us<sup>46</sup>

There are some preachers who say that God blesses a person mainly or even solely for the reason that this person should bless other people, and that because those will in turn bless others, and so on. This is sometimes stated without any biblical support, but then at other times, a verse like Genesis 12:2 might be used: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."

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

Although the purpose appears noble, the teaching itself is false. If God blesses you only to bless others, and if he blesses these other people only because he wants to bless others still, then it is really saying that God wishes to bless *no one* at all. If God saves you only because he wants you to help save others by preaching the gospel, and if he wants to save those who would believe your preaching only because he wants them to help save others still, then it means that God wishes to save *no one* at all.

God did not save me just to save someone else, for if so, he could just as easily save whomever he wants to save directly, without having to go through me. They say that he saved those other people through me so that they could help save others still, but then it means that he really wants to save no one, since everyone's salvation is only the means to another's salvation, who is also the means to still another's salvation, and so on forever. Such means have no ends, and therefore God has no "end" in mind, meaning that he wants to save no one.

It is self-defeating to adopt such a ridiculous doctrine in order to encourage selflessness and evangelism, or to justify our desire to receive blessings from God. God saved me to save *me*, and then by means of my preaching to save others whom he *also* wants to save, and so on. So all those whom God blesses and saves could be both means and ends, or rather, both ends and means.

Relating this to your question, a Christian should pay attention to his own needs. This is not selfish in itself. This applies to prayer, inward reflection, biblical studies, eating, sleeping, and so on. It would be silly to sleep only so that others can sleep, or to help others sleep without getting any sleep.

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<sup>46</sup> The following is an edited reply to a question on the topic.

### 30. Praying for Yourself and Others

After hearing your lecture, "Ask, and You Shall Receive," I have a question concerning prayer and intercessory prayers.

I suppose that it would be selfish for a person to pray for himself *all the time*, and that we should also spend time praying for others. But then, there is a teaching at [name of church] that we should spend *most* of our time praying for others, since blessings will come back to the person.

However, this seems like a silly argument in that the focus has never been the other people, since the point is that if the person prays for others, then he will be blessed even more.

The teaching involves a false application of the virtue of selflessness. Some of the evangelical teachings on "forgiveness" and the charismatic teachings on "sowing and reaping" also exhibit a similar error. Sometimes selflessness is so distorted that the teaching really amounts to either selfishness, or just sinful neglect and rebellion.

When it comes to feeding the hungry, for example, it is not heroic or selfless to feed only others and not ourselves, even when the food is right in front of us, and when we are fully capable of bringing the food to our mouths. It is sinfully stupid to unnecessarily starve yourself so that you may feed the hungry. The "sacrifice" is wholly artificial.

First, not only are we responsible to serve others, but we are also responsible to take care of ourselves, since we belong to God, and not ourselves. When we take care of ourselves in the way and with a motive dictated by biblical precepts, we are not being selfish, but we are being responsible with God's property.

Second, Scripture itself says that God gives us good things to enjoy (1 Timothy 6:17), so that provided we have the right motives and provided that we do all things in moderation, it is not sinful to partake of food, drink, material goods, and the blessings of God even beyond that which is necessary for survival.

I am more aware of my own needs than other people, and I should not defy the word of God by either ignoring those needs, or by trying to meet those needs by praying for someone else, especially when the word of God instructs me to pray for myself:

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

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

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

There are many other biblical passages teaching this; moreover, Jesus, Paul, and other holy men often prayed for themselves. This is not automatically a sign of selfishness, but given the right motive, it can be a sign of holy dependence on God as the source of all power and blessing, and a holy confidence in his ability and willingness to do all that is needed and expedient to uphold his people and advance his kingdom.

As you have mentioned, to pray for others so that our needs will be met is like praying for ourselves, only that it is a hypocritical way to do it. We might as well pray for our own needs, and then pray for the needs of others – we should do both.

A person is often more aware of his own needs and desires than others, and one of the best things that you can do for him is to teach him how to pray for himself. This is very different from telling him to be selfish, to disregard other people's needs, or to put his own needs before other people's needs – God will not hear a selfish person anyway. Rather, we are teaching him to maintain right fellowship with God, sincerely crying out to him out of faith and dependence. This is a beautifully holy and mature practice, and by no means selfish. After all, if you pray for another person at all, one of the best answers to your prayers would be if he can have such a relationship with God, so that he will trust God, and call upon him for all his needs and desires.

Then, some people think that any inward focus in your spiritual life is always wrong, and that the only proper focus is outward, as in evangelism. But this is also against the teaching of Scripture:

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

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test? (2 Corinthians 13:5)

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

Again, the problem is just a distortion of the virtue of selflessness, to a point of being foolish and even sinful.

When I was converted, I believed Christ for myself, not for anyone else – **I** was a sinner, and **I** needed God to save me. But by believing the gospel for myself, there was one more person saved – me. It would have been both foolish and sinful to refuse conversion so that I could immediately start to evangelize! In the same way, if I have access to God, and I am aware of my own needs, it would be both foolish and sinful not to pray for myself.

In fact, given what Scripture teaches on the subject, it would be an insult to God's grace if we fail to regularly petition for our own needs and desires, keeping in mind, of course, that we must pray with a pure motive, and in accordance with God's will as expressed in Scripture.

But of course, if I am selfless, and if I have the right spirit, I would also take time to pray for others, and rejoice when God meets their needs. I have no problem with the idea that we should generally spend more time praying for others and for God's kingdom than for our own individual needs and desires. The point is that it is not necessarily selfish, but rather appropriate and necessary, to regularly approach God to petition for our own needs and desires.

## 31. The Biblical Approach to Evangelism

Have you written anything that specifically deals with missions and evangelism? I remember you mentioning the relationship between apologetics and evangelism, and was wondering if you had a more evangelism-oriented work.

By now, you may have noticed that I am fond of addressing various topics by structuring my presentations around biblical passages.

Although I have commented on the different aspects of evangelism in various places, I address the topic of evangelism mainly in my exposition of Acts 17,<sup>47</sup> which you have probably already read. That chapter blends evangelism and apologetics<sup>48</sup> together in its discussion of the Mars Hill discourse. You might also want to read my short work, *Preach the Word*.

Evangelism should usually be done by preaching the whole counsel of God, instead of by the now common "hit-and-run" method. Evangelism is very much a "teaching" ministry (Matthew 28:19-20), so that when there is time, one must definitely follow Paul's procedure in Acts 19:

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

As J. I. Packer writes in *A Quest for Godliness*: "Evangelism must rather be conceived as a long-term enterprise of patient teaching and instruction, in which God's servants seek simply to be faithful in delivering the gospel message and applying it to human lives, and leave it to God's Spirit to draw men to faith through this message in his own way and at his own speed."<sup>49</sup>

But when there is no time, or when the person is already sufficiently taught and informed, God might perform a quick work, as in Acts 8:26-39:

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started

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<sup>47</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Presuppositional Confrontations*, chapter 2.

<sup>48</sup> Apologetics and evangelism are technically distinguishable, but often combined in practice. See Vincent Cheung, *The Light of Our Minds*, chapter 1.

<sup>49</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Crossway), p. 163-164.

out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

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

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

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

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

For more on this subject, you should study the sermons of Jonathan Edwards, and Puritan teachings on evangelism and "seeking" salvation through the means ordained and provided by God.

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

## 32. A Career in Science

I have somehow come across your books, and I feel very fortunate to have done so. I am having a little problem, and after having read much of your materials, you are the only one I know of that I trust can give me a wise solution to it.

After quite a while of digesting scientific "creationist" materials, the truth of the Bible became apparent to me. I was in my 3rd year of a 6 year term in the Navy when I realized this, and in my 4th year I was convinced that I was called to go to college and become a creation scientist. After praying quite earnestly, I was permitted to leave the Navy after only 4 years, and was allowed to keep all of my education benefits. This, to me, constituted a confirmation of what I was supposed to study<sup>50</sup> – and I chose to study biology and geology.

However, after reading your materials in depth, and listening to some lectures from Gordon H. Clark, I now realize the futility of empiricism – the best I could do to defend the faith as a scientist is to defeat the theory of evolution, using its own flawed methods. Now, I am not certain whether I am choosing the correct path.

I have given my life to the Lord, and want to use my life to bring honor and glory to His name, but I want to do it the best way that I can. My problem is that I was entirely convinced that I am supposed to go to college and become a scientist. However I now see it's ultimate futility, because even if scientists eventually overturn the theory of evolution using empiricism, some evil-minded fool will invent some other anti-biblical theory.

I was hoping you could give me some guidance on this problem, because as I said, I feel you are the only one I know of that I trust to receive a wise answer from.

If I have imposed too suddenly or have taken too much of your time, I apologize. Other than that, please keep up the good work, as you are definitely a blessed child of God.

Thank you for your message.

I appreciate your taking the time to clearly explain the problem. Although I cannot include everything that might be helpful to you in this reply, I will try to help you think this through.

First, I commend you for accurately understanding my position on scientific arguments. I am referring to your statement, "The best I could do to defend the faith as a scientist is to defeat the theory of evolution, using its own flawed methods." This reflects a proper

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<sup>50</sup> This probably betrays an unbiblical view of divine guidance. See Vincent Cheung, *Godliness with Contentment*, chapter 3.



understanding of my position – that is, I would never say that no one should be a scientist, or that scientific arguments have absolutely no place in apologetics. What I do say is that by the scientific method a person can never obtain any positive knowledge or provide positive justification for any claim, since scientific reasoning is always formally fallacious (it involves empiricism, induction, affirming the consequent, and so on).<sup>51</sup> Of course, this position is unpopular enough, but it would be wrong to infer more than this from what I have written.

As a scientist, all you can do is to use the scientific method better than the unbeliever so as to prove him wrong, so that scientific arguments can have only a negative function in apologetics, but they cannot prove any positive claim. Even from the scientist's own perspective, any supposedly proven claim can be overturned in the future. The use of science is an optional aspect of apologetics, since it is possible and even easy to refute all anti-biblical scientific arguments without using scientific arguments ourselves. So, science is not completely useless in apologetics, but at best it serves only a negative function, and it is never necessary.

This is relevant to your situation, since in considering whether you should study to become a scientist, it is better to understand what science is, and the proper place of science and scientists. Of course science is never above Scripture, but many people place it almost on the same level with Scripture; and then, there are those who place it below Scripture only as confirmation, when it cannot even do that. It is important to understand this because if you think too much of science, then you will expect too much from it (in your case, in what it can accomplish for the Christian cause), and then you will be disappointed and disillusioned.

As an analogy, consider a Christian who is wondering if he should become a policeman. This career is certainly a legitimate option for a believer, and it is possible for a believer to glorify God through it. However, if the believer thinks that he can completely and permanently destroy all crimes by becoming a policeman, and that he can even positively turn many people's hearts toward good, then he has a very unrealistic expectation of what a policeman can do, and he is going to be disappointed and disillusioned.

Similarly, if you choose to pursue a career in science, you must find a realistic reason for it. Since science can never provide positive vindication for the biblical worldview (or for anything else), it follows that you must not pursue a career in science for this reason. Nevertheless, there are other legitimate reasons for pursuing a career in science.

Based on what you wrote, it seems that you were planning to pursue a career in science not only because you would be good at it, but your greatest desire for making the right career choice has to do with promoting and vindicating the Christian faith. Science was going to be the means by which you would attain this end. The problem is that you thought science was something that you now realize it was not, and you thought that it

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<sup>51</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, Apologetics in Conversation, and Captive to Reason*.

could do something that you now realize it could not do. In any case, it is better that you realize this now than later.

My suggestion is that you should not eliminate science as a career option just yet, but you should also consider other possibilities. If possible, you should more clearly and narrowly define your end, and then consider the means by which you can best attain it, keeping in mind God's providential arrangements, your interests and abilities, and any practical concerns that are relevant to your situation.

After reconsidering your options, you might still want to become a scientist. There is nothing wrong with that in itself, as long as you have a realistic view of science. Nevertheless, now that you realize what science can never do, even if you choose to become a scientist, you should not make science the primary thrust of your apologetic. Instead, your approach should be biblical and presuppositional, and science should at best serve as an *ad hominem* "arm" of your overall approach. Also, consider the fact that there are other legitimate reasons for becoming a scientist other than to defend the faith. You can glorify God by teaching, by conducting research, and so forth.

Moreover, right now we are not just talking about training in apologetics, but also a career, so you should consider the whole range of relevant issues in making this decision. No, I am not saying that you must choose a vocation that will definitely make you a lot of money, but you should understand what you are getting into when you choose a career.

After considering all your options and all the relevant issues, you might even end up deciding that you should go to a seminary to study theology and then become a preacher, or a writer in theology and apologetics. You should not dismiss this possibility outright.

Also, it might be wise to gather some information about each of the possible career options, including the prospects for each path. You might also want to discuss this with people who care about you and about your faith. This might include your parents, pastor or church elders, friends, and teachers, as well as dedicated Christians who are already involved in the various careers that you are considering.

Thank you for such a speedy reply. Your message is very helpful to me.

The truth is, I really don't know what I am, and I still have to give some more thought as to what I am going to do. I will give it some more thought and prayer. Pursuing the knowledge of God is the only thing that has captivated my attention recently, and it continues to do so, unlike some of the other "interests" I've had. All other "interests" I have very recently regarded as somewhat worthless, although I think they had served a purpose in my past. I have always been interested in knowledge and truth, and now I realize that knowledge and truth have no meaning apart from the God of the Bible.

The writings by you and Gordon Clark seem to be the only materials I have found that contain sound and defensible doctrines. Could I one day study under you? This would be ideal, but the Lord has a plan for me and whatever He is willing, I will do. I consider myself undeserving of even having found your books.

Keep contending earnestly for the faith, and may many more blessings come upon you.

Thanks for your comments.

There are many more faithful servants of Christ than either of us know about, and you will come across more of them as you continue your studies. God has the pattern of reserving for himself in each generation those who have not compromised the truth (1 Kings 19:18).

It would be wonderful if I can take on as students and interns all those who have made such a request. But such a program requires a lot of resources, and right now we are not set up to do it. However, we have big plans, including a training institute for theology, apologetics, and ministry, as well as other programs. God willing, this will happen some time in the future, but this will not be a degree program, and it will most likely not happen in time to affect what you do in the next several years. So you will have to make your decision without taking this into account. However, if and when we succeed in establishing such a program, you might want to apply to receive additional training, and maybe to even help us produce more valuable teaching materials for believers everywhere.

Meanwhile, consider your career choice carefully. Remember, if you are going to choose a path that might sometimes make it harder for you to make a living (such as being a minister), you must count the cost. Otherwise, you might just end up hurting yourself and not helping anybody.

If you choose a "safe" path, you might not end up with as much spiritual influence as you might like, but if you do well, then at least you will not bring shame to the kingdom of God. It is fine to be a scientist, or an accountant, or a school teacher, or a housewife, etc., as long as you labor to glorify God as much as you can within your sphere of activity. Of course, I am not discouraging you from choosing the more "risky" path – you just have to count the cost, and understand what you are getting yourself into.

Then, although it is better to make a good decision now, remember that it is also possible to make a change later on in life. So, although your decision is important, it probably doesn't have to be absolutely final.

### 33. Rational Faith and Nagging Doubts

*The following is an edited and condensed message, responding to an inquirer who had nagging doubts about the Christian faith, although he could perceive no logical flaws with the biblical system.*

*It is usually difficult to give someone like this a satisfactory, effective, and let alone a final answer in a short message. Rather, study, prayer, fellowship, and pastoral guidance are needed. Depending on his actual condition, he must either convert by God's grace, or he must grow in the grace already given, so that he will receive assurance.*

Thanks for your message.

Your problem is not rare, and it might still require some time and patience before it is resolved. A short message from me will not fix everything, but I will give you several points that might help.

First, you need to firmly grasp a coherently formulated system of Christian theology.<sup>52</sup> If you are misinformed about what Christianity teaches, then no wonder there are oppressive questions and doubts. So, you need to continue studying reliable literature on theology.

Then, if there are indeed logical doubts about Christianity, then you need to resolve them, and they can be resolved.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, it appears that your problem is not only (or even mainly) logical in nature.

That is, even if you perceive that Christianity is rationally invincible (and it is), and that you can't see any logical problem with it, you will still doubt. This is because *you* are not strictly rational even though *Christianity* is strictly rational. And you are not strictly rational because there is sin in your mind. Faith is not something that comes only by arguments, even if it is at times the means by which God will give it to a person. But faith is a sovereign gift of God.

Jesus said, "But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:26–28). A person does not finally believe, not because Christianity is not rational enough, but he does not believe because he is one of the reprobates, chosen for damnation.

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<sup>52</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*.

<sup>53</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, Apologetics in Conversation, and Captive to Reason*.

Now, does this mean that you are one of the reprobates, because you have persistent doubts? This is not necessarily the case. But you must rather persist in praying that God will show you the truth, to give you the gift of faith and assurance, so that you can and will believe that which is already rational and true.

Mark 9:24 says, "Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'" It appears that you are in a similar position – it is not that you completely disbelieve, but you still have nagging doubts. You must pray to God about this and ask him to help you. He is the author and perfecter of faith.

In addition, I recommend some of the books written by the Puritans on seeking God through the means of grace. You can start with the following:

Thomas Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm*

Thomas Hooker, *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ*

## 34. Reckless Recreation

*The following is an edited message responding to the question of whether one should purchase insurance when participating in activities involving dangers and risks, such as skiing.*

You can overdo almost anything, but ordinary precautions do not indicate a lack of faith.

For example, it would be irresponsible to ignore home security, and it would not be a lack of faith to lock your door when you go in and out of your home. In fact, the best reason to be concerned about home security comes from faith in God's word – you believe in what Scripture teaches about human depravity, and what acts of greed, cruelty, and violence that men are often capable of doing, and so you act accordingly.

To refrain from locking your door and practicing other ordinary security measures is not a sign of faith, but it is what Scripture calls "testing" God. Faith does not believe only what Scripture teaches about divine protection, but it believes *all* the teachings of Scripture, including what it says about the dangers of living in this sinful world.

It is not only acceptable for Christians to buy insurance, but it is often irresponsible not to do it. When buying insurance, you are often merely taking advantage of an ordinary measure that is there to take care of yourself and your family if something naturally damaging happens under the providence of God. As long as you are acting on the basis of what Scripture teaches, and not what the world says, or out of fear or greed, then it does not contradict faith.

On the other hand, whether it is acceptable for Christians to go skiing is another matter! I am serious about this. Do not assume that something is fine just because it is part of the culture, without even thinking about it in the light of Scripture.

To put it crudely, skiing is nothing more than plummeting down a mountain on two sticks at high velocity for mere entertainment. It is one thing to risk martyrdom for the gospel, another to risk injury or death for recreation. The Christian must consider whether it is a responsible use of his life to be involved in such things.

Here I am not saying that a Christian must refrain from skiing, but I am saying that it involves risks that no responsible Christian should accept without even thinking about it or providing justification for it. It is insufficient to say that every activity involves some risks, since skiing involves a deliberate effort to remove oneself from his regular circumstances in order to embrace greater risks of physical injury or death, and usually for no higher purpose than entertainment.

Again, I am not saying that a Christian must never ski, and not even that he should never participate in any dangerous activities. And of course, there are degrees of risks when it comes to skiing – some places are more dangerous than others, and some people are more skilled than others. I am using skiing only as an illustration, and the main point is not whether it is acceptable to perform a specific activity, but that it is morally reprehensible for a Christian to ignore risks, especially if it is for no higher purpose than entertainment. It is your moral responsibility to take at least the ordinary measures to preserve yourself for the service of God's kingdom.

Sometimes even before you consider the issue of unbelief, you must consider whether you are testing God. Whether or not you think that skiing is testing God, the point remains that not all recreational activities are acceptable. Christians must accept risks for good reasons, since each has work to do for the kingdom of God. You have obligations. Your life is not your own. In any case, once a Christian has decided to do it, then buying insurance might just be the responsible thing to do.

Let us consider a more obvious example. Whereas many regard it as noble and heroic, I consider climbing Mount Everest to be the height of irresponsibility toward God and one's family. I saw a documentary in which one of the climbers who died had a pregnant wife, who spoke to her husband for the last time immediately after giving birth, and they barely had time to name the baby while he was dying on Mount Everest! I pity the wife, but the husband was a monster – leaving his pregnant wife behind, he went to climb Everest just so he could prove a point. Now, although money is no substitute for a husband and a father, I do hope that he bought insurance!

Of course, people climb Mount Everest for all the wrong reasons. How many people are on top of Mount Everest waiting to hear the gospel? Or, how many Christians are living on Mount Everest waiting for someone to help them build a church there? No, people climb Everest usually for something like self-satisfaction, self-realization (whatever that means), or to demonstrate the triumph of the *human* spirit over a seemingly impossible challenge. But you triumph over a mountain by blowing it up, not by climbing it and dying on it.

Then, to offer a less extreme illustration, after meeting my wife many years ago, I immediately became more conscious about the unnecessary risks that I had been taking. Although I still fall short, since then I have altered some of my habits to better maintain my health for her sake, so that I can serve her longer and better in this life.

Nevertheless – and this is an important point that qualifies all that I have said above – I do not trust in my own carefulness, as if it will help prevent all calamities; rather, I am acknowledging my moral responsibility to God and to my family by exercising ordinary precautions and avoiding unnecessary risks, and then I trust in the gracious providence of God to perform all that he wills in my life.

My sense of love and duty toward another person increased my awareness of the unnecessary risks that I had been taking, and how my irresponsible decisions might affect

other people. However, there is no reason to be reckless even if you are single or childless, since your life already belongs to God; nevertheless, he shows patience toward our weak devotion, and sends other people into our lives to remind us of love and duty.



## 35. Dress Code at the Church

As you might be aware, one of the unofficial rules at [name of church] is that one must dress really well when coming to church. They argue that since one usually dresses his best for an important function, the same principle should be applied when meeting the Almighty.

My church also teaches the same. However, I don't necessarily follow it for several reasons:

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

What do you think of my reasoning?

I agree that the Bible does not *directly* require one to dress really well to church, and that the argument you mentioned is fallacious.

A similar argument to the one that these churches use is to say that Old Testament worship prescribes beautiful clothings and ornaments for the priests, and since Christians are now the priests of God in Christ, we should also dress well when going to church.

However, this is a misapplication of the ceremonial commands. For even if the ceremonial commands were to apply, why is the principle to "dress well" instead of to dress *exactly* as the Old Testament prescribed for the priests? The Old Testament does not tell the priests to dress "well," but to dress in the *exact* manner prescribed.<sup>54</sup>

So the issue is not whether there is a direct command for dressing well at church, since there is none; nevertheless, there are at least two other issues to consider.

First, one of your chief concerns should be to edify other people.

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

If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who

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<sup>54</sup> For more on the Law and its application, please see Vincent Cheung, *The Sermon on the Mount and Commentary on Ephesians*.

serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

You should strive to facilitate worship, and to avoid drawing attention to yourself. When going to a church consisting mostly of poor people who do not have nice clothes, you should not dress too well, so that you will not stand out too much. But if you have the means, you should not dress too badly to a church where most people dress well, again, so as not to stand out too much. Of course, there are other reasons why people dress differently besides economic factors, but the principle is to avoid drawing undue attention to yourself.

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

For example, a person does not have to dress exactly like today's teenagers or to use their slangs and expressions to preach to them. Just dress and talk in a way so as not to allow these things to get in the way without compromising your own biblical beliefs. The church should influence culture instead of letting culture influence it.

If wearing baggy pants and talking like a barbarian will make the difference between heaven and hell for my hearers, then I will gladly accommodate. But it is usually enough to just dress casually and avoid pretentious language. Those who are so obsessed with looking and sounding exactly like those they are trying to reach are often distracted from the actual message that they should be preaching, which is where the power lies after all (Romans 1:16).

Some people end up compromising the very precious words of God, so that the Bible itself can become *The Word on the Street* – a "paraphrase" of the Bible so abominable that you would give anything to have people read *The Message* or even *Revolve* instead.

We can only accommodate people to a certain point, after which we must, by the authority of God, demand that *they* follow *us*, as we follow Christ. If they refuse to abandon their unbiblical and brutish ways of thinking and living, then it means that they are reprobates, foreordained to damnation.

To reach today's teenagers, some people go as far as to put on nose rings and dyeing their hair. This is unnecessary, since the power is really in the gospel message, which is the means by which the Spirit confronts, convicts, and converts the hearers.

At least in some cases, the truth is that some professing believers simply enjoy the secular culture – the clothes, language, music, etc., and this is their excuse to embrace the world and still call themselves Christians.

As I have stated several times in my books, some people say that they will go to parties and dinners, and to associate with unbelievers, in order to reach them, "just like Jesus did." However, they do not even mention the gospel most of the time, even after an extended relationship with the unbelievers. The truth is that they in fact enjoy doing what the unbelievers do, and talking about what the unbelievers talk about. And while they are having fun, they are lying to themselves and to others about their true motive. This is carnality with a mission, only it is much more about the carnality than about the mission.

Of course, I mention teenagers above only as an example. The same principles apply whenever we attempt to reach any people group.

Second, the Bible says in Hebrews 13:17:

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

Assuming that your pastor is not some raging heretic or evil villain, this verse alone should settle the matter. For practical issues such as the dress code, if the pastor says that you should wear nice clothes to church, then wear nice clothes to church. Do what the pastor says to make his job easier. It is as simple as that.

Although I do not think that there is a direct biblical argument or requirement for dressing well at church, I would regard a pastor's desire to develop his congregation into decent, disciplined, and organized people a valid one, as well as his desire to present Christians to outsiders as clean and orderly individuals, rather than slobs and bums.

I should not need to mention this (but sadly, I do) – it is wrong for women to dress like whores both inside and outside of the church.

## 36. Scripture for Man's Culture<sup>55</sup>

I am a third year medical student writing from India. I have read most of your writings and have been awestruck by your boldness in offensively attacking unbelievers. You are a great source of inspiration to me.

I wrote this mail to tell you about a particular problem I am facing, which I got into when I was talking with a person just now.

We started off with the subject of marriage. We were discussing as to how we will marry: choose our own partner or allow our parents to choose for us. I stated that my parents will not mind even if I marry somebody of a different nationality.

To this my friend asked, why not marry somebody from a different religion? He said, "After all, you can win her to the truth." I immediately opened my mouth to quote the Apostle Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians. Even before I could complete my statement, he retorted saying, "That applies to the church and those people at Corinth and not to us, who are separated spatially, geographically, and culturally from them. We should not take the Bible literally, but get the general idea that is being conveyed and then frame our own values from that."

I said that truth is truth wherever it is and that the problem faced by the Corinthians is the same faced by us today, so the message of the Bible still does apply to us.

I asked him as to whether his statement is justifiable (that you should not take each verse literally, but get the general idea and apply it). If justifiable, on what authority does he assume his view to be right? He remained silent for a while. By that time, both of us had finished our coffee. This finally got nowhere, except for the fact that both of us were tired of arguing, and so we very diplomatically stopped the discussion.

Sir, I want your advice on how to tackle these sort of viewpoints.

Thanks for your message.

Although I cannot give you a detailed answer in a short message, I will make some general remarks that should point you toward the right direction.

He makes this point because (1) he doesn't understand the correct principles of biblical interpretation in general, and (2) he doesn't understand the actual words and contexts of the letter to the Corinthians in particular. The direct solution against this type of problems and objections would be to confront both (1) and (2). So you should study books on hermeneutics and also reliable commentaries on this letter to the Corinthians to answer

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<sup>55</sup> Also see Vincent Cheung, *Captive to Reason*, chapter 23.

him on this particular point. The rest of my answer deals with some of the issues other than what is directly addressed by commentaries.

He says that we should ignore the direct or "literal" meaning of Scripture, and derive a general idea for our own adaptation. But how does one determine this so-called general idea from a biblical passage? And what is the general idea from the passage in question? Isn't the general idea precisely the admonition to marry "only in the Lord," and not to be yoked together with unbelievers, as if light should join with darkness? That's a general idea, isn't it? Or is there an even broader principle here, so that when applied, suddenly it becomes right for light to join with darkness? Paul says that Christ does not fellowship with Belial, but your friend saying that we should understand the Bible in a way that, suddenly Christ would fellowship with Belial?

Also, what is culture? What are its boundaries and definitions? Does God reveal himself that way only to the Corinthian culture, or is the Bible for the culture of man – that is, the whole mankind? Or does your friend think that the Corinthians were *exactly* like the Hebrews? Yet Paul applies the Hebrew Scripture *literally* to the Corinthians in that same letter.

Unless he has a principle that can be consistently applied to determine why one passage applies (or can be taken "literally") and why another passage doesn't apply, then the whole Bible can be read as culturally conditioned, and therefore inapplicable.

Then, it follows that all of God's moral laws no longer apply, so that all laws against murder, rape, perjury, and whatever other evil you can think of, are no longer applicable. By your friend's own standard, God was only talking to people of those times, so that there is now no relevant laws against murder, rape, perjury, and so on.

But yet another implication is that even the promises of salvation are also culturally conditioned, so that only the people who lived in the first century could be saved by faith in Christ. After that, there is no way of knowing whether the promises of salvation apply or not. Thus, by your friend's standard, the Bible promises him no salvation.

We need not stop there. We can say that even the very existence of God as mentioned in the Bible is culturally conditioned, so that by your friend's standard, he has no biblical reason to believe in God at all.

As you can see, by your friend's standard and the way he views Scripture, marrying an unbeliever would be the least of his problems. His very salvation is in question. However, most likely, the truth is that he does not consistently apply his own principle, but it is just an excuse to ignore biblical passages that he does not want to obey or believe.

Finally, if the claim is that the Bible, either in whole or in part, is inapplicable because it is culturally conditioned, then we can point out that your friend's own statement is itself culturally conditioned. It is spoken in its own culture, context, and to its own audience. So, this means that you don't have to take this or any of your friend's statements

"literally" from this point on. In fact, all of your friend's statements and thoughts become irrelevant to reality. So by his own statement, he has committed intellectual suicide; he has destroyed himself relative to all debates and discussions.

## 37. The Elements of Style

The ability to clearly communicate ideas is one of the most important skills of an effective minister. When it comes to producing books and articles, this means the ability to write in concise and readable prose. It can make a world of difference to the readers. So, I would like to tell you about the things that have helped me as I learned to write, and to offer some suggestions to you.

People like R. C. Sproul, J. I. Packer, Wayne Grudem, and many others are excellent when it comes to readability, but how we wish people like Jonathan Edwards and the Puritans had practiced clearer writing. Packer once noted that if John Murray had been as good a writer as C. S. Lewis (in terms of readability), his works would be much more popular today. Despite the terrible prose, Packer suggested that we endure Murray's *Principles of Conduct* anyway, and with that I fully agree – it is one of my favorite books on biblical ethics. Nevertheless, I have great sympathy for the believer just starting to read the great theological works, for in his studies, Murray's prose would only be the beginning of his sufferings.

Bad prose persists in Christian literature. Many books that are well written are not worth reading, and many books that are worth reading are not well written. Theology would not seem so tedious and difficult to people if not for the complicated sentence structures, infrequent paragraph divisions, confusing table of contents, lack of organization and symmetry, wordiness, and other characteristics exhibited by many theological works.

Good writing has a lot to do with clear thinking. You might think that you have a firm grasp of certain ideas in your mind until you must put them into words, and then you discover that your thinking has been in reality unclear and imprecise, and that it often consisted of little more than a nebulous intuition or feeling.

When you put your thinking into words and sentences, you cannot assume that the reader already knows what you are thinking, even if he could mentally fill in some of the blanks that you have left unfilled. But if you are introducing a new line of thinking or even making an argument to the reader, you will have to describe each step of the reasoning process and write down the premises that you would usually assume, and then provide justification for them. Sometimes, you might even need to abandon an argument, or at least reduce the conclusion to a mere opinion. This is because even though you thought you were correct about a given claim, once you started to write it out for others to read, you discovered that there is in fact no rational justification for it.

Of course, the ideal is to totally eliminate this disparity between private thinking and public expression, so that there is nothing that you need to state, clarify, and prove to your readers that you have not already done for yourself when you first reached a certain

conclusion on a topic. Frequent writing can help you reduce this disparity, even if you can never completely eliminate it.

Thus writing helps you develop clear and precise thinking, and the writing process also exposes to you the strengths and weaknesses in your belief system. This in turn means that as your thinking becomes more clear and precise, and as you learn to accurately attach words to ideas, and to express them in an orderly and systematic manner, your prose will become more readable to people. In other words, verbalization aids intellection, and intellection aids verbalization.<sup>56</sup>

I read many classic fiction works while I was in elementary school, including the novels written by John Steinback, J. D. Salinger, H. G. Wells, George Orwell, Ernest Hemingway, and others. These were not assigned to me at school, since it hardly taught English at all, but reading was my favorite hobby, and I wanted to read what the American high school students were reading. This was my early exposure to English prose of high quality. After I was converted, I turned my attention wholly to Christian non-fiction and theological works, and I have been putting up with tedious and convoluted writing ever since.

Reading excellent fiction works helped me develop some sense of style and creativity in writing, but the contents of these books were not always best for very young minds. Yet when we look for alternatives among Christian literature, we are often disappointed. Some of you must have read *Left Behind* by LaHaye and Jenkins. Other than the false eschatology espoused in the series, the writing is abysmal. Try *The Last Disciple* if you want something with both better writing and better theology. When training children and teenagers to write, I suggest that the curriculum should include a number of carefully selected Christian fictions. Perhaps these should include several C. S. Lewis novels, read along with their teachers' guidance regarding the content and the interpretation, to protect these young readers from some of the dangers in his theology.

Other than what I have mentioned so far, the most important thing that I have done in learning to write readable prose was to study *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White. Every writer must get this book, and if you have never read it, you must buy it now. It is short, inexpensive, available in almost every bookstore, and reading it might be *the* most important thing that you will ever do to improve your writing, especially when it comes to producing non-fiction works, including essays, speeches, and so forth.

Now, I don't consistently practice the rules taught in that book in everything that I write (avoid the passive voice, eliminate unnecessary adverbs, etc.), and this is certainly one reason why my writing is not better than it is. However, it is not because I don't want to faithfully follow those rules, but it is because I am unable to implement all of them while I write, and then I almost always have time to proofread my materials only once before they are released. If I have the time, I would definitely proofread everything that I write several more times and make the appropriate changes according to the Strunk and White rules. In fact, once I made a major revision to one of my books and shaved off twenty

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<sup>56</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Prayer and Revelation*, chapter 11.



whole pages from the manuscript using these principles in Strunk and White. The text did not suffer any damage, but rather became more concise and forceful.

Then, other than Strunk and White, I also recommend *How to be Your Own Best Editor* by Barry Tarshis. It is a guide to help you revise your writing using rules similar to those taught in *The Elements of Style*.

I have a small mountain of writing guides, but if you want to spend your time writing instead of reading writing guides, then the two books suggested above will give you a great start. But if you want more, then consider the following:

Patricia T. O'Connor, *Words Fail Me*

Patricia T. O'Connor, *Woe is I*

Joseph M. Williams, *Style*

Jan Venolia, *Write Right!*

Jan Venolia, *Rewrite Right!*

William Brohaugh, *Write Tight*

Rudolf Flesch, *The Classic Guide to Better Writing*

A. P. Martinich, *Philosophical Writing*

Anthony J. Graybosch, *The Philosophy Student Writer's Manual*

Zachary P. Seech, *Writing Philosophy Papers*

Robert Hudson, *The Christian Writer's Manual of Style*

Bruce Ross-Larson, *Edit Yourself*

Bruce Ross-Larson, *Stunning Sentences*

Bruce Ross-Larson, *Powerful Paragraphs*

Brand Blanshard, *On Philosophical Style*

## 38. Lobsters and Homosexuals

In his book, *The Philosophy Gym*, Stephen Law argues that if Christians are against homosexuality because of what the Bible says, then they must also avoid or condemn eating lobster, because the same authority (Leviticus) forbids both homosexuality and eating shelled seafoods.

Whereas the prohibition against eating shelled seafoods was a *ceremonial* distinctive that ended with the death and resurrection of Christ (Acts 10:9-16), the Law considers homosexuality as both a *ceremonial* and a *moral* abomination. God does not revoke this condemnation against homosexuality in the New Testament, but rather reinforces it in the strongest terms (Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

In any case, *even if* the prohibition against shelled seafoods had never passed away, Stephen Law's argument still fails. All it would mean is that Christians are still prohibited from eating lobster and other shelled seafoods, and those who do are sinning against God. So *even if* Stephen Law is right about the lobsters, all he manages to prove is that many Christians are sinning, but there is still nothing here that is logically destructive to the biblical worldview or in favor of homosexuality.

Nevertheless, as mentioned, Acts 10 shows that these ceremonial dietary laws have served their intended purpose and have passed away by God's own decree. On the other hand, rather than revoking the condemnation against homosexuality, the New Testament repeats it.

Therefore, Stephen Law's argument is based on a very superficial and amateurish reading of Scripture. Now, he has a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Oxford, and he is a lecturer in philosophy at the University of London. But as I have stated in several other places, the best of the anti-Christian scholars are nothing but stupid and careless lunatics.<sup>57</sup> And here I have given you yet another example.

Does he really expect to refute the Christian position with something as pathetic as this? If I were to see this same argument in an essay written by a high school freshman, I still don't think I could make myself give it more than a "C." A high school student might not be a Bible scholar, but then I could still tell him to "LOOK IT UP!" in a commentary. Zero research makes you look lazy; partial research makes you look stupid – like Stephen Law. Perhaps that preacher was right who said that "Ph.D." stands for "posthole digger," with apologies to posthole diggers.

We expect non-Christians to be morons. Many Christians hesitate to say this because they have an unbiblical respect for anti-Christian scholars, and a false concept of biblical

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<sup>57</sup> See Vincent Cheung, "Professional Morons" in *Captive to Reason*.

gentleness. But in hesitating to affirm the mental feebleness of all non-Christians, they have denied an important aspect of the gospel message. The biblical gospel is that man is *both* sinful and stupid without Christ, not just sinful.

Thus in denying that all non-Christians are stupid, these misguided believers also implicitly deny that Christ saves us from both our wickedness and our irrationalism. The implication is that we were doing quite well intellectually even without the mind of Christ, and that we only needed salvation from our sinfulness. To put it mildly, this is a partial denial of the gospel, the depravity of man (including the noetic effects of sin), and the ministry of Christ. It is a serious defect in many people's theology and preaching.

So we expect non-Christians, even the best of them, to be complete morons, and morons give only stupid objections like the one you have just seen. What is really inexcusable is that many Christians are stumped by objections like these. But they don't have to be stumped; they don't have to be stupid. They now have the word of God and the gift of faith – divine wisdom is freely available to them. All they need is to renew their minds with biblical knowledge, and this is why we must diligently study the Scripture and diligently teach it to other believers. Only then will the Church as a whole become stronger and stronger, and unbelievers will no longer be able to get away with stupid objections and careless arguments.

### 39. "Gay" Marriage

"Gay" marriage, of course, means *happy* marriage. However, the debate that is going on almost down the street from where I am typing this is on *homosexual* marriage. I would like to write in some detail about the topic in the future. Here I will explain only the general direction of my thinking on this topic.

Even many Christians who are against homosexual marriage are eager to insist that they don't want to discriminate against homosexuals, and therefore they would have no problem with "civil union." But I am not so quick to make this concession.

Sodomy has been a criminal offense in some states. Some of you have probably heard how police officers recently caught two homosexual men in the act of sodomy in Texas, and brought them up on sodomy charges. The men were acquitted because the court said that the law should not interfere with personal and consensual acts between adults. I am not familiar with the details of the case, but the details are unimportant – my point is that homosexuality is technically still a crime in some places, and saying that homosexuality should be considered a crime should not be entirely novel.

The Old Testament regards homosexuality as not only a criminal offense, but also a *capital* offense, deserving death. I agree with this categorization and this punishment, and there are at least a few other theologians who also agree with this. This is just to say that we agree with the Bible on the subject. Thus Christians should not be so quick to discuss marriage and civil union between homosexuals. What I want to settle with the unbeliever is why homosexuality is not a crime in the first place.

Is it because the act or the relationship is between two consenting adults? First, what is an adult? The State arbitrarily defines the adult, so that a consenting 17-year-old doesn't count. Second, why is the act or the relationship permitted if it is between consenting adults? That is, why is the premise true in the first place? Third, since all arguments must eventually escalate to the presuppositional level, I must finally ask whether the act or relationship has *God's* consent.

Is it because the act or the relationship does not hurt anyone? First, what is the definition of "hurt"? If I say that homosexuality disgusts me and spoils my appetite, and thus wastes a perfectly delicious chicken drumsticks dinner that my wife has prepared for me, does that count? Why or why not? It "hurts" me in some sense, doesn't it? If spoiling my appetite, wasting my wife's time, and disappointing the chicken drumsticks that had to wait so long in the oven all do not count as "hurt," then what kind of hurt are they talking about? They must define it, and then defend the definition. Second, why should the act or the relationship be permitted so long as it does not "hurt" anyone? What makes that the standard? And is that the only standard of morality, or is that the only issue in determining whether homosexuality is right or wrong? Why or why not? We can go on

and on, but as with any other topic, the unbeliever cannot move one step beyond where we let him, since he has no justification for any of the steps in his reasoning process.<sup>58</sup>

Again, my position is not just that homosexuals should not be married, but that homosexuality is a crime, just like murder or theft, so that even before we consider civil union, we must consider whether or not to punish homosexuals, with the possible punishments ranging from imprisonment to execution. Morally speaking, civil union and marriage should not even be on the list of options. *Even if* biblical morality does not require punishment or execution for homosexuality, surely no Christian should argue that homosexuals should have the *right* to have civil unions. But it appears that most Christians are not sufficiently bothered or disgusted by homosexuality.

So why is homosexuality not a crime? Why? If I let the Bible define what is a crime and what is not a crime, then how can I *not* define homosexuality as a crime? But once someone asks why I must submit to the Bible's definition, then we have moved beyond a confrontation on homosexuality alone to a presuppositional confrontation concerning our different worldviews. Thus an even more fundamental and productive debate can begin, and it is a debate that we can and must win every time.

As with other topics related to apologetics, Christians tend to yield too much ground before they draw the line and stand firm. So watch yourselves when you talk to unbelievers. Don't yield ground or permit premises that you don't have to yield or permit. Although the laws of the land might not change to reflect the biblical standard any time soon, when it comes to intellectual debates on this issue, we don't need to compromise anything.

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<sup>58</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, Apologetics in Conversation, and Captive to Reason*.

## 40. Watchman Nee and American Christians

What do you think of Watchman Nee? Have you ever read *The Spiritual Man*?

I have read a number of books by him – such as, *The Spiritual Man*, *The Release of the Spirit*, *The Spirit of Wisdom and Revelation*, among others – some in English and some in Chinese.

I like his serious attitude. Unlike many American writers, he never tried to be "hip" and he was never flippant about Christian teaching and experience. The Christian life is serious but never boring, and if one can avoid boredom only by being less serious, then he might not have the life in the first place. The things of God are inherently interesting to the children of God, who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Watchman Nee was also courageous about his beliefs, and he suffered much because of this. Probably none of us will ever suffer like he did. Just as his seriousness makes American Christians look like clowns, his courage makes American Christians look like cowards.

That said, the well-developed theology of this prolific Chinese "apostle" (as he has been called) is horrific. His ultra-mystical views regarding the constituent elements of man, his sanctification, and the innate power of the soul, are enough to cause alarm. And because he sounds deep and serious, many Christians will fail to perceive his errors and thus be misled. Not everything that he wrote was wrong, of course, and he states several points quite well. However, there is nothing good in his writings that you cannot get from somewhere else, in better form, and with less mixture.

Therefore, my judgment is that his writings pose a danger to the general Christian public, and offer no real or unique value. I cannot recommend any of his books.

Then, Witness Lee, I suppose, is even worse.

But if American Christians will be even one fifth as serious as Watchman Nee was about the faith, and one fifth as courageous, then the reformation that we have been longing for will have already arrived. Right now, we are but still clowns and cowards compared to him. We are the spoiled brats of the kingdom – bored, lazy, and stingy, but proud and demanding.

God gives us the best, but we give him the worst. This is not right. Some of us already have a basic understanding of the truth, so let us strengthen the feeble knees and lay aside the weights, so that we may hold forth the word of life in this crooked and perverse generation, seriously, courageously, rigidly, and offensively, and the Rock of Ages shall

grind all oppositions to powder, for he has promised that the gates of the enemy shall not prevail against his Church.

## 41. Joel Beeke on Sanctification

I am sorry to say this, but most books on sanctification (Christian living, holiness, prayer, etc.) are very poor, and full of unbiblical nonsense. I recently wrote to someone: "Christian books on sanctification are characteristically sloppy, imprecise, unbiblical, and often somewhat anti-intellectualistic and mystical. In general, my advice is that you should always read something on sanctification by a competent systematic theologian rather than one who is famous only for writing 'devotional' literature."

Joel Beeke is one of the better writers on the subject, and it is more than a coincidence that he is a professor of systematic theology.

Here I would like to recommend his recently published *Overcoming the World*.<sup>59</sup> The book is not at all technical, but it is nevertheless substantive, fairly comprehensive, and useful for review and instruction. It should be appropriate for all kinds of readers.

Nevertheless, the book has its problems. In what follows, I will list some of the false or questionable statements that I have found in the book. Some of them might seem trivial to you, but they are not trivial, since many of them reinforce common errors that distort the theological understanding and the spiritual growth of Christian readers.

Since I will be making a number of short quotes from the book, instead of indenting all of them, I will just put them in *italics*, and make place my remarks under each quote. Note that since I am listing more than a few quotes from the book, I can give only very brief comments for each.

Also, since I cannot give a detailed critique of each quote, I will try to be generous in my comments. In some cases, I must simply state my disagreement or ask a relevant question, and then move on, but in almost all of the cases below, I have provided my own positions and arguments for them in my own books, so I will refer you to them in the footnotes.

Some of these errors are not dangerous (although some are), but they are nevertheless listed here because it is best to be aware of all fallacious statements as you read, and make a conscious effort not to accept them or be influenced by them.

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

This is an unbiblical generalization.

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<sup>59</sup> Joel Beeke, *Overcoming the World* (P & R Publishing, 2005).



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

This is an unbiblical generalization, and it is never necessary and often counterproductive to use a non-biblical saying to teach a biblical truth. It is careless and inappropriate to apply "No pain, no gain" to biblical sanctification.

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

Now this is the type of unbiblical nonsense that I am talking about.

The first sentence contrasts the "heart" with the "mind," and the second contrasts the "heart" with the "head." Thus, as in the usage of many others, the "head" refers to the "mind" – but then, what in the world is the "heart"? If the "heart" is not the mind, then is it non-mental? If it is non-mental, then what is non-mental piety? And how can non-mental piety interact with Scripture?

But if they (the heart and the mind) are both mental, then why speak of them as if they are different parts of the human being? Where is the biblical justification for making this distinction between the heart and the mind? And why is the "mind" referred to as the "head" in the first place?

In Scripture, the "mind" and the "heart" are never considered as two separate parts of the human being. The above is an example of using unbiblical language to make an unbiblical distinction, and much of the anti-intellectualistic teachings on sanctification are founded precisely on this false distinction. We must throw out this teaching completely and permanently.

As Gordon Clark writes, "Therefore when someone in the pews hears the preacher contrasting the head and the heart, he will realize that the preacher either does not know or does not believe what the Bible says. That the gospel may be proclaimed in its purity and power, the churches should eliminate their Freudianism and other forms of contemporary psychology and return to God's Word."<sup>60</sup>

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

Really? Can a person who doubts the Word of God like this really come to a correct understanding of the promises of God through the sacraments? Where is this taught in Scripture? Cannot one doubt the sacraments (or their applicability to him) just as easily as the Word, if not easier?

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<sup>60</sup> Gordon Clark, *The Biblical Doctrines of Man* (The Trinity Foundation), p. 87-88.

The rich man wanted to be raised from the dead to specifically warn his own brothers about damnation, but if they would not hear the Word, neither would they hear one who is raised from the dead. So, if having a dead relative raised from the dead for you doesn't work to bring the promise home, then the sacraments will?

But if the thinking is that the Spirit works through the sacraments, then he can just as easily work through the Word.

*5. While self-denial focuses on inward conformity to Christ, cross-bearing centers on outward Christ-likeness. (69)*

I am not saying that he is wrong, but I would like some biblical evidence for this distinction, which Beeke does not supply.

*6. "Theology is the doctrine or teaching of living to God," wrote William Ames.... (77)*

I disagree with this definition.

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

Really? Where is the biblical support for this? And what kind of Christians gets Christ better through the sacraments than the Word?

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

NO! They are learned through the Word of God.<sup>61</sup>

*9. These two things, fighting against sin and lack of success, appear contradictory but are not. (91)*

No, these two things do not even appear contradictory, since there is nothing in either that even apparently makes the other impossible. "Fighting against sin" does not automatically guarantee or even imply success, and vice versa.

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

This is a common error, and another stubborn belief of anti-intellectualistic spirituality. It is unbiblical. A biblical argument (the very Word of God) can "match" holy living any day.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Prayer and Revelation*.

<sup>62</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *The Light of Our Minds*, chapter 2.

11. *(Referring to the church at Ephesus...) Her head was correct in doctrine, her hands were busy in service, but her heart had become cold in affection. (117)*

Here is the unbiblical distinction between "head" and "heart" again. A biblical way to put this would be to say, "Her mind was correct in doctrine, her hands were busy in service, but her mind (this same mind that was correct in doctrine) had become cold in affection." It is also acceptable to use "heart" in both places where "mind" is used in this sentence.

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

This is Spurgeon, not Beeke, and Spurgeon is wrong.

Why are people compelled to put down intellectual studies when they discuss sanctification? It is unbiblical, and there is no reason for it.

Unless "all our libraries and studies" are completely without Bibles and Christian books, then what he says belittles the Bible itself, at least by implication. It would be more simple and accurate to just say, "You must *both* study and pray." Yes, put more fluff into it and make it sound nice and pious if you want, but don't belittle either one to exalt the other.

And if you don't study, your "closet" is going to be pretty empty.<sup>63</sup>

13. *Triumph is reflected in some of the Psalms, but nearly half of them describe the pain, sorrow, frustration, and loneliness of Christian experience.... As Luther said, "If you can't find your life in the Psalms, you have never become a child of God." (129)*

Tell that to someone who just got converted one minute ago. Yes, I know what Luther meant, but it is technically incorrect, and it is an unnecessary mistake because he didn't have to say it, at least not this way.

I am not saying that all of these examples are examples of heresy – by no means – but many of them are unbiblical, or at least sloppy. And even if these are not enough to reject a book altogether, you should at least be aware of them as you read, and not let these fallacious statements sink into your mind, as if by osmosis.

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

This is a common mistake patterned after secular thinking. The biblical thing to do is to base our qualifications on knowledge of the Word (and in Paul's case, also on divine inspiration) rather than experience.

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<sup>63</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Prayer and Revelation*.

Look up 2 Corinthians 1:3–7. It does not teach what is being asserted here. What is shared is God's resources, not insight from experience.

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

Really? How about serial murderers, or Hitler? Personally, I remember the actions of serial murderers rather than their reactions to anything, or Hitler's actions rather than his reaction to anything. But maybe this is just me.

This seems to be a misapplication of Proverbs 16:32, and the assertion sounds rather like something that comes from a secular leadership seminar or a self-help book. If it is really a biblical teaching, he will have to use another verse.

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

This is a misapplication of Mark 14:61, which has a specific and different context and background. Look up the verse, and if needed, get some help from a reliable commentary. It is not mainly about how to handle criticisms, such as what you would receive because of your Christian ministry or witness.

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

Even if he is right, he needs to give some biblical support for this, and to reconcile it with how Jesus, Paul, and the prophets reacted to criticisms, since they did strike back in certain contexts. Otherwise, this is just another false generalization.

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

Peter might be applicable, but Judas at least needs some qualification or explanation. It was not as if Christ was surprised by his treachery; rather, he knew that Judas was a "devil from the beginning," foreordained to betray Christ, so that the Scriptures could be fulfilled.

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

This type of suggestions sounds pious enough, but I am not sure if they are always wise. Is there biblical support for this? Are there any biblical examples in the life of Christ, Paul, Peter, the prophets or others?

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

Does Scripture say that Job had "hard feelings" toward his friends? Where? And does Scripture say that God delivered Job from those feelings when he prayed? If not, this is just pure speculation without any biblical justification. The danger is that the reader might think that he is receiving sound advice based on biblical examples when this is not the case at all.

I will stop here, but there are many other examples that I can give. Again, we do not have to throw out the book because of the above errors, and we do not have to regard Beeke as some fool or heretic. It is just that Christian books are almost always too sloppy and imprecise. Beeke's book is already one of the best of its kind that I have read. Most of the others can go straight to the trash.

Except for the unbiblical distinction between "mind" and "heart," and the unbiblical identification of "mind" with "head," none of the above errors are extremely dangerous, but this is why I can say that it is already one of the best popular-level books that I have read on sanctification.

In any case, while I recommend this book, I also caution the reader not to learn by passive absorption, but to practice attentive reading and active thinking. This way, not only will you be able to sift away its errors, but you will be able to advance in your spiritual growth even more than what the book itself can teach you.

## 42. Building Up the Church

The following are taken from two messages that I wrote. The first one is part of my response to a Reformed writer who asked me to write a refutation against an Arminian who was stirring up trouble. The second one is part of my suggestion to a pastor who was speaking out against a heretic. The main point in both is that, while we should take time to refute false doctrines, our ministry strategy should never be purely reactionary, but we must give even greater emphasis to building up believers in sound doctrine.

Ephesians 4 teaches that the Church will cease to be tossed back and forth by every wind of doctrine, not when we directly refute every little falsehood that we come across, but by building up the Church in sound doctrine, in unity and knowledge, by the efforts of the teaching offices.

If we are not careful, we might be distracted by every new false teaching, or by every new version of an old false teaching, so that we neglect our main focus, which is to "preach the word." Of course we must refute false doctrines. Titus 1:9 says, "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it," but even here the main focus is on "the trustworthy message" and "sound doctrine." It is sound doctrine that we must affirm and practice, and it is by and for sound doctrine that we must refute the false.

– 1 –

Anyway, I think that although there is a place in dealing with specific individuals, we cannot take time to refute every new person that comes along. We must make strategic decisions. And in addition to offering refutations, we must increase our efforts in establishing Christians in the doctrines of grace. Some believers have been in Reformed churches longer than I have lived, and although they call themselves Reformed, their understanding is still shallow and imprecise, and often really half-Reformed and half-Arminian at best.

Thus we need to raise the theological prowess of all Reformed Christians, and raise it by a lot. Churches should train even housewives<sup>64</sup> to be more competent in theology and apologetics than the typical seminary student. I am convinced that this is one of the things we must do to, as you say, "put an end to this age old controversy." We must set up a total clash with Arminianism on all levels, and not just on the "top" professional level.

I am, of course, referring to a reformation, and reformation is broad and positive in its main focus, not narrow and negative.

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<sup>64</sup> I say "even" not because I regard them as less significant, but because churches have regarded them so at times, at least when it comes to theological education.

– 2 –

I support your stance against heresies. I would only urge you to consider the following points.

It is biblical to make direct attacks upon heresies. However, the primary task of the church, as well as the primary solution to heresies, is not the negative task of addressing problems like these when they come up, but the positive task of teaching God's people the Word of God. It is by establishing them on the truth that they will not be tossed back and forth by every wind of doctrine. As long as God's people do not have a positive knowledge and foundation, even if you successfully defeat one heresy, they will be caught up by the next one. In fact, they will be caught up by one heresy while you are yet fighting the other, since there are too many heretics and heresies to even keep track of, let alone directly refute.

This is why I do not focus on individually refuting every false doctrine or system. If I were to do it this way, I would never make a dent in the kingdom of darkness, and my writings will soon become irrelevant (or at least less relevant), since every narrow heresy will eventually fade away (the broader ones stay, like atheism, or Arminianism, etc.). Rather, I focus on the positive task of teaching the Bible and correct theology to God's people, and to teach them how to think biblically, so that they will more and more learn to discern for themselves the falsehoods that I have not even mentioned.

Again, I support direct refutations of heresies, but this does not mean that every minister must do this with every heresy that comes down the stream, since if this were to be the case, we would have no time to focus on the positive task of teaching.

In connection with this, I urge you to give other ministers the benefit of the doubt if they do not all scramble to act whenever you mention a problem, especially if you already know them to be uncompromising ministers of God. They might have their own legitimate agendas to pursue and heresies to refute, that God has providentially arranged for them to encounter. You might consider your cause very important, and it is, but what they are working on might also be very important.

So, if I (or others) do not always give you the active support that you wish for, it might not mean that I disagree with you or that I don't care, but it might just mean that I trust you (and other brothers in Christ) to handle this very serious problem. The Body of Christ is indeed a "body" that includes many people of different strengths, and assigned to different tasks – we can't all be the same. In fact, those who focus on the problems of teens, the homeless, etc., might be wondering why we are not more like them or why we don't care more about them! Don't they have legitimate and important ministries? But we can't all give equal focus on everything at the same time.

So, if you are serious about dealing with this heresy in question, my suggestion is threefold:

1. Strengthen your teaching ministry. That is, not just to teach against a particular heresy, but to teach the whole counsel of God – do it better, do it more.
2. Directly deal with each false doctrine as God providentially arranges for you to encounter it.
3. Appreciate any help and support that you get from other ministers, but also understand their own callings and their limitations.

If you do not do #1, you might win the battle, but lose the war. When Satan is using the machine gun method (many heresies everywhere), he doesn't really care if you can dodge one or two, or even ten or twenty bullets.



## 43. Kingdom First

### MATTHEW 6:33

*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

Jesus says in Matthew 6:33, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Although its meaning seems straightforward, this verse is often incorrectly understood and practiced. Thus many people might think that they are doers of the word when they are merely hearers of the word (James 1:22).

Sometimes we think that we have already done what is required of us, and feel good about ourselves for it, just because we agree with what we have heard from God's word. Sometimes we misunderstand a verse as demanding something lower than what it does, and thus we think that we have satisfied its requirements when this is not the case. Or, sometimes when we fail to satisfy even this lower standard, we will just say to ourselves, "That's close enough." The result is that, in all these instances, we are performing far below what God's word actually demands of us, and enjoying far less of the life and power that he has promised us.

In what follows, we will consider some of the ways that people have distorted and disobeyed this verse. Then, we will also consider the correct understanding of this verse as well as some of its implications.

First, there are those who exhibit blatant and unabashed disobedience; they explicitly make wealth their object of pursuit.<sup>65</sup> Of course, this characterizes only unbelievers, and if it characterizes your life, then you are an unbeliever, still headed for everlasting suffering in hell.

Unbelievers are accustomed to doing the very opposite of what God's word commands (v. 32). All of their thinking reflects the fact that they love "Money" and despise God (v. 24). Their typical goal in life is to attain financial riches and security. This often leads to an emphasis on the means to attaining this goal, such as worldly education and business relationships.

We expect this approach to life from unbelievers, but many professing Christians are no better. They would often admonish their children to focus on school work, but they do not demonstrate the same level of urgency when speaking to them about church work. They tell their children to study hard so that they will get good grades, get into good schools and colleges, and eventually get good jobs and salaries. But their agenda is not

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<sup>65</sup> By "wealth," we are not necessarily referring to great prosperity, but to food, clothing, money, and material things in general.

nearly as specific and ambitious when it comes to their children's theological studies and future in ministry.

This is because the kingdom is not first with them. Whether explicitly or implicitly, whether by instruction or by example, they instill in their children the idea that the highest goal in life is financial security, rather than to know God and to work for his cause. Of course, those who teach this to their children are already practicing the same themselves. This is unacceptable, and unbecoming to those who profess the faith. The problem is so serious that it is to be harshly condemned.

Second, there are those who make seeking the kingdom of God the means to obtaining material things, and wealth is still the end of all their seeking and striving. They take the verse as a teaching or even a promise on how to legitimately obtain material things from God. To them, Jesus is not saying that one should avoid striving for material things, but he is saying that *the way* to obtain them is to seek first the kingdom of God.

This attitude is essentially the same as the first. The difference is that instead of seeking wealth directly and apart from any Christian context, they now convince themselves that they are seeking after material things "the right way" by seeking the kingdom of God in the process.

However, this is a deception, and it contradicts the very point of the passage, which is to direct our attention and our efforts away from seeking material things, and instead to seek the kingdom of God. Jesus does not say, "Seek first the kingdom of God, *so that* you will obtain money and other material things."

Third, there are those who make wealth the means by which they seek and promote the kingdom of God, but they do so in a way that really makes wealth the direct object of their seeking and striving. Claiming that they ultimately have God in mind, they nevertheless center their lives around wealth and other material things, so that if they pay any attention to the kingdom of God at all, it is obviously little more than an afterthought to them.

Some are rather bold about this. I have heard several people assert that although it is true that this verse tells us to seek first the kingdom of God, the best way to seek first the kingdom is to first get as rich as possible! So what if you study, pray, sacrifice, preach, and counsel? A rich person can pay to train up a hundred people like you at one stroke!

According to them, the way to put the kingdom first is *not* to do anything for the kingdom right away, but to have a larger "vision," like getting *really* rich first so that you can make large financial contributions to churches and ministries. This is how their mind works. They are so deceived that they think this is the right thing to do, and they even think that this is what this verse is really teaching, so that they are not embarrassed to freely admit this. From their perspective, those who seek the kingdom of God through sacrifice and discipline, prayer and study, are in fact inferior in vision and in ability.

Of course, this is just an excuse for disobeying the verse. It claims that the best way to obey the verse is by doing exactly the opposite of what it commands. Jesus makes it clear that to seek first the kingdom of God means that we are *not* to seek after wealth and other material things, the things that the unbelievers consider most important, and the immediate objects of their ambition and desire.

Any interpretation of this verse is false that makes wealth the object of our seeking, and the kingdom as merely the means to wealth, or the excuse to seek after wealth. The verse teaches that the kingdom is the object of our seeking, and other things are at best the means by which we seek the kingdom, and we are never to turn these means into the objects of our seeking. Whether we are speaking of our job, money, education, time, skill, knowledge, and even our family, we are not to place these things higher than the kingdom of God, but we are to use these things as the means and the contexts by which we serve God and seek his kingdom. The kingdom of God is to be the direct object of our attention; any view that compromises this is false.

Yet another way to distort the verse is to represent it as teaching a merely chronological order – that we should *first* seek the kingdom, but *then* seek wealth and other material things. This view might initially appear plausible because of the word "first," but it does not imply that Jesus is telling us to merely make seeking the kingdom the first item on an agenda that contains many other items.

In fact, from the language and the context of the verse, it appears that Jesus is telling us to make seeking the kingdom the "first" and thus the *only* item on our agenda. In verse 33, he does not say, "You must serve God *and then* Money," nor does he say, "You must serve Money *so that* you can serve God." Rather, he has already said in verse 24, "You *cannot* serve *both* God and Money." Therefore, in verse 33, he is saying, "You must serve God *and not* Money *at all*."

The verse reads, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness (active); and all these things shall be added to you (passive)." The first part of the verse tells us what we ought to do; on the other hand, the second part of the verse does not tell us some other thing that we also ought to do, but it simply tells us what will happen. The point of the entire passage is to get our attention away from material things in order to actively seek the kingdom of God.

Therefore, by "first," Jesus is not indicating that we should give the kingdom of God mere chronological priority, but that we should actively make it the sole focus of our lives, making everything else subservient to it. In other words, you have not obeyed this verse just because you meditated on a passage of Scripture for two minutes "first" thing in the morning, but then put everything Christian out of your mind for the rest of the day. To seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness would include thinking on his word all day and all night (Psalm 1:2), even while you are doing other things. There are many things competing for your attention throughout the day, and each time you must put the kingdom of God "first"; each time you must let it control your agenda, your thinking, and your behavior.

This does not mean that you must neglect or abandon some of the legitimate things in your life. Scripture teaches that it is your duty to attend to your family, your occupation, and the practical matters of life that are necessary to sustain a normal lifestyle and to function in human society. But even these legitimate things must be done in the context of seeking the kingdom of God, and one must be prepared to put the kingdom first even at their expense. Often it is because of these "legitimate" things that cause people to neglect the kingdom of God, and all the while they still think that they are seeking first the kingdom, and thus they stop being doers of the word, but hearers only.

In a sermon on the same verse, Warfield writes:

How many think it would be unreasonable in God to put His service before their provision for themselves and family? How many of us who have been able to "risk" ourselves, do not think that we can "risk" our families in God's keeping? How subtle the temptations! But, here our Lord brushes them all away in the calm words, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." Is this not a rebuke to our practical atheism?<sup>66</sup>

What a piercing question! Perhaps we have all been guilty of obeying the verse only to an extent (which is to say that we have been disobeying it); we have so many seemingly legitimate reservations. Of course it is our duty to provide for our families, and sometimes it pains us to see that they must do without certain things because of our service to the kingdom of God. It appears that even those of us who seem to measure up to the verse in many respects still fail when it comes to this point.

If yielding to it means disobeying God's command, then this is ultimately a carnal concern. Jesus does tell us to seek *first* the kingdom, and first means first. As Warfield observes, it is practical atheism to think "that we cannot trust God for our earthly prosperity but must bid Him wait until we make good our earthly fortunes before we can afford to turn to Him."<sup>67</sup> Our Lord demands our attention now and not later, and he requires us to serve him continuously and not intermittently; he commands us to put him first every time.<sup>68</sup>

What is our ambition? Is it worldly or spiritual? Is it centered around the kingdom of God or our own little empire? As we have noticed, it is easy to "deceive yourselves" (James 1:22), and to think that you are a doer of this verse when you are only a hearer; it is easy to think that you are doing all that it says when you are falling far short of it. This is why we have spent this time trying to understand this verse better, and to unravel some of its implications for our lives.

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<sup>66</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, *Faith and Life* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), p. 46.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Of course, this is not an excuse to neglect our duties, for some people neglect both the kingdom and their families.

Matthew Henry comments that obeying this verse means "making religion your business," and to "mind religion as your great and principle concern."<sup>69</sup> Is this what you are doing? Is this what you are enforcing in your family? Does the way that you spend your money and your time suggest that you are "making religion your business"?

What are you teaching your children? Do you repeatedly tell them to study hard so that they will get good jobs in the future, or do you tell them to focus on developing biblical knowledge and character so that they will please and glorify God? Do you ever tell them to *stop* doing their homework to pray a while, to read a commentary, or to write a theological essay?

Again, we are not suggesting that our children should neglect their school work and other duties, but Jesus does say that we must seek *first* the kingdom, and first means first. We must believe that even the needed things concerning the children's education will be "added to them" if they will seek first the kingdom of God. In any case, there is no excuse for our children to know more about algebra than theology, or to know more about the theories of physics than Paul's message to the Romans.

Some parents have their children's academic career all planned out by the time they enter elementary school, if not way before that, but very few seem to plan out their theological training and character development *in detail*, so that they will become productive citizens of the kingdom of God.

But of course, parenting is not the only aspect of our lives that we need to be concerned about; we are using it only as an example, and as something that might expose our true priorities and concerns. We must examine every aspect of our lives to make sure that we are really seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

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<sup>69</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), p. 1642.