

# Commentary *on* Ephesians

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## **PREFACE**

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians amounts to a short course in theology. Because of its majestic and exalted content, it has been hailed as "The Queen of the Epistles." Although it does not cover every theological topic, several central truths that are not explicitly stated are nevertheless assumed or implied.

A firm theological foundation leads to spiritual stability, so that God's people will not be tossed here and there by every wind of doctrine. In a day when even professing Christians tolerate just about every "ism" there is – Catholicism, Mormonism, Liberalism, Postmodernism, Barthianism, Arminianism, Marxism, Existentialism, and so on – it is all the more important for us to insist on the biblical gospel, that it is God alone who, through Christ alone, sovereignly predestinates (1:3-14), regenerates (1:15-2:10), reconciles (2:11-20), sanctifies (4:1-6:9), and establishes (6:10-20) his people.

This commentary aims to help beginning readers grasp the main theological themes in Paul's letter in a logical and coherent fashion, although the more advanced readers will probably find some useful insights and apt statements as well. This purpose is consistent with the goal of Christian ministry as elucidated by Paul in Ephesians 4:11-16 – that is, to establish God's people by displaying and teaching God's grand design and sovereign grace in salvation, that it is the Father who has predetermined whom he would save and whom he would damn, that it is the Son who has redeemed the chosen ones, and that it is the Spirit who now applies God's blessings to the elect.

Ephesians contains a number of long sentences packed with clauses that are in turn packed with theological meaning, so that many translations have broken these long sentences into several shorter ones.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## EPHESIANS 1:1-2

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,  
To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:  
Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Following the convention for letter writing of his day, Paul begins by identifying himself as the writer, and then he mentions his readers and states his greeting. Paul always makes use of this space by filling it with Christian content, so that even the greetings in all his letters are filled with theological meaning, and the power to edify and instruct.

Liberals and heretics are always out to blaspheme and make trouble, and some of these nincompoops have suggested that Paul was not the author of this letter. One of their arguments is that this letter employs vocabularies not found in Paul's other letters, as if an author must state the same thoughts in the same words over and over again in all his writings.

As far as I am aware, I have never used the word "nincompoops" in my other writings, nor the words ninnyhammers, blockheads, birdbrains, sapheads, harlequins, or cretins. So let not these ding-a-lings accuse Vincent Cheung for calling them these things, since these paragraphs or even the whole book must have been written by someone else! With little more wit but much more sophistry, they have stated other arguments against Pauline authorship, but we will leave this foolishness behind and move on.

Over and over again I am reminded of the need to teach our people the foundational teachings of the Christian faith, for every once in a while, when I would be instructing a professing Christian on some biblical topic, he would say something that exposes his thorough ignorance of even the first principles of true religion.

I have in mind the time when I was speaking to a person about the role of women in the church, when she asked, "But why should we listen to Paul? It is not as if he is God or Jesus."

Contrary to what many people believe, a challenge to biblical authority is never just an "honest question"; rather, it is always sinful. When a shepherd calls to his sheep, and they fail to come, is the shepherd to blame? When a master commands his servants, and they refuse to obey, is the master at fault? Jesus says that his sheep listen to his voice, and that they follow him. Unbelief and disobedience come from the defect in the sheep and the rebellion in the servants – that is, if they are the Lord's sheep and servants at all. Likewise, when God teaches and commands you through his word, if you fail to hear and

obey, do not claim that you have an honest question about it. Instead, it is better to repent of your doubt and defiance, and plead for mercy.

This woman claimed to be a Christian, and if what Paul wrote about the role of women in the church had pleased her, instead of questioning his authority, surely to her he would have been a great apostle of God, full of good sense and sound wisdom! But since she disliked what she read, she thought there must have been something wrong with Paul.

I told her that what she really wanted was to write her own Bible, and that she wanted a religion of her own creation. If she had made up her mind about everything and refused to yield to biblical authority, so that even the Bible is authoritative and infallible only so long as she agrees with it, then why is she reading it instead of writing it? But she wanted to hold on to the claim that she was a Christian, and so she fell silent.

This gave me time to explain that we must listen to Paul because he was "an apostle of Christ Jesus." By definition, this means that he was one sent with the full authority of Christ, who told his apostles that the Holy Spirit would instruct them after his resurrection and ascension, and that they should then testify about him (John 15:26-16:16). Thus John could write, "We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood" (1 John 4:6).

However, whereas the original apostles had been with Christ "from the beginning" (John 15:27), this was not so with Paul. But Christ made Paul a special case, so that he appeared to him on the road of Damascus, and converted him and called him to the apostle's ministry (Acts 9). As Paul himself writes, "Last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born" (1 Corinthians 15:8). Later, Paul went to the apostles who had been with Christ in the flesh, and set before them the gospel that he had been preaching among the Gentiles (Galatians 2:2). These apostles – including James, Peter, and John – agreed with Paul's message and recognized his ministry as from God, giving him "the right hand of fellowship" (Galatians 2:9).

Thus Christ sent the apostles to speak for him, later including Paul, who was then also accepted by the other apostles. Now, Christ said that those who accept the ones whom he has sent also accept him (John 13:20) – so that the church is built on the apostolic doctrine as its very foundation, with Christ as the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20; also Acts 2:42) – and thus we must listen to Paul because we must listen to Christ. Therefore, Paul warns that those who disagree with his gospel are not Christians at all (Galatians 1:6-12).

Moreover, we must remember that it is God himself who produced the Bible, and saying that Paul was an apostle only stresses that he was the means by which God gave us his divine verbal revelation. The means are appropriate but secondary – the main issue is that "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16), and what Paul wrote is part of Christian Scripture (2 Peter 3:16).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture, please see my *Systematic Theology*.

Paul did not become an apostle by his own will or the will of others, nor did he become one by earning or seizing the office; rather, he was chosen to be an apostle "by the will of God." Barclay comments:

Paul never thought of himself as having chosen to do God's work. He always thought of God as having chosen him. Jesus said to his disciples: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). Here precisely lies the wonder. It would not be so wonderful that man should choose God; the wonder is that God should choose man.<sup>2</sup>

The authority of his ministry and in turn the authority of this letter is thus founded on nothing other than God's sovereign decree. To doubt and oppose anything that Paul wrote as an apostle is to doubt and oppose God – there is no difference.

Although the letter is addressed to "the saints in Ephesus," there are some textual issues here. However, instead of dealing with arguments concerning the manuscripts, we will direct our attention only to the internal indications, and then arrive at a functionally acceptable conclusion from which we may proceed with confidence.

Several indications within the letter suggest that it could have been intended for a broader audience. Paul had preached the gospel in Ephesus for three years (Acts 20:31), two of which were spent having daily discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:10). The result was that "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10).<sup>3</sup> But in our letter, Paul says that he has merely "heard about" the faith of his readers (Ephesians 1:15), and that his readers must have "heard about" his ministry (3:2). Also, the letter lacks the personal references and greetings that are typical of his other letters. The implication is that Paul is speaking not only to those whom he knew very well (that is, the Ephesians), but also to those whom he merely "heard about." Therefore, it seems that his intended audience must have included more than the Ephesians.

Ephesians is rightly considered the least occasional of Paul's letters. It was not written to address particular problems, heresies, and situations, and this is consistent with the view that it was probably a general or circular letter. At the same time, Paul's expressions related to "the spiritual forces of evil" (Ephesians 6:12) and his discussions about Christ's dominion over all the spiritual "powers" (1:18-2:2) remind us of the spiritual atmosphere of Ephesus, and some of the things that he encountered there.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, after several incidents in which the power of Christ's name was made evident (Acts 19:13-17) and in which the gospel triumphed over pagan magic and superstition (Acts 19:18-20), "the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power" (Acts 19:20) to

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians, Revised Edition*; Westminster John Knox Press, 1976; p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> "Asia" is today's Turkey.

<sup>4</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians*; Baker Books, 1992.

such an extent that it threatened the very economic structure of Ephesus, which to a large extent depended on pagan worship (Acts 19:23-27). Demetrius the silversmith said that Paul's preaching had affected "large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia" (Acts 19:26). As cited earlier, Luke writes that "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10).

With the above in mind, it is not surprising that as Paul wrote this letter to the Ephesians, he had in mind all the other Christians throughout the province of Asia. And it is not surprising that as he intended to address all the Christians throughout the province of Asia, he sent his letter to Ephesus, which was the area's chief city, and from which he published the gospel to the whole region for three years.

Therefore, I agree with the conclusion that our letter was meant to be read by the Christians in "Ephesus proper and the surrounding churches."<sup>5</sup> In any case, precisely because the letter's content is not situational, it is unnecessary to know the exact circumstances surrounding its origin and circulation, since these things do not determine the proper interpretation of any verse in the letter.

Paul calls his readers "*the saints* in Ephesus"<sup>6</sup> and "*the faithful* in Christ Jesus."<sup>7</sup> For our purpose, it is enough to note that Paul is speaking to Christians, that is, those who have been consecrated to God through faith in Jesus Christ. This is important because in what follows Paul would jubilantly glory over all the spiritual blessings that God has given to "us" and that "we" enjoy in Christ.<sup>8</sup> By noting that the "we" and "us" are restricted to believers, we will prevent the misunderstanding that these spiritual blessings belong to any non-Christian.

Neither should we think that a person who has anything less than a believing relationship with Jesus Christ is a Christian. One who has an academic degree in theology but who has no faith and who denies the teaching of Scripture is doomed to hell just as much as an unrepentant prostitute or murderer. And one who in the name of Christianity promotes social welfare and justice but who has no faith in the gospel is far from the kingdom of God. Then, one who claims to have faith in Christ but who also says that non-Christian religions are true and good, makes Christ a friend of demons. Let this person try to obtain salvation through these false and impotent religions, since Christ will certainly not save him.

True faith in Christ is faith in him as he really is – Redeemer, Lord, and God – and not as your slave or your pet, to be adored or dismissed as you please. To have genuine faith in Christ is to become the enemy of the whole world (including most professing Christians),

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<sup>5</sup> William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Ephesians*; Baker Books, 1967; p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> For an explanation of the word "saints," see Vincent Cheung, *Commentary on Philipians*.

<sup>7</sup> Or "the believers in Christ Jesus." Hendriksen argues that since the definite article is not repeated before the second word ("faithful"), the first and the second therefore form one unit, and that both of them should be taken as nouns and not adjectives. Thus he translates, "to the saints and believers who are in Ephesus in Christ Jesus." Hendriksen, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> In 1:11-13, Paul distinguishes between "we" (the Jews) and "you" (the Gentiles) to make his point that the two are now united in Christ.



since it necessarily means that you despise their "gods," scorn their "virtues," and that you have become a light that exposes their filth and wickedness. If you disagree with this, your allegiance is divided (to put it mildly), and any spiritual assurance that you have is unwarranted. As James writes, "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

Paul concludes his greeting with his usual benediction, that his readers would have "grace and peace." It appears that he has combined the usual greetings of the Gentiles and the Jews, and has given them a Christian context, filling the words with Christian meaning. The Gentiles wished one another "grace." To the Christian, this refers to the unmerited and undeserved blessings of God, and especially stresses God's sovereign kindness and initiative in salvation. The Jews wished one another "peace," or the Hebrew *shalom*. As with many other instances in Scripture, "peace" here does not refer to a subjective state, but an objective condition. Among other things, this refers to the reconciliation between God and his elect, and also the harmony among God's people.

Such grace and peace come "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." There is no grace and no peace apart from God, who authored our salvation, and Christ, who obtained our salvation. Also, it is not as if any idea of Christ would do, but only the biblical Christ could and did obtain salvation, and only faith in this Christ is effectual. In this verse, the one preposition "from" introduces the entire expression "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," implying that the two are on an equal level. The biblical Christ was God, who having taken upon himself a human nature, sacrificed himself on behalf of those whom God had chosen in eternity.

## 2. PREDESTINATION

### EPHESIANS 1:3-14

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*

*For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.*

*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.*

*In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory.*

Although our English translations divide this passage into sentences and paragraphs, in the original Greek it consists of one long sentence. And although the sentence is densely packed with theological content, it is not written in the form of a precise formulation or ordered argument; rather, it is in the form of a doxology.<sup>1</sup>

Some people tend to think that whereas theology in itself is lifeless and useless, our relationship with God should chiefly consist of doxology. But whence comes the content of our doxology? If worship and praise are so important, then it is also important to know whom we are worshipping and for what we offer praise. Once we attempt to answer these questions, we are doing theology.

It is commonly asserted that right theology does not necessarily lead to right worship, and that right doctrine does not necessarily lead to right living. This is misleading, since it is

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<sup>1</sup> A doxology is "a usually liturgical expression of praise to God" (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*).

true only in the sense that one may learn the right theology without *truly* agreeing with it. If there is no right worship and right living, then it is either that the theology is not really right after all, or that there is no true assent to what God has revealed. True assent, of course, is granted only by the Holy Spirit through his work of regeneration and illumination.

Paul's doxology is filled with theology. He is praising God about certain things, and it would be impossible to share his reverent awe and enthusiasm without also knowing about these things. Thus the less theology you know, the more shallow will be your worship, and an empty doxology is no doxology at all. Therefore, theology is the necessary foundation of doxology, and doxology is the proper context for theology.

Christian faith and practice are coherent and harmonious, so that you should not have to think one way when you are praying and another way when you are studying. Thus there is really no reason for a "devotional" book to be less theological and more practical or even mystical. And unless there is something wrong with you or with the book, reading a systematic theology or biblical commentary ought to produce thoughts of praise and thanksgiving in you such that they erupt in doxology. It seems that this is what happens to Paul as he reflects on God's grand plan for history and his goodness toward the elect.

The passage consists of one long sentence containing a number of clauses and phrases whose relationship with one another is not always easy to determine, and each thought seems to crowd in on the previous one and blend into the next. For this reason, some commentators have concluded that it is impossible to clearly dissect and analyze.

Nevertheless, there are indications of deliberate structure and design in the doxology. "Bless" is thrice used in verse 3,<sup>2</sup> followed by a seemingly Trinitarian outline, describing the special roles of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the plan of God and the work of redemption. In theological terms, the passage speaks of election, redemption, and application.<sup>3</sup> Throughout, Paul repeatedly states the cause ("his will") and the goal ("his glory") of God's predetermined plan, as well as the means ("in Christ") by which God would accomplish it. In addition, the passage anticipates some of the themes that Paul will develop in greater detail later.

## **ELECTION**

Paul begins with the doctrine of predestination, and much of what follows in the letter is in fact an exposition of what God has predetermined to perform (and now has performed or is performing) in history. Since predestination is obviously important to Paul, since all that follows in this letter is wholly founded on God's sovereign predestination and predetermination, and since many commentators seriously err on this topic, we shall take some time to expound on this doctrine.

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<sup>2</sup> "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has *blessed* us with every spiritual *blessing* in the heavenly places in Christ" (NASB).

<sup>3</sup> For the third item, Hendriksen has "certification" instead (*Ephesians*, p. 71; see v. 13-14), which is correct, but I have chosen a broader term that includes more, such as faith (v. 13).

In eternity, God had chosen an unchangeable number of specific individuals for salvation, and had decided that he would adopt them to be his sons through Jesus Christ. That is, according to his foreordained plan, all would fall into sin in Adam, including the elect, whom he had already chosen. Then, out of this mass of sinful humanity, he would call and draw out his chosen ones, removing them from the kingdom of darkness and placing them into the kingdom of his Son (Colossians 1:13).

His selection of each individual was not based on foreseen faith or works; rather, his decision was made completely apart from the person's decision or merit. This is at least part of what Paul has in mind when he writes that God chose his people "before the creation of the world." In another place, when Paul considers Jacob and Esau in relation to predestination, he writes, "Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad...[Rebekah, their mother] was told, 'The older will serve the younger'" (Romans 9:11-12).

The objection may be that although God did not base his choice on anything that they had *already* done, perhaps he based it on something he knew that they would do; that is, perhaps he based his choice on foreseen faith or works. Against this, Paul says that God announced his decision before the twins were born "in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls" (v. 11-12). In denying that election was based on something that the twins had already done, Paul does not leave open the possibility that election was based on something that they would do. Instead, he altogether denies that election was based on anything in them, but that it was based upon "him who calls" and "God's purpose."

Paul assumes the same principle in Ephesians. God chose certain individuals not because of any foreseen faith or works in them, and not because of their decisions or merits, but election to salvation is based solely on his will (1:5), his pleasure (v. 5), his grace (v. 6-7), his plan (v. 11), and his purpose (v. 11). Again, the emphasis is that God's choice of individuals was done completely apart from anything foreseen in the individuals themselves. As Calvin states:

By this he means that God did not seek a cause [outside] of Himself, but predestinated us because such was His will....In adopting us, therefore, the Lord does not look at what we are, and is not reconciled to us by any personal worth. His single motive is the eternal good pleasure, by which He predestinated us....By this he tells us that God embraces us in His love and favour freely and not on a wage basis, just as, when we were not yet born, and when He was prompted by nothing but Himself, He chose us.<sup>4</sup>

On the negative side, Paul makes a broad denial that election is based on anything in the individual; on the positive side, he insists that election is based on God's will, grace,

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<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*; Oliver & Boyd/Eerdmans, 1965; p. 127.

pleasure, and purpose. Therefore, theologians who are faithful to biblical teaching are justified in asserting that divine election is "unconditional."

Then, the objection is that perhaps Paul is speaking of a collective election, or that perhaps the object of election is Christ instead of the individuals. That is, perhaps the only chosen one is really Christ himself, and that God had determined that whoever would freely choose to be in Christ by faith would be included in the "elect" group. However, the passage makes no hint at all toward this direction, but flatly contradicts it. Over and over again, Paul uses expressions like, "he chose *us*," "he predestined *us*," and "he lavished on *us*" – on "us," not Christ.

That God chose us "in him" cannot be construed to imply that we are the ones who place ourselves "in him"! We as individuals never chose to be in Adam, but he was still the federal head of all of humanity, and Paul writes that all fell into sin and death in Adam (1 Corinthians 15:22). Likewise, for the elect to be "in Christ" means only that Christ is the federal head of the elect, and not that each individual could of himself choose to be in Christ, and thus become one of the elect, nor that Christ himself was the object of election to salvation.

Moreover, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:27-30, "But *God* chose...so that no one may boast before him. It is *because of him* that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption." Against those who say that only Christ is the object of election, and that whoever comes into him becomes God's elect, the passage says, "It is *because of him*" – that is, because of God – that you are in Christ Jesus. God is the one who decides who becomes "in Christ," and he is the one who then puts us in Christ by his will and power. Therefore divine election is a selection of individuals for salvation.

Depending on the context, expressions such as "in Christ," "in him," and "in whom" sometimes carry another meaning – namely, they speak of Christ as the agent by which God accomplishes his plans and purposes. Thus Paul says that God "chose us in him," and that he "predestined us to be adopted as his sons *through* Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Referring to the phrase "in Christ" (and its equivalents), Peter O'Brien writes, "Often its use is instrumental, signifying 'through Christ's agency'" [Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary); Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999; p. 97]. O'Brien then makes several ambiguous statements about how the phrase designates "Christ as the 'sphere' in which the divine decisions are made and put into effect" (98), but he is after all referring to "The idea of the incorporation of many into a *representative head*" (98). In other words, "in Christ" (and its equivalents) refers to Christ as the agent or means by which God performs his divine plan. And in other contexts, it refers to Christ as the federal head of the elect. This proper understanding of "in Christ" helps prevent distortions and dilutions of the biblical doctrine of predestination, as well as other false teachings that are based on the phrase. As long as the phrase is ambiguous to people (although its biblical usage is clear), they remain susceptible to all kinds of strange and mystical interpretations. "In Christ" refers to Christ's agency and representation, and not our being "inside" of Christ in a mystical or even physical sense. In fact, *en* in the Greek can be translated "in," "by," or "with," and sometimes "the causal sense of *en* is more intelligible than the local" (Gordon H. Clark, *Ephesians*; The Trinity Foundation, 1985; p. 16). In other words, "in Christ" often means nothing other than "by Christ" or "through Christ."

This is sufficient to refute the idea of collective election (that is, as a denial of the biblical doctrine of individual election for salvation), which is really a silly fantasy invented to subvert clear biblical teaching.<sup>6</sup> But another point we can make about this is that, when we are considering the works of an omniscient being, the idea of collective election as an attempt to deny individual election is absurd.

If one affirms divine omniscience, as every Christian must, then to acknowledge God's sovereignty over groups of people obligates this person to also acknowledge God's sovereignty over individuals. This is because an omniscient being does not think of a group of anything without knowing every individual object that makes up the group.

For example, when I use the word "trees" without setting a limit on the word, as in "these trees," I am using it as an universal, as in "all trees." But I do not know all trees, I have made none of them, I have determined none of their properties, and I do not even exhaustively know any one tree in particular. So do I know what I am saying? Not on the basis of empiricism. On the other hand, when God uses the word "trees," he says it as one who has made and who knows all of them. His knowledge of all particular trees corresponds to his concept of the universal "trees." In contrast, when I say "trees," the actual content of my knowledge does not include all trees, although I intend to refer to all trees by the word. Therefore, when God says that all trees are a certain way, he has in mind every tree, that every tree is a certain way, and not just trees in the abstract without the actual content of all trees. Because God is omniscient, to him "trees" must mean the sum of all individual trees, and not trees in the abstract.

If you have two children, named Tom and Mary, then every time you say "my children," you are in fact referring to Tom and Mary in particular. You would not intend to mean "my children" without the actual content of "Tom and Mary." The words, "my children," represent for you "Tom and Mary." Suppose that you are omniscient, but you do not yet have children. In this case, "my children" would still mean "Tom and Mary," since you would know for certain that you will have these children in the future. Therefore, an omniscient being never uses a designation of a group without conscious awareness of all the members of that group. That is, the universal term always represents the sum of all the individuals belonging to the group. A being who lacks omniscience uses the universal term without knowledge of all the individuals in that group, but a being who possesses omniscience uses the universal term with a conscious awareness of all the individuals in that group. This is a necessary implication of omniscience.

Accordingly, when God thinks of a nation, he is also thinking of all the individuals comprising that nation at any given time, since a nation is the sum of all those individuals whom God has chosen to belong under that nation, and he has exhaustive knowledge of every individual. Indeed, he creates each individual to be included in the nation he has chosen for that individual. It is not as if God decides to enforce a given policy toward a certain group, such as male humans, and then allow each human being to volunteer to become members of that group. Instead, God creates all human beings, and groups them together as he pleases.

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<sup>6</sup> See also O'Brien, p. 99.

Therefore, it makes no sense to say that God exercises absolute sovereignty over a group, such as a nation or the elect, without also affirming the necessary implication that he exercises absolute sovereignty over each individual within that group. It makes no sense to say that God elects a group for salvation without determining which individuals would be in that group, or that he controls a nation without controlling the individuals within that nation. The individuals do not make and move themselves. The point is that even in places where the Bible is emphasizing God's sovereignty over groups, his sovereignty over individuals is implied. This is stated in addition to the many biblical passages that directly assert God's absolute sovereignty over individuals, and not only groups or nations.

The biblical doctrine of predestination opposes the popular assumption that man has free will.

Now, in theological and philosophical literature, free will is rarely defined, and almost never defined in a correct and relevant way. Since freedom is a relative concept – you are free *from* something – in defining free will, we must ask, "Free from what?" If by "free will" we are referring to freedom *from God* in *any* sense, then we must reject it. In this sense, only God possesses free will, since he alone is free from all influences other than or outside of himself.

But if we are referring to freedom from any other thing, then in our context it is irrelevant, because we are considering whether or not we have any freedom in our relationship with God, and not in our relationship with any other person or thing. As Martin Luther writes: "But our question is this: whether he has 'free-will' God-ward, that God should obey man and do what man wills, or whether God has not rather a free will with respect to man, that man should will and do what God wills, and be able to do nothing but what He wills and does."<sup>7</sup>

With this proper definition of free will in mind, the Bible nowhere teaches that man has free will,<sup>8</sup> but instead it repeatedly teaches that God has absolute sovereignty over man,

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*; translated by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston; Fleming H. Revell, 1957; p. 310. I have explained and defended the biblical doctrine of predestination in different places and in different ways. This time, I will invite Luther as my partner by citing him a number of times in the following pages (in the main text and the footnotes). One reason for this is to show that the position I take in this and other books is true to both Scripture and the Reformation. On the other hand, many Protestant writers, and even some professing Calvinists and Reformed theologians, have yielded to certain Arminian assumptions when it comes to divine sovereignty and predestination, and human responsibility and freedom (or free will), so that their theology has become a mixture of incompatible biblical and unbiblical beliefs. Then, they claim that Christians must affirm the resulting contradictions, since they are in fact taught in the Bible, when these contradictions do not come from the Bible at all. In addition, it is impossible to affirm two contradictory propositions, since to affirm both is really to deny both of them in reverse order. When it comes to human freedom, to affirm that man has free will *in any sense* relative to God is to deny both the Scripture and the Reformation.

<sup>8</sup> "There are in existence expositions and discussions of mine in which I have constantly asserted, up to this very hour, that 'free-will' is a nonentity, a *thing* (I have used that word) *consisting of a name alone*" (Luther, p. 271).

including all his decisions and actions. Nevertheless, the sinful desire for autonomy is so ingrained in sinful man's thinking that he falsely assumes that he indeed has such freedom, and at times even asserts that the Scripture also acknowledges it.

Some commentators cannot resist their sinful urge to defy what our passage teaches and implies. For example, after briefly acknowledging that this passage teaches the doctrine of predestination, Francis Foulkes adds, "This doctrine of election, or predestination...is not set in opposition to the self-evident fact of human free will."<sup>9</sup> He offers neither biblical references nor his own arguments, but just says that free will is self-evident.<sup>10</sup> But it is not at all self-evident that man has free will; rather, what is self-evident is that if absolute predestination is true, then human free will is false.<sup>11</sup>

Foulkes continues, "It involves a paradox that the New Testament does not seek to resolve, and that our finite minds cannot fathom."<sup>12</sup> There is a "paradox" now? How? Where? Why? It is "self-evident" to me that he is a quack, and that his mind is indeed "finite" – very finite. As Luther writes, "There is no conflict in the words of Scripture, and no need of an 'explanation' to 'cut the knot.' The protagonists of 'free-will' create difficulties where none exist, and dream contradictions for themselves."<sup>13</sup> Foulkes, like many others, insists that there is such a thing as human free will when Scripture nowhere teaches it, and then when he comes against the doctrine of absolute predestination, which the Scripture does teach, he cries, "Paradox!" and "Mystery!" In the face of this idiocy masquerading as scholarly exposition, should we not cry in response, "Moron!" and "Lunatic!"? Let it be clear, then, that Scripture contradicts Foulkes, not itself.

If God is sovereign, then man cannot be free – that is, not free from God, his power and his control. However, this does not contradict the biblical teaching that man is morally responsible for his thoughts and actions. The common confusion is that freedom and responsibility are either the same thing – so that they are sometimes even used interchangeably in theological and philosophical literature – or that one cannot be without the other.

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<sup>9</sup> Francis Foulkes, *The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries); InterVarsity Press, 1989; p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> "But the Scripture sets before us a man who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick and dead, but who, through the operation of Satan his lord, adds to his other miseries that of blindness, so that he believes himself to be free, happy, possessed of liberty and ability, whole and alive....Hence, the work of Satan is to hold men so that they do not recognise their wretchedness, but presume that they can do everything that is stated" (Luther, p. 162). In other words, man thinks he has free will not because it is self-evident, but because he is deceived by the devil.

<sup>11</sup> "For if we believe it to be true that God foreknows and foreordains all things; that He cannot be deceived or obstructed in His foreknowledge and predestination; and that nothing happens but at His will (which reason itself is compelled to grant); then, on reason's own testimony, there can be no 'free-will' in man, or angel, or in any creature" (Luther, p. 317). By "foreknowledge," Luther does not refer to a passive prescience in which God somehow passively receives information about the future, as if the future brings itself about without his deliberate will and power. Rather, in accordance with biblical usage, Luther means that God knows the future because he has decided what he will make happen in the future, so that his foreknowledge equals foreordination: "Do you suppose that He does not will what he foreknows, or that He does not foreknow what He wills?" (Luther, p. 80).

<sup>12</sup> Foulkes, p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> Luther, p. 236.



The false assumption is that if man is not free, then he must not be responsible. In other words, the assumed premise, often unstated, is that "Responsibility presupposes freedom." However, there is no reason to accept this premise, since by definition, responsibility has *nothing whatsoever* to do with freedom; rather, responsibility has to do with whether one will be held accountable. The first dictionary definition for "responsible" is "liable to be called on to answer."<sup>14</sup> Since God has given his moral laws to humanity, and since he has pronounced judgment upon those who would disobey, this means that man is responsible. The issue of freedom does not enter into the discussion.

Here I must reprimand many Calvinists and Reformed theologians for being unfaithful to both the Scripture and the theological tradition to which they claim allegiance, because some of them also affirm this unbiblical and irrational assumption that moral responsibility presupposes human freedom. They agree with the heretics that for God's commands to be meaningful, man must be free to obey them.<sup>15</sup> Thus they generate contradictions, antinomies, and paradoxes (or whatever else they may call them) in connection with the doctrine of predestination, and then present them as part of the biblical teaching, when the truth is that the Bible is contradicting *them*, and not itself.

For example, in his *Evangelism and The Sovereignty of God*, J. I. Packer writes as follows:

The particular antinomy which concerns us here is the apparent opposition between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, or (putting it more biblically) between what God does as King and what He does as Judge. Scripture teaches that, as King, He orders and controls all things, human actions among them, in accordance with His own eternal purpose. Scripture also teaches that, as Judge, He holds every man responsible for the choices he makes and the courses of action he pursues....

God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are taught us side by side in the same Bible; sometimes, indeed, in the same text. Both are thus guaranteed to us by the same divine authority; both, therefore, are true. It follows that they must be held together, and not played off against each other. Man is a responsible moral agent, though he is *also* divinely controlled; man is divinely controlled, though he is *also* a responsible moral agent. God's sovereignty is a reality, and man's responsibility is a reality too.

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<sup>14</sup> *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*. See also *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition*.

<sup>15</sup> "But the Diatribe is so ruinously sunk in, choked with, and stifled by, this notion of its own carnal fancy, that it is pointless to command impossibilities, that it cannot control itself; but whenever it hears an imperative or hypothetical statement it straightway tacks on its own indicative inferences: 'something is commanded, therefore we can do it, else the command is stupid!'" (Luther, p. 237).

This is the revealed antinomy in terms of which we have to do our thinking about evangelism.<sup>16</sup>

It is true that Packer defines "antinomy" as only an "apparent" contradiction,<sup>17</sup> but to him this does not mean that the human mind can resolve it. That is, the kind of antinomy that we are dealing with is not a real contradiction in God's mind, but it appears to be one to us, and it is not something that we can resolve. As he writes, "To our finite minds, of course, the thing is inexplicable."<sup>18</sup> He should speak only for himself – to *his* very finite mind, the "thing" may be inexplicable (since he *made* it inexplicable), but how dare he impose his confusion on the rest of us and even on Scripture itself?

So he says that we must affirm both sides of an apparent contradiction while it still appears to be a contradiction. However, I have shown elsewhere that this is impossible, since as long as two propositions remain contradictory to us (whether or not they are truly contradictory), then to affirm both is really to deny both in reverse order.<sup>19</sup>

What is the apparent contradiction? Packer says that it is between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. He correctly states that divine sovereignty means that man is "divinely controlled" (so that man is not free), and for him *this* seems to contradict human responsibility. In other words, he assumes that responsibility presupposes freedom.

But Luther had refuted this nonsense long ago. In *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther writes as follows against Erasmus:

Wherefore, my good Erasmus, as often as you confront me with the words of the law, so often shall I confront you with the words of Paul: "By the law is knowledge of sin" – not power of will! Gather together from the big concordances all the imperative words into one chaotic heap...and I shall at once declare that they always show, not what men can do, or do do, but what they should do!

Even grammarians and schoolboys at street corners know that nothing more is signified by verbs in the imperative mood than what ought to be done, and that what is done or can be done should be expressed by verbs in the indicative. How is it that you theologians are twice as stupid as schoolboys, in that as soon as you get hold of a single imperative verb you infer an indicative meaning, as though the moment a thing is commanded it is done, or can be done?

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<sup>16</sup> J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and The Sovereignty of God*; InterVarsity Press, 1961; p. 22-23.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> The *logical* status of an apparent contradiction is exactly the same as a real contradiction until the apparent contradiction is resolved. If one *logically* perceives that something is only an *apparent* contradiction, then he would have resolved it already, and it would no longer even be an apparent contradiction, but there would be no contradiction at all.

But there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip! – and things that you commanded and that were possible enough may yet not be done, so great a gulf is there between imperative and indicative statements in the simplest everyday matters! Yet in this business of keeping the law, which is as far out of our reach as heaven is from the earth and just as impossible of attainment, you make indicatives out of imperatives with such alacrity that the moment you hear the word of command: "do," "keep," "choose," you will straightway have it that it has been kept, done, chosen, or fulfilled, or that these things can be done by our own strength!<sup>20</sup>

Packer is an especially appropriate example of how many Reformed theologians have strangely and ironically gone wrong on this subject. This is because *Packer translated Luther's book!* I am quite sure that Packer had read Luther before he published *Evangelism and The Sovereignty of God*, since it was released in 1961, and his translation of *The Bondage of the Will* was released in 1957, and he had probably read Luther a long time before that.

Therefore, I must conclude that either Packer disagrees with Luther, or he is just muddleheaded.<sup>21</sup> He claims that he wants to be biblical in his beliefs, but if this is true, then he should not add to and impose upon the Scripture his own premise, "responsibility presupposes freedom." At least on this issue, Luther had much more respect for Scripture than Packer.

We would expect an Arminian, who is wholly confused about election, redemption, and conversion, to fail to recognize the simple but clear distinction between freedom and responsibility. But what is wrong with the Calvinists and Reformed scholars who still foolishly assume that responsibility presupposes freedom, making some kind of paradox out of the whole doctrine of predestination, and then say that nobody can resolve it? Do they not cause needless trouble? Are they not lunatics and morons, and like the Arminians, also "twice as stupid as schoolboys"?

With Luther, we must affirm that on this subject Scripture contains no contradictions, no antinomies, and no paradoxes, but that unfaithful and incompetent theologians "create difficulties where none exist, and dream contradictions for themselves."<sup>22</sup> Scripture teaches both divine sovereignty and human responsibility, and these two do not contradict each other; moreover, human responsibility does not presuppose human freedom.

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<sup>20</sup> Luther, p. 159. In other words, God's commands make men responsible, but this does not imply human freedom (nor ability). Thus to Luther the two are separate. This is the proper Reformed and Protestant (and biblical) position.

<sup>21</sup> A more formal explanation is to attribute Packer's blunder (and similar errors in others) to the noetic effects of sin.

<sup>22</sup> Luther, p. 236.

Then, the question becomes one of justice. The objection is that if this is the case, that is, if God gives moral laws to people who cannot obey them, then would it not be unjust for God to judge them? Again, the objection joins together two different things by pure assumption without argument. Since when and according to whom is justice *necessarily* related to the freedom to obey? Just because you join them in your mind does not mean that they *must* be joined.

Paul anticipates such an illogical objection when he discusses divine election in his letter to the Romans. He comes to the conclusion that God sovereignly determines and controls all things, even the will of man: "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Romans 9:18). But then he continues, "One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?'" (v. 19).

The objection is the same one that we are now considering. The claim is that since God controls all things, this means that no one can decide against what God has decided. And since God chooses to harden some people, this means that there is no free will to obey God's commands. But then, God has determined to judge disobedience. Since the objector falsely assumes that responsibility presupposes freedom, he asks, "Then why does God still hold me responsible, if I do not have the freedom to obey or disobey?" In response, Paul rebukes the objector, and writes:

But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (Romans 9:20-24)<sup>23</sup>

God is the sole standard of justice, and we must submit to his standard instead of imposing our own false standard on him. Accordingly, God has the "right" to prepare some people for glory, and to prepare others for destruction.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> "He is speaking of men, comparing them to clay and God to a potter. The comparison is surely pointless – inappropriate, indeed, and futile – if he does not think that our freedom is nil" (Luther, p. 219).

<sup>24</sup> "God is He Whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule and standard; for nothing is on a level with it or above it, but it is itself the rule for all things. If any rule or standard, or cause or ground, existed for it, it could no longer be the will of God. What God wills is not right because He ought, or was bound, so to will; on the contrary, what takes place must be right, because He so wills it. Causes and grounds are laid down for the will of the creature, but not for the will of the Creator – unless you set another Creator over him!" (Luther, p. 209).

As for the charge that the doctrine of predestination encourages licentiousness, there must be something wrong with those who make this objection. Before I heard this objection for the first time, it never crossed my mind that the grace of God could be a license to sin. It is only right that man submits to God and obeys his commands (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Yet some of these objectors speak as if sin necessarily follows grace. Whose fault is it that they think this? The objection poses no challenge to the doctrine of predestination, but it does tell us something about how these people think. In any case, Paul writes that God has predestined us "to be holy and blameless in his sight," so that predestination leads to holiness, and not licentiousness.

## REPROBATION

Speaking of those who have been "prepared for destruction," we now turn to the doctrine of reprobation. One may call this doctrine the negative side of predestination, so that whereas in election God chooses whom he would save, in reprobation he chooses whom he would damn.

Since in our passage Paul is stressing the positive side of predestination, or election, and since I have discussed and defended the doctrine of reprobation elsewhere, I would have been justified in moving on without dealing with the topic here. However, although the emphasis is on election, some commentators cannot resist the sinful urge to deny yet another biblical doctrine, and so they take this opportunity to assert that although Scripture teaches election (although they have a false understanding of even this doctrine), certainly it does not teach reprobation. So here I will offer a brief discussion on the topic.

For example, Arthur Patzia writes, "Election to salvation does not imply that God, therefore, predestines the rest of humanity to damnation."<sup>25</sup> Right, perhaps it is their own idea to damn themselves? Likewise, William MacDonald writes, "The Bible never teaches that God chooses men to be lost."<sup>26</sup>

As with the doctrine of election and the heresy of free will, some Calvinists and Reformed theologians again compromise with unbiblical assumptions when it comes to the doctrine of reprobation. For example, R. C. Sproul writes:

The Reformed view teaches that God positively or actively intervenes in the lives of the elect to insure their salvation. The rest of mankind God leaves to themselves. He does not create unbelief in their hearts. That unbelief is already there. He does not coerce them to sin. They sin by their own choices. In the Calvinist view the decree of election is positive; the decree of reprobation is negative.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Arthur G. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon* (New International Biblical Commentary); Hendrickson Publishers, 1990; p. 152.

<sup>26</sup> William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995; p. 1908.

<sup>27</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God*; Tyndale House Publishers, 1986; p. 142-143.

Along with many others, he adds that to affirm *active* reprobation is to affirm "hyper-Calvinism," "sub-Calvinism," or even "anti-Calvinism."<sup>28</sup>

Against the above writers and others like them, I affirm that Scripture teaches both election and reprobation, and that both election and reprobation are *active* and *unconditional*.<sup>29</sup> Besides Scripture, I find confirmation in the writings of the Reformers.

For example, to cite Luther again, he maintains that the reprobates, and even the devil himself, are "a work of God," and therefore are *in the same sense* subject to divine power and action "than *all the rest* of God's creatures and works." Thus God "moves and works" to operate these evil instruments for his own righteous purposes, and not allowing them to be idle from doing evil:

So that which we call the remnant of nature in the ungodly and in Satan, as being a creature and a work of God, is no less subject to Divine omnipotence and action than all the rest of God's creatures and works. Since God moves and works all in all, He moves and works of necessity even in Satan and the ungodly....

Here you see that when God works in and by evil men, evil deeds result; yet God, though He does evil by means of evil men, cannot act evilly Himself, for He is good, and cannot do evil; but He uses evil instruments, which cannot escape the impulse and movement of His power. The fault which accounts for evil being done when God moves to action lies in these instruments, which God does not allow to be idle. In the same way a carpenter would cut badly with a saw-toothed axe. Hence it is that the ungodly man cannot but err and sin always, because under the impulse of Divine power he is not allowed to be idle, but wills, desires and acts according to his nature.<sup>30</sup>

As for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, Sproul writes, "Active hardening would involve God's direct intervention within the inner chambers of Pharaoh's heart," and so he instead affirms "passive hardening."<sup>31</sup> But Luther writes:

So God's hardening of Pharaoh is wrought thus: God presents from without to his villainous heart that which by nature he hates; at the same time, He continues by omnipotent action to move within him the evil will which He finds there. Pharaoh, by reason of the villainy of his will, cannot but hate what opposes him, and trust to

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>29</sup> As with election, by "unconditional," I mean that the reason and cause of reprobation of the individuals are in God himself. This is just another way of saying that the reprobates do not design themselves in eternity and then create themselves in time.

<sup>30</sup> Luther, p. 204.

<sup>31</sup> Sproul, p. 144.

his own strength; and he grows so obstinate that he will not listen nor reflect, but is swept along in the grip of Satan like a raging madman.<sup>32</sup>

Luther says that God indeed moves within Pharaoh.<sup>33</sup> But he also refers to "the evil will which He finds there." This sounds like Sproul when he refers to the evil that is "already there," but they do not mean the same thing.

When discussing Judas, Luther makes it clear how "the evil will which He finds there," gets there: "It is true that Judas acted willingly, and not under compulsion, but his willing was the work of God, brought into being by His omnipotence, like everything else."<sup>34</sup> In other words, it is true that the reprobates "willingly" sin, in the sense that they decide to sin. But this willing or this deciding is "the work of God, brought into being by His omnipotence, like everything else." This does not sound very passive, does it? Lest this is still not clear enough, Luther also writes as follows:

Paul teaches that faith *and unbelief* comes to us by no work of our own, but through the love and hatred of God.<sup>35</sup>

The king's will cannot escape the action of the omnipotent God by which all men's wills, good *and bad*, are moved to will and to act.<sup>36</sup>

What I assert and maintain is this: that where God works apart from the grace of His Spirit, He works all things in all men, *even in the ungodly*; for He alone moves, makes to act, and impels by the motion of His omnipotence, all those things which He alone created; they can neither avoid nor alter this movement, but necessarily follow and obey it, each thing according to the measure of its *God-given power*. Thus all things, *even the ungodly*, cooperate with God.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Luther, p. 207.

<sup>33</sup> "Those who are moderately versed in the Scriptures see that for the sake of brevity I have put forward only a few of many testimonies. Yet from these it is more than evident that they babble and talk absurdly who, in place of God's providence, substitute bare permission – as if God sat in a watching tower awaiting chance events, and his judgments thus depended upon human will....And surely *unless he worked inwardly in men's minds*, it would not rightly have been said that he removes speech from the truthful, and prudence from the old men (Ezek. 7:26); that he takes away the heart of the princes of the earth so they may wander in trackless wastes (Job 12:24)..." (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; The Westminster Press; p. 231).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228-229.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

As Paul says: "We were all the children of wrath, even as others" (Eph. 2.3), *created such by God Himself* from a seed that had been corrupted by the sin of the one man, Adam.<sup>38</sup>

Again, Luther indeed speaks of God working and moving "the evil will which He finds there," that is, he does speak of the ungodly having an evil nature, and it is this evil nature that God works and moves. But Luther does not mean the same thing as Sproul does when he says that the evil is "already there," as if God has nothing to do with it being there. Rather, Luther refers to this evil nature as a "God-given power," and those who are evil by nature have been "created such by God Himself." In other words, the evil is "already there" only relative to what God has actively done in "there" before.<sup>39</sup>

This is the position of Luther the Reformer. As for Calvin, we find the following in his writings:

Now a word concerning the reprobate, with whom the apostle is at the same time there concerned. For as Jacob, deserving nothing by good works, is taken into grace, so Esau, as yet undefiled by any crime, is hated [Rom. 9:13]. If we turn our eyes to works, we wrong the apostle, as if he did not see what is quite clear to us! Now it is proved that he did not see it, since he specially emphasizes the point that when as yet they had done nothing good or evil, one was chosen, the other rejected. This is to prove that the foundation of divine predestination is not in works.

Then when he raised the objection, whether God is unjust, he does not make use of what would have been the surest and clearest defense of his righteousness: that God recompensed Esau according to his own evil intention. Instead, he contents himself with a different solution, that the reprobate are raised up to the end that through them God's glory may be revealed.

Finally, he adds the conclusion that "God has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills" [Rom. 9:18]. Do you see how Paul attributes both to God's decision alone? If, then, we cannot determine a reason why he vouchsafes mercy to his own, except it so pleases him, neither shall we have any reason for rejecting others, other than his will. For when it is said that God hardens or shows mercy to whom he wills, men are warned by this to seek no cause outside his will.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 314.

<sup>39</sup> It is from this perspective that we must understand a number of passive biblical expressions like, "Therefore God *gave them over* in the sinful desires of their hearts" (Romans 1:24). Such passive language is literally true, but only relative to something that God has already *actively* done. Thus when we are not speaking relatively, but absolutely, so that we must refer to how something that is "already there" gets "there" in the first place, then we must speak of God's action as active rather than passive.

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*; p. 946-947.



Here they have recourse to the distinction between will and permission. By this they would maintain that the wicked perish because God permits it, not because he so wills. But why shall we say "permission" unless it is because God so wills? Still, it is not in itself likely that man brought destruction upon himself through himself, by God's mere permission and without any ordaining. As if God did not establish the condition in which he wills the chief of his creatures to be! I shall not hesitate, then, simply to confess with Augustine that "the will of God is the necessity of things," and that what he has willed will of necessity come to pass, as those things which he has foreseen will truly come to pass.<sup>41</sup>

There are many more such passages in the writings of the Reformers, but it would seem unnecessary to pile up more quotations. It is clear that they do not deny but even teach that reprobation, like election, is both active and unconditional.

But now who is Reformed? And who is the Calvinist? Sproul maintains that in the reprobates, evil is "already there" as if God did not put it there – but then how did it get there? Is there another Creator? He says that God "leaves to themselves" the reprobates to sin "by their own choices." But is there another omnipotent metaphysical principle or power by which the reprobates function? Passive reprobation can only follow from a form of dualism, and perhaps an impossible theory of spontaneous generation, but Christian theism necessarily implies active election and active reprobation, since nothing can happen apart from God's active will and power.

Not all recent Calvinists and Reformed theologians think like Packer and Sproul. For example, G. H. Kersten writes:

From the scriptures quoted it is very evident that reprobation is more than letting one lie in the state wherein he fell. It is a *predetermination* of the state of perdition, both of angels and of men, for God also determined to decree some of the angels to perdition, reserving them in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day. The reprobate are appointed, ordained, and fitted to destruction....Reprobation is therefore no more a passive decree than election is; it is an active decree.

The Cause of reprobation does not lie in anything outside of God, not even in sin, but in God's absolute sovereignty....Thus reprobation is the independent decree of God from eternity, the sovereign, the decreeing God Himself. It is an act of the Father's good pleasure....

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 956.

Sin, unbelief, hardness, and whatever else is mentioned as a reason for the righteous judgment of God, all follows the decree of God, and is *not the cause of the decree*. God is sovereign in election, but also in rejection. Both depend on nothing but God's sovereign pleasure, and, being God's decree they cannot be dependent upon some one or some thing outside of God....

As election is not general, neither is reprobation....It concerns certain people, known to God by name.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, even though we have shown that active reprobation is consistent with Calvinistic and Reformed theology, we are most interested in what the Scripture has to say. On this subject, Paul writes as follows:

Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls – she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

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

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance

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<sup>42</sup> G. H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics*; Netherlands Reformed Book and Publishing Committee, 1980; p. 137-138. Earlier I denied collective election and affirmed individual election, and here Kersten, as I do, rejects collective reprobation in favor of individual reprobation.

for glory – even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (Romans 9:10-24)<sup>43</sup>

From this passage we can derive at least four points that are relevant to our discussion on election and reprobation.

First, reprobation is scriptural. Contrary to the claims of some commentators who acknowledge election but deny reprobation, the Bible teaches both, and teaches them in the same passage here.

Second, reprobation is individual. Contrary to the claims of those who insist that reprobation must be collective even if it is scriptural, Paul discusses Jacob and Esau as individuals – not just the nations that would arise from them, but "the twins."<sup>44</sup>

Third, reprobation is unconditional. When discussing divine election, we already pointed out on the basis of this passage that election to salvation is unconditional. That is, God selected the individuals for salvation not because of anything foreseen in them. But Paul is also addressing reprobation in this same passage, and in the same way; therefore, reprobation is unconditional in the same sense that election is unconditional.

In the light of this, Wayne Grudem blatantly slanders Scripture and shamelessly defies it when he writes, "So in the presentation of Scripture the cause of election lies in God, and the cause of reprobation lies in the sinner."<sup>45</sup> This is unbiblical and impossible. Paul says that God had decided to treat Jacob and Esau differently "before the twins were born or had done anything good *or bad*." Just as election is not based on "anything good" in the person, reprobation is not based on "anything...bad" in the person, as if the person could create and operate himself, with God passively watching him.

As a longtime professor of theology, Grudem should at least have the clarity of mind to make the simple distinction made by Kersten, who writes, "Sin is the *meriting cause* of punishment. The *determining cause* of the state of reprobation is the sovereignty of God."<sup>46</sup> This is better, but lest some people distort even this statement, I would add that the determining cause of this very meriting cause (sin) itself is also the sovereignty of God.

Grudem surely must have read what we cited earlier from Calvin: "If, then, we cannot determine a reason why he vouchsafes mercy to his own, except it so pleases him, neither

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<sup>43</sup> Many other biblical passages affirm active reprobation, but we cannot take time to examine them here. For example, see 1 Peter 2:8. Wayne Grudem writes, "This verse does not simply say that God destined the *fact* that those who disobey would stumble, but speaks rather of God destining certain *people* to disobey and stumble: 'as they were destined to do'" (*Systematic Theology*; Zondervan Publishing House, 1994; p. 685).

<sup>44</sup> Recall our earlier discussion that God's sovereignty over groups presupposes his sovereignty over individuals. Just as collective election (as an attempt to deny individual election) is nonsense, collective reprobation (as an attempt to deny individual reprobation) is nonsense.

<sup>45</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*; p. 686.

<sup>46</sup> Kersten, p. 138.

shall we have any reason for rejecting others, other than his will. For when it is said that God hardens or shows mercy to whom he wills, men are warned by this to seek no cause outside his will." If he disagrees with Calvin, then he should say so and then state his refutation, but as it is, his position dishonors God, slanders Scripture, confuses the unlearned, and wastes our time.

Fourth, reprobation is active. Many people claim that even if reprobation is scriptural and individual, it must nevertheless be a passive decree; however, Scripture teaches otherwise.

Paul writes that just as some are "prepared in advance for glory," others are "prepared for destruction." Because of grammatical considerations but also their theological biases, many have suggested that perhaps "prepared for destruction" is meant in the passive sense, so that it is as if the reprobates prepared *themselves* for destruction.

However, a variation in expression does not always signify a variation in sense. For example, suppose I were to say, "I bought this book for myself; the other was bought for my friend." This does not mean that whereas I bought the first book, someone else bought the second one for my friend, or worse yet, the second book bought itself for my friend. The context clearly shows that I bought both books – one for myself, and the other for my friend.

The false interpretation seems to require the constant use of rigid expressions. Instead of saying, "I bought this book for myself, but *the other was bought* for my friend," I would be *always required* to say, "I bought this book for myself, and *bought the other* for my friend." William Strunk would have preferred the second version all the time,<sup>47</sup> but other than that, why must I submit to this requirement when *the context* is clear enough to determine the meaning, unless the interpreters do not want to accept the clear meaning?

That said, the context of Romans 9 is as follows. Paul writes in verse 18, "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden." It does not say that the people harden themselves. Many want to make it say this, but it does not say it. Then, Paul writes in verse 21, "Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?" Surely the pots do not make themselves! But *this* is the context that Paul gives us by which we must understand the expression, "prepared for destruction" (v. 22).

In addition, God said, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (v. 13). This also indicates that reprobation is just as active as election, that just as God decided to treat Jacob a certain way without basing this decision on anything found in Jacob, God decided to treat Esau a certain way *also* without basing this decision on anything found in Esau. As if it changes anything, commentators are quick to suggest that "hate" here means merely "love less." Fine, but what does that mean? And how much less? Spinach I love, but eggplant I love less. How much less? I *hate* it.

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<sup>47</sup> William Strunk, Jr., E.B. White, *The Elements of Style, Fourth Edition*; Allyn & Bacon, 2000; p. 18.

Many Reformed theologians teach that the difference between election and reprobation is that whereas God must actively select and summon out the elect for salvation, he merely passes by the reprobates, as if this exonerates God from some horrible and shameful crime. But active reprobation is no crime – it is God's righteous decree to reveal his wrath and his power (v. 22), and to show forth his mercy toward the elect (v. 23), all for his glory. Thus all things are done by God's will and power, and he needs no excuse for his decrees and actions.

Although there is indeed a difference between election and reprobation, both are equally active. The real difference is that there is an additional step in *the execution* of God's decree for the elect. Specifically, in eternity God conceived of and decreed the creation of both the elect individuals and the reprobate individuals, and decreed that both would fall into sin through Adam, but he also decreed that he would save the elect through Christ. When Adam fell into sin, both the elect and the reprobate individuals fell with him. The reprobate individuals are then in their divinely-decreed position, prepared for destruction, whereas the elect individuals await the application of redemption in God's appointed time.

Our opponents then object, "But does this not make God the author of sin?" Many Reformed theologians are quick to deny this charge,<sup>48</sup> even including those who affirm active reprobation, and they make all kinds of distinctions and qualifications to distance God from sin and evil.<sup>49</sup> But since the phrase "author of sin" is not even found in the Bible, I wonder why they are so quick to invent or acknowledge an unbiblical phrase, and then scramble to say, "God is not *that*."

Most people do not stop to consider what the phrase means. Specifically, what is meant by "author"? When God inspired the Scripture, he did not physically take up the pen to write, but the creatures did (caused by God, of course). So if you mean by the "authors" of Scripture those who physically took up the pen, then the human writers are the authors. But if you refer to the source of the content – the thoughts and the words – and the very cause that made the human writers take up the pen, and the very power that moved the pen, then God is the author of Scripture.

So if the question is whether the doctrine of predestination makes God a *sinner*, as in one who commits sin or evil, then we must deny it. But if this is what is meant, then let us rephrase the question to say "sinner" or "evildoer" instead of "author of sin." Now, since God is the sole standard of right and wrong, then for him to be a sinner, he would have to establish a moral law for himself, then break it, and then judge himself to be wrong. However, Scripture asserts that he is righteous in all that he does.

But if the question is whether God is the ultimate or even the immediate cause of sin, then we must affirm it, and in this sense, and for those who for some reason want to use the phrase, then God is indeed the "author of sin," because he is necessarily the author of *all things*. The common assumption is that there is something "wrong" with saying that

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<sup>48</sup> Sproul, p. 144.

<sup>49</sup> Kersten, p. 125.

God is the author of sin. However, since God is the sole standard of right and wrong, it is wrong for God to be the author of sin only if God himself has decreed that it is wrong for him to be the author of sin. It is not up to the likes of us to say that it is wrong, and just because some people assume that it is wrong does not make it wrong.

Must we appeal to the Reformers again? But we have given more than a few passages from Scripture, and many quotations from the Reformers. Maybe we will look at one more, but one that is seemingly less relevant to our topic. This is when Calvin says, "Indeed, not even an abundance of bread would benefit us in the slightest unless it were divinely turned into nourishment."<sup>50</sup> Similar statements abound in Calvin's writings.

Theologians are fond of appealing to "secondary causes" to distance God from sin and evil. They say that God indeed causes sin and evil, but he does it only through secondary causes, and thus he indirectly causes them. However, this does not really distance God from sin and evil because, to begin with, each time God must directly make the secondary causes work the way he wants them to work, and he must directly make the objects supposedly affected by the secondary causes respond the way he wants them to respond. Otherwise, it would be as if we acknowledge a metaphysical principle or power that is different from God but that is as powerful as God, which is dualism.<sup>51</sup>

As for Calvin's statement, although bread is designed to be in one sense a secondary cause by which God nourishes your body, God must still in a real sense directly cause the nourishment, since there is no power in the bread itself to nourish, as if the bread can exist and work apart from God's immediate and direct power. Although this is a necessary element of their doctrinal system, many Reformed theologians seem to miss this simple point.

Now, appeals to secondary causes are legitimate as long as it is correctly applied; however, if the intention is to distance God from the event or the effect (such as murder, rape, etc.) as a way to do theodicy, then the approach fails, because nothing can really distance God this way. It is biblically wrong and metaphysically impossible. Therefore, in this sense – in the sense that God is necessarily the author of *all things* – we must affirm that God is the author of sin. But we will add that this does not generate an apologetic problem, because there is no rational or biblical argument showing that there is anything wrong with it; rather, God and his actions are righteous by definition.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*; p. 909.

<sup>51</sup> Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 1*; Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004; p. 226-227.

<sup>52</sup> Now, James writes, "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed" (James 1:13-14). This is sometimes used against my position. However, all it says is that 1) God is not tempted by evil, which does not contradict my position, and 2) God does not tempt anyone, which is true also, since he causes other things to tempt, including lust and the devil. So James does not contradict my position at all. Rather, Isaiah says, "I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things" (Isaiah 45:7, KJV). Of course, many people insist that here "evil" means "calamity" – as if this makes things all better! "Calamity" certainly includes wars, murders, rapes, political upheavals, and so on.

The doctrine of predestination is indeed controversial, not because Scripture is unclear or that there are good arguments on all sides, but it is controversial chiefly because sinful man, taught by Satan, demands salvation from God and yet refuses to give him all the glory. Instead, he reserves a determinative role for himself, asserting that God makes salvation at best possible, but actual for no one until the person permits God to save him.

He convinces himself that he is the master of his soul, and that no one can take it out of his hands. Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you" (John 15:16); in contrast, sinful man retorts, "You have 'chosen' me only because you know that I would choose you, so that my will logically precedes and determines your will!" He says, "If conversion is necessary, then by my will I will turn against my (evil) will, by my might I will escape from Satan's hold and sin's grip, and by my power I will turn to Christ and permit him to save me, as if I need him at all."

Sinful man may resent the above as a misrepresentation, and he may hide his real thoughts and motives with beautiful words and reverent expressions, but underneath all of that rest such wickedness and defiance that would be satisfied with nothing less than making himself the center of the universe, so that even God must heed and serve him. And thus "free will" is Satan's slogan, and Arminianism is his creed. On the other hand, Christianity and Calvinism (which faithfully expresses the teachings of Christianity) affirm, "Salvation comes from the LORD" (Jonah 2:9) – that is, *really* and *wholly* from God, and not just partly or even mostly from him.

Yes, the doctrine is controversial, so that even some who claim to agree with us suggest that we should not preach about it. But then do they really agree with us? If what we have been saying is correct, then predestination is inseparably interwoven with any adequate exposition of biblical theology and of the gospel itself. Their suggestion insults God, as if he was stupid, or that he erred in revealing this doctrine to us through the Scripture. In contrast to their impiety, Luther writes:

It is, then, fundamentally necessary and wholesome for Christians to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that He foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His own immutable, eternal and infallible will....<sup>53</sup>

As I said above, what may be found in or proved by the sacred writings is both plain and wholesome, and so may safely be published, learned and known – and, indeed, should be. So your statement, that some things should not be exposed to everyone's hearing, if made with reference to the contents of Scripture, is false; and if you spoke of other things, your remark was irrelevant and out of place, and a waste of your paper and time.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Luther, p. 80.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

As for the argument that predestination is best left untaught because of the tumult and disunity that it causes, Luther replies:

What a fulsome speaker you are! – but utterly ignorant of what you are talking about. In a word, you treat this discussion as if the issue at stake between us was the recovery of a debt, or some other trivial item, the loss of which matters far less than the public peace, and therefore should not so upset anyone as to make him hesitate to give and take, yielding the point if need be, in order to ensure that no occasion for public disorder arises. You make it clear that this carnal peace and quiet seems to you far more important than faith, conscience, salvation, the Word of God, the glory of Christ, and God himself.

Let me tell you, therefore – and I beg you to let this sink deep into your mind – I hold that a solemn and vital truth, of eternal consequence, is at stake in this discussion; one so crucial and fundamental that it ought to be maintained and defended even at the cost of life, though as a result the whole world should be, not just thrown into turmoil and uproar, but shattered in chaos and reduced to nothingness. If you do not grasp that, if it leaves you unmoved, then mind your own business, and leave those to grasp it and be moved by it to whom it is given of God!<sup>55</sup>

Some will then say that even if the doctrine must be taught, perhaps it should be taught only to the mature saints, or at least only to believers, but certainly not mentioned in evangelism.

However, Jesus flatly tells his hearers, including the unbelievers, that no one can know the Father unless "the Son *chooses to reveal him*" (Matthew 11:27), that no one can come to him for salvation unless the Father "draws him" (John 6:44) and "has enabled him" (John 6:65). This means that it is fully legitimate to preach, even to unbelievers, "Although you will be saved only if you come to Christ and believe the gospel, unless God chooses and enables you, you cannot come and will not believe." In addition, Jesus says to the unbelievers, "You do not believe because you are not my sheep" (John 10:26). This means that it is fully appropriate to preach, even to unbelievers, "If you do not believe, it is because you are not one of God's people, but one of the reprobates, destined for destruction."

Would this not offend some hearers, and drive them away? Yes, preaching like this will offend *the reprobates* and drive them away, which will also mean that we will have fewer false converts in our churches, who cause us unnecessary and (because they are unregenerate) *unfixable* problems. But surely the elect would rejoice to hear about God's sovereign power and grace, revealed for his glory and for our salvation. As Paul writes, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:15). There he

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 90.



cites Isaiah 52:7, and the message in that verse is "*Your God reigns!*"<sup>56</sup> Thus the sovereign rule and grace of God is the message of the gospel.

This is what we find in the ministry of Christ, so that when he says, "I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him," many people "turned back and no longer followed him"; in contrast, Peter says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:65-69). Therefore, because of the teaching of Scripture, the example of Christ, the doctrine of the apostles,<sup>57</sup> and even the preferable effect, both election and reprobation are suitable and desirable subjects in teaching and in evangelism.

The truth is that while many Calvinists are hesitant, the Arminians are boldly proclaiming their false gospel of free will, that the people must save themselves on the basis of what Christ has done, that God has taken the first step but now the final and decisive step is theirs to take, and that God can do nothing in their lives without their consent. In the first place, for us to neglect any part of the biblical system of truth is a great sin, especially such a foundational doctrine, and in the light of the Arminians' audacity, not to boldly preach predestination and sovereign grace in all contexts would be devastating, and has been devastating, to the church's strength and progress.

Some people treat this as a secondary issue, too trivial to bicker over; however, we have shown that the doctrine is not trivial, nor is it just a matter of preference or perspective. Rather, we are considering the very nature of God and the gospel. Is our God as the Bible reveals him – sovereign and almighty – or is he like the pagan mythological gods – limited and struggling? Is salvation really "from the Lord," or is it partly from God and partly from man?

Luther writes that the issue is "of eternal consequence."<sup>58</sup> He calls the topic "the real thing," "the essential issue," "the hinge on which all turns," and "the vital spot," compared to which other disputes are but "extraneous issues" and "trifles."<sup>59</sup> If you are a Christian, design your program for theological studies accordingly; if you are a pastor, set your agenda for preaching with this in mind. Luther and the Reformers understood the nature of the dispute and its implications, for without an absolutely sovereign God who does all things by his sovereign power and saves his people solely by his sovereign grace, there would be no Christianity. Therefore, let us not be ashamed of the gospel – the true and the whole gospel – that God saves his chosen ones by his grace, according to his will and his pleasure, and for his glory.

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<sup>56</sup> The verse says, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'"

<sup>57</sup> The apostles preached on divine sovereignty and predestination in their "evangelistic" sermons (Acts 2:23, 17:26), and surely they also taught it in the church (Acts 4:28). There was no controversy among them; they affirmed God's sovereignty over everything, including sin and salvation.

<sup>58</sup> Luther, p. 90.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 319.

## REDEMPTION

Although predestination pervades the entire passage under discussion (1:3-14), and although Christ's agency and headship also appear throughout, we have noted what appears to be a progression in emphasis from the Father's work in predestination, to the Son's work in redemption, and then to the Spirit's work in application. However, Paul seemingly does not intend to create rigidly defined sections in this passage, but rather to compose a theologically and devotionally rich doxology that blends all these ideas together. At any rate, we now come to the Son's work in redemption (v. 7).

Redemption refers to deliverance by ransom. Barclay adds the theologically significant point that "In every case the conception is the delivering of a man from a situation from which he was powerless to liberate himself or from a penalty which he himself could never have paid."<sup>60</sup> Because sinful man is wholly depraved, he needs more than a little help from God. Even if God were to give him a little grace, it would not benefit him at all; rather, salvation must be all of grace.

The way that Christ performed the work of redemption was "through his blood." The idea of blood atonement is crucial in understanding salvation. Christ did not die on the cross as a mere moral example or as a random martyr, nor is the main significance of atonement in the *liquid* that came out of his body. Instead, the expression refers to Christ, as the federal head of the elect, offering up himself as a perfect sacrifice to render complete satisfaction toward divine justice, which otherwise would have required the everlasting punishment against all sinners.

Because this is what the expression means, Hendriksen translates it as, "deliverance as a result of the payment of a ransom,"<sup>61</sup> adding that "He gave his blood," "He gave his soul," and "He gave himself" are equivalent in meaning.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Barclay translates, "a deliverance which cost his life."<sup>63</sup> They are right to a large extent, and these translations or paraphrases would help correct some of the false doctrines and mystical interpretations taught by a number of heretics and theologically ignorant preachers.

On the other hand, "translating" the expression in a way that removes mention of the blood altogether removes something essential out of the text, namely, the clear allusion of Christ's sacrifice as the fulfillment of the Old Testament blood sacrifices. As Leviticus says, "It is the blood that makes atonement for one's life" (17:11); however, "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4), and thus the Old Testament sacrifices symbolized and anticipated the only sacrifice that could actually "take away sins," that is, the sacrifice of Christ.<sup>64</sup>

For this reason, in trying to translate the "meaning" of the expression instead of the words, those translations have also changed the actual meaning of the verse. As with

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<sup>60</sup> Barclay, p. 81.

<sup>61</sup> Hendriksen, p. 69.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>63</sup> Barclay, p. 81.

<sup>64</sup> See also Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 1 Peter 1:18-19; Revelation 5:9.

other problems of biblical interpretation, the best solution is probably not to translate the meaning instead of the words, but to educate the believers and refute the heretics. As for preachers, rather than dreaming up mystical theories, they should wake up and read some good commentaries.

Misunderstandings of this expression have given rise to a number of perverse doctrines and grotesque practices. For example, many Pentecostals and Charismatics advocate "pleading the blood." The teaching suggests that in the face of demonic powers and at times of desperation, one may verbally call upon the blood of Jesus for deliverance. By this they do not refer merely to the sacrificial death of Christ by which he has purchased our salvation and blessings, but it often seems that they appeal to the shed blood itself – that is, the liquid – as if it has some mystical power in the spiritual realm to exorcise evil spirits and to confer upon the petitioner the needed blessings.

Perhaps this is not as outrageous as the Catholic superstition of "holy water," since at least they are appealing to the blood of Christ, and at least they have some basis in fact, however distorted. Nevertheless, since Scripture never teaches this practice, and since it is in fact based upon a laughable distortion of the biblical expression, "pleading the blood" should neither be taught nor practiced.

Rather than inventing silly superstitions, we should study what Paul actually says in this letter about overcoming the "powers" and inheriting the blessings. Paul's approach toward the "powers" is the very opposite of the magical or mystical view. He writes to an area where there was much concern and superstition about magical forces and demonic powers. Instead of teaching them "Christian" formulas of exorcism and "Christian" magical chants, and instead of sending them crucifixes and amulets, he writes them a letter of high theology, teaching them that Christians overcome all demonic powers in our subjective experience by intellectually understanding the objective work of God in predestination, the work of Christ in redemption, and the present reign of Christ in exaltation.

So we even "exorcise" by theology. The anti-intellectuals believe that theology is boring and powerless, and indeed this is true of *their* theology and that of our opposers. But Pauline theology – that is, *Christian* theology, in which God is sovereign and Christ is exalted – has "divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:4). Paul will emphasize the intellect (and its relation to divine power) several more times in the rest of this letter.

Hebrews 9:22 says, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness," but because of the perfect atonement of Christ, we now have the "forgiveness of sins" (Ephesians 1:7). Since salvation from sin requires a perfect blood atonement, since God has chosen only Jesus Christ to make such an atonement, and subsequently, since only Christ has made such an atonement, this means that salvation from sin is found only in Christ, and that there is no salvation elsewhere. That there is no salvation elsewhere means that the full wrath of God shall descend, and even now rests upon, all non-Christians. It means that not only will atheists and agnostics be condemned to hell forever, but also *all* non-

Christians – Mormons, Muslims, Buddhists, Catholics, and so on – and this includes all who profess a false gospel (Galatians 1:8-9).

Another implication of the necessity and the actuality of the blood atonement is that, since the atonement of Christ is an *actual* atonement (not just a potential atonement), and since it rendered *complete* satisfaction toward divine justice (not just partial satisfaction), this means that for those whom Christ made atonement, he made a perfect, complete, and final atonement for *all* their sins, which means that there remains no sin for which God will condemn them. This in turn means that *every* individual for whom Christ died shall be saved.

However, this does not tell us for whom Christ made atonement – we just know that all those for whom Christ made atonement will be saved. But then, since Scripture explicitly and repeatedly teaches that not everyone will be saved, this necessarily means that Christ did not die for every person. Again, if Christ made atonement for *all* your sins, then there is nothing left for which God will condemn you, which means that you will necessarily be saved. And if Christ made such an atonement for everyone, then this means that everyone will be saved; however, since Scripture says that not everyone will be saved, this necessarily means that Christ did not make atonement for everyone.

Instead, Scripture teaches that Christ died only for his church, his people, his sheep. Taught by necessarily implication and explicit mention in Scripture, this is the biblical doctrine of effective particular atonement. In other words, God had a specific design in redemption, and Christ was the agent by whom God carried out the design.

Of course, many people detest this biblical doctrine, perhaps even more than others. Against scriptural teaching, they insist that Christ made a universal atonement, that he died for every person who would exist in human history. However, this view necessarily entails either an imperfect atonement or universal salvation. But since Scripture affirms a perfect atonement and denies universal salvation, this means that universal atonement is necessarily false.

One objection may be that, even if Christ made a perfect atonement for our sins, we must have faith in what he has done in order to receive the benefits of this atonement. But what is faith, and how does it come? This objection seems to assume that, although we cannot make atonement for our own sins, in our sinful state we can still manufacture faith by our "free will." That is, while spiritually dead and depraved, we can still freely make the most important positive spiritual decision in our lives. This is irrational, unbiblical, and heretical.

We have already refuted free will, and in our spiritually dead condition, it is impossible to have the positive spiritual disposition required to have faith in Christ. Also, the objection assumes that Christ did not atone for the sin of unbelief, or a lack of faith; therefore, the objection does not apply to a perfect atonement, in which Christ made atonement for *all* the sins of the elect. But since Scripture indeed teaches a perfect atonement, the objection does not apply.

In addition, Scripture never teaches that faith is something that we must conjure up by ourselves in order to obtain God's blessings; rather, it depicts faith as precisely one of those blessings obtained by Christ's redemptive work for those whom he redeemed. In other words, you do not benefit from the atonement because you have faith; rather, you have faith because it is a benefit of the atonement. That is, faith is not something by which *you obtain* the benefits of the atonement, but faith is something by which *God applies* the benefits of the atonement to you. Moreover, faith itself is "a gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8) in the first place; it is something that God gives you, and not something that you just decide to produce.

So we again affirm with Scripture, that salvation is really and wholly from God, from start to finish (Hebrews 12:2). Biblical faith is not something that comes by our own decision or by our own power, but it is a "faith that comes through him" (Acts 3:16). Luther writes that faith is "a special and rare gift of God."<sup>65</sup> Therefore, we unyieldingly affirm that Christ's blood atonement is perfect, complete, final, actual, effective, and particular, and that faith itself is a gift that he obtained for us by his sacrifice, so that there is no room for boasting, except in what Christ has done.<sup>66</sup>

When Scripture teaches that Christ's atonement completely satisfied God's justice, it does not imply nor should we infer that there was a disagreement in the Godhead. That is, it is not as if God the Father is a God of wrath, so that he is concerned only with exacting vengeance on those who have transgressed his holy laws, and that God the Son is a God of grace, so that he is concerned only with redeeming sinners. This would be a ludicrous and unwarranted inference from the necessity and the actuality of the blood atonement.

Contrary to this false understanding, Paul states that it is God who has chosen us to be saved, and that it is "in accordance with the riches of God's grace" that he sent Christ to make this perfect atonement for us. Therefore, there is no disagreement among the members of the Godhead, nor does justice contradict grace in the plan of God. Rather, it is because of God's grace that he made a way to satisfy his own justice,<sup>67</sup> so that he could be *both* "just and the justifier" (Romans 3:26, NASB) of those whom he has chosen for salvation in Christ. And therefore, we affirm that justice and grace are in perfect harmony, and the Father and the Son are in perfect agreement.

Hebrews 9:15 aptly summarizes what we have said about the atonement: "For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance – now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant."

Christ is the "mediator" between God and man, so that only through him can man know God and be saved. He is the agent through whom God performs his foreordained plan and

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<sup>65</sup> Luther, p. 155.

<sup>66</sup> For more on the biblical doctrine of effective particular atonement, see my *Systematic Theology*.

<sup>67</sup> In saving sinners, God did not annul, disregard, or contradict his own justice; rather, he *satisfied* it through the atonement of Christ.

redeems his chosen ones, and he is the federal head in whom all the chosen ones are saved. Outside of Christ, there is only darkness and death. Only Christianity leads to heaven; all non-Christian religions and philosophies lead to hell.

Christ is the mediator of the "new covenant." He is the fulfillment of all the expectations and anticipations, and all the types and shadows of the previous administration of God's grace, that is, "the first covenant." The blood sacrifices of the past were really types of the one perfect sacrifice that God himself would provide for his people, and Christ's sacrifice was the complete fulfillment.

Christ "died as a ransom," not as a mere moral example or a random martyr. He died not just to inspire others to do something, but *he* did something, namely, to render complete satisfaction to divine justice and redeem the chosen ones. Because he died as an actual ransom, his death did not obtain the mere possibility of salvation for the elect, but it *accomplished* salvation for the elect. He did not just *start* to save his people, but he *did* it. He did not just take the first step, but he did all that was required to save his people. The rest, even the faith of the elect, is the *application* of what Christ has done.

Christ died for his people to "set them free from the sins committed." Atonement is for forgiveness, and actual atonement guarantees actual forgiveness. That is, an actual and perfect atonement does not provide a mere possibility of forgiveness, but the reality of forgiveness. Therefore, all those for whom Christ died shall be saved. There is no chance that even one of those for whom he died will be lost.

Christ died, not to save everyone, but only "those who are called." Although the actual and perfect atonement of Christ guarantees the actual forgiveness of all those for whom he died, it does not imply universal salvation, since he did not die for everyone, but only for those whom God had chosen. If God has chosen you and given you faith in Christ, then it is only appropriate that you serve him and obey him with fear and trembling. You better not dare think or suggest that you had the good sense or moral clarity to choose Christ, as if God did not sovereignly and irresistibly cause you to so choose. Arminianism represents the height of impiety and the essence of false religion.

Christ died to save us from our sins, and those who are called will "receive the promised eternal inheritance." Paul writes, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him – but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:9-10). The inheritance that awaits us, and indeed what we have already received, is so great and precious that, if God had not revealed it, we would never have been able to even conceive it. But for the unbeliever, death is his destiny, and hellfire is his inheritance. "Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness" (Romans 11:22, NASB).

## **ILLUMINATION**

In eternity, God immutably selected those whom he would save; in time, Christ perfectly satisfied divine justice on behalf of these chosen ones; then, throughout history (even before Christ came, but anticipating his coming), the Spirit applies the blessings

foreordained by God and obtained by Christ to the chosen ones through (giving them and energizing their) faith in Christ.

One foundational blessing coming from divine grace that the Spirit applies to the elect is intellectual – it is the gift of "all wisdom and understanding" (1:8).

The word translated "wisdom" is *sophia*. It has a rich background in Greek thought, and stresses acuity and insight in the philosophical, theoretical, and academic. In our context, since Paul is referring to what God gives us by revelation and impartation, we may take it to designate acuity, insight, knowledge, and intelligence regarding the theological and doctrinal. Of course, this is only to note how the specific context informs the understanding of this word – it remains under the broad meaning of *sophia*. It is by our biblical wisdom and theological insight that we answer the philosophical questions. God has made us master philosophers by his grace.

The word translated "understanding" is *phronēsis*, and is elsewhere translated "insight," "prudence," and "sound sense." Although the two words are not always consistently and precisely distinguished, here it seems correct to maintain a difference, so that whereas "wisdom" stresses the philosophical (or in a biblical context, the theological), "prudence" emphasizes practical wisdom, that is, insight concerning the right use of means to attain the desired ends, and that leads to right action. So the first word stresses the theological, and the second stresses the practical.<sup>68</sup>

Barclay writes, "It is Paul's claim that Jesus brought us *sophia*, the intellectual knowledge which satisfies the mind, and *phronēsis*, the practical knowledge which enables us to handle the day to day problems of practical life and living."<sup>69</sup> In other words, God has made us both philosophically and practically competent; Christians are those who know how to think and how to live. Max Turner notes that this wisdom and prudence are "at the heart of our walk with God."<sup>70</sup> Therefore, "Christian" anti-intellectuals and irrationalists have taken an anti-biblical position.

Paul teaches that this wisdom and prudence comes from God's grace, which he "lavished" on us (v. 8). The word refers to a superabundance, an excessive amount, and an overflowing measure. Thus Paul is speaking of "an oversized grace,"<sup>71</sup> out of which God confers upon us *all* wisdom and prudence – *all* philosophical, theological, theoretical, ethical, and practical knowledge. This does not imply that God has given us

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<sup>68</sup> There is some confusion on whether the words should apply to God, so that it is he would *exercises* wisdom and prudence, or whether the words refer to something that God *gives* us. With good reasons, many commentators agree with us that Paul is referring to the latter. For the sake of brevity, we will not discuss this point in depth except to note that the context lends itself to this understanding, and that the parallel verse in Colossians 1:9 is clear that Paul is referring to something that God gives us: "...asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through *all spiritual wisdom and understanding*."

<sup>69</sup> Barclay, p. 83.

<sup>70</sup> Max Turner, "Ephesians," in *New Bible Commentary: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Edition*; InterVarsity Press, 1994; p. 1226.

<sup>71</sup> Kenneth S. Wuest, *Ephesians and Colossians*; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953; p. 42.

omniscience<sup>72</sup> – the emphasis is perhaps on *every kind* of wisdom – but at least it means that what God has given is comprehensive, and more than sufficient.

What treachery it is, then, to say that biblical revelation alone is insufficient as a comprehensive intellectual foundation! And what blasphemy it is to say that biblical revelation alone is insufficient to address every practical need! God's revelation to us is sufficient – more than sufficient – to sustain a complete worldview, as well as to provide definitive guidance for making wise and moral decisions.

Yet we often hear professing believers glibly say, "The Bible doesn't address this," and then continue to consider their problems as if this assumption is true. They are very quick to assume that biblical revelation is insufficient, but very slow to admit that they are just stupid and lazy.

Instead, their attitude should be as follows: "Since Scripture claims to be sufficient to make me *'thoroughly* equipped for *every* good work' (2 Timothy 3:17), then since I have this problem or this decision to make, this means that the Bible must have an adequate answer. Thus the problem is never in the Bible, but in my ignorance of what it teaches and implies, and also in my laziness for not spending more time in trying to find out. If there is indeed something that the Bible does not address, then it means that I do not need to know it in order to have a comprehensive worldview, or to make wise and moral decisions. In other words, the Bible contains all the information necessary for me to be a good and growing Christian in every sense and in every way. Even though I do not live up to all that it teaches, all the information that I need is indeed in there, and it is my duty and delight to study and obey it."

There is hope for those who will think this way. Scripture itself promises, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). On the other hand, many people set up their own ignorance as God's judge: "If I don't know about it, that means God never said anything about it!" This way of thinking is irrational, unbiblical, and sinful.

It is doubly shameful, therefore, for professing believers to seek answers to the ultimate questions from scientists and philosophers, as if they know anything, and to seek instructions on even ordinary matters from psychologists, self-improvement experts, or even various gurus and fortune-tellers. Are not these professing believers spineless and worthless? Or are they really unbelievers, who are as dogs returning to their vomit, and pigs returning to the mud (2 Peter 2:22)? At any rate, we can say for sure that they have little knowledge of and respect for Scripture.

Now, Paul teaches that God's revelation to us covers all that is needed for human thought and conduct, and all that is needed for salvation and holiness. Christianity addresses both the philosophical and the practical. On this basis (that the biblical worldview addresses both the philosophical and the practical), Foulkes writes, "If this is correct, it follows that

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<sup>72</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, and to the Philippians*; Hendrickson Publishers, 2001; p. 368.



the wisdom of God is not merely intellectual or academic...it is also the source of understanding in the details of daily living."<sup>73</sup> He is technically correct, and many others also make this point; however, what they often seem to forget is that this also works the other way. That is, Paul just as surely shows that the wisdom of God is not merely "the source of understanding in the details of daily living," but that it is also "intellectual or academic." If biblical wisdom is not only philosophical but also practical, then it is not only practical but also philosophical. And if there are indeed some who stress the intellectual too much, as if this is possible, there seems to be many more who do not stress it enough.

Another point that many writers fail to grasp is that it is in fact misleading to "balance" the intellectual with the practical, or the practical with the intellectual. In this verse, *both* "wisdom" and "prudence" are by definition given *to the mind*. It is not as if "wisdom" is given to your mind, and "prudence" is given to your toes! In this sense, both wisdom and prudence are "intellectual." The difference is not that one is intellectual and the other one is non-intellectual, but that they refer to intellectual wisdom *about* different things. Therefore, God's gift of "wisdom and prudence" refers to a comprehensive revelation and impartation of intellectual wisdom, granting us more than sufficient information regarding all philosophical issues and practical things. In light of this, let us destroy all traces of anti-intellectualism and irrationalism in our thinking. An anti-intellectual Christianity is anti-Christianity.<sup>74</sup>

## REVELATION

Now, all those who are saved under both the old and the new administrations of God's grace are saved on the same basis, namely, through a God-given faith in the redemptive work of Christ. Nevertheless, under the new administration, there is a fuller revelation of "the mystery of his will" (v. 9). The revelation of this "mystery" corresponds to God's gift of "wisdom and prudence." In other words, when Scripture says that God gives his people "wisdom and prudence," it is not just saying that God gives us intellectual potential and capabilities (although these are included), but it is also saying that God reveals to us actual information for us to understand and apply.

The word "mystery" is a favorite of the anti-intellectuals, and they constantly misuse and abuse it. When they use the word, they are referring to something that we do not or even cannot understand, and therefore sometimes they make the additional point that it is not something that we should think too much about, and certainly not debate about. Anti-intellectuals often use the word as an escape for something that they cannot refute but at the same time refuse to accept. But Christians should not be like the atheists, who are intellectually dishonest and incompetent.

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<sup>73</sup> Foulkes, p. 59.

<sup>74</sup> Some scholars insist that "wisdom" in Scripture is mainly practical (and moral), but the basis for their assertion consists of their anti-intellectualistic assumptions and prejudices more than faithful and honest biblical exegesis. Their view is obviously false in the light of this and many other biblical verses, showing that biblical wisdom is *both* philosophical and practical, not just practical.

For example, sometimes after explaining the doctrine of predestination to someone, and after answering all of his questions and objections, he would still sigh and say, "Well, I guess it's just a mystery," in the sense that the doctrine is something that we cannot understand after all. But I just finished explaining it to him, answered all his questions and objections, until he could find nothing biblically or logically wrong with it! It is not that the doctrine could not be understood, but that he refused to accept it, and that was one way he thought he could escape. If God has revealed a doctrine in Scripture, then to call it a "mystery" (in the sense of something *still* hidden), as if he has never revealed it, would be to insult and defy him. Therefore, we should never fail to challenge a false and illegitimate appeal to "mystery," especially when it is done to mask one's unbelief and defiance.

If something is clearly revealed and explained, then it is certainly not a "mystery" in the sense that it is still hidden or that it cannot be understood. Indeed, when it comes to this word, there is a confusion between the common usage and the biblical usage.

In common usage, the word often refers to something that we cannot understand, but in biblical usage, and even in the context of our passage, it is obvious that the word is used in a different way. Paul has just said that God gives us "wisdom and prudence," and writes that "he *made known* to us the mystery of his will" (v. 8). In other words, a "mystery" is not something that humans cannot understand, even if it is something hidden at a given time. Here Paul is referring to something that *was* hidden, but that has now been "made known." Instead of referring to something that we do not know or cannot understand, the biblical usage of "mystery" refers to almost the opposite – indeed to something that probably *was* hidden, but now has been revealed and explained.<sup>75</sup>

Therefore, O'Brien calls this mystery an "open secret."<sup>76</sup> Markus Barth is more elaborate, and writes:

But the one *mystērion* of God, even the "secret" of God, is for Paul far from unknowable. It is known by revelation and is to be made known all over the world. Certainly he has the highest respect for the revelation and gospel entrusted to him – but it is respect caused by knowledge rather than by ignorance and incompetence....The "secret" of which he speaks can therefore not be identified with a mystery wholly or partly, always or temporarily, actually or intentionally shrouded in a cloud bank. He does not engage in paradoxical logic or glossolalia. Plain, frank, sober, courageous talk, though tinted with characteristics of the diction of prayer, is the way he speaks of God's secret. In short, when he speaks of one

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<sup>75</sup> In another context, Luther writes, "Does not Paul acknowledge it to be wisdom hidden in a mystery, foretold indeed by the prophets but revealed only by the gospel, so that it was from eternity secret and unknown to the world (cf. 1 Cor. 2:7)?" (Luther, p. 306). Thus to Luther, a "mystery" means something foretold by the prophets, but revealed by the gospel, as we also affirm here. See also Romans 16:25-26; 1 Corinthians 2:7-10; Ephesians 3:2-6, 6:19; Colossians 1:25-27, 2:2-3, 4:3.

<sup>76</sup> O'Brien, p. 109.

*mystērion*, then he means a mystery that is revealed; all he has to say is based on the manifestation of the formerly hidden.<sup>77</sup>

The biblical usage of "mystery" is indeed meaningful and instructive, but it leaves no room for anti-intellectualism, and gives no excuse for withholding assent or obedience. Appealing to "mystery" (as something still hidden) may sound pious and reverent to some, as if one is struck by the depth and the wonder of divine wisdom; however, when such an appeal is made in the face of clear revelation, it simply betrays one's laziness and defiance. If God has revealed something, then we should study it, and we should believe it.<sup>78</sup>

## RECONCILIATION

What, then, is this mystery? What is the content of this "secret," that was once hidden, but now has been revealed? Although Paul elaborates on it later in the letter, the immediate context also gives us some clear indications.

First, whatever this "mystery" concerning "his will" is about, it is entirely founded on God's absolute sovereignty, and performed by agency of the Son. Paul writes that it is "according to his good pleasure" (v. 9), which "he purposed in Christ" (v. 9), and to be executed at his designated time (v. 10).

Then, Paul states that the mystery of his will is "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (v. 10). The word translated "to bring...together" or "summing up" (NASB) designates, in mathematics, the practice of adding up a column of figures and placing the sum at the top, and in rhetoric, it refers to the conclusion of a speech or argument. Therefore, broadly speaking, God's "secret" plan is to "sum up" "all things" in heaven and on earth" under Christ.<sup>79</sup>

God is summing up "all things in heaven and on earth" under Christ. In the general sense, this is not restricted to salvation or believers, but it literally refers to "all things." Paul is first referring to a cosmic unity; however, this does not imply that all things will be peaceably reconciled to God in Christ. Rather, Paul seems to have in mind the same thing that he speaks of in Philippians 2:9-11 – namely, that God has exalted Christ to the highest place, so that all will "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father," although many will doubtless do this by compulsion and not by sincere faith. In this sense, when Paul says that God is bringing together "all things" under Christ, he also includes all the things that will never be peaceably reconciled to God, such as Satan, his angels, and the reprobates.

In other words, God will put everything in its proper place by clearly defining and exhibiting its relation to Christ. This by no means imply that everyone will be saved,

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<sup>77</sup> Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3* (The Anchor Bible, Vol. 34); Doubleday, 1974; p. 126.

<sup>78</sup> The biblical usage of "mystery" also implies the necessity of special revelation – it is something that would remain hidden unless and until God reveals it to us, and now he has indeed revealed it.

<sup>79</sup> I say "broadly speaking" because after this Paul immediately brings up a specific application of this idea (v. 11-12).

since not every relationship with Christ is a saving relationship. However, since Christ himself said, "He who is not with me is against me" (Matthew 12:30), every person has either a positive or a negative relationship with him. It is impossible to have absolutely no relationship with Christ; no one is neutral – one is either his friend or his enemy.

Since God is the one who sovereignty directs all of history by his providence, and since this teaching (that he will sum up all things in Christ) states the purpose toward which God directs all of history by his providence, this teaching is therefore also the necessary principle by which anyone can have an accurate understanding of history, or historical events, persons, and periods.

That is, since God directs all of history – every detail of it – with the intent to sum up all things in Christ, this means that the only way to have an accurate view of any historical event, person, or period is to adopt this principle as the presupposition of historical understanding and interpretation. This applies to even the seemingly least significant decisions and occurrences.

This in turn means that non-Christians cannot be good historians. No matter how skilled and knowledgeable they consider themselves to be, unless they first presuppose the sovereignty of God and the primacy of Christ, they are incompetent, inaccurate, and incomplete in their historical interpretations. Since all of history follows God's foreordained plan, to exclude or ignore Christ in one's historical investigations is also to preclude any possibility for proper understanding. "Christ" (including all the wisdom and knowledge hidden in him, revealed to us in Scripture) must be our intellectual starting point, even in the study of history.

There is a more specific sense in which God is summing up all things in Christ, and that is the soteriological sense, in which we are referring to how God brings together all of his *chosen ones* under Christ. Immediately after stating that God will "bring all things" together under Christ, Paul continues:

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit... (Ephesians 1:11-13)

In these verses, Paul makes a distinction between Jews and non-Jews (or Gentiles).<sup>80</sup> However, he does not make this distinction to emphasize the distinction; rather, he makes it so that he may point out how the two groups have now been united, namely, by the foreordination of God, the atonement of Christ, and the work of the Spirit.

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<sup>80</sup> See also Ephesians 2:11-13, 3:1-6, and 4:17.

The unity between the two groups in Christ is entirely founded on God's immutable and predetermined plan. It was God who decided that he would *choose* for salvation both Jews and non-Jews, or rather, it was God who decided that he would *create* some of those whom he has conceived and chosen in his mind in eternity as Jews, and some as Gentiles. The Jews and Gentiles did not create themselves (or by someone else) to be presented to God for his choosing; rather, God created some of his elect to be Jews, and created others to be Gentiles, but both are elect in Christ.

To paraphrase the apostle, "The mystery of his will is that he will sum up all things under Christ. When it comes to his people, he has predestined some of us Jews to first believe in Christ, but he has predestined some of you Gentiles to also believe in Christ and be saved. By giving us faith in the same gospel, God has placed you Gentile believers 'in Christ' in the same way that he has for us Jewish believers."<sup>81</sup> That this is clearly what Paul has in mind is seen later in the letter, where he writes:

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the *mystery made known* to me by revelation, as I have *already written briefly*. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand *my insight into the mystery* of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as *it has now been revealed* by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 3:2-6)

Note especially verse 6 in which he explicitly explains what "mystery" he is talking about: "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." By faith in the gospel, the Gentile Christians have become "heirs together," "members together," and "sharers together" with the Jewish Christians in Christ. As Paul writes elsewhere, "For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Romans 10:12-13).

If the general sense of "the mystery of his will" is the unity of the *cosmos* under Christ (in the sense that even the hostile forces are put in their proper places), then the specific sense of the mystery is the unity of the *elect* under Christ (in the sense that Jews and Gentiles have become one in him, sharing the same status).

If this is not difficult to understand, for some of us the more difficult question will be why this is a "mystery" at all. It appears neither complex nor surprising to many or even

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<sup>81</sup> It is impossible to properly understand Ephesians without fully acknowledging that God exercises total and direct control over everything, from the most general directions to the most specific details in all of history, including even something seemingly insignificant like the death of a sparrow (Matthew 10:29).

most of us. The answer corresponds to the very nature of divine "mystery," that it is something that *was hidden*, but *now revealed*. As R. B. Kuiper writes:

...salvation is for gentiles as well as Jews. For us who live in the twentieth century after Christ it is difficult, if not impossible, to grasp the novelty of that truth for the Jews of the first century of the Christian era. It impressed them as being exceedingly radical. So deeply was the fact that God showed His word unto Jacob, His statutes and His judgments unto Israel, and that He dealt thus with no other nation (Ps. 147:19f.) ingrained into the very fibre of the Jewish soul, that it rebelled violently against the notion that the middle wall of partition between Jew and gentile had been broken down and that peace was to be preached to them that were afar off as well as to them that were nigh (Eph. 2:14, 17).

The Jews of that day were almost totally blind to what appears to us to be, and really is, the plain and emphatic teaching of the Old Testament: that the national church would one day blossom forth into a universal church. In spite of the fact that the Master had on numerous occasions commanded the disciples to be His witnesses to the utmost parts of the earth, it required a vision and a voice from heaven to convince the apostle Peter of the propriety of preaching the gospel to a Roman...<sup>82</sup>

Therefore, the reason that many of us may not regard this doctrine as a mystery is precisely because it has now been revealed, so that many of us already know it (or think that we know it) and assume it in our thinking.

Nevertheless, this doctrine is still as necessary and relevant as ever. Although we think that we know it, many professing Christians have, perhaps unintentionally, ignored or even denied it in their thinking. I am referring to unbiblical dispensational teachings that insist that God even now regards the Jewish people as especially chosen and superior to the Gentiles. To affirm this in any sense and to any degree is to reject the very "mystery" that has now been revealed for so many centuries, and that we supposedly know so well.

If the mystery of his will is that Gentiles are also equal heirs in Christ, then it is just as certain that Jews are not at all superior to Gentiles in Christ, and those Jews that do not believe are not in Christ at all, and certainly not superior to anybody. Non-Christian Jews

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<sup>82</sup> R. B. Kuiper, *For Whom Did Christ Die?*; Wipf and Stock Publishers; p. 31. Note that, as Kuiper acknowledges, a "mystery" is not necessarily something that has been completely hidden, but what is now revealed in fact has been "the plain and emphatic teaching of the Old Testament" all along. Therefore, we say that a mystery in Scripture is something that is foretold (or sometimes at least hinted at) by the prophets and that is now fully revealed by Christ and the apostles. The salvation of the Gentiles is founded on God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:3).

are doomed to hell just as much as the most vile and wicked non-Christian Gentiles. "There is no difference" (Romans 3:22, 10:12).<sup>83</sup>

When God announced by Christ, "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (Matthew 21:43), he was not making an empty threat – he did it! The church now mainly consists of Gentiles, not Jews. The Jews have no special or exclusion rights in the kingdom; rather, they must enter just like everyone else, that is, through faith in Christ. And they are to receive no special treatment and given no special respect in the church (Galatians 3:28).<sup>84</sup> This point is very simple, and basic to the biblical gospel; nevertheless, many dispensationalists miss it or even reject it.

### CERTIFICATION

According to God's foreordination, he would save the Jewish elect and the Gentile elect in the same way – by giving them faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul writes elsewhere, "The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you'" (Galatians 3:8). Although the Jews were chronologically "the first to hope in Christ" (Ephesians 1:12) the Gentiles "also were included in Christ" by hearing and believing the gospel (v. 13).

Then, Paul says, "Having believed, you were *marked in him with a seal*, the promised Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 1:13). In the ancient world, a seal was often applied to a letter, a legal document, a piece of property, or an important shipment in order to protect it, and to serve as a proof of ownership or authenticity. A sealed letter or shipment was meant to be opened only by the designated recipient, and depending on the person whose seal marked the item, to illegally break a seal could result in grave consequences.

Scripture teaches that when we believed the gospel, God sealed us with his Holy Spirit. By doing so, he officially declares that he owns and protects us, and that we are not to be tempered with by anyone else. And we also have been sealed for a purpose, and that by the seal of God. As Paul writes later in the letter, "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed *for the day of redemption*" (4:30). Therefore, the seal of God upon us implies that, by his divine authority and power, he has decreed that we

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<sup>83</sup> Is there a place for Jewish outreach, then? Yes, but not because they are *Jews*, but because they are *sinners*, just like everyone else.

<sup>84</sup> Of course I *do not* say that they should be given *worse* treatment or *less* respect than others, but only that they are not to be considered superior in any sense *just because* they are Jews. Note that Romans 3:1-2 refers to an advantage that the Jews had in history, because they had the Scripture. However, they no longer have even this advantage, because the Gentiles now also have the Scripture; moreover, the Gentile Christians rightly embrace the New Testament, which enables them to understand the Old even better than the Jews. Any person or any group that affirms anything less than the entire Scripture is at a severe *disadvantage*, to put it mildly. Now, if a Jewish person were to repent and believe the gospel, then he would become *equal* to a non-Jewish believer, but by no means superior. The point is that race is spiritually irrelevant. As Paul continues to say, "What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin" (Romans 3:9).

will remain in the state of faith and grace, and that we will reach the completion of our redemption.

Indeed, the Holy Spirit by whom God has sealed us, "is a deposit *guaranteeing* our inheritance" (v. 14). A "deposit" refers to a down payment or first installment provided by the buyer to signify his intention to complete the purchase and to reserve the item so that it becomes unavailable to any other party.

In today's commercial world, it is possible to forfeit one's deposit if he no longer desires the item or if he cannot produce the rest of the money; however, it seems that at that time, the "deposit" refers to a partial payment or a pledge guaranteeing that the full payment would follow. In any case, Paul's use of "deposit" certainly indicates much more than a mere *gesture* of God's intention, because he explicitly states that it is a *guarantee* that God will complete what he has started in us. Paul repeats this in one of his letters to the Corinthians, saying, "He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (2 Corinthians 1:21-22) and "Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (5:5).

Therefore, Paul teaches that once a person truly becomes a Christian, there is no possibility of him truly becoming a non-Christian again; once God gives a person true faith in Christ, there is no possibility that he will lose this faith (John 10:29). Although true Christians often stumble, and sometimes even into great sins, it is impossible for them to be truly and finally lost (Luke 22:32). If a person truly and finally denounces the faith, then it can only mean that he has never been a true Christian in the first place, no matter how much he appeared to be one to others. As John writes, "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (1 John 2:19).

This does not imply that once you have become a Christian, then you may constantly and deliberately sin without any regard for God's laws and precepts and still regard yourself a Christian, for if you really are a Christian, then you will not think this way. Because a true Christian is one who has been inwardly changed by God, he will not truly and finally adopt a licentious lifestyle. Also, a true Christian who has temporarily stumbled into a sinful way of living will lack assurance of salvation. Although he is still saved, he cannot be certain of it, and this lack of assurance is often one of the means by which God uses to restore the believer who has stumbled. The normal and healthy course for a Christian is to diligently seek assurance of his salvation through pursuing knowledge and holiness (2 Peter 1:10).

Some people call this teaching the doctrine of "eternal security," but I prefer "the preservation of believers" or "the preservation of the saints." Then, some call this "the perseverance of the saints," which is not wrong, for true Christians indeed persevere in their faith. Nevertheless, we must remember that we *persevere* in faith only because God *preserves* us by his power. As Paul writes in the same context where he mentions God's



seal and deposit, "Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:21; also see 1 Peter 1:3-5).

In connection with the "deposit," Paul calls us "God's possession" (v. 14). This seems to be an allusion to how God addresses Israel in the Old Testament. For example, God says in Exodus 19:5-6, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be *my treasured possession*. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me *a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*." Peter takes up the same expressions used here and applies them to the church: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession" (1 Peter 2:9, NASB). And he clearly has Gentile believers in mind when he writes this: "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (v. 10; see Romans 9:23-26).

In other words, Gentile Christians are just as much "God's people" as the Jews were, and now if a Jew wishes to become one of God's people, he must also believe in Christ. Just because he is a Jew means *nothing*, "For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham" (Luke 3:8). It is time not only for Jews to learn this, but also for non-Jews, even professing Christians, to learn this. "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Timothy 2:19) – if God has truly given us faith in Christ, then we are among his chosen ones; if we are among his chosen ones, then we are his special possession; and if we are his special possession, then he has given us his *guarantee* that he will jealously protect and preserve us to the day of redemption by his omnipotence.

## CONCLUSION

Only when we ascribe the power and the initiative to God in every aspect and every stage of our salvation can we be consistent with the repeatedly stated purpose of God's foreordained plan, namely, that God does all these things "to the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1:14; also v. 6 and 12). Arminianism greatly misrepresents both the content and the execution of God's plan, and robs God of his praise and glory. Thus Paul's theological doxology (v. 3-14) opposes Arminianism in all its forms.

God is one "who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (v. 11), and not one who requests man's permission and opinion, as if man can permit or opine anything without God's direct control in the first place. Because there is such a thing as divine sovereignty, there is no such thing as human free will – "only an insane person could believe both of these."<sup>85</sup> Of course Arminians are insane, or at least they sound like it. In any case, what really happens is that they affirm human free will, and they lie when they affirm divine sovereignty. And as we have seen above, *inconsistent* Calvinists sound quite foolish as well.

Paul's doxology begins this letter and contains all the main themes of the letter. At the same time, the content of the doxology itself is founded on the doctrine of predestination,

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<sup>85</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Today's Evangelism*; The Trinity Foundation, 1990; p. 58.

and therefore predestination is the foundation of the entire letter.<sup>86</sup> And since Paul makes the doctrine of predestination the foundation of his letter, we have accordingly made it the foundation of this exposition of the letter. Predestination is the foundation of Christian salvation and expectation; it is the almighty God who sovereignly foreordained all things in eternity and who then executes his decrees in time and in history.

The rest of this letter discusses how God has been carrying out his sovereign decrees, and our proper response as believers. In any case, since we have established the all-important theological groundwork of predestination, and since we have already touched on the main themes of this letter in this exposition of the doxology, and lest this commentary becomes excessively lengthy, we are perhaps justified in giving shorter treatments to the remaining sections of this letter, and be pardoned for passing over many of the details.

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<sup>86</sup> One implication is that if a commentary begins its exposition of Ephesians by affirming Arminianism (and / or dispensationalism), then it entirely misses the main thrust of the apostle's thinking. If it fails to grasp the very foundation of the letter, then it has no hope of accurately explaining the rest of it. Although such a commentary may be useful as a foil for scholars, it is unreliable and useless as a guide to the general reader, because it distorts both Paul's doxology, and also the topics that he brings up in the rest of this letter, such as human depravity, regeneration, reconciliation (between Jews and Gentiles), conversion (repentance and faith), sanctification, and spiritual power and warfare.

### 3. REGENERATION

#### EPHESIANS 1:15-23

*For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.*

*I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*

*That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.*

*And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*

From the doxology of 1:3-14, Paul turns to thanksgiving and prayer in verse 15.<sup>1</sup> Then, as Patzia notes, "It is possible to regard 1:20-3:13 as a long doctrinal parenthesis in which the apostle develops his ideas on the unity of Jew and Gentile in the church (2:11, 12) and expounds upon his personal role as a messenger of the gospel (3:1-13)."<sup>2</sup> He explicitly takes up the prayer again in 3:14-19, seemingly a continuation of what he started in 1:15. After 1:3-14, the next major section appears to be 1:15-2:10, and this is what we will discuss in this chapter of our commentary.

Many people complain that if Calvinism is true – if the Bible is true – then prayer becomes a meaningless exercise. According to them, if God has predetermined all things, including the very thoughts of men, then there is no reason to pray at all. However, this objection betrays certain unbiblical and unjustified assumptions about the role and function of prayer. In other words, because they have assumed certain things about prayer that are unbiblical, their concept of prayer then naturally contradicts the relevant biblical doctrines, such as divine sovereignty, election, and reprobation.

The objection is also self-defeating. Jesus says, "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:8). Even if they reject the biblical doctrine of divine

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<sup>1</sup> See D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers*; Baker Books, 1992; p. 167-180.

<sup>2</sup> Patzia, p. 163.

sovereignty, if they affirm divine omniscience, then by their own way of thinking, prayer would still be meaningless, since God already knows whatever they wish to tell him in prayer.

If their concept of prayer involves initiating an action by God, changing the mind of God, or introducing a new thought to the mind of God, then since this contradicts what Scripture reveals about the nature of God, their concept of prayer departs from the realm of Christian prayer altogether. To their way of thinking, divine omniscience should be just as much a problem as divine sovereignty, but the Bible teaches both.

Scripture nowhere teaches that prayer is to make God do something that he does not already want to do, or to tell him something that he does not already know. Rather, prayer is one of the means by which God performs what he has already decided to do, and to provide what he already knows that we need. This conflicts with neither divine sovereignty nor divine omniscience. A consistent application of the biblical doctrine of divine sovereignty would necessarily imply that even our prayers are immutably predetermined by God in eternity and irresistibly caused by God in history.

In other words, to ask, "If God has predetermined all things, then why do we need to pray?" either assumes that God has not really predetermined all things (so that he has not predetermined our prayers) or that it is somehow wrong for God to initiate and cause our prayers and then use them as the means by which he performs what he has predetermined. The first is an inconsistent application of divine sovereignty, in which case it fails to attack divine sovereignty; the second is not for us to say, and betrays extreme arrogance, as if we should dictate to God how he should perform his decrees.

Paul does not hold to the false view of prayer that we have just mentioned. Instead of thinking that divine sovereignty and predestination render prayer unnecessary and meaningless, he prays precisely on the basis of what he has just said about divine sovereignty and predestination. Our positive expectation in prayer is founded precisely upon the fact that God is in full control of all circumstances. And our faith in praying for the conversion and progress of people is founded precisely upon the fact that God exercises complete control over all people, including their very thoughts and motives. Prayer is meaningful because of the biblical doctrines about divine sovereignty and absolute predestination, and not in spite of them.<sup>3</sup>

Paul's prayer follows from what he has just stated in 1:3-14, and especially verses 13 and 14. Because God is sovereign, because he has predestined believers for salvation, because he has chosen to sum up all things in Christ, and in particular because he has decided to save and unite Jews and Gentiles in Christ, and that this decree is actually being carried out in the lives of his readers, Paul gives thanks.

Having heard about the "faith" of his readers, Paul says that he gives thanks "for" them, not "to" them. This is consistent with the biblical teaching that faith is not something initiated and controlled by the people themselves, but that faith is a gift from God. As D.

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<sup>3</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Prayer and Revelation*.

A. Carson correctly notes, "If we hear of substantial numbers of people in another city or country who have been genuinely transformed by the gospel, we would not think of going to them to thank them for becoming Christians. Instead, we thank God for so working in them that they have become Christians. That is what Paul is doing."<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, since the Arminians ascribe at least a part of the converts' faith to their own "free will," should we not divert to these new believers an appropriate amount of thanksgiving? But if we are going to be faithful to and consistent with biblical teaching, rather than thanking the converts for becoming Christians, or praising them for their good sense for accepting the gospel, we must thank God for making them Christians, and praise him alone for his wisdom and kindness in rescuing them from sin and death, solely by his sovereign grace and power.

Paul directs his prayer to "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father." His idea of God is definite and exclusive. The various religions in this world are vastly different from one another, so that Paul is not praying to a generic deity, as if there is such a thing. Rather, he is praying to him who has a specific relationship to Jesus Christ, and who has a specific relationship with believers through Jesus Christ. He is not praying to Allah or Buddha, or any other god. Instead, he is praying to one who is antithetical and hostile to Allah and Buddha, and all other gods.

Although Paul is thankful for the conversion of his readers and for what spiritual stability they have attained, he prays that God will grant them greater progress and growth. This is because Paul's aim has never been conversion alone, but to "present everyone perfect in Christ" (Colossians 1:28), so that conversion is only the beginning of what should happen in the believers. Therefore, neither the apostle nor the converts could be complacent, but must strive toward perfection by the power of God, that is, by the ability that God gives them.

To this end, Paul prays that God would give the readers "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation." The word translated "spirit" in itself can refer to the Holy Spirit, the human spirit, or even just a quality or condition of the mind. It is not always immediately obvious to which of these the word refers, and one must take the context into account.

Some commentators observe that when "spirit" is preceded by the definite article ("the"), the expression often refers to the Spirit of God, and thus would be rendered "*the* Spirit." In this instance, the definite article is absent in the original; however, this does not automatically mean that Paul is referring to the human spirit. The other possibility is that, when the definite article is missing, and when the context demands it, the proper understanding should be that an endowment or manifestation of the Spirit of God is intended.

The context of our passage seems to leave room for only the last possibility. First, Paul is asking God to give his readers this "spirit," when we know from verse 13 that they have already received the Holy Spirit, and that as humans each of them already have a human

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<sup>4</sup> Carson, *Spiritual Reformation*; p. 171.

spirit. Second, Paul's request for "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation" to be given to his readers seems to parallel what immediately follows, that is, his request that "the eyes of your heart may be enlightened."

Therefore, Paul's request is not that God would give his readers the Holy Spirit, as if they have not already received the Spirit, and it is certainly not that God would grant each of them a human spirit. Rather, Paul is asking God to grant his readers the intellectual quality of "wisdom and revelation," or as he puts it in Colossians, he is asking God to give them "spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Colossians 1:9). Thus some translations instead say, "*a spirit* of wisdom and revelation." Such wisdom, of course, is the result of the Holy Spirit's work in the human mind. Therefore, Wuest rightly concludes:

The word *pneuma* has among its various uses the meaning, "a disposition or influence which fills and governs the soul of anyone." What Paul is praying for is that God might so work in the lives of the Ephesian saints that they will have the spiritual wisdom and a revelation from Him that is the result of the Holy Spirit's work of energizing their human spirit. That spiritual disposition should characterize these saints.<sup>5</sup>

The foundation of such a request can be nothing other than God's absolute sovereignty over all things. Within the biblical worldview, to pray for wisdom and enlightenment presupposes God's direct contact with and control over the mind of man. Biblical teaching opposes any idea that God would exercise absolute control over all things but at the same time allow the human mind to control itself by its own free will, as if this is even metaphysically possible. Instead, Scripture testifies in many places that God can and does enlighten some and confound others,<sup>6</sup> according to his will and pleasure. Therefore, God's sovereignty extends to the mind of man, and nothing escapes his absolute control and determination.

Paul's priority is intellectual, and his prayer reflects this. A Christian properly operates by intellectual understanding of revealed information. In other words, a Christian should strive to understand and remember biblical doctrines, and then obey them and live by them. A Christian lives and grows by knowledge, and knowledge about the things of God. When Paul prays that his readers would receive spiritual wisdom, that they would receive an intellectual acuity about spiritual things, he is in effect praying that God would open to them the way to real and sustained spiritual blessing and progress.

Spiritual wisdom is something that Paul asks God to give to his readers, implying that it is not something that we can attain solely by human effort. To paraphrase Paul, although God employs human ministers to teach and to persuade, only God himself can make such efforts effective (1 Corinthians 3:6). To those who are spiritually blind, God sends human instruments to approach and confront them, but their words become effective only when

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<sup>5</sup> Wuest, p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Daniel 1:17-20, 4:29-37, 5:21.

God directly works from within the hearers' minds, causing spiritual light to break forth from within (2 Corinthians 4:4-6).

Even after conversion, spiritual progress can come only from the work of God within the mind of man. God certainly sends men to teach from without, but this provides only the occasion upon which God may choose to grant illumination from within. Therefore, just as we cannot boast in our conversion, except for what Christ has done in us, we cannot boast about our progress in sanctification, that is, except for what Christ continues to do in us. Although we are speaking of biblical soteriology (Matthew 16:16-17), besides being an explicit biblical teaching in itself, this point is in fact a necessarily implication and a specific application of biblical epistemology.<sup>7</sup>

Paul's request for "a spirit of wisdom and revelation" parallels his request that God would enlighten "the eyes of your heart." Charismatics often abuse this portion of Scripture, deriving from it the notion that it is legitimate to expect private "revelations" of new doctrines, personal information, and future events. *Even if* we should expect God to reveal these things to us, we cannot justify this expectation from this biblical passage, because it is teaching something entirely different. Then, there are non-charismatic evangelicals and even Reformed believers who, on the basis of the language used in this passage, suggest that we must not grasp the word of God only in our minds, but that our knowledge must move "from our heads to our hearts," or that we must not believe God's word "only in our heads, but also in our hearts."

However, this passage can justify neither extra-biblical revelations nor the "head-heart" distinction.

When we examine verses 17 and 18 in context, both what comes before and what comes after these verses tell us precisely what Paul wants his readers to understand. The prayer is only acknowledging the fact that although human ministers can teach about spiritual things, God must then directly work within to cause comprehension and agreement. It provides no support for extra-biblical revelations.

As for the teaching about the "head" and the "heart," not only is this an unbiblical distinction, but it is also unbiblical to suggest that man thinks with his "head" in the first place. If man really thinks with his "head," as in his physical head or brain, then no thinking can remain after the body dies, but this would contradict biblical teaching concerning man's continual consciousness after physical death. No matter what the role of the "head" or the brain is, man thinks with his incorporeal mind, not his physical "head" or brain.

As for the "heart," I have already dealt with this word and its frequent abuse in several other places. Here I will not repeat all that I have said on the subject, but a short explanation must suffice.

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<sup>7</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions*.

Christians often affirm that the "heart" refers to the "whole personality," adding that this must include "the mind, the will, and the emotions." But nowhere in Scripture do we find that the "heart" can be divided into these parts; rather, it appears that these divisions were derived from secular psychology. Besides, the idea is in itself absurd – it seems to suggest that the will and the emotions are somehow different from the mind, that they are non-mental. But both our decisions and emotions are mental by definition; there is no such thing as a non-mental decision or a non-mental emotion.

If by saying that the "heart" means the "whole personality" they are referring to all of the mind's faculties to think, to decide, and to emote (since the mind, the will, and the emotions are all mental), then they are just saying that the heart means the mind, which is my position. The whole mind of man *is* the "whole personality" of man, and thus the heart of man.

Therefore, "the eyes of your heart" is just another way of saying, "the understanding of your mind." Paul is thus praying for his readers to receive an intellectual understanding about spiritual things, especially the doctrines that he mentions in this same letter. As Psalm 119:18 states, "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law." Likewise, O'Brien agrees that Paul is emphasizing a person's "thinking."<sup>8</sup>

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

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

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

The biblical way to spiritual growth opposes all deistic ideas and tendencies, and all mystical and occult means. In other words, although God has ordained various means to help us gain spiritual knowledge and moral progress, and although all of these means are

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<sup>8</sup> O'Brien, p. 134.



founded on an intellectual understanding of revealed propositions, this does not at all exclude the necessity of God's direct participation to render these means effective. Rejecting mysticism and anti-intellectualism does not result in deism; rather, biblical intellectualism depends on God's immanence – his grace and power at work in our lives and our minds. Therefore, while we diligently take advantage of all the means that God has provided for our spiritual progress, we also earnestly petition him for spiritual enlightenment.

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

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

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

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

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

Most Charismatics and many Evangelicals have exchanged true spiritual power with counterfeit spiritual power, and true wisdom with mystical nonsense. Instead of wielding intellectual weapons inspired and energized by "divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:4), they have exchanged them for mystical practices inspired and energized by their own flesh. Scripture teaches that the strongholds we must demolish consist of intellectual "arguments" (v. 5). But some have altogether missed the nature of

this spiritual conflict – that we are to "take captive every *thought*" – and so they spend their time screaming prayers and rebukes at demons in the sky.<sup>9</sup>

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

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

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

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

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel 10 relates what happened in the spiritual world as a result of his prayer *to God*. It does not teach that we are to pray directly against demons or to angels for anything. Rather, we must pray directly to God, and trust him to do what needs to be done. We then participate in spiritual conflict and wage war against Satan primarily by engaging in intellectual preaching and argumentation against demonic ideas in other people. And since our divine weapons are founded on *spiritual* wisdom, we are not referring to arguing against non-Christian ideas with non-Christian wisdom. The nature of spiritual conflict does not consist of arguing against, for example, secular science with *better* secular science; rather, by divine wisdom and power, we declare and demonstrate the superiority of divine wisdom over the entire spectrum of secular ideas. We are referring to the triumph of Christian *theology* over all non-Christian ideas, whether the debate has to do with science, history, politics, ethics, or any other subject. In short, our strategy is a wise application of biblical revelation, made effective by divine power.

Paul's priority is intellectual, but under this general concern, there are several specific doctrines that he now wishes his readers to understand. Thus his priority is intellectual in general, and doctrinal in particular. Just as God grants us not only intellectual potential (v. 8) but also reveals to us actual information about "the mystery of his will" (v. 9), Paul prays that his readers will receive not only intellectual potential (v. 17) but also actual knowledge about specific doctrines. In particular, he prays that his readers will "know him better," that they will know "the hope which he has called you," "the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints," and "his incomparably great power for us who believe." In short, Paul prays that they will know "His calling," "His inheritance," and "His power" (NASB).

It is popular to make a sharp distinction between "knowing God" and "knowing *about* God." However, if there is a difference between the two at all, there must at least be a definite and direct relationship; otherwise, it would be possible for one to meaningfully assert, "I know God very well, but I know nothing at all *about* him," which is nonsense. To have a relationship with someone necessarily implies knowledge about the person, and to know someone better necessarily implies gaining additional knowledge about him. Again, otherwise it would be possible to meaningfully assert, "I know him much better now, but I know nothing more *about* him," which is nonsense.

In our passage, to "know him better" appears to be a general request that Paul makes more specific by what immediately follows. As Patzia explains, "The following verses reveal the spiritual direction of this request and how it is illustrated and developed. To know God is to 'be enlightened' (1:18a); enlightenment leads to an understanding of the hope of God's call (1:18b), God's blessing (inheritance, 1:18c), and God's power (1:19), as demonstrated in Christ's resurrection (1:20) and exaltation (1:21-23)."<sup>10</sup>

Today there are many people who claim that they want to "know God," but they are unwilling to use the God-ordained means to get to know him, since many of them are really seeking feelings and experiences instead of real spiritual knowledge. If a person truly wants to know God better, let him take up a systematic theology or a biblical commentary, and read it with prayer.

Knowing God better involves understanding "the hope to which he has called you," or "the hope of His calling" (NASB). Since the Christians are the ones called by God, it is appropriate for Paul to speak of the "hope of *your* calling" (4:4) later in the letter. But here it seems that the apostle wishes to continue his emphasis that salvation is wholly initiated and effected by God, and thus he speaks of "*His* calling." That is, although the Christians are the ones called by God, Paul wants to stress that it is God who has called the Christians.

The Christian "hope" is not subjective – it is not a private feeling or a personal opinion about God's plan or the Christian's destiny. Instead, it is an objective reality and expectation founded on God's immutable promises. Because the Gentiles were "separate from Christ," they were also "*without hope* and without God in the world" (2:12). Non-

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<sup>10</sup> Patzia, p. 165.

Christians today are in the same condition as these Gentiles were before their conversion – they are hopeless and godless people, living meaningless and worthless lives. And when they die, their condition will only become much worse.

In contrast, God has sovereignly rescued these Gentile readers from their futile existence, and has given them hope in Jesus Christ. Paul prays that they would understand what has happened to them, and that they would learn the content of the hope to which God has called them. The content of this hope includes all that the apostle has already mentioned, and also what he continues to discuss in the rest of the letter.

Paul prays that his readers will also know "the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints" (NASB). He has mentioned "our inheritance" in verse 14, which seems to parallel Colossians 1:12, which says that "the Father...has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light." So there is no doubt but that Christians possess an inheritance from God. Thus the context may suggest that Paul is also referring to the believers' inheritance in verse 18.

Nevertheless, some commentators insist that according to the Greek, Paul has in mind God's inheritance. Both the broad context of biblical motifs and expressions and the narrow context of this letter permit this understanding; it is certainly appropriate to think of God's people as his possession or inheritance (v. 14b). Scripture teaches both ideas – that Christians have an inheritance from God and that Christians are the inheritance of God. Paul most likely has in mind the latter in verse 18, and if so, he prays it "dawns on them that God intends to make them with all the saints a wonderful inheritance for himself."<sup>11</sup>

After praying that his readers would know the hope of God's calling and the glory of God's inheritance, Paul prays that they would also know "the surpassing greatness of His power" (NASB), because it is this very power that undergirds the calling and secures the inheritance. The word translated "surpassing" ("incomparably" in NIV) is *hyperballon*, and "it suggests that the conception it is attached to is thrown over into another sphere altogether."<sup>12</sup> So when it precedes *megethos* ("greatness"), the combination "brings out in a most emphatic way the greatness of the power towards those who believe."<sup>13</sup> It denotes a superabundance of power.

As if this is not enough, Paul presses his point by stacking one synonym on top of another, and writes, "That power [*dynamis*] is like the working [*energia*] of his mighty [*kratos*] strength [*ischys*]" (v. 19). Although the Greek here is "highly poetic,"<sup>14</sup> so that a crude English paraphrase cannot do it justice, Paul is essentially praying that his readers might know something about God's powerful working of his powerful power! He is

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<sup>11</sup> Turner, p. 1227.

<sup>12</sup> A. Skevington Wood, *Ephesians* (The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 11); Zondervan Publishing House, 1978; p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> O'Brien, p. 137.

<sup>14</sup> Patzia, p. 167.

straining the limits of ordinary human expressions in an attempt to give an adequate description of the magnitude of God's power.<sup>15</sup>

In considering the surpassing greatness of God's power, Paul is referring to not only his *potential* power, but rather his *demonstrated* power. He is not just speaking of the power that God *could* exercise, but the power that God *has* exercised. He writes, "That power is like the working of his mighty strength, *which he exerted* in Christ" (v. 20).

Doubtless such great power cannot but be unleashed with great effect. Specifically, what did God do with this power? How did he demonstrate it? Paul explains that this power was exerted in Christ when God "raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand." In other words, this power was released and demonstrated in the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ.

For the sake of brevity, we will not spend time considering the resurrection of Christ by itself, except to mention that his resurrection guarantees the future resurrection of all those who trust in him (1 Corinthians 6:14, 15:23). Nevertheless, even this fact is properly understood only when considered in connection with Christ's exaltation to God's right hand, that is, to the highest place of authority. In this manner, Christ fulfills the Messianic prophecy of Psalm 110.

In Christ's exaltation, God has placed him "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" (v. 21). Some commentators observe that Paul's readers reside in a region where idolatry, the occult, and various superstitions run rampant (Acts 19:17-19, 24-28), and they suggest that the apostle is possibly concerned to show that "none of the powers they were prone to fear could compare with Jesus."<sup>16</sup> Although our struggle is "against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (6:12), Christ has been exalted above all of them, and God has fully equipped us to stand our ground (6:13-17).<sup>17</sup>

Paul wants to make it very clear that there is no exception but that Christ is over "*all* rule and authority, power and dominion, and *every* title that can be given, not only in *the present age* but also in *the age to come*." It matters not who, what, or when these entities are, but Paul says that "God placed *all things* under his feet and appointed him to be *head over everything*" (v. 22). Christ rules with God on his right hand, and there is nothing above him or equal to him. Christ's authority in turn secures our protection and victory, because it is "for the church" (v. 22) that God has so exalted him, so that Christ's ultimate authority directly benefits and empowers God's people.

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<sup>15</sup> I say *ordinary* human expressions (as in our everyday speech) because, strictly speaking, even "mere human language" is adequate to express any thought, if by no other means than using "X" to denote the idea.

<sup>16</sup> Turner, p. 1228.

<sup>17</sup> Clinton Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians*; p. 52-56.

Some of us will tend to think that this biblical revelation of God's power and Christ's exaltation is less relevant (or even totally irrelevant) to the church today as when Paul wrote this letter. Surely there is no room for serious consideration of "the powers of this dark world" and "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" in this modern scientific era! But this is not so. Besides the fact that science itself is irrational<sup>18</sup> and superstitious,<sup>19</sup> our present struggle is *still* against "the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient" (2:2).

Much of the world's population is blatantly idolatrous and superstitious, and most of the rest (including the scientific community) is not essentially better, but only more sophisticated in their idolatries and more "scientific" in their superstitions. Divination and even necromancy are just as popular as ever among westerners; the main difference seems to be that they have added eastern religions and superstitions to their repertoire.

Even some professing Christians affirm that their lives may be governed by planetary and other natural forces, when Scripture explicitly condemns such a belief. And some of these so-called believers even think that if they will rearrange their furniture according to the Feng Shui manual, then wealth and fortune will more easily come their way.

Now, regular scientists may deride the disciplines of parapsychology and paranormal research as pseudo-sciences, but they have yet to establish their own disciplines of natural sciences on rational grounds by a tenable philosophy of science. The scientific method cannot even tell me why my pencil drops to the floor when I let go of it, still less can it refute Feng Shui.

In contrast, the biblical doctrines of the sovereignty of God, the predestination of men, and the exaltation of Christ constitute the definitive answer to all idolatries and superstitions. Because God is sovereign over all things, because he has predestined all men (either for salvation or for damnation), and because he has exalted Christ over all powers, we stand upon a rational and infallible foundation when we deride idolatries and superstitions, condemn all non-Christian religions and philosophies, and refute the scientific method.

The missionary preaching in the jungle has no reason to fear the witch doctors, and the believer living in the city has no reason to fear that his window is facing the wrong direction. Likewise, the college student studying at the university has no reason to think that his professor's irrational and superstitious method can learn any truth, let alone refute his faith.<sup>20</sup> The convert from a culture that is prone to ancestor worship is now free (and obligated to) abandon the blasphemous and forbidden practice. Whether we are speaking of ancient idolatries or modern superstitions, pantheistic mysticism or atheistic science, they are all irrational nonsense. Therefore, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

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<sup>18</sup> Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions and Presuppositional Confrontations*.

<sup>19</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Sceptical Essays*, "Is Science Superstitious?"

<sup>20</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *The Philosophy of Science and Belief in God*; The Trinity Foundation, 1996.

In fact, the biblical worldview does not answer only "adult" superstitions, but it also provides a direct answer to children's fear of ghosts and monsters. Non-Christians may simply tell their children that there are no such things as ghosts and monsters, but how do they know this? On the basis of empiricism, it would be impossible to comfort a child who thinks that he has seen a monster, that is, unless he is as irrational as the empiricist when it comes to epistemology, and thus inconsistently applies the empirical theory. Perhaps the empiricist should stop telling his son, "Believe only what *you can* see and feel," and instead tell him, "Believe only what I tell you *I can* see and feel"!

On the other hand, Christian parents can tell their children that *even if* there are things like ghosts and monsters, Christ is above them all, and he will protect and vindicate those who trust him. Of course, we can (and should) teach our children a comprehensive course in biblical demonology to dispel false ideas about the supernatural, but even before we do that, the sovereignty of God and the exaltation of Christ already provide us with a broad and yet direct answer to all things concerning the "powers."

Thus we do not act like theologians when we need doctrinal information and then change to act like mystics when we need divine power. A theology that is biblical is also a theology that is powerful. Thus Paul is, in effect, praying that his readers might become better theologians, not greater mystics and charismatics. For the church to lay hold of God's power for this generation, it needs a fresh and accurate understanding of the sovereignty of God, the predestination of men, and the exaltation of Christ.

Paul writes that God made Christ the head over everything "for the church," and the relationship between Christ and the church is represented by saying that the church "is his body" (v. 23). This is a powerful metaphor, rich with meaning and encouragement for believers; however, some people have turned it upside down and arrived at an interpretation that is precisely the opposite of Paul's intent.

For example, William Barclay writes, "To say that the Church is the Body means that Jesus is counting on us."<sup>21</sup> Really? Why? So far the letter has made it clear that we are the ones counting on him. Some Charismatics teach that Christ in his present (exalted!) condition *can* no longer exercise authority over demonic powers, because he is no longer present on earth with a physical body, and he has delegated all his authority over earth's spiritual affairs to the church, that is, the believers.<sup>22</sup> This teaching is nothing short of blasphemy.

Thus a metaphor intended to illustrate our dependence on Christ and our unity in him has been distorted to portray Christ as helpless and impotent, hoping that we would follow his directions, or as some of them teach, that we would "grant him permission" to act on the earth, perhaps through our prayers and actions.

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<sup>21</sup> Barclay, p. 94.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth E. Hagin, *The Believer's Authority*; Faith Library Publications.

Of course metaphors are limited, and when taken out of context, they can be misleading. In this case, it is not at all difficult to avoid plunging into heretical conclusions. So far, Paul has mentioned how God has predetermined to sum up all things in Christ, and to unite the Jewish elect and the Gentile elect "in Christ." It is very natural to say that this "body" of believers are now united under one "head," which is Christ.

When it comes to the physical body, one finger has no direct and inherent relationship with another, and the elbow has no direct and inherent relationship with the knee, but all of these are united by and under one "head." Likewise, people from various cultures and backgrounds may seem to have little in common, and at first may even be hostile to one another; however, they have become one in Christ. This must be at least part of what Paul means by the metaphor, since he later writes in this letter:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and *in this one body* to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (Ephesians 2:14-16)

Thus by noting the context, we have derived a much more sensible and theologically rich conclusion.<sup>23</sup>

But it seems that Paul intends to convey even more by the metaphor. Later in the letter, when he mentions it again, he applies it to the relationship between a husband and a wife. He writes, "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is *the head* of the wife as Christ is *the head* of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything" (5:22-24).

By saying that the husband is the head of the wife, Paul certainly does not mean to say that the husband is "counting on" the wife! Neither is he saying that the wife must "grant him permission" before the husband can do anything in the home! He intends to say precisely the opposite. By applying the "head-body" metaphor to the marriage relationship, Paul is saying that "wives should submit to their husbands in everything." And this is what he means when he says that the church is Christ's body – not that Christ is "*counting on* us," but that he is *ruling over* us! For the church to be Christ's body means that "the church submits to Christ."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> One implication is that one who joins himself to another "head," such as Mohammed, is completely outside of Christ and the body of God's people; he is cut off from God, and doomed to everlasting torment in hell. God has joined his people under *one* head; therefore, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Rather than being embarrassed by this teaching, Christians must rejoice and glory in it.

<sup>24</sup> The metaphor conveys other valuable lessons about our relationship with Christ. For example, that Christ is the head implies that he sustains and cares for believers, and causes the church to grow (Ephesians 4:16; Colossians 2:19). See O'Brien, p. 148.



That said, as his body, the church indeed functions as an expression of Christ on the earth (v. 23b), only we cannot say that he is helpless without us. As Christ himself teaches, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). In contrast, the heresy mentioned above teaches that "without us, he can do nothing," which is blasphemy.

The final portion of verse 23 presents several difficulties, which we will not deal with here. For now, O'Brien's summary is appropriate enough:

By speaking of the church as Christ's "body" and "fulness," he emphatically underlines its significance within God's purposes. Its glorious place in the divine plan, however, provides no grounds for boasting, arrogance, or the display of a "superior air," for the church is wholly dependent on Christ. In itself, it is nothing. Its privileged position comes from its relationship to the One who as head graciously fills it with his presence.

God's predetermined plan to save his people is not based on wishful thinking, but his superabundant power is what causes it to happen and brings it to completion. To the extent that we boldly preach about the surpassing greatness of his power, we will effectively combat secular unbelief and liberal theology (Matthew 22:29), and to the extent that we intellectually grasp the surpassing greatness of his power that he exercised in redemption for our benefit, our own faith becomes steadfast and immovable (1 Corinthians 15:58, NASB).

God has been extremely generous with his power for the benefit of his people, and he has done more than enough to subdue all hostile forces. Therefore, there is no reason for believers to cower in fear and defeat in the face of opposition, whether we are speaking of objections from unbelievers or persecutions from governments. The church will not fail in its mission, because Christ is already on the throne. "Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them" (Numbers 14:9).

#### **EPHESIANS 2:1-10**

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.*

*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in*

*Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.*

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

Ephesians 2:1-10 continues from 1:15-23 and also prepares for what follows. After discussing the divine power that has been demonstrated in Christ's resurrection and exaltation, Paul now applies the reality of God's power specifically to the believers.

Paul first defines the original condition of the converts, so that the readers may understand the context in which God exercised his power in their lives. For this, Paul selects the metaphor of death to describe their former spiritual condition, and writes, "you were dead." This is metaphorical language in the sense that he is not referring to physical death, but spiritual death, meaning that they were dead "in your transgressions and sins."

He is not just speaking of the hardened violent criminals or fanatical idol worshipers, but he has in mind all those who "followed the ways of the world." When used in the spiritual and the moral sense, the "world" designates the sphere of living and influence that is outside of the church, and outside of God's precepts and promises. From this perspective, Scripture recognizes only two groups of people – the Christians and the non-Christians, the believers and the unbelievers, or the church and the world. A person belongs to either one group or the other; there is no third category, and there is no neutral ground.

Many unbelievers like to consider themselves independent thinkers; they claim that they are free from religious dogma and popular assumptions – they think for themselves. Of course, if this is true, then they should *independently* investigate the nature of reality. Instead of blindly believing what their scientists and professors claim about physics, biology, politics, and any other subject, they should directly examine the "evidence" by themselves; otherwise, there is no warrant for them to affirm theories concerning atoms, evolution, and so forth.

The truth is that they are not independent thinkers – in fact, they are hardly thinkers at all; rather, they are merely following "the ways of this world," being carried along by the latest fads in science and philosophy. When their theories are no longer fashionable, then they will change their minds in the name of "progress." Of course, this means that what they now affirm is temporary and worthless.

It is not only foolish to follow the ways of this world, but it is also devilish, because worldly thinking is itself patterned after and controlled by "the ruler of the kingdom of the air." With this expression, the apostle is referring to "the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." Those who follow the ways of this world are therefore in

open rebellion against God. As James writes, "Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

By making a distinction between "you" and "us" (v. 1, 3), Paul again distinguishes between the Gentiles and the Jews, but as with before, he does this only to emphasize the way through which the two groups have now been reconciled. We will return to this again starting from 2:11, but now, we must note Paul's current emphasis, namely, that the non-Christian Jews were in the same spiritually depraved condition as were the non-Christian Gentiles.

Paul describes the depravity of non-Christian Jews from a different angle. Whereas he focuses on the external and demonic influences when he describes the Gentiles, such as the world and the devil, he stresses the internal factors when he describes the Jews. Thus he writes that the non-Christian Jews were "following [the] desires and thoughts" and "gratifying the cravings" of their "sinful nature."

Of course, this is not to say that the Jews had no external evil influences, but because they had the law of God, these influences were perhaps comparatively weaker, whereas there was relatively little restraint upon the Gentiles when it came to indulging in demonic religions, occult practices, and pagan philosophies.

Just as the non-Christian Jews also submitted to external worldly and demonic influences, the non-Christian Gentiles also had an inward sinful nature. Paul makes this clear when he says, "*All of us* also...*Like the rest*, we were by nature objects of wrath." The non-Christian Jews and the non-Christian Gentiles had the same sinful nature. Therefore, Paul writes, "What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin" (Romans 3:9).

Let us summarize what Paul teaches about the non-Christian's spiritual condition. Although he claims to be basically free and good, the unbeliever is in fact a slave and a follower of sin. Specifically, our passage states that he sinfully follows the flesh (v 3, NASB), the world, and the devil (v. 2). He is characterized by disobedience (v. 2), transgressions, and sins (v. 1). All of this amounts to a state of spiritual death, which implies spiritual inability and passivity.

Paul is not referring to only what we usually regard as the worst and the most violent criminals, nor is such spiritual depravity limited to people of certain races, cultures, and backgrounds; rather, he says that "all of us" and "the rest" fall under this description, meaning that all of humanity is spiritually dead in their transgressions and sins. And it would be wrong to assume that a person becomes a sinner only after he personally commits his first sin, since all of us are "by nature objects of wrath." Therefore, no one can say that he is not spiritually dead because he is not really sinful, since he is *by nature* sinful, and subject to divine wrath, and out of this evil nature flows a multitude of sins.

Anyone who is a non-Christian follows the flesh, the world, and the devil, and anyone who follows the flesh, the world, and the devil is also spiritually "dead." Therefore,

Scripture concludes that all non-Christians are spiritually dead. If this metaphor for the unbeliever's spiritual condition is at all meaningful – if it accurately mirrors physical death – then, it necessarily means that anyone who is spiritually dead is also spiritually helpless.<sup>25</sup> Spiritual death necessarily implies total spiritual inability and passivity. In other words, a non-Christian, being spiritually dead, can do *nothing* to contribute to or even move toward his own salvation. He must wait for an outside power to do something *to him*, so that salvation is a divine work that is done *to* man, not *by* man or even *with* man.<sup>26</sup>

Paul has given us an extremely negative picture of man's spiritual condition. In fact, he has made it impossible for man to do anything to improve or change his situation. However, Paul does not leave us here, but he says that God did something for us, that is, the chosen ones. And he says that God did it because of his "mercy" and "love." Elsewhere, Paul states that God's mercy and love are sovereignly given, meaning that he gives them to whomever he wills without consideration of the conditions in the objects of his mercy and love (Romans 9:13, 15).

This in turn means that God shows mercy and love to a person not because that person is willing to receive; rather, the fact that the person is willing to receive is because of God's mercy and love, producing this willingness to receive in the person. Paul explains, "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Corinthians 2:14, NASB). In other words, a spiritually dead person cannot decide to receive from God; instead, a person receives from God because God has first made him spiritually alive.

Thus our passage states that because of his mercy and love toward the elect, he "made us alive with Christ." In the same verse, Paul reminds us that God made us alive because we were "dead in transgressions" – spiritual resurrection is the only solution to spiritual death.<sup>27</sup> The apostle remains consistent with his metaphor. By saying that we were spiritually "dead," he means precisely the kind of "deadness" that requires a resurrection. Therefore, when he says "dead," he means "dead," and not mere weakness or sickness. There was no superficial solution; it really took a spiritual resurrection to save us from our state of sin.

This coheres with what we have already stated about the sovereignty of God in salvation, such as the biblical doctrine of unconditional election. Now we are dealing with the biblical doctrine of regeneration – because man is spiritually dead, he must be spiritually resurrected. Moreover, this spiritual resurrection occurs solely due to the sovereign

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<sup>25</sup> James White, *The Sovereign Grace of God*; Reformation Press, 2003; p. 56-59.

<sup>26</sup> Theologians call this biblical view "monergism," in which salvation is wholly a gift and a work of God. The unbiblical and heretical view is called "synergism," in which man must at least freely cooperate for God to save him. But the biblical view contends that any "cooperation" from man is in itself a gift and a work of God.

<sup>27</sup> If a man is truly dead, then rehabilitation is impossible and worthless, especially rehabilitation by other "dead" men, using theories and methods produced by their "dead" minds. True wisdom and holiness cannot stand upon a corrupt foundation.

decision and power of God, without any decision or cooperation from man – a dead man cannot decide or cooperate. As Loraine Boettner writes:

Sinners are compared to dead men, or even to dry bones in their entire helplessness. In this they are all alike. The choice of some to eternal life is as sovereign as if Christ were to pass through a graveyard and bid one here and another there to come forth, the reason for restoring one to life and leaving another in his grave could be found only in His good pleasure, and not in the dead themselves.<sup>28</sup>

Jesus also teaches the necessity of regeneration. He says, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). And he also teaches that this is a sovereign work of God: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (3:8). Regeneration, or the new birth, is something that God controls – it is not something that you control or decide. Thus contrary to popular opinion, Scripture never teaches that you are regenerated by faith; rather, it teaches that you are *justified* by faith, and you have faith because you are regenerated. That is, God first sovereignly regenerates you, then he produces faith in you, and through this faith, he justifies you.

The end of verse 5 explains that this teaching really means that "it is by grace you have been saved." In other words, what we have said above amounts to saying that we are saved by the grace of God. To say that we were in ourselves powerless to improve, to change, to please God, or even to cooperate with God, is not a strange or extreme teaching; instead, this is precisely what Scripture means when it teaches that salvation is by grace. In addition, this necessarily implies that to deny this teaching is to deny that we are saved by the grace of God. Therefore, Arminianism (that we have free will, that faith precedes regeneration,<sup>29</sup> that salvation is synergistic,<sup>30</sup> and so on) is inconsistent with even general evangelical doctrine<sup>31</sup> – its adherents must either contradict themselves on multiple points of theology, or as many of them have done, embrace pagan religious concepts while retaining the biblical labels.

Paul states that God "made us alive *with Christ*," thus establishing the relationship between the resurrection of Christ and our spiritual resurrection (as well as our future

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<sup>28</sup> Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*; Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1932; p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> Arminians usually believe that faith comes before regeneration, or that God regenerates a person *because* that person exercises faith in the gospel. However, Scripture teaches that before regeneration, a person is spiritually dead, and therefore cannot exercise faith; rather, regeneration precedes and produces faith. We have faith because God has first sovereignly regenerated us.

<sup>30</sup> This is the idea that an unconverted man can (and must) cooperate with God even in the initial stages of his salvation. But again, since the unconverted man is spiritually dead, he cannot and will not cooperate. Rather, he is stubbornly and consistently hostile toward God and the things of God.

<sup>31</sup> "Only those views which ascribe to God *all* the power in the salvation of sinners are consistently evangelical" (Boettner, p. 173).

physical resurrection).<sup>32</sup> Our previous passage teaches that God raised Christ from the dead by his great power, and now Paul indicates that because Christ is the federal head of the chosen ones, this means that Christians have been raised together with him. The same divine power that was exerted in Christ's resurrection has effected our spiritual resurrection, and will effect our future physical resurrection. That God raised his people "with Christ" also means that all who were not in Christ were not raised with him, and will forever remain in spiritual death, in this age and in the age to come.

When God "raised us up with Christ," he did not make us just barely alive, but he "seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (v. 6). He did this so that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (v. 7).

The meaning of "in the coming ages" appears to differ from "in the [age] to come" in 1:21. Whereas Paul is making the typical two-age distinction in 1:21 ("not only in the present age but also in the one to come"), here he is likely referring to all the coming centuries of time relative to the writing of this letter, but probably also including "the age to come."

In other words, God's chosen ones are already seated with Christ so that he might demonstrate his grace and kindness to us, not only in the age to come, but also throughout these centuries in which the church exists and labors on the earth. Just as God has demonstrated "the surpassing greatness of His power" (1:19, NASB) in the resurrection and exaltation of Christ, he now demonstrates "the surpassing riches of His grace" (2:7, NASB) in the raising and seating of Christians with Christ.

Christ has been exalted over all the "powers," and Paul says that God has already "seated us *with him*." Because we are in Christ, we now enjoy protection from and victory over all evil powers. There is no need to placate the gods and the forces of pagan religions and superstitions. Moreover, this teaching also contradicts many superstitions and heresies that are distortions of Christianity.

For example, it is utter foolishness to say that we need to appeal to saints, angels, and Mary to aid us in intercession, or to function as mediators in any sense. We are already seated with Christ – how much closer to God do we need to get? As Paul writes later in this same letter, "For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit" (Ephesians 2:18). We have access through Christ *now*; nothing more is needed. To teach that any other person or being other than Christ can or must function as some sort of mediator between God and man, or between Christ and man, is blasphemy and heresy. Although there are many more reasons, at least because of this point, Catholicism is not Christianity, and Catholics are not Christians.

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<sup>32</sup> Scripture teaches that our physical resurrection is based on and patterned after Christ's physical resurrection. In fact, because Christ is the federal head of the elect, his physical resurrection guarantees our future physical resurrection. However, since this is not Paul's emphasis in this passage, we will not discuss it any further than this.

Then, in verses 8-10, Paul states the theological implication and summary of what he has said in verses 1-7. He writes:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

In short, Paul says that God's power and grace effected our justification and sanctification, and because justification is "not by works," and even the works of our sanctification have been "prepared in advance," the conclusion is that "no one can boast" about any part of our salvation.

Commentators disagree as to whether the words "and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" are referring to "faith," or to something else, such as the whole idea of salvation by grace. The disagreement arises because whereas "this" is neuter in the Greek, "faith" is feminine, and some contend that the neuter pronoun cannot refer to the feminine noun.

This discussion is important at least because some Arminians take advantage of the disagreement to assert that faith is not something sovereignly given by God, but that it is something that we decide to have by our own free will. However, this verse does not help Arminianism for at least the following reasons.

First, I have argued earlier in this commentary and in other books that biblical faith is not something by which *we obtain* salvation from God, but it is the means by which *God applies* salvation to us. Also, Scripture explicitly testifies that it is something that God sovereignly gives us, and not something that we produce in our minds by our own free will, with free will being something that we do not have in the first place.

Second, it is wrong to think that a neuter pronoun can never refer to a feminine noun in Greek. But even if "this" does not strictly refer to "faith" in this case, but rather refers to the whole idea of salvation by grace, it does not *exclude* faith – it simply refers to something more than, but including, faith. Also, even if the words "this not from yourselves" do not directly refer to "faith," we cannot go beyond what the verse *does* say and impose upon the word "faith" what the verse *does not* say. That is, the verse never says, "this faith *is* from yourselves, it is *not* a gift of God."

Third, other than a grammatical argument, there is reason to believe that "this" refers to "faith" in verse 8. Again, the verse says, "For it is by *grace* you have been saved, through *faith* – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." Since the divine "grace" in salvation is by definition something that God gives and exercises, and is not at all something produced or exercised by us, it would appear redundant and unnecessary to say that the "grace" is "not from yourselves."

On the other hand, since faith is something that happens in our minds instead of in God's mind, it is much easier to mistake it as a product of our own will and power, thinking that we have faith because we decide to believe by our own "free will." Since sinful man tends to think that faith is a product of his own will, but since faith is in fact a gift from God, then it makes sense for the apostle to clarify it here, so that we do not mistakenly think that grace comes from God (which again, is true by definition), but that faith comes from us.

Fourth, even if we altogether ignore the Greek and all other parts of Scripture, the immediate context of the verse (2:1-10) forbids the idea that man has any positive role in his own salvation.

Verses 1-3 describe our spiritual depravity before conversion, saying that we were *dead* in transgressions and sins, that we follow after the flesh, the world, and the devil. Then, verses 4-7 teach that it is by God's initiative – his love, grace, and kindness – that he has raised and seated us with Christ. We see expressions like, "his great love for us," "God...is rich in mercy," "[God] made us alive with Christ," "God raise us up with Christ," "[God] seated us with him," "that...he might show...his grace," "...expressed in his kindness to us," and so on. Verses 8-10 continue from the above and are clearly intended to ascribe all the power and initiative to God in our salvation. These verses include expressions like, "by grace you have been saved," "this not from yourselves," "it is the gift of God," "not by works," "so that no one can boast," "we are God's work," "created in Christ Jesus to do good works," "which God prepared in advance for us to do."

The entire passage stresses our depravity and inability, and then God's grace and God's work – that we were altogether sinful and impotent, and that every spiritual good produced in us comes from God's sovereign grace and power. So how do we get a faith that comes from "free will" all of a sudden? It would be completely inconsistent with the content and intent of the entire section.

Therefore, even if we cannot settle the grammatical disagreement, it makes no theological difference. The point is that every facet and every stage of salvation is wholly "the gift of God" and "not from yourselves." Whether we are speaking of grace or faith, or any other aspect of salvation, none of it comes from us, so that "no one can boast."

Justification by grace through faith does not lead to licentiousness, but rather to sanctification, since God "created [us] in Christ Jesus to do good works." And if we cannot boast about our justification, neither can we boast about our sanctification, because the very good works that we are to do have been "prepared in advance for us to do." In his sovereign grace, God has foreordained all things in salvation, including both our faith and our works.

Although our faith is rightly said to be "our" faith, in the sense that it happens in our minds, it is in fact a gift of God – he is the one who produces this faith in our minds. The



same is true in sanctification. Although our works are rightly said to be our works, since we are the ones who perform them, still, God is the one who grants both the will and the action in our good works. Therefore, Paul writes, "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for *it is God who works in you to will and to act* according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13).

## 4. RECONCILIATION

### EPHESIANS 2:11-22

*Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men) – remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.*

*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*

*Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

Since I have already dealt with the main themes of 2:11-22 and 3:1-13 in what I have written so far in this book and in my other books, if you have been paying attention, then you should be able to understand these two passages fairly well. So in what follows I will provide only a summary, and briefly mention several details that are specific to these two passages.

With an emphatic "therefore," Paul connects what he is about to say to what he has already written. In other words, what he will say about the Gentile Christians being made one with the Jewish Christians as God's people in Christ is true on the basis of what he has explained so far about the doctrines of predestination and regeneration.

Before Christ came, those who were Gentiles by birth were called "the uncircumcised" by the Jews, who called themselves "the circumcised." Circumcision was the external sign of a covenant relationship with God, so that the rite made a sharp distinction between the physical descendants of Abraham and those who were "foreigners to the covenants of promise."

However, this does not imply that all the Jews were saved, or that all the Gentiles were unsaved. Paul is referring to the circumcision "done in the body by the hands of men," making clear that he is not necessarily referring to an inward distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles, but only to note that the Jews had the advantage of the external covenant sign. As for their inward condition, the previous passage has made it clear that both the Jews and the Gentiles were "by nature the objects of wrath," and there was no difference.

As early as in Deuteronomy, Scripture mentions a circumcision of the heart as opposed to one that affects only the flesh (Deuteronomy 30:6). In opposition to a purely external religion that is without sincere love and true holiness, Jeremiah states that just as the people of foreign nations were uncircumcised, the people of Israel were no better, because they were "uncircumcised in heart" (Jeremiah 9:26).

As Paul explains in his letter to the Romans, "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God" (2:28-29). The only type of circumcision that makes any real spiritual difference is the inward kind, by which God himself operates in the heart of man to cut away his inward filth and remove his spiritual corruption.

This has been true all along. Whether we are speaking of the Old Covenant or the New Covenant, a person is regenerated and saved from sin only if he has been inwardly circumcised by a sovereign act of God. As Paul writes to the Gentile Christians in his letter to the Colossians, "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ" (Colossians 2:11).

Under the Old Covenant, most of the Gentiles were left in spiritual darkness, although God regenerated and saved a small number of them. On the other hand, to the Jews were given the outward signs of the covenant and the means of grace, such as circumcision, the Scripture, and the temple. Under the New Covenant, God now releases the gospel of free grace to all people groups, without the cumbersome outward signs and rituals required under the previous administration of his grace.

Under the previous administration of grace, it was relatively difficult for the Gentiles to approach and to know God. They did not have the Scripture and the temple. They were uncircumcised. Without observing the numerous rituals and dietary laws, they were considered ceremonially unclean. Thus there existed a "dividing wall of hostility" between the Jews and the Gentiles.

Then, Christ brought "peace,"<sup>1</sup> and "destroyed the barrier." He did this by fulfilling the types and shadows of the rituals and sacrifices, and thus abolishing their practice. It is important to remember that he did not destroy the moral laws, but only "the Law of commandments contained *in ordinances*" (Ephesians 2:15, NASB) such as the ceremonies and dietary regulations. Other than that, God's laws, such as the Ten Commandments, remain in full effect and continue to guide and govern the moral thinking and conduct of God's people, and to hold accountable all of humanity.<sup>2</sup> Scripture destroys legalism without leaving any room for antinomianism.

As in 2:1-10, Paul first describes the former condition of the converts. His pattern of thinking is also the same with the previous passage, in that here he again shows that the unconverted were helpless, hopeless, and godless. And as in the previous passage, God did something to change the situation. The Gentiles did nothing, and could do nothing, to destroy "the barrier" that hindered them from approaching God and attaining salvation. They did not come near to God by their own free will – there is no such thing as free will in the first place – rather, they were "brought near through the blood of Christ." They did nothing, and they could do nothing – something was done to them by God and by Christ. They were brought to God by the blood of Christ, not by their free will or good sense.

The effect of what Christ has done is that he has created "one man out of the two, thus making peace."<sup>3</sup> Of course, by saying that *Jews and Gentiles* are now united and at peace, we are not at all saying that *believers and unbelievers* are now united and at peace. Rather, we are saying that any Gentile can now become one of God's people by faith in Christ without submitting to the Law's rituals and ceremonies. And whether a person is Jew or Gentile, if he will not come to God by faith in Christ, he is not one of God's people, even if he observes all the Jewish rituals and ceremonies.

Thus the peace is accomplished and maintained *in Christ* alone, so that it no longer matters whether a person is a Jew or a non-Jew, but that all are alike and equal by faith in Christ, and there is no difference and no hostility between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. On the other hand, the spiritual difference and hostility between Christians and non-Christians remain just as sharp as before, if not even greater, now that Christ has come, and has been raised and exalted.

In fact, we have ground to believe that the spiritual hostility between believers and unbelievers has become much more pronounced than before. Although some Gentiles were indeed sovereignly regenerated by God under the Old Covenant, now that Christ has destroyed "the barrier," the application of divine grace has become broad and global. Likewise, although God held the Gentiles accountable for their sins (Romans 1-2), and condemned all unbelievers to everlasting torment in hell, God now sends his people to all areas of the world to explicitly demand faith and obedience to the gospel. As Paul says,

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the phrase "he himself is our peace" (v. 14) is used to encourage believers to rely on Christ for their subjective peace and to attain peace of mind. However, as with many cases, here the meaning is clearly an objective and relational peace.

<sup>2</sup> Vincent Cheung, *The Sermon on the Mount*.

<sup>3</sup> Charles D. Provan, *The Church Is Israel Now*; Ross House Books, 2003.

"now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). The only way to attain true peace between Christians and non-Christians is for non-Christians to become Christians, but there will always be enmity between the children of God and the children of Satan (Genesis 3:15).

Just as the unbelievers could not escape natural revelation in the past, and still cannot escape it, now the church has as one of its most important mandates to confront the people of all nations with the special revelation of Scripture. As Christ commands, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). Thus Peter writes, "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, 'If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?'" (1 Peter 4:17-18).

Whether Jew or Gentile, there is no escape from natural revelation about God and his moral laws, and there is no excuse for rejecting Christ and his gospel. On the other hand, "through him *we both* have access to the Father by one Spirit." Non-Christians need to know that there is no other way to approach God except through Christ; they must denounce religious pluralism, and all non-Christian religions and philosophies. Christians need to know this also; they must denounce all doctrines (the occult, other religions, etc.) that compromise the sufficiency of Christ.

Because we are Christians, we are "no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household." Some preachers are accustomed to speaking of the Jews (even those who call themselves "Jews" nowadays) as "God's people." But then, who are we? These preachers ignore the very "mystery" that Paul so earnestly preached and wanted his readers to learn. Many of them may acknowledge that we are indeed God's people in Christ, but that the Jews, whether they are Christians or not, are God's people in a special sense.

But to cite Paul again: "A man is *not a Jew* if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man *is a Jew* if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God" (Romans 2:28-29). As a Gentile Christian, I am more of a Jew than a Jewish non-Christian. Paul explicitly says that one who has not been changed by God's Spirit is "not a Jew." So non-Christian Jews are not Jews at all. They cannot be God's people in a special sense, because they are not God's people at all. Only Christians are God's people now, whether Jew or Gentile. Galatians 3:29 states, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Because I belong to Christ, I am a seed of Abraham, and inherit all that God promised him. So when preachers call the Jews "God's people," they are either contradicting Paul, or they must be talking about me.

This truth needs to be emphasized again and again among Christians today, because whereas it was one of the main revelations that Paul wanted to get across to his audience, many Christians have not learned it. The problem is especially pronounced among

dispensationalists. Their fanciful eschatological schemes and false divisions of the biblical covenants and administrations subvert the simplicity of the gospel, divert the proper use of resources, and obscure the truth that Paul expounds in his letter. They make believers treat Jews as Jews, and as superior people, rather than as sinners "like the rest" (2:3). Some of them might even consider this teaching anti-Semitic, but Paul was its strongest proponent, and I doubt that he loved the Jews any less than the dispensationalists (Romans 9:3-4)!<sup>4</sup>

God's household is constructed upon "the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." Commentators disagree as to the precise meaning of "the apostles and prophets." We will briefly discuss the difficulties and their significance.

It would be convenient to understand the expression as referring to the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles. However, some contend that this is improbable because Paul would then have used the reverse order, saying, "the prophets and apostles" instead of "the apostles and prophets." A surer indication that Paul probably does not have in mind the Old Testament prophets is that he later writes, "the mystery...was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets" (3:5). Although the Old Testament prophets had hinted at this "mystery," it was not fully revealed until the coming of Christ and the preaching of his apostles. Although the Old Testament prophets had partial insights into this "mystery," Paul clearly intends to exclude them here, saying, "it has *now* been revealed...to God's holy apostles *and prophets*." Therefore, it appears that Paul is indeed referring to New Testament apostles and New Testament prophets.

Then, because the words "apostles" and "prophets" share one definite article ("the"), the question arises as to whether Paul is referring to only one group of people, so that the expression means something like, "the apostles who also function as prophets," or "the apostles who prophesy." However, other commentators deny that this is the necessary implication of the single article, but prefer to think that Paul is referring to apostles *and* prophets. Nevertheless, the use of only one article before the two nouns seem to at least signify a strong unity between the apostles and prophets.

In any case, the most important issue is the theological significance, or the real point that Paul intends to convey. He clearly intends to say that the "foundation" of God's household consists of the messengers of divine revelations, or more precisely, the divine revelations themselves. Whether he is referring to both Old Testament and New Testament messengers, or only the New Testament messengers, the point is that the foundation is *biblical revelation*, or the doctrines that God has revealed to us through these messengers, as recorded in Scripture. Therefore, this foundation is "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). Nothing about it is to be modified or

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<sup>4</sup> Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1995); Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1993); John H. Gerstner, *Wrong Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Soli Deo Gloria, 2000).

removed, nor is anything to be added to it; rather, our task is to guard, perpetuate, and propagate the doctrines of the apostles.

All of this was initiated by Christ and is founded on Christ, who is the "cornerstone." He holds an even more prominent place than the apostles. God's temple is being built outward and upward from this cornerstone, and each brick or stone finds its proper place in reference to him (Matthew 16:18). Turner correctly states, "The point would then seem to be that the temple is built out and up from the revelation given in Christ, through the revelatory elaboration and implementation of the mystery through the prophetic-apostolic figures."<sup>5</sup> Christ is the starting point of our thought and conduct, and Scripture is our spiritual and intellectual foundation.

Thus verses 21 and 22 say, "In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." Likewise, Peter writes:

As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." (1 Peter 2:4-6)

Before the coming of Christ, the Jews were privileged "in every way," because "they have been entrusted with the very words of God" (Romans 3:2), that is, the Scripture. They also had the temple of God.

However, since the coming of Christ, the Jews have rejected God's fuller revelation, the completion of Scripture through the apostles. The only way they could do this was to abandon the very revelation that they had in the Old Testament. In addition, God destroyed the temple and raised up his true temple in his church. Therefore, Christians are now the ones "entrusted with the very words of God," and Christians constitute the very temple of God. As God says in Hosea, "I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people'; and they will say, 'You are my God'" (Hosea 2:23).

### **EPHESIANS 3:1-13**

*For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles –*

*Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through*

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<sup>5</sup> Turner, p. 1233.

*the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.*

*I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.*

In 3:6, a verse that we cited earlier, Paul provides a clear statement about the "mystery" that he has been discussing; it also functions as an appropriate summary for 2:11-22. He writes, "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." The mystery, once hidden but now revealed, is that Gentile Christians would be "heirs together," "members together," and "sharers together" along with Jewish Christians, that is, "in Christ Jesus."

For preaching this gospel, Paul has become a prisoner of Rome. In accordance with his firm belief in the sovereignty of God and the power of Christ, he refuses to see himself as a victim of religious persecution or political might; rather, he calls himself "the prisoner of Christ Jesus," who controls every detail of every situation, directing history exactly as he has predetermined it.

Many people will not even lose sleep or miss lunch for the sake of the gospel, and still less will they suffer imprisonment or even martyrdom for it. This is first because most professing Christians are false converts; they have never been regenerated. And the rest of us are weak – weak, and feeble, and pathetic! In not making Christ our sole obsession, we have become worldly and ineffective. Soon the apostle will pray for inward power (v. 14-19), at which point we should pay special attention.

Having identified himself in verse 1, "I, Paul" is left without a verb until verse 14 ("I kneel"). This is because the mention of his imprisonment "for the sake of [the] Gentiles" leads Paul into another digression or parenthesis (v. 2-13). He explains, "this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles."

Although he was formerly a persecutor of believers, he says, "I was *made* a minister" (NASB, not "I became," NIV) by "the gift of God's grace." In calling Paul to the ministry of the gospel, the Lord said to him, "I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me"



(Acts 26:17-18). Just as it is God's sovereignty that brings men to salvation in Christ, it is his sovereignty that calls men to ministry for Christ. And just as no one can become a believer by his own "free will" – free will does not exist in the first place – no one can become a minister by his own free will.

Of course, this is not to say that we can become other things by our own free will. It is God's sovereignty that places us in our proper places and vocations. Nevertheless, the office of preaching the gospel is a special calling, and because of Paul's faithfulness to his calling, he was imprisoned, and eventually martyred. God did not save you just so you may continue to pursue your personal ambitions and selfish desires, but he has foreordained a place for you in his plan, one that you will fulfill by his grace and power, and not by "free will."

In connection with this, preachers often tell people, "God has a wonderful plan for your life," or something to that effect. This is indeed true concerning the elect. As Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." But we must not indiscriminately apply this to all of humanity, since it is not true of all of humanity. It would be a lie to tell the reprobate that God has a wonderful plan for his life, precisely because God has a *terrible* plan for his life, one that will end in futility, destruction, and everlasting conscious torment in hell.

Thus our message should be, "God now commands all men everywhere to repent. The only way to escape God's wrath is if you flee to Christ. If God has chosen you for salvation, then he indeed has a wonderful plan for your life; otherwise, he has a terrible plan for your life, and there is nothing ahead of you but death and destruction. Therefore, fear him and seek him, while there is still time."

The message that Paul was sent to preach is the same one that he has been expounding in this letter. He writes that it was made known to him "by revelation." But he tells his audience that, by reading his letter, they would "be able to understand" this insight that he has received from God. His concern is that his readers would attain an intellectual grasp of the gospel, so as to "open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light." Again, he seeks "to *make plain* to everyone the administration of his mystery." His ministry appeals to the mind; its thrust is intellectual.

Some churches and ministries today appeal to the emotions, and some even to the senses like the smell and the touch. These are not biblical ministries, and their efforts will not produce the biblical effect. The main thrust of a biblical ministry is *always* to convey biblical teachings to the mind by various forms of verbal communication, such as by speaking and writing, or even sign language. A ministry that fails to communicate doctrine is completely useless; it has nothing to do with Christianity.

As stated earlier, many professing believers are quick to claim that Scripture does not address many things that they would like to know, and that God certainly has hidden from us his intentions and purposes. However, as I said, the problem is not with the

Bible, but that these people are stupid and lazy, and they will not pray for wisdom and take time to study.

Of course "the riches of Christ," being infinite, are "unsearchable," but this does not mean that we can know nothing about God's intentions and purposes, since the Bible reveals many things to us. As Paul writes, "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 10-11).

Commentators do not immediately agree on whether "the rulers and authorities" refer to the good or evil beings, or both. Here I will only point out a parallel in Peter's understanding:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. *Even angels long to look into these things.* (1 Peter 1:10-12)

Paul calls God's wisdom "manifold." Of course divine wisdom is rich, colorful, and multifaceted, but this does not mean that it can be pluralistic or inconsistent, that two contradictory religions can both be true, or that contradictory doctrines claiming to be biblical can both be correct. Since Christianity is true, then Islam, Mormonism, Catholicism, Judaism (since it rejects Christianity), and all non-Christian religions, must be false. Since Calvinism is correct, Arminianism must be wrong. God's "manifold wisdom" teaches us that truth is absolute and exclusive – colorful, but thoroughly rational and self-consistent.

God's intent is to make known his wisdom "through the church," and this is "according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus." The church's mandate and purpose is thus founded on God's foreordination, which is not mere wishful thinking, but something that God has already established in history in Christ. Therefore, "In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence"!

This in turn means that Paul's imprisonment is not an accident, or an unexpected subversion of God's plan by men. Rather, it is part of the outworking of God's foreordained plan, which he has accomplished in Christ. God's plan has *already* become a reality through Jesus Christ, and he is continuing to fulfill all that he has predetermined, not just despite Paul's sufferings, but even through them. Paul wrote this very "Queen of the Epistles" while he was in prison. As he says elsewhere, "This is my gospel, for which

I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. *But God's word is not chained*" (2 Timothy 2:8-9).

Predestination, then, does not lead to despair for the elect, but to freedom, confidence, and encouragement! For we know that God's plan is being fulfilled precisely according to his foreordination, and that his "eternal purpose" has already become a reality, having been accomplished in Jesus Christ.

#### **EPHESIANS 3:14-21**

*For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

In 3:14, Paul takes up the prayer that he was starting in 3:1. If 1:20-3:13 is indeed "a long doctrinal parenthesis,"<sup>6</sup> then 3:14-21 is in fact a continuation of what Paul began in 1:17. There are similarities in content, but we cannot say for sure that this is a continuation; it might just be a second prayer.

Paul prays to the Father "from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name." There is a play on words here between "Father" (*patros*) and "family" (*patria*). Commentators disagree on whether the verse should say "every family" or "the whole family." If it is the former, then it is saying that human fatherhood, as distorted and imperfect as it is, has been patterned after God the Father. But if Paul intends to say "the whole family," then he is referring to "God's household" (2:19), that is, the family of the redeemed in Christ.

Some commentators consider "the whole family" an impossible translation because the definite article is missing. Others, such as Clark and Wilson, reply that this is not the necessary implication, since 2 Timothy 3:16 also lacks the article, but there it must be translated, "the whole Scripture."<sup>7</sup> If the grammar is inconclusive, or even if it favors "every family," the context certainly favors "the whole family." With all this talk about the Gentiles being "members of God's household" (2:19), and then how they have been called to "one hope" under "one God and Father" (4:4-5), it is more likely that Paul is

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<sup>6</sup> Patzia, p. 163.

<sup>7</sup> Clark, *Ephesians*; p. 117.

speaking in line with the context, and thus referring to the family of the redeemed, or the Christians.

It is astounding how much anti-intellectual nonsense many commentators can conjure up when writing on this thoroughly intellectualistic passage, and so we will examine what follows with the intent to correct their distortions.

Paul prays that God will strengthen his readers with power "in the inner man" (NASB). The "inner man" does not refer to any non-intellectual part of man, or to anything other than the mind, but the most straightforward interpretation is that "Paul meant the minds of his converted Ephesians."<sup>8</sup> Paul prays that God's power would make their minds strong so that "Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." As we have previously established, the "heart" is not non-intellectual, but it "chiefly means the understanding or intellect."<sup>9</sup> Clark adds that "Very infrequently does it mean emotion," and as stated earlier, even the emotions are intellectual – they may not be rational or academic, but they are of the mind.

For Christ to "dwell" in a person, with the meaning being to "settle down," emphasizes the pervasive and lasting influence of Christ in the person, and implies genuine and permanent conformity to the character of Christ. As D. A. Carson explains:

Make no mistake: when Christ first moves into our lives, he finds us in very bad repair. It takes a great deal of power to change us; and that is why Paul prays for power. He asks that God may so strengthen us by his power in our inner being that Christ may genuinely take up residence within us, transforming us into a house that pervasively reflects his own character.<sup>10</sup>

Paul prays that "Christ may dwell in your hearts *through faith*." Most people seem to think that this means Christ dwells in us *because of* our faith, or that Christ dwells in us *in response to* our faith. One commentator writes, "This indwelling is *through faith* – that is, as they trust him he makes their hearts his home."<sup>11</sup> And the way that Christ dwells in us is often described as a "mystical union," which being so mystical, cannot be further explained.

However, the verse is much more intellectualistic than this. We have noted that both the "inner man" and the "heart" refer to the mind. Thus to say that Christ dwells in our hearts cannot mean that our hearts are containers for Christ as buckets are containers for water. It does not always occur to people that "faith" simply means "belief," and to believe is a mental activity. The verse, then, seems to assert that "*the mode* of Christ's dwelling in our

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>10</sup> Carson, *Spiritual Reformation*; p. 187.

<sup>11</sup> O'Brien, p. 259.

minds is through faith," and "The power and strength we derive in answer to Paul's prayers come through and are proportionate to our grasp of Scripture."<sup>12</sup>

Paul writes that Christ dwells in our hearts through *faith*, and not through some mystical, non-intellectual, and indescribable "something." Charles Hodge writes that "the two essential conditions of this indwelling of Christ" are "a rational nature" and "faith." He then notes that faith "includes spiritual apprehension – the perception of the truth and excellence of 'the things of the Spirit.'"<sup>13</sup>

Where then is the *mystical* element in all of this? If our very straightforward understanding is even basically correct, then even if Scripture teaches a "mystical union" elsewhere, it does not teach it here.

In the second part of verse 17, Paul either begins the next petition, or simply extends the first. Whatever the case may be, he continues on the same or a very similar theme. In almost every commentary that I have examined, the author's anti-intellectualism begins to boil starting from verse 18 – if it has not started much sooner – and peaks when he reaches verse 19. This is highly ironic, since both the language and the thought in these two verses (v. 18-19) are highly intellectualistic, perhaps some of the most intellectualistic in all of Scripture.

Paul prays that, "being rooted and established in love," the believers "may have power...to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." He mixes a botanical metaphor and an architectural metaphor to indicate that his readers are already rooted and established in love, and that from this firm foundation, he prays that they may have power to grasp all the dimensions of the love of Christ. The language indicates to Candlish "a comprehensive knowledge of the things of God."<sup>14</sup> Clark adds, "the impression is unmistakable that the understanding must be deep and wide, profound and extensive."<sup>15</sup>

Then, the anti-intellectualism of many commentators reaches its zenith in verse 19, because the verse refers to a "love that *surpasses knowledge*."

For example, on the basis of this verse, Patzia writes, "the emphasis is upon love rather than knowledge."<sup>16</sup> However, knowledge is indeed the emphasis – love is just said to be what one should know. The prayer is for them, not to love, but "to grasp...and to know." Love is just the object of knowledge.

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<sup>12</sup> Clark, *Ephesians*; p. 121.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Hodge, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*; The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991; p. 129-130.

<sup>14</sup> Clark, *Ephesians*; p. 123.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Patzia, p. 223.

Then, he says something really absurd: "love, not knowledge, leads to a deeper understanding of God."<sup>17</sup> But what is the difference between knowledge and understanding? Even if they are different, surely they are almost synonymous; at least they must fall under the same category.

It is as if Patzia is saying, "love, not *knowledge*, leads to a deeper *knowledge* of God," or "love, not *understanding*, leads to a deeper *understanding* of God." But this is nonsense. By definition, knowledge leads to knowledge better than anything else, since the former is already the latter; and understanding leads to understanding better than anything else, since the former is already the latter. So how can love leads to X better than X leads to X? Maybe Patzia does not care, because he has love.

The greatest objection against Patzia and others like him is that this passage simply does not say what they claim that it says. It does not say that love is superior to knowledge, and it does not say that love is a better way to know or understand God than knowledge. Rather, the prayer is for the believers "to *grasp*...the love of Christ, and to *know*...this love that surpasses knowledge." Love is not *the means* to knowing God in this passage, but it is *the object* of knowledge – it is what Paul wants us to know.

Nevertheless, this verse says that this love "surpasses knowledge." Does this not leave room for mysticism, if not anti-intellectualism? But it is precisely this expression that makes this verse probably one of the most intellectualistic in all of Scripture.

Notice what the verse does *not* say – it does *not* say that we *cannot* know "this love that surpasses knowledge." Instead, Paul prays for us "to *grasp*...and to *know* this love that surpasses knowledge"! Of course we cannot *fully* grasp or know the infinite love of Christ; I do not dispute this point. But this does not mean that we can know nothing about it, or that we can know only a little about it. Rather, Paul just finished saying that we are "to grasp *how wide and long and high and deep* is the love of Christ" – that is, all of its dimensions. Yet this love "surpasses knowledge," and we cannot fully know it.

The emphasis is on the greatness of this love, and not in our inability to attain knowledge. In fact, it is precisely to increase our ability to understand that Paul prays that we "may have power." Keeping in mind that Paul wants us to have power to know this love, then the more one emphasizes that this love "surpasses knowledge," the more intellectualistic these two verses become. To illustrate, to pray that a high school student may have power to understand all the dimensions of algebra and literature is certainly intellectualistic, but to pray that a newborn baby may have power to understand all the dimensions of literature, mathematics, physics, biology, chemistry, history, philosophy, and theology is even more intellectualistic!

Thus the more distance one puts between Christ's love and our intellect, the more intellectualistic Paul's words become, since no matter how far this love appears to surpass

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Perhaps he thinks that the "understanding" is something completely non-intellectual, but he does not assert this, nor does he explain its meaning. And if "knowledge" and "understanding" are not synonymous or almost synonymous, he does not explain the difference between them.

our knowledge, he prays for us to grasp *even that*. To maintain even the slightest hint of anti-intellectualism, and to avoid becoming thoroughly intellectualistic, one must either diminish the love of Christ to the finite level, or exalt the mind of man to the infinite level. Scripture permits neither.<sup>18</sup>

Paul prays that God will give us power to grasp and to know the love of Christ, "that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." In other words, the knowledge adds to the fullness. Clark concludes, "God's fulness in us consists in knowledge, not merely the introduction of the Gentiles into the church, but an extensive theology. Ignorant Christians are empty, or nearly empty. It is surprising that so many commentators miss this point."<sup>19</sup> This fullness of knowledge, this "extensive theology," is not reserved only for the theology professors or seminary students, but Paul prays for his readers to attain it "together with all the saints."

At this, Paul erupts into doxology once again, praising him "who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us." In other words, we can have confidence that God will grant this request – that is, to grasp and to know all the dimensions of his love – and in fact, he will do more than what we can ask or even imagine.

As with verse 19, this language about our limitations and God's greatness does not refute intellectualism, but rather proves and reinforces it, since the apostle is saying that God will grant this request for us "to grasp" and "to know," and he will do it by the very divine power that is at work in us even now. If anything, God would have us be "immeasurably more" intellectualistic than we are now, beyond "all we ask or imagine." This is just another way of saying that God would have us know him much better, and by means of our prayers for knowledge, he will indeed cause this to happen.

Although theological knowledge is inherently valuable, all this knowledge has a grand purpose. It is ultimately to glorify God, not only in the age to come ("for ever and ever"), but "throughout all generations" – even now. In the light of this, surely we are not acting as redeemed people, but rather as stubborn beasts, if we still neglect or even refuse to pray for an intellectual understanding of all the dimensions of divine love – that is, "the entire plan of redemption...everything in the divine revelation."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Our straightforward and intellectualistic interpretation of 3:14-21 is certainly consistent with what comes next, for example, in 4:14-15.

<sup>19</sup> Clark, *Ephesians*; p. 123.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

## 5. SANCTIFICATION

### EPHESIANS 4:1-16

*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

*But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)*

*It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

*Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

Scholars observe that in Paul's letters, he often first stresses the doctrinal, and then proceeds to the practical and ethical. Although there is some truth to this, in itself the observation is slightly misleading, and if abused, it can be dangerous to a correct understanding of the faith.

The point can be misleading if one makes too sharp of a distinction between the doctrinal and the practical. First, it might obscure the fact that the practical portions of Paul's letters still consist of intellectual information about the Christian faith, and in this sense they are doctrinal. Rather than being practical in the sense of non-doctrinal, they simply consist of doctrinal information about different matters, namely, practical things. Second, what we consider the practical portions of these letters are not void of theological assertions and



expositions, but as Wood writes, "Theology is not left behind but interwoven with the moral exhortations."<sup>1</sup>

Danger arises when some commentators abuse this distinction to decry biblical intellectualism, and to promote an anti-intellectual pragmatism. That is, some of them go as far as to assert that the sole purpose of the doctrinal is to serve the practical, or that it is always useless to consider the doctrinal without drawing out the practical implications. If they could speak freely, they would probably also suggest that we discard the doctrinal once we have reached the practical. But we have already registered and explained our opposition to this anti-biblical philosophy, and so we will just remind ourselves that Scripture is thoroughly intellectualistic, and that even when it addresses the practical, it is still speaking *doctrinally* about practical things.

If we can keep the above in mind, then there is not much harm in cautiously agreeing with Patzia's explanation concerning the relationship between chapters 1-3 and chapters 4-6. He writes, "If chapters 1-3 provide the *theological basis* for Christian unity, then chapters 4-6 contain the *practical instruction* for its maintenance."<sup>2</sup>

Paul indeed turns to address how the believers should behave to maintain the peace and unity among Christians that God has established in Christ, and that Christ has secured by his own blood. As one who has been faithful to his calling even to the point of suffering imprisonment, Paul urges his readers to live in a way that is consistent with the calling that they have received.

Specifically, he admonishes the believers to "make every effort" to maintain unity and peace among them. This demands that they exercise humility, gentleness, patience, and love toward one another. Although Christians may exhibit many superficial differences, spiritually speaking, there is only one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all of them.

The relationship among believers is founded upon a real spiritual unity, not a human treaty or social agreement, and not just because of mutual financial or political interest, or the general welfare of humanity. The unity of humanism is founded upon compromise, but not so with Christian unity. Rather, as the apostle has explained, God has predetermined that his people would become one in Christ. As redeemed but imperfect individuals, there will still be friction between believers, but now we have a true foundation for unity in Christ, and we also have the spiritual resources by which to maintain the unity, and to resolve conflicts.

After considering the church as a whole, Paul also considers the individual, and writes, "But to *each one of us* grace has been given as Christ apportioned it." He is not referring to the grace that saves, since he is writing about those who are already saved; instead, he is referring to the grace that equips each individual believer for service and ministry. The context shows that this is what he has in mind (v. 9-16).

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<sup>1</sup> Wood, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> Patzia, p. 228.

In connection with this statement about the equipping grace given to individual believers, Paul alludes to Psalm 68:18: "This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.'" Applying the verse to Christ, he continues, "What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe." "The lower, earthly regions" is best understood as simply "the earth below." In other words, the same Christ who "ascended on high" is also the one who first "descended" to the earth. Thus Paul is referring to Christ's incarnation and crucifixion, and his resurrection and exaltation.

This Savior, who came down from heaven and then went up again, has confronted and conquered all the powers in every sphere and on every level, and "led captives in his train." As Paul writes in Colossians, "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (2:15). He did this "in order to fill the whole universe." Of course, this is not an affirmation of pantheism, but an idiom for pervasive influence and control.<sup>3</sup> In his exalted position, Christ is "head over everything for the church" (Ephesians 1:22).

As the conqueror and the exalted one, he "gave gifts to men." Paul says that these gifts have been given to "each one of us," but then he chooses to focus on those in leadership positions. He specifically mentions "apostles," "prophets," "evangelists," and "pastors and teachers," and thus to "highlight particularly those who reveal, declare and teach the gospel."<sup>4</sup> This is consistent with Paul's emphasis on the intellectual and doctrinal throughout this letter.

The "apostles" and "prophets" were the foundational doctrinal ministers in the church. Because the biblical system of truth has been "once for all" (Jude 3) established by them, no one can remove, change, or add to this foundation. Therefore, today there can be no apostles and prophets in the same sense that these terms are used when referring to those who permanently established the church's doctrinal foundation.

For this reason – because there can be no new revealed doctrines today – many people contend that there can be no apostles and prophets today in *any* meaningful sense at all, while others insist that there is no conclusive biblical evidence that these ministries are now extinct. Many of these same individuals agree that Scripture has been completed once for all, but they maintain that there can be apostles and prophets today who are not infallible, and who do not write Scripture.

Without settling the disagreement here by detailed arguments,<sup>5</sup> I will propose a simple principle. Paul here lists only doctrinal ministers – those who preach and teach biblical revelation – with the apostles and the prophets as the most authoritative among them.

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<sup>3</sup> Turner, p. 1228 (on 1:23).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 1238.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Chantry, *Signs of the Apostles* (The Banner of Truth Trust); C. K. Barrett, *The Signs of an Apostle* (Authentic Media).

Therefore, if there are apostles and prophets today,<sup>6</sup> then they must have the doctrinal knowledge and intellectual competence that we are required by this passage to expect from them.

An apostle of God must certainly know much more about biblical doctrines than someone like me, and how pathetic a prophet would be, if he knows less than the ordinary seminary student? Nevertheless, nowadays there are numerous individuals who advertise themselves as apostles and prophets. Nearly all of them are Charismatics, but there are probably some who are not. As far as I am aware, nearly all of them know less about Scripture than I did even before my conversion, or really, anyone who has memorized even a third of the Smaller Catechism. In fact, in some cases, it is very difficult to believe that they are even Christians, let alone apostles and prophets.

The question of whether there are still apostles and prophets is an important one, since it is a question about biblical doctrine, and one that carries some significant implications. However, at least in every case that I have seen, the question was premature, since the person long disqualified himself before the issue became relevant. In the words of Calvin (although he wrote them in a different but still relevant context), "[They] are for the most part rude asses who do not grasp even the first and commonplace rudiments of faith."<sup>7</sup> Those who claim to be apostles and prophets today are so heretical when it comes to even the most central biblical doctrines that we must doubt whether some of them are Christians at all, and even the less heretical ones exhibit such poor doctrinal knowledge that the more appropriate question is whether they are qualified to handle even the least demanding church duties.

In other words, a sewage rat should worry about its next meal instead of about how it can become king of the beasts; a retarded street bum should be concerned with how he could find a shelter or even a job instead of how he could become president. If a person cannot exceed even someone like me in biblical knowledge and intellectual competence, he should be more modest, and instead of claiming to be an apostle, he should volunteer to be the church janitor.

The Charismatics seem to think that the function of the prophet is almost the same as a fortune-teller, but from what we know about the prophets in Scripture,<sup>8</sup> a prophet today must at least be able to refute liberalism, pantheism, pluralism, relativism, communism, fascism, modernism, and postmodernism, as well as to instruct God's people on the right interpretation and application of Scripture. Whereas even some seminary students can do this – and most seminary students are quite incompetent – the Charismatics, whether "prophets" or not, are completely helpless.

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<sup>6</sup> Again, it is already agreed that there can be no apostles or prophets with the same level of authority as those who wrote Scripture. In other words, no one today can replace any part of Scripture, and no one today can write new Scripture. The question is whether there are still apostles and prophets in *any* meaningful sense – that is, whether there are weaker manifestations of these ministries today.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*; p. 1097.

<sup>8</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Final Word* (The Banner of Truth Trust) and *The Christ of the Prophets* (P & R Publishing); Michael J. Williams, *The Prophet and His Message* (P & R Publishing).

As for the even higher office, if we can find someone who even remotely qualifies, then we can consider whether he is an apostle. Charismatics enthusiastically declare the "restoration of the fivefold ministries,"<sup>9</sup> but if God is going to restore the office of the apostle, then he is going to send us people who qualify to bear the title, instead of giving us self-promoting morons. The more relevant question is whether the Charismatics (and for that matter, even the Evangelical and Reformed churches) even have real pastors and real believers in their midst.

The point is that titles should correspond to functions and qualifications, and "apostles" and "prophets" must be tested. For this Jesus commends the church of Ephesus, saying, "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false" (Revelation 2:2).

"Evangelists," of course, preach the gospel to the unconverted (Acts 8 and 21:8),<sup>10</sup> and theirs is probably an itinerant ministry. However, it would be a mistake to think that they preach only to the unconverted, because our passage and probably also 2 Timothy 4:5 suggest that they play a significant role in promoting doctrinal progress and agreement within the church. O'Brien writes:

The admonition to Timothy to "do the work of an evangelist" is set within the context of a settled congregation, which presumably meant a ministry to believers and unbelievers alike, while the cognate verb, rendered "preach the gospel," covers a range of activities from primary evangelism and the planting of churches to the ongoing building of Christians and the establishment of settled congregations (cf. Rom. 1:11-15). Here in Ephesians 4 evangelists are given by the ascended Christ for the purpose of building his body, and this included both intensive and extensive growth.<sup>11</sup>

"Pastors and teachers" are linked by a single definite article. This suggests that either Paul has only one group of ministers in mind, or at least an overlapping of functions. Teachers, of course, teach. On the other hand, many pastors do not teach nearly often enough. Clark observes, "From my admittedly limited experience I would surmise that many of today's ministers spend a great deal of time pastoring and shepherding in the

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<sup>9</sup> See C. Peter Wagner, *Apostles and Prophets: The Foundation of the Church and The New Apostolic Churches* (Gospel Light Publications), *Spheres of Authority: Apostles in Today's Church* (Wagner Publications); Rick Joyner, *The Apostolic Ministry and The Prophetic Ministry* (Morning Star Publications); Bill Hamon, *Apostles, Prophets and the Coming Moves of God* (Destiny Image Publishers); David Cannistraci, *Apostles and the Emerging Apostolic Movement* (Gospel Light Publications); John Eckhardt, *Moving in the Apostolic: God's Plan for Leading His Church to the Final Victory* (Gospel Light Publications); Kenneth E. Hagin *The Ministry Gifts and He Gave Gifts Unto Men* (Faith Library Publications).

<sup>10</sup> F. Scott Spencer, *The Portrait of Philip in Acts: A Study of Roles and Relations* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1992); Roger Carswell, *And Some Evangelists* (Christian Focus Publications, 2003); Peter T. O'Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis* (Baker Academic, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> O'Brien, p. 299.

restricted form of pastoral counseling; and few spend much time teaching. The old Scottish ministers used to go from home to home catechizing. They then had an educated congregation."<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps one way to appreciate this list of ministries is to divide them into the foundational (apostles and prophets), the trans-local (evangelists), and the local (pastors and teachers). The important point is that they are all doctrinal. Calvin notes, "the fact that the Church is ruled by the preaching of the Word, is not a human invention, but the appointment of Christ....doctrine is the present subject."<sup>13</sup>

Elsewhere, Paul writes, "Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work" (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13), and "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17). The doctrinal ministers hold the greatest role in directing the growth of the church; therefore, instead of neglecting or abusing them, believers must respect them "because of their work," and do everything they can to help these ministers properly fulfill their duties.

The purpose of these doctrinal ministries is "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up."

An older interpretation takes the three phrases in this verse as separated by the prepositions, thus the KJV translates, "*For* the perfecting of the saints, *for* the work of the ministry, *for* the edifying of the body of Christ." The meaning would then seem to be that Christ has given these ministers to his people, so that *these ministers* would 1) perfect the saints, 2) perform the work of the ministry, and 3) edify the body of Christ.

On the other hand, the newer interpretation takes note of the different prepositions, taking the position that the second phrase depends on the first, and that the third depends on the first two. This has become the dominant view, and is reflected in some of the newer translations, including the NIV: "to [*pros*] prepare God's people for [*eis*] works of service, so that [*eis*] the body of Christ may be built up." Or, in the REB: "to [*pros*] equip God's people for [*eis*] work in his service, for [*eis*] the building up of the body of Christ."<sup>14</sup>

Besides the grammatical objection, the practical objection against the old view is that it assigns to the "special" ministers all the responsibility of service, and thus encourages other believers to be mere spectators in the church. This would undermine the biblical teaching on "the priesthood of all believers." However, if one takes the entire passage into consideration, even the old view does not encourage a spectator Christianity. Verse 7

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<sup>12</sup> Clark, *Ephesians*; p. 138.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Ephesians*; p. 178-179.

<sup>14</sup> But see Turner, p. 1238, and Mark E. Dever, "The Priesthood of All Believers: Reconsidering Every-Member Ministry," in *The Compromised Church: The Present Evangelical Crisis*, edited by John H. Armstrong; Crossway Books, 1998.

says that "to *each one of us* grace has been given," and verse 16 concludes that the body of Christ maintains its integrity and progress "as *each part* does its work." Therefore, although the newer view is probably correct on grammatical grounds, it makes no ultimate theological difference to the entire passage.

If we must avoid undermining "the priesthood of all believers," then we must also avoid undermining the role of the doctrinal ministers, since Paul indeed highlights their importance in this passage. In fact, whether we affirm the old or new view on this verse, the doctrinal ministers are the ones who "equip the saints." If God's people are all automatically and equally qualified upon conversion, then there would be no need for Christ to send these special ministers, nor for Paul to distinguish them from the rest of the believers. So, of course all believers are encouraged (and required) to participate in the church's progress and growth; however, they must accept the teaching and training Christ provides through the doctrinal ministers.

In recent times, as the mindsets of people have become more and more democratic and individualistic, to the point of showing blatant disdain and defiance against even proper authorities, "the priesthood of all believers" has become an increasingly abused concept. Just because we are all priests of God in Christ does not mean that we are all equally knowledgeable about the things of God. This same passage that affirms that each one of us has been given grace and that each part must do its work also affirms that each one must be trained and taught by the special ministers that Christ has given to his church.

Some time ago, one woman discovered my ministry, and for a while was enamored with the biblical teaching that I offered. When I found out that she had started going to some gatherings led by a certain heretic, and that she had become engrossed and supportive of his teachings. So I gently warned her about the man, and gave her several clear examples of how his teachings departed from central biblical doctrines.

At that, she instantly turned from an enthusiastic supporter of my ministry into a raving lunatic. She was shocked and enraged that I would speak against this other man whom she had grown to love so much. She did not even try to refute my objections against the man's teachings; rather, she responded, "Each of us has our own gift from God. You are a teacher to the body of Christ, so that you excel at detailed and accurate biblical teaching. But he is an exhorter – he is like a cheerleader in the body of Christ." This is the kind of insanity that I sometimes have to deal with.

She thought that this was a proper application of the biblical teaching that each believer has his own gift (Ephesians 4:7-16), that there is a diversity of gifts, and that each part is necessary (1 Corinthians 12). Of course, I recognize and affirm these teachings – not as she understood them, but as they are taught in Scripture.

If there is a ministry of the "exhorter" as one who speaks encouragement to the body of Christ, then instead of just getting people excited and passionate about nothing, he must still exhort people *with* something, and *to* something. For example, he must exhort people to affirm and follow sound doctrine, to shun heresies, to pursue holiness, and to

overcome evil. Did this woman think that an exhorter is performing a biblical ministry when he exhorts people with false doctrines and heresies? So a church janitor can be a Satanist, and still be pleasing to God, because his gift is cleaning and not doctrine? But if so, then maybe a pastor can commit adultery or even murder, and still be approved by God, since his gift is preaching and not fidelity. What if I say that I am called only to teach doctrine to the body of Christ, so it does not matter if I kill, rape, and steal, because it is another person's duty to be the moral example? We have different gifts, you know. But insofar as we are all Christians, we are all called to pursue holiness, as well as to affirm sound doctrine.

If she truly believed that I was a teacher to the body of Christ, then according to her own view, she should have paid attention to me when I addressed doctrinal matters, and she should have heeded my warning about the heretic and his heresies. And if she truly believed that teaching was my gift, then in her view, that exhorter should have first learned biblical doctrines from me (or a teacher like me), and then exhort the people to affirm and follow these biblical doctrines, or exhort them on the basis of these doctrines. Instead, she thought that because he was an "exhorter," he did not need to be accurate when it comes to doctrine. I assume that she would have drawn the line if he had exhorted people to worship the devil, but this would be arbitrary, and inconsistent with her own position.

We must avoid this distortion of the teaching about the diversity of gifts. The passage indeed says that because of our diversity in gifts, we can each make unique contributions to the growth of the body of Christ; nevertheless, whatever our gifts may be, we are united by the work that Christ has done to redeem us, and we are united by common biblical doctrines. It is precisely to unite his people around these doctrines that Christ has sent these doctrinal ministers.

For this reason, although the passage begins by talking about the grace given to each of us, Paul immediately highlights the doctrinal ministers, for they are the ones who nurture and direct the grace given to each believer. That is, whatever your function in the body of Christ, you are unprepared to perform your duty unless you have been trained and continue to be taught by the doctrinal ministers.

Accordingly, church leaders must not forbid anyone who is *teachable and obedient* to participate in some form of ministry in the church. Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you." On the other hand, one who refuses to learn from and submit to the proper authorities is disqualified from even cleaning the church toilet.

If you are eager to participate in ministry because Scripture teaches that you are a "priest" of God, then you better act like one *all the time*, and this means that you must be diligent in prayer and study. Ministry is not an opportunity for you to gain attention for yourself, to satisfy your lust to perform, or to make people hear your irrelevant anecdotes and stupid opinions. Christ has given the doctrinal ministers to prepare you for your ministry

to the church, but if you refuse to learn and to submit, then you have no right to participate, for the same Scripture that allows you to participate states that it is these doctrinal ministers who will equip you.

As the doctrinal ministers perform their duties, and as the other believers learn from them and then participate in "works of service,"<sup>15</sup> they build up the body of Christ. The aim is to "reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God."

"The faith" clearly refers to the system of doctrine in the Bible that every Christian must affirm and follow. 1 Timothy 3:9 says, "[Deacons] must keep hold of the *deep truths* of the faith with a clear conscience"; 1 Timothy 4:6 talks about being "a good minister" who has been "brought up in *the truths* of the faith and of *the good teaching* that you have followed"; and Jude 3 urges readers to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." "Faith" here is used in the objective sense, referring to biblical doctrine.

By now we know that many commentators cannot tolerate Paul's intellectual emphasis, and so they stir up problems when it comes to the word "knowledge." On the basis that the word used here is not *gnōsis* but *epignōsis*,<sup>16</sup> and sometimes without any basis at all,<sup>17</sup> some commentators allege that Paul is now referring to "heart knowledge," or something "deeper" than the intellect, such as personal "fellowship" with Christ.

For example, Foulkes writes, "faith is not just the acceptance of a collection of dogmas, in the embracing of which unity will be found."<sup>18</sup> He is badly mistaken. Paul is teaching exactly that faith *is* a collection of dogmas, in the embracing of which unity will be found. The thrust of this passage is that Christ has given the church doctrinal ministers to teach them these dogmas, and true Christian unity is achieved when believers embrace these doctrines. Paul is teaching precisely what Foulkes denies.

Foulkes continues, "[Faith] is something deeper and more personal. It is unity in *the knowledge of the Son of God*....We can never know any person simply with our mind; and knowledge of such a person as is envisaged here must involve the deepest possible fellowship."<sup>19</sup>

He says that we can *never* know *any person* simply with our mind, but he does not specify what other part of the human person there is with which we can know someone. Does he mean that we must know someone with our spleen as well as with our mind? Or does he mean that we must know someone with our "heart" also? But we have already shown the heart *is* the mind; they are the same part of the human person.

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<sup>15</sup> Barclay thinks that this refers to "practical service" (p. 149). Believers who are relatively inept in intellectual matters, even if they have been trained for practical service, must not be allowed to usurp the doctrinal authority in the church. Most people are not called to the office of teacher (James 3:1), but some are very gifted in handling the many practical matters in the church.

<sup>16</sup> See the example from Lenski below.

<sup>17</sup> See the example from Foulkes below.

<sup>18</sup> Foulkes, p. 129.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



He says that this "knowledge" must involve "the deepest possible fellowship." Again, if this "fellowship" is not a mental relationship sustained by intellectual communication, then what part of the human person is he talking about? Is there a non-mental part of the human person with which we can have "the deepest possible fellowship" with another? Foulkes seems to think so, and certainly if you have been influenced by unbiblical thinking on this matter, you would agree with him. However, both Foulkes and you must show from Scripture that there is such a non-mental part in the human person, but we have already established that the "heart," the "inward man," and all such terms refer to the mind.

Foulkes and many other commentators say what they say most likely because it sounds sweet and pious – they certainly have no exegetical ground for it – but the problem is that it is all meaningless nonsense. Of course we should have "the deepest possible fellowship" with Christ, but this is still a mental relationship, involving intellectual communication. Thus we return to a relationship with Christ and with one another based on the doctrines revealed in Scripture.

We must still talk about *gnōsis* and *epignōsis*. Lenski writes, "Not mere intellectual knowledge is referred to, such as *gnōsis* might express, but true heart knowledge."<sup>20</sup> But what is "heart" knowledge? And where is it? What is "heart" knowledge but intellectual knowledge? Is the "heart" non-mental, and processes no verbal information at all? If so – if the heart processes no verbal information – then how can we have "heart" *knowledge* about biblical doctrine? If not – if the heart *does* process verbal information – then how is the "heart" different from the mind? Again, we have already established that the heart *is* the mind.

Some people argue that we must distinguish the mind and the heart, because even an unbeliever can agree with biblical doctrines in his mind, but he is not truly saved until he agrees with them in his heart. In response, first, we cannot make this distinction between the mind and the heart if the Bible never makes such a distinction, but rather uses the two terms almost as synonyms, if not as exact synonyms. Second, the Bible never admits that an unbeliever can *truly* agree with biblical doctrines – it only teaches that he can claim to agree.

Moreover, even if the unbeliever can *truly* agrees with *some* biblical propositions, the Bible denies that he can agree with the biblical propositions necessary for salvation. Rather, it takes God's sovereign grace and power at work in the man's mind to convert him, granting him the will and power to agree with these biblical propositions that are needed for salvation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Lenski, p. 534.

<sup>21</sup> This is also a partial reply to objections based on James 2:19. Demons can affirm the oneness of God, but can they *sincerely* affirm the proposition, "I will now joyfully worship Christ"? Note that to *sincerely* affirm this proposition would also imply the actual worship of Christ.

Lenski thinks that *gnōsis* is "intellectual knowledge," but that *epignōsis* is "heart knowledge." This is one of the most popular exegetical myths, and many Charismatics, Evangelicals, and even Reformed scholars and preachers lean on it.

Clark replies, "Hellenistic Greek makes no distinction between *gnōsis* and *ginōskō*, and *epignōsis*."<sup>22</sup> Thayer's lexicon says that *epignōsis* means "correct and precise knowledge; used in the NT of the knowledge of things ethical and divine," and in connection with our verse in particular: "Of Christ, i.e. the true knowledge of Christ's nature, dignity, benefits."<sup>23</sup>

Lawrence Richards writes, "*Epiginōskō* is also translated 'know' in the NT. This is an intensive form of *ginōskō* and implies a fuller or more nearly complete knowledge."<sup>24</sup> And in connection with Ephesians 1:17, Ralph Earle writes:

The regular Greek word for "knowledge" is *gnōsis*...But the word here is *epignōsis*...Is there any difference?

Trench writes: "Of *epignōsis*, as compared with *gnōsis*, it will be sufficient to say that *epi* must be regarded as intensive, giving to the compound word a greater strength than the simple word possessed." Lightfoot says: "The compound *epignōsis* is an advance upon *gnōsis*, denoting a larger and more thorough knowledge." And Salmond agrees: "It means a knowledge that is true, accurate, thorough, and so might be rendered 'full knowledge.'"

Paul is fond of compound words. This fact seems to be a reflection of his powerful personality. He felt deeply and expressed himself strongly. His use of compounds with the intensive *epi* was but a projection of his very intense nature, which manifested itself also in a life of unsurpassed devotion to the Lord.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, the prefix *epi* at best intensifies the meaning of *gnōsis*, making it a greater and deeper knowledge of the same kind, but does not change the meaning into another kind of knowledge altogether. Now, as Lenski himself admits, *gnōsis* denotes "intellectual knowledge," and since "Hellenistic Greek makes no distinction between *gnōsis*...and *epignōsis*," and the prefix *epi* most likely even intensifies the meaning of *gnōsis*, this means that rather than denoting "heart knowledge" (as something different from intellectual knowledge), *epignōsis* refers to "super-intellectual knowledge."

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<sup>22</sup> Clark, *Ephesians*; p. 140.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*; Hendrickson Publishers.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Words*; Zondervan Publishing House, 1991; p. 383.

<sup>25</sup> Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*; Hendrickson Publishers; p. 294.

Thus to paraphrase the apostle, Christ has sent us these doctrinal ministers so that they would prepare the believers for service; this results in the continual edification of the whole church, to the end that we all become agreed in doctrine and in the deeply, intensely, super-intellectual knowledge about the Son of God, that is, Jesus Christ. It is in this way and in this sense that we strive to attain "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Scripture teaches that Christian unity *is* doctrinal unity; that is, for Christians to be united is for them to agree in doctrine. Although this is the biblical position, it is the opposite of what many professing believers affirm and teach nowadays. Instead, they insist that we can and must unite around "Christ," not in the form of doctrinal agreement, but *despite* even great doctrinal disagreements.

However, it is impossible to unite around "Christ" while affirming incompatible doctrinal positions about him, since "Christ" would then become an undefined and meaningless sound with no definite content. If Tom thinks that Christ is an elephant, Mary thinks that Christ is a polar bear, Jane thinks that Christ is a merely human prophet, and Vincent thinks that Christ is God incarnate, then to say that we can unite around "Christ" while retaining these different conceptions about "Christ" would make both "Christ" and the "unity" meaningless. For just as Jane refuses to obey an elephant, Vincent refuses to worship a polar bear.

If your response is that the beliefs of professing Christians are not really *that* different, so that the above problem is purely hypothetical, then by implication you have admitted that Christian unity does depend on doctrinal unity, only that you think this doctrinal unity is already present and sufficient. If you insist that there must be only minimal doctrinal agreement among believers, then we already disagree on a doctrinal issue that I consider central. It is one that I refuse to compromise; therefore, our doctrinal disagreement has resulted in disunity.

For Christians to unite around Christ means to affirm the same things about Christ, such as who he is, what he has done, his incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and exaltation, his relationship to the Father, his relationship to the believers, and the relationship between believers in him. In other words, unity in Christ must be unity in what Scripture teaches about Christ. Otherwise, there is no unity, even if there is compromise.

What the doctrinal ministers do, then, is to teach the truth about Christ and to refute false ideas about him: "Preaching the gospel aims at theological agreement."<sup>26</sup> Then, as the various parts of the body of Christ learn and reinforce these doctrines, they grow in knowledge and agreement with one another. This is the essence of true Christian unity. To repeat, Christian unity *is* doctrinal unity, and this doctrinal unity is what Paul teaches and illustrates here.

If you are a church leader, then this is your mandate. You must promote doctrinal agreement by faithfully and forcefully teaching biblical doctrines, and by refuting all

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<sup>26</sup> Clark, *Ephesians*; p. 139.

unbiblical ideas. You must not seek to achieve agreement by compromise, or by reducing the biblical system of truth to a common denominator with which everyone can immediately agree. Rather, you must promote the truth and destroy falsehood.

The Bible never encourages us to "put aside our doctrinal differences," but rather to confront and resolve them. Rather than trying to please both sides of a doctrinal disagreement, if one side holds the biblical position, then he should win the argument, and the other side should discard his false position. If both sides are found to be unbiblical, then they should both discard their false positions to embrace the biblical one.

Of course, this demands unusual commitment and courage from you, "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). Yet, this is the very purpose for which Christ has called you.

Some of you may complain that full or even substantial doctrinal agreement between believers appear too remote. But this is partly because you have not been doing your job! It is your fault, so do not complain. If you have been thinking or teaching all along that Christian unity is not based on doctrine, but rather some non-doctrinal "love" or "Christ," then no wonder there has been no progress in doctrinal agreement. And have you been praying for doctrinal agreement in the church, or do you only pray for agreement in attitudes and actions?

There is much more that we can and must do to promote doctrinal agreement between believers. Of course, everything rests upon God's predetermined plan, and only he can produce real change and growth. Nevertheless, we have now stated your duty as a believer and as a minister, and the ultimate perfection to which God will eventually bring his church.<sup>27</sup>

Paul is not yet finished with his emphasis on doctrine, but he states that as the doctrinal ministers faithfully perform their duty, as they prepare the believers for works of service, as the church as a whole moves toward doctrinal agreement, and thus as the church attains the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, "Then we will no longer be *infants*, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every *wind of teaching* and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming." Therefore, besides telling us that Christian unity is doctrinal unity, he also teaches that Christian *maturity* is doctrinal maturity.

False doctrines sway immature Christians. Evangelical and Reformed churches have very little immunity,<sup>28</sup> mainly because their leaders fail to give doctrine the highest priority; instead, they promote drama programs, youth retreats, singles nights, and bake sales. It would be better if they cancel the drama programs, scrub the youth retreats, call off

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<sup>27</sup> Consider how this goal of doctrinal agreement would fit into a postmillennial scheme of eschatology.

<sup>28</sup> For example, consider the recent Auburn Avenue heresy on justification.

singles nights, turn over the bake sale tables, and devote all the time and money thus recovered to theology classes. That would be a good start.

Church leaders must diligently "encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). When they fail to do this, the believers under them will remain spiritual infants, susceptible to "the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming." So some of them drift away to Scientology, or Catholicism, or Mormonism, and then some of them are carried away by the Charismatics.

What Paul would call a "wind of doctrine," the Charismatics often venerate as a "present truth." The term comes from 2 Peter 1:12, but of course they have distorted it. By the term, the Charismatics refer to a teaching that God is now supposedly emphasizing to the church, probably one that was revealed to the apostles but that had been "lost" until now. So they get excited about "new" truths on territorial spirits, intercessory prayer, church government, discipleship, and the "end times." They think that their "apostles" and "prophets" are bringing back these truths to the people, but all they are bringing are just waves upon waves of heresies.

If they really want to learn biblical truths, they should just take up a book on Reformed dogmatics, and then they will find that they no longer need their apostles and prophets. But since *biblical* theologians do not teach people how to "soak" in the presence of the Holy Spirit, to bark like dogs and make other animal sounds in church (claiming that they are inspired by the Spirit), and to shoot down territorial demons, maybe they will keep their apostles and prophets after all.

Of course, as I said, winds of doctrine do not only blow through the Charismatic Movement, but also the Evangelical and Reformed churches; however, heresies affecting the latter are much more sophisticated, or "intelligent," if you will. In any case, a heresy is a heresy, and we must refute and destroy it.

The better way, however, is to invest our time and resources on building up the believers on sound doctrine, so that they will no longer be infants. Note that spiritual "infants" are those who have no resistance to false doctrines, and accordingly, spiritual adults are those who have been established by sound doctrines, so that they are not easily swayed.

One main measurement of spiritual maturity is doctrinal maturity. Is the person's doctrinal knowledge broad, deep, accurate, and established? Then, he is spiritually mature. One may object that a person can memorize a systematic theology and still remain a licentious person, or even an unbeliever. This is true, and that is why I say that he must be "established" in sound doctrine. A person who *sincerely* and *steadily* believes and follows sound doctrine is by definition a true Christian, and spiritually mature.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:11, "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me." Spiritual maturity has to do with growing up in talking, in thinking, and in reasoning about spiritual things. Such a person possesses deep doctrinal discernment; he is not

easily deceived. As a believer, this is what you must strive to become; as a church leader, this is what you must help believers become. We must read about doctrine, think about doctrine, and talk about doctrine – all the time. As Herman Hoeksema said, "If you ask me what, in our time, our people need above all, in the first place, my answer is: Doctrine! If you ask me what they need in the second place, I say: Doctrine! If you ask me what they need in the third place, I say: Doctrine!"<sup>29</sup>

By now you must have the impression that I stress doctrine a great deal, and perhaps you think that I stress it too much. But the reason why you think that I stress it too much is because you think too little of the Bible, and since the Bible is God's word, the reason why you think too little of the Bible is because you think too little of God. I repeatedly say, "Study theology!" but I hope you are sharp enough to notice that this is just a formal way of saying, "Listen to God!"

Instead of being tossed here and there by every heretical trend, we promote the growth of the body of Christ by "speaking the truth in love." Now, what does this mean? Many people seem to think that this means, "Assert the truth, but do it *nicely*." They define "love" according to secular social etiquette, the non-Christian standard of acceptable speech and behavior.

But if this is the right definition, and if this is the correct understanding of "speaking the truth in love," then Paul would be telling Titus to "speak the truth *in hate*" when he writes, "Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the commands of those who reject the truth" (Titus 1:13-14). Paul's concern is obviously similar to our present one, that is, doctrinal accuracy and maturity. Yet, he says, "*Rebuke them sharply*, so that they will be sound in the faith." Well, is this love or not? Why do you think Paul says to rebuke them in the first place? Because he loves them (Proverbs 27:5; 1 Timothy 5:20).

Of course, to harshly rebuke someone is often not the first step against false doctrine or spiritual immaturity, but it is usually reserved for the obstinate and unrepentant, and those in close danger of spiritual shipwreck. The point is that "speaking the truth in love" does not demand that we always speak softly and nicely, but it is precisely our love that sometimes requires us to let out a thunderous rebuke against the sinning or erring believer. Paul writes, "These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority" – sometimes I encourage and sometimes I rebuke, but I always teach. Some people think that I should always encourage, sometimes teach, and never rebuke, but Paul assures me: "Do not let anyone despise you" (Titus 2:15). So I will keep on encouraging *and rebuking* people. Why? Because I love them.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Herman Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*; Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997; p. vii.

<sup>30</sup> To love does not mean "be nice." Biblical love is much greater than this. It refers to an obedience to the laws of God in our relationship with God and with people (John 14:21; Romans 13:10). It is volitional and sacrificial, often resulting in some corresponding practical action that benefits others at our own expense. Here we stress "speaking the truth in love" among believers. For a specific discussion on what love and hate mean in our relationship with unbelievers, see my *Systematic Theology*.

"As each part does its work," the body of Christ is "joined and held together," and it "grows and builds itself up in love." We have already said enough on this passage so that you must be able to understand this by now. So I will say no more, except to add that it would be helpful to read 1 Corinthians 12 (especially v. 12-16) in connection with this passage.

#### **EPHESIANS 4:17-24**

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

*You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

God has chosen them for salvation, regenerated them, and made them into "Israel" in Christ. And now, because they belong to one body with all the heirs of God, and must contribute to its growth, Paul commands these believers to stop living like the Gentiles; instead, they must "live a life worthy of the calling" (4:1). In other words, they must stop living like non-Christians, and live like Christians.

But what are the "Gentiles" or non-Christians like? What is wrong with them that Christians must not be like them? Read verses 17 to 19. What does Paul say? He mentions "the futility of their thinking," and that they are "darkened in their understanding." Thus he is still not done with the intellect; he is still not done with doctrine. He finally arrives at a more practical and moral emphasis, and he immediately addresses the mind again. He says that the unbelievers are separated from God, that they are ignorant, and hardened. Then, Paul continues to say, they are callous, indulgent, and continually driven by lust. In other words, as Scripture consistently and repeatedly teaches, all non-Christians are stupid and evil.

When Scripture explicitly says that non-Christians are morons, people often try to distort that into a reference to "moral" intelligence. But this is to defy the word of God. Of course unbelievers are stupid concerning moral things, but this is only because they are stupid concerning *all things*. Christians often say that many non-Christians are very smart and very moral, but that they are just not good enough, or that their wisdom and morality are not of the right kind. Again, Scripture denies this; instead, it condemns all non-Christians as stupid and evil.

Paul says that their mindset ends in futility, and that their understanding is darkened. Hendriksen writes, "The 'understanding' or *power of discursive reasoning* has been

affected by sin."<sup>31</sup> Romans 1:22 says, "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools." In the same sense that unbelievers claim to be wise, Paul says that they are fools. But unbelievers do not claim to be only morally wise, but also intellectually wise; therefore, when Paul says that they are "fools" in the same sense that they claim to be wise, he means that they are intellectual fools, and not just moral fools.

Therefore, the apostle is indeed referring to their ability to think and reason, not just about morality, but about anything and everything. You must either reject this assessment, and therefore abandon biblical inerrancy, and perhaps denounce Christianity altogether, or you must confess with Scripture that all unbelievers are morons.

In public discussions, one objection sometimes arises against me even from people who are otherwise supportive of my writings – they disagree that I should call non-Christian morons. However, I do not call only non-Christian morons, because these people who think we should not call non-Christian morons are themselves also morons, even if they are Christians. This is because if they have read much of what I have written, then they must have seen my biblical support for calling non-Christian morons. Unless they can offer a biblical refutation, they are defying Scripture when they complain that I should not call the non-Christians what the Scripture itself calls them. Thus they are also morons.

Almost all of these people who disagree admit that Scripture calls the non-Christians "fools," and they do not object when I point out that the Greek is *moros*, from which we derived the English word, "moron." But they still insist that I should not call them that. Instead of thinking in line with Scripture, it seems that they are operating by a non-Christian standard.

One person responds, in effect, "You're right, but just don't say it, at least not to their faces." But are we allowed to preach on Psalm 14:1 and Rom. 1:22, and other verses telling us that unbelievers are stupid? If so, is this person saying that we must preach on these verses behind their backs? Or must we not even preach on these verses, and just read them silently at home?

Scripture says that unbelievers are "sinners" and that they are "wicked." Are we also forbidden to tell them this? Or is it acceptable to call them "sinners" and not "morons," and say that they are "wicked," and not "stupid"? May we even say that they "sin"? Yes, to their faces? If so, how is "moron" and "stupid" any worse? If not, then how can we even preach the gospel?

Another person writes, "I wholeheartedly agree that I was stupid, foolish, and moronic in my beliefs before I became a Christian...but I just don't see justification for engaging in the manner of name-calling which I have read from Mr. Cheung's writings."

So I have no justification in telling the truth and repeating the Bible? In any case, this is an incomplete account of my position. This person admits only to being "moronic in my

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<sup>31</sup> Hendriksen, p. 210.



beliefs," but Scripture does not only say that non-Christians are moronic in what they believe – it says that *they*, the people, are morons. As for "justification," just because he fails to see it does not mean that it is absent. It is obvious to me that he has not been reading my materials carefully enough. The fact is that I do provide justification for this in my books.

Also, for me it is not a matter of name-calling,<sup>32</sup> but a matter of doctrine. In fact, the only justification for *not* calling non-Christians "morons" is if they are in fact not morons. He can only say that my approach is wrong if he uses a non-biblical standard of judgment or etiquette. For so long people have been trained by unbelievers on how to talk that they are shocked when someone comes along and repeats the Bible! This also means that he who objects to the practice of calling non-Christians "morons" must first refute Scripture, for in my worldview, this is not a name-calling tactic, but it is part of my theology.

In one forum, a person proposes the syllogism: "Scripture says that non-Christian are fools; X is a non-Christian; therefore, X is a fool." He then questions how Vincent Cheung could be in error if Scripture is inerrant and if this syllogism is valid. One person answers that he dares not disagree with what God says, and thus he has to agree with the first premise and the necessary conclusion of the syllogism – but somehow Vincent Cheung is still wrong!

He claims that he does not want to "judge" people. But then, consider this syllogism: "Scripture says that non-Christians are sinners; X is a non-Christian; therefore, X is a sinner." By this person's reasoning, it would also be wrong to call the non-Christian a sinner. But if this is the case, how can I preach the gospel? Am I even allowed to tell Christians that the non-Christians are sinners? Then how can I teach the Bible? And if we are not supposed to "judge" (in the unbiblical sense meant by this person), then who are we to assume that someone might even need the gospel? Then, can we preach to anyone about anything at all? This person's reasoning amounts to saying that although we must agree with the Bible, we are not allowed to draw necessary implications from it, and we are not allowed to apply its "negative" teachings to anyone. No, that would be to "judge" people.

There are some who think that we may call people sinners, but not morons. But why is "sinner" less offensive than "moron"? Or why is "wicked" more pleasant than "stupid"? Non-Christian denies both labels, but Scripture calls them both.

Then, some people, at least on the surface, applaud me for being faithful to Scripture in calling the unbeliever a fool, but they want me to be so poetic and polite – in other words, *unclear* – about it that they are shocked and embarrassed when I merely repeat what Scripture says in plain speech, in a way that both Christians and non-Christians can understand.

My critics appear to assume a secular morality that has been designed to silence Christians, so that they are bound by unbiblical concepts of etiquette and tolerance. As

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<sup>32</sup> And if you are calling them what they really are, why is "name-calling" wrong?

for me, I will "no longer live as the Gentiles do," and this includes believing what Scripture says about them, and calling them whatever Scripture calls them, even to their faces. If Scripture is our spiritual and intellectual foundation, then we must accept, honor, apply, and declare its evaluation of the non-Christians, and its pronouncements against them.

Then, some Christians find it acceptable when I refer to the non-Christians as "irrational" or even "unwise," but they are horrified when I use the word "stupid." Others even call the non-Christian "fools," in accordance with Psalm 14 and Romans 1. But when I use the words "idiots" and "morons," again I am guilty of some horrible crime. No wonder non-Christians call Christians stupid morons!

Now, it is Scripture's own doctrine that the non-Christians are stupid, and that they are morons. I am willing to affirm this doctrine in clear and unmistakable terms before both Christians and non-Christians – whether in a soft or harsh tone, with restrained or flamboyant gestures, or with subdued or forceful mannerisms, as the situation requires. I merely apply and repeat the words of the prophets and the apostles. If you disagree with this, is it really because I am unbiblical, or is it because you are a pathetic wimp, and a product of non-Christian indoctrination?

Paul writes that they are "darkened in their understanding." Do my critics agree with Scripture that the non-Christians are "darkened in their understanding," but that they are at the same time pretty smart? In Romans 1:21, Paul writes that "their thinking became futile and their *foolish* hearts were darkened," very much like what he writes here in Ephesians. Thayer's lexicon says that the word (*asunetos*) means "unintelligent, without understanding," and that in Romans 1:21, it means "stupid."<sup>33</sup>

Then, Paul adds that the non-Christians "indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more." Do my critics agree with Scripture that the non-Christians are "callous" (NASB), and that they continually "lust for more" vile and impure things, but that at the same time they are pretty good people? Are they insane? Or are they just stupid like the unbelievers?

Paul says that the non-Christians are vain, stupid, hardened, callous, and full of lust. My critics must either accept biblical inerrancy or reject it. If they accept it, then they must agree with Paul and me that all non-Christians are stupid and evil; if they reject it, then they must tell us on what basis they can call themselves Christians at all. If they are not Christians, then they must refute Christianity before they can criticize me for repeating what my worldview says about the non-Christians.

In any case, some believers know that I am right, that Scripture indeed calls the unbelievers stupid and evil, but they resent me for being biblical and unambiguous. Also, following Scripture, I do not stop at calling them stupid and evil; rather, I proceed to proclaim the gospel, pressing the point that only Christ can save them from being morons

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<sup>33</sup> Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon*.

and monsters. There is much more that I can say about this, and there are other specific objections that I can mention and answer,<sup>34</sup> but we must move on.<sup>35</sup>

Like I said, Paul is still not done with the intellect, and he is still not done with doctrine. After reminding his readers that non-Christians are stupid and evil, he also reminds his readers that they are not like the non-Christians, because they have been changed by Christian teaching. Carefully note the intellectual references:

You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you *heard of him* and were *taught in him* in accordance with *the truth* that is in Jesus. *You were taught*, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of *your minds*; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

According to Paul, the non-Christian's problem consists of his futile thinking, darkened mind, callous heart, and continual lust. Now he states that Christians are different because they have been taught the truth of Christianity. God's power rescues us from futile thinking and continual lust, not by a divine encounter or experience, but by the teaching of Christ, or Christian doctrine, applied to the mind by divine power.

Even the act of putting off the old self and putting on the new self is an intellectual exercise. The parallel verses in Colossians 3:9-10 say, "Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being *renewed in knowledge* in the image of its Creator." Of course, Christians are able to believe and practice Christian teaching because they have been first sovereignly chosen and regenerated by God, as we have already discussed.

To paraphrase, Paul is saying to his readers, "You don't have to be like the non-Christians, because you have been taught something else. You have been taught the truth of Jesus Christ, that is, the Christian worldview. Moreover, you can live consistently with this Christian worldview because God has regenerated you and his power is at work in you. By renewing your mind with biblical teaching, you can put on the new self, form new thinking patterns and moral habits, and conform to true righteousness and holiness."

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<sup>34</sup> There are several biblical verses that people use against my approach (which is really just to repeat and apply what the Bible says about the non-Christians), but I can show that they have misunderstood these verses. For example, for my response to a misapplication of Matthew 5:22, see *The Sermon on the Mount*. Also, the way that they apply – that is, misapply – these verses would often make them contradict other things uttered by Christ and Paul. Rather than performing careful exegesis, and pursuing a coherent understanding of Scripture, they have taken verses that, when distorted, appear to support what they have learned from the non-Christians on how to treat, think about, and talk to the non-Christians. Why do you think the unbelievers teach intellectual "tolerance"? It is because their thinking and conduct cannot withstand even the casual scrutiny of an informed Christian. On the other hand, I say with Scripture that false beliefs must not be tolerated, but rather be destroyed by conclusive refutations.

<sup>35</sup> For more on this subject, besides my own discussions in my other books, see also Douglas Wilson, *The Serrated Edge: A Brief Defense of Biblical Satire and Trinitarian Skylarking* (Canon Press, 2003), and Robert A. Morey, "And God Mocked Them" (audio).

#### EPHESIANS 4:25-5:2

*Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

*And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

In sanctification, the Christian renews his mind with the teaching of Scripture, and then following its instructions, he puts off the old self and puts on the new self. Having established this in the previous passage, Paul now lists several specific areas in which Christians must practice this principle, and explains what it means to put off the old self and put on the new self in the context of these examples.

Because we must no longer live like the Gentiles, and because we have received the teaching of Christ, "therefore" we must now "put off falsehood." The old self tends to lie whenever it seems advantageous to do so, but we must put on the new self and thus "speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body." Note that although we must follow biblical principles of ethics at all times and toward everyone, Paul here is especially focusing on our behavior within God's household, since the context has to do with maintaining the peace and unity that God has produced among his people through Christ.

"In your anger do not sin" comes from Psalm 4:4. Note the continuity between Old Testament ethics and New Testament ethics.<sup>36</sup> Christ did not redeem us so that we may disobey Old Testament moral principles, but rather to grant us a new spirit to obey them as we ought (Ezekiel 11:19-20). There is such a thing as righteous indignation. That is, anger is not always sinful, but anger is righteous when it arises because we are jealous for God's honor, and zealous for the truth (Mark 3:5). Nevertheless, we must not try to justify our selfish anger, or lack of patience and compassion, by calling it righteous indignation. Righteous anger is different from just holding a grudge. If we can tell the difference, and control our emotions, then we will "not give the devil a foothold."

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<sup>36</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *The Sermon on the Mount*.

Doubtless some of the readers were thieves before they were converted. Now that they are Christians, stealing is unacceptable, because this is not what they learned from Christ (4:20); rather, they have been taught to put off the old self and to put on the new self. That is, they must not only put off the old, but they must also put on the new; they must not only put away wickedness, but they must also pursue holiness. Therefore, it is not enough for them just to stop stealing, but Paul says that they must find some useful work to do, so that they may "have something to share with those in need."

The same principle applies to our daily speech. Now that we are Christians, we must put away any "unwholesome talk"; instead, we must speak "only what is helpful for building others up."

Charismatics often abuse the command, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God." Sometimes they apply this to what they consider to be "moves" of the Spirit, and to warn those who would oppose the unusual things that the Charismatics claim the Spirit wishes to do in church services. However, whether this principle is correct or not, this is not at all what this passage intends to say.

Sometimes they infer that the Holy Spirit is easily offended, that he is like a frightened little girl, or that he could be easily chased away like a pigeon. But if the Spirit is as "sensitive" as they say, we would *never* have the Spirit's presence and power. The Charismatics overestimate their own holiness, and underestimate the Spirit's robust personality.

The "anointing" does not depart from you just because you oversleep or overeat, because you have to clean the toilet, do your laundry, or feed your baby before you preach, or because the music leader plays the wrong song during the service. The power rests in the Spirit! It does not depend on you, or on your serene state of mind. The Spirit is with us because of the work of Christ, not because of our holiness, and not because we manage to tip-toe around him all the time.

Moreover, since God is impassible, the reference to "grieve" is an anthropathism in the first place. God is without emotions.<sup>37</sup>

That said, Paul's point is for us to "Get rid of...every form of malice." But again, biblical sanctification involves more than merely putting off the old self, along with its sinful desires and habits; rather, we must put on or take up the corresponding virtues. In this case, Paul urges us to "Be imitators of God...and live a life of love." Following God's own example, we must "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Clearly, Paul is introducing a whole new pattern of thinking and living to his readers. We may no longer live like the non-Christians, because we have been chosen, changed, and converted in Christ. Non-Christians lie and steal; they are bitter and malicious. At one

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<sup>37</sup> See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*.

time, we were like them, but instead of acting like the children of Satan, now we must be "imitators of God, as dearly beloved children."

#### **EPHESIANS 5:3-20**

*But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person – such a man is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.*

*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."*

*Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul is aware of the rampant sexual perversions that surround the believers, and so after giving them some specific examples on putting off the old self and putting on the new self, he provides an extended warning against "sexual immorality" and "what the disobedient do in secret" – things that are "shameful even to mention."

Among believers, there must not be "even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity." How far are we from this biblical standard! And yet we are still trying to play nice with sins and sinners, and criticize those who speak up. But Paul does not stop here. He adds that even "coarse joking" should be replaced with "thanksgiving." Some Christians are eager to show the non-Christians that we are not prudes, but if we ever succeed in doing this to their satisfaction, then it would also mean that we have accepted a non-Christian moral standard. Rather than trying to prove that we are not prudes, we should show that they are filthy beasts.

Paul continues to make an important point. He says, "For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person – such a man is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient." Many Christians have

changed their theology to accommodate the sinful lifestyle of the non-Christians. It is as if they think that if we are going to affirm that all these things lead to hell, then it would mean that *many* people are going to hell, and surely we do not want such a harsh theology! But take it or leave it, this is Christianity.

In another place, Paul similarly writes, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, NASB). Professing Christians even say that it is fine to commit adultery, that it is fine to have an abortion, that it is fine if you are a homosexual, that is fine if you leave your husband or wife. After all, you must follow your heart, right? God understands.

But it is not fine. Paul explicitly states that adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, and even drunkards will *not* inherit the kingdom of God. They are not Christians, and they will go to hell – all of them. Paul knows that people do not like to think this way, and that many will assert the opposite, and that is why in one passage he warns, "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient," and in the other he also writes, "Do not be deceived."

In other words, it is precisely because of these things – sexual immorality, coarse joking, adultery, theft, homosexuality, drunkenness, and all the other things that Scripture calls sin – that God's wrath is already coming upon "the disobedient." It is precisely because of these things that non-Christians will go to hell. The sooner Christians wake up to this reality, the sooner they can take the proper approach toward these people. That is, they must not tell homosexuals that they can remain homosexuals and still go to heaven as long as they believe in Christ. No, if they believe in Christ, then they must stop being homosexuals. Likewise, one cannot be a Christian and have an abortion, or leave the husband or wife for another person. All these are abominations. It is *not* loving or compassionate to deceive a sinner by letting him think that he is in fact not a sinner.

"Therefore, do not be partners with them." Instead of joining them in their sins, or their approval of these sins, we must "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them." Paul sets up a great contrast between Christians and non-Christians. Whereas we were "once darkness...now you are light in the Lord." The Christians are as light, and the non-Christians are as darkness. We must "live as children of the light." Throughout this letter, Paul labors to convey the tremendous intellectual and moral differences between the Christians and the non-Christians, and here the imagery cannot be any clearer – Christians and non-Christians are intellectual and moral opposites.

But he is not done with the contrast. He writes, "Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise." In other words, do not be stupid like the non-Christians, but be smart, and that means to "[make] the most of every opportunity," doubtless to live as children of light, and to expose the deeds of darkness. "Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is." Here is the contrast again. Non-Christians are stupid;

they indulge in their lusts and immorality and think that they are doing fine. But we must not be like them; rather, we must be wise, and understand the Lord's will.

Paul continues, "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit." Again, the Charismatics distort this verse. They take a mystical and experiential interpretation of this verse, rather than, as consistent with the context, an intellectual and moral interpretation. Many of them assume that this means the Spirit is a substitute for wine, and will produce similar mental and physical effects in a person.<sup>38</sup>

But the verse does not teach this; instead, the contrast is still between folly and wisdom.<sup>39</sup> In fact, O'Brien convincingly argues that the Holy Spirit is not the content of the filling at all, but rather the instrument of the filling. In other words, this verse does not say, "Be filled *with* the Spirit," but "Be filled *by* the Spirit." As for the content of fullness, recall the relevant expressions so far in this letter. O'Brien concludes:

The *content* with which believers have been (or are being) filled is the fulness of (the triune) God or of Christ. No other text in Ephesians (or elsewhere in Paul) *focuses* specifically on the Holy Spirit as the *content* of this fulness. It is better, then, to understand 5:18 in terms of the Spirit's mediating the fulness of God and Christ to believers. In other words, Paul's readers are to be transformed by the Spirit into the likeness of God and Christ, ideas which are entirely consistent with the earlier exhortations of 4:32-5:2...To be admonished, "Be filled by the Spirit," then, means that Paul's readers are urged to let the Spirit change them more and more into the image of God and Christ, a notion which is consistent with Pauline theology elsewhere.<sup>40</sup>

This filling *by* the Holy Spirit generates in the believers "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs," which in turn are connected with "giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." This appears to describe the very doxologies and thanksgivings that we have read from this letter, but unlike the spontaneous "spiritual songs" of the Charismatics, Paul's doxologies contain deep theology and exhibit coherent thought.

This interpretation is credible because the parallel verse in Colossians says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (3:16). Here what is to fill the believers is explicitly said to be "the *word* of Christ," and

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<sup>38</sup> Acts 2 does not support the Charismatic position. First, the passage never says that the disciples acted like drunk men, but only that some people who wanted to mock them accused them of being drunk. Second, Peter explicitly denied that the men were drunk (v. 15). Against many Charismatics, Peter was not saying only that the men were not drunk *in the way* that their accusers thought ("as you suppose"); rather, he meant, "Contrary to what you suppose, these people are not drunk at all."

<sup>39</sup> Turner, p. 1242.

<sup>40</sup> O'Brien, p. 392.



the effect is that they would *"teach and admonish* one another with *all wisdom*, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

Some people may be more prone to write songs and doxologies, even if they are not as good as Paul's, but all who claim to have been filled *by* the Spirit *with* the word of Christ must "teach and admonish...with all wisdom." This is just another way of saying that the Holy Spirit fills us with biblical knowledge, and as he does so, we become capable of teaching and admonishing others with theological insight, perhaps even in the form of songs and doxologies, and always with gratitude in our hearts to God.<sup>41</sup>

#### **EPHESIANS 5:21-6:9**

*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

*Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.*

*After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.*

*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" – which is the first commandment with a promise – "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."*

*Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.*

*Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.*

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<sup>41</sup> For some examples of this, see the hymns by Martin Luther, John Newton, Augustus Toplady, among others.

***And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.***

There is difficulty in determining the relationship of verse 21 with its surrounding verses. Grammatically, it seems to belong to the previous passage, and refers to one of the results of being filled by the Spirit. In terms of content, however, the verse appears to introduce the next section on domestic relationships. In fact, it is verse 21 that supplies the verb for verse 22. Thus we must recognize the relationship of verse 21 with both the verses that precede and follow it.

Corresponding to Paul's earlier admonition, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (4:3), people who are filled by the Spirit do not always insist on having things their own way, but they willingly yield to one another as long as this does not compromise doctrine. After instructing the believers on how to behave in the household of God in general, he proceeds to discuss the relationships in the individual households of Christians.

The verse says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Some have derived from this the teaching of "mutual submission," meaning that every believer must submit to every other believer, and they apply this also to the domestic relationships that Paul is about to discuss. However, this is not what the verse teaches, and when one tries to impose "mutual submission" on the subsequent verses, it just does not fit. We will consider several arguments showing that the verse opposes "mutual submission."

To begin, the word translated "submit" (*hypotassō*) regularly functions to describe a one-directional subordination to another's authority, rather than a symmetrical relationship. O'Brien writes that "it always has to do with an ordered relationship in which one person is 'over' and another 'under.'"<sup>42</sup> Therefore, to say that the word can refer to a relationship of mutual and reciprocal submission would be "to misunderstand the semantic range of the term."<sup>43</sup> That is, the word disallows the "mutual submission" interpretation of the verse; rather, it denotes a one-directional submission to the proper authority in any given situation.<sup>44</sup> Mary Kassian concludes:

*Hypotasso* always requires *one* party in a relationship to submit to the other, and *not* vice versa. The context of Ephesians 5:21 supports this position. In this verse, Paul makes a *general* call to all Christians to submit to one another in whatever hierarchical relationships *they are involved in*. He then gives three *specific* examples of relationships in which submission of one party is

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<sup>42</sup> O'Brien, p. 402.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> To paraphrase, the verse is saying, "Submit to one another – that is, wives to husbands, children to parents, and slaves to masters." See also Dan Doriani, *Women and Ministry: What the Bible Teaches*; Crossway Books, 2003; p. 66.

required. Verse 21 is thus properly understood as an introductory verse to those which follow.<sup>45</sup>

Then, "one another" does not necessarily imply an equal and reciprocal relationship. For example, Paul writes in Galatians 6:2, "Bear *one another's* burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ" (NASB), but then he writes in verse 5, "For each one shall bear his own load." His point, of course, is that whereas each person should indeed "bear his own load," the stronger should help the weaker, or those who are capable should help those who are in need. He certainly does not mean that we should each simply *exchange* our "burdens," and thus to never bear our own load while always bearing the burdens of other people.<sup>46</sup>

Another example is Revelation 6:4. The verse says, "And another, a red horse, went out; and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth, and that men should slay *one another*" (NASB). This just means that men would fight among themselves, and that many of them would be killed. It is certainly not asserting that there would be exact mutual destruction in every confrontation, that people would be killed by pairs, or that both parties in every confrontation would always kill each other, so that each would have to fatally wound the other person at almost the same time, since one cannot inflict harm to his opponent after he himself has already been killed.

Therefore, "one another" in 5:21 does not necessarily imply "mutual submission" in the sense of a completely reciprocal submission; instead, we must determine the meaning by observing the context.

What interpretation does the context demand?

Now, a completely reciprocal submission would mean that whereas wives must submit to husbands, husbands must also submit to wives (in exactly the same sense and to exactly the same extent), that whereas children must submit to parents, parents must also submit to children (in exactly the same sense and to exactly the same extent), and that whereas slaves must submit to masters, masters must also submit to slaves (in exactly the same sense and to exactly the same extent).

However, the passage (5:22-6:9) does not teach this – whereas Paul indeed says that wives must submit to husbands, that children must submit to parents, and that slaves must submit to masters, he *never* says that husbands must submit to wives, that parents must submit to children, or that masters must submit to slaves.

Paul indeed teaches that husbands must treat their wives well, that parents must treat their children well, and that masters must treat their slaves well, but this is very different from teaching submission. Paul never says, "Wives, submit to you husbands, and husbands, submit to your wives," or "Slaves, obey your masters, and masters, obey your slaves"!

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<sup>45</sup> Mary A. Kassian, *Women, Creation, and the Fall*; Crossway Books, 1990; p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> See also 1 Corinthians 11:33; Luke 2:15, 24:32.

In fact, it seems that at least one reason why Paul commands those in authority to treat their subordinates well is precisely because the latter must submit and obey. It is as if Paul says to them, "Because they must obey you, they are in a vulnerable position to be abused by you; therefore, just as I command them to submit to you, I admonish you not to mistreat them, but rather to be tender toward them. Just as you have authority over those who are under you, we are all under the authority of Christ, and are accountable to him."

In addition, Paul uses the marriage relationship as a figure for the relationship between Christ and the church. Now, if verse 21 requires that we understand 5:22-6:9 as teaching "mutual submission," then this necessarily implies that Christ himself must obey the church in the same sense and to the same extent that the church obeys Christ. But this would be blasphemy; therefore, the mutual submission doctrine results in blasphemy.

On the other hand, Paul writes, "For *the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*"<sup>47</sup> Note that "the husband is...as Christ is," and "as the church...so also wives." Does this not give the husbands tremendous authority over the wives? Indeed it does, and that seems to be at least one reason why Paul writes, "Husbands, love your wives."

Therefore, we conclude with Lenski, "...in what follows (v. 22-6:9) we, indeed, have subjection but no reciprocal, no mutual subjection. Wives are to be subject to husbands, children to parents, slaves to masters, but not the reverse, and husbands and masters are not to be subject to other persons in the family."<sup>48</sup>

Now we will deal with verses 22-24. Their meaning seems self-explanatory, especially in the light of our discussion of verse 21. However, there has been many attempts at distorting and subverting the clear meaning of the passage. For example, the *NIV Study Bible* rejects Paul's teaching, and gives the following excuse:

To submit meant to yield one's own rights. If the relationship called for it, as in the military, the term could connote obedience, but that meaning is not called for here. In fact, the word "obey" does not appear in Scripture with respect to wives, though it does with respect to children (6:1) and slaves (6:5).<sup>49</sup>

Submission here is defined as "to yield one's own rights." Another popular understanding of "submission" contrasts it with "obedience," and takes submission in this context to mean humility and respect in the wife's attitude, instead of conformity to the husband's will in behavior. With this latter definition, it is conceivable that a wife may exhibit total

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<sup>47</sup> Calvin writes, "Not that the authority is equal, but wives cannot obey Christ unless they yield obedience to their husbands" (*Ephesians*, p. 205).

<sup>48</sup> Lenski, p. 623.

<sup>49</sup> *The NIV Study Bible, 10th Anniversary Edition*; The Zondervan Corporation, 1995; see notes on Ephesians 5:22.

*disobedience*, and at the same time satisfies the requirement to exhibit total "submission," just because she has a respectful attitude. Both of these definitions are false given the context of the passage and how the word is used in other biblical verses.

As for the claim that "the word 'obey' does not appear in Scripture with respect to wives, though it does with respect to children (6:1) and slaves (6:5)," it is an outright lie.

In response, first, although the word translated "submit" (*hypotassō*) in verse 22 is different from the one translated "obey" (*hypakouō*) in 6:1 and 6:5, it is unnecessary to use *hypakouō* ("obey") in verse 22, since *hypotassō* ("submit") can also denote obedience. For example, the same word *hypotassō* ("submit") is used in Luke 2:51, but this time the NIV reflects the meaning of obedience: "Then [Jesus] went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient [*hypotassō*] to them." But *hypakouō* ("obey") is used in Ephesians 6:1 where it says, "Children, obey [*hypakouō*] your parents in the Lord, for this is right."

Does the commentator<sup>50</sup> dare insinuate that Jesus was merely "submissive" to his parents in his attitude, but that he was not "obedient" to them? That is, he nodded and smiled, but did not do what they said? If so, did Jesus obey the commandment, "Honor your father and mother"? Paul cites this commandment in Ephesians 6:2 as the basis for children to *obey* their parents, but the Bible uses *hypotassō* ("submit") in reference to Christ in Luke 2:51.

But that is not the best part. This commentator states, "the word 'obey' does not appear in Scripture with respect to wives."<sup>51</sup> Thus he must mean that Scripture never uses *hypakouō* ("obey") when it refers to wives, but that it uses only *hypotassō* ("submit"). However, Scripture uses *hypakouō* ("obey") when it speaks about Sarah in 1 Peter 3:5-6: "For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive [*hypotassō*] to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed [*hypakouō*] Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear."

Again, the claim is that "the word 'obey' does not appear in Scripture with respect to wives." But then who was Sarah? She was the *wife* of Abraham, and Peter writes that she obeyed (*hypakouō*) her husband. Then, he says that women are to follow her example. This necessarily implies that we must equally apply *hypakouō* ("obey") to all wives. In addition, the verse itself either equates *hypotassō* ("submit") with *hypakouō* ("obey"), or at least assumes that *hypotassō* ("submit") implies *hypakouō* ("obey"), since it says, "They were submissive [*hypotassō*] to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed [*hypakouō*] Abraham and called him her master." That is, they were *submissive*, like Sarah, who *obeyed*.

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<sup>50</sup> Walter L. Liefeld appears to be the one responsible for this portion of the *NIV Study Bible*.

<sup>51</sup> This statement is no longer in the most recent revised edition of the *NIV Study Bible*; however, it retains the position that the term does not refer to obedience in this passage. In other words, the assertion remains, but the reason has disappeared. Is this a case of intellectual dishonesty, or does this reflect only an "innocent" editorial decision? I cannot tell.

Therefore, whether Scripture uses *hypakouō* or *hypotassō* (and now we see that it uses both words), it commands the wives to *obey* their husbands – nothing less will do. A wife must obey her husband, Paul says, "so that no one will malign the word of God" (Titus 2:5); a disobedient wife brings shame to the kingdom of God.

Husbands are commanded to love their wives: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." The command is not for the husbands to merely show affection, but to love the wives to the death, and cherish her more than his own life and welfare. Now if the wives protest that it is too difficult to obey their husbands, it is even more difficult for the husbands to love these disobedient wives to the extent commanded here.

Many women are difficult to love, especially the defiant feminists. If God has not filled us with divine love in regeneration, it would indeed be humanly impossible to love anyone as Christ loves, and still less the rebellious women that refuse to obey their husbands. At any rate, it is best for both the husbands and the wives to follow God's precepts, since it is indeed easier to obey a loving husband, and to love an obedient wife.

Nevertheless, each of us is accountable to God regardless of what the other person does, as the apostle Peter affirms (1 Peter 3:1-7). It is not up to the husband to withhold his love from a disobedient wife, and it is not up to the wife to withhold her obedience from an unloving husband. As for the preacher, he can help both the husband and the wife by reminding them of their respective duties.

In the context of marriage, Paul writes, "This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church" (v. 32). The "mystery" probably refers to how marriage serves as a type for the relationship between Christ and the church. Notice that although Paul views marriage as a reflection of the relationship between Christ and the church, he also applies his knowledge about the relationship between Christ and the church when he theologizes about marriage. That is, what Scripture teaches about either union enhances our understanding of the other.<sup>52</sup>

Then, Paul proceeds to discuss the relationship between parents and children. Again, there is no mutual submission here. As Dan Doriani writes, "Parents can still tell children when to go to bed, and children may *not* reply, 'Fine, but *you* should go to bed, too.'"<sup>53</sup> Of course, children must obey both their fathers and mothers, but when he turns to address the ones in authority, Paul speaks only to the fathers, and admonishes, "do not exasperate your children, instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

Just as the man is the head of the woman, he is also the head of his entire family; therefore, the responsibility finally rests upon him to bring up his children. Moreover, he is not just to concern himself with the children's vocations and prospects, but rather, he

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<sup>52</sup> See David J. Engelsma, *Marriage: The Mystery of Christ and the Church: The Covenant-Bond in Scripture and History* (revised edition); Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1998.

<sup>53</sup> Doriani, p. 66.

must bring them up in "the training and instruction of the Lord." In other words, he must make sure that they learn and follow biblical *doctrines*. This has been the duty of parents, and especially the fathers, throughout the history of humanity (Deuteronomy 6:6-9). It also necessarily follows that, if you have not been teaching your children Christian theology, then you are a bad parent. This is the measuring stick of parenthood, and until it is first discussed and settled, all other considerations are trivial.<sup>54</sup>

As for masters and slaves, Paul tells the slaves to obey their masters. Contrary to a misinterpretation of Galatians 3:28,<sup>55</sup> which concerns justification by faith, conversion does not dissolve human relationships, obligations, and authorities. If you are a wife, you must still obey your husband; if you are a child, you must still obey your parents; and if you are a slave, you must still obey your master. However, there is one great difference: all Christians now have one common Master, and "there is no favoritism with him," and "the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free."

The passage (6:5-8) provides the foundation for the matchless biblical work ethic that Christians had been famous for in times past, but now so few of them still demonstrate. This work ethic calls for a sincere respect and fear toward one's superior, but also to look beyond them to the Lord: "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men." Alas, many professing Christians today are just as slothful and unproductive as the non-Christians. But Paul writes, "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (4:1).<sup>56</sup>

#### **EPHESIANS 6:10-20**

***Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.***

***Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.***

***And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make***

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<sup>54</sup> See Lou Priolo, *Teach Them Diligently: How to Use the Scriptures in Child Training* (Timeless Texts, 2000), and Bruce A. Ray, *Withhold Not Correction* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1978).

<sup>55</sup> "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

<sup>56</sup> For a biblical perspective on slavery itself, see John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957.

***known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.***

Martyn Lloyd-Jones observes that there are three dangers when it comes to spiritual warfare: 1) Thinking that there is no warfare, 2) Avoiding the warfare, and 3) Fighting with the wrong weapons.<sup>57</sup> Our passage in Ephesians 6 is only one of the many in Scripture reminding us that we as Christians are involved in spiritual warfare, exhorting us to actively engage in it, and explaining to us the weapons that God has given us.

Because we are at war, and because there are evil forces in this world that threaten the peace and unity that Christ has established for the church, Paul concludes his letter with a call to arms. Admittedly, Paul's emphasis here is on the defensive;<sup>58</sup> this is probably because of his previous emphasis on the foreordination of God and the work of Christ throughout this letter. Therefore, now he speaks of our spiritual war not so much as an undecided conflict between two kingdoms, but as our struggle to "stand firm" against the hostile powers that would disrupt what God has already established for us in Christ.<sup>59</sup>

Thus Paul tells his readers to put on "the full armor of God." The *full* armor of God is indeed complete, including all that the Christian needs to "stand against the devil's schemes." Contrary to what some people seem to think, the weapons that God gives us is not mystical in its nature and power. Rather, each piece of armor refers to the doctrinal content of an area of the Christian faith and its outworking in our lives. Accordingly, we will briefly explore these areas of biblical truths that make up our defensive and offensive weapons.

Paul first exhorts his readers to "be strong," or more literally, "be strengthened." The passive verb implies that we are not the ones who strengthen ourselves, but that we continually depend on God to strengthen us. Christians derive their strength from God – we are strong only by his "mighty power."

Earlier in the letter, Paul indicates that the same power God had exercised in the resurrection of Christ is being wielded for the benefit of those who are in Christ (Ephesians 1:18-20). God is already applying this great power to us, so we do not need to beg him to make it available; rather, his power will manifest in our lives when our minds are "enlightened," so that we may know "his incomparably great power for us who believe...which he exerted in Christ" in his resurrection and exaltation. It is for this theological understanding that we ought to study and pray.

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<sup>57</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Knowing the Times*; The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989; p. 200-207.

<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, when the context calls for it, Paul turns the warfare metaphor into a more active and aggressive one (see 2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

<sup>59</sup> The following exposition on 6:10-17 has been adapted from a series of sermons, released earlier as *The Armor of God*. See also John MacArthur, *How to Meet the Enemy* (Chariot Victor Publishing, 1992), and William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armour* (The Banner of Truth Trust).



The power that God has made available to us is more than sufficient. In fact, it is through "his power that is at work within us" that he will "do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20). We can have confidence to face pressure, adverse circumstances, hostile powers, and even demonic forces, knowing that God has put into our lives a power so strong that it raised Jesus from the dead. This power is available to every person who is in Christ.

This information may surprise some Christians, especially those whose lives are characterized by defeat and barrenness. Although God's power is available to every Christian, it remains dormant in some of them because of a lack of knowledge and understanding. The apostle seeks to remedy this by praying that God will enlighten the minds of his readers, so that they may realize what has been made available to them in Christ.

So when Paul says to "be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power," he is not suggesting that we do this only by praying for God to strengthen us, but also by understanding what he has given to us in Christ. When a Christian realizes that God's power has been applied to him through Christ, he ceases to be afraid of other people, of adverse situations, and hostile powers. He remembers that the Scripture says, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

Paul says that God has chosen to "make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). John explains, "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God" (1 John 4:15). The Bible tells us that we are "God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in [us]" (1 Corinthians 3:16). John says in 1 John 4:4, "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them." By "them," he is referring to the spirits that inspire "false prophets," even the "spirit of the antichrist" (v. 3). We have overcome them because "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (v. 4).

We can overcome the world when we believe and depend on God's power. God's chosen ones are destined for victory (Romans 8:37). After all, "Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God" (1 John 5:5).

Then, verse 11 reads, "Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes." The word translated "schemes" (*methodeia*) refers to trickery or deceit – deception is the "method" by which Satan seeks to defeat the believer. It is by putting on "the full armor of God" that we will be able to "stand against" the devil.

Peter also warns that the devil wants to attack us: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (1 Peter 5:8-9). He is telling us to stay awake – "be self-controlled and alert." Although the devil "prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour," we can "resist him" and remain immovable in our stance

of faith. The apostle John assures us, "We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him" (1 John 5:18).

Deception is Satan's weapon. He will lie to us, and he will attempt to bombard us with unbiblical thoughts and arguments, and those who fail to "escape from the trap of the devil" are "taken...captive to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:26). On the other hand, Jesus says, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

Only Christians are truly free. The rest of the world "is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). This is because only Christians possess and affirm the truth, and through the lens of Scripture, they are able to truly perceive reality. As for non-Christians, Paul says, "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" (2 Corinthians 4:4). All non-Christians are blind in their minds, and thus they deny reality. Thus spiritual battle is fought in the mind. Even after you have become a Christian, the devil will continue to attack your mind with lies, and tries to undermine your faith in Christ.

Jesus provides us with some valuable insight into the devil's nature when he says to the Pharisees, "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). When the devil tells a lie, he is doing so out of his own nature. Lying is natural to the devil. Thus he attacks the people of God by spreading lies that lead people away from God.

This means that the nature of our spiritual conflict against the devil is intellectual. As Paul says: "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). The weapons that God has given to us have "divine power to demolish strongholds," which are in fact "arguments" that are "against the knowledge of God." Thus we fight to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." This is how spiritual warfare is done, and it is for this purpose that God has given to us the "full armor of God."

Continuing to verse 12, Paul writes, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Our fight is not natural, but spiritual, and that we are involved in spiritual warfare in turn means that our conflict has to do with the intellect, with ideas, and with arguments.

To say that ours is a *spiritual* fight does not make it a *mystical* one; therefore, let us not think, as some tend to do, that by "spiritual" we are referring to the mystical rather than to the intellectual, for it is the mind or intellect that deals with spiritual things. By saying

that we have weapons with "divine power," Paul refers to the God-given ability to "demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

By tapping into God's power through an intellectual understanding of theological truth, we can be confident of the outcome. We have noted that God is applying to us the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. It is this same power that energizes our Christian work: "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" (Colossians 1:28-29).

Satan cannot resist or withstand this power. This is why when we "put on the full armor of God," we will be able to "stand against the devil's schemes." This is also why the apostle James can assure his readers, saying, "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7).

Of course, in discussing the devil's work, we must keep in mind that even the devil is under God's sovereign control, and that he cannot do anything that has not been actively decreed by God. Thus even the devil is one of the means by which God accomplishes his own purposes. At any moment, God can annihilate him; however, God has ordained that we should resist the devil by the knowledge of Scripture and the energy of the Spirit – for God's glory and for our sanctification.

Since verse 11 instructs us to "put on the *full* armor of God," we must take up every piece of weapon that God has given us, and not neglect any one, so that we will be prepared to "stand against the devil's schemes." Then, verse 12 says, "our struggle is not against flesh and blood," but "against the spiritual forces of evil." We must recognize the reality of demonic powers, that evil spirits are real. Under the sovereign will of God, these beings wield their deceptive powers to blind people from the truth of God's word. It is through God's sovereign grace that we are enlightened concerning the truth and enabled to affirm it. Paul explains, "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3). God removes our spiritual blindness and transmits his truths to our minds through the Scripture.

Jesus prays, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). Not only does our initial enlightenment concerning the things of God come from Scripture, but all subsequent spiritual growth comes also through Scripture, and this is the basis of our progressive sanctification. In connection with this, Paul writes, "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). We are "renewed in knowledge" (Colossians 3:10) – not by mystical experiences, and not even mainly through prayer. It is only when we understand and retain biblical truths in our minds that we will live our lives in obedience to God and to successfully resist the devil when he comes against us.

Paul continues in verse 13, "Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand." Not only does the full armor of God protect us from the "devil's schemes," but

it enables us to stand firm "when the day of evil comes." That is, when every piece of armor that God has provided for us is intact, then we can face the enemy in hand-to-hand combat with confidence.

Paul likens the armor that God has given us to the armor used by the Romans soldiers. Of course, the difference is that our weapons are not physical, but spiritual. However, they are not spiritual in the sense of being mystical; rather, each piece of weapon represents a set of biblical truths (and their outworking) that protects a given area of our Christian walk.

For example, it is possible that when Paul writes that salvation is as a helmet, it means that the biblical truths about salvation is meant to protect our mind. Or, when righteousness is likened to a breastplate, perhaps it means that our understanding of Christ's righteousness and our justification serves to guard our conscience against accusations.

In any case, since Paul in fact names the doctrines, we can be confident that each piece of weapon corresponds to a biblical doctrine that we must learn in order to successfully wage war against the enemy. Since we comprehend doctrinal truth with the mind as it is illuminated by the Holy Spirit, it is undeniable that all these spiritual weapons are intellectual in nature.<sup>60</sup>

The relevance is that when we "put on" the full armor of God, we do not do it through imagining ourselves dressed in a mystical armor with an appearance resembling that of a Roman soldier, nor do we exercise the power in these weapons through physical motion. Rather, our weapons have "divine power" to "demolish *arguments*...and...take captive every *thought* to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). In spiritual warfare, we deal with arguments and thoughts, with the mind or the intellect. Such is the nature of the battle and the weapons.

Thus we will interpret Paul's identification of each spiritual weapon to a corresponding piece of armor of the Roman soldier as meaningful in the sense that salvation is a helmet for a reason – namely, to protect the mind as a physical helmet guards the head. From this perspective, comparing "truth" with the belt in a Roman soldier's armor is also appropriate. Even if this carries Paul's analogy too far, as long as we keep in mind that these are intellectual weapons given us to fight intellectual arguments from the devil, we are operating within the boundaries of the text.

Paul says that truth is as a belt, and in the Roman soldier's armor, it is the belt that holds the rest of the items in place. Likewise, truth holds everything together in our Christian walk, and therefore it is paramount. Without the truth revealed to us by God in Scripture,

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<sup>60</sup> Many people want to give these weapons a moral emphasis. For example, "righteousness" should denote our personal integrity and holiness rather than Scripture's teaching on righteousness. I am not opposed to a moral interpretation of these weapons; however, even the moral is based on the intellectual. Morality does not occur in a vacuum or in our bodies – it has to do with our thinking, dispositions, and decisions. In this sense, even morality is mental and intellectual.

there would be no righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation for us to "put on." Without the truth revealed to us by God in Scripture, we would not have the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

What do we mean by truth? Jesus says, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32). You will know the truth only if you "hold to" the *teaching* (*logos* = word, reasoning, doctrine) of Jesus. Contrary to many people's opinion, a Christian's strength does not rest on experience, prayer, or fellowship, but on truth – that is, the theological principles and biblical doctrines taught by Scripture. Without truth, we cannot even define – and thus cannot "put on" – the other pieces of our armor, such as righteousness, faith, and salvation. As a Christian, your priority must be to gain knowledge of the truth. Since God reveals truth to us through the words of Scripture, you must pursue theological and biblical studies to construct the foundation of your spiritual life.

Jesus says that knowledge of the truth will set you free. As we increase in our knowledge of and commitment to truth, we become increasingly protected from deception. As Paul explains, "We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us" (1 Corinthians 2:12). While the devil lies to us and tries to deceive us – but nevertheless under the sovereign decree of God – God has sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts so that "we may understand what God has freely given us."

As Peter writes, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3). In Christ, God has already given us "everything we need for life," but it is "through *our knowledge* of him" that his provisions are applied to us. Such knowledge is found only in Scripture, and it is the Holy Spirit who sovereignly grants us understanding and assent to such knowledge.

Many professing Christians believe the lie that the spiritual is irrational and that the intellectual is unspiritual – that spirituality and rationality are mutually exclusive. But since the divine weapons were given to you to "demolish *arguments*" and to "take captive every *thought*," you will not become more spiritual by ignoring the essential intellectual nature of biblical faith and life. Rather, to ignore the intellect is to completely stop resisting the devil and his deception, and by thus discarding all of your divine weapons, you will become thoroughly unspiritual according biblical standards.

Paul then mentions the breastplate of righteousness: "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place" (6:14). We were all sinners before conversion, and although God has sovereignly changed our basic dispositions in regeneration, as Christians we have not attained perfection and we continue to commit sins. These transgressions in turn threaten our confidence when we approach God.

John writes, "Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him" (1 John 3:21-22). Having a way to truly deal with sin that leads to freedom from condemnation is essential to a confident stand in God's presence, and this comes from an understanding of the righteousness that God has provided for us through Christ. This righteousness then functions as a "breastplate" in our spiritual battle, guarding our heart and conscience.

We need to know that we can never attain true righteousness by our own good works; rather, it must be imputed to us by God. Paul states that righteousness is a gift (Romans 5:17) that God grants to his elect through faith: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Bible teaches that "a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Romans 3:28). Jesus had committed no sin, but "the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6), so that "whoever believes on him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). However, if God has not granted you faith to trust Jesus Christ for salvation, then you are not righteous: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:18).

Scripture urges us to "draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience" (Hebrews 10:22). The Christian is a righteous person, not because of his own good works, but because he has been justified by God through faith in the work of Jesus Christ. This knowledge gives us the basis from which we can resist anything that seeks to undermine our confidence in approaching God in worship and prayer.

Christians continue to commit sin at times, but God has provided a solution for sins committed after conversion, so that our fellowship with him may remain intact. Although sin is inexcusable, God who "knows how we are formed" and who "remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103:14), have mercy on us and have given us an Advocate, so that "if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 John 2:1). That is, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Of course, a true Christian will not abuse the grace of God by sinning constantly, thinking that all he needs to do is to confess his sins afterward. The person who does this is not a Christian at all, since a Christian is one who has been genuinely changed by God: "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God" (1 John 3:9). And Paul writes, "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:1-2). Those who love God will obey his word: "This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

After the breastplate of righteousness, Paul says that in putting on the full armor of God, we must have our "feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" (6:15). Scripture sometimes uses the imagery of walking to represent our daily conduct, such as when Paul says, "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7, KJV). Therefore, when Paul says that the "gospel of peace" (or "the readiness that comes from" it) is as foot gear for our Christian walk, he is telling us that the intellectual content of the gospel must not only be a topic of discussion during certain specific times and activities, but that it must be an integral and pervasive part of our daily conduct. In the context of spiritual warfare, the gospel is the means by which we will stand our ground, as well as advance the kingdom of God and extend its borders.

Programs, charity, music, and even prayer are ultimately not the decisive means by which we will stand our ground and conquer the enemy's territory. Rather, it is by publishing the intellectual content of the gospel that we will destroy the strongholds that has been built into the minds of non-Christians.

Our gospel is a gospel of peace, but this peace is not to be had with the enemies of God, such as demons and unbelievers – immediately after the fall of man, God established hostility between the children of God and the children of Satan. (Genesis 3:15). It is impossible to have true peace with anyone belonging to the kingdom of darkness. Rather, this peace is only to be had with God and with Christians. As John says, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). Only when we stand our ground and conquer enemy territory with this gospel will others be able to join us in this fellowship. Paul says in Romans 16:20, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."

Paul says that we are to have the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, so that we are not just to know the content of the gospel for ourselves, but we must be prepared to articulate and defend it to others. Peter also instructs us to do this, and writes, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15).

Always be ready to use the gospel to destroy the anti-biblical intellectual strongholds that have been installed in the minds of others. Never be caught without an argument for the Christian worldview, or without a refutation against non-Christian thought. You must be prepared to answer anyone who asks you questions about the Christian faith. You must have a precise and comprehensive knowledge of biblical doctrines, and be able to conclusively defend them against all objections. This is the responsibility of every Christian; therefore, every Christian must immerse themselves in the study of theology and apologetics.

The biblical mandate to the Christian is that he should "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15). This is not an option. Jesus commands his disciples to preach the gospel to "all the world." This is how we will destroy the works of Satan.

Paul says that he is "not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). The gospel is the "power of God," by means of which God will accomplish his purposes on earth. God has made us his representatives, so that we may publish his commands to the nations: "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).

Once we have it settled in our minds that the gospel is "the power of God," we will not be "ashamed of the gospel," or be embarrassed by its claims and demands. When we begin to realize and affirm that Christianity is superior to all other belief systems, that it is the only one that truly represents and reveals God, and that it is the only source of truth and knowledge, we will cease being timid about presenting its claims and demands to the world. Once we are convinced of this and have learned how to articulate and defend it to others, we will have attained "the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace."

The gospel is indeed good news to God's elect, and it brings the believer to a state of peace with God and his people. It is the "fragrance of life" to those who accept it, but as it is also a weapon against the enemy, it carries the "smell of death" to those who reject its claims and demands (2 Corinthians 2:16). Thus the one who preaches the gospel brings the power of God to summon and to save those whom God has chosen to believe, and at the same time brings destruction and condemnation to those whom God has designated as reprobates. The one who preaches the gospel is God's messenger, releasing his power to save and to destroy, to justify and to condemn.

However, contrary to many people, I disagree that what is commonly called "evangelism" is the *highest* priority of the church. Rather, Scripture indicates that the teaching ministry – that is, the theological training of believers – takes precedence over evangelism, and that evangelism is not an end in itself, but only the means by which the elect are brought into the church so that they may be taught.

This may sound strange to those who are accustomed to hearing that evangelism is the church's top priority. This unbiblical view has caused many people to neglect investing and participating in the theological training of believers. As a result, most professing Christians are feeble in intellect, ignorant of biblical doctrines, and incompetent in defending the faith. After all, without extensive training by the church and other institutions (such as the family), how many Christians will attain the "readiness" described above? And how can one properly preach the gospel without having at least an elementary understanding of biblical doctrines? But since God has commanded us to proclaim and defend the faith, this means that without biblical and theological training, it is impossible for a Christian to obey God.

No Christian will doubt the evangelistic zeal of Paul, but he describes his own ministry as follows:



To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 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. (Colossians 1:27-29)

He says that he is "*admonishing and teaching* everyone with all wisdom, so that we may *present everyone perfect* in Christ" (Colossians 1:28). He says that he is doing the work of the ministry with God's energy, which powerfully works in him (v. 29), so that he may, not just to bring people to conversion, but beyond that to "present everyone perfect" in Christ. He says that it is "to this end" (v. 29) that he labors.

Maturity is the goal of Christian ministry, not conversion. Conversion should be considered as only one of the first steps that the elect take toward maturity and perfection in Christ. Both evangelism and teaching serve the ultimate end of producing mature Christians to be presented to Christ. This should be the church's priority. Whereas evangelism concludes once God sovereignly grants a person repentance and faith, a believer requires biblical and theological teaching throughout his life. Evangelism is only a short-term means to a long-term process (teaching) that in turn leads to an ultimate end (maturity and perfection). Thus to view evangelism as the greatest task of the church is to distort the nature of biblical ministry, and it often turns out that spiritual maturity, the real goal, is never reached or even considered.

Since the main task of the church is to teach believers, most of the church's time and money should be devoted to the biblical and theological education of Christians, whether in the form of sermons, lectures, books, tapes, broadcasts, or other means. To put evangelism first results in the accumulation of feeble believers and false converts, and makes the church a poor witness to the world. This in turn undermines evangelism itself. Thus to put evangelism first is unbiblical and self-defeating.

In what is commonly called the "Great Commission," a passage often used to encourage evangelism, Jesus says:

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)

If Jesus intends to command only evangelism, why does this mandate include "teaching" the people? If Jesus intends to command what many people today call "evangelism," then why is he commanding us to teach the non-Christians to "obey everything" that he has commanded? When people perform what they consider "evangelism," do they recite all the commands in Scripture to the unbelievers? But this passage makes perfect sense

when we realize that Jesus has the teaching ministry in mind – our mandate is to "make disciples...teaching them to obey *everything*" in Scripture.

Even if we think that the words, "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," refer only to "evangelism," we must admit that the latter part, "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you," refers to the teaching ministry, and that the former (evangelism) leads to the latter (teaching). Evangelism is only a means to produce converts, *so that* we may teach them to obey all the commands of Christ. Therefore, those who exalt evangelism at the expense of the teaching ministry defies the very command of Christ that they claim to obey.

To summarize, the Bible says that the purpose of ministry is to produce mature Christians (4:12-14). Of course, to become mature in Christ, one must first be in Christ, and thus the reason for evangelism. This also means that evangelism is not the ultimate goal of Christian ministry, but the means by which God calls his elect into union with Christ, and through the process of sanctification, to become mature in him. Therefore, evangelism is not a greater ministry or responsibility than the teaching ministry, but it serves only as a way to bring people into the teaching ministry. Even evangelism itself is dependent on the prior doctrinal instructions received by the one who performs evangelism. Because Scripture defines all Christian beliefs, doctrine necessarily precedes all Christian activities.

Thus "the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" must mean more than having just enough comprehension of the gospel to tell people how to become Christians, but it must imply a comprehensive knowledge of biblical doctrines. Otherwise, all Christians would already be sufficiently prepared, since all of them have already learned enough to become Christians in the first place, and no one would need to deliberately obtain this "readiness" at all. However, the fact that Paul tells us to put on the "readiness" of the gospel implies that it is not automatic, and this in turn implies that some Christians may not be ready with the gospel. Only the teaching ministry can remedy this lack of preparedness, and any so-called "evangelistic" ministry that does not provide meticulous and comprehensive teaching of Christian theology is incomplete and unbiblical.

Coming now to verse 16, Paul introduces the shield of faith: "In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one." The word translated "shield" is *thyreon*, and Wood writes as follows:

*Thyreon* is derived from *thyra* (a door) and refers to the large oblong or oval *scutum* the Roman soldier held in front of him for protection. It consisted of two layers of wood glued together, covered with linen and hide, and bound with iron. Soldiers often fought side by side with a solid wall (*testudo*) of shields. But even a single-handed combatant found himself sufficiently protected. After the siege of Dyrachium, Sceva counted no less than 220 darts

sticking into his shield. For the Christian this protective shield is faith (*pistis*).<sup>61</sup>

The question is whether "faith" here refers to the subjective belief of the Christian or the objective content of Christianity. Wood responds, "Believing cannot be divorced from what is believed, and no rigid line should be drawn between these two aspects."<sup>62</sup> But his statement does not squarely address the issue. Even if believing cannot be divorced from what is believed, what is believed can be distinguished from what *ought to* be believed. That is, the subjective belief of the professing Christian does not always correspond to the objective content of Christianity. Of course, in this case, what is "taken up" by the person is not "the shield of faith," and the person is left without full spiritual protection.

We have stated that each piece of armor represents the biblical doctrine that corresponds to it, but this means that each piece of armor refers to an objective aspect of the Christian faith, and not just the subjective belief of the individual about the subject. That is, the belt of truth refers to truth itself, and not just our commitment to it. Likewise, the breastplate of righteousness represents the biblical doctrine on the subject, and not just the individual's subjective realization of it.

Paul is certainly not telling his readers to "put on your subject beliefs," since one's subjective beliefs are never "off" in the first place. Rather, his point is that the Christian must deliberately "put on" something that can be either "put on" or "put off" – that is, something that has objective existence and validity independent of the subjective beliefs of the individual. For example, the sword of the Spirit is the word of God, not our beliefs about the word of God. By telling us to take up the sword, Paul is telling us to believe and apply it.

He is calling his readers to take possession and identify with the biblical doctrines represented by these pieces of armor. Truth is truth by itself, whether one commits to it or not; however, it will not benefit the one who has not put it on to structure his thoughts and actions. The content of the gospel remains the same even if a person has only a partial understanding of it, but when he puts it on through intensive study and training, and allows the gospel to govern his daily conduct, he becomes one who is prepared to advance the kingdom of God. Likewise, the shield of faith may very well represent the objective content of the Christian faith, but it will protect the one who picks it up and puts it before him.

On demonic attacks against the church, Wood writes, "But in the context of Ephesians they are more likely to have been deliberate attempts to destroy the unity of Christ's body (3:14-22; 4:1-16, 27) through the invasion of false doctrine and the fomenting of dissension (4:2, 21, 31, 32; 5:6)."<sup>63</sup> Paul instructs the Philippians to be "of the same mind" (Philippians 2:2, NASB), and that they should "with one mind" be "striving together for the faith of the gospel" (1:27, NASB). A church can hardly be "of the same

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<sup>61</sup> Wood, p. 88.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

mind" when its members cannot agree on the content of the gospel, and when false doctrines have taken over the minds of professing believers. Division and heresy pervade the church today because it has neglected the study of biblical theology and apologetics.

False doctrines are as "flaming arrows," rapidly spreading destruction. But the shield of faith can "extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one." If the shield of faith refers to the content of the Christian faith, then picking it up would mean to learn and affirm the content of Scripture. Those who thoroughly understand and strongly affirm biblical doctrines are able to resist and overcome the false ideas that are sent their way.

Although it requires strength and discipline to take up this shield and to hold it before us, its use is sometimes remarkably simple, especially when it comes to private attacks against our minds:

Although Paul does not give individual examples of these flaming arrows, Hodge mentions horrible, blasphemous, skeptical thoughts and more subtle suggestions of cupidity, discontent, and vanity. These, or whatever else the figure of speech may represent, are to be extinguished by faith. Evil thoughts must be dislodged and expelled by good thoughts. If in trouble we doubt either the power or the wisdom of God, we should say to ourselves, "I believe in God the Father Almighty," or repeat some verse that speaks of his loving kindness. Thus the doctrines of faith will expel our false ideas.<sup>64</sup>

That the shield of faith and the flaming arrows are intellectual and doctrinal in nature produces certain implications, namely, "We must have already studied and memorized some Scripture in order to have something to remember. This study is like picking up the shield in the first place."<sup>65</sup> One who is weak in biblical and theological understanding has not picked up the shield of faith, and indeed cannot do so until he has learned the basics of theology and apologetics. Until then, he has little protection against the false ideas that come against him. Once a member of the church has been injured or infected by false doctrine, the damage may quickly spread if left unchecked, because "a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (Galatians 5:9). It is important for church leaders to teach their people, so that they become skilled at using the shield of faith (Hebrews 5:13-14; Ephesians 4:11-16).

Thus picking up the shield of faith is not only a matter of will, but also one of understanding. It is not only a matter of volition, but also of comprehension. In fact, intellectual understanding of biblical doctrines necessarily precedes volitional assent to them, since the will cannot commit to something that is not even there. If the shield of faith represents the objective content of Scripture, then the intellectual comprehension of and volitional commitment to Scripture represent the act of picking it up. The large size of the shield is significant. Knowledge of the truth in one area may not offer sufficient

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<sup>64</sup> Clark, *Ephesians*; p. 208.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

and precise protection from falsehood and confusion in another area. Therefore, picking up the shield of faith implies obtaining a comprehensive knowledge of Scripture.

The helmet was "the most ornamental part of ancient armor,"<sup>66</sup> and Paul uses this attractive piece of armor to represent salvation: "Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). Hodge writes:

That which adorns and protects the Christian, which enables him to hold up his head with confidence and joy, is the fact that he is saved. He is one of the redeemed, translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son. If still under condemnation, if still estranged from God, a foreigner, and alien, without God and without Christ, he could have no courage to enter into this conflict. It is because he is a fellow citizen of the saints, a child of God, a partaker of the salvation of the gospel, that he can face even the most potent enemies with confidence, knowing that he shall be brought off more than a conqueror through him that loved him.<sup>67</sup>

In a sense, God reveals his goodness to everyone: "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). Even those hostile to God must constantly depend on his sustenance for their very existence, "For in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Everyone should be moved by God's goodness, so as to repent to God and believe in Christ. But without God's sovereign decision, they cannot repent and believe; therefore, God's general goodness results in the everlasting condemnation of the reprobates.

Scripture shows us that God's saving grace is revealed and applied only to his elect, and the wicked have no part in it. Thus salvation distinguishes Christians from the rest of humanity. Christians are God's chosen people: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). All other human beings are unsaved because God has not chosen them.

The helmet may represent Christian salvation in another significant way besides its attractiveness, namely, "*Take* is really receive or accept (*dexasthe*). The previous items were laid out for the soldier to pick up. The helmet and sword would be handed him by an attendant or by his armorbearer. The verb is appropriate to the 'givenness' of salvation."<sup>68</sup>

The helmet appropriately represents Christian salvation not only because of its attractiveness, but also because of the manner in which the Christian puts it on. Although the believer adorns the other pieces of armor by willingly taking them up or putting them

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<sup>66</sup> Hodge, p. 286.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>68</sup> Wood, p. 88.

on, salvation is wholly dependent on God.<sup>69</sup> The Christian must not flatter himself that he has "accepted Christ" because he was better and wiser than the unbelievers in himself, when in reality it was God who has sovereignly chosen and accepted him. The only reason we are able to love him is "because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Thus in place of self-congratulation and boasting, we should offer thanksgiving to God, who has chosen us and shown us mercy, not because of any prior condition in us, but because of his sovereign grace.

As to whether there is any meaning in salvation being represented by a headgear, some suggest that the metaphor refers to clarity in thinking,<sup>70</sup> but others consider this "too imaginative."<sup>71</sup> To correctly understand a passage, we should not apply a metaphor in a way that exceeds the intention of the writer; however, even if Paul does not explicitly emphasize the intellect with the helmet as a metaphor, many elements throughout the passage imply such an emphasis.

For example, truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith (in both its subjective and objective aspects), salvation, and the word of God all imply intellectual content to be understood by the mind. Therefore, even if making salvation a helmet is not in itself an attempt to emphasize the intellectual comprehension of soteriology, the inclusion of this emphasis is inescapable. Elsewhere Paul writes, "[The Scriptures] are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15). The wisdom for salvation comes from an intellectual comprehension of the Bible, applied to our minds by the Holy Spirit to produce conversion and sanctification.

We have derived several points from the metaphor that salvation is like a helmet for the Christian. First, salvation is "the most ornamental part" of Christianity, so much so that "even angels long to look into" it (1 Peter 1:12). Also, the faith with which we affirm the gospel is "not from ourselves, it is the gift of God," so that "no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). In addition, it is of utmost importance that we obtain an in-depth theological understanding of salvation, since only then will we be properly wearing the helmet of salvation, which is able to protect us from the numerous false doctrines that surround the subject.

The final piece of armor is the sword, which represents the word of God: "Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). In ancient times, there are several types of swords, varying in length and weight; however, since Paul is drawing his metaphors from the weapons of the Roman soldiers, the "sword" can only refer to the short straight sword of the Roman soldiers.<sup>72</sup> This is also indicated by Paul's use of the word, *machaira*, as opposed to the word for a long sword, *rhomphaia*, used in Luke 2:35.

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<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, this is only a matter of emphasis, since even the volition to put on the other pieces of armor still comes from the sovereign will of God (Philippians 2:12-13).

<sup>70</sup> Clark, *Ephesians*; p. 209.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>72</sup> Barth, p. 776.

Some commentators observe that the sword is the only weapon used for attack in the set of armor described. In fact, the sword is both a defensive and offensive weapon. Besides its obvious purpose of slaying the enemy, it also serves to block some of the attacks coming from him.<sup>73</sup> The implication of it being a *short* sword is that the fight involves close encounters with the enemy, which demands the use of a relatively light and flexible weapon.

That this sword is "of the Spirit" (*tou pneumatos*) does not mean only that it is of a spiritual nature (as in "spiritual sword"), but also that the sword, as mentioned previously in conjunction with the helmet, would be handed to the soldier by an attendant,<sup>74</sup> and thus Barth thinks that it means "the sword provided by the Spirit."<sup>75</sup> The sword is "of the Spirit" in the sense that it is produced by and given to us by the Holy Spirit.

We encounter some difficulties when we come to the point where this sword is said to be "the word of God." There are several proposed interpretations, and since one of them is more obviously false, we will dispense with it first.

This first view teaches that the words of Scripture, particularly those "given" to the person by the Spirit at the moment, when uttered through the believing lips of a Christian, form what constitutes either an actual or figurative sword in the spirit realm to inflict injury upon demonic forces.

This mystical interpretation suggests that the power of the sword of the Spirit does not rest in the intellectual content of the word of God, but in the brute force that it contains to overcome the enemy. However, as Gordon Fee writes, "[Paul] would simply not have understood the fascination with 'words' that one finds among some contemporary charismatics." The view in question completely fails to consider "the way he ordinarily uses this kind of language."<sup>76</sup>

The second view, also popular among the Charismatics, claims that since the Greek word *rhema* is used in "the word of God" as opposed to *logos*, the sword of the Spirit must then refer to a "word" given at the moment by the Holy Spirit.

It is true that we may depend on the Holy Spirit to bring to our consciousness verses of Scripture that we need to confront a particular thought, temptation, or argument. However, it would be most foolish to think that even obviously relevant biblical verses are ineffective against an unbiblical thought or argument unless they are first somehow "quicken" by the Spirit for the moment. But this mystical foolishness seems to be what this second view states or implies.

The Christian obtains his "sword" and becomes skilled in using it through his usual biblical and theological training at church. Having prepared himself, he should not

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<sup>73</sup> Marvin Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament, Vol. 3*; Hendrickson Publishers, p. 410.

<sup>74</sup> Wood, p. 88.

<sup>75</sup> Barth, p. 776.

<sup>76</sup> Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*; Hendrickson Publishers, 1994; p. 728-729.

require a special word to be given to him for the moment when he comes under attack, since he will already have a number of applicable verses in Scripture in mind. The Christian should not require any special unction from the Spirit before applying an obviously relevant verse of Scripture to a situation.

This second view carries too far the alleged distinction between *rhema* and *logos*, since the two words are often interchangeable in the New Testament.<sup>77</sup> A number of false doctrines can be traced to the excited popular preaching of those who have applied the false distinctions between these two words to the extreme; they give the impression that although *logos* is God's word, it is rather useless and ineffective until the Spirit "quickens" it and turns it into *rhema*. This teaching is false and unbiblical. Paul writes, "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" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Every verse of Scripture is "God-breathed" – "alive" and effective at all times, even without any special spiritual unction to utter it.

That said, Paul's use of the word *rhema* might indeed have some significance. Now, Gordon Fee writes:

While these words are near synonyms and therefore can often be used interchangeably, *rhema* tends to put the emphasis on that which is spoken at a given point, whereas *logos* frequently emphasizes the content of the "message."

However, this does not lead to the second view as described above. As Fee continues:

If that distinction holds here, then Paul is almost certainly referring still to the gospel, just as he does in Romans 10:17, but the emphasis is now on the actual "speaking forth" of the message, inspired by the Spirit. To put that in more contemporary terms, in urging them to take the sword of the Spirit and then identifying that sword with the "word of God," Paul is not identifying the "sword" with the book, but with the proclamation of Christ, which in our case is indeed to be found in the book.<sup>78</sup>

This leads us to the third view which says that the sword of the Spirit is nothing other than the publication and application of the words of Scripture. It refers to the intellectual and not the mystical. Of the three views listed, this is the only one that reflects the meaning and intention of Paul's metaphor about the sword of the Spirit being the word of God.

Thus the content of *rhema* is not different from *logos*, although in certain instances *rhema* may denote actual communication of the content. Whenever Christian and non-Christian ideas clash, the believer should be prepared to not only maintain his ground, but

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<sup>77</sup> Foulkes, p. 184.

<sup>78</sup> Fee, p. 728-729.



also to invade and capture the enemy's territories. Every time a Christian verbally defends Christian ideas and attacks non-Christian ideas in a biblical way, he is wielding the sword of the Spirit. The verbal expression and intellectual expression of the word of God is the *rhema* of God; it is a sword that comes from the Spirit.

It is most foolish and unspiritual to think that we must wait until the Holy Spirit "quickens" a verse of Scripture before we can effectively answer an unbiblical thought or argument, even when we already know how to answer it from our previous studies of Scripture. Instead, Scripture itself maintains that every biblical verse is true, effective, and "alive" at all times (2 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 4:12). You must use what you already know about Scripture to engage the enemy, rather than to think that all that you know about Scripture is useless until a part of it is "quickened" for your particular situation. This also means that if you know too little, you will be unable to effectively overcome spiritual attacks against you. The remedy is not to wait for some mystical "quickening" from the Holy Spirit; rather, the only solution is a program of intense theological education (2 Timothy 2:15).

We will now consider an example of how Jesus wields the sword of the Spirit against the devil:

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him. (Matthew 4:1-11)

This passage illustrates how Jesus uses the sword of the Spirit to overcome temptation. In all three temptations, he applies direct quotations from Scripture to counteract the words of Satan.

In the first instance, he cites Deuteronomy 8:3 to resist the devil. Seeing how Jesus uses Scripture to defend himself the first time, the devil makes a second attempt and quotes from Psalm 91:11-12, hoping to deceive and persuade Christ. But Jesus answers by saying, "It is *also* written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test,'" quoting from Deuteronomy 6:16.

All spiritual battles involve the authority and application of Scripture, and theological reasonings and arguments. In this second temptation, Satan quotes a biblical passage that, when falsely understood and applied, seems to permit Jesus to jump from the temple. But Jesus notices that Satan has abused the passage, so he says, "It is *also* written" in Scripture that one should not put God to the test, thus exposing Satan's misuse of Psalm 91:11-12.

This exchange produces several important implications. For example, the answer Jesus gives necessarily assumes the unity of Scripture, that one part of the Bible agrees with all the other parts, and that one part of the Bible never contradicts any other part. This is consistent with a hermeneutical principle that faithful Christians have long affirmed. In addition, the way Jesus handles this temptation strongly supports the discipline of systematic theology.

To wield the sword of the Spirit is to present and defend biblical truths and to attack unbiblical beliefs through rigorous scriptural and rational arguments. Therefore, this weapon can apply to preaching, writing, debates, and ordinary conversations in which the Christian presents and defends the biblical worldview, and attacks and refutes unbiblical beliefs.

All this will sound foreign to those who are accustomed to considering the sword of the Spirit from a mystical perspective, rather than thinking of it as the act of arguing against the enemies of biblical thought, or defending the faith against their attacks. But it is the mystical approach to the sword of the Spirit that is foreign to biblical thinking. Against the mystical approach, we must insist that the sword of the Spirit refers to intellectual presentations and arguments whose content and form are derived from Scripture. As Matthew Henry writes, "The word of God is very necessary, and of great use to the Christian, in order to his maintaining the spiritual warfare and succeeding in it...with this we assault the assailants. Scripture-arguments are the most powerful arguments."<sup>79</sup>

Christ's response to the second temptation from Satan shows that the sword of the Spirit advances the kingdom of God through scriptural argumentation. Then, in the third temptation, he seals Satan's defeat with yet another correct application of Scripture, and emerges victorious. It is by persistently wielding the sword of the Spirit in this manner that we will plunder the territories now occupied by the devil – that is, we will rescue the

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<sup>79</sup> *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*; Hendrickson Publishers, 1991; p. 2319.

minds of the elect and confound the minds of the reprobates (2 Corinthians 4:4-6, 10:3-5).

Examples of wielding the sword of the Spirit through scriptural argumentation abound in Paul's ministry (Acts 17:2-4, 16-17; 18:4-5, 19). He is emphatic about the intellectual nature of our conflict with Satan (2 Corinthians 10:3-5). The devil "has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel" (2 Corinthians 4:4), and it is our purpose to "demolish arguments" that have been set up against the biblical faith, and to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

One who powerfully wields the sword of the Spirit is one who possesses considerable theological knowledge and superb reasoning powers. On the other hand, one who lacks these spiritual assets may never inflict much damage to the kingdom of darkness. Let us therefore heed the words of the apostle Paul, who says, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15, NASB).

Because Paul mentions prayer in verse 18, some people wonder whether it represents another piece of armor. But since Paul does not state that it corresponds to any piece of armor, we should not assume that he still has the armor metaphor in mind; nevertheless, the military imagery indeed continues.

Accordingly, he urges his readers to "be alert," and rather than relaxing their spiritual vigilance, they must persist in prayer, that is, "on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests," and to "keep on praying for all the saints."

Then, he also makes personal request for prayer. This request is important, because it tells us what Paul is most concerned about. With this in mind, we read that he asks the believers to pray that he will "fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel." This is the proper concern of every minister – to preach the gospel, and to do it fearlessly.

## 6. CONCLUSION

### EPHESIANS 6:21-24

*Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you.*

*Peace to the brothers, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.*

Every part of Paul's letter is objectionable and repulsive to unbelievers and heretics. Accordingly, they will also find every part of this commentary objectionable and repulsive. During the course of my exposition, we have affirmed and studied the doctrines of the absolute sovereignty of God,<sup>1</sup> the total depravity of man, the particular atonement of Christ, the irresistible calling of the Spirit, and the preservation of the saints.<sup>2</sup> All unbelievers and heretics, including most of today's professing Christians, detest these biblical doctrines.

In an orderly fashion, and following the structure of Paul's letter, we have proceeded from predestination to regeneration, from regeneration to reconciliation, and from reconciliation to sanctification. Among other things, we have discussed the foolishness and wickedness of all non-Christians, the intellectual emphasis of the Christian faith, and the authority structure in the home. We have shown that Christianity is thoroughly deterministic and intellectualistic. In contrast, the very essence of popular "Christianity" consists of anti-determinism and anti-intellectualism. The necessary implication is that popular "Christianity" is anti-Christianity.

What does this all mean? If unbelievers and heretics find Christianity objectionable and repulsive, and if popular Christianity is really anti-Christianity, it means that the world *hates* Christianity, and therefore they hate Christians, and they hate Christianity and Christians because they have first hated Christ (John 15:18).<sup>3</sup> For this reason – that is, because the world hates Christ, Christianity, and Christians – it is a matter of supreme importance for us to take up the spiritual weapons that God has given us, so that we may stand our ground and maintain that which God has accomplished for us in Christ.

To conclude, then, "If anyone does not love the Lord – a curse be on him" (1 Corinthians 16:22), but "Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love" (6:24).

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<sup>1</sup> This includes unconditional election and active reprobation.

<sup>2</sup> We have thus affirmed and studied "The Five Points of Calvinism."

<sup>3</sup> Every non-Christian – every person whom God has not changed and converted – is an enemy of Christ (Matthew 12:30).