

The Ministry *of the* Word

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SUFFICIENT AND PROFITABLE

2 TIMOTHY 3:14-17

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.¹

This chapter in 2 Timothy begins with Paul's warning: "There will be terrible times in the last days." He proceeds to describe "men of depraved minds" who would "oppose the truth" (v. 8), "evil men" who would "go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (v. 13), and those who would "turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (4:4).

On the other hand, Paul declares that Timothy should and could be different from these evil people, emphasizing the contrast with three instances of "but you" (3:10, 14, 4:5). To paraphrase, Paul says:

Timothy, trouble is coming. There will be evil people – selfish, treacherous, unholy. They will have a form of godliness but deny its power. They will be always learning but never acknowledge the truth (v. 1-9). **But you**, Timothy, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, and my character (v. 10-11).

These people are imposters, and they will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived themselves (v. 13). **But you**, Timothy, continue in what you have learned and believed since the beginning, even as your mother and grandmother taught you the sacred Scriptures while you were still an infant (v. 14-15).

¹ An earlier work, *Preach the Word*, deals with the passage that follows (2 Timothy 4:1-3). The present piece, then, can be considered a prequel. We will be discussing the authority, sufficiency, and utility of Scripture – *Preach the Word* considers the principles of preaching and education, and thus extends and overlaps with the final section. Nevertheless, there will be no deliberate attempt to connect one article with the other.

These people will not endure sound doctrine. They will gather around themselves teachers who will only say things that they want to hear. They will turn away from the truth and turn to myths and fables instead (4:3-4). **But you**, Timothy, even when the times are unfavorable, you must endure hardship, preach the word, and fulfill your ministry (4:5).

These three "but you" instances are more or less obscured by some translations, but are given greater attention in others, such as the NKJ, NCV, GNT, REB, and HCSB. Wuest and Lattimore translate all three instances as "but as for you," which is good. The NLT translates all three instances as "but you," and even begins a new paragraph each time.

An adequate translation should show that Paul is making sharp, consistent, and repeated contrasts between the "man of God"² and the men of evil. Jay Adams translates the three instances as "you, in contrast," "you, however," and "but you." This reflects the meaning and even the contrast that Paul tries to make, but it obscures his consistent language. Thus I would suggest that all three instances should be rendered either "but you" or "but as for you."³

Our passage begins with the second instance of "but you." The contrast is made against "evil men and imposters" who will "go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (v. 13). Paul wants Timothy to be different from these people, but to continue in what he has learned and believed. And what he has learned and believed is Scripture.

Thus we will discuss the authority, sufficiency, and utility of Scripture, these being the attributes emphasized in the passage.

Since verse 16 says, "All Scripture is God-breathed," one might think that our emphasis should be "inspiration" instead of authority. Inspiration is certainly in view, but it is mentioned here to provide the foundation for something else, and thus "authority" is appropriate.

The idea of sufficiency is prominent in verse 17. It also broadly represents one emphasis of the passage. Scripture is the sufficient answer against the situations and evil people that Timothy must face, and one who stands firm on sound doctrine is also one who stands in sharp contrast against those who "go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived."

The utility of Scripture is closely related to its sufficiency in our passage. Paul says that Scripture is "useful" or "profitable." It is not only effective, but also adaptable – not that its standard and meaning are flexible, but that its truth can be applied with several different methods with complete rigidity in content but perfect relevance at the same

² See verse 17, but also 1 Timothy 6:10-11: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. **But you, man of God**, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness."

³ "You, however" and "you, in contrast" are in fact fine translations. The point is that all three instances should be translated the same way.

time. Thus we will consider its modes and spheres of application. For this, we will not limit ourselves this passage, but will take its surrounding verses and even the whole Bible into account.

1. AUTHORITY

Verse 16 asserts the divine inspiration of Scripture, and although it is mentioned as if in passing to introduce another thought, it is nevertheless foundational to the whole purpose of the passage. Without the inspiration of Scripture, the rest would be empty and futile.

We shall begin, then, by considering the meaning of divine inspiration, and how it renders the Scripture sufficient and profitable.

a. Breathed Out by God

Although we are accustomed to affirming the "inspiration" (KJV) of Scripture, the compound word *theopneustos* literally means "God-breathed" (NIV), and since the ending *-tos* indicates a passive meaning, an even more precise translation would be "breathed out by God" (ESV).

The implication is tremendous. Scripture does not contain mere human opinion or even the human interpretation of divine revelation, but it came "right out" of God, so to speak, and thus there is no difference between what Scripture says and what God thinks or what God says. The Scripture *is* what God thinks and what God says.

This being the case, there is no difference between the authority of God and the authority of Scripture. To understand Scripture is to understand the mind and the will of God, and to disobey Scripture is to disobey him. Just as one who stands before God cannot say, "I will obey you, but I will not obey what you say" – since to obey or disobey one is to obey or disobey the other – no one can say, "I will obey God, but not the Bible," for there is no difference.

Some would ridicule us as following a "paper pope," but I would much prefer the seemingly greater insult of following a "paper *God*," since only then would the insult correspond to the position actually espoused. The answer is that we are not following a *paper* pope or God, but we are following *God*, since again, there is *zero* difference between obeying the Bible and obeying God. Thus the "paper pope" insult is not nearly strong enough. In fact, according to God's sovereign arrangement, to obey the Bible is the only way to obey God. Let our opponents, then, insult us for obeying God, and in doing so condemn their own defiance.

Because the word *theopneustos* means "breathed *out* by God," there is a legitimate objection against translating it as "inspiration." The word "inspiration" comes from the Latin and is used in the Vulgate, and even in the English has the meaning of breathing *in* – the opposite of what is conveyed by *theopneustos*.

The danger is in supposing from this translation that Scripture is a merely human product into which God has breathed in his spirit, or that God merely exerted his influence in the writing process while the product remained essentially and primarily human in origin. On the other hand, the translation "breathed *out* by God" would hardly allow such a misunderstanding.

The objection is technically correct; however, the misunderstanding does not appear likely or common. Under "inspiration," the idea of "divine influence"⁴ appears as the first definition in *Merriam-Webster*, but the fifth in *Webster's New World*. But even with the latter, the danger that someone would apply the first four definitions before considering the fifth is minimal, for the fifth definition is clearly designated as "*Theol.*" – that is, theological – so that it ought to be the first one considered in such a context.

Due to usage and common understanding, the English word "inspiration" has long become a broad theological term for what the Scripture actually teaches about its own origin, that it is "God-breathed," and thus also infallible, inerrant, and carries absolute authority. For this reason, I would not oppose using the word "inspiration" here in verse 16 because of the possible misunderstanding, since the theological meaning is generally recognized.

However, I would oppose such a translation for the simple reason that it is not truly a translation, but a (correct) theological inference or interpretation of what the verse asserts. That is, even if we agree that the word does not mean "breath in" when used in the theological sense, but broadly refers to what the Scripture teaches about its own divine origin, it is still not what is stated *here* in this verse. Rather, the verse says that Scripture is "God-breathed," and it is from this and other relevant passages that we derive the doctrine of divine *inspiration*.

Paul writes that "*All Scripture* is God-breathed." There is some debate about the correct translation for "All Scripture." Of course, we should always strive for the most precise rendering, but the dangers of other translations for the phrase have sometimes been exaggerated. Whether we translate it "all Scripture" or "every Scripture" makes no essential difference – the former declares the whole of Scripture inspired, and the latter declares every part of Scripture inspired. Either way, all of Scripture and every part of it is God-breathed.

It is true that translations such as "every scripture inspired of God is also profitable" and "all inspired Scripture has its use" greatly weaken the verse, since they seem to allow the possibility that at least some parts of the Bible are not inspired. To translate "whatever is Scripture" similarly cripples the verse as a clear text in support of the plenary inspiration of the Bible.

⁴ Of course, to speak of Scripture as a product of "divine *influence*" is much too weak, unless it is clear that this "influence" is absolute and exhaustive. However, right now the question is not whether the dictionaries provide a precise definition of the biblical doctrine, but whether the word "inspiration" must mean "breathing in," or whether it is easily construed as such in a theological context.

Even with these potential problems, none of these translations actually *contradict* the divine inspiration of Scripture. Therefore, although the problem is serious, the actual danger is limited. Then, considering the fact that the doctrine of inspiration does not depend on this verse alone, but is attested by a mountain of biblical passages, we must not think that the very truth of inspiration stands or falls on the precise translation of this verse.

Still, some options are better than others, and some attempts are outright distortions. We can offer grammatical arguments showing that "All Scripture" (NIV, ESV) is the most accurate, and we already noted that even to translate "Every Scripture" would not undermine divine inspiration at all.

Although the other options do not contradict inspiration or make it impossible, they should not be considered serious contenders. This is true if for no other reason than that, given the historical and cultural context, and more reliably the Bible's internal evidence, it is impossible for Paul to have in mind the weaker meanings. In fact, the main thrust of the verse is not even to assert the divine inspiration of Scripture, as if Timothy needed to be convinced; rather, Paul merely states the assumption to introduce his subsequent comments and admonitions.

We will not spend any more time on this, since as noted, inspiration is not in danger, and this is sufficient for the point that I am about to make. But there is one more step to take before that.

By "All Scripture," it is certain that Paul is referring to at least the Old Testament, since as a Jew, that was his "Scripture." Also, he has just mentioned "the holy Scriptures" that were taught to Timothy by his Jewish mother and grandmother, which likewise would have been at least the Old Testament. The question is whether he has in mind the New Testament also, or from another perspective, whether what he is saying about "All Scripture" can be directly applied to the New Testament in particular.

Here we will again recall that the inspiration of Scripture, and now the New Testament in particular, does not depend on this verse alone. Jesus says that he would send the apostles the Spirit of truth, who would then guide them into all truth (John 16:13). And Peter writes that ignorant and unstable people distort the letters of Paul, "as they do *the other* Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:15-16). The necessary implication is that Paul's letters were already considered as part of the Scriptures. That is, he says that these people distort Paul's letters, which are Scriptures, as they do *the other* Scriptures.

As for Paul, he was aware that the very words he spoke were "taught by the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:13), and not just the general ideas. He introduces himself as an apostle, foreordained and called to be such by God and the Lord Jesus. And he repeatedly defends his identity and authority as an apostle in his writings. He tells the Corinthians to "acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command" (1 Corinthians 14:37). Then, in 1 Timothy 5:18, he prefaces both Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7 with

the expression, "the Scripture says," effectively calling the Gospel of Luke "Scripture" and ascribing to it the same divine inspiration and authority of Deuteronomy.

It is therefore unreasonable to assume that Paul must refer to only the Old Testament when he says "All Scripture." As Robert Reymond writes, Paul would have been willing to include, and "almost certainly did include, within the technical category of 'all Scripture' the New Testament documents, including his own, as well."⁵ Since the New Testament documents are regarded as inspired and even called "Scripture," we may with complete certainty regard them as "God-breathed." Both the Old Testament and the New Testament are "Scripture," and they make up *one book* that is our Bible. Therefore, there is no problem in regarding the verse as asserting, "The whole Bible is God-breathed." In fact, there is no excuse in thinking otherwise.

Now we have arrived at the point that I would like to make. That is, given that the *whole Bible* is breathed out *by God* – all from a single divine source – there is no reason to regard one part of the Bible as more authoritative than another, or to regard one inspired person speaking in Scripture as more inspired by another.

Indeed, if by inspiration we mean God-breathed, then a text is either inspired or not inspired, and inspired texts are equally God-breathed. Thus Moses is not more reliable than Jeremiah, or David more authoritative than Malachi. God is the source of every part of Scripture, and not Moses, Jeremiah, David, or Malachi. Therefore, there is no difference in the reliability and authority between the various biblical books and their writers.

Here I have in mind the "red-letter Bible" mentality. Some people treat the words of Jesus as if they form a Bible within the Bible, or as if they are especially reliable and authoritative. If they are conscious of doing this at all, they might assume that this is right and good, and that it represents an attitude of special reverence for our Lord. However, given the Bible's own teaching that "All Scripture is God-breathed," to *especially* honor the words of Jesus is in fact an implicit denial of the inspiration of Scripture.

Probably more than a few people would find this assertion disturbing. Someone might say, "Is he denying that Jesus is greater than the prophets and the apostles? But Jesus is God, not a mere man. He is greater than Abraham and Solomon, and even David called him Lord." It is true that Jesus is greater than all men, but to even raise this point in *this* context is to betray a tendency toward the error that I am talking about.

In affirming the inspiration of Scripture, there is no place to compare the merits of the individual speakers and writers, since the doctrine of inspiration is that "All Scripture is God-breathed," that is, the *whole Bible* comes from *God*. In other words, when we are comparing the words of Jesus to the words of Paul, the fact that Jesus is infinitely greater than Paul is irrelevant. *All Scripture* is God-breathed, so that unless we deny the inspiration of either Jesus or Paul, we are comparing the words of *God* with the words of *God*, so that there is *zero* difference in inspiration and authority. If the words of Paul in

⁵ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 34.

the Bible are less authoritative than the words of Jesus, then they are not inspired at all – they are not *God*-breathed.

Sometimes people try to sound clever. Referring to what he considered an astonishing teaching, one preacher said, "If Jesus hadn't said it, I wouldn't have believed it!" He probably did not realize the implication of what he said, but the meaning was that if the same teaching was asserted only by the prophets and the apostles, he would have declared it false. This would imply that he did not believe in the inspiration of Scripture *at all*, at least everything that is not in red. Non-inspired writings can be sometimes right and sometimes wrong, but for a piece of writing to be inspired means that it is always and completely right.

When discussing the topic of divine revelation, even evangelical scholars have said, "The prophets and apostles were inspired by God, and they spoke by the Spirit, but Jesus *was* God himself." The point is true in itself, but again, to even bring up this point here betrays a tendency to think of the words of Jesus in the Bible as superior to the rest of the Bible, which amounts to a denial of biblical inspiration, that *all* Scripture is breathed out by *God*.⁶

This implicit denial of biblical inspiration is in fact present in more people than one would assume, and this might hinder some people from understanding my concern. What could be wrong with giving special honor to the words of Christ? It might seem to them that I am bringing *down* Jesus to the level of the prophets and the apostles. One who thus misconstrues what I am saying still misses the point.

If *all* Scripture is *God*-breathed, then all the writings of the prophets and the apostles already carry *maximum* authority, and the words of Jesus cannot be more authoritative because there is no room for anything higher – *every* part of Scripture carries the very authority of God. In fact, if every part of Scripture is revealed by God, then every part of Scripture is also in this sense the words of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. And the word of God spoken through the human body of Jesus cannot be superior than the word of God spoken through David or Paul. If an "inspired" document is a "God-breathed" document, then there cannot be degrees of inspiration, but something must either be inspired or not inspired, and if inspired, then it is the very word of God.

Another point that is often missed is that, as long as the issue is inspiration and not the merits of the individuals, we are not even comparing Jesus to the prophets and the apostles, but Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to the other writers of Scripture. Without hesitation, we acknowledge the utter superiority of Christ over all men, but the issue is

⁶ Hebrews 1:1-2 says, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe." The emphasis here is that *God* spoke to us, only that he did it through the superior person of Christ, and not that the words of Christ were somehow more inspired. If the prophets spoke from *God*, then nothing could be more inspired. Also, our topic is the inspiration and authority of Scripture, but this is not what this passage from Hebrews is addressing. Nothing in the passage indicates that Christ's words were more true or inspired than the prophets, or that the words of the prophets in Scripture had anything less than the authority of God.

whether Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were inspired. Since they were, then the documents that they produced, which included the words of Jesus, carry maximum authority, just as the writings of the prophets and the apostles carry maximum authority, and just as any word from God would carry maximum authority. There is no room for one to be superior to another. Since all of them carry the authority of God, none can be any greater or lesser in authority.

We may even concede that, if "inspiration" applied to him at all, it occurred differently in Jesus than in the prophets and the apostles. Among other things, he had no sin whose effects the Spirit must overcome or suspend to ensure the perfect communication of God's mind. And he could speak by his own divine authority in harmony with the Father's will. So the mode of operation was certainly different. Yet the product is the same – infallible and inerrant "God-breathed" words. The point is that to make any distinction in authority between God and Scripture, or Jesus and Scripture, is also to deny the inspiration of Scripture.

Disregarding for now the ramifications of this truth for theology, hermeneutics, and other disciplines, it has immediate relevance to our text. Paul says that all Scripture is God-breathed and is "useful" or "profitable" for the purposes that he enumerates. It follows that we must not consider the words of Jesus in the Bible as more useful or profitable than the words of the inspired human writers in the rest of the Bible.

In fact, an exposition of our text does not strictly require us to mention the human writers at all, or to consider how divine inspiration occurred in them. This is because the word "God-breathed" has no reference whatever to any human role or agency in the production of Scripture. The term emphasizes the God-given nature of Scripture, and that it is directly given by God in terms of content. God wrote on tablets of stone when he gave the Ten Commandments, but the rest of the Bible came from him just as much, so that there is no essential difference than if God had taken up a pen and wrote the whole thing himself without using human writers. The word "God-breathed" forbids us to form a weaker conclusion.

Nevertheless, most portions of Scripture indeed came through inspired human writers rather than by a voice from heaven, by dictation, or by the finger of God, and it is often observed that the various parts of the Bible reflect the different circumstances, backgrounds, and personalities of the inspired writers. Our text does not mention or explain this about the Bible, but calling it God-breathed, it stresses the divinity of the source and the purity of the product. To learn about how God wrote down his thoughts through inspired human writers, and in a way that the Bible can be called God-breathed without qualification, we will have to take a quick detour into another biblical passage.

b. Carried by the Spirit

In explaining the Scripture's true origin and nature, Peter writes, "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation.

For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

This important passage is just as rich as our main text from 2 Timothy, and it would take just as much attention to do it justice. But as this is something of a digression, all the fascinating details will have to await another time. Right now we will take time to extract not much more than what is needed to address the issue mentioned above – that is, the role of the human writers in the Scripture's formation, or the relationship between the human writers and divine inspiration.

To begin, Peter refers to the "prophecy of Scripture." He could be talking about specific portions of the Old Testament that are narrowly considered prophecies. Even if this is the case, it would still include much more of the Bible than what many people realize, since prophecies do not refer to only predictions, but the term refers to inspired utterances and writings by which God communicates through his agents, whether or not these utterances and writings are predictive in content.

However, it is likely that Peter has in mind something broader, so that by the expression he intends to place emphasis upon the prophetic nature of Scripture (as in "the prophetic word" in v. 19, NASB), that it is a revelation from God. This would not be surprising given the context, since he is combating false teachers and prophets that claim to speak the truth, when they could offer only their own opinions and speculations.

Even if the narrow view is true – although the opposite appears to be the case – the application cannot be limited to only certain portions of Scripture. We have established from Paul that *all* Scripture is inspired, and Peter is here telling us something about how inspiration occurred; therefore, the principle must apply to all of Scripture. Indeed, although Peter is writing against "false teachers" and "false prophets" (2:1), he does not say, "no true prophecy came about by the prophet's own interpretation," but "no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation." His focus is on the written product.

At first glance, the latter part of verse 20 appears to offer several possible meanings. The various translations and commentaries favor different meanings and perpetuate them.

The Jerusalem Bible translates, "the interpretation of scriptural prophecy is never a matter for the individual," and this has been used to teach the Catholic doctrine that ordinary individuals cannot just pick up the Bible and understand what it says – only the Church can interpret it for them. The Reformers fought against this false doctrine, and defended the right of individuals to read the Bible.

Then, the KJV says, "no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation." This could also be construed as above, but Protestants would tend to think that this is a repudiation of a subjective and relativistic understanding of Scripture. Indeed, much damage has come from the American way of thinking, that every person is entitled to his opinion, and that every person has a right to contribute to a discussion, even in the

church. The Bible denies both – every person must affirm what God's word says, and anyone who ignores God's word must himself be ignored (1 Corinthians 14:38).

In many churches, Bible studies are performed by allowing the participants to give their private interpretations of Scripture. They would begin by saying, "I think this means..." or "To me this means..." Nobody is ever wrong and no view is denounced as heretical, but the moderator would construe all the views presented so that they are all correct and all in agreement with one another.⁷ But then they might as well write their own Scripture, since in effect that is what they are already doing. In any case, the Reformers defended the right of individuals to read the Bible, but not to violate the text and assign subjective meanings to it.

So this second option is true enough in itself. Each passage of Scripture has an intended and fixed meaning, so that a subjective and relativistic approach to reading the Bible is to be denounced as an assault upon the word of God. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that this is what verse 20 conveys.

The word "interpretation" can mean "explanation," but it can also mean "loosening," "release," or "discharge." In the New Testament, the noun is used only here, whereas the verb appears in Mark 4:34 and Acts 19:39. In Mark 4, the verb means "to expound" or "to explain," and in Acts 19, it means "to decide." Its meaning in our verse should be determined by the context.

The immediate context has to do with how "Scripture came about" (v. 20), and Peter insists that "prophecy never had its *origin* in *the will of man*" (v. 21). The issue is the origin of Scripture and its relation to the will of man, and not the interpretation of the product of inspiration. Therefore, the "interpretation" is referring to the *writers* of Scripture and not the *readers* of Scripture.

As for the broader context, Peter asserts in verse 16, "We did not follow cleverly *invented stories* when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." He is contrasting his own preaching and the words of the prophets in Scripture against the "false prophets" and "false teachers" (2:1) who would exploit people "with *stories they have made up*" (2:3).

With the above in mind, we may paraphrase Peter (1:20) as follows: "The false prophets and false teachers would exploit you with stories that they made up, but we did not invent what we told you about Christ's transfiguration and God's voice from heaven. Likewise, nothing in Scripture came from man's personal decision or understanding. Scripture was produced in a very different way than how these false prophets and teachers operate, since they made up their doctrines and stories, but everything in Scripture came from God."

⁷ See Vincent Cheung, *The Parables of Jesus* for additional comments.

A. T. Robertson writes, "No prophecy of Scripture comes out of private *disclosure*, not of private *interpretation*."⁸ Gordon Clark suggests the translation, "No written prophecy ever came into being by any individual's setting it free [or, more literally] by private release."⁹ The emphasis would be that Scripture did not come by man's decision ("never had its origin in the will of man," v. 21), or just because a person "wanted to prophesy" (NLT).

I should add that even if the word "interpretation" takes on the meaning of "explanation" here, it would make no essential difference. The emphasis would shift slightly to the fact that Scripture did not come from human understanding about historical events and current affairs, or human speculation about the future. Wuest takes this perspective and translates, "every prophecy of scripture does not originate from any private interpretation [held by the writer]."¹⁰

Both ideas are found in verse 21, which says that "prophesy never had its origin in the will of man" (not by human *initiation*) but that "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (not by human *interpretation*).

Thus in declaring the inspiration of Scripture, Peter first makes an important denial. He denies that Scripture is a product of human initiation and interpretation, unlike all non-Christian religions and philosophies. But then, he makes an affirmation about the origin of Scripture that tells us something about the nature of inspiration. Scripture "came about" (v. 20), he explains, as "men spoke *from God*" (v. 21). The words of Scripture came from God, and not from the men themselves.

We can learn something about the nature of true prophetic utterances by noting how false prophecies are described and condemned in Scripture. For example, Jeremiah 23:16 says, "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD." False prophets speak "from their own minds," but true prophets speak "from the mouth of the LORD." The New Testament says that "God...spoke through David" (Hebrews 4:7), and that "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth...through Isaiah the prophet" (Acts 28:25).

It was God who spoke, not men – he spoke *through* men. The implication is unmistakable – the words of Scripture are so much "from God" that it is as if they came straight "from the mouth of the LORD," and in fact, they did. Therefore, we are to make no distinction between the words of Scripture and the words of God.

In fact, we can – we *must* – regularly and in various contexts use "God" and "Scripture" as interchangeable terms, for this is also the Bible's own practice. Genesis 12:1-3 says, "*The LORD had said...*," but referring to the same instance, Galatians 3:8 reads, "*The Scripture foresaw...and announced...*" Exodus 9:13-16 says, "Then *the LORD*

⁸ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. 6 (Broadman Press, 1960), p. 158.

⁹ Gordon H. Clark, *New Heavens, New Earth: A Commentary on First and Second Peter* (The Trinity Foundation, 1993), p. 192-193. Brackets in original.

¹⁰ Kenneth S. Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation*. Brackets in original.

said...confront Pharaoh and say to him....," but referring to the same instance, Romans 9:17 reads, "For *the Scripture* says to Pharaoh...."

In the Bible, "Scripture" is personified and sometimes used in the place of "God" altogether. This is only right and natural if Scripture is *exactly* the word of God, so that there is zero difference between them in thought and in authority. And it is only right that we as Christians adopt the same practice. It reflects our belief in the divine inspiration of Scripture to think of God and the Bible as interchangeable. We refer to both as powerful, penetrating, wise, just, pure, and holy. Galatians 3:8, cited above, attributes prescience to Scripture. We can even refer to the Scripture as the judge of mankind: "And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him – the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day" (John 12:47-48, NKJ).

All of this does not apply only to the Old Testament, as if the Old and the New are two separate books forcibly put together instead of one organic whole foreordained, developed, and preserved by God. As Peter writes, "I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles" (2 Peter 3:2). The apostles also "spoke from God." Their inspired words were not their own, but came from the mouth of the Lord, and thus carry the authority of God (1 Corinthians 2:13, 14:37).

Scripture "came about" when "men spoke from God," so that Scripture carries absolute authority, and the term can even be personified to be used interchangeably with God. The ramifications for the sufficiency and utility of Scripture should be as obvious as they are numerous. But before we take this next step, we must recall the purpose for this detour into 2 Peter in the first place, which is to explain the human role in divine inspiration and the writing of Scripture.

Peter indeed says that Scripture came about as "men spoke *from God*," so that it did not come by human initiation or interpretation. But he also says that "*men spoke from God*," so that men were involved in the writing of Scripture. What was this role? What did they do? In what sense and in what way were they involved? Peter proceeds to tell us. He writes, "men spoke from God as they were *carried along* by the Holy Spirit" (v. 21).

The translation "moved by" (KJV, NASB) at least indicates that the men were passive, that they were *acted upon* by the Spirit, and this is certainly a main emphasis here. But the translation "carried along" (NIV, ESV) paints a better picture of what the word means. It is a metaphor taken from the nautical world, and describes how a ship is carried and compelled by the wind. Thus in Acts 27:15 and 17, the word is translated "driven along" (NIV, ESV). In that passage, the ship is not self-powered, nor does it *actively* cooperate, but it is passive – acted upon and driven along by the wind, which is active.

Likewise, when men spoke from God and wrote Scripture, they were passive and the Spirit was active. In fact, the men were so passive relative to the Spirit that they were

described as being "carried along," as if the Spirit went under them, lifted them up and carried them for his own purposes. They were the passive objects carried entirely by the power of the Spirit, and this was their role and their involvement.

As Edward J. Young writes: "If a person picks up something and bears it, he does it by his own power. That which is picked up and borne, however, is absolutely passive. So the writers of Scripture who spoke from God were passive. It was the Spirit of God who bore them. It was He who was active, and they were passive."¹¹

Some commentators insist that the words "men spoke" grant an active role to the prophets, but in what sense were they active? If I were to take up a pen to write a letter, of course the "pen writes," but its role is active only relative to itself and relative to when it is not writing at all. Relative to me, the pen is entirely passive, and cannot even be described as actively cooperating. For those who always seem to misconstrue analogies, I am not saying that a man is exactly like a pen,¹² but I am saying that we cannot infer too much from the words "men spoke" themselves, but the sense and the extent of these words are restricted by the context.

Peter qualifies "men spoke" by saying the Spirit *carried* them, so that even their speaking was performed under this passive condition. So the men *did* speak, but only as they were carried by God's active power. That is, their act of speaking was active only relative to not speaking at all, but they were in no sense self-moved or self-powered as they spoke, nor did they have a "free will" from which God must obtain cooperation. Thus the entire verse speaks of men as passive, and God as active.

Perhaps motivated by his theological bias, as he offers his exposition on this same verse, Michael Green writes, "For revelation was not a matter of passive reception: it meant active co-operation."¹³ However, this is the very opposite of what Peter emphasizes in the verse. Green makes no mention of the obviously passive sense of "carried along," or how he could derive active human cooperation from the text. Of course, Green serves only as an illustration here in our discussion, since many others describe divine inspiration in such a manner.

What beliefs and assumptions is Green trying to protect, so that he would assert them even when they are nowhere to be found in the verse, or anywhere around the verse? He continues, "The fact of God's inspiration did not mean a supersession of the normal mental functionings of the human author....Moreover, he did not use *any* men, but *holy men*, those who were dedicated and pledged to his service. And even with such men, he did no violence to their personalities...."¹⁴

Green is concerned to preserve the "mental functionings" and the "personalities" of the human writers, and also the fact that they were holy men. And from this he infers that

¹¹ Edward J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1957), p. 25.

¹² See Vincent Cheung, "More Than a Potter."

¹³ Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), p. 103.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

revelation could not be "a matter of passive reception," but demanded man's "active cooperation." To put this another way, he wants to prevent the misunderstanding that the human writers were unconscious, unthinking, unaware, or in a trance when they spoke and wrote from God.

However, Green's inference does not follow from his concerns. When I write, of course the "pen moves," and when I play tennis, of course the "racket swings." In this sense, both the pen and racket are active, but they are active only relative to themselves, and relative to their previous resting condition. Relative to me, they are completely passive, being carried along by my strength and my design to do my bidding. Do they "cooperate"? Of course! But this is not because I politely request their assistance, to allow me to channel my thinking and energy through them. They "cooperate" because I have control over them.

Such an analogy will stir up much indignation: "How much greater is a man than a pen, and an intelligent thinking being is in an entirely different category compared to a tennis racket!" Rather than enforcing a right view of man, this objection betrays a false view of God. For if you think that God needs you to be in a trance or somehow get your mind out of the way to exercise exhaustive control over you, then your view of God is way too small.

Of course the "mind thinks," but what causes it to think? And what causes it to think a certain thought in a certain way at each moment of the man's life? Do you think that God does not continuously control man's conscious mental states? Of course God spoke through holy men, but what caused them to be holy? Did they create themselves or make themselves holy, or did God, as the Scripture says, out of the same lump of clay created some for noble purposes and others for common use? "It is God who works in you *to will* and *to act* according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). It is God who works in man to produce holy decisions and actions.

Moreover, although he rarely did it, God could just as easily speak his words through a wicked man, exercising exhaustive control over him just as he does all his other creatures, including the holy prophets, so that he would speak his words just as infallibly as the prophets did. Balaam is such an example. For inspiration is not a matter of man's cooperation, but the Spirit's power to *carry* the person to do and say all that God wills. And God's control over man is so exhaustive that he does not need to suspend the person's thinking and personality in order to speak through him exactly what he wills, since even the person's thinking and personality are under his direct and continuous control.

Therefore, that the prophets retained their "mental functionings" (most of the time), their personalities, and that they were holy men have no immediate relevance to whether they offered active cooperation – God had direct access and total control over all of these factors. Rather, we must ask Peter what happened as the prophets spoke, and he tells us that they were "carried along by the Holy Spirit," as if they were ships passively driven by the wind.

Now, because Christians affirm that God inspired every word in the Bible and not just the general ideas, critics sometimes allege that this amounts to claiming that God gave the Scripture by *dictation*, while the prophets served as secretaries and wrote them down. Then, on this basis, the critics attack the inspiration of Scripture by pointing out that such a dictation theory is inconsistent with the actual characteristics of Scripture. This is because the various documents in the Bible apparently reflect the different backgrounds, personalities, conditions, and circumstances of the human writers. But if Scripture came by God's dictation, then supposedly there should not be these variations.

Theologians are quick to deny this dictation theory of inspiration, charging the critics with attacking a straw man. Many of them would approach the issue from a perspective similar to Michael Green's, stating that inspiration does not imply dictation, but it even required active cooperation from the human writers, only that God "superintended" their writing so that the product is jointly human and divine, and at the same time exactly what God intended to set in writing.

However, this falls short of a biblical answer, and is itself ensnared by false assumptions. We have already said something about this above when we interacted with Michael Green, but here we will apply and extend what we have said to address the dictation theory in particular.

But before explaining why we must reject the theory, we should point out that there is nothing *inherently* wrong, repugnant, or impossible about dictation. If God had chosen to speak his words to the prophets and have them write down what they heard, then that is how the Bible would have been written, and there would be nothing wrong with it. In fact, some parts of the Bible were apparently written this way. The prophets would say something about the contexts and the circumstances, and then relate a verbatim quotation of what God said to them.

Even if we were to apply dictation to the whole Bible, there still would not be any inherent difficulties. The objection stems from the fact that the Bible reflects a variety of writing styles and personalities. However, God is not a man and does not have the limitations and narrowness of a man's mind. He could have dictated different parts of the Bible in different ways to reflect his intellectual immensity. The essential issue is whether this multifaceted revelation nevertheless exhibits a perfect internal harmony. If it does not, then whether God gave the Scripture by dictation is the least of our problems, but if it does, then this harmonious variety found in Scripture cannot be used to argue against a dictation theory of inspiration.

Although there are no inherent problems with dictation, there are indeed several definitive reasons to reject it as a description or explanation of biblical inspiration. We will discuss only three – the theory is false, irrelevant, and weak. Any of these reasons would be enough as a basis to reject it.

First, we must reject the dictation theory simply because it is false. It is not that dictation was impossible in principle, but it was not how Scripture was written – it was not how it happened. We mentioned that some parts of Scripture were written when the prophets recorded verbatim what they heard from God, but the whole Bible was not written this way, so that the theory fails to describe or explain the inspiration of the entire Bible. However, even if the entire Bible was written this way, dictation would still fail to describe or explain inspiration, at least because of the next two reasons.

Second, the dictation theory is irrelevant. Although it is called the dictation theory of *inspiration*, dictation has little to nothing to do with inspiration. Dictation describes how God speaks to a person or conveys *that* God speaks to a person, but inspiration refers to or must include what God does to a person as this person speaks and writes the words of God to produce an accurate product. Paul refers to the Scripture as God-breathed – something that came directly out of God. And Peter writes that men spoke from God as they were carried along. In other words, God did not just carry the prophets to *hear* his words, and then left them to relate what he said to the best of their human ability, but God carried them *as* they were speaking and writing his words.

God could dictate his words to an *uninspired* individual and the person could write down what he heard, but the product would still be an *uninspired* document, since without inspiration at the moment of writing, the authenticity and authority of the document would depend on the uninspired person's human ability to recall, arrange, and record what he thought God revealed. And there is no guarantee that he would not subtract from or add to what he heard.¹⁵ In fact, God could speak from heaven, and some would say that it thundered (John 12:29). Paul says that the *Scripture* is God-breathed, and not that the prophets heard God-breathed words which they then tried to relate without any divine guarantee of success or perfection.

For this reason, I wrote earlier, "If God had chosen to speak his words to the prophets and have them write down what they heard, then that is how the Bible would have been written, and there would be nothing wrong with it. In fact, some parts of the Bible were *apparently* written this way." I said "apparently" because the truth is that, when the subject is inspiration, *no part* of the Bible was actually written by mere dictation. Even when dictation was involved, if we were to associate "inspiration" with what Paul and Peter are talking about in the passages that we examined, then inspiration must at least refer to how God carried along the human writers as they were speaking and writing the words of God, and not just when they were hearing the dictation.¹⁶

Therefore, if the Scripture was nothing more than dictated, then it was not inspired. And even if the original dictation was God-breathed, unless God ensured by his omnipotence

¹⁵ Of course, the person is still not autonomous in this case, but it would be God who controls him to produce a flawed document. But if this is the case, then the document is not rightly described as inspired, and still less infallible, inerrant, or God-breathed. It would be just another flawed piece of writing produced under God's ordinary providence.

¹⁶ It could be that they were also "carried along" by God as they were hearing his words, but it remains that the only issue of *immediate* relevance is whether they were carried along when they were speaking and writing.

that his words were faithfully recorded as the human writers wrote, we still cannot say that the written product is God-breathed. The dictation theory is irrelevant because it addresses something other than the question at hand, that is, whether the *written product* is the infallible and inerrant revelation of God. As we have seen, Paul's answer is that "All Scripture is God-breathed," regardless of whether it was dictated or not dictated, or whether we are referring to the narratives, the prophecies, or the genealogies.

Third, the dictation theory is far too weak to describe or explain the divine inspiration of Scripture. This might surprise some people, since they think that dictation would have been the strongest possible method for God to produce the Bible through human writers. However, we have shown that if the Bible was nothing more than dictated from God to men, then it was not inspired at all. For if such were the case, although the dictation would indeed be God-breathed, and thus infallible and inerrant, we would not be able to say the same about the written product.

People usually oppose the dictation theory because they think that pure dictation would have obscured the personal characteristics of the human writers, but since the Bible exhibits these characteristics, it is said that the Scripture was not given by dictation. Inerrancy is not in question here, as these people could also affirm it, but we are trying to ascertain *what happened* in inspiration, and the implication of this perspective is that dictation is too "strong" to describe or explain inspiration.

However, the opposite is true. The above fails to consider where these human characteristics came from in the first place. They were not self-created, and the human writers were not autonomous. Dictation is not false because it minimizes the human role, although the human role was merely to be "carried along," but the theory is false because it undermines the sovereignty of God. It is false not because it gives too little freedom to man, but because it leaves too little control to God.

Consider the relationship between an employer and his secretary, not only on the interpersonal level but on the metaphysical level as well. In the first place, they have to find each other. The employer puts out an advertisement for the opening, and an interested person applies for the job. After reviewing her qualifications, the employer either accepts or rejects the applicant. This continues until the employer finds a satisfactory candidate and hires her.

As she begins to work for this employer, the secretary brings into her work her education, experience, personality, belief system, and even health condition – the employer has no influence over these previously determined factors. He assigns a number of tasks for her to do, and one of these is probably to take down his dictation. He would dictate to the secretary memos, letters, and various documents. For our purpose, we can even assume that his dictation is always perfect, so that all the secretary needs to do is to write down his words exactly as spoken. The written product, of course, should reflect only the personality, vocabulary, and other characteristics of the employer, and not that of the secretary.

After work, the secretary goes home. The employer has no access to her private life, inner thoughts, personal decisions, and physical condition. He has no right or power to determine how many children she has, where they go to school, where her husband works, what friends she makes, and when her mother dies. All he can do is to dictate his words to her, but she has to write them down of her own will (the human employer has no direct control over her will)¹⁷ and according to her ability.

The relationship between God and the human writers of Scripture is wholly different. In the first place, God did not *find* the human writers, as if they were created and developed apart from God, only to be discovered by him later, but he *made* them according to his own specifications. Commenting on a related subject, Geerhardus Vos writes, "The revelation does not spring from the character; on the contrary, the character is predetermined by the necessities of the revelation."¹⁸

Some theologians are fond of using "natural propagation" to explain human traits, including the universal sinfulness of man.¹⁹ However, natural propagation is at best relative – that is, it describes the relationship between past generations to the current one – it cannot function as the metaphysical explanation of the propagation of these traits, the relationship between God and human beings, or the relationship between God and human depravity.

Otherwise, Romans 9:21 could be referring to only Adam and Eve at best, but of course this is impossible – the immediate context as well as the entire Bible forbid such an interpretation, nor have I read anyone propose such nonsense. Those who make natural propagation into almost an absolute explanation of human traits seem to altogether ignore this verse and others like it, and given their theory, this is indeed what they would need to do. Also, this perspective has never been able to explain the origin of sin. Its proponents must relegate it to a complete mystery.

Rather, this verse as well as the entire Bible affirm God's direct and total control over the characteristics and destinies of all his human creatures.²⁰ And *this* is both the immediate and ultimate explanation for all human traits, and for the origination and the perpetuation of human depravity. As Luther writes, "the children of wrath" are "*created such by God himself*" after the pattern of Adam.²¹

Therefore, the various human characteristics exhibited in Scripture can never undermine its inspiration, for this variety is part of God's design. God did not dictate the Scripture using only one set of characteristics (personality, vocabulary, etc.), nor did he dictate it

¹⁷ Here we are not speaking of her relation to God, who exercises direct, total, and continuous control over her will.

¹⁸ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 91.

¹⁹ For example, see William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (P & R Publishing, 2003).

²⁰ See Vincent Cheung, "More Than a Potter."

²¹ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Fleming H. Revell, 1957), p. 314. Luther does not here address what caused Adam to commit the first sin, since he is discussing Ephesians 2:3 and not Adam, but he does assert that all of Adam's descendents are *created as sinful* by God. Lesser theologians prefer to hide behind "natural propagation" so that they can distance God from evil.

using a numerous sets of characteristics. Rather, if we wish to speak in terms of dictation, the *whole creation* is God's "dictation," including these human writers who exhibited different characteristics, since these characteristics themselves were "dictated" by God. He did not only dictate the words of the Bible, but he "dictated" the very *people* who spoke his words and held the pens to write them down. And he even "carried" them along as they did so.

This is why a theory of mere verbal dictation is far too weak to describe or explain biblical inspiration, since behind the production of Scripture is God's exhaustive and pervasive control over all of history and all of humanity, including the rise and fall of nations, every good deed, every evil thought, the course of every drop of rain, and the precise length and number of a person's hair. And even now he must sustain all things by his word (Hebrews 1:3).

What an insult, then, it would be to say that he dictated the words to the human writers, or that these human writers "actively cooperated" with God. No, God first "wrote" the prophets themselves and then "carried" them to write the Bible. He created, caused, and carried the men to write his words. No weaker description or explanation can do justice to the inspiration of the Bible.

To summarize our position on the inspiration and authority of Scripture, Edward Young is right when he says that the Bible is "not a magical book dropped down from heaven";²² however, the result is the same. The Bible that we have now is so absolutely infallible, inerrant, and authoritative that it is as if God had taken up a pen himself and written the whole book, and then dropped it down from heaven to us. But we have already made the strongest possible statement about this long before, that is, when we refer to the Bible in a personified sense, God and Scripture are interchangeable.

²² Young, *Thy Word is Truth*, p. 25.

2. SUFFICIENCY

Although it is not the main focus of our passage (2 Timothy 3:14-17), we have spent so much time on the inspiration of Scripture because, besides its inherent importance, it is the foundation for a proper view of the sufficiency and utility of Scripture. Given its claims and purposes, the Bible can be sufficient and profitable only to the extent that it is authoritative, so that a false view of inspiration will limit and distort all aspects of our relationship with Scripture – that is, all aspects of our Christian life and relationship with God.

Scripture is the very word and mind of God, and just as it is a contradiction to say that we love a person but hate everything about him (since everything about him *is* him), our love, faith, and reverence toward God can never rise higher than our love, faith, and reverence toward the Bible. Thus only the highest and most extreme view of inspiration can serve as a proper foundation for our Christian life. As we proceed, it will become evident how the sufficiency and utility of Scripture are dependent on its divine inspiration and absolute authority.

Now, when it comes to the sufficiency of Scripture, we cannot just say that "the Scripture is sufficient," and leave it at that. This is because the idea of sufficiency remains empty and meaningless unless we also ask, "For *what* is Scripture sufficient?" and "For *whom* is Scripture sufficient?" Something that is "sufficient" is sufficient *for something*, and not "sufficient" in general or in the abstract. The Bible contains the answers, but what are the questions?

This brings to mind a common pastoral problem. Christians often ask questions that they either should not ask in the first place, or that are latent with false assumptions and unbiblical concerns, so that from the start their approach blinds them to what Scripture is really saying.

For example, someone might complain, "I understand that the Bible is sufficient, but it does not tell me which stocks to buy," or less reverently, "*You say* that the Bible is sufficient, but it does not tell me which stocks to buy." Of course, people ask questions about all kinds of topics. Another one would be, "The Bible does not tell me whom to marry, so how I am supposed to decide?" Thus I am not only thinking about stocks, but there are common problems with these questions, so with the appropriate adaptations, the following response will apply to all of them.

First, like most people, this person probably never read the entire Bible, so he is just assuming that the Bible does not specify, even by name, which stocks he is supposed to buy. And even if one has read the entire Bible, he cannot say that he has derived all that is possible from it. More often than not the Bible has something very specific to say about the question, and one can always derive some definite principles that will either

render the right choice obvious or at least greatly limit the allowable options. The problem is that this person has too little knowledge of what the Bible says.

Second, the person assumes a goal and the means to that goal that he probably did not derive from the Bible, and then expects the Bible to instruct him on how to attain this goal by such means. He wishes to make a financial profit, and he thinks that purchasing the right stocks would be the right way to attain this goal, and since the Bible is infallible, he approaches it to find the answer. But does the Bible approve or command such a goal? If it does, does it say that this is the right way to attain it? How about the lottery? Is the Bible insufficient if it does not tell you which numbers to choose?

Many people first define what they want or need apart from the Bible, and then come to the Bible for answers. In a financial situation, they would think, "The Bible is supposed to be sufficient for every situation that I face in life, and to tell me God's mind on the subject. With this problem that I am facing, what should I do so that I will *make a profit or not suffer loss?*"

They appear to seek guidance from the Bible, but they have already assumed the proper result that the Bible is supposed to help them attain. However, they never asked the Bible as to whether God wishes for them to make a profit or not suffer loss. Their respect and dependence on the Bible does not start from *the beginning* of their chain of priorities and their process of reasoning, but only when they have made enough assumptions apart from the Bible that they are now willing to let it take over to satisfy those assumptions.

But the Bible might not offer them the answers that they seek, since it probably never approved what generated the questions in the first place. Or, in our example, even if the Bible would declare profit a proper goal, it might do so for a different reason, or from another perspective, attaching to it different motives and background assumptions.²³

The point is that the Bible tells us about its own purposes and powers, what it is for and what it can do. The Bible tells us what are the important things in life and what questions we should ask about them, and then it answers those questions. And since the Bible is the very word and mind of God, it is God who is saying these things to us.

Therefore, the Bible should define *both* the questions and the answers. It is authoritative and sufficient to tell us what questions to ask and then to answer those questions. The Bible is sufficient because it is at the same time God's revelation of the right questions and God's revelation of the right answers to those questions. If the Bible does not address something, then who says we need to know it? But if there is no need to know it, then how can the Bible be insufficient if it does not address it? In contrast, human philosophy asks the wrong questions, and then it cannot even answer those wrong questions.

Those who go to the Bible only for the answers and not the questions betray a feigned reverence. They are not treating God as God, but as a mere expert that they wish to consult in order to attain their own goals. Underlying all of this is their rebellion and

²³ See Vincent Cheung, "Biblical Guidance and Decision-Making" in *Godliness with Contentment*.

unbelief – they either refuse to let God define their goals or they doubt that God's will is better, or both.

In our example, the goal of making a profit is so dear to the person's heart that rather than letting Scripture challenge or modify it, he would even shield it from Scripture. The goal is tenaciously held, and not open to question – he only wishes to know how to attain it. It so drives his agenda that he never even thought to ask the Bible whether it is right, or whether he is thinking about it the right way.

Again, here we are not at all considering what the Bible says about wealth and stocks, but we are making the point that the Bible should define both our questions and our answers at the very beginning of our thinking. We also mentioned a question about whom to marry. Applying our point to this question, we are saying that rather than carrying to the Bible all that the person *thinks* that he knows about marriage and then demanding it to tell him whom to marry on such a basis, the person should start by learning what the Bible teaches about God and man, then men and women, Christ and the Church, and the marriage covenant in general. Then, instead of demanding the Bible to answer a question that it never asked, or at least not in the way and with the assumptions that this person asks his question, the answer as to whom he should marry should be a logical application of what the Bible teaches about marriage.

A person who pays no attention when the Bible talks about what marriage is cannot expect to rightly derive an answer from the Bible as to whom he should marry. But for one who starts with the Bible on the subject, the answer is easy – applying what Scripture says about marriage to what providence has arranged around a person often eliminates all other possibilities except one.²⁴ Pastors and counselors sometimes assume that the Bible offers only general guidance on the subject, but this is not true. The Bible gives very specific criteria and instructions, and providence never confuses us with too many options.

Consistent with what we are teaching here, in what follows even the idea of sufficiency is derived from our passage, and the questions "Sufficient for what?" and "Sufficient for whom?" are also thus derived. Paul tells us that the Scripture is God-breathed, and on this basis, it is useful or profitable, and also sufficient. But he tells us more than this, since he also mentions for what and for whom the Scripture is sufficient.

Of course, to learn all that for which Scripture is sufficient, one must read the entire Bible and note all the topics, situations, and people that it addresses. But our project is much more modest – we will limit ourselves to 2 Timothy 3 and 4.

a. Sufficient for What?

Paul says that "the sacred writings" (NASB, ESV) are "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15). Salvation is one of Scripture's chief concerns, and Paul affirms that it is "able" to give us the answer on this all-

²⁴ See Vincent Cheung, "Unfading Beauty" in *Renewing the Mind*.

important topic. It asks the question, "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3). And then it answers, "But with you there is forgiveness" (v. 4). It tells us how God could be at the same time "just and the one who justifies" sinners (Romans 3:26).

Paul's statement about Scripture is made in contrast against the people described in 3:1-13. Among other things, these people are "men of depraved minds" (v. 8). They are "evil men and imposters" who are "deceiving and being deceived" (v. 13), "having a form of godliness but denying its power" (v. 5). Therefore, as Paul affirms the sufficiency of Scripture when it comes to salvation, he is at the same time condemning any form of religion and lifestyle that is not derived from it. It is the Bible that will lead us to salvation, and that will make us different from these evil men.

Scripture is the light of salvation. The Bible supplies us with the categories and concepts of good and evil, law and sin, salvation and damnation, and then it gives us the truth on these subjects. Apart from it, man remains trapped in darkness. Without it, man remains caged in by his own foolish speculation, so that there is no salvation for those who reject its teachings.

Human philosophy has been a dismal failure. Even if man manages to come up with the right questions, he certainly does not have the answers within himself, and all his striving is nothing more than the outworking of his blindness and rebellion, leading only to despair, death, and damnation. Accordingly, it is spiritual treason for professing Christians to concede that there is some wisdom in every religion and philosophy. To be double-minded on this issue is to weaken and confuse the message of salvation.

This message is clear, specific, and exclusive, for Paul says that the wisdom Scripture provides leads us to salvation "through faith in Christ Jesus" (v. 15). And throughout his letters, Paul leaves no doubt as to what he means by "faith in Christ Jesus." Not only must a person believe in the grace of God and the atonement of Christ, but this faith must exclude dependence on anything else. In addition, this is a faith that God sovereignly gives to his chosen ones – it is not something that a wicked and unbelieving person can just all of a sudden decide to generate by himself.

Human wisdom will try to add to this faith good works, sacred rituals, infused grace, and whatever else they can imagine, but then they are back to "having a form of godliness but denying its power." Any salvation message that demands more or less than "faith in Christ Jesus" spells damnation for those who preach and follow it (see Galatians 1:8-9). It is the biblical "life and doctrine" that will "save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:16).

According to some, the way of salvation is so simple even from a human and natural perspective that even "fools shall not err therein" (Isaiah 35:8, KJV), in the sense that even fools can understand the gospel and will not make a mistake about it. However, the verse is saying exactly the opposite: "And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that

Way; wicked fools will not go about on it" (NIV). That is, "the Way" (Acts 9:2, 19:9, 23, 24:14, 22) is reserved for those whom God has chosen and Christ has redeemed, so that the unclean and the fools will not enter into it, and will not even stumble upon it or wander into it by mistake.

Spiritual fools can never find salvation by themselves. It is so far from their reach that they will not even stumble across it. All are spiritual fools by nature, but the Bible can make one wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.²⁵ Thus the Bible is sufficient for salvation.

Then, Paul writes that "All Scripture...is useful...so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (v. 16-17). The NIV obscures the triple emphasis on the sufficiency of Scripture in this verse. The NKJ is better – it says, "that the man of God may be *complete, thoroughly equipped* for *every* good work."

The word "complete" can mean "adequate," "fitted," and "capable" (ESV: "competent"). The KJV has "perfect," which carries the same meanings in old English. The word translated "thoroughly equipped" or "fully furnished" is even more descriptive in the original. Together with "every good work," Paul is obviously making a special effort to stress the sufficiency of Scripture. It is enough. It is complete. You need nothing else.

Verse 17 is mainly referring to Timothy in his capacity as a minister – that is, a "man of God." So the Scripture is sufficient to fully equip Timothy for every "good work" that he would need to perform in ministry. However, we must not isolate this statement from its surrounding verses. Paul also makes a contrast between Timothy and the evil men that he has been describing. In verses 1-13, Paul mentions people who are, among other things, "lovers of themselves," "lovers of money," "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God," "having a form of godliness but denying its power," "evil men and imposters" who are "deceiving and being deceived." And it is against this background that Paul says to Timothy, "But as *for you*, continued in what you have learned and become convinced of," and by this he means "the sacred writings" (v. 15) and "All Scripture" (v. 16).

Therefore, Paul is not only telling Timothy that the Bible is sufficient to equip him as a minister to effect sanctification in others, but he is also saying that the Bible can make him the opposite of these evil people that he has just described. That is, if Timothy will persist in following its teachings, the Bible will make him into a lover of God rather than a lover of pleasure, and he will have the power and reality of godliness rather than a mere appearance of it. Rather than "deceiving and being deceived," he will be able to save himself as well as those who hear him (1 Timothy 4:16).

Paul applies the sufficiency of Scripture to "training in righteousness" and "every good work." Scripture is thus a complete and sufficient revelation of God's will in that it can always show us the *right* path, that is, the path that leads to *righteousness*. Many people struggle with the sufficiency of Scripture, constantly complaining about what the Bible

²⁵ In connection to 2 Timothy 3:15, please also see my *On Good and Evil*, where I correct an anti-intellectual misinterpretation of John 5:39-40.

does not tell them, because they want it to point out the path to prosperity, a favorable outcome, or some other effect that they desire. But Paul's point is that if Scripture is perfectly followed, then we will never do anything that is sinful, and all that we do will be "good work" in the sight of God.

Of course, with the remaining sinfulness even in believers, perfect obedience to Scripture is not attained in this life, but the point is that the needed information to define perfect righteousness for every situation, and every area of life and thought, is indeed contained in Scripture. The Bible is sufficient for sanctification. This means that it can cause us to grow in knowledge and holiness, and shield us from deception and contamination. If we sin, if we fail, and if we do not know the right way, it is never because the Bible lacks the relevant warnings and instructions.

b. Sufficient for Whom?

Since the Bible is the word of God, and since God has the right, power, and wisdom to define our needs and meet those needs, Christians correctly assume that the Bible is for everyone. By this we mean that every person should learn from the Bible what his needs are and then derive from it the wisdom to satisfy those needs, and that he should learn from the Bible what his duties are and draw from it the strength to fulfill them.

Regardless of times and cultures, the Bible wields absolute authority over every human being. Every person must believe it, obey it, and then be judged by it. In it is the message that saves some for heaven and condemns all others to an endless hell. Anyone who would approach God must come to him through faith in the Bible. It rules over mankind, and in it is written the fate of the world. Whether we are referring to believers or unbelievers, they are behaving exactly in the manner that the Bible says they would, and their respective destinies will also be exactly what the Bible predicts. No one is exempt, and no one can escape – you either fall upon the Rock and be broken, or the Rock falls on you and crushes you to powder.

Sinners scoff at the notion that humankind could be ruled by a book, but as the Scripture says, the wisdom of God sounds foolish to those who are heading toward damnation, not that God is foolish, but that sinners are too stupid and deceived to recognize true wisdom. Moreover, as we have already mentioned more than once, since the Bible is the exact and direct revelation of God, to say that the Bible rules the world is to say that God rules the world. There is no difference.

With such power and relevance, of course the Bible is sufficient for every person. Why, then, do we still ask the question, "Sufficient for whom?" Even if it was necessary to ask before, now that we have stated a general answer that covers every person, do we need to go any further?

For the most general purposes, we may indeed stop at this point, since there is no exception to what we have said. However, the Bible itself acknowledges different categories of people, and provides specific information about them and instructions

directed toward them. It addresses kings, judges, and others in authority, outlining both their powers and duties. It speaks to husbands and wives, distinguishing their roles and ranks in the home. It mentions different types of sinners, such as murderers, thieves, and homosexuals, commanding them to repent of their evil deeds, to believe in the gospel, and then to change their behavior.

In other words, although the Bible is sufficient for every person, and although every person needs the Bible, paying attention to the specific instructions in Scripture about different groups of people enable us to make deliberate and effective applications. Now, to list all the different groups specified in Scripture would require one to go through the whole Bible. We will deal with only those mentioned and implied in our passage and surrounding verses.

In verse 15, Paul says to Timothy, "*from infancy* you have known the holy Scriptures" (NIV). Another good translation would be "from an infant." The word refers to an unborn child in Luke 1:41 and 44, where it is translated "baby" or "babe." In Luke 2:12 and 16, the word refers to someone who has just been born.

It is translated "newborn babies" in Acts 7:19. There the context is Pharaoh's command to kill all the male children born to the Hebrews (Exodus 1:16). The command seems to demand immediate action, as the midwives were supposed to observe the gender of the babies right "on the delivery stool." The mother of Moses hid him for three months after he was born (2:2). The text is clear that, relative to Pharaoh's command, she was not permitted to wait that long. It is possible that the word includes slightly older children in Luke 18:15, but it remains that the word refers to *very small* children.

Instead of "from infancy" or "from an infant," a number translations say "from childhood" or "from a child." The first definition in *Merriam-Webster* for "child" is "an unborn or recently born person," and the second is "a young person especially between infancy and youth," but does not exclude the infant. To use "child," therefore, is not necessarily wrong, but unless it is understood that the meaning is a very young child, it is more clear and precise to use "infancy" or "infant" in our verse (2 Timothy 3:15).

Jewish children were taught the Scripture at a very early age, probably as soon as they could understand language. In fact, it is probable that they learned language itself from the Scripture. It is suggested that the uncommon phrase for Scripture, translated "the sacred writings" in our verse, could signify that Timothy learned to read and write with the Bible as his textbook. But whether this is what *this* verse implies, it is clear from the Old Testament that the Jews were commanded to diligently educate their children in the Scripture.

From the beginning, God's people have always emphasized the passing on of their faith to future generations. As God says regarding Abraham in Genesis 18:19, "For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

The Jews heavily stress the early religious education of children. There are several essential characteristics about their method. First, it involves complete immersion:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; see also 11:18-20)

Every situation and every time of the day provides the context to teach their children the Scripture.

Moreover, they are not encouraged to be original and creative, to come up with their own answers to spiritual things, or to explore the various options offered by the pagan nations around them. Instead, they are told what to believe, how to behave, and what to avoid and oppose. They are not taught to "think for themselves,"²⁶ as if sinful children can answer the ultimate questions apart from revelation, or as if they could dictate to God how God ought to be worshiped. No, they are taught to think what God tells them to think.

This method of education is very much a passing on of bare facts and knowledge, a method that the contemporary western mind detest, which is also why the average knowledge and intelligence of the contemporary western mind seems to have plummeted to an irrecoverable low.

As Hendriksen writes:

As to methodology, the Israelites were not, as a rule, afflicted with memorization-phobia. To a certain extent, necessity even demanded and common sense dictated that committing to memory receive its prominent place in the system of education (Is. 28:10). At times this method may have received undue emphasis, just as today it certainly receives *too little* emphasis.

The notion that educators should merely ask questions to which no one except the child (!) has the right to supply answers was favored only by men like Eli ("Why do you do such things?" I Sam. 2:23), who failed miserably in the task of bringing up his children. *God demanded that when questions were asked, definite answers should be given* (Ex. 13:8; Deut. 6:7; 6:20-25; 11:19; Josh. 12:26-28); that children should be *taught* Jehovah's statutes; that a body of truth with respect to the words

²⁶ Unbelievers have influenced Christians to teach this way when it comes to religion, but this is not how they teach evolution.

and deeds of Jehovah should be handed down from generation to generation.²⁷

The strength and weakness of this method is the same – it is only as good as the contents of what is taught. But when what is so rigidly taught is in fact the very word and mind of God, no other method and no human ingenuity can rival its power and excellence. It is the only appropriate method to teach a perfect book. Thus the Bible is to be dogmatically impressed upon children, both in systematic programs and daily conversations, rather than creatively subverted by modern theories, which encourage children to give their wicked and foolish hearts full expression.²⁸ This does not need to be done in an overbearing and annoying manner, but when properly performed, it can be very natural and pleasant.

Against this biblical method of early dogmatic religious immersion, many professing Christians say that they prefer to wait until their children become older, so that they can study the various religions and philosophies, and then "decide for themselves." This kind of thinking, of course, has been adopted from the parenting philosophy of unbelievers, although it is never actually practiced by them. Rather, the children are immersed in their anti-biblical beliefs and values instead. And when "Christian" parents try to avoid teaching their children religion, what do these children end up learning? Whether right or wrong, biblical or anti-biblical, the children will not learn *nothing* until they become teenagers or adults – they will not live in spiritual suspension.

Parents withhold biblical indoctrination from their children in direct defiance against God's commands. This should be enough to condemn the neglect, which is a form of spiritual child abuse. And as mentioned above, it is often *deliberately* practiced, and even believed to be a superior form of parenting. So not only do they disobey God, but these parents think that they know better than he does how to love and raise their children.

This practice of withholding biblical teachings from the children betrays another problem. Just as clearly as the above, this one also calls into question the personal faith of the parents. Part of the biblical method of total religious immersion has to do with answering the children's questions about the faith of the parents. As God states in Exodus:

"Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.'" Then the people bowed down and worshiped. (12:24-27; see also 13:14-16)

²⁷ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of The Pastoral Epistles* (Baker Books, 1957), p. 298.

²⁸ For more on theories of education, see Vincent Cheung, *Preach the Word*, and Gordon Clark, *A Christian Philosophy of Education*.

If the parents practice their faith at all, religious questions from children are unavoidable. Do the parents go to church, receive communion, read the Bible, make petitions to God, preach the gospel to their neighbors? If they do any of these things, then the children are going to ask about them. They will say, "What is this place? Why do we go to church? What are you reading? Can I read it? Who do you talk to when you bow your head like that? And who is this Jesus you were talking about with Uncle Bob?"

And do these parents ever exhibit an integrity that would intrigue their children? "Mother, why did you give the money back when the person at the store gave you too much change?" Or, what do these parents say when they tell their children not to lie, and they ask, "Why"? The answer will either be God-centered or man-centered. It will be based on either biblical revelation and absolute moral laws, or pragmatic concerns and mere convenience. The children will be indoctrinated one way or the other.

Parents who think that religion is too difficult or boring for children betray a fundamental ignorance of both religion and children. God declares that the biblical religion is an appropriate topic of conversation *all the time*. These children were expected to learn about God, Egypt, slavery, freedom, grace, power, prayer, and rituals, as well as the prohibitions against such things as homosexuality and bestiality. If taught properly from the Bible, and if taught within the framework of the whole Christian worldview, no topic is too mature for children to hear about.

As for the parents whose lives never generate religious questions from their children at all, they are most likely not Christians in the first place. They are just false converts trying to avoid acting like true believers. For if they indeed perceive religion as a matter of salvation or damnation rather than a matter of mere preference and mental well-being, then doubtless they would earnestly teach the whole counsel of God to their children, and practice the faith before them.

Now, even if the children have been properly instructed from infancy, there will come a time when the world will challenge and oppose what they have been taught. Their faith will be tested. As Paul writes in our passage, "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). The solution is just to "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of" (v. 14). The Bible is sufficient to teach even infants, and if they will continue in what they have learned, it will see them through persecution and unfavorable times.

Finally, for the Bible to be sufficient to teach children also implies that extra-biblical materials are unnecessary to achieve the desired outcome. It is unnecessary to supplement dogmatic verbal instructions with cartoons, puppets, toys, and all kinds of gimmicks. The correct method is to immerse the children in biblical teachings, and enforce them with discipline.

As I mentioned earlier, the "man of God" in verse 17 is mainly referring to Timothy as a minister or preacher, instead of a Christian in general. Of course, much of what applies to

a minister will also apply to any Christian, and what is sufficient for a preacher should also be sufficient for any believer. Nevertheless, Paul is indeed addressing some pressing problems relative to Timothy's situation as a minister, and since we cannot spare time to give a full exposition, we can consider only the primary emphasis of the verse.

Note again the problems and the people that Paul has brought up so far. He mentions people who are "lovers of themselves," "lovers of money," "not lovers of the good," "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God," and "having a form of godliness but denying its power," they are "evil men and imposters" who are "deceiving and being deceived."

Against the "terrible times" (3:1) in which Timothy must live, Paul reminds him that it would be enough if he would "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of" since infancy. When Paul says this, he of course has in mind Timothy's ministerial duties and difficulties. Thus "the sacred writings" that Timothy has learned since he was an infant would be sufficient to sustain him, both as a Christian and as a minister, in these "terrible times." The Scripture is sufficient to sustain the minister as an individual believer, so that he would become and remain the *opposite* of these evil men that Paul has just described.

Then, Paul adds that by the Scripture, "the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (v. 17). Although the Scripture is certainly sufficient for an individual's sanctification, here the "good work" mainly refers to what Timothy must do as a minister. Paul is saying that the Scripture is also sufficient to equip Timothy for his ministry to other people.

Thus the Bible is not only sufficient to *train and sustain* the minister, but it is also sufficient to be *used by* the minister. Just *how* he ought to use the Scripture in ministry to others is a topic we will reserve for the section on the utility of Scripture (see v. 16). Right now, we will briefly consider the implications of Scripture being sufficient to equip the minister for every good work.

Our passage and its subsequent verses (3:16-4:5) show that Timothy's task is very much a ministry of the word of God. One of the main ways that God reaches the world through his ministers is by preaching, and in our passage, preaching is evidently the primary solution to be applied against all the problems and people that Paul has just described. The question, then, is whether the Bible supplies the necessary materials that a minister needs in his ministry of preaching.

To this, Paul writes that "All Scripture is God-breathed and useful...so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (v. 16) The verse hints at no exception, and the unmistakable assertion is that the Bible is sufficient for whatever the minister needs to accomplish. That is, whatever is the minister's duty to do, he can take the Bible and apply it to the need, and it would be an adequate solution.

It follows that extra-biblical materials are unnecessary. In his ministry, it is *never* necessary for the minister to have studied the disciplines of psychology, sociology, physics, biology, astronomy, or even secular history and contemporary culture. At this point, we are not saying anything about whether these can be helpful to the ministry, but we echo Paul's triple emphasis that the Bible is sufficient for the minister, so that he may be *complete*, and *thoroughly equipped* for *every* good work. And this means that no supplemental knowledge is necessary. To assert otherwise is to deny the sufficiency of the equipment that divine inspiration insists to be sufficient.

In his ministry, Timothy would have to deal with many people who are enemies of the Christian faith. Since we have already referred to it several times, we will not repeat Paul's description of these "men of depraved minds" (3:8). But besides what he has said in 3:1-13, Paul adds in 4:3-4 to his description of the kind of people that Timothy would have to face: "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."

It is in such a context that Paul charges Timothy to "Preach the Word" (4:2).²⁹ He must do it "in season and out of season," whether the times are favorable or unfavorable. This is a remarkable charge, and very instructive for our time. Can you not see what Paul is saying? He tells Timothy that the Scripture is useful and sufficient to equip the minister "for every good work." And then he adds that the Bible is sufficient, that it is *the* answer, even when the people refuses to listen to the Bible!

To paraphrase, Paul is telling Timothy, "Terrible times are coming, when all kinds of evil people will roam the earth and the church. When this happens, Timothy, just continue in what you have learned and become convinced of. I am referring to the Scripture that you have known since you were an infant. It will carry you through these terrible times; it will secure your faith in God and maintain your holy character. Moreover, this same Bible will function as an adequate equipment with which you can teach and correct others. Now, the time will come when people don't want to hear what the Bible has to say. But you must preach the word of God, whether the times are favorable or unfavorable. Even when people refuse to listen to the Bible, preach the Bible some more – 'keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry' (4:5). Even when your preaching ministry is not welcomed, just keep on doing what you are supposed to do."

But Paul does *not* say, "If the people refuse to listen to Bible preaching, then you must accommodate them and reach them where they are. You must dilute the message somewhat so that you will not offend them right away. You must make your church seeker-friendly so that even those who hate the Bible will come in and feel comfortable, and that even those who gather around themselves teachers who will say what they want to hear will somehow accept you. If they don't like the Bible, maybe you can make your sermons shorter, or not preach at all. Maybe you can play the kind of music that they will

²⁹ See Vincent Cheung, *Preach the Word*.

enjoy. And if you will open a coffee shop *inside* the church, then it will make the church experience even more enjoyable for people."

Many churches have strayed far from what the apostle prescribes. He says, "If people don't want to hear the Bible, *keep on preaching it*. Discharge all the duties of your ministry." The Bible is sufficient for everyone – to teach children, to equip ministers, and to confront hardened apostates and hostile detractors.

3. UTILITY

The utility of Scripture cannot be separated from its sufficiency. As we will see, the Scripture is useful because it is inspired and sufficient, and it is sufficient because it is inspired. By the utility of Scripture, we have in mind the fact of Scripture's usefulness as well as the ways that it is used and applied. We have in mind the question of how this *sufficient* book becomes *efficient* in our lives and ministries.

To this question, Paul writes, "All Scripture is God-breathed *and is useful* for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). In context, Paul is telling Timothy that the Scripture is able to see him through the "terrible times" and is "useful" to fully equip him for ministry. Of course, the inspiration of Scripture is not a new teaching to Timothy, but Paul mentions it here to explicitly base the usefulness of Scripture on its inspiration and authority. We will consider why he does this and what this means in a moment.

The word translated "useful" here means "useful," "profitable," "beneficial," "advantageous," and so forth. It also appears in 1 Timothy 4:8 and Titus 3:8, and is consistently translated "profitable" in the KJV and NASB. In 1 Timothy, it refers to the enduring and far-reaching "value" of godliness, "holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." In Titus, it seems that the word refers to holy character, sound doctrine, and "doing what is good," with Paul saying that "These things are excellent and profitable for everyone." There are no interpretive problems with this word in 2 Timothy. Precisely what "useful" or "profitable" means here is defined by the context.

a. Modes of Application

Other than what we can derive from the broader context, Paul immediately lists several things for which Scripture is useful and profitable.³⁰ He says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for *teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." The word "for" (*pros*) appears before each of the items listed in verse 16, but the NIV omits this. That part of the verse literally says, "profitable *for* teaching, *for* reproof, *for* correction, *for* training in righteousness" (NASB).

We have already dealt with the triple emphasis on Scripture's sufficiency in verse 17 – it is an unmistakable declaration that the Bible is the *all-sufficient* tool for ministry. It is enough to address every need. Here we will turn our attention to the four items in the second part of verse 16.

³⁰ Also see 2 Timothy 4:2: "correct, rebuke and encourage." I have given an exposition of this in *Preach the Word*.

Scripture is useful "for *teaching*." The word appears also in 1 Timothy 4:6, 13, 16, and 6:3. As it is "a technical term in the [Pastoral Epistles] for the doctrinal formulation of Scripture,"³¹ another good translation is "doctrine," which is how the word is often rendered. Here it refers to the positive task of teaching the biblical doctrines, or the system of truth that God has revealed in Scripture. It is the positive exposition of the whole counsel of God. As Gordon Fee notes, this is the minister's "primary responsibility."³²

If the Scripture is merely "useful" for teaching, then the possibility remains that it needs to be supplemented with something else that is also useful for teaching. But Paul does not allow such an inference, since in this verse he declares that Scripture is useful for teaching and other things, *so that* the man of God may be *complete*, and *fully* equipped for *every* good work. In other words, the Bible is not only "useful" for teaching, but it is also sufficient and complete, containing all that is necessary for the teaching ministry.

There is also an essential relationship between the utility and sufficiency of Scripture with its inspiration and authority. Scripture is useful for teaching not only because it contains sufficient doctrinal information, but it is also sufficient in another sense, namely, that it is "God-breathed," and therefore speaks with ultimate authority. Thus the Scripture is useful and sufficient for teaching because, if the Bible asserts something, it is God's word on the subject, and that settles the matter. No additional confirmation is required, and any extra-biblical evidence cited as support would in fact carry an infinitely inferior authority, so that its rational value would be negligible.

Then, Scripture is useful "for *rebuking*." Several English versions favor "for reproof." This translation can be misleading, and at best it conveys only part of what the word means. The original has the sense of prosecuting a case against error, so that Jay Adams translates it as "conviction."³³ This is to be taken first in the objective sense, as in to convict someone in a court of law.³⁴ Only in a secondary sense or as a byproduct of the objective conviction does the word refer to a subjective feeling of guilt or admission of wrongdoing.

Here the word mainly refers to the minister's opposition against false teachers and their doctrines instead of the people's sinful behavior (which is taken up by the next item). Paul is saying that, besides offering a constructive system of truth, the Bible is also sufficient for "the conviction of false doctrine."³⁵ Therefore, Lenski suggests the word "refutation" instead.³⁶

³¹ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2000), p. 570.

³² Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), p. 279.

³³ Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's New Testament and Proverbs* (Timeless Texts, 2000).

³⁴ Jay E. Adams, *How to Help People Change* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), p. 113-115.

³⁵ Mounce, p. 570. Also, Fee, p. 280, and Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles, Revised Edition* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), p. 176.

³⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), p. 846.

Just as the Bible is both sufficient and profitable for teaching, it is also sufficient and profitable for refuting error. Lattimore even offers the translation, "useful...for *argument*." Keeping in mind that Paul considers it "useful" to the extent of being "complete," he is saying that Scripture supplies all that is necessary to perform such a task, so that the minister requires no extra-biblical materials.

Also, since he bases the Scripture's usefulness and sufficiency to refute error on the fact that Scripture is "God-breathed," this means that once a position has been refuted by Scripture, it has been declared false by God. Nothing else can add to God's authority, and thus nothing else can strengthen the refutation. Any belief that has been rejected by Scripture is a dead position. Possessing an infinitely inferior authority, or none at all, human philosophy and the natural sciences cannot resuscitate any position that has been refuted by the Bible, nor can they make it any more false or absurd. God's word is true and final, and thus Scripture is sufficient and profitable for refutation, for doctrinal combat.

Paul then proceeds from the doctrinal to the ethical. Scripture, he says, is useful "for *correcting*." The word means to restore to an upright position, and denotes moral reformation. To "correct" something implies existing wrongdoing, and so this word refers to the negative aspect of Scripture's moral authority and guidance.

Because Scripture is "God-breathed," it carries God's own authority on moral matters. Therefore, when Scripture exposes sin and corrects error, God himself is speaking. This ends all moral debates and speculations. If the Bible says something is good and right, then it is good and right. If the Bible says that something is evil and wrong, then it is evil and wrong. Nothing can add to or take away from the authority and certainty of Scripture's declarations on moral matters. The Bible is sufficient and profitable for correction.

Scripture is also useful "for *training* in righteousness." The word for "training" is *paideia*. It can refer to instruction, discipline, or the whole program of training for the young, so that some translations prefer the word "education." But Paul is talking about a training and education "in righteousness," and thus the phrase denotes positive ethical instruction, or the other side of "correction."

Again, since God is the sole moral authority, since his moral declarations are absolute and final, and since the Bible is the very word and mind of God on all matters revealed through it, this means that the moral teachings of the Bible are authoritative, absolute, and final. There is no difference at all between what the Bible says and what God thinks concerning moral matters.

Moreover, the Bible contains enough information so that the man of God may be fully equipped for every good work. In other words, the Bible contains a complete moral system. It is sufficient and profitable to provide moral instruction and guidance, and to define good and evil. It is the first and final word on all moral considerations, and is to be the first and final court of appeal for all moral debates and discussions.

Putting together all of the above, the verse teaches us that Scripture is God-breathed, and therefore it is profitable to address the positive and negative aspects of both creed and conduct. Moreover, it is profitable to the utmost extent, so that with it, the man of God is complete and fully equipped for ministry. He needs nothing else.

This provides us with pivotal insights for faithful and effective ministry, although the principles are also relevant to any setting in which the word of God is applied. The obvious point, which we have repeatedly emphasized, is the sufficiency of Scripture, and we have also noted what this sufficiency means. But Paul is more specific, and specific instructions enable us to be more precise and deliberate in our use of Scripture. He tells us that Scripture could be used to address both creed and conduct, not just one of the two. Then, whether we are addressing creed or conduct, he tells us that Scripture has both constructive and destructive uses.

We should examine how we are using Scripture in the light of this information, and align our ministry's focus and agenda with it. To illustrate, some ministries focus almost exclusively on refuting doctrinal error, cults, and false religions. They are doing the Body of Christ an important service, but at the same time, this imbalance could inflict great damage and hinder the overall progress of the gospel.

Of the four items listed in the verse, the first one is the foundation – that is, the constructive teaching of Scripture. Hendriksen agrees that "This is ever basic to everything else."³⁷ Doctrinal error is discerned and refuted only relative to an absolute standard of doctrinal truth. Likewise, both the positive and negative aspects of the ethical principles in Scripture are founded on the authority of God's positive revelation. Without the positive and constructive teaching of Scripture, the other items would lack the necessary reference point from which they must operate.

Even so, the negative uses of Scripture are not to be neglected. Certainly the man of God must confront heresies and sins with the Bible, but these are what they are only because they stray from or go against the positive teachings of Scripture. As Paul writes, "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). The minister must refute those who oppose sound doctrine, but this means that sound doctrine must be previously defined, and it is sound doctrine that we seek to uphold even as we issue the refutation.

So whether we are referring to our preaching, our parenting, or our individual spiritual growth, our work is inferior and incomplete if we apply the Bible only to refute errors and neglect to provide constructive teachings, or vice versa. Likewise, we must make the proper adjustments if we notice that we are addressing only matters of conduct and not of creed, or vice versa (see also Jeremiah 1:10). Then, we shall be well on our way to having, as one of Spurgeon's books is called, an "all-round ministry."^{38 39}

³⁷ Hendriksen, p. 303. Also, Fee, p. 279.

³⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon, *An All-Round Ministry* (The Banner of Truth Trust).

b. Spheres of Application

When it comes to the sufficiency of Scripture, we have said that the Scripture itself must define both the questions and the answers. Scripture tells us what subjects are important and then it tells us what to believe about them. And although it is sufficient for everyone, it specifies various categories of people so that we may be more conscious and deliberate in our application of biblical teachings.

The same is true with the utility of Scripture. Because Scripture tells us about its own various uses – such as to teach, refute, correct, and educate – we can be much more deliberate in our application, and we are much more likely to become aware of our negligence and imbalance.

For this reason, it would benefit us to also consider the different spheres in which the Scripture can be applied. By "spheres," we refer to the social contexts or circles in which people function. A simple dictionary definition would be "place in society" or "walk of life." For example, the school and the office represent two different social spheres or circles.

The various spheres accommodate different types of relationships and operate by different rules, and they present different opportunities as well as difficulties, challenges, and temptations. Of course they overlap, and what happens to a person in one social sphere carries over to another. Nevertheless, they are often well-defined enough to be discussed separately and specifically. Again, this enables us to become more deliberate in our application of Scripture, and also more aware of our negligence.

Although we have already affirmed that the Scripture has universal application, and that it demands every person's attention and obedience, as with categories of people, it also acknowledges different social spheres. Here we will discuss three major ones, but only in brief, and only to raise some of the issues that must be addressed. These must be addressed by applying what we have already discussed above, and by reflecting on the whole teaching of the Bible regarding each of these areas of life.

The social spheres that we will discuss are the home, the church, and the world. It is within these contexts that we must use the Scripture to teach, to refute, to correct, and to educate ourselves and others, and to promote salvation and sanctification.

The home, or the family, is the smallest circle on our list, but it is also the building block of the others. The Scripture is authoritative, sufficient, and profitable to define the family's relationship with God, the church, and the world, the authority structure between the members, the relationship between the husband and the wife, the relationship between parents and children, the authority and responsibilities of the parents, how widows within

³⁹ At this point, the original plan for this exposition proceeds to discuss several ways or modes by which Scripture is presented – namely, speaking, writing, and reading. However, due to a lack of time, we will forgo these items and move on to the next and final section.

the family should be treated, and all other related issues. It should also regulate the family in the areas of education, work, money, sex, food, health, time, recreation, and entertainment.

In other words, Scripture's authority and usefulness touches every aspect of family life. Most families do almost nothing to enforce biblical teachings in the home. There is much more to going to church together, praying together, and reading the Bible together. For example, most men probably know nothing about dealing with ungodly in-laws other than to practice the most general biblical principles such as love, forgiveness, or "a soft answer turns away wrath," and more often than not, even these are misunderstood and misapplied by them. This is why families must *deliberately* study and apply what the Bible has to say about how the home ought to operate.

Although the family is the building block of the church, it usually functions in connection with and even under the influence and authority of the church. Yes, the family can operate in *relative* independence from the church as a self-contained unit, so that a church that seeks to exercise *absolute* authority over a family is really a cult, but the Bible's command to obey church leaders and serve the interests of the covenant community applies to the individual families that make up such a community.

Moreover, the church is where the word of God is authoritatively preached and enforced. Of course, the word of God is also preached and enforced in the family, but the church is a larger institution that preaches and enforces the word of God *to* the family. Whereas the husband is the final court of appeal in the home, if the need arises, special appeals could be made to the church, so that under the authority of Scripture, the church may offer counsel or render a verdict, and in extreme cases, even excommunicate the offender.

For example, the husband could appeal to the church if his wife persistently refuses to obey him, or the wife could appeal if her husband abuses her – that is, not as she defines abuse, but as the Bible would define it. Feuding families that cannot settle their disputes by themselves may also appeal to the church. This can work very well even when the families involved belong to different churches, that is, if both churches are committed to enforcing the biblical principles of church discipline. However, it is difficult for many families to find *any* church that even knows about what the Bible teaches on the subject, not to mention one that would enforce it. This contributes to the way that Christians often disgrace the kingdom of Christ before the world's court, as if the church cannot even settle the smallest matters among its members.

Then, as mentioned, the church's primary task is to preach and enforce the word of God, that is, the Bible. It is "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). Under this general description, there are many tasks that it must perform. The Sunday sermon is obvious, but it should also provide individual counseling, theology classes, and ministry training.

These are just different ways of applying the sufficient word of God in different contexts, on different levels, and toward different people. But the sufficiency and usefulness of

Scripture do not only imply *that* these things should be done by the church, but also *how* they ought to be done. For example, because the Bible is sufficient to fully equip the man of God for every good work, secular theories and methods are unnecessary and even undesirable in church counseling. If the filet mignon is just right, spreading horse manure on it would not make it taste any better.

Moreover, since the Bible itself claims that it makes the man of God *complete*, and *fully* equipped for *every* good work, then the church should be able to train its own ministers without sending them to seminary. Whether the seminary serves a legitimate purpose is a separate question, but it should not be *necessary*. If the seminary is *necessary* to fully equip the man of God, it can only mean that the church is not effectively teaching the whole word of God.

In this case, the solution is to fix the church, and not to build a seminary. And it would not do to say that it takes a seminary-trained person to fix the church, since this argument would work for one generation at best – if the seminary-trained minister fixes the problem, this deficiency in the church should no longer exist in the next generation.

Now, if the seminary is only an extension of the church, then I would have no problem with it. However, it would then be unnecessary to even call it a seminary – it would just be part of what the church is doing to train its own ministers. Also, it must then actually operate like part of the church. It should not charge any tuition,⁴⁰ and it should be overseen by church elders, not deans and directors. It should be taught by actual ministers, not just professors. Instead of granting degrees, it should issue personalized letters of recommendation attesting to both the orthodoxy and the character of the disciples it promotes to eldership or sends forth to other places. In addition, church discipline should be enforced, and those who affirm heresies or persist in known vices must not be allowed to "graduate." It should be a discipleship program (with the most rigorous academic training), not an academic program. The truth is that most seminaries are not like this, but their entire system is patterned after secular institutions, and most of their graduates are unfit for ministry.⁴¹

An even larger sphere than the church is the world. By the world, we can refer to all human beings in general, including both Christians and non-Christians, or of non-Christians in particular. Sometimes we may be referring to a circle that is outside of the church, but might include both Christians and non-Christians, such as the school, the office, or the government.

The Bible draws a clear line separating the church and the world. It tells us to remain in the world but not to be contaminated by it. Reacting against hermitism, many believers throw themselves into the world, participating in almost all that it has to offer. As a result, they have ended up on the other extreme, that of befriending the world, and using as an excuse the claim that they are embracing God's creation and functioning as salt and

⁴⁰ However, the church might require a faithful pattern of giving from its students as part of their character training and to help them become good examples to others.

⁴¹ See Vincent Cheung, "Church and Seminary," in *Doctrine and Obedience*.

light to the world. If this is what they are really doing, then the world would either change, or vomit them back out. But the world is comfortable with them because they *are* the world. Let us not deceive ourselves. The Bible says that we must remain in the world so that we may preach to it, to be a witness *against* it, to lead people *out of* its darkness, but not so that we may play with it.

The Bible is sufficient to address all people, even hostile unbelievers, scoffers, and apostates. It supplies sufficient materials for a full system of apologetics, and a complete method and message for evangelism. But as we are speaking of all things outside the church, the Bible is not only good for apologetics and evangelism, but it defines and rules over all aspects of all people. This means that it is the defining standard for art, science, commerce, and even government.

Speaking of the government, there is much discussion and debate about the separation of church and state. The controversy in this country has much to do with the meaning and interpretation of the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. On this point, I agree that the First Amendment is meant to protect the church from the state, or at best from each other, but not to eliminate religion from all government sponsored programs and activities, such as the public school system.

However, the First Amendment has only a local, legal, and practical relevance. It has no direct relationship with whether something is right or wrong from the perspective of God's absolute revealed standard. The prior question is whether the First Amendment is biblical in the first place. If it is unbiblical, then it is wrong, and believers must oppose it. But if it is biblical, then it is right, and believers should advocate what it says even if there is no such amendment in the Constitution. Regardless of what human law actually says and means, the more important, universal, and spiritually relevant issue is what the Bible teaches about the proper relationship between the church and the state.

Now, suppose we agree that the church and the state are two different institutions with different functions, and that one should not usurp the other's authority. For example, the church has the power to excommunicate a murderer, but it has no right to execute him. This indeed answers some questions, but sometimes people miss the larger point, and therefore arrive at erroneous conclusions about how the government should operate. They tend to forget that just because the church cannot control or replace the government does not mean that the government is free from God's authority, or what is the equivalent in this context, the Bible's authority.

Lawmakers, politicians, judges, police officers, and so on, are all human individuals, and as such, they are *never* exempt from believing the gospel and behaving as Christians. They are not morally free to be atheists, to ignore biblical precepts, or to follow non-Christian religions and philosophies just because they work for the state. Every unbiblical law and every unbiblical opinion is sinful when found in any context and in any person, and will be judged by God according to the standard that he has revealed in Scripture.

Thus a government is either for Christ or against him. Just as no human individual can be neutral toward Christ, neither can a government, which consists of human individuals, be neutral. Any government that claims to be religiously neutral has already set itself against Christ. In fact, as is true with human individuals, any government that fails to explicitly pledge allegiance to Christ is an enemy of Christ.

Therefore, at least from this perspective it is irrelevant that the state is a separate institution from the church, and that the church has no legislative authority over it – the government is *directly* under the threat of divine curse to follow *all* that the Bible commands in *all* that it does. The fact that it is not accountable to the church makes no difference, since it is still directly accountable to God, and God condemns all laws, all opinions, and all actions other than those that he approves and permits through Scripture. Thus if the government does not learn its obligations to God from the church, it must still learn it directly from the Bible.

Many Christians are wary of theonomy, but how can the state rationally justify laws against murder, theft, rape, perjury, or any such thing without appealing to Scripture? In fact, how can the government justify its very existence apart from the Bible? Here we do not have to discuss the rights and wrongs of Reformed Theonomy, but there is no denying the fact that the government cannot justify its own existence, understand its own purpose and mandate, or define the various crimes and the severity of each crime without the Bible.⁴² If we must call this a form of theonomy, then so be it.

Many Christians have no idea what they are fighting for. They claim to reject all forms of theonomy, and that they want total religious freedom for everyone, but then they would fight for the government sanctioned public display of the Ten Commandments. Do they not see that there is no such thing as the "Ten Commandments" in the abstract? What are these ten commandments? If they are fighting for the right to display two tablets of stone with ten Roman letters engraved on them, then they are not fighting for the biblical ten commandments at all. They frequently speak of how our laws are based on "Judeo-Christian values." But there are no values in "I, II, III, IV...."

The Ten Commandments are not just the words "Ten Commandments," but there are actually *ten commandments* that God revealed to Israel in the midst of a spectacular display of his power and glory. To cite only the first commandment would be sufficient to make my point: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). To fight for the government's permission or sanction to publicly display the Ten Commandments is not to fight for the right to display two blank tablets of stone or the words "The Ten Commandments," but the *actual* ten commandments, including this first one. To fight for "Judeo-Christian values" is not to fight for a meaningless expression, but to fight for the moral laws revealed in the Bible, including the first commandment.

⁴² To defend this statement, we only need to apply our usual approach of biblical-presuppositional apologetics to the area of politics. If all non-Christian worldviews fail at the start, then there can be no rational justification for any non-Christian theory about *anything*, and this includes politics. See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, and On Good and Evil*.

What is the meaning of all this? It means that if you are fighting for the Ten Commandments as a mere abstraction, instead of fighting for the government's sanction to *declare* and *enforce* the actual ten commandments, then it is not worth the effort, since you are fighting for a cause that is without meaning and without content, and that has nothing to do with Christianity.

On the other hand, if you are demanding the government to sanction and sponsor a public declaration of the Ten Commandments as the actual ten commandments, beginning with "You shall have no other gods before me," then understand that you are not just fighting to make room for Christianity as one option among many, but you are fighting for the right – by the government's sanction, on the government's property – to publicly condemn all non-biblical religions, all non-biblical philosophies, and all their adherents, and to exalt Christianity as the only true religion and the only legitimate basis for human civilization. Now *this* is a cause I can support.

For the government to admit that it is founded on Christian principles is also to declare that its very foundation condemns all non-Christian ones, as such a condemnation is fundamental to Christianity. And although such a government might not actively persecute them, all non-Christians living under it are nevertheless regulated and judged by explicitly Christian principles. This is what we demand our government to tell the world when we call for it to acknowledge its Christian roots. And what a grotesque monster our government would seem, if from Christian roots it grows not only Christian, but also Muslim and Buddhist fruits. The Bible is sufficient and profitable to build a nation, and if the foundation is truly Christian, then exclusion must be part of this foundation.

PREACH THE WORD

Preach the Word was originally a continuous essay on preaching and education. This being so, it may be apparent that each chapter follows closely after the previous one. Dividing the essay into chapters risks compromising the sense of continuity; nevertheless, I have divided the text to make it easier to read.

The essay is structured around 2 Timothy 4:1-3, and discusses Christian preaching and education. In the process, it criticizes secular theories on learning methods, and calls for a comprehensive teaching and writing ministry from preachers of the gospel. It is my desire that this work will awake the preacher as to the seriousness of his task, and the believer as to his responsibility to study the words of Scripture with all diligence and reverence.

1. THE DIVINE MANDATE

Invoking deity to witness a formal commission or oath is serious business, and therefore we are to anticipate a duty of the most sacred nature when Paul begins the final chapter of 2 Timothy with the words, "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge..." (2 Timothy 4:1). Whatever the next words may be, it is certain that anyone who fears God and respects apostolic authority has come to full alert after reading such a solemn preface.

This charge is given "in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus," causing Timothy to become acutely aware of God's scrutinizing his thoughts and actions as he receives and carries out the oath about to be spoken over him. Bringing a christological focus to the invocation of deity, Paul designates Christ as the one who "will judge the living and the dead." The text thus reminds Timothy that he stands accountable to Christ in his function as the judge of all, and puts him under this solemn oath by "his appearing" and by "his kingdom." These terms resonate with the eschatological motif present in this second letter to Timothy.

Saying that Christ will "judge the living and the dead" had become a familiar "semicreedal formula"⁴³ early in church history. For example, *The Epistle of Barnabas* contains the following statement: "Though the Son of God was the divine Lord, and the future *Judge of living and dead* alike, yet nevertheless He suffered, in order that His affliction might win life for us."⁴⁴ Polycarp, who according to tradition was a disciple of John, wrote to the Philippians saying, "So gird up your loins now and serve God in fear and sincerity...put your trust in Him who raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, and gave Him glory and a seat at His own right hand. All things in heaven and earth have been made subject to Him...He comes to *judge the living and the dead*..."⁴⁵ In addition, the Apostles' Creed affirms, "He will come to judge the living and the dead."

Christ will judge both those who are alive at "his appearing," as well as those who have died prior to that time, and who will be raised for judgment. No one escapes his authority and rule – all are accountable to Christ for what they believe and do, even when they deny this at the present.

At the least, we must say that such an appeal to the divine witness does not occur casually, but is reserved for only matters of utmost importance and urgency. Knowing all

⁴³ Gordon D. Fee, *New International Biblical Commentary: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1988; p. 284.

⁴⁴ *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*; New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1987; p. 167.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

of this causes Timothy to take what follows seriously, and this is also how we must consider the charge Paul gives to Timothy in the next verse.

2. PREACH THE WORD

Immediately following the invocation of God as witness, verse 2 says, "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction." Having created an eager expectation and even some apprehension in the reader's mind, Paul announces what it is that he deems so important. "Preach the Word," he says. No doubt the mindset common in today's professing Christians rebels against such a command, that the aged apostle might dare suggest that the verbal communication of biblical truths is the supreme ministry. We must therefore take time to absorb the meaning and implications of what it is to preach.

A full analysis of the word translated *preach* may necessitate a discussion more lengthy than is desirable in this setting. *Kittel* has done such a study, but I am opposed to several major claims in its extensive article.⁴⁶ Thayer's "to proclaim after the manner of a herald"⁴⁷ is standard, but does not mean much to those who fail to understand what *proclaim* and *herald* imply.

Kenneth Wuest explains: "At once [the word] called to [Timothy's] mind the Imperial Herald, spokesman of the Emperor, proclaiming in the formal, grave, and authoritative manner which must be listened to, the message which the Emperor gave him to announce...This should be the pattern for the preacher today. His preaching should be characterized by that dignity which comes from the consciousness of the fact that he is an official herald of the King of kings. It should be accompanied by that note of authority which will command the respect, careful attention, and proper reaction of the listeners. There is no place for clowning in the pulpit of Jesus Christ."⁴⁸

This is an excellent general description of preaching, and foreshadows some of what I will say in the following pages. However, I intend to break from the confines of what is strictly meant by the term in this study. I will instead go by what is commonly meant by the word *preach* as pertaining to its English usage. This is not poor form if admitted explicitly, and it is done so that I may expound in a general way on all that is meant when we refer to preaching, teaching, and education.

Didaskalia from the Greek is rendered *teaching* in 1 Timothy 5:17, and one may discuss its specific meaning as opposed to that designated by *preach*. Without being ignorant of the distinctions between these and other related words, our study will continue with the whole of Christian instruction in mind, whether preaching or teaching. In other words, I

⁴⁶ Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965; p. 697-714.

⁴⁷ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2002 (original: 1896); p. 346.

⁴⁸ Kenneth S. Wuest, *The Pastoral Epistles in the Greek New Testament*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999 (original: 1952), p. 154.

am interested in discussing what is common to the whole scope of Christian instructions. This grants us opportunity to introduce words such as *sermons* and *lectures* as well. The reader may consider this as using 2 Timothy 4:2 as a departure point to discuss several broad issues that apply to all Christian discourses.

Many regard a sermon as different from a lecture. The former is what one hears at church from the preacher – the rhetorical structure it follows, the content it is invested with, and the intent based on which it is delivered, are all very different from a lecture. Sermons do not, and we think should not, resemble even the lectures delivered in Christian seminaries. In seminaries, professors *lecture* to their students so that they may in the future *preach* to their congregations. Some may add that lectures tend to be boring, while sermons can at least occasionally be interesting, and they are interesting to the extent that they do not resemble theological lectures. However, this distinction is false, and perpetuates shallow thinking in congregations as well as the anti-intellectualistic mentality that seeks to give it justification.

Since I will be interacting with a point Jay Adams makes in his *Preaching with Purpose*, we should first allow him to define his use of the word *preaching*. The explanation is useful in illustrating something stated just above, and therefore I will quote him at some length:

Strictly speaking, the principal biblical words translated "preaching" do not correspond exactly to that activity to which we affix the label. They are somewhat narrower in scope. These words, *kerusso* and *euangelizo*, are used in the New Testament to describe "heralding" and "announcing the gospel." They refer to evangelistic activities. The former always has to do with public proclamation of the good news, while the latter may be used to describe making the gospel known to either unsaved groups or individuals...

On the other hand, the word *didasko*, translated "to teach," more nearly corresponds to our modern use of the word preach, and has to do with the proclamation of truth among those who already believe the gospel...Though at times *didasko* seems also to be limited to evangelistic speaking, and occasionally it is possible that *kerusso* may refer to preaching to the saints...⁴⁹

There are, then, two kinds of preaching (because of a deeply impressed use of the English word I shall use the term "preaching" to cover both evangelistic and pastoral speaking): evangelistic preaching (heralding, announcing the good news) and pastoral or edificational preaching (teaching).⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Adams cites our text, 2 Timothy 4:2, as an instance where *kerusso* means the "preaching" that is directed to believers. The verse not only refers to evangelistic preaching, since the context dictates otherwise.

⁵⁰ Jay E. Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982; p. 5-6.

This not only provides us with Adams' understanding of the biblical use of the terms, but also lends justification to our present procedure, which is to discuss preaching in general as referring to all Christian orations – whether for evangelistic purposes, or to instruct and edify believers.

Then Adams explains the difference between lecturing and preaching this way: "[In lecturing] the preacher does a good job of considering the historical-grammatical exegesis of the preaching passage, considers it theologically and rhetorically, and then – simply tells his congregation what it means. His response, and consequently theirs as well, is to say, 'Well, now I understand it,' and that's that! That is not preaching. True preaching does all of the above, but it also identifies the *telos* (purpose) of the passage, builds the message around it, and calls on the congregation for a response that is appropriate to it. It works for change."⁵¹

It will be instructive to see what is wrong with the above. Adams claims that lectures aim to give understanding, while preaching *both* gives understanding and "works for change." I challenge this way of distinguishing between the two since he ignores the ordinary meanings of both English words, constructs his own definitions, and presents them again to show up their difference.

*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*⁵² defines the word *preach* as "to deliver a sermon," and by *sermon* it means, "a religious discourse delivered in public usually by a clergyman as a part of a worship service." It then defines *lecture* as, "a discourse given before an audience or class especially for instruction." According to these definitions, a *sermon* is merely a *lecture* with religious intent and content, thus making the former a subset of the latter, and not a different type of speech altogether. Adams, therefore, merely imposes upon us his private definitions of these terms.

Also, note that even when the preacher tells the congregation what the text means in a lecture, Adams implies that he hides the behind-the-scenes research from his audience. The hearers are not privy to his "considering the historical-grammatical exegesis of the preaching message," as well as the theological and rhetorical issues. He "considers" the materials but does not present them. But are not these things beneficial for the believers to learn?

My definition of a lecture, and thus also a sermon, permits the inclusion of background research in the delivery, as well as the usual elements such as an exposition of the topic or text. It aims to inform and persuade, and certainly "works for change." Yet, it is still a lecture in every aspect – content, structure, style, and so on. Granted, most of the theological and exegetical insights fail to become part of the end product. This is only due to sensitivity to the less advanced listeners, and also the impossibility of including all

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵² *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*; Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2001.

of the relevant information in a relatively brief presentation. Such content is never excluded as a rule, but only due to necessary constraints.

In his book on lecturing, Donald Bligh writes, "In politics lectures are called speeches. In churches they are called sermons. Call them what you like; what they are in fact are more or less continuous expositions by a speaker who wants the audience to learn something."⁵³ Thus, I am not alone in stating that a sermon is a lecture. But even Bligh imposes restrictions on the lecture that are unjustified.

If saying that a lecture intends for the audience to "learn something" is meant as a restriction, then it must be denied. For "learn" to carry *Merriam-Webster's* first meaning, "to gain knowledge or understanding of or skill in by study, instruction, or experience," is too narrow. But the third meaning is acceptable: "to come to know." The lecture is meant to communicate something, so that the audience may "come to know" the thoughts of the speaker. We will ignore other defects in Bligh's work for now.

⁵³ Donald A. Bligh, *What's The Use of Lectures?*; San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000; p. 4.

3. ON TEACHING METHOD

A lecture is not limited to presenting facts, but also arguments and exhortations. This is often done even in secular classrooms, so it is strange how some define the lecture otherwise. Many are prejudiced against anything that carries an academic connotation, as the word *lecture* does, and so they define it in a way that renders it vulnerable to their criticisms. They will protest my defining the sermon as a lecture because this would make preaching too academic in nature. But this is my assertion, that the sermon ought to be more academic than it is commonly conceived. It is not enough to provide the audience with only the most superficial findings of our biblical research.

Preachers should apply to their sermons Mortimer Adler's recommendation concerning the lecture:

Always risk talking over their heads!...It will not hurt if some of the things you say may be beyond their reach. It is much better for them to have the sense that they have succeeded in getting some enlightenment by their effort to reach up (even if they also have the sense that some things to be understood have escaped them) than it is for them to sit there feeling insulted by the patronizing manner in which you have talked down to them.

The truly great books, I have repeatedly said, are the few books that are over everybody's head all of the time. That is why they are endlessly rereadable as instruments from which you can go on learning more and more on each rereading. What you come to understand each time is a step upward in the development of your mind; so also is your realization of what remains to be understood by further effort on your part.

...What is true of books to be read is true of lectures to be listened to. The only lectures that are intellectually profitable for anyone to listen to are those that increase one's knowledge and enlarge one's understanding.⁵⁴

To preach is to give a lecture, and it ought to be somewhat intellectually mature in content. Of course, the speaker is permitted to adjust to the audience's current level of understanding and other limitations (such as attention span), but not to the extent that it becomes entirely comfortable, and thus promotes no growth in them to accommodate more advanced materials in the future.

⁵⁴ Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Speak, How to Listen*; New York: Touchstone, 1983; p. 61-62.

While to many it is anathema to suggest that the Bible commands intellectual growth, and in a definite way equates it with sanctification, this is indeed what it teaches: "Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity" (Hebrews 6:1); "Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:13-14); "Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults" (1 Corinthians 14:20); "...and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Colossians 3:10).

There are many more relevant passages available, but we will now proceed to examine and refute several objections and alternate theories, and in the process refine our understanding of the preaching task as has been established so far. We will come across ideas people have regarding preaching and teaching that have resulted from secular theories on education rather than biblical models.

Although professors still find lecturing indispensable in the classroom, contemporary education models tend to favor the role of discussion and active participation. Presumably, this stimulates the students to original thinking, but the honest observer must admit that what passes as a creative thought in the classroom is more often rehashed foolishness.

To quote the great theologian and educator J. Gresham Machen:

The undergraduate student of the present day is being told that he need not take notes on what he hears in class, that the exercise of the memory is a rather childish and mechanical thing, and that what he is really in college to do is to think for himself and to unify his world. He usually makes a poor business of unifying his world. And the reason is clear. He does not succeed in unifying his world for the simple reason that he has no world to unify. He has not acquired a knowledge of a sufficient number of facts in order even to learn the method of putting facts together. He is being told to practice the business of mental digestion; but the trouble is that he has no food to digest. The modern student, contrary to what is often said, is really being starved for want of facts...

We professors get up behind our professorial desks, it is said, and proceed to lecture. The helpless students are expected not only to listen but to take notes...Such a system – so the charge runs – stifles all originality and all life...A mass of details stored up in the mind does not in itself make a thinker; but on the other hand thinking is absolutely impossible without that mass of details. And it is just this latter impossible operation of thinking without the materials of thought which is being advocated by modern pedagogy and is being put into practice only too well by modern students...In the presence of this tendency, we

believe that facts and hard work ought again to be allowed to come to their rights: it is impossible to think with an empty mind.⁵⁵

Such a simple point escapes experts in education. Machen first published his book in 1925. Students have been becoming more dim-witted for decades, but the system continues to starve them of information readily available if they would only allow for many more hours of lectures and textbook reading.

To the above, I would only add that even thinking itself may be taught and demonstrated through lectures and textbooks. On the other hand, in a classroom that favors discussion as a pedagogical device, there is nevertheless nothing much to discuss if the students do not know anything about the subject at hand. Rather than learning first from the instructor, and then perchance to refine and even correct his teaching, ignorant students are encouraged to pretend to be experts.

The same problem exists in the church today. Preachers are told to focus on application of biblical truths, but the trouble is that both they and their congregations know too little of the Bible for there to be anything to apply. Machen had also said something about this:

If the growth of ignorance is lamentable in secular education, it is tenfold worse in the sphere of the Christian religion and in the sphere of the Bible. Bible classes today often avoid a study of the actual contents of the Bible as they would avoid pestilence or disease; to many persons in the Church the notion of getting the simple historical contents of the Bible straight is an entirely new idea.

When one is asked to preach at a church, the pastor sometimes asks the visiting preacher to conduct his Bible class, and sometimes he gives a hint as to how the class is ordinarily conducted. He makes it very practical he says; he gives the class hints as to how to live during the following week. But when I for my part actually conduct such a class, I most emphatically do not give the members hints as to how to live during the following week...a class that gets nothing but practical directions is very poorly prepared for life. And so when I conduct a class I try to give them what they do not get on other occasions; I try to help them get straight in their minds the doctrinal and historical contents of the Christian religion.⁵⁶

My lengthy quotations of Machen are justified by how peculiar the views that I espouse must sound to many believers. But I am not alone in thinking this way, and certainly not the first to identify the problem, as well as the remedy.

⁵⁵ J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?*; Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991 (original: 1925); p. 16-17, 19-20.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20-21.

Christian education must not be a democracy, where everyone is considered as having valuable ideas to contribute; it is not primarily pragmatic, where one is controlled by the "Give me something I can use!" mentality so common in the secularly influenced audience. But we are arguing against symptoms here: the real culprit is anti-intellectualism, from which silly ideas about preaching and education grow, and the solution is biblical intellectualism.

Brookfield and Preskill have produced a volume called, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*.⁵⁷ The title reveals that "discussion as a way of teaching," is governed by and presupposes democracy as an ideal, and applies it even to knowledge acquisition. However, Christian knowledge is based on revelation and authority, not democracy. Not everyone is entitled to his opinion. We are to believe what God tells us to believe, and many will suffer eternal damnation for believing the wrong things. Besides the biblical command to obey and hear their spiritual leaders, most Christians are automatically excluded from speaking much at church due to their erroneous beliefs. They must remain silent, and learn. In connection to this, those Bible study sessions that allow for unrestricted expression of everyone's opinions are most destructive.

Without the exchange of ideas in the classroom, even if not at church, how are the students supposed to interact with ideas other than those espoused by the professor? Democratic discussion among incompetent peers is the worst way to answer this question. Why not listen to more than one professor lecturing on the same subject? Or read numerous textbooks by experts in the field?

Robert Hutchins calls the exchange of ideas carried on through the intellectual works produced in western history, "The Great Conversation."⁵⁸ Such a conversation is greater than any that may take place in the classrooms of undergraduate college courses. My advice to budding Christian thinkers: talk less,⁵⁹ read the Bible and the great theological works, and read the classics.

⁵⁷ Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*; San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999.

⁵⁸ *The Great Conversation*; Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1994 (original: 1952); p. 46-73.

⁵⁹ See Proverbs 10:19, 13:3, 15:2, 17:27, 21:23; Ecclesiastes 5:2; James 1:26, 3:2.

4. LEARNING BY DOING

Another favorite educational model is "learning by doing," or to learn by experience. To learn this way, one must interact with the object about which one seeks knowledge, be it an athletic endeavor, a scientific experiment, a social situation, or life in general. Through the challenges and feedbacks from such experiences, the student is supposed to derive principles suitable for retention, which he may then apply to other similar situations.

This learning method is impossible. One who does not know how to perform a given task at all cannot even begin unless someone through verbal instructions, be it in the form of lectures or textbooks (or other informal equivalents), tells him the elementary principles. When this is done, the person is no longer learning from experience, but through intellectual communication. He is merely applying what he has learned to the experience. And if he can be told the basics, he can perhaps also learn the more advanced materials in a similar manner.

However, some may object, even if one must first learn enough in order to begin, does he afterward not learn from his experience while applying his knowledge? The problem with this is that no one can, without having relevant prior knowledge or presuppositions, choose from the many singular events and factors within his experiences and derive objectively true propositions from them. An infinite number of propositions may be derived from each experience, and which one of these a person "learns" depends on his worldview, already presupposed. The same set of circumstances can instill patience in one, and cynicism in another.

Arthur Holmes points out: "...to suppose unanalyzed experience itself is an omniscient teacher presupposes an empiricist theory of knowledge that is nowadays highly suspect. The eighteenth century view that we can gather piecemeal data and come up with generalizations and causal explanations simply has not stood up under scrutiny. Empirical observation is not entirely objective but selective, guided by theoretical assumptions and personal interests. This has become evident in recent work on the history of science: and if experience is not enough for science, how can it be enough for education?"⁶⁰

He is correct, with the qualification that empiricism is "highly suspect" only in certain academic circles, and remains popular among the less informed populace. It generally takes many years for ideas to trickle down from the despised "ivory tower" – which is in fact the command center of the world – to those uninterested in academic struggles, and who falsely imagine themselves to be relatively free from the influence of obscure scholars. It remains that no one ever learns from experience itself, but every observer

⁶⁰ Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999 (revised: 1987; original: 1975); p. 89.

brings his entire worldview to the situation, and evaluates it through his presuppositions, which in turn governs the way he processes any information encountered.

When this difficulty is pressed against secular education, it can only result in complete skepticism regarding reality. On the other hand, when the Christian is challenged with such issues, he answers with the verbal revelation given him by the omnipotent creator God. All propositions deducible from divine revelation are rightly considered knowledge. But if so, knowledge comes from revelation and deduction, not experience.

Holmes, under a section called, "Pragmatism In Experiential Education," describes the theory of learning by experience as follows: "Experience is an immersion in natural processes, our sense of security challenged by unforeseen problems which demand solution...All learning is therefore situational...Learning is learning to adjust. Even the classroom simulates life experience, rather than exploring a heritage of truth and values."⁶¹

To say something else about the ivory tower, most people are oblivious to how learning by experience is a secular philosophy promoted by John Dewey which, as Holmes then says, was "in [his] thinking, simply an application of the theory of natural selection"⁶² – that is, an evolutionary doctrine. It is based on anti-Christian philosophical assumptions.

The attitude rampant in today's churches that we should "experience God" rather than to talk about him, besides exhibiting a false sense of piety, is based on a philosophical system hostile to the Christian faith. We increase in the knowledge of God by reading Scripture, listening to preachers that respect biblical authority, engaging in theological reflections, and constantly discussing the things of God with care and reverence.

Another writer has this to say: "A popular liberal slogan has been, 'learning by doing.' So the ten-year-old smokes pot, tries out sex, and sticks a knife into another kid's ribs. He learns by doing. Apparently some educators never suspected that some things should not be done and not be learned. But the pupil is not competent to decide such matters."⁶³ Conversely, "The Christian educator...is convinced that the popular shibboleth, learning by doing, is unmasked when we see that evil learned in such a manner does irreparable harm."⁶⁴

The current study mainly concerns itself with preaching, and while to discuss the theories of education is not too much of a detour, a thorough philosophy of education must be reserved for another setting. For now, let it suffice to say that learning by doing is an anti-Christian theory, and even sports and carpentry can be taught in a way consistent with the biblical model. We first provide the theoretical basis, and then if there is time, application. Further development occurs through additional theoretical reflections. This

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 88-89.

⁶² Ibid., p. 89.

⁶³ Gordon H. Clark, *A Christian Philosophy of Education*; The Trinity Foundation, 2000 (original: 1946); p. 52.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 134.

model invariably implies that a properly educated person will possess much more knowledge than his life and vocation require from him.

For the reason that one's knowledge should not be limited by pragmatic concerns, I find Jay Adams' "learning *for* doing,"⁶⁵ inadequate as well. It fails to produce a superior student because how certain knowledge may be applicable is not always obvious; this is true even of biblical doctrines. If we were to limit our learning only to knowledge that may be applied, our narrow lives would imply an equally restricted scope for knowledge and skill acquisition.

Adams writes, "Learning takes place when one knows that what he must study is essential to accomplishing what he wants to achieve."⁶⁶ That is what the product will be – one who knows only the essentials. How many accounting majors would then be interested in cosmology? Doubtless very few would find the need to read Homer or Milton. Only so much knowledge is required for any given field, and under the learning for doing scheme, one finds no justification to continue his studies after he has reached the necessary level of proficiency, and still less reason to study materials unrelated to his needs.

The correct model that maximizes learning and competence is to perceive knowledge, especially theological knowledge, as inherently valuable, whether one finds occasion to apply it or not. American pragmatists are horrified at the suggestion that knowledge should be acquired for its own sake, but I have no respect for American pragmatism. It produces shallow thinkers and incompetent workers.

However, certain theological knowledge demands obedience and drastic alterations in the ways we think and live; if so, we must comply, and this is application. This allows for an unending pursuit of knowledge, especially as relating to the things of God, as well as ready application where knowledge and actual needs coincide. But it also means that in knowledge acquisition, application never deserves the main focus.

This model of education is heavy on theory, and light on application; it emphasizes thinking more than doing – much more. Although I am wary of empirical endorsements, research in sports psychology suggests that mental rehearsal, with a minimum of actual practice, can be just as effective in improving performance as regular physical training. The point is that, with or without the support of such studies, this learning strategy applies even to areas that seem to be more physical than intellectual. We teach to the mind, and learn by the mind.

In the end, this manner of education produces the most brilliant thinkers who find their daily tasks easy to handle, since their knowledge and capability far exceed the actual requirements. In church, let us be more like Mary than Martha. The latter "was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made" (Luke 10:40), but Jesus says that "Mary has

⁶⁵ Jay E. Adams, *Back to the Blackboard: Design for a Biblical Christian School*; Woodruff, South Carolina: Timeless Texts, 1998 (original: 1982); p. 126.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (v. 42), because she "sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said" (v. 39). Incidentally, this passage in Luke shows that it is more important for women to study theology than to do chores.

Still, many insist that lectures and textbooks are no substitute for life experience, but that is because they have never read a textbook where the author has recorded his life experience for others to read. Who is to prevent us from reading about the experiences of hundreds of people instead of only having our own? Yet, principles derived from life experience, whether others or ours, are unreliable and often plain false. In theology, our life experience will never produce knowledge that approaches the status of divine revelation, so we might as well abandon such a method of learning.

5. THE USE OF STORIES

Let us assume, after the previous pages, that the legitimacy of preaching or lecturing as the proper way to teach has been accepted. There remain a number of false theories and emphases even among those who favor, or at least appear to favor, such an approach to teaching. We will examine two of these; they pertain to the roles of humor and stories in preaching.

Since I intend to spend more time discussing stories, we will quickly dismiss an emphasis on humor in preaching, even if it deserves more extensive argument elsewhere. Humor may be connected to the alleged need to make one's sermons interesting, and so we will not be neglecting this issue too much, since this is something we will come against later on below. For now, note that humor adds no information unattainable through regular speech. It is without scriptural justification, and many may consider its use, especially if it is applied in abundance, to be irreverent.

Sometimes people claim to find certain parts of the Bible humorous, but this says nothing about whether the biblical authors intended to amuse their readers in such a manner. Just because one finds something amusing does not mean it is intended to be a joke. If the listeners find humor in something the minister seriously asserts, fine – unless the context betrays their irreverence. Otherwise, let the preacher take time in his study to read an additional chapter of systematic theology rather than to concoct another humorous anecdote. The use of humor as a device to enhance communication comes from secular theory and human experience, and cannot be justified from Scripture.

True, "A cheerful heart is good medicine" (Proverbs 17:22), but what good is a person who can only be cheerful when bombarded with jokes? The verse does not indicate how one is to become cheerful – I can become quite jolly by reading the ontological argument of Anselm or the genealogy of Christ. What we know is that the Bible is not filled with jokes. To me, the question is not whether we should include humor in our preaching, but whether we should deliberately abstain from it. Without settling this final point, we will proceed to discuss the use of stories in preaching.

The use of stories is usually recommended in preaching for two reasons: to make the message more accessible and to sustain the audience's attention and interest. Since we will be soon dealing with the alleged need to make sermons interesting, here I will only address the first reason, mainly by showing that stories often hinder communication.

At the outset, we must point out that stories can be very difficult to understand. This is illustrated by how American students read their novels in literature classes. Many fanciful interpretations may be given, while the authors may have intended none of them. The teachers say this does not matter, but it indeed matters if an author intends to communicate definite information to the reader. The foolishness of the American

classroom has been carried over to the church, so that believers often tend to derive purely subjective interpretations from the biblical text, and cares little for the intended meaning of a passage.

Alice in Wonderland is so difficult to understand that it requires the extensive notes of *The Annotated Alice*⁶⁷ by Martin Gardner to expose the numerous mathematical, philosophical, political, and other types of references spread throughout the story. The dust jacket says that "it was Gardner who first decoded many of the mathematical riddles and wordplay that lay ingeniously embedded" in the stories of Lewis Carroll. Even then, one wonders if some of his annotations are not more speculative than factual.

The modern student has no chance of understanding Carroll without much assistance – given in plain speech instead of narrative form. And how many can perceive the theological references in *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, and *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien?⁶⁸ Even adults do not always grasp the lessons in Aesop's fables and Dr. Seuss. And need we mention Shakespeare? Stories require explicit explanations, by the authors or otherwise qualified individuals, or risk producing a myriad of false interpretations.

That the Bible contains stories does not contradict the above, although much of what is in the Bible is properly termed *history*, not stories. The question is the role of narratives in *preaching*. As will be demonstrated from Scripture shortly, preaching ought to explain the stories in the Bible by means of plain and literal speech, instead of adding even more stories by the speaker. In preaching we expound on God's verbal revelation, instead of following its form of presentation. Just because the Bible contains many poems, proverbs, and psalms does not mean that the minister should preach in these literary forms.

Mark 4:33 may appear to some as inconsistent with what has been said so far concerning stories: "With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand." The verse directs us to recognize that there is a sense in which the parables may be understood without extensive explanation, but what this is remains to be seen.

First, we should read both verses 33 and 34: "With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything." Right away we may conclude that the crowds do not understand all that may be inferred from his parables, else he would not need to explain them to his disciples. Jesus speaks to the multitudes in parables, and they would understand them in a certain sense, and then he turns to his disciples and explains them in private, so that the latter group may understand them in a sense or to an extent not applicable to the crowds.

⁶⁷ *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition*; W. W. Norton & Company, 1999.

⁶⁸ Kurt D. Bruner and Jim Ware, *Finding God in the Lord of the Rings*; Tyndale House Publishers, 2001; Mark Eddy Smith, *Tolkien's Ordinary Virtues: Exploring the Spiritual Themes of the Lord of the Rings*; InterVarsity Press, 2002.

Many commentators are all too eager to assert that Jesus desires the crowds to understand what he says, but their exegesis of Mark 4:33 fails to account for verse 34 and the other passages denying that parables are easy to understand. Larry Hurtado relegates Mark 4:12 and 33 to some sort of "prophetic irony."⁶⁹ *Matthew Henry* is better: "...he fetched his comparisons from those things that were familiar to them...in condescension to their capacity; though he did not let them into the *mystery* of the parables..."⁷⁰

John Gill observes that Jesus "condescended to their weakness, accommodated himself to their capacities...made use of the plainest similes; and took his comparison from things in nature, the most known and obvious." However, "he spoke the word to them in parables, as they were able to hear, without understanding them; and in such a manner, on purpose that they might not understand."⁷¹ The parables or stories themselves are simple enough, but the theological truths represented may not be at all clear to the hearers.

Matthew 13:1-23 follows the same pattern – Jesus tells the parable of the sower in verses 3-9, and explains its meaning to his disciples in verses 18-23. In verse 10, the disciples ask Jesus, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" Instead of saying that parables are conducive to understanding, Jesus replies, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, *but not to them*...This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.' In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving'" (v. 11, 13-14).

Whatever understanding the crowds may receive, the parables are intended to hide from them "the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven." Such understanding is only given to those whom Christ chooses to grant it. In light of this, Mark 4:33 only means that the multitudes are able to understand the surface of the parables, and at the most only some elementary principles.

They are able to understand the literal stories themselves, but miss all or most of the theological truths they intend to communicate. A more complete understanding is given to the disciples in private through plain explanations. For example, the general audience may understand that the farmer sows seeds into the ground, but only a few receive the interpretation that this means the minister preaches the word of God. Nevertheless, some are able to understand the parables to a greater degree when the insinuations are just too obvious: "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them" (Matthew 21:45).

Among contemporary works, a superior statement on Mark 4:33 is as follows: "There was *veiling* (or very partial disclosure) before the multitude and *disclosure* (but only

⁶⁹ Larry W. Hurtado, *New International Biblical Commentary: Mark*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1983, 1989; p. 73-74.

⁷⁰ *Matthew Henry's Commentary, Vol. 5*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2000; p. 384.

⁷¹ John Gill, *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments, Vol. 7*; Paris, Arkansas: The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., 1989 (original: 1809); p. 404.

partial understanding) to the disciples. This is the pattern illustrated in Ch. 4 and assumed throughout the Gospel of Mark."⁷² Another scholar notes, "...the parable is a riddle...veiling their understanding as the Scripture had prophesied...To them Jesus remains a provocative enigma..."⁷³

The parables are in general difficult to understand, but the crowds are able to derive some basic ideas from them. On the other hand, the disciples receive direct instructions, but their spiritual inaptitude prevents even them from understanding fully what Jesus says. This interpretation alone explains all the biblical data on the subject, while others fail to account for Jesus' saying that the parables have the explicit purpose of withholding spiritual enlightenment.

Nevertheless, Jesus also uses plain speech in speaking to the crowds when he sees fit. Without quoting the verses, in Luke 4:18-21, Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah, and then plainly states that the prophecy has been fulfilled. In verses 24-27, he cites the historical record concerning Elijah and Elisha, makes a relevant observation regarding their ministries, and says, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown" (v. 24). The speaking is plain, and so the people understand; as a result, they try to kill him (v. 28-29).

To cite an example from the Old Testament, David fails to see himself in Nathan's story until the prophet says, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7). Then Nathan provides the explanation in plain speech: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites'" (v. 7-9).

Without already knowing the full context of the incident, it would be impossible to derive such an interpretation only from the story in verses 1-4. To test this, read verses 1-4 to anyone who is altogether ignorant of this part of the Bible, and see if he will come up with verses 7-9 on his own. Again, this shows that stories are difficult to understand without explicit explanations.

John 10:6 says, "Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them." And in John 16:29-30, his disciples say to him, "Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God." Jesus answers, "You believe at last!" (v. 31). To facilitate understanding and faith, one should minimize the use of stories, and explain in plain speech any narratives on which he has chosen to preach.

⁷² William L. Lane, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to Mark*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974; p. 173.

⁷³ *The Reformation Study Bible*; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc., 1995; p. 1567.

Explaining the sacrificial death of the Messiah to his downcast disciples in his post-resurrection state (Luke 24:17), Jesus proves the proposition, "Christ [had] to suffer these things and then enter his glory" (v. 26), not by the use of stories and illustrations, but by a process of biblical exegesis considered tedious by many: "...beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (v. 27).

Verse 45 says, "Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures." Can anything be plainer than this? Stories and other rhetorical devices do not aid in understanding, but plain speech enables one to state his meaning with clarity and precision. Then only by the grace of God will a person's mind be opened to understand theology.

Therefore, that the Bible contains many narratives does not mean we should adopt such an approach in our preaching; it only means that we should lecture on the meaning of these stories. The apostles lectured and wrote plainly on the meaning and implications of the biblical narratives, as well as expounding on new revelations given to them through special inspiration; they did not use stories as a means to teach divine truths.

Admittedly, Revelation was written by the apostle John, and is filled with figurative elements. How many people understand it? If a minister preaches on Revelation, he should give plain and literal explanations to its passages, rather than using one apocalypse to explain another.

Again, the apostles say to Jesus that plain speech is easier to understand than stories, parables, and figures of speech (John 16:29-30). Therefore, although Jesus has his own reasons for using parables, if a speaker really wants to be understood, he should limit his use of stories. Of course he should expound on the biblical narratives and parables, and even the apocalypses of Daniel and John, but that is using plain speech to explain stories and figures of speech, and not using stories to explain divine truths.

6. A COMPREHENSIVE MINISTRY

All these pages are only to uncover the meanings and implications of the first word in 2 Timothy 4:2. The rest of the verse, among other things, tells us something about the content of our preaching: "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction." We have found out what it means to preach; now we shall consider what it is that we should preach.

"Preach the Word," Paul commands. The *Word*, or *logos*, has such theological and philosophical significance that one can write an entire book on it. Here we are only interested in what it can tell us about the content of the messages we are to preach. It would be easier if we had arrived at this point in our study as a result of having already expounded all of 1 Timothy, and all the previous portions of 2 Timothy. But since we have not done so, I will point to several passages that seem to be directly relevant.

Paul writes at the beginning of 2 Timothy, "So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher" (1:8-11).

These verses contain references to divine election, the incarnation, the atonement, and eternal life (v. 9-10). The resurrection is also implied in that he says Christ "destroyed death" (v. 10). It is this message that Paul proclaims as a "a preacher and an apostle and a teacher" (v. 11, NASB). Obviously, several verses cannot summarize all that Paul preaches, but elsewhere we find that he proclaims to his hearers "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27).

Then, in verses 13-14, the apostle instructs Timothy to guard the message that he has heard: "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us." By "guard the good deposit," Timothy is not just to retain and live Paul's teaching, but also to spread it, since he says to him, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2).

If Paul proclaims "the whole will of God," and Timothy is to continue preaching all that he has heard from the apostle, this means that Timothy is to preach "the whole body of

revealed truth"⁷⁴ also. Besides, Jesus commands his disciples to teach their hearers "to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20). The content of preaching is therefore all that the Bible says and implies.

Do not underestimate the importance of establishing the scope of our preaching. There are those who, using 2 Timothy 4:2 or other passages,⁷⁵ attempt to limit the content of preaching, at least to unbelievers, to what they call "evangelistic" materials. They may point out that 2 Timothy 4:5 says to "do the work of an evangelist." However, as we have seen earlier, based on the context of 4:2 in this letter, the audience consists mostly of believers and false teachers. Timothy has been instructed to instruct and warn the former, and refute the latter. Even if verse 5 intends to be a command to evangelize unbelievers, it does not control the content of preaching that verse 2 intends to express.

Also, the anti-intellectuals who desire to limit the scope of preaching cannot define the minimum required number of doctrinal truths that we must preach in order to perform what they consider to be evangelism. Perhaps they would agree it is necessary to preach on the atonement. But the atonement presupposes the incarnation; the incarnation presupposes the deity of Christ; the deity of Christ presupposes the Trinity. The need for the atonement presupposes the fall of man; the fall of man presupposes the doctrine of man as the image of God; that man is the image of God presupposes creation; creation presupposes God and his attributes, and also supralapsarianism.

Studying the Trinity results in doctrinal formulations concerning the eternal generation of the Son, the definition of personhood (which then carries over to the doctrine of man), and a host of other issues. The incarnation of Christ must be harmonized with the immutability of God, and his sinless birth with the federal headship of Adam, and this latter with the justice and sovereignty of God. To affirm all of these doctrines presupposes the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture. This is just a small demonstration of how all biblical doctrines are interrelated, showing that it is not possible for one who restricts the doctrinal scope of his preaching to be an adequate minister.

"All Scripture," Paul says, "is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The doctrinal ministry must not only be accurate, but also comprehensive. Paul is able to say, "I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men," because "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Acts 20:26-27). One who preaches only "evangelistic" materials to unbelievers and only "practical" truths to believers has not fulfilled his ministry, and is guilty in the sight of God.

Our inability and mortality may prevent us from teaching people absolutely everything there is to know, but we must strive to be comprehensive. Scripture also prescribes the depth of the doctrinal ministry: "We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the

⁷⁴ Wuest, p. 154.

⁷⁵ One such passage may be 1 Corinthians 2:2, but theirs is a misinterpretation, as can be seen from verse 6, Paul's preaching in Acts, and his letters.

mature...we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began...The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God...We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand..." (1 Corinthians 2:6-7, 10, 12). We should take the apostle James seriously when he says, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers" (James 3:1). Assuming the role, and its honor, also brings with it all the responsibilities implied by the position.

7. NOTES AND DELIVERY

A common question asked by preachers is whether one should write out the message he is to preach, or whether an outline may be sufficient. Given the aforementioned required breadth and depth in preaching, writing out the entire sermon appears to be preferable. But some argue that preaching should be done without any notes – not that we can do without preparation, but only that the materials should be rehearsed enough so that one requires no notes for the actual presentation.⁷⁶

The concern of this latter view is that using notes prevents effective sermon delivery, since the speaker may become rather monotonous and rigid, and fails to properly engage his audience. Needless to say, this viewpoint is especially opposed to writing out the sermon word for word. We will address a related issue further below that renders this and other such concerns unimportant, and thus negates the arguments for favoring preaching without notes. My position is that notes are not a requirement if one knows his materials very well, but it is preferable to use them.

At any rate, few would object to following an outline when preaching a message. A prepared outline enables the speaker to structure his thoughts, thus ensuring a coherent presentation of the materials, and helps prevent the type of free association or stream of consciousness style of preaching passing for inspiration so common in contemporary sermons.

The real debate is whether the entire sermon should be written out and read to the audience during delivery. Karl Barth insists that this must be done; he gives his reasons:

The basic prerequisite in execution is to write the sermon...a sermon is a speech which we have prepared word for word and written down. This alone accords with its dignity. If it is true in general that we must give an account of every idle word, we must do so especially in our preaching. For preaching is not an art that some can master because they are good speakers and others only by working out the sermon in writing. The sermon is a liturgical event...they can engage in this ministry only after full reflection, to the very best of their knowledge, and with a clear conscience. Each sermon should be ready for print, as it were, before it is delivered...

This demand is an absolute rule for all. We may rob it of its universal validity by applying it only to young preachers until they have had the necessary practice. There is great danger in this type of thinking...⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Charles W. Koller, *How to Preach Without Notes*; Baker Book House, 1997.

⁷⁷ Karl Barth, *Homiletics*; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991; p. 119-120.

Advocates of preaching without notes usually give only pragmatic reasons, such as how it hinders delivery, and when speaking against writing out every word, the extra effort demanded from the preacher. However, one can almost always find a counterexample to every pragmatic objection. Jonathan Edwards wrote out his sermons and read from his manuscripts during delivery. Eyewitness accounts indicate that at times he would hardly look up from his notes, and yet he was one of the greatest revivalists. This is the way he delivered his famous *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, and his hearers were more than a little affected, some cried out so loudly that at one point he had to pause and ask them to quiet down, so that he may finish reading from his manuscript.⁷⁸

Another example may be the radio addresses delivered by Winston Churchill. To quote Mortimer Adler:

Hearing him on radio during the opening days of the Second World War, I listened with awe at what appeared to be a beautifully organized speech, eloquently delivered with all the hesitations and pauses that indicated improvisation on his part. There were many moments when he appeared to be reaching for the right word to come next. But the truth of the matter was, as I later learned, that the speech was completely written out and delivered so cunningly that it had all the qualities of impromptu utterance.⁷⁹

Of course, this has to do with radio broadcasts, and not a speech presented in person. But it still goes to show that the objections based on delivery, although I will argue that they are unimportant, can be overcome.

Pragmatic arguments are almost worthless. One must give the sort of theological reasons that Barth offers above. To emphasize delivery is pragmatic, and thus fails to convince, but theological concerns compel us to prefer depth and precision in our sermons.⁸⁰ Writing out the sermons in their entirety helps achieve these qualities.

Having made this a theological issue instead of a pragmatic one, some may argue that the apostles never had to write out their sermons; rather, they were inspired by the Holy Spirit. This argument is irrelevant since no one possesses inspiration of the same kind today. The Holy Spirit may "inspire" us in the sense of making our minds efficient and capable, but the type of inspiration the apostles and prophets had was unique to them. Certainly no one may add to Scripture, the New Testament canon having been completed.

Many people do not understand 1 Corinthians 2:13, and try in vain to apply it directly to themselves: "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in

⁷⁸ Such an account of his preaching has been challenged. Whether we use Edwards as an example, the real point here is that there are effective ministers who employ full manuscripts in their preaching.

⁷⁹ Adler, p. 69.

⁸⁰ But see Wilbur Ellsworth, *The Power of Speaking God's Word* (Christian Focus Publications, 2000).

words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words."⁸¹ This refers to the inspiration given to the apostolic company so that, when an apostle speaks as an apostle, he speaks the very words of God. He does not use words he has formed to describe a thought God puts in his mind, but the very words themselves are given him by the Holy Spirit. One claiming inspiration of this kind today is a heretic, in which case the problem becomes a different one than that which we are discussing; otherwise, we "must prepare sermons with prayer and toil."⁸²

However, it is misleading to say that the apostles and the early Christians never wrote out their sermons. Some believe that 1 Peter may have been a baptismal sermon written by the apostle whose name it bears,⁸³ and Ronald Nash argues that "the Epistle to the Hebrews is actually a type of written sermon,"⁸⁴ authored by Apollos. Even if neither of these are true, Paul says that his letters are to be read to the churches: "After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea" (Colossians 4:16); "I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers" (1 Thessalonians 5:27). And if the apostles never wrote out their sermons, the early church fathers wrote enough of them to fill volumes.

There are good reasons, therefore, to write out our sermons in their entirety, and read from the manuscripts during delivery.⁸⁵ But whether this practice becomes a moral duty to the preacher, as Barth maintains, we will not further investigate.

⁸¹ Without settling the dispute surrounding this verse, it remains that the apostles were uniquely inspired. See John 14:26, 16:13; 1 Corinthians 14:37; 1 Thessalonians 4:2, 8; 2 Peter 3:2; 1 John 4:6.

⁸² Barth, p. 120.

⁸³ But see Wayne Grudem, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 1 Peter*; Grand Rapids, Michigan; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000 (original: 1988); p. 40-41.

⁸⁴ Ronald H. Nash, *The Meaning of History*; Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1998; p. 47.

⁸⁵ It is important to note my intention here. I am merely suggesting that there are good reasons for this approach, so that it should not be ruled out. But I am not saying that it is the only proper approach, or even the best one. It has not been my own practice to use full manuscripts.

8. CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

This affords me a natural transition to discuss the place of written publications in the doctrinal ministry. Recall what Barth asserts: "Each sermon should be ready for print, as it were, before it is delivered."⁸⁶ Also note that, "At the meetings of learned societies or academic associations...The speaker knows in advance that he is expected to submit his speech, as delivered, for subsequent publication in the proceedings of the conference."⁸⁷

Since sermons and lectures that are fully written out are already ready for publication, we ought to consider the place of reading in the doctrinal ministry and the believer's spiritual development. It is true that a written sermon may be different in several aspects than what is intended as an article not meant for oral delivery, but for our purposes the differences are negligible.

The two should not be all that different in the first place – I find no trouble in delivering the present article as a sermon (or divide it into a series of sermons), or to preach by reading a chapter from one of my books. Remember, I have established that a sermon is a lecture; what I write as a sermon does not have to be all that different from an article or part of a book. Therefore, in this section we will not only be referring to written sermons, but all Christian literature in general.

It can be a dangerous thing to be somewhat proficient at word studies without knowing enough about biblical revelation as a system. The meaning of a word is finally determined by its usage and theological background, not merely its dictionary definition. Failing to observe this principle, William Barclay writes, "The very fact that the word *logos* is used for the Christian message is very significant. It means *a spoken message*, and therefore it means that the Christian message is not something which is learned from books, but something which is transmitted from person to person."⁸⁸

If this is true, his entire 17-volume commentary on the New Testament does not contain the Christian message, nor can his several other books enlighten us as to the nature of Christianity. Even more perplexing is the question of what we have been reading from the Bible all this time. From what he says, it certainly cannot be the Christian message.

However, in the same paragraph, he says, "The Christian message comes far more often through the living personality than through the printed or the written page."⁸⁹ However, if "the Christian message *is not* something which is learned from books," then it must mean that it *always* comes from the spoken word. For him to then say that it only "far more

⁸⁶ Barth, p. 119.

⁸⁷ Adler, p. 73.

⁸⁸ William Barclay, *New Testament Words*; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1964, 1974; p. 179.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

often" comes this way means that it *sometimes* comes from the written page, and thus contradicts his earlier statement. But "sometimes" is still not good enough – all that we know about the Christian message comes from the writings of the apostles and prophets.

Sinclair Ferguson brings our attention to Luther's example:

Early in his ministry, Martin Luther, the reformer, had little time for Christian literature. Like others since, he tended to regard Christian literature as antagonistic to the spirit of the gospel. The gospel, he said, is about the preached word and we must preach. Yet that same Martin Luther (incredible though it seems) was responsible for one-third of all the books published in the German language in the first half of the sixteenth century! On every bookshelf in Germany, one out of every three books was probably authored by Luther!

Why was this? Luther saw that by writing he could spread the message of the gospel and the joy of the Reformation; by reading Christian people would grow in grace and the church of Jesus Christ would be built up and strengthened.

Think about the biographies you have read. Isn't it true that the majority of greatly-used Christians were men and women who were always using, in one sense or another, printed material? Thus, in the purpose of God, using Christian literature has been a sign of vitality in the people of God... There are many reasons for this. One is that the Christian faith is a faith of the mind...⁹⁰

I am glad Ferguson mentions the nature of faith. Romans 10:17 says, "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." From this verse, I have heard the argument made that faith comes by hearing, not reading, and therefore only preaching stimulates faith in others. The less extreme thinks that hearing is at least better in producing faith than reading. But the verse neither denies that faith can come from reading, nor does it say that hearing is better.

To cast doubt upon the effectiveness of reading based on this verse contradicts biblical teaching. The apostle John says, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).

Note: "...these are *written* that you may *believe*..." Faith comes by reading as well as hearing. This passage in itself is conclusive evidence against the idea that "the Christian message is not something which is learned from books." Other than the Bible, no written literature carries divine authority, but this is also true concerning preaching. To the extent

⁹⁰ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Read Any Good Books?*; Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992; p. 2-3.

that our written message is faithful to Scripture, it is an effective means through which God may generate faith in the minds of readers. Regeneration comes only from God's direct action within the person, but the Christian message itself *can* be learned from books.

Ferguson realizes that "the Christian faith is a faith of the mind." The crucial issue, therefore, is not whether the message is spoken or written, although the written word is superior when it comes to precision and permanence. What matters is whether the proper intellectual information has been successfully conveyed. This being so, the Christian message brings faith even when communicated through sign language, as can be done when ministering to the deaf.

If I were to point out that the longevity of ideas written down tend to be greater than those merely spoken, some would invariably object that Jesus had never written a book. This point has been repeated over and over again, usually in the context of trying to show how influential Christ has been in spite of what he did not do. But it is puzzling as to how such an argument can be made by people who have read the four gospels and the letters of Paul, where the life, words, and ideas of Christ have been recorded in written form. It is immaterial whether Christ himself wrote anything – the question is what the status of Christianity would be today if the New Testament had never been written.

Objections against writing and reading Christian literature again appear to be the result of a prejudice against items and activities that carry academic connotations. Christianity, according to them, is supposed to be lively, dynamic, creative, and personal. And to them books are none of these things. That we must so emphasize preaching, a form of verbal communication and thus an intellectual activity, already pains them enough. Once we dismiss such anti-intellectualistic nonsense, the opposition against written materials is left without justification.

9. REFUTE! REBUKE! REMIND!

We will consider the rest of 2 Timothy 4:2: "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction." Besides commanding Timothy to preach the word of God, Paul also directs him as to when he should preach, and in what forms his preaching may take. The apostle lays down the principle that preaching is universal in several ways: it should propagate the whole scope of biblical revelation, it is always appropriate as a form of ministerial expression, and it functions to address all types of needs – to "correct, rebuke and encourage."

That all of Scripture should be proclaimed through preaching has already been established, but Paul proceeds to say that this ministry is to be performed at all times: "be prepared in season and out of season." The words translated "be prepared" mean to "be ready," "be persistent," or "stand by it." Lenski prefers "stand at hand," by which he intends to mean "Be right on the spot!"⁹¹ Timothy is to be right there preaching, whatever the condition may be.

As for "in season and out of season," it is better rendered in the NRSV as "whether the time is favorable or unfavorable." It may seem reasonable to assume that different types of ministries are suited for different occasions. There is a time for prayer, a time for music, a time for fellowship, a time for counseling, and a time for preaching. However, Paul says that preaching is appropriate at all times. It makes no difference whether the setting is a funeral or a wedding, whether we are at church or the dinner table, whether the audience is friendly or hostile, or whether it consists of adults or children – preaching should be done on all occasions, having priority over every other ministry. Just when one thinks that a certain situation is "unfavorable" toward preaching, that is the time to preach. And when the time becomes "favorable," Paul says, preach again.

Preaching may take several forms. As mentioned earlier, although a lecture can inform, it may also "correct, rebuke and encourage." For "correct," Lattimore's "confute,"⁹² is acceptable given Thayer's "to call to account, show one his fault..."⁹³ We should "overwhelm in argument" and "refute conclusively"⁹⁴ the false teachers. The word is used of "the exposure and confutation of false teachers of Christianity"⁹⁵ in Titus 1:9: "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and *refute* those who oppose it." Mounce has

⁹¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001 (original: 1937); p. 852.

⁹² Richmond Lattimore, *The New Testament*; New York: North Point Press, 1996; p. 462.

⁹³ Thayer, p. 203.

⁹⁴ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*; "confute."

⁹⁵ Thayer, p. 203.

"confront."⁹⁶ If as Wuest says, the word "speaks of a rebuke which results in the person's confession of his guilt, or if not his confession, his conviction of sin,"⁹⁷ then Lenski's "convict"⁹⁸ successfully conveys the meaning. The minister is to *confute* (or to refute by argument) the heretic, and possibly bringing him to a *conviction* about his errors.

"Rebuke" in the NIV is accurate, but one needs to realize the word refers to a very sharp reprimand, not a gentle warning. It is used in connection with exorcism in the ministry of Jesus: "When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he *rebuked* the evil spirit. 'You deaf and mute spirit,' he said, 'I command you, come out of him and never enter him again'" (Mark 9:25).

A false conception of biblical love has caused many to consider severe rebuke as unchristian behavior, but Scripture indicates otherwise: "Better is open rebuke than hidden love" (Proverbs 27:5); "Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning" (1 Timothy 5:20); "This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith" (Titus 1:13); "These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you" (Titus 2:15).

Biblical love requires one to rebuke another sharply under certain circumstances. Here in particular, Paul says for Timothy to rebuke others for holding to false doctrines. That is, to reprove them sharply, with a threat of "impending penalty."⁹⁹ Thayer defines the word as, "to tax with fault...chide, rebuke, reprove, censure severely"¹⁰⁰ Both "rebuke" and "reprove" are good translations, as long as English readers understand the strength of the word, and the severity of the intended reprimand.

Gordon Fee prefers "urge"¹⁰¹ rather than "encourage." The word may be more gentle than the previous two, but Lenski thinks that, perhaps given the context, "the meaning can scarcely be...comfort," and prefers "admonish" instead.¹⁰² "Exhort" receives multiple endorsements. A fondness for alliteration may justify the translation, "Refute! Rebuke! Remind!" – although *remind* may not be precise enough unless understood as "admonish"; otherwise, "confute, reprove, exhort"¹⁰³ is more than acceptable.

There are five aorist imperatives in the verse, and so Mounce translates it as follows: "Preach the word! Be prepared when it is opportune or inopportune! Confront! Rebuke! Exhort! – with complete patience and teaching."¹⁰⁴ The second seems to qualify the first, as assumed when the words are discussed above. The minister is to preach; the content of

⁹⁶ William D. Mounce, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 46: Pastoral Epistles*; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc., 2000; p. 574.

⁹⁷ Wuest, p. 155.

⁹⁸ Lenski, p. 853.

⁹⁹ Wuest, p. 155.

¹⁰⁰ Thayer, p. 245.

¹⁰¹ Fee, p. 285.

¹⁰² Lenski, p. 853.

¹⁰³ Lattimore, p. 462.

¹⁰⁴ Mounce, p. 553.

his preaching is the whole word of God. In his preaching, he is to refute those who believe false doctrines, rebuke them so that they may be sound in the faith, and exhort or urge them to believe and obey the true faith. This can be a very taxing task, and therefore requires "great patience" (2 Timothy 4:2)

The basis from which one executes all of the above is "doctrine" (v. 2, KJV). We refute with arguments the heretic so that he may see the error of his false *doctrine*; we rebuke him so that he may be warned of the consequences for adhering to the said *doctrine*; we then exhort him to believe and live in accordance to true *doctrine*. "Doctrine is the foundation and the fountain of all religious life, false doctrine of a false religious life, true doctrine of genuine religious and truly Christian life. All Scripture, which is full of religious facts, *is doctrine*...To be without this doctrine is to be left in darkness...to be tossed to and fro by every wind of false teaching like a helpless vessel that is at the mercy of the waves...a pitiful condition."¹⁰⁵ Mounce thinks that the emphasis here is on the act of teaching rather than what is taught; however, he admits that "it is the gospel, the word, that is taught."¹⁰⁶ An excellent minister possesses tremendous doctrinal insights, he is able to lead God's people with "knowledge and understanding" (Jeremiah 3:15), and teaches truth to them with great patience and endurance.

¹⁰⁵ Lenski, p. 853-854.

¹⁰⁶ Mounce, p. 574.

10. GOD GIVES THE INCREASE

We have summarized the preaching ministry as taught in verse 2, and now we come to an objection that may have arisen in the reader's mind long ago: How can such an intellectualistic, authoritarian, impractical, humorless, and unimaginative approach gain the audience's interest? Will not the presentation be rather boring, if not repulsive? And with the lecture-like sermon already written in a manuscript to be read by the minister, will not the monotony become unbearable?

The question is put in the pejorative terms that probably reflect the objector's attitude, but we have dealt with issues relating to the intellect, authority, pragmatism, humor, and narratives in preaching, as well as the advantages of writing out the sermon. The objection now being considered is again a pragmatic one, namely, some find it hard to accept that such an approach to preaching will attract anyone, or produce much positive effect. We may repeat our earlier assertion that pragmatic concerns can form no real objections at all, but there are more detailed answers.

To begin, we may cite the final verse of our text for this study: "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Timothy 4:3). Timothy is commanded to preach in the manner described in verse 2 precisely because "the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine." He is to refute, rebuke, and exhort them, rather than to accommodate them. The biblical solution is confrontation, not accommodation.

Additionally, Paul writes that these people who "will not put up with sound doctrine" would instead "gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear." For one's preaching to be naturally of interest to such individuals, one must become one of these teachers who would "say what their itching ears want to hear." Preacher who has attracting listeners as their priority must then change their doctrine, not just their presentation.

Charles Swindoll speaks for many when he says, "Theology needs to be interesting,"¹⁰⁷ but he is wrong. Instead, *true Christians are interested* in theology – the knowledge of God is inherently desirable to the regenerate, and separates them from those who are not. Preachers are obligated to present the whole scope of biblical revelation with clarity and accuracy, but to be attentive is the responsibility of the hearer. One who is not already interested in theology should examine himself, to see if he is indeed in the faith. Verse 3 says that many will not hear; the crisis is not that many preachers will be boring.

¹⁰⁷ Charles R. Swindoll, *Growing Deep in the Christian Life*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986, 1995; p. 10.

Assuming that the preacher's doctrine is pure, the Bible blames the hearers for not producing spiritual fruit, but with the sovereignty of God as the determining factor. Jesus explains the parable of the sower as follows:

When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. (Matthew 13:19-23)

"He who has ears, let him hear" (v. 8), Jesus says. When God sends the prophet Ezekiel to speak to Israel, he commands, "Son of man, go now to the house of Israel and speak my words to them" (Ezekiel 3:4; also 12:2). However, he also says, "But the house of Israel is not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for the whole house of Israel is hardened and obstinate" (v. 7). Israel is unwilling to listen to Ezekiel because their minds are "hardened and obstinate" against God, not that Ezekiel is an ineffective speaker.

Thus, God tells the prophet, "You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious. But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you" (2:7-8). 2 Timothy 4:2 prescribes for us the preaching ministry after the tradition of the apostles, and refusing to speak in such a manner when we have been commissioned to do so is rebellion against God.

Not only is a rejection of the message blamed on the hearers, but a positive reception of the message is correspondingly credited to the audience: "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe" (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

For the explanation to be complete, we will mention that all this is true on the human level, but ultimately it is God who works in a person to will and to act: "...for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). Other relevant passages include 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 and Romans 9:18: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow"; "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden."

Against the objection that the type of preaching proposed in these pages is impossible for most hearers to comprehend, the Scripture again places the duty of grasping the message on the hearers, and emphasizes that God is the one who gives understanding: "Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this" (2 Timothy 2:7). Rather than accommodating the hearers in ways unwarranted by biblical precepts, the preacher should urge the congregation to be more studious. However, it is God alone who gives understanding. In preaching I inform, argue, rebuke, and exhort with sound doctrine, but depend on the sovereign grace of God, who uses the words by means of which to convert and edify the hearers. Therefore, the "free will" of the humanists is denied.

Pragmatism is impractical, humor is distracting, and narrative is ambiguous – give me a theological lecture instead. Preach the word to me; refute the false doctrines that wish to seduce me; rebuke me in areas where I may have strayed; exhort me to renew my commitment to believe and obey the Scripture. Going through all sorts of rhetorical gymnastics to hide the sermon's lack of substance only generates disdain in my mind for the preacher. If he is out of ideas, I would welcome hearing a chapter from a seminary textbook or biblical commentary in place of what he thinks to be a proper sermon.

It all depends on the condition of the hearers and the work of God within them. Many people consider the Bible uninteresting, but true Christians dare not try to modify its message or presentation because of this, nor do they sense the need to do so. They realize that the fault is in the readers, not the Bible. Likewise, it is the hearer's responsibility to appreciate the type of preaching advocated here. The minister is not required to make the sermon appealing to the people. In answer to the objection that he may nevertheless try to do so for the sake of capturing their attention, the proper way for making a sermon more interesting is to enhance the doctrinal content, not to add jokes and stories.

Much remains to be said, but we have outlined many of the main ideas. Instead of adjusting their presentation to contemporary culture, ministers are authorized to command Christians to be interested in hearing doctrinal sermons. He who hates understanding may hate it still, but the most urgent need in the church today is a greater intellectual comprehension and appreciation of theology, which in turn provides the only foundation from which we may proceed to resolve other important issues. The way to effect such an improvement is through theological lectures, a form of teaching that even the regular sermon ought to assume.

TEACH THE NATIONS

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Matthew 28:18-20

The Church is the gathering of God's people. These people come together because of the sovereign election and providence of God, and they come together around a common creed and a common cause. They should not be a group of people who are just drifting through life, waiting for death, for this describes the pitiful existence of non-Christians, from which our Father has delivered us by his grace through Christ.

This common creed and common cause must not be reduced to almost nothing, just so that they may remain common among God's people. But Christ is the one who defines our creed and our cause. It is around *his* creed and *his* cause that true Christians unite. Those who reject his creed and his cause betray their false profession.

The creed and the cause of Christ are not minimal, but meaningful, substantial, and detailed. And for the Church to remain a faithful and effective community of God's people, it is imperative for it to have a firm grasp regarding its creed and its cause, its doctrine and purpose.

Only by knowing the doctrine that it must promote can the Church remain faithful, distinctive, and retain its purpose and identity in this world. And only by knowing the mission that it must fulfill can the Church remain effective, focusing its resources and designing its activities and outreaches with this proper end in view. Moreover, when the creed and the cause of the Church are specifically spelled out, it becomes easier for individuals within the Church to align themselves with its doctrine and purpose, and this in turn makes them more faithful and effective as individual believers.

Therefore, in what follows, we will direct our attention to the passage in the Gospel of Matthew commonly called the Great Commission. From this passage, we will consider the creed and the cause of the Church as they were first declared to the apostles by the Head of the Church.

Although the first recipients of this commission were the apostles, it was never meant to begin and end with them. Rather, the apostles laid the necessary foundation, and in the course of their ministries, they taught others and commanded them to continue the mission, and so that they would in turn teach others, who would also teach the generation after them.

We will divide our discussion into three parts, and in these three parts, we will consider the charge, the message, and the power of our Lord's command to teach all nations everything that he has commanded.

1. THE GREAT COMMISSION

By the time Jesus declares to his apostles the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel, he is about to be taken up to heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father. At the background of this commission are all the things that transpired before this event. Among other things, these include his incarnation, temptation, proclamation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

It would be instructive to examine all of these items before we consider the Great Commission, and indeed they provide the necessary background to fully understand our passage. However, to do that would entail going through the entire Gospel from its beginning, and that would be a much larger undertaking than we can presently afford. So, despite the deficiencies, we will have to limit our study to these several verses.

Jesus begins by saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." An in-depth exposition of the passage should include an explanation on how he obtained this authority. But as mentioned, we cannot spend time to consider all that went before, and so we must begin from here, and simply note that he has this authority, and then proceed on this basis. Nevertheless, we can mention that this authority pertains to his human nature, and as our Mediator and the Head of the Church. In his divine nature, he had always possessed absolute authority over all things.

We shall return to this issue of authority later and apply it to the Great Commission, as we will need this point to address a particular question.

He continues, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations." Previously, the apostles were told to remain in Israel when Jesus sent them to preach, and Jesus himself stated several times that he was sent to the people of Israel. However, the gospel was never rigidly and totally withheld from the Gentiles. Indeed, Jesus even commended the great faith of several Gentiles who acknowledged his special authority and power.

But now he explicitly charges the disciples to preach to all nations. People speak of universal grace and universal salvation, but this is the only kind of universalism that the Bible knows – not the salvation of all people, and not even the possibility of the salvation of all people, but the salvation of all kinds of people, people from all nations and backgrounds.

God has chosen all kinds of people for salvation. By his grace, no group is too bad to be excluded from hearing the gospel. Peter was admonished with the words, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15). But on the other hand, no group is good enough that it can escape God's wrath and gain access to him without the gospel. Thus the Church is to proclaim the gospel to all nations, summoning the elect to faith in Christ.

When Christians think about their responsibilities toward the Great Commission as individuals, on the one hand, they must become dissatisfied with a spectator mentality, but on the other hand, it is just as important that they reject an extreme individualism, as if a Christian is not fulfilling his duty unless he is doing every little thing that the Church as a whole is supposed to do.

You know what I mean by a spectator mentality. Pastors often warn their people about this. It is the attitude that the work of the gospel is almost exclusively carried out by professional ministers, while the rest of the believers just sit and watch. The better spectator Christians might be very generous with their money, so that even though they are not doing anything, at least their ministers can continue the work. But this is not enough. Christ calls everyone to actively and zealously labor for his kingdom. Besides being generous with their money, believers ought to be generous with their time, their strength, and their other resources as well, and to dedicate these things for the work of the gospel under the direction of their church leaders.

The spectator mentality is too common, but at least there are people who preach against it, and who urge believers to become more active in helping their churches, as well as to become more aggressive witnesses for Christ in their daily lives, in whatever situation they find themselves. On the other hand, the problem of extreme individualism is less obvious, and it is even encouraged and commended by some well-meaning preachers who nevertheless fail to realize that the Great Commission is to be carried out by the Church as a whole, and not by individuals as considered independently from one another.

Thus sometimes you would hear a preacher say, "You ought to witness to at least one person every day," or "If someone has known you for a week and still doesn't know that you are a Christian, there must be something wrong with you." Both of these statements, and many others like them, might be true in some circumstances and for some people, but it is destructive and irresponsible for preachers to make these generalizations.

Sometimes they speak as if each believer is a whole church in himself, so that as an individual he must perform all the tasks that a church is supposed to carry out. Now if someone is excellent as a church administrator, but is terrible at preaching the gospel, of course he should strive to improve in personal evangelism, and of course he should preach the gospel to whomever God brings to him in his providence. But there is nothing wrong for him to spend more of his time in church administration, so that other people, and the church as a whole, can become more effective in evangelism. It would be a great injustice for someone to ignore his less direct but nevertheless substantial contribution to the success of the church, and chide him for doing too little personal evangelism.

If someone appears to be doing too little of what you consider important, before you rebuke him about this, try to think if he is contributing to other areas of the church's ministry. Maybe personal evangelism is the only area in which he seems to come behind other people, and his contributions in other areas put you and the rest of the church to shame. And perhaps it is precisely because of this that he has not been able to spend as

much time in personal evangelism, while making it possible for you and the others to effectively preach the gospel.

A congregation consists of various individuals – each has his own gift, and each has his own place. Rather than asking whether someone is doing *this* thing enough, we should ask whether he is doing a part, *his* part, in the church. We can also apply this to individual churches as well. Each local congregation is not expected to fulfill all of the Great Commission by itself; otherwise, each church would have to send missionaries to every nation in the world. Imagine the confusion that would result and the resources that would be wasted if this is indeed what each church tries to do, that is, when each church tries to be the whole Church.

In short, while it would be wrong to think that you do not need to obey the Great Commission, and to leave it to other people, it would also be wrong to think that you are the only one obeying it, so that you would try to do all of it by yourself. Do not act as if other individuals do not exist, or as if other churches do not exist. And before you condemn someone else for doing too little, pay close attention to see if he is not in fact doing much more than you, and maybe even the one who makes your ministry possible and sustainable.

Now, Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. *Therefore go and make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them...teaching them...." As the Head of the Church, he has defined our purpose and our agenda. What is it? What is this Great Commission? It is to "make disciples" – that is the simplest and most inclusive answer to the question. We have left out many words from verses 19 and 20 that will give us more details, but we will look at them later. Right now, we will focus on those words that we have highlighted, and draw out some of their implications.

The Church must actively make disciples. What this involves is explained by the words that follow: "baptizing them...teaching them...." But the word "disciple" itself tells us a great deal. A disciple is a learner. He is certainly a student in the "classroom" sense, as he studies his master's teachings through verbal instructions and intellectual reflections. However, his relationship with the master is more involved than the typical classroom student, as he must also submit to his master's commands and follow his master's conduct. In other words, a disciple is a *total* student – he strives to learn and adopt his master's philosophy, lifestyle, purpose, and passion.

Because Christians are the human contacts through which the world learns about Christ, in this very limited and relative sense the people that we bring to the faith are our disciples. But it would be wrong to stop here, and to allow the converts to go no further than this. Instead, we must make it clear that we are ourselves disciples of Christ, and that there is really only one Master (Matthew 23:8). Nevertheless, not all Christians are on the same level of maturity, and Christ has indeed designated teacher-student relationships among the members of his Body. Thus Paul urges his readers to follow *him*, that is, as he follows *Christ* (1 Corinthians 11:1; also see 4:15-16, Philippians 3:17, 1 Thessalonians 1:6).

We must avoid following and revering particular Christian leaders so much that it amounts to idolatry. On the other hand, there are those who rebel against all human authority and claim that they follow Christ alone. But this is to be rebellious and not spiritual. The real reason for their defiance is often not a deeper allegiance to Christ, but a resistance against Christ, and this leads them to turn away from the human leaders who endeavor to declare and enforce Christ's commands to them. In any case, the Bible says, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority" (Hebrews 13:17).

Notice that we are to make disciples and not mere converts. Indeed, the Bible does not make a distinction between converts, believers, and disciples, as if one can barely become a believer and stop there, without becoming a learner after Christ. Rather, every true convert has also become and will remain a disciple. But if in our usage we make a distinction between conversion and discipleship, then we must say that the Great Commission is to make disciples, and not to make converts.

Now if disciples are learners, what are we to teach them? Or, to put it another way, what message must we declare to "all nations"? What is the "gospel" that we must preach to people? We will take up these questions later, but before we can even discuss the *message* of the Great Commission, there is already an objection about the *fact* of the Great Commission.

Non-Christians resent not only the message of evangelism but the very act of evangelism. They think that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with them, and so they regard the Christian mission to "convert" people as a tremendous insult. Various specific objections against evangelism are voiced on the basis of this general antagonism against the very idea of conversion, or the necessity of conversion.

For example, it is said that the Church's missionary emphasis amounts to a disdain toward the beliefs and customs of various people groups. Instead of bearers of good news, Christians are therefore invaders of cultures and destroyers of traditions, urging their hearers to abandon the faiths and practices that they have tried to preserve for hundreds of years. Protesting against Christian evangelism, these unbelievers suggest that rather than telling them to change and to convert, we should celebrate diversity and respect their beliefs and lifestyles.

And so they challenge the Church: "What, do you think that you are so superior to all these people? What right do you have to impose your beliefs on them? How dare you to subvert the very beliefs and practices that have distinguished and identified them as a people for hundreds of years? Why must everyone behave as you do, or believe what you believe? Who are you to tell them that they are all wrong and that you are right, that only you have the truth?"

As is the usual practice of Christians, many believers have responded to the objection by appeasement and compromise. That is, whenever non-Christians challenge the beliefs and practices of the Church, believers typically respond by trying to show that the non-

Christians have exaggerated the gap between the Church and the world, and that they have exaggerated the threat that Christianity poses to their beliefs, customs, and preferences.

But in reality, the situation is *much worse* than the non-Christians perceive, and sadly, than many Christians are willing to admit. The gap is the distance between heaven and hell, but the non-Christians might not even believe in hell. The difference is between light and darkness, but many non-Christians only believe in gray. Thus the non-Christians in fact typically underestimate the gap between the Church and the world, and the threat that Christianity poses against the things that they cherish.

Of course we are superior – if we are equal or even inferior, then why are we trying to convert them? Of course we know better; otherwise, why are we preaching to them? But the key is that we are not superior or better *in ourselves*. And so we tell them, "Yes, we are indeed superior, and we indeed know better than you, but not in ourselves, for before we became Christians, we were just like you, without God and without hope in this world. But God, who is greater than all, has enlightened our minds and granted us understanding. He changed us and made us different – better – than before. And he has given us a mandate to declare the same message to you, and to warn you about the judgment to come."

If this is not the truth, then we should leave them alone. If this is not far superior to anything that they know, then there is no point in seeking their conversion. To seek their conversion means that we think there is something wrong with them. Why not admit it? "Yes, there is something wrong with you, and that's why you must be converted."

The proper response is not to compromise, or to weaken our stance, but we must return to the foundation of the Great Commission, and that is the authority of Jesus Christ. The unbelievers' challenge against the Great Commission is ultimately a challenge against the one who issues the commission. But Jesus declares that he possesses "all authority in heaven and on earth," and it is on *this* basis that he gives the command to disciple all nations.

Because he has all authority "in heaven," the entire heaven is shut to any person who refuses to enter through him. As he states elsewhere, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). And because he has all authority "on earth," the whole earth is open to Christians through Christ. Therefore, our answer to the objection against the gospel is the gospel itself. As we go forth into all nations to obey the Great Commission, we are not trespassing, for we operate under the authority of Christ who rules over all the earth. If anything, the world is ours through Christ – it does not belong to the unbelievers. Christ authorizes us to enter any territory and engage any person as we obey the Great Commission. It is not up to the unbelievers to complain.

As for the charge that evangelism reeks of intellectual and cultural arrogance, our response should be that Christian intellect and culture are indeed superior, whether or not we are humble or arrogant about it. Still, we are not arrogant enough to defy Jesus Christ,

who gave us the Great Commission. And we are certainly not stupid enough to say to him, "We are too humble to obey you!"

Having stated the above, and without taking back anything that we have said, we are commanded to preach the gospel, and not to transmit Western ideals or American values. What is Western is not necessarily Christian, and what is American is not always biblical. It is true that many Christians have blurred the distinction, and have preached their own non-biblical ethnic, cultural, or national traditions along with the gospel. We are commissioned to teach the nations a Christian system of thought and a Christian way of life.

So we are going beyond what Christ has authorized us to do if we enter a nation to take away their chopsticks and give them forks instead. This might seem trivial, but we are not authorized to make these changes, that is, unless their customs contradict Christian teachings. On a more important level, we are also not called to preach our non-biblical theories of politics, science, education, and so on. But it is true that a biblical philosophy should affect and control every area of human thought and conduct – we just have to make sure that it is really a *biblical* philosophy that we are teaching, and not just the American way.

I am concerned to show that Christians have been commissioned and authorized to enter and engage every nation and every person with the teachings of Christ. And since Christ has commanded us to make disciples and not mere converts, not only are we to enter and engage, but we must also stay and teach. May God instill and reinforce in us a sense of mission, of duty, and of joyful obligation, to enter into every corner of the world and declare the gospel with authority. This comes as we embrace this great mandate from Christ, and truly understand that he has sent us to declare his salvation and dominion by his authority and at his command.

2. THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE

Jesus commands us to "make disciples of all nations," and we have seen that disciples are learners. So what are they supposed to learn? When we approach potential converts, what are we supposed to tell them? Now that we have defined the Christian mandate, we must also define the Christian message.

However, before we consider *what* we are to teach people, we should first consider the fact *that* we are to teach them. This characteristic of the Great Commission carries tremendous implications that define our entire approach toward non-Christians. The Church today has often failed to confront the world with power partly because it has adopted a philosophy of discourse from the unbelievers that is contrary to the method dictated by Christ in the Great Commission.

One way to indicate a common error that I have in mind is by noting what Christ does *not* say – that is, he does not say, "Learn from all nations" or "Dialogue with all nations." Some people think that it is less abrasive to give the impression that we are promoting mutual respect and understanding rather than imposing our beliefs on people. Such an approach generates less discomfort and hostility in others, and perhaps some of them will eventually see things our way.

But if we give the impression that we are willing to listen or even learn from non-Christians as we demand that they listen and learn from us, then we are also implying that it is possible for us to change our beliefs upon hearing the non-Christian views. Just as we demand that they abandon whatever non-Christian view that they now hold in order to submit to Christian teachings, such an approach gives the impression that we are also willing, or even with the same level of willingness that we demand from them, to abandon Christianity and adopt non-Christian beliefs.

If we give the impression that in every encounter with non-Christians, we are seeking mutual understanding, and that at every encounter it is possible for us to abandon Christianity, then either our faith is false or we are liars. That is, if you are *sincerely prepared* to abandon Christian beliefs every time you speak or debate with a non-Christian, then you are *already* a non-Christian. True faith believes that Christianity is the truth, and not only that it is the best option out of what you have encountered so far in your life. Consider the Chinese saying: "Riding on a cow to look for a horse" – you stay with what you have while looking for something better. This is contrary to biblical faith, which affirms that we have already found and embraced the ultimate truth in Christ, and there is *no chance* that we are wrong about it. On the other hand, if there is in fact no possibility that you will consider the non-Christian views as true, or to abandon Christianity, then it would be dishonest to give the opposite impression.

Therefore, when I approach an unbeliever, I am not going to lie to him and let him think that I am personally interested in his ideas, or that we are two seekers trying to discover the truth that is "out there" somewhere. I *know* that I have already found the truth, that Christ has revealed the truth to me, and granted me faith to believe it and be transformed by it. So I am interested in the unbeliever's ideas only for the purpose of refuting them, and to adapt my presentation to anticipate objections and misunderstandings.

Jesus sent me to *teach* the unbeliever the truth, to *tell* him what I know, and not to insinuate or negotiate him into the truth. Still less am I there to seek the truth along with him. I am on a mission, not a quest for truth – I have already found the truth, and that is what I am there to tell him. This does not imply that I must be mean and hostile. Depending on the person and the situation, I might be gentle, or I might be forceful, but I am not going to do anything less than to tell him what to believe and how to behave in accordance with Christ's teachings.

Of course this is offensive to the unbelievers, and doubtless also to many who consider themselves believers, but it is the Great Commission. Or do you think that the unbelievers are supposed to support the Great Commission, giving it their approval and cheering us on? No, those heading for destruction are scandalized by the gospel. Only those whose hearts God has prepared will welcome and embrace, not only the message of evangelism, but the very act of evangelism as well.

One problem is that many believers are too self-centered in their thinking – they go because *they* want to go, because *they* want to share something useful with others. They do not operate on the basis of an external and objective spiritual authority. To illustrate, if as an ambassador you visit a foreign nation with the possibility of defection already in mind, then from your perspective you are not carrying out a mission at all, but you are there to gather information and weigh the advantages for yourself. Although you think that you are better off staying with your side, you are willing to entertain other options. On the other hand, I go to the unbelievers because Jesus sent me, and I am there to deliver a message, to *tell* the people what my King requires of them. There is no possibility of compromise or defection, and I would be a miserable herald to allow a contrary impression.

So in the Great Commission we are to teach, and not to learn from or dialogue with unbelievers. But then, Jesus does not say that it is the United States that will teach all nations, but it is the Church that must teach all nations, including the United States. Therefore, we must disciple the United States also. This nation is a vast and hard mission field. It is vast because many people are not Christians, and it is hard because many of them think that they are. The Great Commission is relevant everywhere, even in the United States, and even in the Church.

Now we must consider the message itself. Subordinate to and explanatory of "make disciples" are the commands to baptize and teach. We will focus on the teaching aspect, so that we cannot take time to discuss the significance of baptism in the Great Commission. This does not mean that I think baptism is unimportant to the Great

Commission. A full study of this passage ought to explain its significance and its role in making disciples, but this is not a full study.

Nevertheless, we can say this: Water baptism cannot save anyone, and it happens only once to a person, whereas it is the teaching of the gospel that leads to conversion and maturity, and it is to be a constant and lifetime pursuit. Thinking about its role and implementation in the Great Commission will take up what time we have left. Again, this might highlight the importance of teaching, but it does not diminish the significance of water baptism.

Our passage specifies at least two things that must characterize our approach as we disciple the nations:

First, our message must be *Christian*. We make disciples "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Notice that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit each receives a definite article, indicating a clear distinction between the three, but the word "name" remains in the singular, indicating their essential unity and equality. The grammatical construction is such that if the Father is God, then the Son and the Spirit must also be God, and that if the Father and the Son are persons, then the Spirit must also be a person.

So the grammatical construction strongly suggests a Triune Deity, if it does not prove it altogether. Of course, the doctrine of the Trinity does not rest on what we can derive from this verse alone, but it is the consistent teaching of the whole Bible. Right now, the point is that the Christian religion is one in which the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinctively three but essentially one, and in which the Son is God and the Spirit is a person. This makes our religion very specific and exclusive, and among other things, it is this doctrine of the Trinity that makes it Christian.

And if disciples are to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, how can we make disciples without affirming and teaching the Trinity? We must recognize it as one of the controlling elements in a distinctively Christian theology. Furthermore, if disciples are to be baptized in this name, it seems impossible to recognize those who deny the Trinity as Christian disciples at all. To say that it is crucial for the Christian message to be Trinitarian is also to say that it is crucial for the Christian message to be truly Christian in the first place.

This first requirement alone effectively excludes Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and all similar groups that claim to be Christian but that deny the Trinity, as truly Christian. But this is just one requirement, and not the only one, so that even if a group appears to be Trinitarian, it still does not necessarily make it a Christian group. For example, Roman Catholicism affirms the Trinity, but on every other essential issue it contradicts Christianity, whether we are talking about hamartiology (sin), soteriology (election, justification, sanctification), ecclesiology (church government, biblical authority, the sacraments), or eschatology (purgatory, heaven, hell). Catholicism is a *thoroughgoing* opposition to Christianity – the two must never be identified or united.

Second, our message must be *comprehensive*. Jesus says that we are to disciple the nations by teaching them "to obey everything" that he commanded. This is, again, why we say that a disciple is a *total* student, since it is not enough for us to teach people to memorize the teachings of Scripture, but we must also make sure that they obey all of them.

We cannot limit the "everything" in "everything I commanded you" as referring only to the red-letter portions of the Gospels, as the whole of the Gospels reflect the teachings of Christ, and not only the direct quotations. We cannot limit "everything" even to the Gospels themselves, since Jesus acknowledged the authority of the Old Testament and taught from it. Then, he told the disciples that he had "much more to say" (John 16:12) to them that they could not yet bear, and that he would later send the Holy Spirit to transmit from him to them these additional teachings (John 16:13-15).

Paul explained that he spoke "in words taught by the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:13), and that what he wrote was "the Lord's command" (1 Corinthians 14:37). He said that he proclaimed "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27) and held nothing back. An important passage from Colossians explains his thinking. There he writes, "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me" (1:28-29).

The apostle was not interested in preaching the bare minimum, nor was he aiming to produce people who were barely Christians. He was interested in presenting everyone "perfect in Christ," and it was to *this* end that he labored. In fact, according to the Great Commission, the bare minimum that we must teach all nations is *everything* – the whole biblical revelation, and all that is Christianity.

One of the most important things for the Church to realize at this hour is that the Great Commission is certainly *not* "evangelism," that is, in the narrow way that we often use the word, but it is to "make disciples," to baptize them in the Triune name and to teach them *everything* that God has revealed in the Bible. "Evangelism" is just one of the first steps on the way to fulfilling the Great Commission. Thus a church whose primary objective is "evangelism" is also a church that defies Christ's Great Commission to his face. To make one's main focus "evangelism" is to refuse to obey the better part of the Great Commission.

Although he was not as harsh, Lloyd-Jones was just as clear on this point in one of his sermons on Romans:

'The gospel of his Son' does not merely mean evangelism – and I think you will agree that this needs to be emphasized at this time. I think there is a real danger at present that all the energy of the church should be given to evangelism. Does anybody misunderstand that, or think I am saying that there should be no evangelism? I am saying the exact

opposite. All I am saying is that the activity of the church should not be *only* evangelistic. I think there is a real danger at the present time that the emphasis on evangelism may become an exclusive emphasis, with the church always evangelizing, and stopping at that. That way lies disaster. No! The gospel of God's Son starts with the evangelistic message, but it does not stop there. It goes on to teach – and, indeed, teaching is a part of the evangelizing if it is to be true evangelism. Indeed, let me put it like this – all the profound doctrines of the Epistle to the Romans come under the heading of 'the gospel of his Son'. All is the good news from beginning to end, and nothing must be left out. (*Romans, Chapter 1: The Gospel of God*; The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985; 219-220.)

Today, the world is unfamiliar with Christian teachings. We cannot assume that our hearers possess any biblical knowledge, and still less can we assume that they already agree with us on certain points and that we only need to address the differences. This is because unbelievers really have no biblical knowledge, but usually many prejudices, assumptions, and misunderstandings. This applies even to those living in a nation with a Christian heritage like the United States. It applies even to the Church, as it seems that nowadays you cannot even assume monotheism with many of those who claim to be Christians.

Therefore, it is not enough to preach "The Four Spiritual Laws" or some other message that is incomplete and disconnected with the whole system of biblical revelation. Of course God might convert a person with much less, but right now we are not considering what God can do, but what we have been told to do.

So, in general, the best way for you to approach an unbeliever is to first provide a summary of the whole biblical worldview, adapting the length and depth of the presentation according to the amount of time available. Then, as Providence arranges additional opportunities, you must extensively expound on the points that you mentioned in the summary.

Notice that this actually makes "evangelism" the first step to a complete discipleship program. Now if the person refuses to believe, he would probably terminate the discussion at some point. But if God has chosen him for salvation and opened his heart, then at some point in your teaching program, this person will be converted. Although some things might need to change in how you relate to him, there would be no drastic shift in your program, since he would already be on the discipleship track. It matters little whether conversion takes place at your first discussion, or whether it happens months later after many discussions – the main thrust of the method remains the same.

What topics must we address in our preaching? With Jews who claim to believe the Old Testament, you can include a presentation of biblical theology, or a "history of redemption" aspect in your message. If we go into this, it will take up the rest of our time, so I will just refer you to Acts 7 for Stephen's example. However, most of the people that

you will face, including those who claim to be Christians, will be wholly unfamiliar or even hostile to the biblical worldview. Therefore, you will need a logical outline that covers the main topics. A good example of this is found in Acts 17:22-31.

As I have previously produced a detailed exposition of Acts 17 in my *Presuppositional Confrontations* in which I defended my interpretation of the passage, I will not repeat what I wrote, but will assume here what I have established there. In addition, since our goal is to derive a simple outline for our presentation of the Christian message, we will ignore some of the details in the passage, such as the citations from pagan poets, as I have also addressed these in my exposition of the passage.

Paul started by saying that he would tell his hearers what they did not know. Thus he declared the message from a position of authority and knowledge, as an official herald of God, and not as just another confused seeker on the quest for truth. He *found* the truth in Jesus, but his hearers had not. He knew the truth, but his hearers did not, and he was there to teach them.

But how did Paul know? How did he learn the truth? By the sovereign grace of God, who opened his spiritual eyes, he learned it from the Scripture and from the revelation of Jesus Christ. Now we have the same Scripture that he had, and we also have what he learned from Christ and wrote down for us. Therefore, we have the same message, the same knowledge, and the same fullness of revelation.

When we speak to unbelievers, we speak from the Scripture, and thus a position of prophetic and apostolic authority, and a position of knowledge. The non-Christians are in a position of wickedness and ignorance. This is offensive to the unbelievers, but it should not be so to Christians. And if this offends you, the Great Commission will not make sense to you, and will go against the sensibilities of your unrenewed mind, and you will not be able to properly obey it.

Then, on this foundation, we observe that Paul's message coherently touches on a wide range of topics: theology (idolatry, God, creation, providence), anthropology (creation, common descent, cultural mandate), hamartiology (ignorance, repentance, judgment), christology (election, resurrection), soteriology (calling, repentance), eschatology (justice, judgment, resurrection). In other words, Paul spoke on God, man, sin, Christ, salvation, and the consummation (which includes the resurrection and judgment).

This resembles a standard systematic theology outline, not only when it comes to the topics covered, but also the order in which they are addressed. Contrary to one objection against systematic theology, the discipline is not arbitrary, but biblical and logical. Of course the topics interpenetrate, and of course no presentation – adapted to the situation, the audience, and the speaker – is completely "clean" and rigid, but it is unmistakable that Paul gave a presentation of what we would call systematic theology. And *this* is the answer to what we must include in our preaching, and how we should organize it.

Such an outline is most useful in directing a positive presentation of Christian theology, but we can also translate it into philosophical terms to make it even more adaptable. It might look something like this: epistemology, metaphysics, morality, soteriology, and eschatology.

Why would we need a philosophical outline? In a positive presentation of the faith, there is indeed no need for it; in fact, the theological outline would be better for that purpose. However, the theological outline cannot be directly used to engage the unbeliever in that he might not have the corresponding categories in his thinking. A person who has never heard of Christ is not going to have much of a christology; however, he is most likely going to have a view of right and wrong (even if he believes that there is no right and no wrong), and an opinion on what is the solution for the wrongs in humanity – that is, what it is that will "save" humanity. At least when pressed to think about it, he might also have a view concerning the final fate of humanity, individually and corporately speaking.

Thus a philosophical outline is broader, and can guide the engagement between the biblical worldview and the unbelieving worldview. It can direct the positive presentation of the biblical worldview, as well as to guide the believer in asking the right questions and mapping the unbelieving worldview, for the purpose of refutation. But I will repeat that the theological outline is superior for a positive presentation of the biblical worldview, as it is more detailed and specific, and useful in ensuring a complete and coherent presentation.

Yet another outline can be derived from Acts 17. Even if it is unnecessary to reduce our outline to a simpler one, this one is useful if for no other reason than that it is easy to remember: authority, reality, morality, and mortality. The "authority," of course, refers to the controlling epistemological principle that produces and restricts the rest of the system. To discuss mortality is to discuss the person's view of death, of the end, and where the preceding items of his philosophy lead him.

Again, although one may roughly follow such an outline in a monologue, a rigid plan is usually not possible in a conversation. Each topic implies the others, and the discussion will roam back and forth between these major issues. For example, if the non-Christian's view of *reality* denies an incorporeal soul, then this will affect his view of *mortality*, and probably even *morality*. And if he denies the soul, we can ask him, by what *authority* does he know?

The outline can also facilitate engagement. For example, if the unbeliever affirms the *authority* of science, how does this relate to your belief in the authority of Scripture? Does scientific authority refute biblical authority? If so, how? Or is science itself in trouble, so that it has no authority to tell us anything about reality, morality, and mortality? So the interrelatedness of the topics is not a problem, and a strictly linear discussion is unnecessary, as long as each major area is eventually covered in some depth.

3. THE ABIDING PRESENCE

If the act of evangelism is offensive to the unbelievers, the message is even more scandalous. It clashes with their belief systems at every point and on every issue. It is intrusive, subversive, an insult, and an omen. To the chosen ones, it is a "fragrance of life," but to those whom God has cast off, it is the very "smell of death." Such a ministry is not to be taken lightly. As Paul asks, "Who is equal to such a task?" (2 Corinthians 2:16).

Now, I dislike it when preachers and theologians cite a statement from the Bible that seems to lead toward a certain direction, when the same Bible immediately answers it in order to point toward the opposite direction. One of the best illustrations is 1 Corinthians 2:9, which says, "However, as it is written: 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.'" Many people just stop here, and this gives the very opposite impression of what Paul is saying, for he continues, "BUT God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (v. 10).

We *do* know what God has prepared for those who love him. No eye has seen it, but God has revealed it. No ear has heard it, but God has made it known. No mind has conceived it, but God has taught it to us. How? By his Spirit. *That* is the point, so if we are not going to quote verse 10, then we should not quote verse 9, either. The passage does not assert mystery but knowledge, not hiddenness, but revelation.

Something similar has been done to 2 Corinthians 2:16. Preachers and theologians lament, "Oh! Who is equal to such a task?" But Paul does not leave us in despair, for almost immediately, he says, "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (3:5-6). We were not competent in ourselves, but God has *made us* competent as ministers of the covenant by his Spirit.

Right now our problem is that Christ has given us a seemingly impossible task. He has commanded us to do something that people find intrusive in order to tell them something that they find offensive. He requires us to do something that he knows is difficult and sometimes dangerous.

But the Lord does not leave us helpless and hopeless. When Jeremiah said, "Ah, Sovereign LORD...I do not know how to speak; I am only a child," the Lord answered, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you....Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land – against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land.

They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you" (Jeremiah 1:6-8, 18-19, but also see v. 17).

Here we have the greatest of promises in the Great Commission – Jesus says, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." The pronoun "I" is included in the verb, but it is spoken as a separate word for emphasis, as if to say, "I, even I, and no one less than I myself, will always be with you." Not someone else, not an angel, not a force, but Christ himself will lead and accompany us as we obey the Great Commission.

The Great Commission would be impossible without Christ's presence, for the task is to make disciples, but only he can change human hearts. Only he has the power to directly control the mind of man, and to turn it in whatever direction he chooses. Without this spiritual power to fill our preaching, and to make it effective, no one would ever be converted.

Paul writes that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing" (1 Corinthians 1:18). This is not because the gospel is indeed foolish from a rational perspective, but it is because sinners are so foolish, so irrational, and their minds have been so darkened and damaged that it is impossible for them to recognize true wisdom. Their reference points are so far from the truth that even the highest wisdom would appear to them as the greatest falsehood, and the most absurd foolishness. Their intellects are so crippled that they cannot rightly judge even the plainest proofs and the keenest arguments.

We can offer proofs and reasons, and the Spirit will often use them in his work of conversion and sanctification. But in themselves, even the soundest arguments, those that are irrefutable and undeniable, cannot convince non-Christians of the truth of the gospel, because their minds have been pervasively ravaged by sin, so that there are moral and intellectual barriers in them that are impenetrable by ordinary human speech, however true and sound it may be. Unbelievers are too stubborn to listen, and too stupid to understand.

This is why conversion requires a spiritual power to directly operate upon the human mind, and to undo sin's hold on it at the deepest level. This is what we call regeneration, and when the Spirit causes this to occur in one of God's chosen ones, then he also sovereignly grants faith in the gospel to this person. And so Paul writes, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God...For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:4, 6-7).

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that the gospel came to them "with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thessalonians 1:5), and he says to the Corinthians, "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom,

but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). Since I have written a fairly detailed exposition of the two passages in *Ultimate Questions*, I will do nothing more than to mention them here. For our purpose, it is enough to agree that we need spiritual power to effectively carry out the work of the gospel, and the good news is that this power is promised to us along with the Great Commission.

This spiritual power is not something that you can work up. You cannot manipulate it with your voice, your mannerisms, your personality, or your willpower. You cannot increase or control it even by much prayer, but we are talking about the sovereign action of the Holy Spirit. Your part is to make the message clear, and the Spirit will work in accordance with the will of God.

The promise of God's presence and power does not mean that all who hear you will believe – far from it. Although all are morally required to repent and believe the gospel, and those who reject the gospel will be punished for it, it is not given to all to repent and believe, but only those whom God has chosen and loved before the foundation of the world. In these, the Spirit will work, and he will regenerate and convert them. They will welcome you with joy and with open arms. Others, on the other hand, will oppose you, slander you, and revile you. But even then the Spirit is at work, hardening those whom he wishes to harden, directly and actively confirming evil in their hearts.

If they have thought about it very much at all, most Christians have a woefully inadequate theology of spiritual power, one that not only fails to fully acknowledge the work of the Spirit in conversion and sanctification, but that fails even more in squarely confronting the claims of power from the occult, witchcraft, false religions, and demon worship.

Some people take the position that demonic powers are not real, and that Satan has no actual supernatural power, but the word "supernatural" is often ambiguous. Although not all of them would go this far, some of them would clarify this by saying that all apparent demonstrations of satanic powers are in fact illusions. This position seems awfully naïve unless its truth is established by solid biblical exegesis, but so far I am unconvinced by the attempts that I have come across. And if the meaning is that Satan indeed has power to manipulate physical objects and forces, but he can do nothing more, or as some say, that he has superhuman power but no supernatural power, then we still need to formulate a biblical perspective from which to confront this.

Sometimes it is pointed out that Scripture refers to "false" signs and wonders, and from this, inferences have been made concerning the nature of satanic "miracles," as to whether they are supernatural, or just superhuman, or even nothing more than natural illusions that any party magician could produce. But we need more than this, since "false" has several meanings, and to call someone a "false" prophet does not mean that the person does not exist, but that religious speaking, he represents a false message. A "false" religion is still a religion, only that its message is untrue.

Likewise, the term "lying" signs does not immediately indicate the lack of real supernatural power, since it might be that the lie is in the accompanying message, and not that the signs are mere illusions. Moreover, even if some of these "false" miracles are in fact illusions, and not supernatural at all, it does not automatically mean that all such miracles are nothing more than natural illusions.

The biblical perspective regarding demonic powers, it seems to me, is never to deny them, or to deny that they are supernatural, but to assert the superiority of God's power. This does not mean that all satanic signs are necessarily real, in the sense of supernatural wonders rather than illusions, but that the Bible does not confront them from such a perspective.

Now, the Bible relates many instances of power encounters between God's followers and Satan's followers. When Moses confronted Pharaoh's magicians, he threw down his staff and it turned into a serpent. The magicians threw down theirs, and they turned into serpents as well. Whether or not the magicians performed mere illusions, and that their staffs in fact never turned into actual serpents, or that by a sleight of hand they exchanged the staffs for serpents, is not the most important and relevant aspect of the issue. The point to be grasped and applied is that Moses' staff, transformed into a serpent, consumed the staffs or serpents of the magicians. And at least from this perspective, it matters little whether or not Satan's followers possess real supernatural power. What matters is that God's power is always real and triumphant.

Let me tell you the story of the Shaken Wiccan. I must leave out many interesting and instructive details about this incident because of the lack of time, but I will tell you those things that are necessary to understand the story and that are relevant to our current discussion.

It happened when I was still a teenager in high school. At that time, I preached every Sunday to a group of adults off campus. There was a Bible study group on campus that met every Wednesday night, but I had no contact with it. Up until that time, I had never preached to other teenagers, that is, except for several private discussions with friends about the gospel.

Then, one day I ran into the sister of a friend from junior high. Now she was attending the same high school as I was, although her brother had gone to somewhere else. He had told her about me, and I knew about her as well. As we talked, she mentioned that she was going to the school's Bible study. She invited me to go, but when I hesitated, she suggested that I meet with the group's faculty supervisor. Maybe he could make the group sound more appealing and change my mind about it.

So I went to meet the supervisor, and immediately we got along very well, mainly because he was an extremely sociable and hospitable man, and more than a little jovial as well. He opened his on-campus home every day so that Christian students could pray and socialize with one another. For the next several weeks, we met a number of times, and

after he found out more about me, some of the things that I had been doing, and perhaps some of my strengths, he invited me to address his Bible study group.

It would be accurate to say that the group practiced a seeker-friendly format when they came together. In fact, it was so "friendly" that, as I later found out, a Wiccan girl had been attending the meetings all year and felt completely at home there. Later, I would discover that the faculty supervisor had asked her why she was going to all those meetings when she had no intention of becoming a Christian, nor was she convicted or disturbed by anything that was said there. Her answer was, "I like the songs."

You can understand what kind of atmosphere they had been providing for those who went. No one felt threatened or challenged in any way, and that was the way they wanted it. So, now knowing a little about the kind of person I was, the kind of things that I was likely to say, and the way I was probably going to say them, the faculty supervisor and student leaders, although expectant, were at the same time a little apprehensive about my appearance.

To the supervisor, it was a rather bold decision – there could have been great trouble, and a lot was on the line. Although I thought that he was too "soft," and told him so, he had already been receiving pressure from the school for encouraging so much talk about Christianity on campus, even if it was a seeker-friendly variety. And so what I was going to do and say there, at his invitation, could have put his job at even greater risk. Perhaps he thought that I had something that his group needed, but for whatever reason, he decided to turn me loose despite the danger.

As for me, the incident presented a number of personal challenges that I had to overcome. Later, I realized that the incident marked a turning point in my faith and ministry, not because of what happened when I addressed the group, but because of what it took for me to get there. But that is another story, and it would take too long for me to tell you what happened.

The day finally came, and after singing several songs and a few minutes of Bible reading, the supervisor gave a short introduction and I stood up to speak. I talked about what I thought the group needed to hear most – biblical supernaturalism. I affirmed the creation account against biological evolution, and the historicity of the Eden narrative against the mythological theories. I spoke about the inerrancy of Scripture and affirmed that the miracles in the Bible indeed happened. I condemned the liberal scholars in "cemeteries" (seminaries) who were subverting the faith that these teenagers were trying to follow, or at least trying to investigate. It was indeed a "seeker-friendly" speech – I am sure it was pleasant to those who were really seeking. To the rest, it was a sound of condemnation and an aroma of death.

The general reaction was very positive. The Christians became excited and encouraged in the faith. One of the student leaders told me in jest that the Spirit must have been upon me, since he thought that I was unusually lively – he thought I was often too serious.

But not everyone was entertained. The next day, that Wiccan girl went to the faculty supervisor and told him that, as I started to speak, she felt a power took hold of her and physically shook her, and it continued throughout the night until the morning. She was convicted, and very afraid, and she went to the supervisor for an explanation. I could not have manipulated the situation in such a manner, as I was unaware that there was such a person in the audience until I was told about her later.

I can tell you many stories like this one, some of them much more spectacular than this, in which the Spirit of God worked in and on people in ways that were beyond my awareness and control. But *this* incident is especially relevant because it presents to us a contrast between two approaches and their respective results. On the one hand, you have a seeker-friendly environment in which even a Wiccan could sit there week after week for almost a whole year without so much as a twitch in conscience. Then, on the other, you have a forceful declaration of the truth of Scripture, the historical reality of creation, and the miracles and resurrection of Christ, together with an unapologetic condemnation of unbelieving theories. The promise of the former is unqualified human acceptance, but the reward of the latter is the visitation of the Spirit. One welcomes you with a hug and a pat on the back; the other confronts you with truth and power.

Imagine! The Wiccan girl did not believe, but she liked the songs! For months she had been singing:

Deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, down, down,
deep down in my heart, I love you Jesus!
Deep down in my heart.

Some of you would consider a song like this too shallow, and you would be right, especially if you only sing songs like this one. Nevertheless, this is something that a believer could sing with meaning – I *do* love Jesus deep down in my heart. "Oh Happy Day" is not deep worship, or not worship at all, but it is enough to move me to tears. It *was* a "happy day" when "he washed my sins away."

However, "Oh Happy Day" was not about to convert that Wiccan girl, and she did *not* love Jesus deep down in her heart, or anywhere in her person, for that matter. She was just having fun and enjoying the melodies. Everybody was comfortable, and the only person offended was God.

But then, and not until then, someone came along and preached the gospel to her, and perhaps for the first time made her realize that there was a person and a power associated with this message that she had never known before. She was made to realize that there was something wrong with her that she could not fix herself, and that she needed salvation from God.

Paul writes that he is not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God to save all those who believe. If we will not be ashamed of the gospel, then Christ will not be ashamed of us, and neither will we be ashamed of ourselves at the judgment. But what is

there to be ashamed of in the gospel? What promise! What power! What beauty! What perfect coherence! It is easy to have confidence in the gospel.

For the Christian who embraces the Great Commission, and who obeys it in faith, love, joy, and duty to the Lord, the power of God in all its fullness is a present, active reality. I can preach with confidence and teach with authority every time, and in any context, because I know that the power of the Lord Jesus Christ is with me. On a subjective level, my confidence rests on the call of God upon my life, which is more real to me than my own name. It occupies my consciousness at all times, and defines all of my thoughts, plans, and actions. But the objective basis for confidence is even stronger. It is the biblical revelation of God's eternal purpose and his sovereign power to perform it. He will have mercy on those whom he will have mercy, and he will harden those whom he wishes to harden. He will accomplish his will, and there is no chance for failure. With the same message, he will save the elect and slay the wicked. And because this pleases him, it pleases me as well.