

# Sermonettes

~ Volume 4

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## 1. Joy in Suffering

**Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4)**

The followers of Jesus Christ face many hardships in this world. Some of these are the common experience of all men, but Christians are a chosen people, saved and enlightened by God, so that we ought to interpret our lives by the light of the gospel. Non-Christians hold to a philosophy that is opposed to the righteousness of God and the way of Christ. They deny the true causes and solutions to the troubles of humanity. Thus regardless of the variations and revisions, all non-Christian theories fail to arrive at the truth about our situation. Instead of taking warning from difficulties and heartaches, they become bitter, and they harden their hearts against the message of salvation. And instead of surrendering under the heat of God's wrath, they band together to withstand him. But rebellion increases their troubles, and wrecks havoc in their souls.

Jesus Christ saves us from bitterness and rebellion, and he transforms our perspectives and attitudes. In fact, he introduces us to the only true perspective and the only proper attitudes. He makes us superior men and women. Those who are still hindered by unbelief and evil traditions hesitate to say this about the followers of Christ, but if you refuse to say that you are now superior to your former self, then this means that you also allege that the gospel is impotent and that the claims it makes about the power of Christ are fraudulent. But if you admit that you are superior now, this must also mean that you have become superior to non-Christians, since they have not benefited from the wisdom and power of God. The logic is inescapable, but theologians usually do not speak this way, because most of them remain in bondage to false humility and religious clichés. We are superior because Jesus Christ is superior, and he has made us superior in him by his grace. It is God's gift to his people.

Non-Christians are out of touch with reality. Their view of the world is pure fantasy, in which they are good and useful people, where men and women can save themselves from wickedness and destruction, and God will not punish them with hellfire. Jesus Christ shows us truth and reality. He reveals to us that God is righteous and sovereign, and that mankind has transgressed his standard and has fallen into sin, and that Christ has arrived to save us from the wrath that is to come, and that is even now at work in the world. Jesus shows us that although we have a glorious future in him, that although the path of the righteous grows brighter and brighter, this world is still fallen and corrupted, that we are not yet perfected, and that growing in the virtues of Christ involves enduring hardships in this life.

Hardships are in themselves not enjoyable and not encouraging, but Jesus Christ enables us to face them with joy because we understand that when we address them in the light of the gospel, they exercise our patience and increase our endurance. For this to mean anything, we must treasure the virtues of Christ more than the comforts of this world. We must mind the things of God more than the things of men, and we must possess an appetite akin to that of angels rather than that of the beasts.

Those who have been regenerated by the Spirit of God have received the wisdom to face life with this perspective. We want to be like Jesus Christ, who endured not only the general hardships of living in this world, but also unbelief, slander, all kinds of abuse, and even death, so that he may honor his Father and rescue his people, that is, the believers of all generations. If we will follow his example, then our suffering in the Lord will not be in vain.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that we do nothing to resist. Some religious traditions would have us believe that patience and endurance translate into surrender, so that we should allow troubles to trample all over us, as if this alone glorifies God, and as if this is the proper way to surrender to God's sovereignty. This is a lie of Satan to convince us to embrace defeat, and to do it without a fight. God has given us resources to overcome many of our troubles; in fact, it is often his command for us to resist with the methods that he teaches and provides.

Since we have come to know the Christian faith, no matter what we face in life, we shall always remember that in Jesus Christ we have already escaped the worst kind of trouble – that is, the wrath of God at work in the soul, the intellectual darkness of an unbelieving mind, and the moral depravity of a sinner who lives without the power of the gospel. Unlike the non-Christians, who are being devoured by death from the inside, we have a definitive and growing freedom from it. We are being educated in the truth by the word of God, and increasing in courage and self-control by the power of the Holy Spirit.

## 2. Wisdom from God

**If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. (James 1:5-8)**

It is often said that life does not become easier once we become followers of Jesus Christ. We continue to experience many of the problems shared by the rest of humanity. These are the products of the wicked imaginations and lifestyles of non-Christians, which we once were before God saved us by the gospel. We also contributed to the sad condition of the world, and insofar as we still think and behave like non-Christians, we continue to contribute to it. Nevertheless, now that Jesus Christ has been revealed to us, and our justification and adoption in him have been made manifest, even though we remain in the world, we are no longer of the world. For this reason, in addition to the problems that are common to humanity, now we also face persecution from those who hate our Master. Our thoughts and ambitions are redirected to promote God's truth and honor, but this is not the world's agenda.

Yet life indeed becomes easier when we believe in Jesus Christ. Perhaps for those who were extraordinarily young, stupid, or self-righteous as non-Christians, life seems to become more difficult when they suddenly awake to the truth about their own depravity, the fallen condition of the world, and the countercultural lifestyle of the disciples of Christ. But for those of us who had been granted some measure of spiritual awareness on the way to conversion, and who basked in the misery of life without Christ for a time, there is nothing happier than the Christian life. We were dying on the inside, but Jesus Christ apprehended us and injected his resurrection life into us. We were spiritual losers and criminals, but he has made us winners and conquerors in him. Of course, now the world hates us and treats us as enemies and troublemakers, but the eternal glory of life in Jesus Christ far outweighs the momentary suffering of living as children of God in a world of demons.

The world is hostile toward Christians, but God does not leave us helpless and without spiritual resources to overcome. Even though it appears that many problems can be dealt with by money and power, and even though God is always able to deliver his people by miraculous force, in the course of ordinary providence he would have us face our difficulties with intelligence. God wishes for us to understand his mind, and thus it is proper for us to possess a corresponding desire, so that like Moses, we will say to him, "Teach us your ways." As we come to know the word of God and to know how to apply it to our situation, more and more we will understand him and agree with him. We will learn to think as he would think, decide as he would decide, and behave as he would

behave. We will learn that the way of God is different than the way of men, and that his way is far better and much wiser. In life, many things seem helpful and necessary, but what we need most of all is God's wisdom.

God will grant us wisdom when we pray for it. There is no need for a complicated explanation. Just ask him, and he will give it to you. Still, the Bible insists that we ask in faith. There is really no other way to ask, but the point carries an important lesson, because faith implies a definite stance toward God that cannot be confused with unworthy attitudes about him. If you must ask in faith, this means that you cannot be bitter and fearful in the face of problems. You cannot resent God and ask him for help at the same time. Prayer that pleases God and that is effective must be the outworking of a sound theology or doctrine, an intellectual grasp of the truth about God. Here the Bible requires that a person understands and believes something about God, namely, that he is generous with his wisdom toward his own people. When you need wisdom from God, you can have it, and you can have lots of it. But you need to come and ask, and when you come, you must believe that God is the generous God that the Bible says he is.

God never commends doubt, but he always condemns it. However, there are Christian authors and teachers who tell us that doubt is natural, and that doubt ultimately helps us grow in faith. This is not the Bible's perspective. Of course doubt is natural to fallen humanity, but in this sense murder and rape are also natural. If there is no reason to be lenient toward murder and rape, there is still less reason to be lenient toward doubt. And when his disciples doubted him, Jesus did not say, "Look into this doubt. Entertain it. Go further with it. Regard my Father and I as liars for a little longer. It will help you grow!" No, he blasted them for their doubt. He scolded them and made them feel bad about it.

The attempt to beautify doubt is men's sinful way to justify their shortcoming, to delay correction, and even to refuse repentance. We would never say to a serial murderer, "Go kill a few more people and explore your thinking. Consider what made you this way. Kill more people so you can understand your motivations. Take your time to resolve it and you will become a better person because of it. Murder will help you grow in holiness!" No, we will demand him to stop right now. We will treat him like a criminal and lock him up, and even execute him. But some people want us to think that doubt is healthy. This is a deception. Doubt is a sin that is even more closely related to our estrangement from God – even more than murder or rape. Anyone who beautifies it is an accomplice, a spiritual criminal. You grow in holiness by stopping murder. You grow in faith by killing doubt.

Jesus Christ has commanded us to teach the nations. The world is looking for solutions to its problems. We might say that it is looking in all the wrong places, but their situation is in fact worse than that. They are not even fighting for the right side, or facing the right direction. Their first problem is their rebellion against God, and all their other problems are only byproducts of this fundamental transgression. So we teach the non-Christians, "No matter what issues you face today, you are miserable and you are dying because your sin has separated you from God. Putting a bandage over a rotting cancer is not going to cure you. You must confess your sins, and return to God through Jesus Christ. Then, you

can approach him in unwavering faith, and ask him to grant you his wisdom and to teach you his ways. This is the only hope for you, and the only hope for mankind."



### **3. The Lord of Temptations**

**When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.**

**Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. (James 1:13-18)**

Centuries of religious tradition has insisted that God cannot be the author of sin. I have refuted this in a number of places.<sup>1</sup> There is the assumption that for God to be the direct metaphysical cause of all evil would compromise his righteousness. I have demonstrated that this is baseless and unintelligent, and to deny that God is the author of sin is also to deny his sovereignty and providence. In fact, it is an attack on his very being and position as God.

For every event, whether good or evil, there must be a metaphysical cause. If there is no cause, then that event would itself be God; however, we are not talking about God, but about what happens in his creation. If the cause is not God, then it must be something else. And if it is something else, then that event and its cause are outside of God's direct control. This is a form of the heresy of dualism, that there are two or more ultimate forces at work in the universe, perhaps one to rule over good and the other to rule over evil. It is a pagan philosophy, and it is the inevitable result of the doctrine that God is not the author of sin.

All kinds of arbitrary assumptions are smuggled into the discussion. Some people think that for God to "author" sin is for him to "commit" sin – that is, for God to cause evil in the metaphysical sense would be for him to perform evil in the moral sense. But this assumption is destroyed just by clearly stating the matter like this. It is obvious that the two belong to two different categories of actions and events. In addition, since God is the one who defines good and evil, for him to commit evil, he must first define something as evil for him to do, and then go ahead and do it. In other words, unless God disapproves of himself, then whatever he does is righteous by definition. It is not up to theologians to define evil for him, and to say that even though he is God over all things, he must not directly reign over evil, but that God must be God only over good, and Satan must be God over evil, to rule over a realm that God himself cannot touch. Such a doctrine is

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<sup>1</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Commentary on Ephesians, The Author of Sin, and Blasphemy and Mystery*.

blasphemy of the highest order. We insist that God is the author of all things; therefore, God is the author of sin.

Some people make the objection that if God directly controls all things, then this becomes the doctrine of pantheism. This objection saves us time because it immediately exposes their lack of intelligence and their inferior ability as thinkers, so that we will know not to take them too seriously from now on. The objection stems from the absurd principle that God is identified with what he controls, so that if God directly controls all things, then he is identified with all things, which is pantheism. Since this assumption is arbitrary and unjustified, we dismiss the objection simply by exposing and rejecting the assumption.

The people who advance the objection is then left with an unhappy dilemma. That is, since *they* assume that God is identified with what he controls, then they must either deny God direct control over any part of his own creation, or they must affirm that God is identified with whatever he has direct control over. Thus they must either affirm that God has no direct control over anything, or that God is identified with at least part of his creation. Either option would make them non-Christians. In their attempt to advance a clever objection against God's total sovereignty and direct control over all things, they have become pagans and heretics.

The unbiblical and irrational tradition that God cannot be the author of sin underestimates his power and necessity when it comes to the existence and operation of creation. It seems people think that God is just a very good person, and the devil is a very bad person. But the difference is much greater than this. God is not only the opposite force in the same category with Satan, but he is in a different category altogether. He is the direct and necessary power in and through all things. Satan himself depends on God's direct and constant power to cause his every thought and every movement. Without God, nothing can exist or continue to exist, and without him, nothing at all can happen, good or evil.

James cannot be trying to distance God from the existence of evil, or to say that God is not the author of sin, because the point would not make sense here when the explicit context concerns hardships and temptations. As I will demonstrate below, it would not make sense, first, because the point would not be consistent with what the rest of the Bible teaches, and second, because he would not succeed in making the point this way – this would not be the way to do it. In other words, if James is attempting to somehow "exonerate" God from evil, the rest of the Bible shows that God does not need to be exonerated, and that even if he needs to be, he could not be exonerated by what is stated. If God appears to be "guilty" for the existence of evil, and of temptation, this text does nothing to nullify this. But there is nothing wrong with James. The real problem is that the passage has been misused – he is not asserting what people make him out to say.

God has always been revealed as one who leads people into temptations. We acknowledge that there are differences between a test of hardship, a test of obedience, and a test of enticement. Although it appears that the last kind is the most relevant, it is appropriate to include all of them in this discussion for two reasons. First, they are not

completely separable, since, for example, a test may have to do with whether a person will persist in obedience even in the face of enticement. This would describe the temptation that Adam and Eve experienced. Second, and supported by the first reason, even a test of hardship or of obedience may be what it is precisely because it appeals to a person's desire, even evil desire, so that to pass the test or to successfully endure the trial involves a measure of self-control, or a denial of one's desires. Therefore, all kinds of tests are relevant to the text in James, so that God's control over these other kinds of tests can also be cited to illuminate the discussion. Nevertheless, the inclusion is not necessary, but only serves to produce a fuller explanation, since we will see that God controls even the test of enticement and leads people to face them.

Consider the testing of Abraham (Genesis 22). God told him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. The child was the fulfillment of divine promise. There was no good reason for him to perish; indeed, the Scripture says Abraham believed that if he had sacrificed Isaac, God would have raised him from the ashes. Here the point is that God instituted the test and created the opportunity for Abraham to sin. And even though he believed that the child would have been raised from the dead, Abraham would have sinned if he had allowed his desire to exempt his son from the ordeal overwhelm his desire to please God. In any case, God alone instituted the test and led the patriarch to the potential rebellion. Abraham did not conceive it. Satan was absent from it.

In 2 Samuel 24:1, the Bible says that God incited David to sin by taking a census. Then, in 1 Chronicles 21:1, it says that it was Satan who incited David to do it. Oddly, while considering the passage in James, one commentator writes that 1 Chronicles 21:1 reveals the "real cause" of 2 Samuel 24:1. Depending on what he has in mind, this is at least a careless remark. If God is the one who directed Satan to incite David to sin, then how is God not in some sense, and in a better sense, the "real" cause? Given the commentator's theology, he should perhaps say "immediate cause." However, I would still disagree with the use of "immediate" cause. Just as we all live and move and have our being in God, Satan himself cannot be the immediate cause of anything *so as to* leave out God's direct causation. In this sense, God is the only direct or immediate cause of any object, thought, or event, whether good or evil. Creatures are at best the relative, the apparent, the perceived, or the descriptive cause. It follows that when it comes to metaphysics, there is no such thing as a "secondary cause" – the words "secondary" and "cause" are both misleading. The term can at best refer to a relative or apparent cause, a perceived relationship between two objects or events, but which can never serve as the metaphysical explanation. It is best to abandon its use.

So the commentator is mistaken in calling Satan the "real" cause if he at least acknowledges that it was God who directed Satan to incite David to sin. But if by "real" he refers to the metaphysical cause, then it is even worse. This would mean that either 2 Samuel 24:1 has no place in the Bible, in which case the commentator has denied biblical inerrancy, showing that he is an unbeliever and has no authority to teach Christians what the passage in James means, or it would mean that he makes Satan the metaphysical explanation for God, in which case the commentator has disowned God and has turned to worship Satan. Either possibility would make his opinion on James worse than useless.

Rather, we say that 2 Samuel 24:1 is the explanation for 1 Chronicles 21:1, and God is the metaphysical explanation for Satan.

Deuteronomy 8:2 says, "Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands." It was God, not someone else, who led them through the desert to test them, to reveal whether or not they would keep his commands. In other words, God led them through situations in which they could – and seemingly more often than not, did – disobey his commands. Then, in Deuteronomy 13, Moses says that when a false prophet announces a sign or miracle that indeed takes places, but then tells the people to worship a false god, "The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul." What is the commentator going to say, that a false prophet is the explanation for God, that the false prophet is the "real" cause? With so many morons like this throughout church history to defend God's honor, atheists and skeptics are hardly necessary – theologians do their work for them well enough. No, God is the explanation for false prophets. He controls false prophets and uses them to test people.

In 1 Kings 22, the Lord asked, "Who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?" An evil spirit answered, "I will entice him....I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets." The Lord said that the spirit would succeed. Then, the prophet Micaiah explained, "So now the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours. The LORD has decreed disaster for you." The demons and false prophets enticed Ahab because God had "decreed disaster" for him. It is not Satan's activities that explain God's decree, but God's decree that explains Satan's activities. In 1 Samuel 2, when Eli warned his sons about their sins, verse 25 says, "His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the LORD's will to put them to death." Thus God controls men's evil choices. He can make a person believe anything, think anything, decide anything. God is the explanation for evil, both for the temptation and for the surrender to temptation. He rules over all things – he controls the tempter, the temptation, and the tempted.

Jesus himself was "led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil" (Matthew 4:1). It is true that Jesus endured temptation for our sake; however, it remains that it was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus to the temptation. If it is wrong as a matter of principle for God to lead anyone into temptation, then it would have been wrong for him to lead Jesus to temptation. But there was nothing wrong with this, and God has been leading his people to temptation since the creation of humanity. This is so much the case that when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he said they were to say, "Lead us not into temptation," because God is the one who does it. Then he added, "Deliver us from evil," or the evil one, because it is God who orders Satan to incite evil.

Returning to our text, how does all of this fit with verse 13, which says that "God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone"? The verse is true, and it is consistent with the rest of Scripture. In the other passages we have just examined, although God decrees sin and evil, he does not become the tempter to entice the people, but he sends evil spirits

and false prophets to deliver the actual temptation. Again, this does not distance God from sin and evil, since "in him we live and move and have our being," and he must be the direct energy that propels all sin and evil. Nevertheless, as I have explained, God does not become identified with what he creates and what he causes. When God creates a stone, he does not become the stone. When God destroys a planet, he himself is not destroyed. Those who are desperate to oppose the biblical teaching of absolute divine sovereignty assert that this doctrine amounts to pantheism, but when they make this assertion, it becomes an assumption in their own system, requiring them to either accept at least a partial pantheism to preserve some control for God, or to deny God any control at all in the universe. Either option would make them non-Christians. But we are undamaged simply by rejecting the stupid assumption. God is not the same as what he creates, causes, and controls.

So God directly controls all aspects of temptation, but he himself is not the tempter. He does not tempt people in the sense that Satan tempted Eve and the Lord Jesus. He does not speak and instruct people to do wrong. In fact, it is impossible for him to be the tempter because of his very own nature – since he is the one who defines right and wrong, whatever he tells someone to do would be the right thing to do. If he had told Eve to eat the fruit, then it would have been right for her to eat it. There would have been no temptation, since by telling her to eat the fruit he would have lifted the original prohibition. But if he had directed and caused Satan to say it, then it would have been a temptation. And that was what happened with Eve, with David, with Ahab, and so on. Likewise, if he had told Jesus to turn stones into bread, it would not have been a temptation; in fact, if it had come as a statement or command, Jesus would have had to do it in order to perform the Father's will.

Therefore, God is the author of sin, but he is not the tempter. It is obvious that this does not in any way distance God from evil, but it only specifies his relationship with it. So we must assume that when James stresses that God does not tempt, it is not his intention to distance God from evil. This becomes even more clear when he does not name Satan as the tempter, but turns the focus to a person's evil desire, which is the spiritual and psychological factor that moves him to succumb to temptation. If James is interested in identifying the tempter, why does he not point at the devil? Scripture portrays him as such in Genesis, when he tempted Eve, and in the Gospels, when he tempted Jesus. And later in the letter, James shows that he is conscious of the devil when he writes, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (4:7). If his intention is to identify the tempter, especially in contrast to God, this would be the place to do it. But he does not mention the devil here because he has a different purpose.

Thus to assert that God is not the author of sin on the basis of verse 13 misses the point of the text, and such a misuse ends up robbing the students of Scripture of its valuable instruction. If James wishes to distance God from evil, even if this is possible, what he writes here would not be the way to do it. One can complain that, even if God is not the author of evil, and even if he is not the tempter, why does he permit evil, and why does he permit temptation? If it is indeed necessary to distance God from evil in order to exonerate him, the only way to do this in a meaningful sense and to an adequate extent is

to dethrone God, and to set up Satan as a competing force who directly controls evil. But if Satan is free from God's direct control, then Satan himself is another God, even if we can still say that either one is God at all. For this reason it is so dangerous and blasphemous to deny that God is the author of sin. It is not that we are especially interested in connecting God with evil, but that we are especially interested in affirming that God is truly God, that he wields direct control over all things, and we must insist that this control includes evil when people attempt to deny it, as if to do God a favor.

All of this is to remove false religious traditions so that we may read the passage and learn what it really teaches. Satan was the tempter in Genesis, and when he spoke to the woman, he appealed to her evil desires: "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it" (3:6). James is not talking about metaphysics, and he is not trying to identify the tempter. He wishes to make us take responsibility and confront temptation. This is not accomplished by blaming God's sovereignty. The divine decree is not something that we can dictate or negotiate with. And it is not done by blaming the devil as the tempter, either. We have no sovereignty over the devil, and we cannot stop him from being the tempter. However, we are responsible to examine our desires, and if they make us susceptible to temptations, we must resist them. We ought to be always aware of our thoughts, motives, and desires, to cultivate those that keep us on the way of righteousness, and to annihilate those that would draw us away from God and into the way of rebellion and transgression. This is the way to master temptations.

Our desire gives birth to sin (v. 15), but God's truth gives birth to our renewed spirits as believers in Jesus Christ (v. 18), so that "we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." Of course, Christians are the firstfruits not in a chronological sense, since other things in creation were made before us, and our conversions occur at different points in time. Rather, we are the firstfruits of all he created in terms of rank, honor, and priority. This brings to the fore the difference in status between Christians and non-Christians. We are the firstfruits because God has birthed us into the Christian faith, but even though others are humans like us, they are not converted, and thus are not the firstfruits. Christians, therefore, are an entirely superior brand of humanity. No wonder James writes, "Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (v. 16-17). What an insult it is, if all we take from the passage is the false inference that God is not the author of sin. What a pathetic doctrine. What a weak theology. James is not interested in this.

Christians, do not be deceived. Do not remain in bondage to religious traditions that claim to reverence God and to defend his righteousness, but are in fact filled with unbelief, arrogance, and that impose man-conceived limitations on God that he has never placed on himself. Do not accept anything less than what the apostle tells us. If God has given spiritual birth to you by the gospel of Jesus Christ, then he has made you the firstfruits of creation. He is your Father. He is not your enemy. God is the Lord who controls temptations, and for the same reason, he is also the Lord who teaches you to overcome them and to increase in faith in the process. Therefore, when you face

hardships and temptations, do not become bitter and use his sovereignty against him, but examine your own thoughts and motives. The way to deal with temptations is to affirm God's goodness and to confront your urges, wants, and ambitions. If you learn to master and destroy your evil desires, then you will put an end to sin before it has the chance to conceive. This is what God told Cain, but he did not listen, and killed his brother (Genesis 4:6-7).

## **4. Faith and Deeds**

**What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?**

**Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.**

**You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.**

**In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. (James 2:14-26)**

This is often regarded as a problem passage, but it is in fact an aid to the cause of the gospel of faith. It advances the truth about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, and it installs a roadblock against the imposters that attempt to infiltrate the church. When dealing with this text, there is no need to devote most of our effort into defending Paul's doctrine of justification by faith, since James is asserting a valuable lesson of his own, and a lesson that we also find in Paul.

Back in 1:22, James writes, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves." A man can think and claim that he has given God's word the proper attention when in fact he has not. And in 1:26, James writes, "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." That is, a man can consider himself religious or spiritual, and he can make this claim before others, but this does not mean that he is indeed religious or spiritual. His claim is exposed as false if his life contradicts it. His action does not make him irreligious or unspiritual – it does not transform him from a spiritual person into an unspiritual



person – rather, he is already unspiritual when he makes the claim, only that the claim is exposed as false by his action.

Now, in 2:14, James does not say, "What good is it, if someone has (true) faith but does not have works?" Rather, he says, "What good is it, my brothers, *if someone says* he has faith but does not have works?" (ESV), or as the NIV reads, "What good is it, my brothers, *if a man claims* to have faith but has no deeds?" If you can physically pronounce the words, you can say anything you want to say, but you might not mean what you say, or what you say might not be true. All this means is that it is possible to lie about being a Christian. It has nothing to do with earning salvation by works. James defines the issue in verse 14, and it does not change into something else in verse 19 – he is not saying that demons have true faith.

Then, in verses 15-17, James says that suppose someone is without clothes and food, if you say, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? This continues the thought from verse 14, that a person can claim to have faith but does not in fact have faith, and that a person can lie about being a Christian. It is not very different from what Jesus teaches in Matthew 25:31-46, where he says that the righteous, by caring for the Lord's people, are regarded as having provided him food and drink and clothing, showed him hospitality, and visited him in prison. In contrast, the wicked denied help and mercy to the Lord's brothers. He says that they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. As he says elsewhere, "Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit" (Matthew 7:17), and also, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46).

Likewise, John the Baptist realized that people can lie about their relationship with God. So he said, "And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'" Rather, he commanded the people to "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:8). Among other things, this means "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same" (v. 11). The fruit is not something foreign to repentance, but it is something "in keeping with" it. All James is saying is that a person who has true faith will produce fruit "in keeping with" faith; otherwise, although he claims that he has faith, he does not. The teaching contains nothing strange or surprising in comparison to the rest of the New Testament.

Verse 19 says, "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder." This is often used to devalue orthodoxy or the insistence on orthodoxy. As they say, "It is not enough to believe the right doctrines. Even the devil knows theology!" It is also used to argue that faith is more than an intellectual assent to revelation. These are two widespread abuses; indeed, it is difficult to find those who read the text another way. However, this interpretation is so shallow and amateurish, but persistent, that it must be regarded as an exegetical conspiracy. In this context, if faith is more than assent, then this something more is not the "trust" or "commitment" that people allege, but the added factor can only be works. This alone frustrates the second abuse. The passage does not fit the point they wish to make. James has something much more profound in mind,

and his coming sections on Abraham and Rahab should utterly embarrass the standard interpretation and show that by it the scholars make themselves look like uneducated children and inferior believers, if believers at all.

In Romans 4, Paul cites from Genesis 15, and writes, "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God. What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works" (v. 1-6). So Paul's doctrine is that a man receives righteousness through faith – not by works, and apart from works.

James also cites from Genesis 15, but he adds that it was "fulfilled" by what Abraham did in Genesis 22, when he offered his son Isaac on the alter. Since James accepts Genesis 15 as it is written, he agrees when it says that "it was credited to him as righteousness." And if God already credited righteousness to Abraham in Genesis 15, then it is impossible for James to think that he did not attain it until Genesis 22. Rather, as James refers to Genesis 22, he says that it "fulfilled" Genesis 15, or as the NLT reads, "And so it happened just as the Scriptures say." In other words, James regards Genesis 22 as the inevitable result of Genesis 15. If we have in mind the justification that refers to the crediting of righteousness through faith and in contrast to works, then both Paul and James agree that it happened in Genesis 15, since this is what Genesis 15 teaches even prior to and apart from Paul and James. But James is focusing on Genesis 22, and his point concerns the fulfillment, or the inevitable result, of Genesis 15.

Paul teaches the same thing. He urges sanctification as the reasonable and inevitable consequence of justification by grace through faith. As he writes in Romans 6, "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?...Just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life....Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness," and in Romans 12, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship." God's mercy does not lead to licentiousness, but holy living. Holiness is a natural outcome of faith.

Then in Galatians, he writes, "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature....But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." In this same letter where he argues so vehemently for justification by faith, he also stresses that faith leads to the fruit of the Spirit. In Ephesians, he writes that we are "saved, through faith...not by works," but "to do good works, which God prepared in advanced for us to do." And so he says, "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received....So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking....For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.

Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord." This is not different from what James teaches. Yet we know that Paul affirms justification by faith without works and apart from works.

Now, James uses three examples in the passage, and he chooses ones that fit his point, or that are able to illustrate what he wishes to convey. Thus one way to attain a better appreciation of what he means is by considering the hypothetical scenario in verses 15 and 16, then what Abraham did in Genesis 22, and what Rahab did in Joshua 2. We may quickly pass over verses 15 and 16, since we examined them when we noted their agreement with the teachings of Jesus. We acknowledge that the deeds James has in mind include charitable works, such as feeding and clothing those in need. This is not in dispute, and it is often the kind of works that interpreters and preachers emphasize. We shall advance in understanding by considering Abraham and Rahab.

Abraham's action was not a case of charity. God had promised that Abraham would become a father of nations, and that this would happen through his son Isaac. But some time after he was born, God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. This meant that not only would Isaac be killed before he could marry and produce offspring, but that he would be reduced to ashes. Still, Abraham believed God's promise. The only way for Abraham to obey the command to sacrifice Isaac and for Isaac to live and produce children would be for God to raise Isaac from the dead, even from the ashes. Although God was to stop him at the last moment, Abraham did not know this beforehand, and he was prepared to do what God commanded. Therefore, the Bible says, "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death" (Hebrews 11:19). Thus Abraham carried to the alter of sacrifice this well-reasoned theology of divine omnipotence, of covenant promise, and of the resurrection of the dead. His doctrine was integral to his action – this is the Bible's own explanation.

When I talk about theology, or doctrine, or orthodoxy, *this* is what I mean. If James cites this incident in 2:21, how is it possible that he intends to belittle theology in 2:19? We cannot even soften this to say that the verse intends to prevent an overemphasis of orthodoxy. What overemphasis? Abraham's theology was extensive, and it was integral to his action. Which part could you take away? Which part could you reduce in emphasis? Which part could he have denied or erred in, and still produced the same action? His faith and his deed were distinguishable, but one in agreement. Then, if verse 19 indicates that there is more to faith than assent, the additional factor cannot be "trust" or "commitment," but in this context it can only be works. But if works becomes an essential part of faith, then how can James distinguish the two? Yet he does make a distinction, judging from the way he uses Genesis 15 and Genesis 22.

Rahab's action was not a case of charity. Israel had commenced the military campaign to conquer the land that God had promised. Joshua sent spies into Jericho, and their adventures took them into the house of Rahab. The king of Jericho was informed of this

and commanded Rahab to hand them over, but she hid them and helped them escape from the city.

She said to the spies, "I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and that you will save us from death."

She had an extensive theology. She believed that God worked signs and wonders when he brought the people out of Egypt. She believed that God had given the land to Israel. Thus she believed God's promise to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Israel. She believed that, unlike what was assumed about the heathen gods, the God of Israel was not local or limited, but he was "God in heaven above and on the earth below." So she believed that God was willing to do it, that he was able to do it, and that he would succeed – the Israelites would indeed invade Jericho and slaughter its people.

Now, if James cites this incident in 2:25, how is it possible that he intends to belittle theology in 2:19 or to warn about its overemphasis? What overemphasis? Rahab's theology was extensive, and it was integral to her action. Which part could you take away? Which part could you reduce in emphasis? Which part could she have denied or erred in, and still produced the same action? Her faith and her deed were distinguishable, but one in agreement. And again, if verse 19 indicates that there is more to faith than assent, the additional element cannot be "trust" or "commitment" or any such thing, but in this context it can only be works. But since the passage itself would not allow a confusion or mixture of faith and works, the conclusion is that the verse does not introduce some additional factor. Things like trust and commitment, as elements additional to belief, are introduced to the discussion by force, since the passage itself suggests nothing about them.

You say, "Orthodoxy is not enough. You can believe all the right things and still do the wrong things." Can you? Even if this is true, James is not making this point, since he only says that you can claim to have faith and not have deeds, because anybody can tell a lie. You say, "Orthodoxy is not everything. Many people who err in doctrine live wonderful lives." Do they? Are you only looking at charitable works, and only those that are common to unbelievers? With God, doing good works involves much more than feeding a widow here and clothing an orphan there. Abraham's and Rahab's deeds were not charity, and both of them required a definite and extensive set of doctrines to have naturally produced the actions.

It is essential to acknowledge that James is not referring only to works of charity, and that the kinds of actions he has in mind are inseparable from sound doctrine. Only then can we grasp what he teaches and correctly apply it. Suppose a person claims to have faith, but he votes to ordain a homosexual as minister, can this "faith" save him? Or, what if a woman claims to believe the gospel, but she murders her own child by abortion, can this "faith" save her? What about those who call themselves Christians, but who encourage religious tolerance, diversity, dialogue, and mutual respect? Even non-Christians sometimes claim to tolerate the Christian faith – and shudder, if only in disgust. And what about those theologians who wish to be known as Christian scholars, but who deny biblical inspiration and inerrancy, or the resurrection of the dead, or the reality of an everlasting hell? They claim to have faith but have no deeds. They are liars. They are not really Christians, and when they pass from this life, they will suffer the torment of hellfire. This is the significance of what James teaches.

What does James mean by deeds? Or, what does he include other than the ordinary works of charity? Think about it. What did Rahab really do? For the sake of Jesus Christ, she betrayed her nation, her race, her religion, and her culture. She knew that there would be genocide, but she aided the spies who planned to slaughter her own people. This is what she did. Those who use James to devalue orthodoxy and to urge a little charity have no idea what they are talking about. They are dealing with holy things that are too great for them. They have no concept of how much strong theology and strict orthodoxy it takes to propel this kind of spectacular heroics. They so readily condemn theology and orthodoxy, or those who in their opinion care too much about these, but they probably would not even turn against their football team for Jesus Christ, let alone their entire nation, race, religion, and culture. The truth is that, like Rahab, if a person is to have such a power to act, it is going to take some extreme conviction in some serious theology.

Jesus Christ has commanded us to invade all nations with the Christian faith, not by military might but by spiritual power. He has led his people out of spiritual bondage with mighty signs and wonders. He has defeated all demonic powers and the forces that enslave. All authority in heaven and on earth belongs to him, and one day this will become manifest to all. He is coming, and when he arrives, all who oppose him will be thrown into hellfire. This is Rahab's theology for Christians. Anyone can claim to believe in Jesus Christ, but if he refuses to aid in the annihilation of national, racial, sexual, professional, and denominational identities (multitudes call themselves Christians but love these things more than Christ), of beliefs, lifestyles, cultures, and religions that are contrary to Christ, and if he refuses to consign unbelieving friends and family members to the flames of hell, can this "faith" save him? He is no Abraham. He is no Rahab. His faith is false. Perhaps he will donate a few dollars to a cancer society, but God is not deceived.

Rahab wished to save her immediate family, but she explicitly agreed that they would be killed unless they remained in her house under the protection of the scarlet thread. Likewise, we wish to save those who are close to us, but if we have true faith, we will readily agree that those who refuse to come under the blood of Jesus Christ would be burned and tortured in hell forever. As Jesus said, "Anyone who loves his father or

mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37-38). Although Jesus Christ will triumph whether or not we participate, if we have true faith we will turn against all non-Christians and do our part to advance the Christian faith, and to quicken the demise of their cultures and religions. If we do not, then we are counted among those whom Christ will trample under his feet when his reign comes to full manifestation.

True Christians acknowledge that the Christian faith will take over the whole creation, that we will be vindicated, and that non-Christians will suffer in hell forever. This is our theology, and it is integral to our action. Those who belittle theology and orthodoxy can never hope to attain this kind of faith, and they probably do not want it. But if their lives demonstrate neither the theology of Abraham nor the "treachery" of Rahab, how dare they lecture me about what James means, or about theology or orthodoxy or spirituality, or whether faith is mere assent? They claim that there is something more but they have no idea what it is and they do not have it themselves. It is not a trivial matter to kill your own son and burn him to ashes, or to aid foreign spies who intend to wipe out your race and your nation along with the people, religion, and culture. Actions like these demand extreme conviction, and as illustrated by Abraham and Rahab, this conviction is in turn based on a theology that is sufficiently profound to sustain and energize it. When faith is true assent to a full doctrine, then faith and deed are one, and there is nothing more. Let us, therefore, shake off a shallow interpretation of religion, but rather mature in Jesus Christ, and into an intelligent and triumphant faith.

## 5. Wisdom from Heaven

**Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.**

**But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.**

**But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. (James 3:13-18)**

A central theme of this letter addresses the inconsistency between claim and reality in one's spiritual life.

James 1:22 says that when a person listens to God's word but does not do what it says, he deceives himself. That is, what he thinks has happened is inconsistent with what has actually happened. Perhaps he thinks that he has accepted the word, or that he has benefited from it, but the reality is that he has not. He has been exposed to the word, but he has not done with it what he thinks he has, or all that he needs to. James says that he is like a person who looks at himself in a mirror but as he walks away he immediately forgets what he looks like. But a person is blessed only when he looks into the word, and continues to look at it, and then acts and behaves according to what it teaches.

There is the popular idea that faith is more than mere assent, belief, or agreement to God's word, but that there must be something more, such as trust or commitment, so that faith consists of knowledge, assent, and trust. However, this causes confusion in Christians because it is a false teaching and it presents a hindrance in properly understanding some biblical passages. It becomes a stronghold in the mind that obscures the plain scriptural idea of faith.

James does not just say that the man agrees with God's word and then does nothing about it; rather, he says that the man, whether in fact or in a manner of speaking, "forgets" what he hears.

As a child, once I learned and accepted the name that my parents gave me, it became an integral part of my identity. It was not a trivial sound or fact, but it was a name – *my* name. Even as a child I understood that and from then on I never forgot it and I never wavered as to what it was. If you believe that your name is Ezekiel, and that it has always been Ezekiel, but then the next day you introduce yourself as Elizabeth, or if you say that

you do not know your name, would we say, belief must be more than agreement? No, we would say that you are either mentally defective, that you are dishonest, or some such thing. Whatever the precise reason, we may suspect that you have never really accepted your name as Ezekiel, that is, that Ezekiel is your *name*, that it is not something trivial, and that *it can be nothing other than* Ezekiel. When you have a belief in something, by definition both the belief and the something must be present. If there is belief without the something, then there is no belief in that something. And if there is the something but no belief, then again there is no belief in that something. Thus if there is agreement but no name, or if there is a name but no agreement, there is no agreement in a name. And because what is agreed to is a name, it is agreed to *as a name*, not just a word or a sound. If it is agreed to as a word or a sound, when the thing is a name, then there is in fact no agreement.

The above can serve as an illustration, but an imperfect one, because God's word is by its very nature something that is intended to be much more integral to a man's personality, thinking, and behavior than his own name. If a man does not look at God's word this way, then he has never regarded it as God's word in the first place, and there is no assent. And if he looks at God's word as what it truly is, then assent to it would be assent to something that is intended to be integral to a man's personality, thinking, and behavior. Therefore, there is no assent in a doctrine without both the assent and the doctrine, and if there is assent in a doctrine, there will always be assent in the doctrine. And when the doctrine concerns God, man, salvation, and the like, there is no reason for the doctrine to be absent or irrelevant at any time in a person's life, since the doctrine concerns all of his life. Can a person assent to the resurrection of Christ and then say that Christ did not rise from the dead? This is a contradiction. He does not really assent to the resurrection. Can a person assent to the sovereignty of God and then refuse to accept the necessary implications that follow? No, a proposition and its *necessary* implications possess equal force, since the implications, being logically necessary, have always been in the proposition. They are inseparable. Thus when a person says that he believes in the *absolute* sovereignty of God but then denies the sovereignty of God when it comes to certain things, creatures, and events, he deceives himself. He does not really assent to the *absolute* sovereignty of God.

Therefore, it makes no sense to add to *true* assent an additional element like trust or commitment. Rather, to assent to Christ, to believe in Christ, to have faith in Christ, to trust in Christ, and to commit to Christ, all mean the same thing. If you do not trust Christ, then neither do you assent to Christ. If there is no trust, there is no assent, because assent to Christ *as Christ* must entail trust, commitment, obedience, and the like. Here assent and trust would be one. However, anyone can *claim* that there is assent. Thus the distinction is made not between assent and trust, but claim and reality. One can *claim* to assent to Christ, but in reality he does not. This is the same as to say that he can claim to trust Christ, but in reality he does not. You say, "But he indeed agrees that Christ is true, only that he does not commit himself to him!" No, he does not agree. He *claims* to agree. He deceives himself, and apparently he has deceived you as well.



Again, this is important because James does not say that we must add something to *true* assent or belief, but the point is that a person can lie, even to himself, when he claims to agree with the word of God. This is the true spiritual diagnosis. Thus it is not that faith involves more than belief in biblical doctrines, but the real issue is that there is *true* faith and there is *false* faith, or it is possible for a man to falsely claim to have faith. There is only assent, or agreement, or belief, since these are the same. But because a man can lie, we make a distinction between true and false assent, true and false agreement, or true and false faith. True faith in God's revelation, or the biblical doctrines, will produce the necessary implications and effects of belief in these doctrines.

Let us dismiss the ultra-pious interpretations of Scripture that complicate the nature of faith. If you believe the Bible, you agree with it. If you claim to believe it but consistently act like you do not (we have not reached perfection), then you do not believe. Jesus said that the Pharisees did not really believe Moses, because if they did, they would have welcomed and followed Jesus. He did not say that they believed but did not trust, or some such thing; instead, he said that they claimed that they believed, but they lied. So we say to the theologians, "I think your teaching is a sham designed to confuse me and to sell books, and to make me learn three Latin words instead of two, when I should not need to learn even one."

We should focus on incongruity and deception, and the fact that it is possible to claim something about oneself that is not true.

James 1:26 says that if a person considers himself religious but fails to keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. In other words, a man can claim to be religious or spiritual, but in reality he is irreligious and unspiritual. Verse 27 talks about caring for orphans and widows. A similar thought will come up in 2:15-16.

James 2:14 indicates that a man can claim to have faith, but if his actions are inconsistent with this claim, then it shows that his claim is false. Remember, there is no additional element to assent in 1:22, because the man "forgets" the word. There is no true assent. And there is no additional element to being religious or spiritual in 1:26, since the man is not in fact religious or spiritual – he thinks he is, but he is wrong. Likewise, there is no real faith in 2:14. There is not even two thirds faith, because there is either true faith or false faith, and false faith is no faith.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Since 2:14 sets the direction for the section on faith, and not 2:19, it is 2:14 that determines how we should understand 2:19, and we have 1:22, 1:26, and 3:13 to reinforce this. The verse has been misused to teach that faith is more than assent, since it is thought that demons assent, but they do not have faith. But this infers too much from the proposition provided. James indicates that the demons yield a negative reaction to the doctrine, but since he expects true faith to react differently to the same doctrine, this means that the proposition does not produce only one reaction, or it does not produce the same implication for everyone. Thus the demons are in fact reacting to *an implication* of the doctrine, an implication that applies to them because they are demons. If those who have true faith do not face the same implication, they would naturally not yield the same reaction. Each implication can be stated as a proposition, and two different implications would produce two different propositions. The two groups, therefore, would be assenting to two different propositions, so that there is nothing in the verse to show that faith is more than assent. If demons understand and assent to more orthodox doctrines than even Christians, as it is sometimes said, we may ask, do demons assent to all Christian beliefs, including propositions that say they *should* and *would*

You may claim to have faith, but if you are cold and cruel, and if you show no mercy to others, then you do not have faith. You may claim to have faith, but if you do not believe in the promise of God and the resurrection of the dead, then your claim is false. How can you have Christian faith and not believe in Christian doctrines? It is a contradiction. You may claim to have faith, but if you will not turn against your race and culture for the sake of Christ, then your faith is a mere claim. It is not real. Many people induct the Christian faith to serve their own ideologies. You see that their Christianity has been thoroughly Americanized, or feminized, or that it has undergone some other kind of transformation that robs it of its heavenly culture. Some wish to subjugate Christianity to the scientific mindset, or to the concern for racial equality and liberation. They claim to have converted, but their priorities have never changed. Now they want to use Jesus Christ to serve their ideologies – ideologies that they are eager to promote in the first place with or without Christ. Can this "faith" save them? True faith Christianizes everything – it reorders all priorities, subjugates all ideologies, and transforms all relationships, and compels all of them to conform to the doctrines of Christ.

James continues the motif in 3:13. Who is wise among you? Let him, James says, show it by his good life, but if this so-called wisdom is characterized by envy and ambition, "do not boast about it or deny the truth." A man may claim to have received God's word in a positive and meaningful manner, but unless he does what God says, his claim is false (1:22). It is not that this man really received the word but that he must add something to it – he never truly received the word, since he turned away and forgot about it. One may claim to be religious, or very devout and spiritual, but if his speech is full of hatred and falsehood, or if he is merciless toward orphans and widows, then his claim is also false (1:26). It is not that he needs to add self-control, mercy, and the like to spirituality – he has never been spiritual in the first place. And a person may claim to have faith, but if he has no deeds that correspond, then his claim is false (2:14). It is not that he must add deeds to his faith – he never had any faith, since true faith would have naturally and inevitably produced the deeds.

James does not say that the man in 3:13 is indeed wise, only that he needs to add something else on top of it to build it up into heavenly wisdom. Rather, in accordance with his motif, he means that a man may claim that he has wisdom, but if this wisdom produces envy and ambition instead of spiritual virtues, this is not wisdom at all. Christians would often refer to an unbeliever thus: "He is an extremely intelligent man, but..." No, if he is a non-Christian, he is not intelligent, not even a little bit. An "intelligent" non-Christian is only a fool who is stupid in a complicated fashion. This is the way with non-Christian scientists, philosophers, and other so-called intellectuals. Other non-Christians remain relatively simple in their stupidity, but the scholars think themselves into a deep hole. And when the blind leads the blind, they both fall into the ditch. It is a betrayal of biblical teaching and the entire spirit of this letter from James for a Christian to attribute any wisdom, understanding, or intelligence to non-Christians,

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worship and obey God – propositions that say they *will* actually do it? If so, then the problem is demonic schizophrenia, and not the definition of faith. Rather, James is just making the point that by their behavior they show that they have no faith.

except in some metaphorical or animalistic sense, and except in a measure that barely allows them to count as human, as those made in the image of God. The Bible takes the fall of man seriously, and when Christians praise non-Christians, it shows that they do not take it seriously enough and that they deny the truth in order to sound a little more cordial.

Just as a non-Christian has no love, no faith, and no righteousness, he has no wisdom. If a man has even a little true love, or a little true faith, or a little true righteousness, since these things come only from Jesus Christ through the Spirit of God, this person would already be a Christian. A non-Christian can have none of these. But if he has no love, no faith, and no righteousness, then neither does he possess any true wisdom, intelligence, or understanding. The Christian must pick a side and make a choice. I side with the Bible and say that a non-Christian is *completely* stupid. This is an essential premise. Now, although the non-Christian has no love at all, because he is still human, his own constitution testifies against him that love is a good thing, and that he has none of it, so that he is inferior and stands condemned. The same is true of faith, righteousness, patience, kindness, and all other virtues. The non-Christian invents qualities that are obviously different, and then he applies the names of these divine virtues on the counterfeits.

So he worships a bird and calls that faith, he makes a system of conjectures and calls that reason, and he arranges relationships that are barely more advanced than those of the beasts and calls that love. This is the best that non-Christians can do, because what they cannot do is to become honest and admit that they have nothing. They cannot face the fact that they have no faith at all, but only despair. They are too stupid and proud to acknowledge that they have no reason, but that all their scientists and scholars are like madmen trapped in a crazy house, banging their heads against the wall. They laugh and congratulate one another on their progress, and offer one another grants and prizes. Love sounds like something that is good to have, but they do not even know what it is. So they make something up and pretend that it is love. They can preserve the illusion if everybody assures everybody else that what they have is real. Then some Christians come along and say, as Paul said to the Athenians, "What you do not know, I will now declare to you." They hate us for this.

You say, "But isn't James writing to Christians?" He is certainly writing to people who *claim* to be – people to claim to have received the word, who claim to be religious and spiritual, who claim to have faith, and who claim to have wisdom. But not everyone who claims to be a Christian is indeed a Christian, and even a true Christian must renew his mind to rid himself of all traces of non-Christian thinking. A non-Christian is incapable of doing this. If the Christian's idea of wisdom is still anything like the non-Christian's idea of wisdom, then he should change his thinking and seek the true wisdom that comes from heaven. James writes to help him make this happen.

The non-Christian has no wisdom, but he claims to have lots of it. What he calls "wisdom" is not really wisdom at all. It harbors bitter envy and selfish ambition. This may manifest itself in skills and strategies on "getting ahead" in the world, without regard

to biblical godliness, and often at the expense of others. And since Christian congregations are often cultivated in a way that is indistinguishable from non-Christian society, this kind of "wisdom" also thrives in the church. Why, if you have some "wisdom" about you, you would know how to manipulate your way to the position of associate pastor! And then you will be the envy of all your underlings! After all, why should that other fellow, who has only two advanced degrees instead of three like you, be promoted before you? What? They promoted a man who has never even been to seminary because he has the best working knowledge of the Bible, the most pure and forceful theology, the trust of the people, and...Christian character? Are they insane? You are the one who put in all those hours at church, who tirelessly flattered the pastor and the board members, and who bought expensive presents for their kids! Did they really think that you were doing it for Christ? You see, bitter envy and selfish ambition.

James does not say that such a man lacks something, if only he will add that to his wisdom. He does not say that he has true wisdom, only not enough of it. He does not lament, "If only he will use his intelligence for good." No, he writes that this so-called "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, even of the devil. The wisdom that comes from heaven is not just more of the same, or something at a higher point on the same scale, but it is something altogether different and superior. It is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Sometimes even Christians, or those who claim to be Christians, are so unfamiliar with true wisdom that they think to promote peace means to speak and behave in a weak and effeminate manner. However, Scripture offers us examples like Moses, Elijah, Jesus, and Paul. Along with many others in the Bible, they were often much more harsh and fierce than even the more unfriendly non-Christians that we know in both their words and mannerisms. This is a fact. If you deny it, you might as well throw your Bible away, because it is obvious that you see only what you want to see from it. So the peace that wisdom brings is not the peace of non-Christian social etiquette. How far Christians have demeaned and trampled the Bible in the name of Christian love! Learn the definition of true wisdom from Scripture, but then do not run away with it and ask the world to explain the definition to you.

What the Scripture defines, let the Scripture also explain and demonstrate. For example, when Peter says to speak with "gentleness and respect" to authority figures, learn what this means from Peter and the apostles, not from your non-Christian friends, and in this day, not even from other Christians. It may be that Peter does not have in mind "pleases" and "thank-yous" and curtsies, but only that you should not stab someone in the eye with a knife when you preach the gospel. Or does he mean something else? Interpret Peter's words relative to Peter's cultural and religious background as recorded in the Bible. Christian scholars teach you to read biblical texts in context, but they practice it only when it is convenient for them, and when the conclusions do not contradict their preferred attitudes and theologies.

The "wisdom" of demons may promote men within the world's own corrupt system, but it will also lead them to destroy one another and to destroy this world. Then, the men are so stupid that they think Christians are the problem, and they despise the wisdom from heaven. It is the wisdom of God that will save the soul and save the world. And this wisdom begins in reverence toward God and faith in Jesus Christ, promoting peace among men on the basis that Christ is the hope for everyone, that he is the only hope for true peace and love, and everlasting life.

If a man claims to have wisdom, if he claims to understand the nature of people and of the universe, then let him show it by his life. Does he believe in God? Does he believe in Jesus Christ, that he is the only way to salvation? Does he believe that men ought to seek first the kingdom of God, and that a man's life does not consist of the abundance of his possessions? Does he agree that the most important things in life are faith, repentance, honesty, humility, grace, forgiveness, doctrine, and other things that pertain to truth and holiness? If he does not think like this, then he has no wisdom. True wisdom does not consist in one's expertise in manipulating other men and gaining some advantage over them, but in faith and reverence toward God, and in relating to other people on this foundation.

God teaches us to think in two categories, not three, not ten, not five thousand. There are only two sides. There is that which is of God and that which is of Satan. He speaks in terms of light and darkness, good and evil, humility and pride, love and hate, Christ and anti-Christ, Christians and non-Christians. Then there is the wisdom from heaven and the wisdom from hell, and just as darkness is not light, evil is not good, pride is not humility, and hate is not love, the wisdom of demons is not wisdom at all. Thus God would have us view all things in this clear and simple manner, and follow the way of true wisdom and holiness. Any reluctance to think this way in the name of humility, tolerance, and such, is itself a manifestation of the mind of the devil. Rather, if anyone claims to have wisdom and understanding, let him show it by a good life, where "good" is defined by the mind of Christ and not by the standards of the world.

## 6. The Enemy of God

**You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. (James 4:4)**

There is a lot of resistance to the message of James. This is because he is so right, and he exposes our unbelief and our hypocrisy. Among Christians this resistance usually subtle, since Christians are not supposed to go up against the word of God, and this letter from James is most definitely the word of God.

So even though some of them pay lip service to James, they attempt to go around him by appealing to the goodness of creation. In some traditions, an entire doctrine has been constructed that allows people practically unlimited indulgence in personal hobbies, sports, amusements, and political and financial ambitions. But the truth is that Scripture is not flexible enough to accommodate all of this.

Indeed, the Bible teaches that God "who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17). It never condemns riches and material goods as such, but all these are tempered with the principle that even if everything is permissible, not everything is beneficial. The person deceives himself who fully devotes all his energies to gathering the world's riches and sampling its pleasures, and still presents himself as if he is doing God a favor, as if worldliness is a mandate from God.

There are those who attack James more directly. Like the others, these people are hearers of the word but not doers of the word, and they deceive themselves. The truth is that the message of James pervades the entire Bible – other writers may use different words to say the same thing – and there is no way to isolate James for exclusion without throwing out the whole Christian faith, and along with it, one's own soul. Perhaps even more than his original readers, who needed to hear this message, those who hear this message and then attack it are in even greater darkness and delusion, and will certainly come under a greater condemnation.

James says that a person can claim to have faith, but he might be a liar so that he in fact has no faith. Why would a person rise up against such a message? Because even as he denies it, he realizes that James is talking about him. The proper response consists in confession and repentance, and in asking God for grace to improve.

A person can claim to be a friend of God, but if he is clearly a friend of the world, then this shows that he is a liar, and that he is in fact an enemy of God. The passage describes something that is more than a thankful enjoyment of God's gifts; rather, the person covets and quarrels. He tries to gain an advantage over others to obtain the things that he wants,

and even as he asks God for them, it is a pretense and does not proceed from a genuine faith, since he only wishes to satisfy his own sinful desires. Among some who claim to be Christians, who wish to give an appearance of religion, friendship with the world may take a subtler form, but it will be clear in that he shares the world's values, desires, and priorities. Can this "faith" save him?

People resist the message of James because they are the kind of people that James is talking about, so that they wish to hide and excuse their sins, and to further deceive themselves so that they would not have to face the truth. James speaks so explicitly and forcefully about his subject, and this puts people in an embarrassing position. It strikes fear in the religious impostors. On the other hand, if we will receive the word of God that he sends through James, it will deliver us from delusion and hypocrisy, and from those things that distract and hinder us from offering true service to God, and from a life that demonstrates full commitment toward thinking and living according to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

## 7. The Prayer of Faith

**Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. (James 5:13-16a)**

We ought to live all of life in relation to God and to acknowledge him in all things. If a person is suffering or in trouble, he should not wallow in fear and self-pity, or rely solely on human resources to rescue him, but he should turn his mind toward God, and pray for help and deliverance. And we are not to forget him when we are happy and comfortable; rather, we should offer him thanksgiving and songs of praise.

Then, if a man is sick, he should call a medical doctor right away. What? Is that not what James says? Oh, he says to call the church elders so that they could pray. Is it to pray that the man may endure sickness "for the glory of God"? Oh, he says for them to pray so that the man will receive healing and so that the Lord will raise him up. Does your seminary teach this? Does your church even allow it?

If a person disagrees with James, or if he heaps up excuses so that he could teach something different – even the exact opposite – is it because James is defective and outdated, or is it because this man is teaching rebellion against the Lord? And if I cannot pray for healing when I am sick, why can I still pray when I am suffering or in trouble, and when I am happy, why should I still offer songs of praise? James makes no dispensational distinction in the middle of his passage.

The founder of a biblical counseling movement complains that Christians are inconsistent when it comes to resolving spiritual or psychological issues. They claim to believe in the sufficiency of Christ and of the Scripture, and indeed they at least attempt to be consistent with this when it comes to our justification before God, and thus we affirm that we are made righteous by Jesus Christ through the gift of faith, apart from our own works and merits. But then these same Christians would seek help from therapists and psychologists who counsel on the basis of anti-biblical theories and methods, in order to resolve problems like fear, rage, depression, addictions, destructive sins and habits, and marital conflicts. He correctly insists that the Scripture is sufficient to provide guidance in these areas.

However, when he comes to physical ailments, or even psychological issues that stem from physical defects, such as a chemical imbalance, suddenly it appears as if the power of Christ is sufficient only as long as the matter does not touch the physical realm. The



moment it is suspected that there is some physical basis to the psychological symptom, the matter is referred to a medical professional. What, is Jesus Christ good for the soul, but useless for the body? Which is easier: to say "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Get up and walk"? But the Son of Man has power to do both.

To add hypocrisy to unbelief, this theologian, this scholar, this defender of biblical sufficiency and biblical counseling, wrote from a theological tradition that stresses God's rule over all of life. We are supposed to regard the body as holy, even integral to the human person like the soul; yet, God will regenerate the spirit and charge it with divine power, and leave the body to the non-Christian doctors. We trust God for forgiveness, and for our psychological well-being, but to trust him for health is the height of recklessness, and to teach about prayer for physical healing is to give people false hope. What is this strange doctrine? James knows nothing about it. It does not come from faith, but from unbelief, and from the devil.

There are arguments that pertain to the situation of that day. The medical care was poor, expensive and dangerous, and often associated with paganism. But this is not fundamentally different from the contemporary scene. How many people receive good medical care, even in advanced western nations? And even if you think that your doctors possess the very powers of God, how about the millions of people that reside in other countries? The truth is that even in your nation, medical care is often expensive and dangerous, and the doctors are evolutionists. The situation has not changed as much as theologians wish to believe. But suppose it has indeed improved much, the most disturbing implication remains, and that is these theologians wish to convince you that God is *always* the last resort, even in the face of an explicit biblical teaching to seek him first. What explains this baffling way of thinking? Unbelief.

All this is not an argument or prohibition against medicine. Since I have made a statement about this elsewhere (there is no condemnation – call a doctor, or call fifty if you wish, but do not make yourself into some kind of faith hero when you do, and do not call your recovery a miracle),<sup>3</sup> I will not repeat everything here, except to note that I have also refuted the view that by the anointing with oil James intends to combine medicine and prayer (if one insists on combining them on the basis of this passage, then he can either make the church elders perform the surgeries, or else drop the pretense and admit that he wishes to assert an alternate view no matter what, changing only what he wants to change, all the while claiming biblical support). Rather, I am insisting that unless there is an infallible and biblical argument to do otherwise, there is no reason to annul an explicit command in Scripture, and here this means that church leaders must pray in faith for the healing of their people. No historical-redemptive maneuver can make this text mean the opposite of what it says. You either believe and obey it, or you do not.

As for method, although James says that the elders should anoint the sick with oil, it is understood that this is not the only way. It is certainly one way, and an acceptable way, and it should be followed when one's attention is focused on this text. But Scripture shows that healing is effected by the laying on of hands, and by prayer or a word of

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<sup>3</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Biblical Healing*.

command without any physical contact. There is much freedom and power in Jesus Christ.

The essential thing is faith. It is easy to utter a prayer of doubt and unbelief where one believes nothing, expects nothing, requests nothing, and receives nothing. But let us not settle for that which is natural for the old, sinful man. Let us not be mere hearers of the word, and so deceive ourselves, but let us be doers of the word as well. Let us truly live all of life in relation to God and acknowledge him in all things, even when it comes to the health of our bodies. And whether or not we call on doctors, when we fail to pray in faith or when our prayer does not bring healing, let us admit our shortcoming and ask for grace instead of continuing in a state of delusion. Of course we acknowledge the sovereignty of God, but the Bible never uses this to excuse unbelief. The worst thing we can do is to justify ourselves by condemning James to irrelevance.

## 8. The Power of Elijah

**The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. (James 5:16b-18)**

There are two kinds of lessons that we can draw from a flawed man of God. We can be inspired to imitate him because of his failure; that is, since even Elijah had his imperfections and moments of weakness, we are encouraged to persevere in our struggles. But James takes us in a different direction – he points us to Elijah's success, and to his power in prayer as an example for our own. The emphasis was not that, although Elijah was a great prophet, he was nevertheless flawed like us; rather, since Elijah was a man just like us, this means we can be like him! The lesson is not that because he ran away and wallowed, we should not feel hopeless when we find ourselves doing that as well; instead, it is that even in our weakness and human frailty, we can aspire to the prophet's power.

There is a third way to allude to a man of God, and that is when preachers and theologians tell us, "You cannot do this. You cannot be like him. He was an apostle." In this manner, they attempt to restrain our boldness, to smother our faith, and to quench the Spirit, even as the gift of God stirs within us. It is the call of unbelief seeking company. They have not learned this from the Bible, and James does not teach us to think this way. Rather, James would say that Paul was a man just like us, and Peter was a man just like us, and since they did wonderful things for the Lord, so can we, because "the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." We trust in the power of Christ, and he is greater than any apostle or prophet. If God heard Paul and Peter and Elijah, then he hears us as well. James refers to Elijah not to pull him down to our level, but so that we may rise to his level.

How should we answer those who teach unbelief? We say, "Right, he was an apostle, and evidently you are a nobody. So I would rather follow his example of faith and power, and his boldness of speech, than to follow some loser like you. He was an apostle, and that is precisely why I will imitate his success as much as I can. But you want me to become a weakling and a failure, and powerless like you. That is not going to happen." Now if the Bible teaches us to imitate even Jesus, who is more than a man like us, then it teaches us to think like spiritual winners and achievers. Thus we will learn the faith of Abraham and Rahab (2:20-26), the endurance of the prophets and of Job (5:10-11), and the faith and power of Elijah (5:17-18).

Our preachers and theologians are so fond of Nehemiah, and they refer to him as an example of reliance in God's hidden providence. I have no objection to this. Nevertheless,

James does not cite Nehemiah to illustrate the kind of power that is available to us in Christ. He cites Elijah, who prayed and the rain ceased for three and a half years, and again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. Let us always keep in mind that we will not be judged by unbelieving leaders and scholars, but by the Lord Jesus in how we respond to his words, that is, to what the Bible actually teaches. False teaching from men is never an excuse, for if we are so easily swayed by unbelief, then there must be some attraction in it for us in the first place. But James speaks the truth, and he encourages our faith. Jesus Christ has set us right with God, and now our prayers can be powerful and effective, even like the prayers of Elijah.

## 9. Fellowship with Father and Son

**That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. (1 John 1:1-4)**

The passage is sometimes used to support an empirical epistemology. Although I have refuted it elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> a reminder is useful since this error entails an assault on the very nature of deity in order to preserve a false philosophical position.

The nature of God, or divinity itself, is spiritual and invisible and without form, and not subject to detection by the physical senses. God is unlike the heathen idols. He can indeed produce a tangible manifestation of his power and presence; however, John does not refer to knowledge of a manifestation, but to knowledge of what it was that was manifested. The Gospels teach us that the disciples recognized who Jesus was not by man's testimony or by flesh and blood, but by revelation from the Father. Likewise, when we come to the faith, it is because of the Father's testimony to our spirits that Jesus is the Christ, our savior and our sacrifice.

To claim that this text supports empiricism, that knowledge can come from sensation, is to say that the disciples recognized who Jesus was, even the divine Word, by their seeing and hearing and touching, that divinity itself was directly detected or necessarily inferred from the sensible aspects (or their sensations of the sensible aspects) of Jesus, namely, his human body. This constitutes a denial of the nature of God as spiritual and invisible and without form, and it is blasphemy by implication. Instead of winning an argument for empiricism, the person who so uses the passage endangers his own soul.

Once the theological implication has been made clear to him, if he refuses to recant in utter terror for his offense, the church should place him on trial as a heretic, lest his false doctrine infects the rest of the people. We must not represent the essence of divinity as something that can be examined and handled like an idol. This denial of God's spiritual and transcendent nature results in the destruction of all sound theology, including the doctrines of the incarnation and atonement, and thus salvation itself. Ironically, those who reject empiricism in favor of God's revelation and his direct action on the mind to impart understanding are the ones who are often regarded as false teachers.

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<sup>4</sup> See Vincent Cheung, "Empiricism and 1 John 1:1-3."

The passage is not about epistemology, but Jesus Christ. John is telling us what it was that he saw and heard and touched. He does not mean that he found out what it was that he saw and heard and touched by seeing and hearing and touching. He saw and heard and touched the body of Christ, and he found out – not at all by seeing and hearing and touching – that this body belonged to the Word, or the Son of God. Jesus Christ, who appeared to us as a man, and who indeed possessed a true human nature, was the incarnation of deity.

So it was the Word that appeared, and what appeared was the Word. We must stress both sides of this, or what we have would not be the doctrine of the incarnation. If we say that Jesus was a genuine man, but only a man, then he was not the incarnation of anything. If we say that Jesus was God, but that he did not appear in a genuine human body, then again there was no incarnation. And if there was no incarnation, there was no substitution and no sacrifice for our sins. But since Jesus was indeed deity, and since as he indeed came to us and lived among us as a true man, and since he died for our sins and was raised from the dead, and since he even now continues to live as this same Jesus, we have life and hope in him.

John wishes to emphasize the incarnation very likely because his readers are encountering false teachers who in some way denies or distorts the doctrine. He writes, "Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us....Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist – he denies the Father and the Son" (2:18-19, 22).

Thus he is referring to not only a general teaching or a potential danger, but an existing situation. And this involves the threat of a false doctrine that denies the incarnation: "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world" (4:1-3).

The apostles testified and left a permanent record concerning Jesus Christ, as to who he was, what he did, what happened to him, and also where he is and what he is doing now. It is often thought that we who are not apostles are at a disadvantage, but this is not Christ's own view; instead, he said that blessed are those who have never seen, but who still believe. He does not regard those who have not seen him to be at a disadvantage, because truth and faith have never been dependent on physical sensations in the first place. Even the apostles did not believe because of their sensations, but because of the testimony of the Father by the Holy Spirit. This is the same Spirit that we have received in Christ. Therefore, our faith is essentially the same as the faith of the apostles. The foundation of our confidence is identical to theirs.

What is this testimony? What is this that the apostles proclaim? It is the message that Jesus Christ is the Word, the Son of God, who had been with God the Father since the beginning, even before the creation of the world. It is he who appeared as a man and lived for a time on the earth. This is the doctrine of the incarnation, and it embodies both the divinity and the humanity of Christ. In him is eternal life. It is necessary to grasp the whole of this message and all that the incarnation means, because John will go on to say that some have denied it, and because of this they can have no fellowship with us.

To have fellowship does not mean to have social interaction; rather, if there is going to be any meaningful social interaction, it should be because there is fellowship. And where there is fellowship, it remains even when there is no socializing. Fellowship refers to partnership, or to have something in common. In the biblical context it would denote a deep bond and unity because of faith in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, we are joined to the Father and to the Son, and also to one another.

It is harmful to reduce fellowship to socializing, because then the idea of true fellowship is lost. And then salvation is also lost, because this fellowship is inseparably tied to eternal life in Christ, and this is in turn tied to the testimony of the apostles. A church barbecue is not fellowship, but where this is a common faith, there is fellowship even if there is never a church barbecue. Fellowship is the bond that we have with the Godhead and with one another as we affirm the doctrines regarding the nature, life, and work of Jesus Christ.

## 10. God is Light

**This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.**

**If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.**

**My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 1:5-2:2)**

Light is a positive metaphor and can represent a number of things. When it is used as an intellectual metaphor, it can refer to revelation, guidance, intelligence, knowledge, and the like. The Bible teaches that God enlightens the minds of his chosen ones and grants them understanding about Jesus Christ and spiritual things. On the other hand, it refers to non-Christians as blind, stupid, and so on. When it is used as an ethical metaphor, it refers to holiness, righteousness, purity, openness, and so on. The Bible calls Christians the children of light, and non-Christians are the children of darkness.

Here the emphasis is ethical. John says that God is light, and there is no darkness in him, and then darkness is associated with sin. He is making a point about claim versus reality, and truth versus deception in the spiritual life. If we claim to have fellowship with God but yet walk in darkness, or walk in sin, then we lie and do not live by the truth. Or, if we claim to be without sin or if we claim that we have not sinned, then again we lie, deceiving even ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

James makes the identical point in his letter. He says that if we merely listen to the word but does not do what it says, then we deceive ourselves (James 1:22). If a man does not obey the Bible, he can think he is one kind of person when in reality he is the opposite. Then, a man can think that he is religious and spiritual, but if he does not control his tongue and if he hardens his heart against orphans and widows in need, again he deceives himself and he is not in fact religious and spiritual (James 1:26-27).

And a man can claim that he has faith, but if his faith does not lead to the results that the Bible specifies as the inevitable fruit of faith, then he does not in fact have faith (James



2:14-26). A man has faith and is justified entirely apart from works, but if he has genuine faith, then this faith will produce what the Bible says true faith ought to produce. Paul writes that we are "created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Ephesians 2:10). Or, a man may claim to possess wisdom and understanding, but if he harbors envy and selfish ambition, then this wisdom is not of God but is of the devil, and thus in fact not wisdom at all (James 3:13-18). The man thinks that he is wise, but the truth is that he is a fool.

Some professing believers attempt to isolate James from the rest of the New Testament writers and then eject him from the Bible. They do this not because they are heroes for orthodoxy and champions of the faith, but because they are false believers and James makes them nervous. It is futile to isolate James in the first place. The apostles were united on this issue, so if anyone claims to be a Christian but attacks this doctrine or any of the writers, then he is a liar, and the truth has no place in him. He is afraid that his secret sins and his hypocrisy will be found out, and rather than running to God for forgiveness and deliverance, he tries to excuse himself. Thus he deceives himself and is cheated out of the salvation that is only in Jesus Christ. There is no need to wonder or be in doubt. The truth is straightforward and the lie is obvious. The Bible tells us the truth plainly. One is a liar if he walks in darkness and if he claims to be without sin, or that he has not committed sins.

It is appropriate to draw attention to the implied blasphemy of a false claim or false doctrine. John writes, "If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar." God says that we have sinned, and he has sacrificed his Son, Jesus Christ, to atone for our sins, to save us from hellfire and divine wrath. So for a person to claim that he has not sinned is to say that God has made a false statement about him and that there was no need for the atonement. His false claim implies the blasphemy that God is a liar and a fool. John charges such a person not only with the claim that he makes but also with the implication of the claim. This is a significant point for theological discussions and church policies.

People can lie about their spiritual condition. They can lie to themselves, and they can lie to others. But God is never deceived, and not one of these liars can escape his punishment. On the other hand, Jesus Christ gives us wisdom to perceive the reality and the courage to admit the truth, and he speaks good news into our plight. He gives us the ability to confess our sins, and when we confess our sins, we agree with the truth that God speaks about us, and instead of hiding our sins in self-righteousness and self-deception, we show reliance on Jesus Christ to deal with our sins, expressing our faith that he has secured forgiveness and cleansing for us by his sacrifice.

## 11. Jesus the Advocate

**My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:1-2, ESV)**

All of us were sinners before God brought us to the Christian faith. While we were still non-Christians, we were filled with unbelief, hostility, and wickedness. We were born with an evil nature, and out of this evil nature came evil thoughts and actions. Any sin at all against a holy God incurs ultimate punishment, and since we were slaves of sin, and since we already owed to God a debt that we could never pay, we had no hope in ourselves.

But God sent Jesus Christ, who has delivered us from the punishment that we deserved. We were saved, not by our works, and not even by our faith as such, as if we could manufacture such a holy thing to receive from God, but we were saved by Jesus Christ, who has revealed God's election and regeneration of us through the faith that he has produced in us. In this sense, we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ, and there is no place for boasting, except in what the Lord has done.

Although we are saved by Jesus Christ apart from our own works and merits, this does not mean that God's ethical standards have become meaningless. Instead, the Bible teaches that because we have been liberated from the power of sin, we ought to walk in truth and holiness; in fact, we will naturally do so. God has granted us various means and graces, including the Scripture and his Spirit, to strengthen and encourage us, so that we would overcome sin, and so that we will not conform to the world's thinking and behavior, but will rather follow the example of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Therefore, John writes to his readers "so that you will not sin." Nevertheless, it is assumed that we might sin, and there is provision for continual forgiveness and cleansing even after we have come to the faith. So he continues, "But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Thus although John wishes us to cease all sins, he does not expect perfection.

This is especially important for the proper interpretation of verses like 1 John 3:6 and 9, which say, "No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him....No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God." The usual grammatical arguments on how John indicates continuous action could be true and useful, but hardly necessary. He clearly refers to a continuous state of sin, and not just occasional or even frequent failures. What he has said earlier in the letter reinforces

this necessary interpretation, that is, he is not suggesting that a genuine believer would never stumble after his conversion.

We could declare, "No one who becomes a believer will continue to be an atheist." Of course that is true, and it would be a contradiction to say otherwise. This would be like saying, "No one who becomes a believer will continue to be an unbeliever" or "No one who becomes a Christian will continue to be a non-Christian." This is true by definition, but as unhealthy and reprehensible as it is, it is possible for a true believer to waver in his faith.

As Peter walked toward Christ on the water, he doubted and began to sink. Unlike some preachers and theologians who condemn attributing our failures to a lack of faith, Christ rebuked Peter for this very thing. Thus these preachers and theologians dare defy Jesus Christ in order to make their people – or perhaps themselves – feel better about their unbelief, their lack of results, and their numerous failures. The disciples asked, "Why could we not cast him out?" Jesus answered, "Because of your unbelief." Because...of...your...unbelief! Our teachers exclaim, "Now that is just so insensitive. Let us follow the love of Christ instead." Evidently, they follow some other Christ than the one portrayed in the Bible. The Christ in the Bible rebuked people from all walks of life repeatedly, over and over again in exasperation, about their lack of faith. Let us follow *this* Christ, and not some lame duck softie, who is no Christ at all.

Likewise, no one who becomes a child of the light will continue to walk in darkness, that is, to be continuously living in it as if he has never been regenerated. And if he is still continuously living in darkness, then it means that he has never been regenerated. He lives as if he is a child of darkness because that is really what he is. It is not that walking in the light earns him regeneration, since it cannot be earned, but that regeneration so changes a person that he now walks in the light. Righteousness has become his nature. If it is clear that this is not his nature, then he has never been regenerated. This walk in the light does not eliminate occasional failures, since we have not attained perfection. Still, we ought to grow in knowledge and in holiness, and to be eager to repent when we stumble.

"We all stumble in many ways" (James 3:2), but we can still have confidence before God since our confidence has never been placed on ourselves, but on Jesus Christ, and when we stumble we recognize that he is our advocate before the Father. He has made a perfect and permanent sacrifice for our sins, and he is our high priest forever, so that our forgiveness remains and our righteousness stands secure. I do not want saints to intercede for me. I do not want Mary to speak for me. What, do you think that she could have escaped hellfire unless the Lord Jesus had pity on her? I do not want those prophets and founders of non-Christian religions to intercede for me. If anything, they need me to intercede for them! I want the Son of God, whom God loves, to speak for me. I trust him, and I believe God always hears him. Because I am confident of his standing before God, I am confident of my own standing before God.

People are adamant about using the word "propitiation" in verse 2, lest we lose the idea of appeasing divine wrath. I do not object to this, but it is questionable that many readers will catch this idea of appeasing divine wrath from "propitiation" more readily than from something like "the atoning sacrifice" (NIV). If an atonement is demanded, there must be divine wrath. If more of the intended meaning is carried by the former, the idea that we wish to preserve is more easily inferred from the latter by ordinary readers. This is not to argue about translation, but only to point out that the biblical doctrine is invulnerable to tampering, because to appease divine wrath is a theologically necessary doctrine founded on all of Scripture.

Our God is not a local or limited deity. The power of Jesus Christ blasts through all kinds of barriers. His gospel penetrates all races, cultures, and nations. He is not only the savior of the Jews, but also of all other peoples. His authority and relevance are universal. As Peter says, "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off"; nevertheless, this does not mean that every individual is chosen for salvation, since he adds, "for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39).

It is a disgrace to contextualize Jesus Christ as if to make him into a local deity, a racial savior, or a political champion. You adapt yourself to him! You contextualize your life to conform to him! Do not use him to glorify your race or culture or nation, or even to justify your hobbies and lusts and ambitions, but use your race or culture or nation to glorify him. Bend your race to exalt Jesus Christ. Twist your culture to serve his name. If it snaps in your hands, then throw it out and walk away from it. Jesus rebuked his disciples when they minded the things of men rather than the things of God. Yet there are Christians who constantly force the Christian faith to further their race, culture, and political ideals, even making this a mandate that believers must endorse. This is utter rubbish, unspiritual, and the vanity of vanities.

## 12. Walk as Jesus Walked

**We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. (1 John 2:3-6)**

In the context of this letter, to "know" God carries the equivalent meaning of to have fellowship with God. Just as sinners cannot have fellowship with God by their own merits and powers, sinners cannot come to know God by their goodness and initiative – they have no goodness in them and no desire or ability to initiate reconciliation with God. Instead, if anyone is saved at all, God chooses the person and changes him, injects life and faith into him, and causes him to forever attach himself to Jesus Christ.

So it is not that we come to know God by obeying his commands; rather, we realize that we have come to know God if we obey them. Obedience is the natural and inevitable outcome of fellowship with God, where fellowship does not mean to socialize, and fellowship with God does not refer to prayer or worship, as the term is often misused, but it refers to the objective commonness, partnership, and unity that we have with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Out of this faith necessarily arises a holy lifestyle and obedience to God's commands.

John again directs our attention to the issue of claim versus reality. A person can say anything about himself, but what he says might not be true. So a man can make the claim, "I know God," but if he does not obey God's commands, then this man is a liar, and he does not really know God. On the other hand, a man who obeys God's word shows that his love for God is genuine. As Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15, ESV). Love for God is impossible before regeneration, and Jesus did not say that we will come to love him by obeying his commandments; rather, if we love him, so that regeneration has already occurred, then we will obey his commandments.

Thus this biblical teaching does not contradict or compromise the doctrine of justification by faith. John writes, "This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did." He does not say that we come to live in him by walking as Jesus did, but we *come to know* that we are living in him when we walk as Jesus did. To walk as Jesus did is the natural and inevitable outcome of living in him, and we come to live in him when God sovereignly unites us to Jesus Christ through the faith that he gives us. So obedience, holiness, and to walk as Jesus did are just the natural and inevitable results of God's own action in our lives. It is God following through with what he has started. If there is this follow through, then we realize that God has indeed started a work

in us. But if there is no follow through, then regardless what a man claims about himself, God has never started a work in him.

When we say that a true believer naturally performs good works or that he inevitably lives in obedience to God's commands, we ought to consider what these good works and divine commands are. And what does it mean to walk as Jesus did? When people talk about good works, they often have in mind works of charity. In itself there is no problem with this, since James himself says that true religion has to do with caring for orphans and widows (also 1 John 3:17). However, this is not the Bible's main emphasis. Consider the works of Jesus as depicted in the Gospels. How much emphasis is really given to works of charity? His works mainly consisted of teaching sound doctrine, confronting false religion, and performing miracles. The apostles also followed this pattern, not that works of charity were absent or neglected, but the chief emphasis has never been on charity, but on the advancement of true religion and sound doctrine. Thus our idea of a holy lifestyle that naturally arises from regeneration and conversion cannot become focused on charity works, kind attitudes, and the like, but it must first focus on distinctively religious activities, such as teaching the doctrines of the Christian faith, attacking non-Christian ideas and religions, worship, and prayer.

We arrive at the same conclusion when we consider what it means to obey God's commands. What are these commands? Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God, and after that, his commandment is for us to love other people. So our conception of a life of holiness, good works, and obedience to God's commands would be wrongheaded if we assume that such a life mainly or firstly means to love people. Certainly, if we love God, we will also follow his command to love people (1 John 4:19-21), but the love for God is the foundation for loving people, and loving people is a manifestation or expression of our love for God. Our faith becomes humanistic if this order is reversed, and in some cases it would mean that those who think this way have never been converted. Perhaps they are nothing more than non-Christian philanthropists, attempting to save men apart from repentance and belief in the truth.

In the Ten Commandments, God first issues commands concerning true religion, that he is to be exclusively worshiped, that no idols are to be worshiped or be used to represent him, and so on. After this foundation is laid, he then issues commands concerning human relationships. Thus when John says that if we know God we will obey his commands, those commands that are distinctively religious are assumed, and assumed to be primary rather than secondary or even irrelevant. What this means is that even if a person performs all kinds of charitable deeds such as feeding orphans and widows, as long as he remains a non-Christian, as long as he fails to offer exclusive worship to the Christian God and as long as he does not affirm the incarnation, atonement, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, he does not know God. Rather, if a man knows God, he will obey God's commands about worship, so that he will affirm the divinity and humanity of Christ and all other Christian doctrines, and then he will obey God's commands about how we ought to treat people, resulting in works of kindness and charity.

### 13. Many Antichrists Have Come

**Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist – he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also. (1 John 2:22-23)**

The term "antichrist" has been popularized as a reference to a future demon-possessed dictator who would wield his formidable political and military might to persecute the followers of Jesus Christ. However, such a figure is more aptly represented by the "beast" in Revelation, which arguably found its fulfillment in the first century.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the antichrist is mentioned only in the letters of John, and is never connected with political or military power. An antichrist is what the term suggests – someone who is against Christ. Thus the term can refer to any non-Christian, but it is especially applicable to false teachers, that is, those who oppose the idea that Jesus is the Christ.

An antichrist is not a political adversary, but a doctrinal adversary. And there is not only one antichrist, but as John writes, "even now many antichrists have come" (2:18). It is silly for Christians to speculate about some political antichrist in Europe or some other place, when they have truckloads of them in their own churches and seminaries. What makes a person an antichrist? John writes, "He denies the Father and the Son," and in this context, he does this mainly by denying the Son, and to deny the Son is also to deny the Father. This is "the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ."

"Christ" is not just a random sound or title. John has made clear what he means by the term from the outset of this letter. Christ is the one who had been the Word, and who had been with the Father since the beginning, even before the creation of the world, and who then appeared in human form, in a physical body that can be seen, heard, and touched. Then, John also mentions his work of atonement (which entails his sacrificial death) and his work as advocate (which assumes his resurrection and ascension). Therefore, to affirm that Jesus is the Christ means to affirm his incarnation, including his divinity and his humanity, and also his work of atonement, his resurrection, his ascension, and his continual role as high priest for his people. Because this is what John means by "Christ," it follows that he means that someone who denies any of this denies that Jesus is the Christ, and this makes him an antichrist.

John continues, "No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also." This is the Christian answer to religious diversity. The world says that everyone is entitled to his own beliefs, that there are many ways to God, and that we are not to condemn other people for disagreeing with us. Against this, the Christian faith declares that nobody is entitled to his own beliefs, that there is only one

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<sup>5</sup> See Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration Of The Left Behind Theology*.

way to God, and that we are to condemn everybody who disagrees with this. "No one who denies the Son has the Father." Again, this refers to the denial of what John means when he calls Jesus the Christ – that Jesus was the incarnation of the Son of God, so that he was both divine and human, that Jesus died and made atonement for the sins of the chosen ones, that he was raised from the dead, and that he is now at the right hand of God as high priest and advocate for his people.

No one who denies any of this, that is, no one who denies the Son, has the Father. This must direct how we think about other religions, including the faith of those Jews who deny that Jesus is the Christ. I mention this because some Christians regard the Jews as their brothers in faith, at times even their superiors, although the Jews deny that Jesus is the Christ just as much as Muslims and Buddhists do. Do we think that the Jews have fellowship with God, only that they need to catch up to the Christians by acknowledging Jesus as well? But John says, "No one who denies the Son has the Father." If they do not accept what we say about Jesus, then they have no fellowship with God – at all. They have fellowship with God just as much as the atheists do – that is, zero.

Anybody who had fellowship with God in the Old Testament knew and believed in Jesus Christ, although they had to believe in the promise rather than the fulfillment, and we possess a richer revelation about Christ than they did. God promised a savior to Adam and Eve, and from then on the promise – that is, the gospel – was passed down from generation to generation, while God continued to expand on it by his revelations to the prophets. Jesus said, "Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). Moses predicted that a prophet like him would appear, and he visited Christ on the mount of transfiguration.

This has always been true: "No one who denies the Son has the Father." Thus since the beginning of the world, the only ones who have been saved from hell and who have gained fellowship with God were "Christians." It is not an anachronism to apply this term to Old Testament figures. In this sense the Christian faith is an outgrowth and completion of the Jewish faith, but not of a Jewish faith that denies Jesus Christ! A Jewish faith that denies Jesus Christ has no true connection with the faith of the Old Testament, but it is a mere cultural relic. We are the spiritual descendents of ancient "Christians," and not the descendents of ancient antichrists. The Bible has never been anything but a Christian Bible. From the time of Adam to Abraham, and from Moses to Jesus, this faith has never been anything but the Christian faith.

Jesus said that if the Jews had believed Moses, then they would have believed in Jesus also, because Moses predicted the coming of Jesus and commanded the people to believe in him. Therefore, there is no such thing as a Jew who truly believes Moses who is not also a believer in Jesus, or a Christian. If he does not believe in Jesus, then neither does he believe Moses.

Now if the Jews, that is, those who are not Christians, do not know God, then it is even more obvious that all other non-Christians do not know God. This is the message of the apostles, and anybody who claims to be a Christian but who relaxes this even a little has



aligned himself with the antichrists, because it is certain that he does not understand or acknowledge the idea of the Christ, and that Jesus is the Christ. "No one who denies the Son has the Father." This applies to Jews, Muslims, Mormons, Buddhists, atheists, and all those who are non-Christians. "Whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also." In other words, whoever is a Christian has fellowship with God, but whoever is not a Christian (no matter what kind of non-Christian he is) does not know God.

Even if we believe that all non-Christians are condemned to hell, perhaps we can be polite about this? John does not think so. He calls the antichrist a liar. In fact, he repeatedly calls his opponents liars in the letter, and he uses many other terms in his Gospel and in Revelation. Sometimes I come across comments on debates between Christian and non-Christian scholars, and the positive reviews from believers often echo the refrain that the exchanges were "refreshing" because both sides remained "respectful" of the opponents, so that there was "more light than heat," and so on. But if the Bible calls non-Christians all sorts of demeaning names, then have the Christians presented the biblical worldview if they have repeated none of them? Do the non-Christians really get a sense of what God thinks about them after these debates?

Christians have allowed non-Christians to frame the way that they think about unbelief and how they talk about Jesus Christ. (If that happens to you, realize that you are already defeated.) But let the non-Christians insult their wives and daughters, or even their favorite football teams and video games, and there comes the indignation! There comes the hostility! Jesus Christ has become an object of detached academic discussion, because that is "scholarly"! If this is what it means to be scholars, then let us become prophets instead. As the disciples of Jesus Christ, and as those who have inherited the apostolic message, we have a duty to call non-Christians what they are. Therefore, let us revive the biblical practice of name-calling, and of insulting and deriding unbelievers and false teachers.

## **14. Believe Not Every Spirit**

**Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.**

**You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood. (1 John 4:1-6)**

Christian teaching breeds careful, intelligent people. All non-Christians are stupid, and they believe all kinds of absurd ideas like atheism, evolution, the goodness and progress of humanity, and religions other than the Christian faith. Jesus Christ came to deliver us from our stupidity just as much as our sinfulness, and indeed the two are intertwined. A person believes in evolution, or the reliability of science (among numerous other errors, the scientific method commits the triple fallacy of empiricism, induction, and asserting the consequent), or any other non-Christian idea or religion, because he is stupid, and since he is also sinful, he holds on to his superstition no matter how ridiculous it is, and no matter how thoroughly we have refuted it. Likewise, wisdom and righteousness are inseparable. God is wise in his holiness, and it is wise to believe him and follow his commandments.

There is a perspective that encourages us to accept every, affirm every, respect every, and learn from every perspective. Those who advocate this way of thinking associate it not only with good sense, but also with a fair and humble character. This further emphasizes the stupidity and sinfulness of non-Christians, since they not only adopt a foolish and wicked perspective, but they distort intelligence and righteousness into their opposites in order to justify their position.

In his grace, God does not permit us to be so simpleminded. Faith in Jesus Christ is not founded on gullibility, but it is rather the deathblow to the gullibility and irrational thinking of the non-Christians. The Bible teaches us, "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God." Instead of telling us to embrace every, respect every, and learn from every, the apostle instructs us, "Do not believe every...but test." The Christian faith is a perspective that distinguishes between truth and falsehood, and that exercises holy intelligence and suspicion. It teaches us to respect and accept the

truth, but to despise and trample falsehood, even every thought that does not agree with Jesus Christ.

People disagree with the Christian faith not because they exercise freedom of thought or simply because they see things from a different perspective. All disagreements with the Christian faith are outright demonic and come from the spirit of the antichrist. This is the inspiration behind all scientific, philosophical, and religious ideas that do not acknowledge the divinity, humanity, and the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. The demonic spirits operate through human persons, who are but the children and the pawns of the devil.

In the face of this demonic opposition, the apostle encourages us: "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." Who is this that lives in us? Earlier he writes, "And this is how we know that he lives in us. We know it by the Spirit he gave us." The Spirit of Jesus Christ who lives in us is greater than the spirit of the non-Christians, and the spirit of their various beliefs and religions. John does not say that we cower in the corner while the Spirit of Christ overcomes the spirit of the antichrist, but he says that God lives in us, so that we, the Christians, overcome them, the non-Christians. The Bible does not separate sinful ideas with sinful people – the sinful people are the one who believe and promote sinful ideas, and they do this precisely because they are so sinful. So God enables us to overcome not just non-Christian ideas, but the non-Christian people, not by physical violence, but by divine intelligence and spiritual power.

To distinguish between the Spirit of God and the spirit of the antichrist, John gives us a doctrinal test. Here it is not a test of experience or character, but of theology. Christians are familiar with those words of Jesus: "By their fruit you shall know them." In other words, if a man claims to be a prophet but is a raging homosexual, he is not someone that you should follow. Of course, such a test does not eliminate matters of doctrine, but rather presupposes the primacy of doctrine, since it is a matter of doctrine that homosexuality is a transgression of God's command, and one's theology is an aspect of one's fruit.

So even when the emphasis is on character, it does not reduce the importance of doctrine; rather, a character test is applied only after one has already passed the doctrinal test. This is an essential point because the test for "fruit" is often misapplied as if to say that if a person's lifestyle appears to fit a Christian pattern, then his ministry must be legitimate even if we must overlook many doctrinal defects and outright heresies.

This kind of thinking cannot be more wrong. If a person does not pass the doctrinal test, there is no need to even apply the character test. Paul told the Galatians that if anyone preaches a different gospel, then it is no gospel at all and he would be eternally condemned. We make this determination even before we consider his behavior and lifestyle.

Likewise, John writes, "If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him" (1 John 2:29). But this presupposes the doctrinal test he mentions earlier: "Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist" (2:22). We are not to think that an antichrist could act righteously and be judged as having been born of God. The righteousness of verse 29 is defined by the righteous of Christ ("if you know that *he is righteous*"), and therefore it cannot accommodate the antichrist of verse 22.

All this is to say that it is a mistake to relax the doctrinal test in favor of the character test, as if the character test is the one that determines the issue. Again, the doctrinal test is so much more important that if a man cannot pass the doctrinal test, there is no need to apply the character test, since he must be rejected without further consideration. And the nature and scope of the character test – what counts as righteous character – are themselves determined by our theology.

Here the doctrinal test centers on what the teachers or prophets think about the nature and work of Jesus. This is not a complete doctrinal test, since in other contexts we would want to investigate their view on the nature of God, the inspiration of Scripture, justification by faith, and so on. The focus is on the nature and work of Jesus most likely because John is targeting specific individuals who are spreading a false christology: "I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray" (2:26).

We can say that the test has to do with the nature of Christ because John refers to some who have denied that God has come in the flesh. He wants us to know that Jesus had indeed come in the flesh, and he wants us to know *what* it was that appeared in the flesh – he was the incarnation of deity, the Word, in actual humanity. The test also has to do with the work of Christ because the antichrists denied that Jesus was the Christ, where "Christ" is not an empty title but carries specific meanings for John, that is, one who was both divine and human, who died to make atonement for sins, and who was raised from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God to make intercession for his people. Any worldview or religion that denies any of this is inspired by the spirit of the antichrist.

The world is so vocal against the "we are right and everyone else is wrong" mentality that Christians have become timid about it and ashamed of it. Of course, the non-Christians are hypocritical about this, since they indeed think that they are right and all others are wrong, especially the Christians. In any case, John teaches that we must have this mentality of "we are right and everyone else is wrong," only that we must ensure that the "we" is an identification, not with the world, but with Christ and the apostles. Once we are established in the right doctrines, such as those affirmed by John in this letter, then whether others agree with us becomes a valid test for truth and falsehood: "They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood."

I affirm that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who has come in the flesh. He died for the sins of his chosen ones, and then he was raised from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God to make intercession for his people. I have inherited this message from Christ, the prophets, and the apostles; therefore, those who know God will agree with me and stand with me, but those who disagree with me on this are of the spirit of the antichrist and the spirit of falsehood.

On the other hand, those who are of the world speak from the perspective of the world, and the world listens to them. When someone follows or sympathizes with those who deny the nature and work of Christ as taught by the apostles, I know that this person is of the world and does not know God, even when he pretends to be a Christian pastor or theologian. I am not afraid of his popularity or reputation, and I will not waver on my judgment. John has taught me what I should think of such a person, and I have overcome him because the Spirit of God who is in me is greater than the demonic spirit that is in him.

Is there a parent, or a pastor, or a professor who urges you to welcome every spirit, to welcome dialogue and mutual learning, and to even respect those who deny the nature and work of Jesus Christ? "This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world." Be strong and confident, since you are of God and have overcome the antichrist, because greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world.

## **15. God is Love**

**Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.**

**This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.**

**Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.**

**In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. (1 John 4:7-18)**

"God is love" is a most popular teaching, as well as a slogan, that has been taken from the Bible to assert the opposite of what the Bible teaches. The confusion results from a case of equivocation, where men have inserted unbiblical ideas of love into the biblical text and then inferred whatever they wished from it. So they think that because God is love, men will not be condemned to hell, or that men can remain ignorant of Jesus Christ or even reject him with impunity.

Suppose I say, "Mr. Lee is the very picture of generosity, since he founded a scholarship to send ten students to college." From this, it would not be right to declare, "Mr. Lee is the very picture of generosity; therefore, feel free to break into his home and take whatever you want." The meaning and application of generosity are defined and restricted by the initial statement. Just as one cannot alter "ten" to "five million," or "students" to "mechanics," or "college" to "Japan," the statement does not permit one to interpret generosity any way he likes.

Likewise, just as we learn that God is love from the Bible, we must also learn what love is from the Bible. If the Bible defines and restricts the meaning and application of love, then we may infer nothing different or beyond the boundaries that it sets on the term. Since the Bible teaches that multitudes of people will suffer damnation, God's love is

evidently consistent with his sending people to hell and torturing them forever. That is, whatever the Bible means by love, it is not something that extinguishes hellfire. It may be contrary to what non-Christians think that love should be, but if they rob Mr. Lee, they will be hauled to jail just the same. God's jail is a bit hotter.

Just as the initial statement about Mr. Lee's generosity is specific and restrictive, "God is love" also appears in a context that defines this love. Next time someone says, "Well, after all, God is love," perhaps to excuse sin, unbelief, and heresy, demand from him, "Where is this in the Bible? What is the context of the verse? And what does love mean in that context? Tell me!" As his jaw drops and his eyes glaze over, you can tell him what I am about to show you.

John first says it in verse 8: "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." And then he immediately explains this love in verses 9 and 10: "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." Therefore, by "love" John refers to God's sending of Jesus Christ and the purpose for sending him.

He says that God sent his "one and only Son," which refers to the deity of Christ, which in turn means that the sending refers to the incarnation, of deity being "sent" to dwell in humanity. And then he says that God sent his Son to make "an atoning sacrifice," or propitiation, "for our sins." Thus the very character of this love assumes human depravity and divine wrath, else there would be nothing for which to make atonement. The atonement entails the death of Christ, and since the Bible teaches that the resurrection is the proof that Christ has fulfilled this sacrifice and that God has accepted it, it also entails the resurrection of Christ.

John says this is how God "showed his love among us." How much detail this contains is one issue, but it is indisputable that when John says, "God is love," he refers to a love that is inseparably associated with and defined by the sending of Jesus Christ and the redemptive work that he accomplished. Since the topic is God's love, and since this love is defined by his work of salvation through Jesus Christ, all other biblical passages that explain redemption become relevant, including Romans 9. There Paul shows us that God's redemptive love entails many casualties. The passage will help us see what is taken for granted by John.

Paul writes, "Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated'" (Romans 9:13). He mentions this to make the point that God's love, which in relation to us is a redemptive love, is not indiscriminate but is directed to specific individuals according to God's own choice. Thus he continues, "For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion'" (v. 15). The demonstration of this love is salvific and specific.

If God's love is directed toward specific individuals, what does this love mean for the reprobates? Paul answers, "Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same

lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?" (v. 22-24).

He states that God has the right to make some people for noble purposes, and in this context, this means to receive his mercy, and that he has the right to make some people for common use, and this means to suffer his wrath. This is to address the issue of justice – God can do whatever he wants. Then, Paul explains the reason for creating and tolerating the reprobates, who are "prepared for destruction." He writes that God chooses "to show his wrath and make his power known...to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory."

In other words, since his chosen people are saved from God's wrath and will therefore never experience this aspect of divine glory, God made the reprobates so that he can show off all that he is by damning them, punishing them, and torturing them in hell. This proceeds from his redemptive love. He does this precisely because he loves those he has chosen to receive his mercy. If I want to show my son how skillful I am with a rifle, I am not going to shoot him in the face with it. No, I will shoot a deer or a bear, whose life is dispensable. And I will do this because I love my son and want him to know more about me.

This is God's love, and this love always wins, because God always wins. And this means that, because God is love, the reprobates – those who are non-Christians and will remain non-Christians because of God's foreordination – can never escape hellfire. No matter how hard non-Christians strive to save themselves, God will catch them and send them to hell, where he will actively torture them with endless pain and anguish. God's love (for himself, for his Son, and for his chosen people) guarantees the eternal damnation and suffering of all non-Christians. He will see to it that it happens.

Then, later in his passage, John says it again: "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:16b). As with the earlier instance, this appears within a context that defines the love and restricts its meaning and application. Immediately before this, he writes, "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us" (v. 15-16a). The apostle indeed writes that "whoever lives in love *lives in God and God in him,*" but in this context this refers only to a Christian kind of love, a love that affirms Christian theology: "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, *God lives in him and he in God.*" The love that we must walk in is a love that "acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God." Only Christians can walk in the kind of love that the Bible commands.

Thus on God's end, love is inseparably tied to his sending Jesus Christ. And on our end, love is inseparably tied to our receiving Jesus Christ. John adds, "We know and rely on the love God has for us." God's love never fails. We can count on him to save us through



Jesus Christ, and we can count on him to damn the unbelievers to hell. This is what it means when the Bible says, "God is love."

## 16. Infant Salvation, Part 1<sup>6</sup>

There is biblical evidence that some infants are saved. For example, David said that he would go to his dead son, but his son would not return to him. John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit in the womb. However, there is no biblical basis to believe that all who die as infants will go to heaven. It is indeed possible, since it seems the Bible has no example of any infant going to hell. But it is a mere possibility that all are saved.

Any infant that is saved must be saved on the basis of God's election and Christ's atonement. The Bible denies that there is any other basis for salvation. This means that God could create some who would die as infants, but who would be saved, and Christ died for these when he was crucified. The fact that they are too young to be conscious of sin may mean that no conscious faith is required of them. Their minds have not reached the stage where deliberate belief in doctrine and repentance from wickedness are meaningful. However, this does not mean that all who could not exercise conscious faith are saved.

It may make Christians uncomfortable to say that some may not need to exercise conscious faith, but we assume that David's son and John the Baptist had not exercised faith when they were saved. There is a coherent way to explain this that does not compromise the gospel. Recall that even when we speak of salvation by faith, we are not really referring to faith as such, but Jesus Christ. Faith *itself* does not save – only Christ does. If anyone is saved, he is saved by Jesus Christ.

Thus by affirming that infants could be saved apart from faith but not apart from Christ, the gospel is not compromised. Christ saves adults in conjunction with conscious faith, and Christ saves some infants – at least two! – apart from conscious faith. I am saved not because of faith, but because of Christ. My faith is a manifestation of salvation, of election and regeneration. It is not a cause of salvation, but rather an effect of salvation. We would expect a person who receives salvation as an infant but who does not die to manifest this faith when he grows up and becomes aware of right and wrong, sin and repentance, and so on. And this is what happened in John the Baptist.

Perhaps the same applies to those who are mentally retarded, although there seems to be no biblical evidence to say that some mentally retarded people are saved, since there seems to be no equivalent examples in Scripture. Their salvation is only a possibility. It is also possible that all mentally retarded people are damned. If this is the case, it would be misleading to complain that they are punished for being mentally retarded; rather, on the basis of the doctrine of reprobation, they would be created as damned individuals in the first place. The point is that there is no theological problem either way.

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<sup>6</sup> Adapted from email correspondence.

This does not apply to mentally aware infants, teenagers, and adults who have never heard the gospel – they will all surely go to hell. (I include infants because, although we refer to infants who could be saved apart from faith, many of them become aware enough at an early age, perhaps by the time they are two, three, or four years old). The Bible is clear on this. There are those who try to say that some normal adults may be saved by Christ apart from faith. This is heresy. Those who affirm this should be excommunicated. We must deal with them in the harshest manner we can muster, because the entire gospel and the work of preaching are compromised.

The popular position that all infants are saved is wishful thinking, and continues as a groundless religious tradition. Those who affirm the doctrine of election have never been able to establish that all those who die as infants are elect. Their arguments are forced and fallacious. And those who reject the doctrine of election lacks even this to fabricate a doctrine of infant salvation. Thus the invention deceives the masses and offers them hope based on mere fantasy. The way to comfort bereaved parents is not to lie to them, but to instruct them to trust in God. Whatever God decides must be right and good. It may be difficult due to their grief and weakness at the time, but if the parents cannot finally accept this, that God is always right, then they are headed for hell themselves and need to become Christians.

As for why the Bible does not tell us exactly who are saved, and who can be saved apart from faith, if any, it seems that its interest is in addressing those who need to have conscious faith to be saved. In other words, all those who could understand the gospel, must believe the gospel to be saved. This includes all intelligent infants, teenagers, and adults in all parts of the earth, whether or not they have access to the gospel. If someone dies without hearing the gospel, it just means that God has decreed his damnation beforehand. Although he will still burn in hell, the punishments that he receives will probably be less extreme than one who hears and rejects the gospel, since the Bible teaches that those who know more but disobey will suffer more. The fate of those who cannot understand the gospel – fetuses, very young infants, the mentally retarded, and so on – rests in God's hands, and he does not see fit to tell us what he does with them. Rather, we must mind our own business, examine ourselves to see that we are in the faith, and trust God with the rest.

## 17. Infant Salvation, Part 2

Most of those who comment on infant salvation, it would seem, prefer the view that allows the salvation of all those infants who die at a very early age. To them my position is less comforting. Then, there are those who insist that, in an absolute sense and without exception, only those who exercise a conscious faith in Jesus Christ are saved. To them my position represents a compromise of the gospel. Now, I would admire their zeal for the necessity of faith in Jesus Christ if they were more skillful in presenting their objections. Some people consider themselves defenders of the faith, but their zeal for this honor, not necessarily zeal for Christ, exceeds their ability.

Let me state my position again. First, I insist that every person is in need of salvation, without which he will suffer eternal wrath in hell, and that this applies to infants and the retarded; second, I insist that any person who is saved at all is saved by Jesus Christ – that is, by God's eternal choice and Christ's sacrificial death for that particular person; third, salvation is not by faith *as such* but by Jesus Christ – I do not save myself by my faith, but it is God who saves me by Jesus Christ; fourth, God saves anyone that he chooses, and anyone that he chooses will believe the gospel – the issue here is whether we can add, "where the ability to believe applies," with the assumption that this ability does not apply in infants and the retarded.

In itself, I have no problem with the idea that for anyone to receive salvation, in the absolute sense and without exception, he must exhibit a conscious faith in the gospel. This would mean that those who are presumably unable to exercise faith are all damned to hell, including infants, the mentally retarded, and intelligent adults who have never heard the gospel. I have no misgivings about this at all. Those belonging to the third group, I say, are damned no matter what, but the topic concerns those belonging to the first and the second, or the like.

If I am not ready to affirm the above in the absolute sense and without exception, it is not because I am trying to be charitable. Again, I have no problem with the idea that all who die as embryos, fetuses, infants, and mentally retarded would burn in hell. If this is what God has decided, then this is what happens. I am not like that idiot who thinks that no one ends up in hell because "love wins." If God succeeds in doing what he wants, then God wins, whether this means sending people to heaven or to hell. If he saves those he loves, so that those whom he loves reaches heaven, then love wins. If he loves his chosen ones so much that he wishes to show forth his glory and wrath to them by visiting the reprobates with judgment and hellfire, then love wins again. Rather, among other considerations, I consider the cases of David's son and John the Baptist two hurdles. If these hurdles are overcome, then it seems that there remains nothing to prevent the absolute assertion that only those who exercise conscious faith in Jesus Christ are saved.

After his son died, David said, "I will go to him, but he will not return to me" (2 Samuel 12:23). If we assume that this referred to heaven, then the child was saved. Thus the way to overcome this hurdle would be to show that the child was no longer a small infant, but that he was already old enough to be aware and to believe. But then we are burdened with the implication that David did not repent for an extended period of time. Perhaps he refused to repent for two, five, ten years? A popular estimate is that Nathan came after one year. Also, if the "seventh day" (12:18) refers not to the seventh day of the illness but the seventh day since the birth of the child, then an attractive interpretation is that God did not allow the child to be circumcised on the eighth day and thus as an act of judgment prevented him from becoming a citizen of Israel.

Another way to remove the hurdle is to show that when David said, "I will go to him, but he will not return to me," he referred not to heaven, not to the place that the child's spirit had been taken, or to death or the grave. That is, the child would not come back to David from death, but David would go to the child at death. Of course, initially there is also the option to think that the child was sent to hell, and David said that he would also be sent to hell when he died. But based on what we know of David from Scripture, it seems safe to think that he was saved.

As for John the Baptist, the angel said, "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15, ESV). So he was young enough to represent the group that we have in mind. One way to remove this hurdle is to show that to be filled with the Holy Spirit does not refer to salvation, that is, to show that a person can be full of the Spirit and still headed to hell.

I do not think that it is impossible to overcome these two hurdles, but it will entail a display of some exegetical skill to make an irrefutable case. At this time neither have I come up with nor have I come across a definitive argument that removes them. Just as I have been dissatisfied with all attempts to show that all those who die as infants are elect and saved, I have been dissatisfied with the attempts to show that these two hurdles have been conclusively overcome.

Suppose one presents such a conclusive argument, then to me there would no longer remain any hurdles to the view that conscious faith in Jesus Christ is an absolute requirement, and that all those who are unable to exercise such faith are condemned to hell forever. Again, it is essential to note that the question pertains only to those who are presumably unable to exercise faith, not including those who are merely ignorant, as in those who have never heard the gospel (given passages like Romans 1 and 2, these will surely be damned), but only those of an immature or defective constitution as human beings.

Nevertheless, there are smart alecks who wish to push the issue, but they should slow down and think. Perhaps I am not less zealous than you are for the gospel, but just more intelligent about it. Even if we manage to show that conscious faith is an absolute requirement, infants and the retarded not excepted, this still does not show that infant salvation is impossible. We will have to hold constant the idea of the necessity of

conscious faith in Jesus Christ – I shall most gladly comply, and urge it more vehemently than you ever could – but there is nothing in Scripture that requires us to hold constant the assumption that very young infants, even embryos and fetuses, cannot receive awareness and intelligence, and that the mentally retarded cannot be cured.

In other words, first, if God indeed requires conscious faith even from infants and the retarded, and second, if he indeed saves infants and the retarded, this would mean that when he regenerates infants and the retarded, he also grants them knowledge of the gospel and the intelligence to consciously affirm it. There is nothing in the Bible that requires everyone who learns the gospel to learn it from men (they would be relieved that they do not have to learn it from the likes of you), and there is nothing in the Bible that says an embryo cannot think or believe – we only assume that they cannot, and if this requires extraordinary providence or miraculous power, so be it. Certainly, there is nothing in the Bible that says the mentally retarded cannot be cured. So I have no problem with this, and I think that this is entirely possible. But I cannot say for sure what is actually the case, if this or another possibility is in fact what happens. If you know, that is fine with me, but I do not believe that you know.

And the Bible does not say that, when infants and the retarded receive awareness and intelligence, they must tell you about it. But you say, "If they do not talk about it, then how are they saved?" Perhaps they just do not talk *to you* about it. Why? Because you are so obnoxious about this whole thing on infant salvation that these tiny prodigies know better than to tell you that it is possible. But you say, "If they tell other people about it, then why would I not hear about it?" Perhaps God in his providence arranges everything to prevent you from hearing about it, because he also finds you obnoxious, and the best way to punish you is to allow your ignorance and self-righteous zeal to continue. And after this, unless you have something more intelligent to say – there are many more considerations, so do not bring up the topic like you know what you are talking about if you cannot list them – I would rather not discuss it with you, either.

If an infant is in heaven, I have no desire to damn him to hell; if an infant is in hell, I have no power to elevate him to heaven. But whether embryo, fetus, baby, or adult, if you can read this and understand this, then I am sure that it is true, and I am sure it is my right and duty, to tell you that you must believe in Jesus Christ to save your wretched soul. Yes, even someone obnoxious like you, can be saved. My concern is less about whether embryos can exercise faith, but that as pushy and annoying as you are, whether *you* can exercise faith, and whether the faith that you think you have is real. As for the embryos, if they perish, they will go where God decides – if they all burn in hell, they all burn in hell – but if they live, I will talk to them in a few years.

## 18. Tongues and Human Languages

As to whether the tongues in 1 Corinthians 12-14 refer to human languages, as they do in Acts 2, many cessationists assert that they are different, that 1 Corinthians does not refer to languages, but gibberish, since they seem to think that this helps their position, or at least their agenda in belittling it.

However, Paul says that tongues could be interpreted, which means that tongues, even before interpretation, could convey meaning; otherwise, the interpretation would not really be an interpretation, but it would be an original and standalone message that has no prior basis. Then, Paul cites Isaiah where the prophet refers to "strange tongues" and "lips of foreigners." The "lips of foreigners" would refer to actual languages used by foreigners, as in the foreigners who invaded Israel, and thus human languages.

Indeed, throughout the discussion on tongues, Paul gives no indication that he is talking about anything other than languages: "Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning" (14:10). The issue has never been whether someone exercising the gift of tongues speaks in a language, but it is whether he speaks in a language that his immediate audience can understand: "If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me" (14:11). Sometimes a seminary professor might speak a minute or two in Greek, or Latin, or German, without translating what he says for the students. I could shout at him in Chinese and call it even. Even though this involves no gibberish, Paul would have been displeased about such a transaction.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul posits several hypothetical scenarios in order to make his point about love, and in the process he assumes the functions of the gifts he mentions, only that he magnifies their usual powers to a higher level without changing what the gifts actually do.

He mentions prophecy. Evidently, pushing this gift to the highest level would enable him to "fathom *all* mysteries and *all* knowledge." The power of prophecy is usually not manifested to this extreme degree, but it is clear that the gift enables one to fathom at least *some* mysteries and *some* knowledge, even though not *all* mysteries and *all* knowledge.

Next, he refers to a faith that can move mountains. Faith usually does not manifest to this degree, but this is not unrealistic, because Jesus indeed said that faith could throw a mountain into the ocean. In my exposition on Mark 11, I have demonstrated that this cannot be a hyperbole.<sup>7</sup> Again, even as Paul uses a hypothetical scenario in which faith is manifested in a strong degree, he does not change what it actually does.

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<sup>7</sup> See Vincent Cheung, "Faith to Move Mountains."

Then, he talks about giving all he has to the poor and even offering his body to be burned. This is entirely realistic, since even though a person might give only some of what he possesses, it is indeed possible for him to give all of it to the poor. And although offering one's body to be burned is unusual, and presumably most people can do it only once, it is still possible for someone to do. In any case, sacrifice usually occurs on a less drastic level, but the extreme example does not alter the meaning of giving or sacrifice.

Returning to the beginning of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul refers to speaking in the tongues men and angels, or as the NLT reads, "If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels." Given what he does with the other gifts in this passage, the only correct interpretation is that here he talks about a strong and extraordinary manifestation of speaking in tongues but does not change what the gift actually does. Since this hypothetical scenario has him speaking "all the languages of earth and of angels," we know that tongues can realistically speak in all human languages, not to mention the angels, although the gift usually does not manifest to this degree. Perhaps the gift never speaks in the language of angels, although it can in principle, just as prophecy can reveal *all* mysteries and knowledge in principle, but perhaps it never does.

What, then, is an ordinary gift of tongues? It must be human language, although it usually does not, and perhaps never, enable a person to speak in all the languages of men and even of the angels. Here we are interested in the definition of the gift, a definition that applies regardless of one's view on the continuation of the gift. And by this definition, even an ordinary manifestation of the gift could enable a person to speak in one, a few, or more than several human languages by supernatural power.

Paul never belittled any of the gifts of the Spirit. Rather, those who belittle the gifts due to their own unbelief and tradition should themselves be belittled. Let them take care in how they talk about the gifts, lest like the Pharisees who had small faith but big mouths, they persist in persecuting believers in a jealous rage, and in the process even commit the sin of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.



## 19. The Legalist's Best Friend<sup>8</sup>

When I read "The Legalist's Worst Nightmare," I felt compelled to respond. Do you see anywhere in Scripture where Christ pursued those who followed the Law like you said to pursue them? You may be trying to make a valid point, but the method is extremely wrong. I see your point, but to follow through would be horrendous. This is the Muslims' technique! They force people to follow their beliefs. That is totally wrong.

Sorry, Vincent, the best way is to live and love Christ as displayed in the Bible, then let the Holy Spirit do His work. To attempt to be the Holy Spirit for others is extreme folly and will drive anyone away. Our job is to live for Christ and love others as Christ did. We are NOT the "Hound of Heaven." We are but messengers. Our job is to tell others and get out of the way and let the Holy Spirit do His work.

Then why do you write to me and try to "force" your beliefs on me? You hypocrite! You Muslim! I have never met you. I have never heard of you. I have never initiated anything with you. Yet you take it upon yourself to send me a correction. Why do you pursue me like this, you hypocrite? By your standard, this makes your behavior worse than what I recommended to this man. You see, you do it yourself, but when I suggest it, you say I am wrong. You self-righteous Muslim hypocrite.

Can you read? Are you stupid? Before you initiate a correction, make sure you read what you are correcting. The person who wrote to me said that his in-laws were trying to impose the Law on him. Like the Pharisees, this probably meant not the pure Old Testament laws, but Jewish traditions as well, which often contradicted God's laws. I was telling him to force *their own* beliefs on themselves (not with violence, but with his words), to challenge them to live up to their own standard. Do Muslims force Christians to live like Christians? I did not tell him to force the Christian view on them, since they have already rejected the Christian view. *They* initiated, and he was answering them. *They* pursued him, and I taught him to respond in a decisive manner.

Have you never read how Christ dealt with the legalists? Whenever the Pharisees tried to impose their beliefs on Christ, he challenged their interpretation of Scripture and exposed the fact that they could not live up to their own standard. But he did more than that. He went all over the place preaching against them and telling parables about them. He called them all sorts of names. The Sermon on the Mount blasted their whole way of life. He criticized their prayers and their offerings, to their face and also to the multitudes. The

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<sup>8</sup> Adapted from email correspondence.

"woes" at the end of Matthew was an explicit and public curse against them, even saying that they would die and burn in hell. He did this sort of thing repeatedly, until he became so irksome to them that they wanted to kill him, and did kill him. Is anyone nearly this angry with you, huh, "messenger"? Jesus even got physical when he went into the temple, where he turned over tables and used a whip to clear the place. Is that a Muslim technique, or is it just that you know nothing about Jesus Christ, and then like a hypocrite, you lecture someone about his ministry and his love? I never tell anyone to get physical, yet you say that I teach a Muslim technique. So would you like to tell everyone what you *really* think of Jesus?

Have you never read how Paul dealt with the legalists? Like Jesus before him, he went into the synagogues, into the stronghold of the legalists, and preached doctrines that were contrary to their beliefs and way of life. He even had heated arguments with them. Like the in-laws of this man who wrote to me, although they claimed to follow the Law, they did not, else they would have believed on Christ, for the Law is as a schoolmaster who leads people to Christ. Paul did this constantly, so much so that the Jews made the false charge against him that he wanted to overthrow the temple. He told the high priest, although not knowing who he was at the time, that God would strike him, since he ordered the apostle to be struck contrary to the Law. He told those who advocated circumcision to go all the way and castrate themselves. Paul was never violent, and he never plotted insurrection, but he did pursue the people and told them the truth. If the people persisted in unbelief, he would leave them, which is also what I told this man to do. Does that sound Muslim?

Where do you preach the gospel, "messenger"? In the shower when no one is listening? Jesus and Paul went into other people's territory and disrupted their lives. How do you preach the gospel, "messenger"? In such a soothing way that it pleases itching ears? Jesus and Paul made people so angry that they wanted to kill them. You would regard Jesus and Paul as Muslims, then. You hypocrite. You pay lip service to the Lord and say that we should follow his love, but in reality you disapprove of him and regard him as "horrendous" and "totally wrong," and you think that he acted in "extreme folly." Thus you blaspheme by calling the Lord Jesus himself extremely stupid, only that in your hypocrisy, you take it out on me instead. Did Jesus and Paul "force" people to follow their beliefs? Well! Now I know that either you disobey the Great Commission, or you are a hypocrite every time you follow it. Next time a non-Christian tells you to shut up, you better obey like a good little Christian dog, that is, if you do not want to become a Muslim and "force" your beliefs on him.

There is something very wrong with you, "messenger." Like the legalists, who mistakenly assume that they understand what the Law is, you assume you know what Christianity is, what Christian love is, what Christian ministry is, and how Christ and his disciples lived. But you are ignorant. You are hypocritical. You are self-righteous. Your whole perspective is wrong and from the world. Your Christianity is what Satan tells you it ought to be, and not what the Scripture teaches you that it is, and what the Lord Jesus shows you that it can be, and what the prophets and apostles practiced before you.

Now I will let the Holy Spirit do his work, and if he works on you, you will smarten up and stop talking like an imbecile that has been programmed with false religious traditions. We are indeed messengers, but we are messengers of the King, and thus messengers with knowledge and authority, and we are to go forth with boldness to tell the nations what to believe and how to behave, even all that the King has commanded. May the Holy Spirit deliver all of us from hypocrisy and self-righteousness, and make us an unstoppable spiritual force in the world.

## 20. Not Forsaking Context

**Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. (Hebrews 10:25, KJV)**

We begin by stating those things with which we are in agreement. We affirm that God himself has designed and established the church, so that it is not man's unworthy invention, and that Christ is the one who builds his church, so that to undermine its value and progress is to oppose Christ himself. We affirm that the church manifests itself on the earth as many local congregations, and that each local congregation is assumed to be imperfect, but that imperfection itself does not make it an illegitimate congregation. These are not in dispute in what follows, so that no matter what is said, it is not to be understood that these items are denied or compromised.

Then, we affirm that faithful church attendance is desirable at least in principle. We say "in principle" because it would be absurd to claim that church attendance is good no matter what, that is, regardless of the doctrines and the qualities of the preachers, the members, and other considerations. Perhaps some would object to even this, and say that church attendance is desirable and even required no matter what. This is one of the things that will be resolved, at least in relation to our text. In any case, the items listed above and the general legitimacy of church membership and church attendance are not in dispute. What is in dispute is the proper use of Hebrews 10:25.

The Bible possesses unparalleled power, and it commands respect and obedience. For this reason, it is not unusual for people to hijack it in order to promote their own viewpoints and interests. Phrases and sentences that seem usable for this purpose are repeated as truisms to coax, to manipulate, and even to threaten others into submission. This is done so often that there are those who complain that the Bible can be twisted to endorse any agenda. But such a remark is lazy and false. One person may fail to notice a text taken out of context, so that he comes under pressure to believe the asserted position. Another person observes that the same text is used to assert many contradictory positions, but if there is a context to the text that restricts its meaning, then to complain that the text can be so used, is to be deceived just as much as the first person.

The complaint would be relevant only if it is accompanied by the claim that there is no context to any biblical text, and that every text, or at least every text that has been used to assert contradictory positions, occurs without any theological, literary, and historical or cultural context. However, the claim that every such text occurs in a vacuum would be false; rather, the truth is that every text in the Bible appears in some context that places great restrictions on its possible meanings and applications. If a letter must be read in relation to its adjacent letters in order to form a word, and a word must be read in relation

to its adjacent words in order to form a sentence, then a sentence or a paragraph must also be read in relation to its context in order to form a thought.

To illustrate, there is the commandment, "Honor your parents," and this includes the idea to obey them, to do what they say. Parents are human, and as such they are vile sinners like all men and women. So it is not unusual for parents to manipulate their children with this text. Even non-Christian parents sometimes use it to impose their evil wishes on their children. However, the commandment was not discovered in a fortune cookie, but God announced it in the context of the Ten Commandments, which in turn were revealed in the context of his mighty signs and wonders in Exodus, and in the context of the whole law.

The authority of parents was sustained and restricted by the law, and they had to obey the law. The parents themselves would have been punished by the law if they had violated its commandments. If a parent had commanded his child to worship an idol, to commit perjury, or to do some other thing that was contrary to the law, such an instruction would have carried no force, and the child was under no obligation to obey it; rather, he would have had to resist it and even report it, so that the parent may receive the punishment he deserved from the law. Thus Paul writes, "Children, obey your parents *in the Lord*." If your parents tell you to take out the trash or wash the dishes, or something much more significant than that, do it. But if they tell you to worship an idol, to accept a non-Christian teaching or ideology, to lie to someone, or to overlook sin, then disobey them and plead with them, and if that fails, rebuke them and defy them to the death.

Or, how about the proverb, "In the multitude of counsellors there is safety"? Using this, people have tried to impose their bad advice on me. They not only forced me to listen, but it was assumed that unless their advice affected my decision, I was rejecting counsel and disobeying the Bible. However, in Proverbs 11:14, the statement applies to a people or a nation, and in 24:6, it refers to waging war. Admittedly, this does not prevent it from being applied on a smaller scale, so a more significant consideration is that Proverbs itself distinguishes between the wise and the fools. And it says, "He that walketh with wise men shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed" (13:20). Thus it is assumed that the multitude of counselors are wise men. As 20:18 says, "Plans are established by counsel; by wise guidance wage war" (ESV). Who are the wise men? Proverbs says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, so non-Christians have not even started to possess it.

The truth is that most people are non-Christians, that most people who claim to be Christians are not, that most real Christians are uneducated in the word of God, and that most genuine Christians educated in the word of God are nevertheless biased because of their sinful desires and religious traditions. Most people who offer advice, offer bad advice, because most people have no idea what they are talking about. In the multitude of fools, there is much danger. "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise" (12:15). This is true, but in the context of Proverbs, it is assumed that such counsel is godly and wise. Now, not all good advice agree, and even when all agree, it does not always mean that it is the right advice for you. You could take

it into account but then do something else. But foolish advice from foolish people are to be rejected, no matter which verse they use to manipulate or threaten you. Do not feel fear or guilt about dismissing them. If possible, get acquainted with people who revere God, and who know and believe the Scripture, and seek advice from them.

Thus to wildly sling a verse taken out of context all over the place does nothing to promote truth and godliness; instead, it damages the faith and the lives of those who respect the Bible and try to obey it. Much harm has been done by the misuse of Hebrews 10:25. It has been used, often without regard to the context of the verse or the situation of the audience, to demand church membership and church attendance, and to threaten those who abstain or withdraw. But the reason for withdrawal is paramount in this verse; in fact, unless our understanding of the verse is thoroughly colored by it, we would miss the point of the verse, and indeed the point of all of Hebrews. The reason for withdrawal is so important that it is questionable whether the verse can be applied outside of the context. It restricts the possible applications.

Beginning from the first verse of Hebrews, the writer offers a meticulous demonstration of Christ's superiority over the Jewish system. He shows that Jesus Christ is superior to Moses, Aaron, the prophets, and even the angels, who must worship him. He shows that Christ stands in a superior order of priesthood, that he administers a better covenant with better promises, in a more excellent sanctuary, and that he has offered a superior sacrifice, one that was complete and permanent.

The comparison is made not against the popular religion of the Jews, which was corrupted with rules and traditions invented by men that claimed to enforce the law but in fact subverted it, but it is made against the actual law that God himself established in the Old Testament. The writer does not suggest that the law was a mistake, but that it was always meant to be the shadow that would introduce the reality, that is, Jesus Christ: "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves" (10:1). Or, as Galatians 3:24 says, "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith."

The fact that the argument entails this meticulous comparison with those things that were most important to the Jews could suggest that the readers were Jewish and that their condition was such that they needed to be reminded of the superiority of Christ. Nevertheless, a general teaching on the superiority of Christ is insufficient to establish this context. As I sometimes point out, scholars regularly assume that when a biblical writer exhorts his readers on a doctrine or practice, it must mean that they were believing or doing the opposite, or at least in danger of believing or doing the opposite. But this is a fallacy, since in reality any person can mention any matter to any other person for any reason, or just because he thinks it is important. This does not mean that the Bible contains irrelevant materials, because the whole Bible is important for Christians, so that the whole Bible is relevant to Christians – to all Christians in all situations. The point is that we cannot assume that relevance means that the original readers were always believing or doing the opposite of what was written to them. This seems to make it more difficult to learn the context (but the other way only produces an illusion of a good grasp

on context), but contrary to scholarly opinion, it is almost never necessary to know the specific condition of the readers in order to understand and apply a passage.

When we tell a student to "study hard," it does not necessarily mean that we think he is lazy. Perhaps he is already studying hard and the exhortation is intended as an encouragement for him to continue. A person who overhears this should have little problem understanding what the words mean even without any knowledge about the student. Granted, "hard" is relative and one could gauge the meaning only if he has a reference point. However, this reference point does not have to be the student. If this person follows us around instead of the student, he would soon grasp what we mean by "hard," perhaps even better than if he were to follow the student around.

Likewise, there is no need to follow the readers of Paul and Peter to understand what the apostles mean. I can follow Paul and Peter by reading the Acts of the Apostle and their many letters. The entire New Testament helps me understand their culture and background, and thus what they mean by their teachings. In fact, we could say "study hard" to no one in particular and a person who overhears us could still gain some insight into our thinking. He would understand that this is what we value, and again, he could gauge what we mean by "hard" by knowing more about us, without any need to know more about whom we say this to, which in this case is nobody at all.

On the other hand, biblical scholars are often so obsessed with researching extra-biblical information to enlighten their reading of biblical passages that they fail to read the biblical passages themselves. It is not unusual to find a commentary that provides pages of uncertain historical information only to prove what the verse explicitly says, often within the same sentence, or worse, to find that it makes false inferences from already dubious research to draw a conclusion that is explicitly contradicted by the verse, or perhaps the next sentence in the passage. The first, the most important, and also the most neglected rule of biblical interpretation is to read the words.

Now, if we were to say, "Study hard – stop being so lazy," then a person who overhears would also gain some knowledge concerning not only what we value but also the condition of the student. This can be useful, but again, it is unnecessary in understanding the exhortation to "study hard." Nevertheless, there are statements in Hebrews that provide us with this direct insight into the condition of its readers. For example, 5:11 says, "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn." To say "learn faster" would not indicate that the readers were slow to learn (again, biblical commentaries constantly commit such a fallacy), but "you are slow to learn" would no doubt indicate this. The statements surrounding such a description, if they are obviously related to it, would also provide information about the readers. After that, when we encounter statements in other parts of Hebrews that echo the same emphasis, it would be reasonable to assume that they also address the condition of the original audience.

With this in mind, the section beginning from 5:11 indicates that the readers had been slow in making progress in the faith (5:11-14), with special emphasis given to their lack of advancement in the comprehension of Christian doctrines (6:1-3). There is a warning

or exhortation (6:4-8), but the writer notes, "We are confident of better things in your case – things that accompany salvation" (v. 9). Then we see this: "And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (v. 11-12, ESV). If we were to discover this statement in another place, we would not be able to conclude that it is written to address the readers' specific condition. But we can draw this conclusion here because the statement appears in the context of a direct address and description about the readers (5:11, etc.). After this, it becomes reasonable to assume that similar statements in Hebrews are also written for the same reason and with the same intent (3:14, 4:14, etc.).

To summarize, the readers were believers and have made some progress since they were converted, but they have come under persecution because of their faith and were pressured to abandoned the Christian faith, and to return to a former way of life, very likely the Jewish way of life. Using a sustained and mature theological argument, the writer of Hebrews demonstrates that Jesus Christ is the superior way and the only way, and that rather than become slack and fearful, and rather than turning back to their previous lifestyle, the readers ought to press forward in the faith and follow through, and to persist to the very end.

This is how we should understand the statements surrounding our text: "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful (v. 23)...Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy...How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God...and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? (v. 28-29)...Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering....So do not throw away your confidence (v. 32, 35)...You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised (v. 36)...But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved (v. 39)."

The theme that penetrates every passage is Jesus Christ, no doubt to drive home this exhortation: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (12:2-3). So the thrust of 10:25 cannot suddenly be about the church as such. The message of Hebrews is that Christians should cling to Jesus Christ, and not that they should cling to one another. These two are not the same. Members of a local congregation can remain together, and together they could forsake Christ and head toward the wrong direction, as many churches have done. But the message of Hebrews would demand a person to stand alone and cling to Jesus Christ even when all the other members of a congregation forsake the faith.

Hebrews 10:25 must be colored by this context and message, and therefore the point is that believers must not withdraw from a local congregation *due to spiritual weariness or fear of persecution*. That is, if the writer had added a verse that says, "And do not leave



the country," in this context it could not be interpreted as a prohibition against travel, but the meaning would be, "Do not run away (even out of the country) because of spiritual weariness or fear of persecution."

Thus Christian leaders cheapen the verse and draw attention away from its main theme – Jesus Christ – when they use it mainly to demand church membership and church attendance. It is often said that no believer can grow or remain faithful without constant fellowship with other believers. Rubbish! There are indeed several verses in Hebrews telling Christians to encourage one another, but the Bible never says that no one can stand without this. Rather, no one can stand without Jesus Christ, that is, his grace to sustain our faith in him. And with his strength, anyone can stand alone, not only against unbelievers, but even against ten thousand apostate churches. Jesus Christ is the author and finisher of our faith, not the church or other believers. He may use other people to accomplish his purpose, but nothing in the Bible suggests that he must.

There are significant ramifications. For example, this leaves the possibility that a person may suspend his attendance or withdraw his membership, not out of spiritual weariness or fear of persecution, but precisely due to faithfulness to Christ. One cannot say to him, "But the Bible says 'not forsaking the assembling of ourselves.'" No, it does *not* say that, not exactly. The context is like a phrase or statement in parenthesis. So the verse really says, "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves (out of spiritual weariness or fear of persecution)." Of course, it is possible that he is using faithfulness to Christ to excuse himself, but first, he might indeed be withdrawing due to faithfulness, and second, as long as he makes this claim, even if he is making an excuse, 10:25 does not directly and immediately apply to him.

There are many possible manifestations of this. Remember that Christ and his doctrines are not to be separated (6:1-3). To advance in Christ is also to advance in Christian theology, among other things. Suppose you are the pastor and a member complains, "Your preaching is so shallow and even heretical that it is better for me to stay home and read a book." He wishes to stay away from you precisely because he wishes to cling to Christ and make progress in the faith. He is not abandoning Christ, but he leaves your church precisely because he does not want to abandon Christ. He is not going back to his former life, but he is leaving you and going forward with Christ. And he is leaving your church precisely because he is unafraid of persecution, even persecution from you and your people.

So you cannot use Hebrews 10:25 against him, not unless you can demonstrate that you are in fact skillful and orthodox in the biblical doctrines and that this person does not know what he is talking about. You may disagree with what he is doing or with his reasoning, but you will need a biblical basis other than 10:25 to support your view. However, if he is right, then Hebrews 10:25 in fact works against you – you are the one who has failed to cling to Christ, even though you remain in an assembly, and probably an assembly of people just as destructive and heretical as you. You see, because its true meaning has been obscured, it has been used by church leaders to threaten believers into

submission without having to improve their own ministries or to allow people to follow Christ when their leaders have failed.

If the argument is that we attend church not only to receive but to contribute, then do you allow him to contribute? If he cannot progress in Christ without your church, and if he is not qualified to contribute, then demonstrate this to him, but notice that 10:25 still does not apply. And if he is correct that your church is problematic, and if he is qualified to contribute, then why is he not permitted to start his own church or ministry? Hebrews 10:25 does not prevent him, and does not force him to stay with your particular assembly, so again it does not apply. He would be leaving your church because he is full of zeal and courage, not because of weariness and fear.

In an age of spiritual apathy and callousness, many congregations are losing members. Leaders become nervous and desperate, and somewhat angry, and they threaten the sheep with verses taken out of context, such as Hebrews 10:25. However, the true solution is to declare the same message that the writer of Hebrews wrote to his readers. That is, Jesus Christ is superior to all things, and he is the only way to life, to rest, and to salvation. If those who rejected Moses died without mercy, how much more severely will God punish one who turns away from Jesus Christ? There is no religious diversity with God, but there is only one Lord, one faith, one focus. There is mercy in Christ, but none apart from him. It is either Jesus Christ, or everlasting pain and torture in hell. But this message would not serve your private agendas and ministry ambitions – you can do this only by distorting Scripture. Therefore, we ought to press on with Jesus Christ and make progress in the faith, whether with or without a local congregation, and whether for or against a local congregation, for salvation and spiritual progress are in Christ and not the church. Some leaders would rather make empty threats than to press on with Christ themselves. They are the ones who will be left behind.

Lest the above is still subject to misunderstanding, since the traditional use has been so cemented in people's minds that any challenge against the distortion might be interpreted as a challenge against the church itself, I will stress again that nothing I have said constitutes an argument against the church, church membership, and church attendance, since I endorse all these things. The argument is against the misuse of a verse, against leaders who make excuses, and against, whether intentionally or not, replacing Jesus Christ with church fellowship. Let us rightly interpret Scripture, not forsaking context, as the manner of some is, but focusing our mind and energy on Jesus, hold fast to our confession of faith.

## 21. Head Covering and Hermeneutics

**Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head – it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.**

**In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice – nor do the churches of God. (1 Corinthians 11:3-16)**

A common approach is to cite the ancient culture to make the passage inapplicable or somewhat inapplicable for today. Some people have used it in an attempt to undermine my argument about Paul's commands regarding spiritual gifts. That is, I argue that Paul commands us to desire spiritual gifts, to forbid not speaking in tongues, to test all things, and so on, but they answer that I must then also accept 1 Corinthians 11 as it is written. The fact is that I do, and I find it insulting that they assume I would not, as if I am like them. Their argument backfires, and confirms my complaint that they so easily dismiss Scripture and find ways to disobey it whenever it teaches something that they find even slightly inconvenient.

In verses 8-15, Paul does not appeal to culture, but to creation and the inherent relationship between God, man, and woman. The command stands today. It does not teach that a woman must wear a veil, but only that she should not look like a man. She should have long hair and maintain a feminine appearance. If any part of the passage is indeed restricted to the culture of that day, to take the reference to a shaved head as a possible example, notice that it still has no effect on the application. The basis of Paul's argument is still creation and not culture, and the application still requires women to look like women and men to look like men. And if the retort is that how men and women ought to look depends on the culture, first, I contest this assumption – I demand an

infallible proof for this – and second, this is not what Paul says, so again it is smuggled into the discussion by force in order to subvert the passage's explicit instruction. Rather, it seems that the Bible itself has defined how men and women ought to look as men and women.

The hermeneutical principle that interprets every little detail of the biblical text against ancient cultural background is overrated and overused. It is common to find that one can either reach the same conclusion just by reading the text (the scholars took off to the archaeological sites before they finished reading the sentence), or that the cultural analysis (often based on much speculation, reducing the reliability of the conclusion at every step) actually leads to a conclusion that is contrary to the plain words of the text. This principle in hermeneutics, especially when it becomes such an obsession that it becomes more significant than the text itself, does great injury to the sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture.

Like they do to many other passages, with this one in 1 Corinthians 11, Christians immediately reach for a cultural explanation to neutralize it, because it seems to be a threat against our modern lifestyle and preferences. But Paul gives a number of reasons for his command, and they have nothing to do with culture. He appeals to creation, to nature, and so on, but not the culture that exists around his audience. Yet they appeal to a culture that Paul does not refer to in order to dismiss what he commands on the basis of creation.

Now if there is an infallible and biblical argument that Paul is referring only to his culture, then this would satisfy the requirement I stated (that only an infallible biblical argument is able to release us from an explicit biblical command), and one would still be unable to use this passage to contest the requirement itself or my insistence that the apostolic commands in 1 Corinthians 12-14 remain in full force. In his attempt to reduce verse 14 to a mere cultural allusion, one foolish commentator cites the Nazirite vow, but that would be an explicit and infallible exception, as not everyone is a Nazirite. So it has no effect on 1 Corinthians 11. And then he refers to Absalom...but wait, are we to let *Absalom* teach us what it means to follow the law? Absalom also did other things. Maybe this commentator should read about him first.

While we are at it, stop making this passage a mere test case. It is an actual teaching to be learned and followed, but so many Christians use it only as an exercise in hermeneutics or a tool to overturn other passages that they dislike. It is certainly true in any culture, as Proverbs would attest, that whether or not they cover their heads, Christians (if they are Christians at all) who have little reverence for the Scripture and who do not know what they are talking about should at least cover their mouths, lest they continuously spew out foolishness and bring shame to their head, Jesus Christ.

## 22. The Son of Man<sup>9</sup>

**"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." (Daniel 7:13-14)**

The term "son of man" was bound to be familiar to the Jews, since they studied the prophetic writings, and since this was obviously a significant prophecy, referring to one who would be king forever.

By referring to himself with the term, Jesus identified himself as this "son of man" in Daniel. This "son of man" accepts worship (v. 14a), and thus he is deity. So when Jesus referred to himself with this term, he affirmed his own divinity. He also affirmed his humanity by the term, since universal authority was "given" to him. As the Son of God he would not have needed this, since as God he would have already possessed universal authority, but Jesus as the incarnation of God received universal authority in his role as Messiah. Therefore, the term entails a full-blown Christian doctrine of incarnation, including the deity of Christ.

Then, we read in Matthew 26:

The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." (v. 63-64)

Jesus admitted that he was "Christ, the Son of God," and then he called himself the "Son of Man" in connection to receiving authority and coming on the clouds. In Scripture, God is said to travel on the clouds: "He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind" (Psalm 104:3); "See, the LORD rides on a swift cloud and is coming to Egypt" (Isaiah 19:1). Thus Jesus claimed that he was the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy, that he was God, and one to be worshiped.

The passage is a quotation of what Jesus said. It includes both an explicit confession of his deity, and an appeal to prophecy or prophetic language that amounts to another

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<sup>9</sup> Adapted from email correspondence.

confession of his deity. So in one short passage he asserted his deity at least twice. There are many other texts to support the fact that Jesus confessed to be God, but this is sufficient to make the point that he indeed made such a claim.

Therefore, the assertion that Jesus never claimed to be God, but rather insisted on his humanity by calling himself the "son of man," is shown to be a myth and a false interpretation believed and promoted by ignorant people. Non-Christians are hard-hearted against the Christian faith. They pretend to be Bible experts but cannot carry simple discussions about what it teaches. This is another example showing that they are indeed stupid and sinful people.