COMMENTARY ON COLOSSIANS

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PREFACE

Paul's letter to the Colossians is an impressive piece of writing that weaves together high theology with holy living, and exhortations with warnings. One of its main themes is the fullness of Christ, and the fullness that Christians have in him. By this we mean that Christ's person and work are complete, and Christians have benefited from this completeness. Since this is the case, any attempt to supplement or replace the person and work of Christ is in fact to undermine and devalue him, thus severely compromising the integrity of the Christian faith.

This is possibly an occasional letter that Paul has written to combat a specific heresy that looms over the church. However, it is unnecessary to assume this background in order to find the letter intelligible. This is because its positive exposition of sound doctrine is so rich, so broad and so deep, that it lends itself to universal application.

This basic commentary provides some basic helps for understanding and appreciating Paul's written address to the Colossians. In the process the reader will encounter our discussions on several major, and at times controversial, doctrines and issues. Among these are the incomprehensibility of God and the origin of sin and evil. Other features include a summary of systematic theology from the perspective of christology, discussions on true versus false philosophy, true versus false spirituality, what it means to see the Father by "looking at" Jesus, the priorities of Paul in life and prayer, and the true nature of the Great Commission.

COLOSSIANS 1:1-2

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

Since Paul's letter to the Colossians is considered a warning and corrective against a heresy threatening the church, we will begin with a brief word on the nature of occasional letters.

As suggested by the word "occasional," these letters are "occasioned" – and written to address – particular needs, questions, threats, events, and so on. An occasional letter represents only one side of a conversation, and since the meaning of language depends on context, this could present difficulties in interpretation, especially when there is little information concerning the issues that it is intended to address. For this reason, emphasis is often given to ascertaining the "missing" end of the conversation, and then our interpretation of the letter is made dependent on what we think we know about the purpose for which it is written.

However, the difficulty that this poses to biblical interpretation is often exaggerated, and thus also the importance of access to this other end of the conversation. This is because the difficulty is often sufficiently reduced and sometimes completely eliminated by the thoroughness of the side of the conversation that is before us.

To illustrate, suppose someone asks me, "Can a non-Christian religion save a man from the wrath of God?" An answer of "no" is accurate, and as far as it goes, also sufficient. In this case, it is true that one who has access to only my side of the conversation – only the word "no" – could have no understanding of what the negative answer really means or what it is intended to address. Therefore, my answer would not teach such a person anything about Christian doctrine.

But instead of a simple "no," I could say, "All men have fallen under Adam, and have fallen short of God's righteous moral demands. But God ordained and sent Christ to take up a human body and to die for the sins of those chosen for salvation, so that all who receive the sovereign gift of faith may be saved through him. Because redemption of the elect through Christ is God's only plan of salvation, so that Christ is the only one who satisfied the wrath of God and redeemed the elect, the only way that any person can be saved is through faith in Christ." This much fuller reply is also accurate and relevant. And it is indeed possible that I would answer the question this way, that is, during those times when I would not provide an even lengthier explanation.

Without knowledge of the inquiry that occasioned my answer, although someone might not realize what question it is intended to address, I have filled my end of the conversation

with so much information that the original question is practically dispensable in order to understand my statements. From my reply, one could make a *possible* reconstruction of the original question, but it would be unnecessary to do so unless the aim is to reconstruct the entire exchange rather than to understand my side of the conversation.

Further, not only is my answer intelligible in itself, it also provides ample information on Christian doctrine that can be affirmed *and* applied by someone unfamiliar with the original exchange, but who has access to only my answer to the question. In fact, such an extensive answer by itself is more instructive concerning Christianity than if one were to have both sides of the conversation but with only a simple answer – such as only the word "no" – on my end of the exchange.

We may also observe that just because my statements are formulated as an answer to a question does not mean that every detail in the answer must correspond to something mentioned in the question. For example, the idea of redemption is essential in my answer, but the question itself contains no concept of redemption. It does not ask whether we need redemption, or whether Christ is the only one who has redeemed sinners. That is, it would be irrational to think that because the question contains no concept of redemption, then neither can my answer refer to it, or that because my answer refers to it, then redemption must be first mentioned in the question.

As in our own conversations, Paul's letters consist of much more than a "yes" here and a "no" there. They include extensive expositions of sound doctrine and thorough refutations of his opponents. The issues being addressed are often stated, explained, or rephrased. The difficulty often associated with a lack of historical context in interpreting occasional letters is an exaggeration because they contain so much positive information as well as direct and indirect indications concerning the issues being addressed that it is seldom a major hindrance to possess only the letters, or this side of the conversation. A much greater threat to interpretation is the tendency of some to speculate about information that we do not possess, instead of paying attention to the documents that we have right before us.

There is some debate about the nature of the heresy that Paul's letter is supposedly written to address. If we operate by the (unwarranted) assumption that every major issue Paul mentions in the letter is intended to counteract a corresponding element in the false doctrine that he writes to address, then it would seem that the heresy contains a mixture of mysticism, asceticism, Gnosticism, and Jewish tradition. Although Gnosticism was not systematized until the second century, Gnostic tendencies have long infiltrated some schools of Jewish and Greek thought, so it is conceivable that Paul would have had to combat them during his ministry.

That said, as Paul does not directly refer to any heresy in the letter, some argue that he is not writing to confront a specific threat at all. Perhaps it is just a general letter of instruction and exhortation, or at best the contents correspond, not to a specific heresy, but to the general intellectual and religious culture that surround the Colossians.

Just because Paul emphasizes the supremacy of Christ does not mean that there are false teachers denigrating the sufficiency of Christ. Just because he sets forth an exalted and precise Christology, insisting on both the divinity and humanity of Christ, does not mean that there is a heresy that threatens either aspect of the doctrine. And just because he writes, "Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day," does not mean that there are indeed individuals there seeking to enforce these traditions. It is possible, but not necessarily true. The letter to Colossians is different from a letter like the one to Galatians, in which false teachers and false teachings are explicitly described.

Thus although the presence of a heresy is possible, and may be employed as a practical assumption in exploring the precise interpretation of the letter, there is no solid warrant to insist on it. And if the assumption is false and interpretation is made to depend on it, then the result could be an inaccurate understanding of the letter. The point is that, in this case, Paul's side of the conversation is so extensive that no loss is suffered due to uncertainty about the situation at Colosse.

Therefore, Barclay is mistaken when he writes, "These, then, were the great Gnostic doctrines; and all the time we are studying this passage, and indeed the whole letter, we must have them in mind, for only against them does Paul's language become intelligible and relevant."[1] On the contrary, the main ideas in the letter are intelligible and relevant to any ordinary reader even without any exposition, or any knowledge of ancient Gnostic and Jewish thought. The assertion that it is necessary to read Paul's letter against the background of Gnostic doctrines is absurd and irresponsible.

[1] William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p. 134.

COLOSSIANS 1:3-8

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints – the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

Some people have an aversion to the word "religion" and prefer to have nothing to do with it. Among them, those who consider themselves Christians object to the word on the ground that Christianity is not a religion but a "life" or a "relationship." But this disdain for the word is based on ignorance and false piety.

First, we may question whether the words "life" and "relationship" are in fact adequate descriptions of the Christian faith. The biblical account of this life and relationship is much richer than what most people have in mind who prefer these words as descriptions of the faith. In fact, Scripture includes many things in its exposition of this life and relationship that many of these people seek to exclude by their rejection of the word "religion."

In *Merriam-Webster*, one main definition of religion is "the service or worship of God." This might seem too specific for some philosophers, but the average Christian could hardly protest against it. Even if the definition is insufficient, there is nothing repulsive or unspiritual about it. And of course, "the service or worship of God" can include the idea of a life or a relationship, but it is also broad enough to include more, or more of the things that are involved in this life or relationship.

Then, a second definition is "a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices." This probably represents the idea of "religion" that many Christians disassociate with their faith or any legitimate spiritual life. However, there is nothing inherently wrong in this idea of religion; rather, we need to know *what it is* that has been personalized or institutionalized. If it is a true religion, then it ought to be personalized. If this true religion endorses a formal organization in its operations, then it ought to be institutionalized.

To institutionalize something means "to incorporate into a structured and often highly formalized system." This could be right or wrong, and the way it is done could also be right or wrong. A "highly formalized system" could canonize a set of human traditions, resulting in the repudiation of doctrinal orthodoxy and spiritual liberty. However, the fault then lies in that which is formalized, and not the very idea of a formal organization. So even

institutionalization has nothing inherently objectionable about it, nor is it necessarily opposed to or by Christianity.

Thus, for example, if it is not wrong for a believer to say that "Christianity is the only true service or worship of God," then it is not wrong for him to say that "Christianity is the only true religion." There is likewise no problem with the first and second definitions in *Webster's New World Dictionary*: "belief in a divine or superhuman power or powers to be obeyed and worshiped as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe" and "any specific system of belief and worship, often involving a code of ethics and a philosophy."

If a person insists on a private definition of religion that renders it wrong or unbiblical, then of course he should not apply it to Christianity, but he has no basis to impose such a definition on other people. The point is that when we operate by the ordinary dictionary definitions, the statement "Christianity is not a religion" is false, and in fact unbiblical. Of course Christianity is a religion. And if we operate by these definitions, then the person who says "Give me Jesus, not religion" is telling us that he wants nothing to do with "the service and worship of God."

The needed distinction is not one between religion and relationship, since at least by the ordinary dictionary definitions, a religion can sustain a relationship. Rather, the needed distinction is one between good and bad religion, or true and false religion. Christianity is superior to Islam, Buddhism, and others, not because Christianity is a relationship while these are mere religions. All of these are religions. The difference is that Christianity is true and the rest are false. Christianity is a divinely revealed religion. It is God's own word on the proper service and worship of God. All other religions are human and demonic inventions.

So the crucial issue is not whether Christianity is a religion, but what kind of religion it is. One way that Scripture characterizes the Christian religion is with the words faith, love, and hope (v. 4-5).[2] When subjective and emotional meanings are attributed to these words, they cannot convey anything substantial about Christianity or accentuate its distinctive features against other religions and philosophies. But when understood according to their biblical usage, these words are able to embody some core aspects of the Christian religion, so much so that some writers have organized their dogmatics under them. Of course, the same information can be presented in different ways in terms of structure and emphasis.[3]

Faith is not general belief or confidence. Sometimes people are urged to "have faith" without mention of the content of this faith. Even unbelievers are encouraged to have faith in this sense. If this faith is intended to produce a desirable outcome or cause one's effort and stamina to prosper, then what is the basis for this confidence? "Faith" in this sense often refers to nothing more than an irrational willpower or expectation.

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[2] Romans 5:1-5; 1 Corinthians 13:13; Galatians 5:5-6; Ephesians 1:15-18., 4:2-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 5:8; Hebrews 6:10-12, 10:22-24; 1 Peter 1:3-8, 21-22.

[3] See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology* and *Presuppositional Confrontations*.

Scripture speaks of faith in several ways. Here we will mention only two of its broad meanings. First, "faith" can refer to the Christian religion itself, that is, the set of doctrines and practices that define it, as when we say "the Christian faith" and "contend for the faith" (Jude 3). Or, "faith" can refer to one's personal belief in this religion, as when we say "have faith in God" (Mark 11:22) and "we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus" (Colossians 1:4). This kind of faith is a gift from God, produced by his Spirit in those whom he has chosen. When we affirm the doctrine of justification by faith, we affirm that God saves us by giving us faith in Jesus Christ.

As we discuss faith, love, and hope together, we are interested in this second sense of faith – it is "faith in Christ Jesus." There is the popular misconception that to "believe in" God is not the same as to "believe that" what he has revealed about himself is true, that is, to believe these things "about" God. Sometimes the distinction is made between trust and belief, or trust and assent. However, the proper distinction is one made between true and false faith, not "believe in" and "believe that" faith, or between trust and assent. It would be absurd to say, "I believe in Christ, but I believe nothing about him" – to "believe in" Christ this way is meaningless. To have faith in someone is to believe something about him, and it is impossible to have faith in someone in a way that is beyond or other than what we have faith in him *about*, or what we believe *about* him.

It has been argued that the contents of "believe in" and "believe about" (or "believe that") are not necessarily identical since we believe certain things *about* a person that provide us a basis to "believe in" or "trust" him beyond what is immediately indicated by these things that we believe about him. Unless "trust" refers to a blind assumption affirmed by sheer willpower, in which case it is not biblical faith at all, to say that you "trust" God beyond what you believe "about" him is just to say that what you believe "about" him provides a basis for you to do this, which in turn means that this "trust" remains identical to what you believe "about" him. That is, the distinction or "distance" made between trust and assent is itself another object of assent. And this means that the distinction is in fact false and the "distance" between the two non-existent.

Thus to say that we have faith in Christ is a shorthand for saying that we believe a number of propositions about Christ. The word "faith" indicates the positive and desirable nature of the things that we believe about him, and to the extent that this faith is biblical, these would be biblical propositions.

Just as Paul has in mind a faith that is specific – it is "faith *in Christ Jesus*" – he has in mind a love that is also specific – it is "the love you have *for all the saints*." Some commentators remark that in this passage faith characterizes our "vertical" relationship with God, while love characterizes our "horizontal" relationship with other people. This is true to the passage as far as it goes, but it would be a mistake to infer from this a broad principle that rigidly enforces the distinction. This is because, among other things, love must also characterize our vertical relationship with God.

Although faith is sometimes associated with a feeling of confidence, it is not to be identified with the feeling itself. Rather, faith is belief in divinely revealed propositions and it is in

itself independent of feelings that may fluctuate. Feeling good about a biblical proposition is different from believing it. Likewise, although love is sometimes accompanied by certain emotions, love itself is not an emotion. The idea that love is either an emotion or necessarily and proportionately associated with certain emotions has inflicted disastrous damages to the intellectual and ethical development of countless believers.

The Bible speaks of love as the disposition to think of and act toward other persons (including God) in accordance with divine precepts and laws – that is, to treat them as God tells us to treat them. This love has no direct and necessary connection with any emotion, which without any inherent negative connotation, we define as a type of mental disturbance.[4] This disturbance can be positive or negative, but it is a disturbance.

As Paul writes in Romans 13, "The commandments…are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (v. 9-10). Notice that love is the *fulfillment* and not the *replacement* of the law. We do not treat people with love *instead* of treating them according to the law. Rather, to treat them with love is to treat them according to the law, or God's commandments.

He says that the commandments, such as "Do not commit adultery" and "Do not murder," are *summed up* in the commandment to love. A summary is not different from or superior than the things that it embodies. In fact, to truly understand the details represented by the summary, one must examine the things that it summarizes. Thus the commandment to love is not different from or superior than the other commandments – love is defined by these commandments in the first place.

Scripture defines our love toward God in the same way. Jesus tells his disciples in John 14:23, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching" – not that he will feel a certain way or have a certain emotion. If he loves, he obeys. Then he says, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (15:12-13). There is no emotion here. The command is to love, and this love means heroic and sacrificial action for the benefit of others.

Many people who feel thoroughly distraught inside at the slightest suffering in others would never sacrifice even their personal comfort to save them, not to say their very lives. But they have been taught – by culture, by tradition, by anti-Christian philosophies, but not by Scripture – that *this* represents compassion. They groan and weep for them – is this not love? Although it might permit themselves to feel very compassionate and spiritual, it has nothing to do with love.

In their more sober moments, theologians and commentators admit that biblical love has to do with thinking and acting in accordance with God's commands toward other persons, and that it has nothing to do with a particular kind of mental disturbance, or emotion. The Scripture is clear on this; it is not difficult to recognize. As one commentator writes, "The

[4] *Merriam-Webster's* dictionary lists this as its first but "obsolete" definition.

Bible speaks of it as an action and attitude, not just an emotion….Christians have no excuse for not loving because Christian love is a decision to *act* in the best interests of others."[5]

Defining love as an emotion leaves one with an excuse, since our feelings could fluctuate. Moreover, such a definition generates unnecessary guilt in the person who does not always feel what he thinks he should feel toward people. And if love is an emotion, then exactly what emotion is it? That is, what should it feel like? But according to the Bible, if a person will consistently treat other people in accordance with God's commands, regardless of how he feels, then he walks in love. On the other hand, the person who does nothing more than collapse into an emotional mess at any sign of human suffering does not walk in love. He is an unloving nuisance, and he might as well stop pretending.

Christian hope is also specific, a hope that is "stored up for you in heaven." We have seen that faith can be used in an objective sense, as in "the Christian faith," or in a subjective sense, as in "your faith in Christ." Likewise, there is an objective sense to hope, and then also a subjective sense. Even when used in its subjective sense, the hope of the gospel is much more than a general expectation of or desire for a positive future, or to wish for something. A mere wish often has no basis for its fulfillment, and outside of the gospel promise, the nature of what is desired falls far short of the believer's inheritance in its glory and purity. On the other hand, the Christian hope rests on the promise of God and the reality of redemption.

In any case, whereas faith is used in the subjective sense in this passage, hope is used in the objective sense – the significance of this will be noted in a moment. This is evident because, first, a subjective hope is an attitude, condition, or disposition of the mind – again, not necessarily and proportionately connected with a disturbance of the mind, or an emotion – but here the hope is stored up in heaven, not in the mind. Second, Paul says the Colossians "heard about" this hope, thus it is not something that is felt, sensed, opined, or affirmed in the mind, but something proclaimed and described. And third, if we may equate what the believers have received in verses 5 and 12, then this "hope" is said to be an "inheritance," which is something objective, not subjective.

Although this hope is stored up in heaven, so that the full benefits are reserved for a future time, through the Holy Spirit we now enjoy the powers of the age to come. Moreover, it is stored up in heaven not in the sense that it is kept from us, but that it is reserved for us. It is not something that we wish for or work for – it is not a possibility but a reality. God has foreordained our salvation, and nothing can take away our inheritance, because no one can snatch us from the his hand. This objective hope is the foundation of our subjective faith. The significance, therefore, is that our faith is not based on presumption or possibility, but destiny and reality.

One way to use these three words to embody a course of dogmatics is to place the doctrinal aspect of Christianity under faith, the ethical under love, and the eschatological under hope. These distinctions are meaningful, but not precise or perfect, for both the ethical and

[5] *Life Application Bible Commentary: Philippians, Colossians, & Philemon* (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1995), p. 154.

eschatological can also fall under the doctrinal, so that the entire religion can be called the Christian *faith*. Also, when used in this context, all three words would take on their objective senses.

We say that the Christian religion is characterized by these three things, but do other religions also offer faith, love, and, hope? When properly defined, we see that they do not. Again, Paul does not refer to some general faith or belief without regard to its object. The faith here is "faith *in Christ Jesus*." If non-Christians could have faith in Christ Jesus in the sense specified in Scripture, then they would already be Christians. Non-Christians do not have faith. And since love entails obedience to God's commands as they have been revealed in the Christian Bible, then no non-Christian religion, philosophy, or ethical view can offer or produce true love. Non-Christians do not have love. However, note that almost all of non-Christian philosophies – from Buddhism to Satanism – can contain love if it is defined as some sort of emotion. Then, our hope refers to the "inheritance" of the saints as promised in Scripture, stored up for us in the heaven described in Scripture. It is specific and exclusive. Thus there is no faith, no love, and no hope except in the Christian religion.

The Colossians' faith and love "spring from" the hope that is stored up in heaven, and they heard about this hope "in the word of truth, the gospel" (v. 5). This gospel is a message about God's grace, bearing fruit consisting of faith, love, and hope once it is heard and understood (v. 6). And it is heard and understood when a person teaches it to an audience (v. 7).

Because the Christian faith is transmitted when it is explained and understood, it is intellectual in nature. We can think about it, and talk about it. We can explain it, and we can understand it. The idea that faith is "caught, not taught" is against the whole spirit of the Christian religion, and is also an assault on the verbal revelation of Scripture. True piety begins and grows in precisely the opposite manner – it is taught, not caught. The idea that God's grace is beyond our understanding comes from false humility and a rejection of the nature of the gospel in favor of human tradition and philosophy about God's "incomprehensibility." One who does not understand something about God's grace cannot believe it, since there would be nothing for him to believe, so that he is not a Christian at all.

One commentator remarks that Paul does not include "knowledge" in this list of things that characterize the Christian faith, but "he deliberately omitted the word 'knowledge' because of the 'special knowledge' aspect of the heresy,"[6] that is, the heresy of Gnosticism. But to say this is so misleading that it should almost be considered a heresy itself. Paul represents "the word of truth" as the foundation of the Christian's entire life of faith, love, and hope. It is information about God's grace that is "learned" and "understood" by the mind, so that it could produce the intended effects in those who affirm it.

The rest of the letter continues to hammer on the essential role of knowledge in the Christian religion over and over again. It is one of the major themes of the letter. By verse 9 Paul is already praying for his readers to be "filled with knowledge" – not just to have

[6] Ibid., p. 150.

the bare minimum, but to be filled with it. The above commentator admits, "In 1:9, Paul did pray that they would be filled with the knowledge of God's will," and adds, "not some speculative or intellectual knowledge (*gnosis*) of the heretics and their false teaching."

But then what has become of his remark that Paul does not add knowledge to faith, love, and hope? It is a misleading observation. Knowledge produces and sustains faith, love, and hope. The commentator seems to think that Paul de-emphasizes knowledge in order to make a contrast between Christianity and Gnosticism (or tendencies that were to develop into Gnosticism). But Paul in fact does something very different – he emphasizes knowledge even more than Gnosticism, only that this knowledge is "truth" (v. 5-6), conveyed in the message of the gospel.

The commentator has, it seems, read into Paul's letter a strategy of spiritual surrender and suicide that Christians sometimes employ. In essence, it is the practice that says, "I will kill my own beliefs to spite yours." However, Paul does not defend Christianity by denying its very foundation – that is, true knowledge – but rather emphasizes it even more and contrasts it against the imposter. As the commentator says, Paul's knowledge is not the "speculative or intellectual knowledge *of the heretics*." Although Christianity is not speculative, as it is in non-Christian science and philosophy, it is *intellectual* knowledge, since knowledge is by definition intellectual. One cannot "know" something in an non-intellectual way, as in apart from the intellect or the mind.

Christianity is an intellectual religion, not always in the academic or professional sense, since any ordinary person should be able to understand it, but it is intellectual in that it is of the mind, to be taught and learned. We can discuss it, think about it, remember it, and debate about it. Christian evangelism and teaching are possible only when the intellectual nature of this religion is acknowledged and emphasized.

COLOSSIANS 1:9-14

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Christianity changes people. A convert to this faith is "born again" and becomes different than before. Scripture stresses the necessity of this change, and explains it to its converts. Paul's letters provide good examples of this emphasis, telling his readers about this difference, how to think about this new life, and how to live it. Besides the fact that truth possesses intrinsic value and therefore ought to be known, it is necessary to understand a person's condition before and after his conversion – and thus the nature of this change – for several reasons.

It is necessary for ministry to non-Christians – in preaching the gospel to them, or evangelism. Without an understanding of the non-Christian's condition, he cannot be informed, let alone persuaded, as to why he needs salvation in the first place. What are the spiritual and intellectual differences between the Christian and the non-Christian? If the Christian does not know the answer, then why and how does he commend the faith to the non-Christian?

It is necessary for ministry to Christians – in deciding our agenda and emphasis in preaching, in theological education, in formulating church policies, in parenting, and so on. One of the decisive factors in considering these aspects of ministry to believers is our view of the sinner's condition and the non-Christian world and culture. If the intellectual and ethical differences are small, then the biblical command to put off the old man and put on the new man would be unnecessary, and in fact, almost meaningless.

Whether we consider non-Christian culture as consistent with the Christian worldview also makes a difference. Is non-Christian thinking false, deceptive, irrational, satanic, or does it contribute to our knowledge of truth? For example, if non-Christian thinking is utterly corrupt and incompetent, then there should be no attempt to harmonize Scripture with non-Christian science and philosophy. Instead, we will realize that we already have the truth in Scripture and refute the opponent.

It is necessary for ministry to God – in prayer, worship, and thanksgiving. "Ministry" here, of course, means service, and although God does not need our service, he requires it (Acts 17:25). When Paul writes that we are to be "giving thanks to the Father" (v. 12), he also describes what the Father has done for us. To give thanks without knowing what one is giving thanks for, or to give thanks for nothing, would render the thanksgiving a meaningless gesture. But Scripture says that God has done something for us, an act whose magnitude is such that it deserves our everlasting gratitude.

Thus we cannot function as Christians unless we understand salvation, and part of this means to acknowledge the contrast between the condition of the Christian and the non-Christian. On this point, Scripture portrays the two as standing in opposite extremes, and it uses various ways to explain and emphasize this. In our passage, Paul states that the believers share an inheritance in the "kingdom of light" under Christ, and that while they were still unbelievers, they were under "the dominion of darkness." The contrast between the Christian and the non-Christian, therefore, is as the difference between light and darkness.

The ways that Scripture uses the contrast between light and darkness suggest that the metaphors apply to at least four major areas of differences between Christians and non-Christians – the ethical, intellectual, existential, and eschatological. Ethically, non-Christians are evil and filthy people. Intellectually, they are stupid and irrational people. Existentially, they are restless and miserable people. Eschatologically, they are condemned and doomed people. In contrast, because of the grace of God and the work of Christ, Christians are righteous, enlightened, joyous, and redeemed.

Of course, non-Christians deny these differences, even claiming the opposite on some points. We expect unbelievers to think this way – if they agree with us on the above, they would believe the gospel and become Christians. However, although Scripture is clear on these contrasts, the most scathing attacks against those who affirm them come from those who claim to be Christians. Perhaps some of them are only Christians in name and not in reality. Perhaps some of them are embarrassed by the biblical faith. But since these contrasts constitute the very foundation of the gospel – the very need and reason for it – faithful believers must not compromise on these points.

Those who deny the nature and degree of these differences also deny the necessity and magnitude of the work of Christ, and thus deny the Christian faith. Therefore, we must denounce as traitors and imposters all those who dilute or reject these contrasts. Many of them are spiritual prostitutes who lie in bed with the enemies of the faith in exchange for some tokens of kindness and respect. Since the genuineness of their profession of faith must be doubted, certainly there should be no place for them in positions of church leadership. The stubborn and outspoken ones should be excommunicated from the church.

Since we were once non-Christians, our present understanding of non-Christians is at least in principle also our perception of our pre-conversion condition. That is, if we are consistent, what we think about non-Christians now is also what we think about our pre-converted selves, or what we were before we became Christians. Therefore, to the extent

that we are "soft" in our view toward non-Christians, we are also soft on our past selves. And to the extent that we are soft on our past selves, we belittle and devalue the work of Christ, through which our redemption was secured. It follows that to think or speak of non-Christians as less evil, filthy, stupid, irrational, restless, miserable, condemned, and doomed than Scripture describes them is tantamount to a personal rejection of the gospel. He is as one who tramples the Son of God underfoot and insults the Spirit of grace (Hebrews 10:29).

Truth is black and white; there is no gray area. Christianity is entirely right, and all non-Christian views are entirely wrong – completely, at every point, and to its utmost degree. Darkness is not a dimmer light, but the absence of light, and light is not just a brighter darkness, since there is no light in darkness to be increased in the first place. Rather, light stands for the opposite of everything that is represented by darkness, and darkness stands for the opposite of everything that is represented by light. Scripture maintains this contrast in numerous passages, not as a difference in degree, but as two extreme opposites: "For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God" (2 Corinthians 6:14-16).

Paul refers to Christians as those who have been "rescued…from the dominion of darkness." Non-Christians are enslaved by the persons and qualities represented by darkness. They are intellectually and ethically ruled by Satan,[7] and they are characterized by total wickedness and irrationality. They are bound in this condition, both unable and unwilling to free themselves from being evil and stupid. Unless an unbeliever admits this, he does not acknowledge his wretched condition and his need for God's grace, so that there is no repentance. And unless a believer declares this, he deceives the hearers and fails to deliver the gospel.

Some of the Christians who oppose me confess that Scripture indeed speaks and teaches as I do. However, they add, perhaps we should not tell the unbelievers all that we are saying here. That is, we realize that the Bible calls them evil morons, and many other derogatory things, but do we have to tell them that? Perhaps we can tell them about their true condition as unbelievers, using the words that Scripture uses, after they have converted to the Christian faith? In their rebuffs against me, this has been suggested even by some Reformed Christians, who take great pride in their strong doctrine of sin. But rather than a show of wisdom and kindness, this is blatant hypocrisy and underhandedness. What? Do we refuse to say to the non-Christians what we say behind their backs? Is this the kind of people we are as Christians? And then we have the gall to declare that they should become like us? This shameful behavior belongs to the realm of darkness and not the light.

On the one hand, we must not impose unbiblical barriers to the Christian faith, such as circumcision, food laws, or the celebration of holy days (2:16); on the other hand, we must

[7] They are not metaphysically ruled by Satan, for even Satan himself is metaphysically ruled by God (who directly controls all things), so that Satan's rule is only true in a relative sense, and when we discuss the matter in a context such as the present one.

not remove barriers to the Christian faith that are necessary aspects of the gospel, and that can only be overcome by the Spirit of God at work in the human heart. One such barrier is the biblical doctrine of sin. It offends and humiliates the sinner, and demands his repentance. Just as the doctrine of the crucifixion presents a stumbling block to some, the doctrine of sin, when presented in its fullness, causes those to stumble who have not the grace to acknowledge the truth and relinquish their pride, so that they may be saved through faith in Christ. But this stumbling block is a presupposition and cornerstone of the gospel, and it must remain if the truth – if the Christian faith itself – is to be preserved.

Of course, we may distinguish between the content of a message and the manner in which we present it. The biblical doctrine of sin is harsh in content, but the way it is presented can vary, depending on a number of factors, including the context of the conversation and the attitude of the audience. The point is that we must present the truth about what we believe, that is, if we truly believe what the Bible says about non-Christians. When we compliment the devil, we become the enemies of Christ. It follows that to preface our gospel preaching with praises for non-Christian science, culture, altruism, and so on, as even Reformed Christians often do, is something that comes from the evil one. Rather, our doctrine and conduct must reflect who we are – that is, children of the light – and also who they are – slaves of darkness, children of the devil.

Further, just as the people of a conquered nation is transferred to the land of the victor in the ancient world, the language of verse 13 suggests that the kingdom of light has triumphed over the kingdom of darkness (see also 2:15). To us who believe, this is a rescue. But it also means that those who remain non-Christians are a defeated people – they are losers. Our victory will one day become obvious even to the stubborn rebels, since those who believe will be together with the Lord Jesus, while those who do not will be thrown into the lake of fire.

But even now our authority over darkness is demonstrated, among other things, in our superior intellectual powers (in knowing and asserting the truth, and in refuting error, through preaching and argumentation), in our superior ethical potentials (in our ability to pursue good and resist evil), and in our superior existential postures (in our mastery over the emotions, in exhibiting contentment, patience, and endurance in the midst of adverse circumstances).

So great is the contrast between light and darkness! How we betray the Lord Jesus and become worthless servants, then, when we neglect or compromise it – that is, when we minimize the difference between Christ and Satan. As mentioned, because of this repeated contrast in Scripture, to soften our view toward the non-Christian condition is also to reduce our appreciation for redemption, for God's grace and Christ's sacrifice. To commend one is to condemn the other, and in this case, the more we condemn one, the more we commend the other (Luke 7:42-43, 47; Romans 5:20).

Finally, to diminish the contrast between light and darkness also distorts the nature of gospel ministry. Jesus said to Paul in commissioning him to the ministry, "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). This is consistent with what Paul says in our passage, that Christians are called to receive forgiveness and an inheritance, but that, on the other hand, non-Christians are under "the power of Satan," that they are "darkness," and that someone must "open their eyes" in order for them to see the truth – not that they are physically blind, of course, but that they are intellectually dull.

Sometimes it is said that non-Christians are foolish, irrational, and ignorant toward spiritual things, but that many of them are geniuses when it comes to natural matters. But at least in this context, this is a misleading distinction, because everything is related to the spiritual in such a way that it is necessarily determined by it. Since there is a God, and he is as he reveals himself in Scripture, no non-Christian view of science, philosophy, ethics, art, culture, politics – no non-Christian view about anything – can be accurate. So if unbelievers are foolish, irrational, and ignorant about spiritual things, then they are foolish, irrational, and ignorant about everything.

But how can one turn darkness to light? How is it possible to convert a people that is so evil, so wicked? How is it possible to teach a people that is so stupid, so irrational? And how is it possible to fill such a miserable people with unspeakable joy, contentment, and thanksgiving? "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). The gospel ministry is the means ordained by God to convert sinners from darkness to light. We preach to them "Jesus Christ as Lord," so that the same God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," would make his light to shine in their hearts. So we have this power, this treasure in vessels of clay, accomplishing that which is beyond our own human ability, "to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:3-7). Maintaining the extreme contrast between light and darkness honors the grace and power of God in conversion.

However, although Christians have been sanctified by faith, enlightened to grasp the truth, and have tasted the powers of the coming age (Hebrews 6:4),[8] they are far from perfected. There is still much room for learning, correction, and development. Nevertheless, as our focus turns from the contrast between Christians and non-Christians to the matter of the Christian's spiritual growth, the issue is no longer one of conversion, or the extreme difference between light and darkness. Despite his shortcomings and imperfections, the Christian has been rescued from the dominion of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of Christ. So we are considering his development as a child of light, as one who can recognize and affirm the truth, and as one who can put off the old man and put on the new man, who can now love and obey God's commandments. A person who has been converted to Christianity is not different than before only in degree, but he is now in another spiritual, intellectual, and ethical realm altogether. He is now a child of the light, a son of the King of Heaven.

[8] In relation to the debate concerning the perseverance of the saints, although this passage in Hebrews might not describe all that it means to be a Christian (so that one who has attained the items on the list may still not be a believer), it does describe what every Christian should possess. If it comes short of a full description of a Christian, it just means that a genuine believer will have more than the things listed here.

Paul's letters and prayers demonstrate that his priority is for Christians to increase in knowledge. Although it leads to other things that he also values, spiritual knowledge – or theology, which is just a formal term for the same thing – comes first with the apostle (1:28-29). Here he writes, "we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (1:9). Or, as he writes to the Ephesians, "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" (Ephesians 1:17). And to the Philippians he says, "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ" (Philippians 1:9-10).

Wisdom, knowledge, insight, and the like, are necessary and foundational to spiritual development. Without them, it is impossible to grasp "his will," to "know him better," to "discern what is best," and to "be pure and blameless until the day of Christ." Therefore, it is self-contradictory to claim, "I may not know much about the Bible, but I know God," or even, "I may not know much theology, but I know a lot about God."

This biblical emphasis on wisdom and knowledge does not limit spiritual development to only a small number of Christians. Now, there are indeed those who practice a form of elitism – they would rule a person's theology or ministry illegitimate because he has not earned a certain degree from a certain seminary, or because he does not interact with a certain theologian, or because he does not write for a scholarly audience. These are people who would criticize a book not because it lacks truth or zeal, but because it does not cite the important scholars in its footnotes. In any case, elitists are usually not the spiritual elite at all, but they are incompetent cowards and hypocrites. And this is why they would not criticize the same point in another writer if he is famous or idolized enough so that their jealousy and cynicism would only backfire against them.

These elitists are the spiritual descendents of the Pharisees, and they are very widespread. They are fond of asking, "By what authority are you doing these things?" (Matthew 21:23), when in fact their own authority comes from one another. As with the Pharisees, their appeal is made not to Christ but to human idols and traditions. They would condemn someone for following the biblical practice of name-calling, but they do not hesitate to practice the idolatry of constant name-dropping. Their wisdom is not pure and spiritual, but demonic. By sheer clout rather than reason, they attempt to intimidate Christians into submission. They are not to be feared, but resisted, mocked, and despised.

Scripture does not condone elitism. It does not exclude anyone because of worldly standards or human traditions. Spiritual wisdom is available to every Christian who asks God for it. Here Paul prays for all the believers at Colosse, that all of them would receive "spiritual wisdom and understanding." James writes, "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), although he says this requires faith and patience. At any rate, this wisdom leads to humility and good deeds (James 3:13), whereas the demonic wisdom of the

unbelievers and the elitists exhibits envy and selfish ambition (James 3:14), and often a lust for power, control, and admiration.

The good news is that the spiritual wisdom that is necessary to develop as a believer, and to grow in faith, love, and hope, is available to every Christian through the means God has provided, such as prayer and study. But this also removes any excuse from the believer for spiritual and theological ignorance. A lack of formal education is no excuse, since spiritual wisdom comes from God and not from man.

God's promise in Scripture, that he will pour out his wisdom upon those who ask, is more than sufficient to overcome any hindrance that seems to be present due to the lack of academic training. To deny this is also to deny the power and the promise of God. On the other hand, there are those who take pride in going without a formal education, and at the same time make no effort to pursue wisdom and knowledge through prayer and study. This is not spirituality, but self-righteous delusion. The point is, whether or not one has received a formal education or any training facilitated by man, true wisdom comes from God, through his appointed means, and it leads not to elitism, but humility and service with great boldness.

Then, Paul continues, "And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work" (1:10). The Bible teaches a strong connection between true wisdom and holy conduct. For example, the verses that we cited from Paul's letter to the Philippians say that we are to abound "in knowledge and depth of insight" so that we may be "pure and blameless." Our passage speaks of being filled with "the knowledge of his will." God's "will" in such a context denotes his precepts and not his decrees, that is, the morality that he has defined, and not the reality that he has determined. A strong and growing believer, therefore, is one who is learning and obeying God's will, or the teachings and precepts of the Bible.

There are three observations that we can make in connection with this. The first two are two sides of the same issue, and the third one will bring us to a separate discussion.

First, Paul prays that the believers would receive spiritual wisdom *with the intent* that this will also produce good works. The natural fruit of godly wisdom is a godly life, because this wisdom has within it the knowledge that defines godliness, the understanding that this is the way one ought to follow, and the insight to agree with all that God has revealed. So true wisdom leads to godly conduct, but what appears to be godly conduct is only such if it is a product of wisdom from God. An outward conformity to a precept of God that is based on an evil motive or a false understanding is not godly at all. The conformity in this case is incidental and not intentional. Moreover, a godly life is not characterized by altruism alone, but also endurance, patience, joy, and thanksgiving.

The first point is probably agreeable to most and is widely emphasized, but in the second point I must defy a common teaching. This is the idea that if knowledge does not lead to good works, then the knowledge is worthless, and if one's theology does not produce holiness, then the theology is defective. Along with this comes the assertion that knowledge

is *necessarily* tied to godliness, and that the sole purpose of theology is to produce a godly life. (There are variations of this teaching, but the basic idea is the same.) However, the Bible does not teach this.

The above is often asserted on the basis of passages like Colossians 1:9-14, in which Paul indeed requests spiritual wisdom for his readers *so that* they will "bear fruit in every good work." But this is a false inference and a misuse of the passage. Contrary to the popular teaching, this relationship does not hold in the same way when it is reversed – that theology is intended to produce godliness does not render the theology worthless when there is no godliness. There is no need for detailed explanation. The idea is simply absent from the passage.

Even 1 Corinthians 13 does not support the teaching. There Paul says, "If I…can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge…but have not love, I am nothing." He does not say that the knowledge is nothing or that the ability to fathom it is nothing, but that *the person* who does not have love is nothing. Theology is a revelation of the mind of God, and as such it possesses intrinsic value, so that to denigrate it is akin to blasphemy, if it is not already. When there is sound theology but no sound conduct, let us denigrate the person – *he* is worthless and defective – and not the theology.

Third, Paul prays for the Christians to be "*filled* with the knowledge of his will in *all* spiritual wisdom and understanding" (ESV). Unlike many believers, who exhibit either feigned humility or genuine unbelief, the apostle asks for his readers to be *full* of knowledge in *all* wisdom. He requests for them the maximum – the fullness – both in terms of the nature of the knowledge and their capacity to contain and grasp it.

Of course, even our maximum has a limit (1 Corinthians 13:12), but the apostle sets this limit far, *far* beyond those who exalt the doctrine of our "finite human mind" more than the generosity and promise of God (James 1:5), and his power in conversion. This *fullness* of *all* wisdom is extensive enough that, if attained, enables us to be "*fully* pleasing to him, bearing fruit in *every* good work" (Colossians 1:9-10), serving him with "*all* power" and "*all* endurance" (v. 11). Paul's prayer is for fullness in knowledge, holiness, and power. Since this prayer is written under divine inspiration, even if we do not attain to such fullness, we must never suggest that it is impossible in principle.

This biblical teaching requires us to revise some of the traditional theological formulations that erroneously exalt the doctrines of human finitude and depravity above the doctrines of revelation and salvation. Why we do not attain or receive is one issue, but what there is to attain or receive is another. We must not reduce the grace of God and the work of Christ to the level of our failure and unbelief. Paul says that God's gift is greater than man's sin:

> But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many

> trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:15-17)

Since the present discussion concerns the fullness of spiritual knowledge, it is appropriate to consider the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God in relation to what is said above. Some courses in dogmatics *begin* their presentation of the divine attributes with the incomprehensibility of God, and in a manner that sets a pessimistic tone for the entire theological enterprise. This is contrary to the biblical pattern.

Consider the example of Romans 11:33-35, a passage often cited in relation to God's incomprehensibility: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" It is an abuse of the passage to make it an absolute reference point, as if it stands alone in Scripture, or to make it the starting point of our theology. This is because when we consider the passage in context, we notice that it comes at the *conclusion* of a lengthy and extensive doctrinal section in which Paul expounds on the full range of Christian theology, including divine creation, human depravity, present and future judgment, the federal headship of Adam in sin, the vicarious atonement of Christ in redemption, justification by faith (and not works), sanctification by the Spirit, predestination (election and reprobation), and more. By Romans 11:33, Paul has resolved *every* question he has raised, including those topics that many theologians insist on calling mysteries and paradoxes, even in defiance against Scripture, such as God's purpose and justice in election (Romans 9), and his sovereign decrees (Romans 10-11).

Charles Hodge thinks that the passage asserts "the incomprehensible character and infinite excellence of the divine nature and dispensations," and that "We can only wonder and adore. We can never understand."[9] However, this is not at all what the passage suggests. Whether we are considering the immediate context of Romans 11 and Romans 9-11, or all the previous materials in Romans 1-11, what exactly is it that we do not understand? What is it that Paul has not explained? He has addressed and resolved all the issues that he raised with full knowledge and confidence.

Whether we understand Paul is another issue – I say that we can, but right now this is not our topic. And if we do not understand Paul, we still cannot attribute this to God's incomprehensibility, since Paul seems to have no problem in understanding the things that he writes, so that it is not impossible in principle to understand all that he expounds in the letter. Now if Hodge means that God cannot be "fully comprehended,"[10] then we might agree (nevertheless, with the qualifications that we shall discuss later), but certainly it is wrong to say that "We can *only* wonder and adore. We can *never* understand." This is not

[9] Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), p. 378.
[10] Ibid.

what happens in Romans. In Romans we wonder and adore *because* we have understood Romans 1-11 – all of it.

Let us consider Romans 11:33-35 in its immediate context. He writes in verse 25, "I want you to understand this mystery" (ESV). Our purpose does not require us to consider the mystery itself, but only that Paul wants his readers to *understand* what he calls a mystery. As with other instances in which he uses the word, mystery does not refer to something that is intellectually unattainable in the technical sense, as in how calculus might elude an infant. Rather, a mystery is something that we can understand but, at least for a period of time, has not been told or explained to us.

I could think of a number between 1 and 100,000, and as long as I refuse to reveal it, it would remain a "mystery" to you. But you would have no difficulty understanding it if I were to tell you the number. Mystery in Scripture does not indicate something that we cannot understand because of our limited comprehension, but something that we cannot discover unless conveyed and explained to us by revelation. Then, we can understand it, in many cases, without any difficulty. So Romans 11:33-35 could be expressing a sense of appreciation and wonderment at what Paul has just explained and what we have just understood (whether in Romans 11, 9-11, or all of 1-11). But he has left no question unanswered for 11:33-35 to express an inability to discover or understand anything.

In particular, consider 11:34, which comes from Isaiah 40:13. Paul also cites the verse in 1 Corinthians 2:16. But right after it he adds, "But we have the mind of Christ." And in verse 12, he writes, "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." His point is that we cannot know God and his ways apart from his word and his Spirit (1:21), but because he has given us his word and his Spirit, we do understand – quite well, in fact (2:6-10, 13-16), because "God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (2:10).

It is more than likely that Paul is making a similar point with Isaiah 40:13 in Romans 11, that is, not to say that we cannot understand, but to say that we can and we do, and at the same time to express wonder at what we have just understood. And as in 1 Corinthians 1-2, its use also conveys the assumption that we cannot understand God and his ways *without* or *beyond* what he has revealed – BUT, he has indeed revealed and explained to us all that Paul has written, and this includes most if not all the topics that theologians often call mysterious, paradoxical, and incomprehensible. Paul uses Isaiah 40:13 to stress the abundance of information revealed to believers and their potential to understand it, all of it.

Paul does not begin his letter to the Romans with God's incomprehensibility, but by calling attention to how much we already know about God – even as unbelievers attempt to suppress this knowledge – rather than how little we can know about him. In fact, for many people, his view of our knowledge is too optimistic for comfort. He declares that even unbelievers cannot help but know about this God, including his power and wisdom in creation (Romans 1). Even some of his moral principles are innate in man (Romans 2). Elsewhere unbelievers are rightly said to be ignorant of God, since they suppress what they

know about him, and they do not know him in the sense of having a positive relationship with him. Right now the point is that Paul does not begin his letter – or for that matter, any of his presentations – with God's incomprehensibility. But we find that he often begins with God's knowability, especially where Christians are concerned – that they can and do know God, and that they can and do possess extensive and accurate knowledge about him.

He writes in 1 Corinthians 1:21, "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." God cannot be discovered or understood through human effort alone, apart from revelation. God reveals himself through the gospel, which saves those who believe. Unbelievers indeed possess an innate knowledge of God, a knowledge that God placed in them. They did not obtain it by their own human wisdom. And they are indeed so dull that many of them will deny this knowledge, even as the assumptions in their speech and conduct betray the contrary. This universal knowledge is sufficient to condemn them, but insufficient to enlighten them to the truth and produce faith toward Christ.

Our main focus, however, is on how God's incomprehensibility applies to Christians. And we find that even before 1:21, at the very beginning of the letter, Paul says, "For in him you have been enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge – because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you" (1 Corinthians 1:5-6). Then, at the end of the second chapter, after citing Isaiah 40:13, a verse often used to assert God's incomprehensibility, he adds, "*But* we have the mind of Christ" (2:16). All of this – that although unbelievers know about him, they deny him, but that believers know him through his self-revelation – is consistent with what we have said about Romans 1-2 and 11.

We take another example from Paul's speech to the Greeks on Mars Hill, as recorded in Acts 17. There he begins by a confident assertion of his own knowledge of God in contrast to the ignorance of the non-Christians (v. 23). The rest of his speech bears a remarkable resemblance to many of our dogmatics in both outline and content.[11] We can multiply examples. The letter to the Hebrews begins by calling attention to God's verbal revelation delivered through the prophets, and now even through the Son (Hebrews 1:1-2). Thus it begins with our extensive and increasingly clear database of spiritual knowledge, not human ignorance or divine incomprehensibility. And John begins his first letter by claiming physical contact with Christ, whom apart from sensation (Matthew 16:17; John 6:45; 1 Corinthians 2:9-10), he recognized as the "Word of life" (1 John 1:1-3). Thus he begins with an assertion of direct knowledge and understanding, not with God's hiddenness or incomprehensibility.

In his *Systematic Theology*, Louis Berkhof precedes his discussion of the attributes of God with a chapter on "The Knowability of God." But he begins this chapter as follows: "The Christian Church confesses on the one hand that God is the Incomprehensible One, but also on the other hand, that He can be known and that knowledge of Him is an absolute requisite unto salvation."[12] The statement is acceptable as far as it goes, although the emphasis here

[11] See Vincent Cheung, *Presuppositional Confrontations*.
[12] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 2003), p. 29.

reverses the pattern that Scripture exhibits when it addresses believers, who constitute Berkhof's primary audience.

He continues, "It recognizes the force of Zophar's question, 'Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?' Job 11:7." But this is a misuse of the verse. Who says that we are attempting to know God "by searching"? We have already acknowledged 1 Corinthians 1:21: "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." We despair of knowing spiritual truth through our sinful efforts, but "God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (1:10), rendering Job 11:7 practically irrelevant in this context. We do not even try to do what that verse tells us we cannot do.

Then, in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Herman Bavinck begins his presentation of theology proper as follows:

> Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics. To be sure, the term "mystery" in Scripture does not mean an abstract supernatural truth in the Roman Catholic sense. Yet Scripture is equally far removed from the idea that believers can grasp the revealed mysteries in a scientific sense. In truth, the knowledge that God has revealed of himself in nature and Scripture far surpasses human imagination and understanding. In that sense it is all mystery with which the science of dogmatics is concerned, for it does not deal with finite creatures, but from beginning to end looks past all creatures and focuses on the eternal and infinite One himself. From the very start of its labors, it faces the incomprehensible One.[13]

This probably sounds sober and pious to many people, but it asserts the opposite of the biblical pattern and emphasis. At least he raises the relevant point of the believer's understanding of revelation, and not an attempt to know God through his own effort. But to our disappointment, he says that the Christian can barely understand what is revealed. On the contrary, Jesus says, "I…will tell you plainly about my Father" (John 16:25) and Paul says, "We have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). There is zero support in Scripture for the idea that we cannot, even in principle, understand something that God has revealed to us.

In fact, rephrasing Bavinck's paragraph in the opposite direction yields an accurate summary of the biblical view:

> Understanding is the lifeblood of dogmatics. Scripture is far removed from the idea that believers cannot grasp the fullness of revelation. In truth, the knowledge that God has revealed of himself in Scripture is well-suited to the redeemed intellect. In that sense it is all understanding with which the science of dogmatics is concerned, for it does not deal with the investigation of finite and sinful creatures, but from beginning

[13] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume Two: God and Creation* (Baker Academic, 2004), p. 29.

> to end looks past all creatures and focuses on the eternal and infinite One, who has revealed himself. From the very start of its labors, it faces the One who knows the human mind, and who has enlightened those who believe, and who has clearly revealed himself to them in a way that they can understand.

To begin the theological enterprise with ignorance and pessimism rather than a confident assertion of knowledge, even though we have received God's word and God's Spirit, is to place ourselves in the position of the non-Christians. This is not humility, but an arrogant and rebellious denial of God's grace and of the work that he has performed in us.

The biblical pattern is to begin by God's knowability – not only that he is knowable, but that as Christians we do know him – and if it is to be mentioned at all, to conclude with God's incomprehensibility after *all* questions have been answered and resolved. The only acceptable reason to introduce this doctrine at the beginning is to subsume the topic under God's knowability, and then to use the doctrine to stress the fact that God has made himself knowable and known, especially to those who believe (1 Corinthians 1-2).[14]

The biblical doctrine is that we cannot know God by our own efforts and methods, but we know only what he reveals to us – that is, what he tells us. We cannot know and should not speculate beyond what he has revealed. God has revealed an abundance of information to us, much more than what many theologians are willing to acknowledge. This amount of information is sufficient to constitute a complete worldview that answers all necessary questions, and in a way that is explicit and consistent, without apparent or actual contradictions.

Theologians often present a different view concerning the actual extent of this revelation and the nature of our understanding of it. My judgment is that the usual proposals are false, and usually blasphemous, at least by implication.

First, there is the premature assertion, vehemently defended, that God has not revealed anything beyond what they have grasped. So some questions are said to be beyond revelation as we have it, when the truth is that the questions are beyond their own understanding or that the answers are beyond their willingness to accept. All this talk about the "finite human mind" amounts to measuring divine revelation by our human finitude. It is the very opposite of humility.

Second, there is the violent insistence that revelation as we have it contains numerous paradoxes and contradictions, and that only additional revelation, which we will not receive in this present life, will provide the necessary materials for understanding and reconciliation. This denial of the clarity of revelation and the effect of redemption is so essential to the theological thinking and ecclesiastical posturing of some theologians that they would even strive to defrock ministers who insist that God's revelation is understandable and self-consistent.

[14] This is what I have done in my *Systematic Theology*.

J. H. Thornwell concludes his lecture on "The Nature and Limits of Our Knowledge of God" as follows:

> Our ignorance of the Infinite is the true solution of the most perplexing problems which encounter us at every step in the study of Divine truth. We have gained a great point when we have found out that they are really insoluble – that they contain one element which we cannot understand, and without which the whole must remain an inexplicable mystery. The doctrines of the Trinity, of the Incarnation, of the Prescience of God and the Liberty of Man, the Permission of the Fall, the Propagation of Original Sin, the Workings of Efficacious Grace, all these are facts which are clearly taught; as facts they can be readily accepted, but they defy all efforts to reduce them to science.[15]

He seems to say that if we cannot "reduce them to science," then they are "inexplicable." Is he indeed asserting this relationship? Is something either "science" or else inexplicable? Why? And what does he mean by "science"? Why should we reduce anything to "science"? We will not spend time on these questions. At this point, we need only to notice that he calls those doctrines he listed "inexplicable," and that they carry problems that are "insoluble."

First, the "problems" with all of these doctrines have been conclusively solved, often just by pointing out that there were no problems in the first place – they were invented by human tradition and philosophy.[16] If Thornwell does not know or refuses to accept these solutions, that is his fault. But when he proposes that "ignorance" is the "solution" to all these problems, then we must protest that all of Scripture is against him both in its pattern and content. Scripture does not use ignorance as an excuse for believers or a defense against unbelievers. It does not admit to any internal incoherence, and it does not then appeal to either God's infinitude or man's finitude to "solve" the problem. When we follow Thornwell, who represents only one of many like him, we introduce confusion and false humility into Christians, and rather than exalting the truth of the gospel before unbelievers, we confirm them in their disbelief and irreverence.

In fact, to begin our consideration of the doctrine of God with his incomprehensibility, and to introduce pessimism for believers, is to model the pagan disposition to suppress the knowledge of God, perhaps even out of a similar motive, that is, to leave room for disbelief, disagreement, and disobedience against him. The difference is the starting point for the denial – unbelievers deny God at an earlier point – but the principle is identical. And indeed we find that God's incomprehensibility is often used as an excuse to reject God's answers to a number of doctrinal questions.

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[15] James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* (Solid Ground Christian Books, 2004), p. 141-142.

[16] See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*, *Ultimate Questions*, *Presuppositional Confrontations*, *Apologetics in Conversation*, *Commentary on Ephesians*, *The Author of Sin* and *Captive to Reason.*

To insist that we cannot understand something when God has repeatedly explained it and answered all questions about it – for example, when it comes to the "problem" of evil – is just a polite way of saying that we reject God's revelation on the matter. It is an attempt to think like the devil but speak like a saint. And it is in this way that teachings on the incomprehensibility of God and the finitude of the human mind are, more often than not, used to display false humility and to disguise gross rebellion against God's explicit and thorough revelation.

Suppose there is a child whose parents understand how he processes information and provide him with detailed explanations and instructions, but he plugs up his ears and screams, "No! No! No! I do not understand! You are so wise and mature, so far beyond me, but I am just a child. I cannot understand what you are saying." There is no humility here; rather, he mocks his parents and despises their authority. He is an irksome and disobedient child who requires correction and discipline.

Now, is God infinitely greater than human parents, so that he is indeed too far beyond our grasp? But he is also infinitely more knowledgeable of the human mind, infinitely more capable of explaining himself, with an infinitely greater access to our souls by his Spirit. If we speak in faith and honesty, we will have to say that we can know God and his will much better than we can know our human parents. This may still not be very much, compared to all that there is to know about an *infinite* being. We can never know all of him, but we know our parents even less.

Paul writes, "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. 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 2:11-12). In ourselves, we have access to neither the mind of man nor the mind of God, but God has revealed his mind (not the mind of other men) to us by his Spirit. Scripture is consistently optimistic about *the Christians'* ability to know God. The traditional doctrine of God's incomprehensibility that teaches the opposite is outright damnable.

Critics might now say, "Ah, now he claims to have all the answers." Based on the pattern of their previous objections, we should anticipate this as a possible reaction. But this response would show once again how obsessed they are with personalities and with themselves. How much a particular Christian knows is irrelevant to a proper formulation of the doctrine. Our main concern has been the biblical position, or the principle of the issue. Also, throughout our discussion we have made it clear that this biblical optimism is applied to all Christians, although it is withheld from those who remain in unbelief. On the other hand, our critics and the theologians that they follow wish to impose their own limitations upon all believers, and even upon the content of God's word and the power of God's Spirit.

In revising the traditional doctrine of God's incomprehensibility, we must also reconsider the terminology that is used and the category that is assumed. It is agreed that God is infinite, and therefore there is an infinite amount of information that could be known about

him. And since we are finite, this means that we can never know all of God. In this sense, God is incomprehensible. It is not that we cannot understand anything about him at all, but that he can be known only as far as he has revealed himself.

Theologians fall into error, and I would say heresy and blasphemy, when they say that we cannot understand even God's written revelation. But they are often vague and inconsistent on this point. In any case, the important issue right now is to note that "incomprehensible" often means that we cannot understand *everything* about God, and not *anything* about God. And the doctrine is often introduced as an intrinsic characteristic of God's nature, or an attribute of God.

Regarding the terminology, the word "incomprehensible" could be misleading, since it can be, and often is, used in two different ways. The first definition in *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, designated as archaic, is "having or subject to no limits." This definition is appropriate to the doctrine, since we indeed admit that we cannot know the *totality* of God *because* he is infinite. However, the second definition, not archaic, is "impossible to comprehend: unintelligible." This is not the idea that we wish to convey by the doctrine. There are indeed theologians who at times affirm that God is incomprehensible in this sense, but we have said enough about them by this point – Scripture exposes their false humility. God and his revelation are not unintelligible. Since the first definition is archaic, perhaps *Webster's New World Dictionary* is correct in reversing the order, so that its first definition for the word is "not comprehensible; that cannot be understood; obscure or unintelligible." Again, we must not say that God and his revelation are incomprehensible in this sense.

The point is that the primary meaning for "incomprehensible" is now "unintelligible." And this is the first meaning that comes to mind when many believers and unbelievers learn of the doctrine. If this is what we mean, then we are wrong. But if this is not what we mean, then we are misleading our audience and compromising the faith. Believers who struggle against assaults from outsiders as well as their own doubts will think that we have no answers for them. And unbelievers who already think that Christianity is irrational and that Christians are simpletons will receive confirmation for their suspicion – their own theologians call God and his revelation "unintelligible," which is not very far from "complete nonsense."

Our only option is to disown the theologians and believers who speak this way (they do not represent the Christian faith), and restate our doctrine in accordance with Scripture – that God has revealed himself in a clear and coherent way, and in a way suited to the human intellect, that we understand much about God and his revelation, that we are able to answer all questions and challenges against the faith, and that whereas non-Christians stand in blindness and ignorance, we proclaim the fullness of the will of God to them from a position of knowledge and authority (Acts 17:23).

To correct this problem of misleading terminology, we can either subsume this doctrine under the "knowability" of God (and while we are on the subject, perhaps "understandability" is a better word?), or subsume it under the "infinity" of God. He is

infinite, but intelligible and understandable. He has spoken abundantly and clearly to mankind. And it is from this foundation of revelation, knowledge, and understanding that we proclaim, "Now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).

Regarding the category, we should note that the incomprehensibility *of God* is in fact an attribute *of man*. If a cat cannot fully understand me, it does not mean that incomprehensibility is inherent in me, or that it is one of my attributes. If I *could* be fully understood, even if only in principle or if only by God, then incomprehensibility is not one of my attributes.

God is incomprehensible to his creatures, but since he is omniscient, he is not incomprehensible to himself. Since he fully understands himself, incomprehensibility cannot be one of his intrinsic qualities. *He* is not incomprehensible; *we* find him incomprehensible. And the divine attribute that renders him incomprehensible *to us* is his infinity, not an intrinsic attribute of incomprehensibility.

If there were no creatures, God would still be triune, spiritual, eternal, self-existent, immutable, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and so on. But there would be no one to find him incomprehensible. He would still be infinite, and his infinite understanding would fully comprehend his own infinite being.

COLOSSIANS 1:15-23

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation – if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

It is often suggested that we have in this passage probably the most exalted christology in Scripture, or the highest view regarding the nature and the work of Christ. Preachers and commentators have a tendency to call whatever biblical topic or passage they currently deal with "the most" this or that. But even disregarding this, the statement is misleading because it is impossible to have a more exalted view of anyone than to affirm or imply that he is God. And since Scripture affirms and implies the deity of Christ in numerous places, this passage does not present a higher view of Christ, but the normal and proper view of Christ. There is nothing here that surprises the Christian or stretches his belief. This is the Christ that we know and recognize from all other portions of Scripture, including the Old Testament. An overly dramatic reaction is unhelpful. Nevertheless, the passage is indeed descriptive and substantial. It includes details on the implications of Christ's deity and his exalted station as a divine-human person.

The common assumption is that Paul is answering a heresy – namely, Gnosticism, a precursor to Gnosticism, or a set of false doctrines with Gnostic tendencies. Since the passage presents a high view of Christ, and it is assumed that Paul responds to the heresy by affirming a contrary position almost point-by-point, from this perspective it would appear that the heresy threatens the faith of the Colossians with a doctrine that denigrates the person of Christ or that presents a false and downgraded christology. This may indeed be the situation that Paul faces as he writes this letter, but as mentioned, it is not necessarily the case, and it is not necessary to assume such a background for an accurate understanding of the text.

For example, the Gnostics teach that God did not directly create the universe, but through a series of emanations. Each step in the series stands further away from God than the previous one, so that by the point where matter is produced, it is so far from God that matter is essentially evil and opposed to him. And since matter is evil, Jesus Christ could not have walked the earth in a genuine body of flesh. This could explain Paul's emphasis on an accurate and exalted christology.

The assumption that he is responding to a Gnostic or Gnostic-like heresy is consistent with his insistence on Christ's divine nature (1:15), his direct creation of all things (1:16), and his incarnation in and atonement by a physical body (1:22). That is, Christ was not only one in a series of emanations, but the very image of God. And it was he who created all things, so that God did not create by a series of emanations. His work of redemption was accomplished through his incarnation in and atonement by a physical body (also 1 John 4:2-3).

However, it is a fallacy to conclude from this that Paul is indeed writing in response to such a Gnostic or Gnostic-like heresy. Just because something could be true does not mean that it is true. And it is absurd to suggest that one cannot understand what Paul is saying without acknowledging this Gnostic or Gnostic-like heresy as the letter's background or occasion. Truth is not generated by and does not depend on falsehood. Christ is "the image of the invisible God," and can be described and understood as such, whether or not anyone denies it. It is true that he redeemed believers "by [his] physical body through death" – a doctrine that can be preached and believed – whether or not there is a heresy that regards matter as evil.

All the heresies in the world cannot force God to reveal anything to us that he does not wish to reveal. And if he wishes to communicate something to us, he does not need heresies to arrange the context for the revelation, although he can use and has used them as occasions to disclose and implement truth. The point is that truth can be revealed and learned apart from the background of falsehood and deception. God is before Satan – he does not need the devil to give him identity and purpose. Likewise, truth is before falsehood – it does not need heresy to give it context and meaning. And even if some teachings were at first declared and expounded against such a background, if they were presented in positive and substantial form, then they can be understood even without this original context. Christ is the image of God, creator and sustainer of all things, the head of the church, and redeemer of all who believe, no matter what. In fact, it is when we understand the nature and the work of Christ apart from any heresy that we are able to apply the true doctrine against any heresy.

That said, this is indeed a remarkable passage on christology. As mentioned, the reason is not that it presents a high view of Christ, since it is impossible to present a higher view of Christ than any other passage that affirms his deity. Rather, its significance rests in the details that it provides about the nature and the work of Christ. But before we proceed in that direction, we must say something about Christianity as a system of thought.

Christianity is a complete and coherent belief system; it addresses every category of thought, living, and reality – often in explicit terms, but at least in principle or by implication. Putting this in terms suited to our purpose, Christianity is system of thought summarized and contained in a series of doctrines that are arranged and considered in what we call systematic theology.

These doctrines are biblically and logically related such that any topic can be, and often must be, discussed in relation to other topics. In fact, one way for a believer to comprehend truth and to guard against error is to do precisely that – that is, to learn each biblical doctrine itself as well as its relation to all other doctrines. Then, since they are related in such a manner that the central principles necessitate or authenticate all the others, and that all of them affirm or justify one another, as a result of grasping these doctrines *as a system*, each one gains greater depth and security in the Christian's thinking. When placed in the context of a system, the understanding of one doctrine enhances and fortifies the understanding of all others. And there is a similar benefit when Christianity is advanced and defended as a system (Acts 17:22-31).

Therefore, systematic theology is paramount – not just beneficial, but essential and necessary – to spiritual development and church operation. Of course, it is just a formal term to denote a comprehensive, interrelated, and coherent understanding of biblical doctrines. Some theologians insist that Scripture contains logical paradoxes and apparent contradictions. We must condemn this as satanic, and purge this stubborn wickedness from our churches. They further insist that when Scripture affirms both sides of a contradiction, we must believe both of them. We must denounce this as moronic, and in fact, impossible.

This is because when one proposition is said to contradict another, by definition it means that to affirm one is to deny the other. So to affirm both sides of a contradiction is to deny both sides in reverse order. That is, if X contradicts Y, then to affirm both X and Y is to deny Y and X. The person who claims to affirm both sides of a contradiction either believes one and lies about the other, or he believes neither. His pretense about affirming scriptural teachings in the face of opposition and ridicule amounts to nothing, since he is in a manner an even greater enemy of the truth.

The teaching that there are contradictions in the Bible (even if only apparent ones that we cannot resolve in this life), and that we should affirm these contradictions, has done incalculable damage to the cause of Christ. It has sown the seed of rebellion against God and disdain for his revelation, and the evil harvest has plunged Christian theology into generations of disrepute. In false reverence, these believers say, "Only God can reconcile what our finite minds perceive as contradictions." But in reality they boast, "We declare as contradictory what he declares as clear and coherent revelation."

Scripture never admits to containing actual or apparent contradictions, and all alleged self-contradictions have been demonstrated as false and slanderous. How great is the mercy of God, and how deep is his patience, that he does not right away smite those who blaspheme his word! They perform the sacrilege in his house and in his name, as if doing him a service, and persecute those who oppose them. But "God is not mocked. A man reaps what he sows"

(Galatians 6:7). When theologians fornicate with the devil in God's own bed, divine judgment will not forever tarry. There is a time when they will both be cast into the outer darkness. In contrast, we insist against the combined force of all contrary tradition and authority that the Bible is actually and apparently – and obviously – self-consistent. Let those who dissent be anathema.

As we keep in mind the importance of understanding Christianity as a comprehensive and self-consistent system, we perceive that our passage refers or alludes to all the major topics covered in a course of systematic theology, with Christ as the central motif and unifying principle of the doctrines.

Christology is presented and emphasized, including the deity of Christ before and at the creation of the universe, and the humanity of Christ in the incarnation and atonement. As it sets forth a broad and coherent christology, the passage also relates to it epistemology (revelation), theology proper (God, Trinity, creation, providence), angelology and demonology (angels, demons, powers), anthropology (man), harmatiology (sin), soteriology (reconciliation, atonement, resurrection, conversion, faith, perseverance), ecclesiology (the nature, structure, and mission of the church), and eschatology (glorification, judgment, heaven, hell). Berkhof calls this order of presentation the synthetic method.[17] Contrary to those who complain that it is artificial and extra-biblical, it is the correct arrangement. It is comprehensive and logical, and Paul uses almost the same outline in his speech on Mars Hill in Acts 17.[18] This is in fact *the* biblical-logical outline for systematic theology, and there is nothing wrong with calling this simply the *systematic* method.

These doctrines cannot be fully expressed and developed within several statements, but the passage alludes to all of them, and suggests how each one is related to the biblical doctrine regarding the nature and work of Christ. Nevertheless, since they are not developed in the passage, and since the central motif of the passage is christology, instead of adopting the synthetic approach as the main outline, a superior approach, loosely derived from the passage itself, is to structure the discussion as follows: Christ the Revealer, Christ the Creator, Christ the Sustainer, and Christ the Redeemer. This approach is also more fitting for the preacher to expound the passage in a sermon. Moreover, the systematic outline readily fits into this christological structure.

First, Christ the Revealer. Verse 15 says, "He is the image of the invisible God." This tells us something about the ontology of Christ, that he is the very image of the Father, the exact expression of deity. That he is "the firstborn over all creation" is based on and related to this. But the passage refers to Christ the incarnate Son of God, and not only as the second member of the Trinity apart from the incarnation (also 2 Corinthians 4:4). He is also said to be the image of the *invisible* God, suggesting that the "image" here does not denote only his ontological status, but also his revelatory function as the incarnate one.

[17] Louis Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1932), p. 74-75.
[18] See Vincent Cheung, *Presuppositional Confrontations*.

As John writes, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (John 1:18). Or as Calvin says when he comments on our passage, "For Christ is the image of God because He makes God in a manner visible to us….For in Christ He shows us His righteousness, goodness, wisdom, power, in short, His entire self. We must, therefore, take care not to seek Him elsewhere; for outside of Christ, everything that claims to represent God will be an idol."[19] Thus the phrase, "image of the invisible God," refers to the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, as revelation or as revelatory.

Now, in what sense is Christ a revelation of God? How does he reveal God? And what do we mean by "reveal" or "revelation"? It is often said, "The incarnation is the greatest revelation of God." The language suggests that the incarnation *in itself* is a revelation. Does the Bible say this? In what sense is the statement true, if it is true at all? Another popular statement that seems to make the same point in a less formal way is, "If you want to know what God is like, just look at Jesus." Variations abound when it comes to the first part of the statement, but the key phrase is the second part: "Just *look at* Jesus." Again, is this what the Bible teaches? And what does it mean to "look at" Jesus? Is the meaning totally visual, as in to "stare at" Jesus without thinking about him or even listening to him? Is the meaning only empirical in part, as in to "observe and consider"? Or, is it even non-empirical, requiring no empirical contact with Jesus at all? If it is so important to "look at" Jesus, and if to "look at" him can do so much for us, we should at least know what it means.

Then, in the study of theology, Christ is often said to be *the* supreme special revelation. He is often referred to as a revelation apart from and superior to Scripture. I am all for saying pious things about Christ, but such a theological position is misleading, if not outright false. Should we say that Christ *is* a superior revelation *to* Scripture, or that Christ *gives* a superior revelation *in* Scripture? The former translates into the nonsensical position that God is apart from and greater than his own mind – that is, unless we reject the inspiration of Scripture. But then we run into the problem of having an uninspired testimony to a supposedly greater revelation. The former would place an insurmountable restriction on our knowledge of the latter.

Once we have affirmed and defended the position that Scripture is the very word of God, nothing can be a higher revelation, for the inspired word would by definition be equal to any revelation that comes from Christ, and God cannot be higher than himself. Even the continuous and direct revelation of God that we will receive in heaven can only be fuller, and not superior in the sense of being more authentic or authoritative. Scripture is either his word or it is not, and if it is his word, then it is as much truth and life here as any revelation will be in heaven. God can offer a revelation that is fuller than what he has provided in Scripture, but by definition he cannot offer a revelation that is greater.

In any case, some theologians have an inordinate obsession to make the *person* of Christ a revelation, and to assert that he *is* a revelation. Again, such language appears pious to many

[19] John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians Philippians and Colossians*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 308.

people, but it is ambiguous, and possibly meaningless. In what sense is Christ's *person* a revelation? What does it mean to say that Christ *is* the greatest revelation? Those rare attempts at actually explaining this language fail to present the revelation in a way that is consistent with its alleged nature – not that the person *gives* the revelation, but that the person *is* the revelation. That is, if every attempt at explaining and defending the idea that the person *is* the revelation is unintelligible, or if it amounts to saying that the person *gives* the revelation, then the idea that the person *is* the revelation remains unjustified, and shall we say, incomprehensible.

In what sense, then, is Christ a revelation of God? Or, in what way does Christ reveal God? Before we proceed to the true doctrine, we will address two false answers.

First, we must deny that Christ is a revelation of God in the sense that by his incarnation he has made himself perceptible to human sensation. He has indeed taken upon himself a human body that is perceptible to human sensation, and his resurrected body now remains perceptible to the senses, but this is not why he is a revelation of God. Even a manifestation or an incarnation of God does not make God *as such* perceptible to the senses, for God is spirit and not flesh. When we say, "If you want to know what God is like, just *look at* Jesus," we must not mean that a person can learn about God just by looking at the physical appearance of Jesus, or just by staring at him without thinking about him or listening to him.

As Isaiah writes, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2). He has a genuine human body, not essentially different from that of any other human body, so that it is impossible to know that Jesus Christ is God, or to learn anything special about God, just by looking at his physical appearance. We must insist on this in order to maintain the true doctrine of the incarnation.

Although Peter have followed and perceived Jesus in the flesh, when he confesses, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16), Jesus replies, "This was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (v. 17). He says in John's Gospel, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44) and "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him" (v. 65). Although Jesus came to reveal the Father, no one could recognize Jesus unless the Father reveals him. Then, in Luke 10:22, we read, "No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Another problem with the idea that we should "look at" Christ in the physical and empirical sense is that, since he has been raised and seated at the right hand of God, we can no longer perceive his physical body unless he chooses to grant a special appearance. There is no biblical warrant to assume that he does not do this today, but he certainly does not appear to every person whom he converts to the faith. In fact, except for the apostles and a significant number of other disciples, he did not appear to the rest of the early believers, who believed not because they saw Christ, but because they believed the testimony of the

disciples about Christ. This same testimony about Christ is recorded for us in Scripture, and it is by believing the Scripture that we become Christians.

Those attempts at showing from the Bible that some kind or degree of an empirical epistemology is compatible with or even necessary to a spiritual knowledge of God and of Christ are based on invalid and distorted interpretations of Scripture. One example comes from 1 John 1:1-3, which says:

> That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

It is impossible to smuggle empiricism into Scripture through this passage. First – but this is not the main reason – as we have mentioned, if a spiritual knowledge of Christ is gained by touching him and seeing him, then those who have not seen him or touched him cannot possess the same kind or amount of knowledge. This is against the entire spirit of the New Testament. The same apostle who penned this passage records Christ as saying, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29; also 1 Peter 1:8-9).

Those who have not seen Christ in the empirical sense are not necessarily at a disadvantage, but how often do theologians, commentators, and preachers suggest that those who perceived Christ with their senses were indeed more blessed! They speak thus because of a pagan and carnal mindset that is driven toward that which is of the flesh and of the senses, rather than that which is of the spirit, or the mind. This crippling moral defect underlies the insistence to include a kind or degree of empiricism in the Christian's epistemology.

Pseudo-presuppositionalism is the most absurd and deceptive of the various proposals. It pretends to uphold revelation as the first principle and necessary precondition of all knowledge, but in reality it subjugates God's word, God's Spirit, and the Bible, under physical sensations. This strange philosophy, revered by many in Reformed circles, is a disguised form of empiricism or irrationalism, a syncretistic epistemology that combines heathen and biblical ideas. In making anti-Christian principles the precondition of Christian revelation, it does the opposite of what it claims to accomplish. Contrary to its pretension, it makes empirical humanity rather than the "ontological Trinity" the presupposition of all knowledge.

From the theological perspective, then, it is a form of idolatry and blasphemy. It would bow to Christ only if he would first bow to Belial. In contrast, we affirm that divine revelation does not depend on human sensation, whether in its inspiration, formation, reception, or propagation. From a philosophical perspective, although it makes a show of

confronting the presuppositions of evidentialism, pseudo-presuppositionalism makes human sensation the necessary doorway to divine revelation, so that it is in fact nothing more than evidentialism without evidences. When it comes to defending the faith, it is irrational and impotent. It survives because of its fundamental agreement with and surrender to anti-Christian principles – non-Christians do not oppose their own assumptions – and because of the even more severe irrationalism and impotence of the unbelievers.

Our direct answer to the distortion of 1 John 1:1-4, however, is that it does not permit an interpretation that favors empiricism. John writes that he has seen, heard, and touched (what he has come to know as) the Word of life. He does not say that he has come to recognize Christ as the Word of life *because* he has seen, heard, and touched him, or that it was necessary for him to have seen, heard, and touched Christ in order for him to recognize Christ as such. What is needed to endorse empiricism is simply absent from the passage.

Of course John has seen, heard, and touched Christ, but as we have already shown from Scripture, he could recognize the Christ only because the Father revealed this to him. The significance of the passage, then, is not an endorsement of any form or degree of empiricism, but the emphasis that Christ indeed walked the earth in a human body (4:1-3), in which he died, and was raised, and made atonement for the forgiveness of sins (1:7, 9). The emphasis is not on the empirical, but on the physical and the historical. Christ's incarnation entails a physical body and historical events, so that he could be seen, heard, and touched, although no knowledge and revelation can come from the sensations. Here John testifies to only *what it was* that he saw, heard, and touched, and not that he received any knowledge or revelation from the seeing, hearing, and touching.

Second, we must deny that Christ is a revelation of God in the sense that his miracles and actions *as such* reveal God or make God's characteristics evident or accessible to human observation. The biblical reason is that Scripture never teaches that Christ's miracles and actions *in themselves* accomplish the purpose of revelation. The logical reason is that it is impossible to validly infer any truth from observation. Moses performed great miracles, but he was not God. Many men have lived holy lives, but they could not claim, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Since I have already explained this numerous times in other places, here we will consider only two short illustrations from Scripture.

Hebrews 2:1-4 indicates that "the message" is "confirmed" by "signs, wonders and various miracles." God's revelation is not *carried* or *conveyed* by miracles, but merely *confirmed* by them. In fact, in themselves the miracles cannot even tell people that they serve as confirmation to a message, so that sometimes people have to be told to look to them as confirmation (Matthew 14:4-5; John 10:25, 38, 14:11). In other words, the miracles do not speak for themselves or for the message, but it is the message that speaks for itself and for the miracles, pointing to them as its confirmation.

If miracles can "speak" for themselves, then there would be no need to refer to them as confirmation or even to mention them, for a person would only need to do another miracle to speak for the first miracle if the first fails to communicate the point. It would suffice to simply keep on doing miracles in silence. But the truth is that miracles in themselves cannot "speak" at all. The biblical pattern is that the miracles confirm the message, but it is the message that explains and interprets the miracles. To put this another way, the miracles are meaningful and serve their purpose only because they occur within the context of a message, and are thus properly related to it.

Then, in John 13, Jesus sets an example for the disciples by washing their feet (v. 15, "I have set you an example"), but they did not understand until it was explained to them (v. 7, "You do not realize now what I am doing"). Thus even a deliberate moral example cannot speak for itself. It is not in itself a revelation, but it serves only as a context and occasion for the revelation, which resides in the verbal explanation of the action (v. 12-17).

Moreover, Jesus was readily exposed to the human senses only during his short time on the earth, and even then not every person living at the time saw him. So it is impossible to "look at" the moral example of Jesus in his action, but only in the words that record and interpret his actions. This again indicates that either the revelation was made available to a few people in the past, and it is no longer possible to "look at" him to benefit from the revelation, or the revelation was never necessarily inherent in the actions themselves in the first place.

For the true doctrine, we will begin with John 14:6-9. The teaching that we should "look at" Jesus in order to learn about God was most likely derived from this passage.

> Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."
>
> Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."
>
> Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

Jesus says to the disciples, "You *have seen* the Father." Philip says, "*Show us* the Father." And Jesus replies, "I have been with you so long, and you still do not know me? If you have *seen* me, you have *seen* the Father." From this some have derived the teaching, "If you want to know what God (the Father) is like, just *look at* Jesus." The ambiguous and improper repetition of this statement, which has become a Christian cliché, has led to some strange and false ideas about Christ as the revelation of God. So now our aim is to consider what we ought to mean when we say that we should "look at" Jesus.

Right away, *even if* – I do not say that this is the correct view – we interpret the "seeing" in these verses as referring to the empirical, to physical sight, the passage compels us to

conclude that this way of "seeing" Jesus carries no necessary relationship with "knowing" Jesus. He says that if Philip knows him, then Philip would realize that to see him is to see the Father, so that because he has indeed seen Jesus, he has already seen the Father as well. However, Philip does not know this until Jesus tells him about it, for until this time he remains oblivious.

Therefore, even without reading further, the passage itself teaches that you can see Jesus and not know Jesus, and if you see Jesus and not know Jesus, then you will not know that to see him is to see the Father. And if you do not know Jesus so that you do not know that to see Jesus is to see the Father, then you can see Jesus and still not see or know the Father. At this point we can already be certain that the "seeing" here does not refer to the mere sensation of sight, but rather to a spiritual-intellectual perception. Even for his immediate disciples, it is the verbal explanation of all of this that removes the obscurity (John 16:25-31). The rest of this large section, John 14-17, will reinforce and extend this position.

John 14:10-11 comes right after the above passage (14:6-9), and provides an explanation: "Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? *The words I say* to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me *when I say* that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves." Jesus says, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father," because *the words* that he speaks come from the Father, and not because he *looks like* the Father, since God is spirit, and has no visible form. His words bear the exact message that the Father's words would bear, since his words come from the Father, and are the Father's words. It is in this sense that, if anyone has "seen" Jesus, he has seen the Father. And note again that even if one believes on account of the miracles, it is still the message that he believes, since the miracles themselves merely confirm rather than carry or convey the message.

John 14:16-19 says that believers can "see" the Holy Spirit, and that they will continue to "see" Jesus even after his death. Even if we assume that to "see" Jesus after his death refers to his post-resurrection appearances, to "see" the Holy Spirit certainly cannot be explained in empirical terms. Jesus says, "The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him." He is speaking of "seeing" the Spirit in a sense that is possible for believers but impossible for unbelievers, but unbelievers can indeed see the Spirit's outward manifestations, such as the miracles performed through the disciples. This means that Jesus is not referring to seeing the Spirit in the empirical sense, but believers can see him in terms of a spiritual-intellectual apprehension.

A disciple asks in John 14:22, "But, Lord, why do you intend to *show yourself* to us and not to the world?" Jesus then refers to his "teaching" (v. 23) and says, "*These words* you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. All this *I have spoken* while still with you" (v. 24-25). Again, to "show" himself and the Father has to do with words, or intellectual content, and not appearance or something that can be "looked at" in the visual or empirical sense. Verse 26 says that the Holy Spirit will remind them of everything that Jesus "said" to them – not the sound of the words, of course, but the meaning conveyed by

words – and not what he looks like or the visual images of his miracles and righteous actions.

Jesus says in John 15:16, "Everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" – as we have seen, not by letting them look at him, but by conveying intellectual content to them through speech. Verse 22 says that because he has "come and spoken to them," non-Christians "have no excuse for their sin." The "coming" here refers to the incarnation, and the "speaking" refers to the revelation of God, his will, and his righteousness. The world does not reject the "coming" *as such*, but the "speaking" of the one who has come. There is a difference. That the "speaking" is from the one who has come from heaven, of course, makes the rejection of the spoken message all the more deserving of condemnation.

Verse 24 indeed makes a parallel statement regarding his miracles, but we have already addressed this. That is, the miracles are intelligible only because they occur within the context of and in association with a message. They are to confirm and not to carry or convey the spiritual-intellectual content that confronts the minds of men. Also recall the illustration taken from John 13, where Jesus washes his disciples feet, an example that they do not understand until it is explained to them. The example serves the message; it does not stand by itself.

Then, as Jesus explains the work of the Holy Spirit in John 16, he does not say that the Spirit's revelation consists of a feeling, or an impression, or some sort of visual representation through which we can "see" Jesus. Rather, the Spirit reveals truth by speaking: "He will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only when he hears" (v. 13). All that the Father has belongs to Christ, and the Spirit takes from what is Christ's and makes it known to the disciples (v. 14-15). And he does so by "speaking," by imparting intellectual content that is conveyed and represented by words. It is in this manner that Christ's teaching work continues, not by something inherent in his physical incarnation, but by speaking to his disciples in intelligible speech through the Holy Spirit (v. 25-30).

John 17 makes a transition so that Jesus turns from teaching his disciples to addressing God the Father in prayer. We read in verses 6-8, "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me." He *does not* say, "I have revealed you by being born as a man, by walking around on the earth, and by letting them look at me." But he says, "I have revealed you" – how? – "For I gave them the words you gave me." He says again in verse 14, "I have given them your word." Verse 20 indicates that these disciples will continue this work of revelation when others believe "through their message" (not their appearance or example).

The above defines how we should understand a verse like John 1:18, and all similar statements: "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's

side, has made him known." How did Jesus make known the invisible Father? He did not do it by taking up a human body just so he could become visible and be looked at. He did it by using words to tell people about the Father. Corresponding to this, when Jesus was baptized in water and the Holy Spirit came upon him, the Father thundered, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5). He *did not* say, "This is my Son, take a good look at him!"

All of this is consistent with Hebrews 1:1-2, which says, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe." The passage *does not* say, "God spoke through his prophets in the past, but now he has revealed himself through the incarnation of the Son." And contrary to yet another Christian cliché, it *does not* say, "The prophets spoke God's *words*, but Christ was God's *Word*." It does not make the incarnation a superior revelation to verbal revelation, if the incarnation is a revelation in itself at all. As we have seen, the truth is that for *the Word* to reveal God, he must speak *words* just like the prophets did. To contrast Christ against the Scripture, or the words of the prophets, is a theologically devastating error. It is also blasphemous because, since God cannot be higher than himself, to make Christ essentially superior to the Scripture as a revelation, one must deny the divine inspiration of Scripture, that is, to call God himself uninspired.

By now we have established that to "see" Christ is to perceive his message, a message that he received from his Father and delivered to his disciples. Under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, the disciples then continued to transmit this message. It is by receiving this same message that we can still "see" Christ today, and to see him is to see the Father also, since the Father is the source of this message, this revelation, and the whole system of Christian revelation. It is in this way that the invisible God is made, in a manner, visible.

Christ indeed brings a fuller revelation, but it is not in the incarnation as such, but in words spoken *by* and spoken *about* the incarnate Son of God, as they are recorded in the New Testament. If we want to know God, we should indeed "look at" Jesus, for to see him is to see the Father. But all this means is that we should read the words spoken by Jesus, and the words spoken about Jesus.

In addition to dispelling the false piety that often accompanies the common expressions, there are significant advantages to the above explanation. First, it sets forth the true biblical teaching, and this reason alone is sufficient for us to affirm it. Second, now that we understand what it means to "look at" Jesus, we can actually do it and reap the benefits. Third, now we can "show" Jesus to other people, so that they also can "look at" him. We show them Jesus, and thus also the Father, with words – that is, just by telling them about Jesus. The knowledge of God is not something mystical or nebulous, and in the sense that it has been revealed, it is not even mysterious. God sent his Son, an exact representation and a perfect messenger, to talk to us. This incarnation of deity performed many miracles and righteous deeds, and these are also recorded for us in the words written about him.

Through these words we have a clear perception of both the Father and the Son – we "see" them – as the Spirit grants us understanding.

Now, Christ the Creator. The passage relates christology to every other major doctrine in Scripture. We have considered the doctrine of Christ in relation to the doctrine of revelation, and now we will consider the doctrine of Christ in relation to the doctrine of God, as well as other topics that sometimes fall under this heading or are closely associated with it, such as creation, angelology, and demonology. In other words, at this point, we proceed from epistemology to ontology, or metaphysics.

The deity of Christ is indicated at the outset by the same statement that stresses his revelatory function: "He is the image of the invisible God." In fact, he is able to reveal God in a complete and perfect manner because he himself is deity. He is the exact representation, or image, of deity because he *is* deity. Verse 19 says that all divine fullness dwells in him. His ontological status is the basis of his revelatory power. His own explanation is that he is able to tell us about God because he has been with God from the beginning, and has "seen" and "heard" the things of heaven. Again, these terms cannot denote empirical sensations, but a spiritual-intellectual apprehension. In any case, epistemology and metaphysics must be consistent with each other in a system of thought, as it is in the Christian religion.

As with many other biblical passages, although Scripture describes Christ in a way that he cannot be anything other than deity, and sometimes applies to him the word "God," its language often makes a distinction between Christ and "God." That is, although Scripture asserts the deity of Christ, it does not portray him as identical in every way to the person that it often designates as "God." This is consistent with and explained by the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are all deity, equal in every way in terms of their divine attributes, but the word "God" is most often used to refer to the Father.

Since Christ is the *exact* image of the Father, then of course he is God. But since he is an *image* of the Father, then even though he is God, as in divine, he is not identical to the Father. Adding to this what Scripture teaches about the Holy Spirit, the biblical doctrine is that the Godhead is one and triune. This is not a contradiction, and there is not even a hint of paradox in it, since he is one in one sense, and three in a different sense. Our passage does not offer the complete doctrine on this, but it assumes and applies it throughout its discussion on christology.

The second part of verse 15 says that Christ is "the firstborn over all creation." This does not mean that he was born first or the first to be created. Scripture indicates in other places that he is not a creature, but that he has always been with God. And here it does not say, "He is the firstborn over all creation, the first to be created"; instead, it says, "He is the firstborn over all creation, for by him all things were created."

The word "firstborn" can indeed indicate a temporal priority, as in one who is born first, but it can also indicate a hierarchical priority, as in the superior rights of the firstborn.

These two meanings do not bear a necessary relationship, so that it is possible to have one without the other. As one commentator writes:

> In Exodus 4:22 God says, "Israel is my firstborn." There was no secondborn. Literally and physically Israel was the secondborn and Esau was the first. Hence the meaning is not temporal priority but the legal rights of the boy whose father designates him as the head of the family. Exodus 4:22 refers to God's choosing a nation. Even though the next verse has the literal meaning, as God threatens to kill Pharoah's firstborn son, the position of Israel as a nation is not one of temporal priority, but one of favor and privilege. Psalm 89:27 records the Lord's promise to or about David: "I will make him my firstborn, the highest of the Kings of the earth." Obviously this refers to office and dominion; not to any temporal priority, for David was neither the eldest child in his family, and all the more clearly he was not the first king who ever ruled on earth.[20]

The fact that Christ is God, or deity, already means that he cannot be a creature, and that "firstborn" here cannot refer to the temporal priority of a creature. The passage itself speaks of Christ as a creator and not a creature, and stresses his "supremacy" over all things (v. 18). Thus the word "firstborn" is to be taken as a reference to rank and status.

Then, verse 16 says, "For by him all things were created…all things were created by him and for him." The doctrine of creation, as it is related to Christ, reinforces Scripture's insistence on his deity. This is because it attributes the ability and accomplishment of creation to God alone, and at the same time it says that all things were created by Christ, and therefore Christ must be God: "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:3).

Paul's purpose is to emphasize Christ's "supremacy" (v. 18), and so in this context the doctrine of creation suggests the supremacy of Christ over all things. That is, he is greater than all things because he is the creator of all things. He is the firstborn over all creation because of who he is and what he did. This is said in relation to him not only as the second person of the Trinity in eternity, but the apostle stresses his supremacy *as Christ*, or as the incarnate Son of God. This is the Jesus who walked the earth, preached to the people, who died on the cross, and was raised from the dead (v. 22). He is the creator of all things, and he has supremacy over all things.

Although this might be the main reason for the apostle's mention of creation in this passage, the doctrine does more than to reinforce Christ's divinity and supremacy. The manner that it is asserted informs us about the creation itself, such as the purpose, the nature, and the content of creation. By "purpose" we mean the reason for which Christ created all things. By "nature" we refer to the general manners in which these created things exist. And by "content" we refer to the actual objects that have been created.

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[20] Gordon H. Clark, *Colossians* (Trinity Foundation, 1989), p. 36-37.

Regarding the purpose of creation, verse 16 says that "all things were created…for him." Although we may call attention to some secondary purposes for creation that are legitimate to mention when speaking relative to non-ultimate reference points, the primary and ultimate purpose of creation is for God himself. As with all biblical teachings, the doctrine of creation is God-centered. Any formulation of a doctrine of creation that is not God-centered must be false. For example, it is against the entire spirit of divine revelation to suggest in any way that the purpose of creation terminates on the development and the salvation of mankind. These are at best secondary purposes that serve the primary, God-centered, purpose of creation.

This controlling theological principle produces clear implications for Christian doctrines and practices.

First, the God-centered principle defines true religion. For example, it requires a supralapsarian approach to the order of the eternal decrees. This is the biblical and rational order. Infralapsarianism confuses logical conception with historical execution, so that not only is it contrary to fact, but it makes nonsense of some of the divine decrees. For any given decree, it leaves the purpose of the decree unspecified until the next decree. But then, of course, there is no reason for the present one, so that it becomes arbitrary. Thus infralapsarianism is blasphemous by implication, since it insults God's intelligence and rationality.

Infralapsarians retort that supralapsarianism undermines God's justice, but to assert this they smuggle in a private and unbiblical standard of justice, one that rejects God's absolute sovereignty and violates strict logical inference, and then evaluate the eternal decrees by it. Their attempt to defend God's subservience to a human standard of justice turns out to be a subversion against his sovereign and divine justice, and a denial of even a simple ability for logical planning and arrangement in the mind of God. Hence their objection commits another act of blasphemy, although again, by implication and not necessarily by intention.

Berkhof, in explaining some of the objections against supralapsarianism, writes, "Notwithstanding its seeming pretensions, it does not give a solution of the problem of sin. It would do this, if it dared to say that God decreed to bring sin into the world *by His own direct efficiency*."[21] But I dare say this. In fact, I dare not deny it, since if I do, I would be saying that some other power has the ability to generate and control sin by its own "direct efficiency." Handing over divine power to humans and demons, this is the heresy and blasphemy of dualism. Berkhof continues, "Some Supralapsarians, it is true, do represent the decree as the efficient cause of sin, but yet do not want this to be interpreted in such a way that God becomes the author of sin."[22] But I do affirm that God is the sovereign and righteous author of sin, for the same reason that I just stated. To deny that God is the author of sin would produce some form of dualism, which amounts to a rejection of biblical theism.[23]

[21] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 121.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Vincent Cheung, *The Author of Sin*.

Then, another objection goes, "It is pointed out that the supralapsarian scheme is illogical in that it makes the decree of election and preterition refer to non-entities, that is, to men who do not exist, except as bare possibilities, even in the mind of God; who do not yet exist in the divine decree and are therefore not contemplated as created, but only as creatable."[24] This is a perplexingly stupid objection. In a logical arrangement, the final purpose is first conceived, and then each succeeding decree is made to accomplish the one that comes before. Thus of course the decree that concerns the creation of man would be preceded by a decree that requires the creation of man to accomplish but still represents man as bare possibilities. The objection fails to grasp the reasoning of supralapsarianism, and amounts to saying that supralapsarianism is wrong because it is not infralapsarianism.

As with many other related controversies, the real question in this disagreement between supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism is whether we are willing to "let" God be God *on his own terms*.[25] A *consistent* supralapsarianism is the only position that honors God, Scripture, and reason on this matter. And it is the only God-centered position.

Second, the God-centered principle explains and directs proper worship. Some people wonder if it is right for God to require worship, for is it not selfish and self-exalting? Would we not question the character, if not also the sanity, of any man who demands the same thing? But God is not a man. This objection assumes that either God is not as exalted as he is, or we are not as abased as we are. Among other things, to worship is to ascribe honor to the one most worthy of it. Since this person is God, it is ethically appropriate and necessary for man to worship him. And by the same principle, it is also appropriate and necessary for God to ascribe honor to himself. He does what is right when he exalts himself and demands his creatures to do the same, since he is the one who is most worthy of honor and praise.

What frustrates man-centered religion is that God refuses to worship his creatures or to allow them to worship themselves. This explains why greed is idolatry even when it is not explicitly religious (Colossians 3:5). All self-centered or man-centered thinking and living, or to honor any object, person, or ideal in a manner that ought to be reserved for God alone, is idolatry. Since all things were created for him, to place anything other than God in the highest place in our thinking and living is to go against the very purpose of creation. It is unethical and destructive. It is the reason for all present human misery, and the basis for future divine judgment.

We must note as well, that when the passage says "all things were created…for him," it is referring to Christ – all things were created for Christ, the Christ of the Christian Trinity, so that worship is not ascribed to any deity conceived by non-Christian religions. Rather, they are in the same position as any self-centered and man-centered system. And so all non-Christian thoughts and religions are idolatrous, because they refuse to honor the true God. The failure to consistently employ our principle, that creation is first "for him" and not for man, betrays a breakdown in both the intellect and character of man.

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[24] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 123.

[25] Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*, *Commentary on Ephesians*, and *The Author of Sin*. Also, Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1998), p. 479-502.

As for the nature of created things, again, we refer to the general manners in which they exist. Scripture teaches that God created persons and objects, mind and matter, spirits and bodies, things in heaven and things on earth, the invisible and the visible. From one perspective, these are various ways to distinguish the spiritual and the physical.

Thus when it comes to this question of the nature of created things, the Bible teaches a dualism. Here the word is used in a different sense than before, when we were discussing the sovereignty of God and the order of the eternal decrees. In the context of metaphysical causation, dualism refers to at least two supreme powers that create and sustain the objects and operations in the universe. This is the heresy that results from the attempt to metaphysically distance God from the creation and continuation of evil.

However, when it comes to the nature of created things, we are using the same word to refer to a different distinction, namely, that the universe consists of spiritual and material objects. Some objects possess both a spiritual aspect and a material aspect. For example, the Bible presents man as a spirit and a body. But here it also teaches a dualism – that is, the spirit *is* the man, who lives in a body. We may neutralize the rhetoric of objectors by absorbing their pejorative phrase – man is indeed "a ghost in a machine."

One trend in theology denies that man is essentially a duality, but claims that Scripture insists that man is a unity. Their use of the biblical evidence is misleading. Of course it is appropriate to refer to both the spirit and the body together as "man," as a unity, in ordinary discourse, when the topic is not about the nature of man. The question is whether the Bible makes the distinction when it addresses the topic, or when the truth about the topic must be assumed as it addresses something else. And we find that it consistently makes such a distinction, so that a disembodied person is still the same person, but the corpse of that person is not the person.

It is sometimes alleged that dualism is the "Greek" view of man, at times adding that such a view is anti-biblical because it assumes that matter is essentially evil. Such an objection is foolish and unproductive. I could not care less about what the Greek view is; rather, does or does not the Bible teach dualism when it comes to the nature of man, and that a person retains his personhood without his body? Since it does, and assumes this everywhere, our conclusion is that if this is the "Greek" view, then the Greeks were more biblical than these Christians who deny this position.

Also, one can hold to this position without thinking that matter is essentially evil. Just because matter is not evil in itself does not mean that it has to be a necessary part of a human person. These are two separate issues. There is no conflict between dualism and the biblical teachings that the deeds of the body are morally significant, that the bodies of believers form the temple of the Holy Spirit, and that there is a future physical resurrection, in which our bodies will be raised and changed. All these doctrines can be affirmed without also affirming that the body is an essential part of the human person.

The biblical doctrine of creation entails the creation of spirit and matter, and that not from preexisting substances, but by the bare power of God. All of creation – anything that exists that is not God – was conceived by divine intelligence and generated by divine ability. These propositions carry obvious implications for theology, philosophy, and science. Any theory of reality must be false that denies the spiritual world or the distinction between spirit and matter. Any method of investigation begs the question that begins from the assumption that the universe consists of matter alone. And since matter was created by God, material objects were not evolved from matter that already existed.

The duality of creation frames our discussion on the content of creation. By content, we refer to the specific objects or categories of objects that have been created. Since Paul divides these into "things in heaven and on earth" and the "visible and invisible," we will also divide our discussion into the heavenly or the invisible, and the earthly or the visible. Of course, here we cannot list all the objects or categories of objects in creation, but we can state what kinds of things would be included.

For example, heaven itself would fall under the category of invisible things. Creatures such as angels and demons would be invisible things that possess intelligence. However, this just means that they are usually invisible, since they can assume visible forms at times. The visible would include things like water, rocks, plant life, and the animals. Humans would usually fall under the category of visible things, but keep in mind that they also possess intelligence, and because of their dualistic nature, there is a spiritual and invisible aspect to them.

Here we will direct our attention only to those things that possess intelligence and are the most theologically significant, as well as the most relevant to Paul's letter. As indicated, they are angels, demons, and humans. Even with this narrower focus, it would be impossible to address these three items in a comprehensive fashion. So we will have to select some aspects of each topic for our discussion.

Angels belong to a class of strong, intelligent, and holy spiritual creatures who are in constant worship and service of God. In the study of angels, or angelology, we would consider their nature and purpose, their types and ranks, their relationship to God and to man. Part of what we can say about their purpose and relation to man is that they are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14). According to biblical examples, their service would include the direction, protection, provision, and vindication of God's people. They perform these tasks under the command of God, and not by their own decision.

There is a teaching that because angels are "ministering spirits" sent to serve us, believers are to speak to them, and command them to perform their desires or to fulfill the promises of God. However, this teaching finds no support in the biblical accounts of how God's people relate to angels. First, the angels are the ones who initiate interactions with humans; people cannot initiate contact with angels. Second, their activities are ordered by God's command, and not by his people's command. Angels serve the heirs of salvation in the

sense that they obey God's command to perform various tasks for our benefit. They are not our servants in the direct sense; rather, both angels and believers are God's servants.

If there is no biblical support for commanding angels to do our bidding, petitioning them to grant our desires is even more unbiblical and sacrilegious. In short, our conscious relation to angels is usually limited to an awareness that God commands them to serve the heirs of salvation, in the sense that they perform his will in the direction, protection, provision, and vindication of the believers. Their activities are almost always undetectable to us, but there is no biblical evidence to suggest that angelic appearances have ceased at the completion of the canon of Scripture, and the two in fact have no necessary relation to each other. Anyone who would insist that angels never appear to humans today do so by their tradition and prejudice.

That said, even if there is to be any verbal interaction with angels, we do not speak to them unless they first speak to us by God's command. And any such visitation must be tested by the word of God – not only by those who hear about it, but by the person encountering it even as it occurs. Since angels must obey the command of God, and the Bible is the word of God, they are subservient to the Bible in all their speech and conduct. Any being claiming to be an angel who distorts or disobeys Scripture is an imposter, and a spirit of deception. If an angel cannot satisfy me with sound logic, precise exegesis, and a consistent theology, he cannot be an angel, and I will have no obligation to follow what he says or to accept his message. If he comes from God, he will speak and obey the word of God, which is the Bible.

In our context, perhaps the most important point to make about angels is that Christ is the creator and sustainer of them all. He is not himself a mere angel, not even the chief of angels, but he is the God who made them, who sustains them, and who commands and controls them. Therefore, Christ has the supremacy over all angels. The implication for Christian doctrine and practice is that it is an act of idolatry to worship or to render excessive honor to them.

Demons, on the other hand, are strong, intelligent, but evil spirits that are in constant opposition against God, his purpose, and his people. Theologians are careful to note that demons were not created evil, but that they are fallen spirits. This is accurate as far as it goes, but when these theologians use it to distance God from the origin of evil, we must respond that their effort is unbiblical, irrational, and unnecessary.

Some recognize the fact that the sovereignty of God and the freedom of creatures are incompatible. But if the demons became evil by an autonomous self-determination, then this is dualism, and theism itself is overthrown. Distancing God from evil then becomes the least of our concerns. This is the position that all attempts at metaphysically distancing God from the origin of evil put us in – they destroy theism itself.

And then there are those who claim that the two are compatible. However, when the context has to do with the cause of an event relative to divine sovereignty, it is self-contradictory to say that a creature's change of nature from good to evil, or even a simple decision to

perform evil, is at the same time God-determined and self-determined. But this is the absurdity that results from trying to preserve both the sovereignty of God and the freedom of creatures. Since divine sovereignty is by definition an absolute and exhaustive control, the two are never compatible.

It is said that the self-determination refers not to a freedom from God, but to a person's ability to decide according to his own desires, and in a manner that is free from coercion. The subtle deception here is that "God-determined" and "self-determined" (or equivalent terms) are now used to address two different questions. The first term, "God-determined," specifies the metaphysical cause behind all events. So if the second term, "self-determined," refers to the metaphysical cause behind one's decision, it gives a contradictory answer to the same question. Also, it is dualism, which is blasphemy. On the other hand, if it addresses the event from a "lower" reference point, on the level of consciousness (desires, coercion, etc.) rather than metaphysics, then it has changed the question before answering it, which makes the answer deceptive and irrelevant.

Those who advocate compatibilism make much of the claim that the decisions of creatures are not "coerced," but this is again deceptive and irrelevant. Coercion is not a thing in itself – it is something that a person or object does to another. If it is said that a man is not coerced *by other creatures* in making his decision, then it is irrelevant because we are talking about *divine* sovereignty – the sovereignty *of God* relative to the decisions of creatures. But if it is said that man is not coerced *by God* in making his decision, then we must still ask why he is not coerced. If God exercises a genuinely absolute sovereignty, then the man is not coerced only because God so completely controls him, including all his desires and the principle that he will decide according to his desires, that there is no need for coercion – it simply does not apply.

God's sovereignty necessarily implies that he is the author of sin, that is, the metaphysical cause of it; otherwise, Satan and Adam could not have turned evil. Many theologians perceive this but refuse to follow through with it. And so they just call the entire question a "mystery," while the unbelievers rejoice in this hopeless inconsistency, and deride the Christian faith as if Scripture teaches this self-contradiction. God is the author of sin – it is blasphemy to say otherwise, for it would attribute the very power of God, of metaphysical causation, or of even creation itself, to demons and to men. Nevertheless, under God's control, the sinners are the ones who break his moral laws, and they are judged relative to these moral laws, not relative to the metaphysical cause behind their transgressions. There is no mystery or inconsistency here. The only hurdle is religious tradition that upholds the teachings of man rather than the word of God.

As for demonic activities and their place in human lives, unbelievers are children of the devil, and they are vulnerable to all kinds of demonic attacks and influences, resulting in lust, greed, rage, violence, insanity, and so on, but God's people are delivered from demonic powers through Jesus Christ. They can be tempted by the devil, just as Satan tempted Christ in the wilderness, and they can be assaulted by the devil's children, just as Christ suffered at the hands of the Jews and the Romans. But in all things we possess the victory through

faith in Christ, because he has overcome all temptations and persecutions, including the power of death.

Demonic activities were already rampant before the coming of Christ, but God's people had limited abilities and options in dealing with them. The spiritual ministry of an anointed one could at times provide relief for the demonized person: "Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him….Whenever the spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take his harp and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him" (1 Samuel 16:14, 23). The evil spirit was under God's direct command, and not regulated by some "permissive" sovereignty, a ridiculous theological invention that is unbiblical and self-contradictory.

The forceful expulsion of demons from persons under their influence is a sign of the kingdom, that is, a sign that the king has come, and that he is enduing his people with power and sending them forth as his heralds. As Jesus says, "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). Even the demons bore him witness in their panic and confusion, exclaiming in effect, "What are you doing here? Have you come to send us to the pit before the appointed time?" He was not a prophet like any other, but the very Son of God. They recognized him, and they were mystified as to why he visited the earth in person.

Christians usually ignore Christ's command to cast out demons. One reason for this is the false doctrine of cessationism. Although not all cessationists think the same way, some of them argue that since the time of Christ and the apostles, the kind of demonic activities that we refer to have reduced or ceased. However, there is no biblical evidence to suggest this. And if we were to consider the contemporary cases of possible demonization, we might have to conclude that these activities have greatly multiplied, perhaps due to the neglect of this very ministry of casting out demons. Now, I agree that extra-biblical cases can at best illustrate a biblical teaching and not serve as a conclusive demonstration of a position. But this is precisely the point: unless there is a definitive demonstration from Scripture, to teach that it is no longer a Christian's duty to cast out demons is to teach rebellion against a clear command from Christ.

Even in the absence of any biblical argument to excuse them, some people just prefer not to deal with this. So when it comes to contemporary instances of demonized persons, they either stick their heads in the sand and pretend these things can no longer happen, or they shove these people into mental institutions and lock them up, so that these maniacs cannot trample their impotent theology. But psychiatrists and medications are no match for demons.

In any case, if anyone would teach that a command of Christ is no longer applicable, ***he better be sure***, lest he falls under the curse of Matthew 5:19 and be regarded as a worthless servant. Are you so sure that you will tell someone to stop doing what Christ said to do? Are you so sure that you will criticize and even persecute those who continue to do what Christ commanded? If so, then make your case. If not, then shut your mouth. Tradition can

be effective in hiding unbelief and disobedience (at least from ourselves), but when it seeks to subvert God's command, we must defy what authority that these men credit to themselves and to one another, even in the face of severe persecution unleashed by those who call themselves Christians, and instead follow the command of Christ with boldness of speech and action.

Perhaps it is better that the cessationists leave the demons alone, for the fallen spirits might say to them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?" (Acts 19:15), and then overpower them and beat them (v. 16). Demons will submit to servants of Christ who act boldly in his name, and not to credentials and reputations that men have conferred upon one another. It is not that God and Satan have ceased their extraordinary activities in the world, but that faith has ceased in the hearts of the cessationists.

It is sometimes said that a "Reformed charismatic" is an oxymoron. This can be contested on both theological and historical grounds, but so what if it is granted? So what? Why does anyone need to call himself "Reformed" or "charismatic"? Those who make this claim assume a meaning for "Reformed" and a meaning for "charismatic" that are incompatible with each other, and then jam them together and slap the label on people, thus appearing to make their opponents look foolish. It is easier and much more accurate to say that a Christian cessationist is an oxymoron, not because cessationists are all unbelievers (although they are at least crippled by their unbelief), but because cessationism is incompatible with Christianity. Also, the objection itself betrays that they value tradition in their hearts, and not Christ. This is the murderous spirit of the Pharisees, else why do they persecute their brothers who heal the sick, cast out demons, and desire spiritual gifts, as Scripture commands all Christians to do?

One argument is that ever since Christ's triumph over Satan, God has placed strong restraints upon demonic activities, so we ought not to come across the kinds of demonizations that are recorded in Scripture. There are variations of this argument. But this is a forced inference that is contradicted by Scripture. Christ's triumph over Satan does not make it unnecessary for believers to cast out demons; rather, it has made it possible. And Christ's triumph did not occur at the completion of the canon of Scripture, but at his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. All of this has already happened by the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, but evil spirits continued to demonize people, and believers continued to cast them out. If some Christians insist on their defiance against Christ on this matter, at least they should refrain from criticizing and persecuting those who obey him.

Regarding the ministry of casting out demons, if a person's first reaction is disbelief and ridicule, he would do well to examine his own attitude toward God and the Scripture, rather than to criticize those who attempt to obey Christ's command on the matter, and to face the evil one on the behalf of those oppressed by him. Casting out demons was an integral and consistent ministry of Christ and the apostles, so that a person's attitude to this ministry also reflects his attitude toward them. To argue for a cessation of these activities is one thing, although this is an assault on the Christian faith, but to mock the ministry itself is to mock Christ and his holy servants. There are many who commit this evil today. It is far

better for them to acknowledge their unbelief, cowardice, and disobedience in failing to obey Christ's command.

We have stated that humans are not to initiate contact with angels, but can only respond to contact initiated by them, if such should occur. A similar principle applies here. The kind of confrontation that is involved in casting out demons is not to be initiated by believers. Some Christians who advocate a "ministry of deliverance" have indeed carried it to an extreme, attributing even ordinary flaws and habits in people's lives to demonic activities.

Although there is a sense in which Satan's hand is behind all wickedness, this is not the kind of demonic activity that we have in mind in this context, and it is unbiblical to constantly suspect or look for demonic activities in people. Rather, the biblical pattern is that when the demonization becomes so evident that the victim's mind and body are taken over in an obvious manner, when the demons begin to overtly express themselves through a person, then believers are to confront this situation head-on and command the evil spirits to depart. Demonic powers are involved in many other instances of evil, but in ordinary cases the biblical teaching is for us to utilize the usual methods of ministry to overcome them, such as prayer and preaching. That is, in ordinary situations there is no need to distinguish between demonic or human evil, for they are addressed in the same manner.

Again, in our context the most important point is that Christ is greater than all demons, not as an angel, nor as a man, and not as God only, but as the incarnation of God, the God-man, Jesus Christ. And as Christians, we have authority over the father and master of all non-Christians, that is, the devil.

As for man in God's creation, our passage refers to "thrones or powers or rulers or authorities," so that it is fitting to say something about human government and its relation to Christ. In our culture, debates on this subject are often framed by the expression "the separation of church and state." Although the intention of a nation's founders is an argument from history that has practical importance, it has no direct bearing on a proper understanding of divine precepts and moral principles that are authoritative everywhere. Most people in the world are not Americans. So as practical as it is in some situations to debate the separation of church and state and the intention of the founders, once we transcend this very narrow focus, the only relevant issue is the source of authoritative moral absolutes, and what they say about political authority.

The word "separation" is so loaded and misleading that, it is probably better to abandon it when stating the biblical teaching on the matter. One danger posed by the word is that it tends to suggest an exclusion of God from human government, when throughout the Bible, the command of God is the only legitimate basis for human government. We could make a distinction between God and the church, so that by "separation" we intend to exclude only the church and not God. Of course there are those who wish to exclude God, but this distinction at least allows us to state our position (or something closer to our position), although it still requires careful explanation.

But our position cannot be so simply stated, for the church cannot in fact be *separated* from the state, unless it is affirmed that man's relation to God can be separated, even in principle, from the church. I would affirm, and on this point contrary to many believers who hold to tradition rather than to Christ, that it is *possible* (I do not say usual or desirable) for one's faith in God to exist and prosper in *complete isolation* from other believers. But a Christian's faith is often associated with the church in some way. And like the church, the state is not an abstract institution, but a group of people, so that when we refer to government, we are often referring to the people in power. Although it is correct to insist that all government officials ought to be Christians (in the sense that God commands all men everywhere to repent, Acts 17:30), it would be absurd to also insist that they are forbidden to go to church or to apply anything that they have learned from church in performing their duties, and in this way to include God but not the church in the state.

The Bible is against the separation of God and state, for he who is not for him is against him. Any state that is not a Christian state is a Satanic state. Again, the government is not an abstract institution, but it consists of people who are either Christians or non-Christians, children of God or children of Satan. So just as there is no such thing as a spiritually neutral person, there is no such thing as a spiritually neutral government. This is not to say that Christians should always disobey such an ungodly state, for all authority comes from God, not in the sense that he morally approves of what is done, but that he has established the principle of human government, and particular governments by his providence.

Proverbs 3:6 says, "In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." This is said to individuals, not abstract institutions. Because all institutions consist of individuals, this statement applies to all institutions, whether schools, corporations, or governments. When it comes to the government, only an explicit and biblical confession of Christ can provide a basis for laws that prohibit the likes of murder, rape, theft, and perjury, if these laws are to reflect an objective moral standard rather than mere preference or practical concerns.

Then, perhaps the only sense in which we can construe Scripture to teach a separation of church and state is, not in the separation of beliefs and ideals, but in a separation of roles. The major principle here is that it is the state that handles civil affairs, while it is the church that handles spiritual matters. The church is not responsible to direct traffic, collect taxes, organize drug raids, fend off invaders, or to arrest, judge, imprison, and execute criminals. On the other hand, the state does not the possess the spiritual authority of the church. That is, government officials who are *operating as such* do not have the authority to, for example, excommunicate unrepentant sinners from the church and order them to be shunned by the community of believers. But *as Christians*, these officials would have the same rights as other believers in the church. It is better to say that the church and state are different institutions with a distinction of roles, rather than to say that there is a simple "separation" between the two.

As the creator of all thrones, powers, rulers, and authorities, Christ has the supremacy over all human institutions. All things were created "by him and for him." Whether church or

state, if it does not honor and serve Christ in an explicit and intentional manner, then it is a perverted, defective, and rebellious institution.

Then, Christ the Sustainer. Verse 17 says, "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." And Hebrews 1:3 says, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." Whereas the doctrine of Christ as Creator stresses his transcendence, the doctrine of Christ as Sustainer places the emphasis on his immanence. In other words, as God he is other than and greater than the creation, but by his power and wisdom he actively sustains and regulates the existence of this creation and all the occurrences within it. This doctrine teaches that God not only creates, but he also maintains and controls what he creates. And since he has created all things, he also maintains and controls all things.

This completes the biblical teaching on metaphysics, so now we have a firm position on both the origination and the continuation of creation. That is, the creation does not contain within itself the power and wisdom to sustain and regulate itself. It was made *by* God but was not made *into* God, not that this was possible, and so it depends on him for its continual existence and operation. "The point is not that He *lets* the world exist but that He *makes* it exist."[26] And because it depends on God for its existence and operation "moment by moment" – at this time the issue is the idea of continuity and not the precise expression by which we should designate this continuity – one moment in creation (the totality of its contents and configurations) is not the metaphysical cause of the next moment, so that in creation itself one moment bears no necessary relation to the next. Rather, it is God who directly sustains – or as some say, continuously creates – his creation moment by moment. The continuity is not inherent in the creation, but it is established in the mind of God.

Again, this biblical, rational, and necessary position on metaphysics also entails that God is the metaphysical author of sin. The implication is almost always denied by tradition and prejudice without argument. For example, Jonathan Edwards affirmed continuous creation, then immediately denied this necessary implication, but could not offer a case for the denial. Thus a splendid statement on God's exhaustive providence is marred by false piety and tradition. If we would be so bold as to take Goliath's sword, then let us not cut off our own heads with it. Let us go all the way in theological consistency. God has done nothing wrong, and he does not need us to be ashamed for him.

The doctrine of divine providence comes under this section of Christ as Sustainer. And this is often divided into ordinary providence (all events, thoughts, and actions), and special providence (such as miracles). We cannot discuss the entire doctrine here. In our context, the emphasis is that Christ sustains and controls everything – every detail of every object and every person. Because of his pervasive and precise power, "we know that all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). Christ directs all of history, and rules over all nations and cultures. In all things he has the supremacy.

[26] Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Baker Book House, 1977), p. 178.

Finally, Christ the Redeemer. We will put under this heading harmatiology (the doctrine of sin), christology (Christ), soteriology (salvation), and ecclesiology (the church). Recall that our four major sections (Revealer, Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer) relate christology to every other major doctrine in systematic theology – it is a summary of systematic theology from a christological perspective. But now christology occupies a subsection by itself because it is here that we specifically relate the nature and work of Christ to the redemption of his chosen ones. And although it is possible to mention eschatology (last things) based on the passage, since it already suggests so many items for mention, we shall forego a discussion on the topic, except to note that Christ's redemption saves believers from the full measure of God's wrath that will be revealed against all non-Christians in the final judgment.

Beginning with the doctrine of sin, as mentioned, one of the greatest errors committed by otherwise sound theologians is the attempt to distance God from evil even on the metaphysical level, that is, on the level of causation. Instead of humbly and boldly applying the doctrine on divine sovereignty – a doctrine to which many of them pay lip service – they are held back by tradition and prejudice, and without argument call it blasphemy to affirm the Bible's own explicit and implicit teachings. They want a God that they can approve, and if the Bible teaches about a God who is greater than their conception, so as to transcend their cultural values and religious traditions, then he must be taken down to their own level. In effect, in refusing to accept God's revelation about himself, they betray their secret desire to replace him with an idol of their own making.

There is a great tension (or contradiction) in the work of these theologians. Contrary to their claim, this tension is not within divine revelation itself, but it is between divine revelation and their human rebellion. It is not that the Bible contradicts itself, but that it contradicts these theologians, so that it is a matter of truth against tradition, and not revelation against itself. They blame the contradiction on God, so as to excuse themselves, and then they call the contradiction a "mystery," so as to excuse God.

In this manner, they could persist in their rebellion against divine revelation, but at the same time preserve an appearance of faith and piety. However, in principle, they are no different than the atheists and heretics who allege that the Bible contradicts itself, only that these theologians make an excuse for God so as to keep their religion without having to agree with it. But it is impossible to forever hide this sinister method of doing theology. Along with the ridicule that it encourages from the unbelievers, and the disillusionment that it fosters in those who profess the faith, it has resulted in all kinds of perplexing theological formulations.

For example, in his discussion on the origin of sin, the famed Reformed theologian Donald Macleod writes:

> How then does sin come in and how does it relate to the purpose of God? Sin, according to 1 John 3:4, is *lawlessness*. Sin has no meaning, no logic, no purpose, no fruit. Sin is the end of law. When we ask, Why sin? How sin? we are really forgetting that. We are assuming that there is

> some logic to sin. But at the point of sin logic collapses because sin is the Black Hole whence there is no light and for which there is no logic. There is no way of knowing how or why sin entered heaven. There is no answer to the query, How could Satan tempt Adam and Eve when they were perfect and holy and so close to God? There is no answer to the question, Why did God permit it? Because it is a Black Hole.[27]

My jaw drops. I open my mouth, but no words come out. This is all so stupid. This is so wrong. Christians should not talk like this, should not make mistakes like this. But they do when they refuse to accept what God tells them, and they do when they wish to replace him with something that they made up, that they consider more worthy to receive worship than the God of the Bible.

We wish for some confirmation before we respond. Is he serious? Does he really mean what he says? And is this the doctrine of sin that a world-renowned professor is prepared to assert in the name of God and Scripture? Is *this* the best of the best? We hope against hope that we have misunderstood him. Some pages later, he writes:

> There are four New Testament words which express vividly what sin is….The fourth word is *anomia*: "sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). This is in many ways the most important definition of sin in the New Testament….This definition reminds us that sin in its very nature is anomalous. The English word "anomalous" comes from this same Greek word, *anomia*: without law. If something is an anomaly, that means it goes against all law and all reason, and that is a marvelous way of describing sin. Sin is the ultimate anomaly.
>
> We are always reluctant to accept that sin cannot be understood. We want to ask, How? and, Why? How did it come? Why did God permit it? We want to reason through all those questions. But we have to come back to this: Sin is the end of law. Sin is an anomaly, and an anomaly by definition is what is beyond reason and what cannot be understood. How can we understand or explain how sin came into heaven? There was this great, brilliant angel, now known as Satan, but also known as Lucifer, the Light-bearer. He was perfectly blessed, magnificently intelligent, morally upright and totally integrated. Why should he choose to sin? How can I explain the Luciferian decision to rebel against God? How can I explain the lawlessness of the Light-bearer? Why did the Light-bearer choose darkness? I have no answer to that at all.
>
> Nor do I have any answer to the question, Why did Adam choose to sin? There was no need, no defect, no pressure, no threat, no danger, nothing to be gained. The Satanic arguments look so absurd and yet the first man freely chose to sin.[28]

[27] Donald Macleod, *A Faith to Live By* (Christian Focus Publications, 1998), p. 41.
[28] Ibid., p. 78-80.

This is indeed his position – sin cannot be understood because sin is lawlessness, so that there is no law and no logic by which it could be explained. So when it comes to the origin of sin, the turning of creatures from good to evil, a Christian must say, "I have no answer to that at all." We quiver with indignation and disappointment, that a top theologian can be so stupid, so confused, and so slanderous toward Scripture. And now, lest some readers fail to perceive the extent of the problems with his statements, we must address them.

Since almost every phrase contains several errors, and every error is related to several others, it would be difficult to produce an exhaustive yet orderly response. Therefore, we will organize the response by topic, and hope that readers will gain enough from it to see through the many other errors that we have no time to mention.

The central idea on which he bases all this nonsense is that sin is lawlessness, so that it cannot be understood. He claims to derive this idea from 1 John 3:4, which says, "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). However, his explanation contains one equivocation after another – that is, the meanings of his terms change back and forth, so that the premises do not in fact lead to his conclusion. Sometimes he uses the word "law" as if it refers to moral precepts, which is the correct meaning for this context, but sometimes he uses it as if it refers to metaphysical principles, laws that describe causation and so on. And sometimes he equates law with logic, so that if sin is lawlessness, then there is "no logic" to explain it.

This equivocation with the term "law" is then combined with equivocation on the "less" in law*less*ness. That is, whereas in the Bible lawlessness means a transgression of the moral law, so that John says, "Everyone who sins breaks the law," Macleod changes the idea to an *absence* of law. To paraphrase, the Bible teaches that sin is a transgression of moral precepts, but Macleod changes this to say that sin is an absence of principles of operation, so that it cannot be understood. By "law," the Bible is talking about ethical precept, but Macleod makes the word refer to metaphysical principle. This outrageous and inexcusable error is possible only when working with certain languages, for in others there are specific words for law that carry with them legal and moral connotations, so that they cannot be so easily confused with metaphysical principles.

To illustrate the baffling idiocy of this spectacular display of equivocation, take the word "godless." Jude 4 says, "For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are *godless* men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord." Other translations say "ungodly," which already demonstrates the point that I am about to make, but for the purpose of our illustration we can use the English NIV.

If we do to the word "godless" what Macleod does to the word "lawless," then we will have to say that God is metaphysically absent to "godless men." That is, although God is omnipotent and omnipresent, somehow he does not apply to these men because they are "godless." This would also mean that these men will not be punished for their wickedness,

since God himself cannot reach them. But the same verse says that their "condemnation was written about long ago."

Of course, the truth is that "godless" refers to their wickedness. It does not mean that God is metaphysically absent from their lives, or that God does not apply to them, but that their thoughts and actions are in violation of God's moral precepts. They do not order their lives to grow in knowledge of him or to follow his commands, and thus they are "godless." In the same way, some men are "lawless" because they think and behave against a very present and active law. It does not mean that the law has become absent or inapplicable to them. And the meaning of "law" here refers to moral precept, not metaphysical principle.

In another place, Macleod writes, "There is no law to sin….There cannot be love where there is lawlessness, because love is the fulfilling of the law."[29] Again, notice the equivocation. When he says that there is "no law to sin," does he mean that there is no metaphysical principle that applies to sin, or no moral principle that applies to sin? Or, does he mean that sin acts against the law, in which case the law is in fact present? If he means the first, then he has changed the word "law" back to moral precept by the time he says, "love is the fulfilling of the law" – love fulfills God's moral commands. If he means the second, that no moral principle applies to sin, then neither can sin be judged as wrong. If no moral law applies to sin, then sin does not violate any moral law, so that there is in fact no such thing as sin. The third option takes the biblical meaning of law, and affirms that sin acts against a law that is very much present. But then this destroys Macleod's equivocation and also his point about why sin cannot be understood.

He says that "Sin is the end of law," but the Bible says that sin *transgresses* the law, and not that it *terminates* the law. If sin ends the law in the sense that it terminates the law, this would mean that once sin occurs, the law is destroyed, and there is no longer a law by which to judge sin as morally wrong. In other words, sin in fact neutralizes the condemnation against itself by doing what it does. Once sin is committed, there is no longer any sin. If so, neither can there be any judgment against sin. This is the result of his equivocation.

What we are presenting here is not some deep biblical truth or theological argument. This is more like a simple English lesson to address an error that even a child in elementary school should be able to avoid.

There is more. From the premise that "lawlessness" means an absence of metaphysical principle, Macleod asserts that there is "no logic" to sin. Sometimes he appears to say that sin is illogical – that is, every decision to sin is an irrational decision. So far this is correct. However, he equates the idea that sin is illogical with the idea that it is impossible to obtain a logical understanding *about* this illogical thing. In other words, not only does he say that there is no rational *justification* for a decision to sin, but he also says that it is impossible to have even a rational *description* or *explanation* of sin. But these are two very different things, and the former does not imply the latter.

[29] Ibid., p. 285.

He does not even say that sin is such a complex matter that the human mind cannot fathom it. This would indeed be false, since sin is rather easy to understand, but at least he would be leaving open the possibility for someone to understand it, at least in principle. However, he asserts that sin itself is something that cannot be understood. But if sin is *in itself* something that cannot be understood because there is "no logic" to it, then the necessary implication is that even God cannot have a logical understanding of this illogical thing. This means that Macleod's doctrine, as an attempt to preserve both the biblical doctrine that God possesses absolute sovereignty and the traditional doctrine that God is not the author of sin, is in fact a blasphemy that strips God of his omniscience, and like other similar efforts, destroys even simple theism.[30]

If anything that is illogical cannot be logically understood, then logic ceases to apply once it is violated. Thus once a logical fallacy is committed, it is no longer a fallacy, since logic then ceases to apply. Again, this is a very simple and therefore inexcusable error. The truth is that every illogical thought or argument can be logically described and explained. The irrational process can be logically traced and the errors logically identified. God possesses a complete and perfect logical understanding of sin, and because he has provided a extensive explanation of it in Scripture, we can also possess a logical understanding of sin. In fact, if God is the creator, sustainer, and sovereign, who is before all things and who is over all things, then he is the one who has conceived and ordained sin. Because he has a perfect understanding of it, he can control it and condemn it. And because we understand what he has revealed to us about it, we can preach about it, teach against it, and order our lives to overcome it.

Then, Macleod makes the point that sin cannot be understood because it is an anomaly. His reasoning process is as follows: Sin is lawlessness; the Greek word for lawlessness is *anomia*; the Greek word *anomia* produced the English word "anomalous"; therefore, sin is an "anomaly"; and an anomaly "by definition is what is beyond reason and what cannot be understood." My jaw drops again. At the moment I cannot come up with an insult strong enough for this, so let me just point out the errors in his reasoning.

Scripture indeed teaches that "sin is lawlessness," and we have already considered Macleod's equivocations regarding the English word. This time he also equivocates, but he takes another path so that he can abuse another English word at the same time. The Greek word for lawlessness is indeed *anomia*, and we might as well agree that the English words like "anomalous" and "anomaly" have been derived from it. However, *anomia* does not mean what we mean by the English word "anomaly." It refers to and has been translated as "iniquity," "unrighteousness," and "transgression of the law," whereas the English word refers to an irregularity or exception.

This means that by the time Macleod arrives at the English word, he has already changed the meaning of *anomia*. Then, he imposes it back to his theology as if this is the Bible's definition of sin – that is, as if the Bible teaches that sin is an anomaly. But the Bible says that sin is lawlessness in the sense that it is a transgression of the law, defiance against the

[30] That is, simple biblical theism, since there is no such thing as a bare theism that is independent of any worldview.

law, and not an irregularity of some kind, or an exception to the norm. And after this, when he says that an anomaly "by definition is what is beyond reason and what cannot be understood," even the English definitions are against him, since no ordinary definition gives such a meaning. The entire point about sin as anomaly is his invention, which has no actual connection with Scripture, with the Greek, or with the English. He made up the whole thing.

This has similarities with one popular abuse of the Greek word *dunamis* (*dynamis*), or power (see Acts 1:8), from which we probably obtained the English "dynamite." The error is in applying the English meaning back to the Greek, and thinking that *dunamis* must therefore refer to an "explosive" power, when this idea might be completely absent from the word. This false teaching is sometimes heard from preachers who have access to nothing more than a *Strong's Concordance*.

But Macleod's mistake is even worse than the uneducated and anti-intellectual preachers. At least dynamite is explosive, so that they are using good English to make bad Greek, but Macleod does not even abuse the Greek with the correct English definition of anomaly. The Greek does not say that sin is an anomaly (in the sense of irregularity), and the English does not say that an anomaly "by definition is what is beyond reason and what cannot be understood." Of course, if he employs this invented meaning for anomaly, and applies it to the idea of sin, then by definition – by *his* definition – even God cannot understand sin, so again we charge Macleod with the sin of blasphemy.

And, there is more. Macleod proposes the concept of a "Black Hole," and throws everything that he rejects from Scripture into it so that he does not have to provide an alternative anti-Christian explanation. He writes, "Hell is a Black Hole, to which and in which no law applies."[31] But hell is ordained, designed, approved, created, and sustained by God to manifest his wrath and justice. So while Macleod thinks he is being clever and poetic, he is in fact calling the wrath and justice of God lawless and nonsensical. He continues:

> Sin is impossible. It is impossible that man should sin. It is impossible that God should feel pain. It is impossible that God's Son should have to become incarnate and die. Yet in the Fall the impossible happened. Sin is the impossible that happened. And when sin happened the even more fundamentally impossible happened: God felt pain. There is no law to any of this. There is no law to sin. There is no law to God's pain. There is no law to hell. Both sin and hell are outside the sphere of the possible.[32]

Pious nonsense. So are these things possible or not? We understand that sometimes a writer may use hyperbole for effect, and when we perceive that this is what he is doing, we should read the text with this in mind so that we do not misinterpret it. However, it is rather clear that Macleod is not using the word "impossible" as a hyperbole – he really means that sin,

[31] Macleod, p. 285.
[32] Ibid., p. 285.

hell, and even the incarnation and atonement are impossible. This is reinforced when he rephrases "impossible" into "outside the sphere of the possible."[33]

Since he is not using the word "impossible" merely for effect, then unless the Bible itself says that these things are impossible, then Macleod has invented these impossibilities in order to generate contradictions in Scripture. These contradictions in turn provide the nonsense and confusion that he needs to assert his anti-Christian theory, that sin cannot be understood.

The Bible does not say that sin, hell, the incarnation, and so on are impossible. Nowhere does it say this. Macleod made it up. In fact, since these things were ordained by God to happen, not only are they possible, but it is impossible that they should have failed to happen. In a relative sense – that is, relative to the moral law and man's natural constitution – it was indeed possible for Adam to abstain from sin. However, in the absolute sense – that is, relative to God's absolute and sovereign ordination – it was impossible for Adam not to sin. He was predestined to sin by God's active and immutable decree.

In other words, there was nothing inherent in God's moral law or in Adam's constitution that necessitated sin. Speaking on this level, it was possible for him to sin, and possible for him not to sin. But God's decree did necessitate sin, so that from this absolute reference point, it was impossible for Adam not to sin. If sin and hell are inherently impossible, then even God cannot ordain or control them. But God is the standard of what is possible and not possible, and not sin and hell. As for God's pain, there is nothing in the Bible that says God felt pain in the sense that Macleod seems to mean. He made it up again.

Moreover, even if there is "no law" to sin, there is still a consistency, a principle, a rationality to God's nature, so that when Macleod applies the same "lawlessness" to God's pain, he blasphemes again. That is, even if there is no "law" to the sin that caused God's pain, there is still a "law" in God who experienced the pain. But what Macleod says would deny this "law" in God's nature. Anyway, we deny that God felt pain in the sense that Macleod seems to intend.

But there is still more. First, keep in mind that he does not say that sin is incomprehensible because of our human limitations, which would be wrong enough since sin is easy to understand, but he says that sin is inherently incomprehensible. As mentioned, this necessarily implies that even God himself cannot understand sin.[34] And if no law (no metaphysical principle) applies to sin, it necessarily implies that God himself cannot ordain or control it. Then, along with this first point, in one place Macleod asserts that sin is not "a mere defect"; instead, he writes, "It is a rampant, productive, energetic, multiplying,

[33] If Macleod were a competent thinker, we might think that the ridiculous phrase "more fundamentally impossible" could indicate that all of this is hyperbole, since something is either impossible, or it is not impossible. Something cannot be more or less impossible. But we are not dealing with a competent thinker.
[34] Macleod does not explicitly say that God cannot understand sin, and he somehow still thinks that God can control sin (albeit in an indirect sense, as in to "permit"), but it is impossible for both of these to be true given his view that sin is inherently incomprehensible. The fact that Macleod does not follow through in his blasphemy only betrays his inconsistent thinking.

self-propagating entity. It is fierce. It is fire. It is living. It is a force, a tremendously powerful force."[35]

So Macleod thinks that sin is inherently immune from comprehension by the intellect and from regulation by law, and that it is at the same time a living entity. Again, to him, sin is an incomprehensible, untouchable, active and living "entity." This can mean only one thing – he thinks that sin has the status of deity. To Macleod, sin is a god. So, in his view, there are two competing deities – the God of the Bible (in a diminished form), and Sin (the Black Hole, the Impossible, the Incomprehensible). Macleod's confusing and cowardly anti-explanation to sin, as an attempt to protect tradition and neutralize revelation, and to metaphysically distance God from evil and from being the author of sin, has resulted in a form of dualism. This is not Christianity.

At this point, the reader might ask, "Why must I waste my time with this blasphemous idiot?" The answer is that although it may appear a waste of time to study this nonsense, when nonsense pervades the church, and when it is blasphemous in nature, then it is necessary to confront it. The above serves as another illustration that every attempt to distance God from evil, that is, to remove him as the ultimate *and* immediate cause of evil, and to demonstrate that he is not the author of sin, has resulted in ridiculous and blasphemous theological formulations that cannot withstand any kind of biblical or rational scrutiny. This time it cannot survive even a quick reference to the English dictionary.

The truth is that these attempts have nothing to do with defending God's honor or promoting true piety. Rather, it is first insisted that God, in order to be righteous, must adhere to certain moral principles that men have imposed upon him, principles that God never declared for himself. These principles are then held constant, while everything else in the system is adjusted to conform, and failing that, it is relegated to the venerable status of a "mystery." These principles and their implications, regardless of their independence from and contradictions against Scripture, are then codified into creeds, which even in the Reformed tradition, are often subservient to Scripture only on paper. This tradition is then assumed to be sound doctrine, and in turn is used to interpret Scripture and to persecute those who oppose it, whether or not the opposition has a biblical and rational basis. And this is when "orthodoxy" becomes blasphemy, and an abomination against God and Christianity.

As if we have not read enough to illustrate this, in another place Macleod writes, "Apart from any other argument in its favour, the doctrine of the Fall relieves God of the guilt of creating a sinner."[36] We affirm that God created Satan and Adam as good and not evil creatures, but we deny that they turned evil by themselves without God's deliberate and immediate causation.

Now notice Macleod's assumption. He presupposes a moral principle by which he holds God accountable – that is, he thinks that God would be guilty of wrongdoing if he had created a sinner, or if he had created Satan or Adam as evil in the beginning. However, this principle – that God would be guilty of wrongdoing if he were to directly create an evil

[35] Macleod, p. 85.
[36] Ibid., p. 81.

creature – is not a moral principle that God has declared about himself or imposed upon himself. Rather, Macleod is the one who imposes it on God, and then he takes it upon himself to rescue God from its condemnation. This is the supreme presumption and arrogance behind the attempt to distance God from the origin of evil – it is nothing more than an attempt to deliver divine majesty from human condemnation, even though this condemnation often comes from those who seek to rescue God in the first place. The entire enterprise is sinister to the core.

Unless God himself declares it, it is not up to me to say that God would be guilty of wrongdoing if he had created an evil creature, which I say that he does with the conception of every human person after Adam, although Macleod thinks that it is up to him to say so. Instead, I affirm that God is completely sovereign – yes, really sovereign – and that he is righteous in all that he does. He defines good and evil. It is not up to a man to define them for him. And if God has in fact performed what Macleod calls evil, as we affirm that he has, then his defense of God is in reality an accusation and condemnation against God.

Lest the reader thinks that Macleod is just some isolated and inferior theologian – he is in fact considered one of the most cogent and reliable – we find a similar example in the revered Herman Bavinck:

> We can shed some light on the *possibility* of the fall, but the transition to the *actuality* of it remains shrouded in darkness. Scripture makes not so much as a single effort to render this transition understandable. Therefore Scripture also lets sin stand in its properly sinful character. There *is* such a thing as sin, but it is *illegitimate*. It was and is and will eternally remain in conflict with the law of God and with the testimony of our own conscience.[37]

Whether Bavinck's senseless babbling inspired Macleod's outright blasphemy is a matter of interest, but since it is not theologically significant, we will not pursue it. However, we cannot ignore his slander against Scripture. It is false that Scripture has made no effort to "render this transition understandable," since it repeatedly affirms God's general sovereignty over all things, God's specific sovereignty over evil, and also God's direct creation of the reprobates *as* reprobates and his direct control over all demons and sinners, as well as their evil deeds. We have documented these biblical teachings in a number of places.

The truth is that Bavinck "makes not so much as a single effort" to accept and believe what Scripture says on the subject. In another place, he writes:

> Humans were not created morally indifferent by God, but positively holy. Still, we have to bear in mind the following as well. In the first place, God most certainly willed the *possibility* of sin. The possibility of sinning is from God. The idea of sin was first conceived in his mind. God eternally conceived sin as his absolute polar opposite and thus, in that

[37] Bavinck, *Reasonable Faith*, p. 224.

> sense, included it in his decree, or else it would never have been able to arise and exist in reality. It was not Satan, nor Adam, nor Eve, who first conceived the idea of sin: God himself as it were made it visible to their eyes….There is therefore no doubt that God willed the possibility of sin.[38]

So far so good, that is, if we will for the moment ignore the tendency to dualism in the phrase "his absolute polar opposite" and the suspiciously weak statement, "in that sense, included it in his decree," as if God decreed the possibility or actuality of sin in a weaker or even different sense that he decreed other events, an absurd theological invention that we deny. In any case, when he proceeds to the actuality of sin, he falls into Macleod "black hole":

> With all of this we have established nothing other and nothing more than the possibility of sin. How that possibility became a reality is and will presumably remain a mystery….This explanation eludes us, not only in connection with the origin of the first sin but over and over with respect to all sorts of human deeds and actions….The sinful act is caused by the sinful will, but who will indicate to us the cause of this sinful will? "Trying to discover the causes of such deficiencies – causes which, as I have said, are not efficient but deficient – is like trying to see the darkness or hear the silence…."[39] In its origin, therefore, it was a folly and an absurdity….Satan has, therefore, not incorrectly been called an "irony of all logic." The impossibility of explaining the origin of sin, therefore, must not be understood as an excuse, a refuge for ignorance. Rather, it should be said openly and clearly: we are here at the boundaries of our knowledge. Sin *exists*, but it will never be able to justify its existence. It is unlawful and irrational.[40]

Again, it is said that the origin of sin is a mystery because sin in itself is "darkness" and "silence." But this would mean that sin is obscure and silent even to God, so that even God cannot understand it. Thus Bavinck also blasphemes. Satan is an irrational person, since it is irrational to defy God, but in himself he is not an irony of all logic, because his sin is clearly explained in the Bible. Bavinck's anti-explanation is indeed an excuse, but probably not "a refuge for ignorance"; rather, it is a refuge for defiance. He refuses to accept what God says. In his denial of an explanation for sin, he has become an illustration of sin.

At the end, he confuses a rational understanding about sin with a justification for "its existence." Moreover, he fails to make a crucial distinction – a justification for committing sin is different from a justification for sin's existence. Bavinck himself acknowledges, albeit in a confused and compromised manner, that sin exists because of God's decree. So it is easy to interpret his comment as saying that God cannot justify his decree for sin's existence, in which case Bavinck blasphemes again. It is true that a creature can never

[38] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 3* (Baker Academic, 2006), p. 66.
[39] And here we trace the nonsense all the way back to Augustine.
[40] Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, p. 69-70.

provide a moral justification for committing sin. However, a rational explanation or description of the metaphysics of sin, of the causes and effects, is not only possible, but simple.

The biblical teaching on sin, including its origin, is one of the easiest doctrines to understand. All it takes is an unflinching application of divine sovereignty. There are those who present themselves as guardians of the faith, and who purport to uphold the doctrine of divine sovereignty, but when God's majesty is pitted against human tradition and religious prejudice, they flinch so hard that they slap God right out of his throne. Although at times presented as a theodicy, in reality their theology is a disgrace to the kingdom of God, a testimony to their hardness of heart and their worship of human inventions.

The biblical teaching is clear and simple. Since I have explained it so many times and in so many ways, I will provide only a summary. It is just this: God understands it; God ordains it; God causes it; God controls it. From the metaphysical perspective (cause and effect), this summarizes the entire biblical position. From the moral perspective, we first note that although God causes moral evil in his creatures (in the metaphysical sense), there is no moral law stating that it is wrong for him to do so. So God's righteousness is never in question.

Then, when God causes evil in his creatures, it means that he causes them to transgress the moral commands that he has given them, and that is why although it is not evil for God to metaphysically cause his creatures to transgress these moral commands (since he does not transgress any moral law in doing so), it is evil for his creatures to transgress these moral commands (since his commands toward them define good and evil for them). The moral accountability of these creatures is not determined by whether they are the metaphysical cause of their own transgressions, but whether they have indeed transgressed. If they have, then they are guilty (regardless of the metaphysical cause behind their transgressions), and God has determined to judge them.

If one objects that it is unjust for God to judge his creatures for their transgressions when he is the metaphysical cause of these transgressions, then again we reply that this applies a standard of justice that is nowhere announced or even implied in God's word. It is again a human invention to restrict God's sovereignty, and the act of making or applying this invention is itself defiant and sinful, and subject to divine punishment. And again, the real question is whether we will "let" God be God on his own terms.

Louis Berkhof writes that "it would be blasphemous to speak of God as the author of sin."[41] But the opposite is true. I have demonstrated over and over again that we cannot even maintain a basic theism, let alone Christianity, without affirming that God is the sovereign and righteous author of sin. Theologians are so fond of delivering God from the "guilt" of creating evil, but the real issue is whether God will hold them guiltless for denying his unquestionable sovereignty and righteousness. Certainly, I do not have the warrant or authority to absolve them.

[41] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 220.

God created Satan and Adam as good and holy. Why did they turn evil? One can hardly think of an easier theological question. The answer is that God caused them to become evil. And this is not all, since we even know why God did it. Under a supralapsarian scheme of the divine decrees, God ordained sin so that there would be elect sinners for Christ to redeem, and so that in the end God would be glorified in the accomplishment of such. The reprobate angels and humans also have their purpose, as stated and explained in Scripture. We have discussed other aspects of supralapsarianism elsewhere, and so we will not repeat. A consistent supralapsarianism that affirms God as the author of sin also acknowledges him as the end of all explanation, while theologians such as Macleod and Bavinck make sin the end of all explanation – that is, at least when it comes to the origin of evil – and thus elevate sin into God.

This is the difference between Christian and Satanic theology. One theology is biblical, consistent, and God-centered, whereas the other is blasphemous, confusing, incoherent, man-made, and man-centered. One looks to God for salvation from sin and hell, while the other – in the guise of Christian piety – first condemns God by a human standard, and then rejects his self-revelation in order to rescue him from this same condemnation without abandoning this human standard. They resist truth by their private judgment and tradition, and they forbid Scripture to exercise any authority on the question. They make the most simple biblical doctrine into the most difficult and confusing, and make the name of Christ an object of mockery among the unbelievers. This is the inevitable result of denying that God is the sovereign and righteous author of sin.

Verse 21 describes the previous condition of the Colossians, and in doing so lists for us some of the effects of sin on the human person: "And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds" (ESV). The two categories of damage are the intellectual and the behavioral, or thought and conduct. Adam's sin initiated a spiritual corruption in him that has been passed on to all his descendents, so that every person after him is born with a depraved heart.

All of a sinner's beliefs, thoughts, reasonings, desires, priorities, ambitions, and emotions are against God. Because God is a God of truth, and the truth about all things are established and disclosed by him, a sinner is therefore also against truth and cannot know the truth, not just what is usually considered religious truth, but the truth about any matter. Sin ensnares all non-Christians in irrational systems of thought and methods of investigation, so that in all subjects of study they are never able to rise above the level of foolish speculation. They do not want to know the truth, and they are unable to find the truth. Their foolish and immoral thinking is in turn manifested in their wicked actions. These include various intellectual demonstrations of their unbelief and disagreement against God, and also things such as murder, adultery, dishonesty, covetousness, hatred, and so on.

Thus one way to summarize the sinful condition is that non-Christians are foolish and wicked people who perform foolish and wicked actions. As Ephesians 4:18-19 says, "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." They are alienated from God. They are unfamiliar with intelligence and righteousness.

So Scripture presents God and non-Christians as enemies. All non-Christians hate truth, reason, and goodness. But this relationship is not one-sided. They are enemies, not just because sinners are hostile against God, as evident in their thoughts and actions, but also because God has foreordained his wrath against them, and he executes his decree in condemnation and judgment both in this life and in the life to come.

There is no quality or resource in sinners by which they can save themselves. Salvation is granted only through the one way that God has appointed, and sinners cannot earn their pardon by good deeds. But speaking hypothetically, even if there is a way by which they can save themselves, non-Christians cannot find it, for their depraved minds lack intelligence. And even if it is permitted, they cannot perform enough good deeds – or any good deed – that is sufficient to cancel the debt incurred by their wickedness, for all their works are evil. It is necessary to acknowledge the extent of the depravity of man in order to understand and appreciate the grace and glory of Christ in his work of redemption. When we compromise the doctrine of sin, we also undermine the doctrine of salvation.

Paul reminds the Colossians that once they were in this condition, but they did not remain in it. This is because God has reconciled them through Christ. And here we enter into the area of christology, the person and work of Christ, especially as it relates to soteriology. We have considered Christ as creator and sustainer, and now we will see him in his role as redeemer.

We have already discussed Christ's deity in connection with the statement, "He is the image of the invisible God," and in connection with his role in creation and providence. He has all the essential qualities and powers of God the Father, or the divine attributes. Moreover, verse 19 says, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him." At the same time, Christ possesses a human nature. This is indicated by the fact that he has a "physical body" that could undergo death, and by which he atoned for the sins of the elect.

Here we note again that the passage places the emphasis on Christ not only as God the Son, or the second member of the Trinity, but as Christ the mediator, as one who has taken upon himself a human nature by which he visited the earth and redeemed the chosen ones. That is, of course God the Son is divine, but since he has remained the same in his divine nature, then so is the incarnation of the Son, Jesus Christ.

He is so truly God that he is the very image of the Father, and he is so truly human that he could undergo physical death. Both aspects of his person, the divine and the human, must be maintained. In our context, both would counter false strands in Gnostic teachings, if indeed Paul is writing to confront them. In any case, the positive affirmation of the full deity and humanity of Christ is more important than the exact nature of the heresy that Paul writes to refute, that is, if there is a heresy in view at all. By affirming the truth concerning both the deity and humanity of Christ, all teachings that undermine either are then known as false.

This proper understanding of the nature of Christ is necessary to preserve a biblical doctrine on the work of Christ. At this time our focus turns to the atonement. The deity of Christ lends to his death infinite value and significance, but since God cannot die, it is the humanity of Christ that makes it possible for such a death to occur. The doctrine of the atonement, then, refers to Christ's work of sacrifice by which he secured redemption for those who would believe, and effected reconciliation between God and these chosen ones.

Paul writes, "But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death…by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (v. 22, 20). The reconciliation has been brought about through the death of Christ's physical body. It was not some spiritual or symbolic death, but among other things, a physical one. Moreover, this death occurred "on the cross," emphasizing the history and implying the sufficiency of the event. It happened at a definite time and at a definite location, and it does not need to be repeated. This prevents the atonement from being only a spiritual or symbolic event in our doctrine, and it excludes any theory that in some sense suggests a repetition of the event, as in the Roman Catholic view of the Lord's Supper. Thus an insistence on this physical and historical aspect of the work of Christ is in itself a valuable and necessary affirmation of saving truth, and at the same time a repudiation of many heresies.

Proceeding to the doctrine of salvation, or soteriology, our passage alludes to four main items. They are conversion, justification, sanctification, and preservation. In a fuller study of salvation, election would come before this list, and glorification would come after. But since these two things are not clearly referenced in the passage, we will focus our attention on the four that are mentioned.

Conversion, in the context of this passage, would be an act of God in connection with the work of Christ by which he changes the sinner's disposition from hostility toward God into adoration and obedience, his intellect from foolishness to enlightenment, and his behavior from wickedness to righteousness. The attitude that the Christian has toward God is often summed up by the word "faith." Its basic meaning could refer to nothing more than an intellectual assent toward revealed propositions. The nature of these propositions is such that, when one truly affirms them, this belief implies an antecedent inner work of God, and produces effects that are demanded by these propositions, such as obedience and holiness.

The atonement secures for the chosen ones justification and sanctification in Christ, so that they may be presented to God "holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation." This assumes that the Christian's faith would be preserved from backsliding and destruction, or from the believer's perspective, that he would persevere in his faith. Indeed, Romans 8:29-30 states that all those who are justified are also glorified, so that it is impossible for a genuine believer to fall from his faith so completely and permanently that he could be justified, but then finally loses this justification and fails to attain glorification in Christ.

Since Paul is appealing to the Colossians to persist in their faith, it is appropriate that he stresses their conscious effort in maintaining it: "…if you continue in your faith, established

and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel" (v. 23). That said, Scripture elsewhere explains that it is in fact God who preserves this faith, so that even our conscious effort are motivated and sustained by God's Spirit (Philippians 2:13).[42] In this manner, no believer will fail to attain glorification, and none shall fall from the grace of Christ. The believer's perseverance is thus a product or effect of God's preservation. Therefore, no believer can boast in his faithfulness, as even this is provided and maintained by God, so that he alone receives the glory. Anyone who boasts can boast only about what God has done.

From the doctrine of salvation we proceed to the doctrine of the church, or ecclesiology. There is a natural transition because the church is the community of individual believers, gathered together by the saving message of the gospel. We will make some preliminary comments about the church before turning to the passage's own emphasis.

Theologians make a distinction between what is called the visible and the invisible church. Whether it is appropriate to characterize the difference with the idea of visibility is open to debate, but it is possible to make the distinction clear and precise by an explanation.

The visible church consists of all those who profess the Christian faith, who claim to follow Christ, and who join themselves with others who also profess the faith. The problem is that a person who does not have genuine faith in Christ can still claim to believe in him. Although he might find acceptance in the church, his profession is false, dishonest, and hypocritical. Such a person is often self-deceived, so that even he might think that his faith is genuine and sincere. In fact, in many cases it is possible for someone who has never even professed the faith to join a community of believers, and it is simply assumed that he is a Christian like the others.

Therefore, the visible church is infiltrated by many false believers and outright unbelievers. There are at least three factors that prevent the church from being overrun by them. First, divine providence regulates the number of false believers in the visible church. Second, biblical preaching on the one hand converts many unbelievers, and on the other, it so offends many of those who refuse, and it so tortures their consciences and sentiments, that they are compelled to leave the church. Third, church discipline exposes and expels unbelievers who might claim to profess the faith, but who so stubbornly defy the doctrines and commands of Jesus Christ that they are banished from the church and shunned by the community.

Infestations of non-Christians occur where preaching is not strong and discipline is not enforced. Church leaders must confront this as a serious threat to the mission of the church. It is not a sign of compassion to allow unbelievers to run rampant in the community; rather, we must expose them, restrict their activities, and neutralize their influence. Non-Christians are alienated from God and enemies in their minds (v. 21), and it is pure fantasy to think that they will remain part of the community in silence and submission, without corrupting the church.

[42] See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*.

Some boast about their acceptance and tolerance toward unbelievers. But Paul writes, "Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast – as you really are" (1 Corinthians 5:6-7). It is impossible for us to discern and uproot all the unbelievers in the church, but the non-Christian population within the covenant community must be controlled, and each one who has been exposed as a false brother must be confronted with fairness and strictness, "so that no wickedness will be among you" (Leviticus 20:14).

Non-Christians disobey the commands of Jesus Christ, and they despise and oppose his teachings. Their agenda is, of course, not the preaching of the gospel and the advancement of the kingdom, but the destruction of the church and its message. Thus when the church is infiltrated by a large number of unbelievers, it will inevitably suffer the corresponding consequences. Non-Christians, who do not seek biblical counsel but at the same time demand attention, drain the personal and financial resources of the church. By their evil speech and conduct, they introduce doctrinal and ethical corruption into the community. Their failure to uphold the church's standard of thinking and living ensures an inferior public image for the church and for the faith. Their immoral dealings, such as dishonest business practices or pleas for assistance, might inflict otherwise unnecessary losses and expenses to others in the community. Those who have established themselves in the community might even gain control over church policies, thus directly affecting the community's doctrines, practices, finances, programs, and outreaches.

As for the invisible church, it consists of those whom God has truly chosen, converted, and collected into the body of Christ. In other words, the visible church consists of those who claim to be Christians, but among these are true believers and false believers, since some claim to believe but do not in fact believe. But the invisible church consists of only true believers. Although it is impossible for us to know the precise number and identities of these individuals, so that this collection of believers remains "invisible" to us, Scripture assures us that God knows those who are his.

One important point to note is that, although all true believers who are in the visible church are also in the invisible church, many of those who are in the invisible church are not a part of the visible church. This is just another way of saying that many true Christians are not members of some persistent and recognizable local communities of believers. Here the issue is not whether it is always desirable for a Christian to belong to such a community – in fact, the answer is no – but whether it is possible to be a true Christian, to truly believe in Christ, and not belong to such a community – the answer is that it is possible.

Nevertheless, it is not a neutral choice. One must have biblical and defensible reasons to deliberately remain outside of the visible church. But on the other hand, two relevant points are often neglected. First, one must possess reasons that are just as biblical and defensible to attend and support a local community that is unfaithful to Christ in doctrine and practice. And second, the visible or local church is often defined in such a way as to exclude legitimate communities that are rejected simply because they are different in their background, magnitude, organization, and other non-defining factors.

This distinction between the visible and invisible church reminds us to exercise discernment and humility. That is, it reminds us that not every member of the visible church is a true believer. He may be a demon in disguise, waiting to wreck havoc in the community. Church leaders who tolerate a stubborn offender shares in his guilt. On the other hand, the distinction also reminds us that God is greater than the community of individuals that is visible to us, or the limited number of credentials and authorities that we would acknowledge.

The Pharisees challenged Jesus, asking, "By what authority do you do these things?" when their own recognition came from one another, and not from God. Thus what purported to be a respected and organized community of teachers became nothing more than a conspiracy against the divine messenger, concerning whom God thundered, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!" Later the religious leaders persecuted the apostles, but Gamaliel said, "For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God" (Acts 5:38-39).

Our passage relates christology to ecclesiology in verse 18, where it says, "And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy." Consistent with its emphasis on Christ's supremacy, the passage states that he is the head of the church. The body metaphor is just that, a metaphor, so that not everything about a human body is to be applied to the church just because the church is said to be a body and Christ is the head. Those who are eager to assert their opinion sometimes take the analogy and run too far with it, so that what they say about the church may be true of the human body, but not true of the church or of Christ.

For example, to say that Christ is the head of the body does not mean that he "depends on" the church to function, as Barclay has said in connection with Ephesians 5:23, where Paul uses the same metaphor. The passage asserts his supremacy, so that such an application would in fact undermine its own purpose. Rather, the point is that Christ rules over the church, and not that he depends on it. The same is true in Ephesians 5, where it is said that the wife submits to the husband, as the church submits to Christ.

Finally, we can place verse 23 under this heading of ecclesiology, since it informs us of the mission of the church as a collective and the mission of the preacher as an individual. The mission of the church is to proclaim the gospel "to every creature under heaven." This does not refer to a "hit and run" method of preaching the gospel. As I have explained elsewhere, whenever possible, the biblical approach involves an extended period of teaching the full system of Christian doctrines, and all the commands and teachings of Christ.[43] As for the individual preacher, he is a servant laboring at his assigned post in contribution to this broader mission of the church (v. 23, 25).

[43] See Vincent Cheung, *Preach the Word*.

By relating the doctrine of Christ to all other doctrines in the Christian system, the passage demonstrates that christology does not stand by itself. Rather, it overlaps and interpenetrates other doctrines in such a manner that renders it impervious to arbitrary alterations. When the Christian faith is understood as a *system*, and when the relations and implications of all propositions are noticed and specified, then any assault against or aberration from sound doctrine becomes highly detectable and easily refutable. Christianity does not represent only a narrow disagreement against other viewpoints, but it is a comprehensive declaration of war against all non-Christian worldviews and against all non-biblical thoughts. Anything less than a full acknowledgment of Christ as Revealer, Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer – and all that these items include and imply – is not Christianity.

COLOSSIANS 1:24-2:5

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness – the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. 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.

I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

Paul has been laying down the doctrinal foundation for the rest of his letter, and this is the reason we have allotted so much time to the previous passages. Now in a more personal section, he proceeds to discuss his work and how it relates to the Colossians and other believers. First, in 1:24-29, he describes in general his suffering for the church, his commission from God, and the message, method, and purpose of his ministry. Next, in 2:1-5, he explains that his work is related to the Colossians and the other Christians in their part of the world, even though they have never met him. Verse 4 indicates a specific reason for much of what he says in the letter.

Paul writes, "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's affliction" (v. 24). Although he is making a positive statement about what he does, because of misunderstandings, it is needful to first indicate what he cannot mean by it.

Divine justice always entails condemnation and punishment against transgressions of God's law; in other words, we must "pay" for our sins. However, since our sins have offended an infinite God, the price is also infinite. Since our suffering is of finite value, it can never satisfy divine justice. Moreover, even if we were able to pay for our sins through suffering punishment, an unrighteous suffering – suffering with anything other than the perfect reason and attitude – would in itself be another sin against an infinite God. Our sinful disposition and total depravity would prevent us from suffering for our sins in a righteous manner. So the truth is that no one can pay his own debt – no one can redeem himself through suffering the punishment due to him.

Rather, God in his grace sent his own Son, who took upon himself a human nature to redeem the chosen ones. He paid our debt by suffering the punishment that was meant for us. And by this he has canceled the condemnation that was against us. Now by faith in him and in what he has done, we have peace with God, righteousness in Christ, freedom from sin, and an eternal hope.

The above is a limited summary of why Christ's suffering was necessary and what this suffering purchased for us. When it comes to verse 24, the most dangerous and erroneous of all possible misinterpretations would be to think that his suffering was incomplete, that his suffering was insufficient to redeem us from our debt and to effect for us a full salvation.

There are a number of biblical passages that address the topic, and that preclude this misinterpretation. Just several verses before this (1:13), Paul affirms that in Christ we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins, and that we have been rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son. The language leaves no room for any deficiency, any middle place, or any unfinished business where Christ's atonement is concerned.

Later in this same letter he writes, "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross" (2:13-14). In Christ all our sins have been forgiven, and the judgment against us has been canceled. This leaves no room for additional vicarious suffering as far as the purpose of redemption is concerned.

Another example comes from Hebrews 10, where it says that when Jesus "had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (v. 12-14). The obvious emphasis is the final and complete effect of Christ's sacrifice. He offered "for all time one sacrifice for sins," and by this one sacrifice – a single event in history – he "made perfect forever" those who would believe in him. There is no deficiency, no unfinished business, and no outstanding debt for himself or someone else to pay.

Therefore, whatever Paul is saying, he cannot mean that Christ's suffering for the salvation of believers is incomplete, so that he requires his special saints and apostles, or his people in general, to undergo additional suffering to supply the deficiency. Christians indeed suffer in this world, but not because Christ's suffering falls short of effecting a full salvation for us. Since Christ's sacrifice is complete and sufficient, Paul is not suffering to pay a debt that Christ left unpaid. His suffering is for another reason, although this suffering has a close connection with Christ in a different sense.

The most appropriate understanding of the text is that this is just a natural application of the union between Christ and all Christians, or the church, and that the language merely reflects this. Before Paul's conversion, he was a Pharisee who aggressively persecuted the

believers, but when Christ confronts him in Acts 9, he says, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (v. 4). In other words, when unbelievers criticize and attack Christians, they are in fact persecuting Christ. This suffering is not a payment for sin, in the sense of an atonement to purchase salvation, but it is the result of the unbelievers' opposition against the message of Jesus Christ.

While he was on the earth, he suffered in his own human body, but now unbelievers continue to attack him through persecuting his people, that is, the collective "body" of the church. So Paul writes elsewhere, "The sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives" (2 Corinthians 1:5). Since we have become one with him, we also suffer with him. But we can rejoice in our suffering because we esteem the honor of enduring persecution for his sake, the knowledge of Christ in "the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (Philippians 3:10), and the glorious future that God has promised to all who believe in him.

Some commentators suggest that the verse alludes to a Jewish teaching that God has allotted a definite amount of suffering before the end time, and so Paul rejoices in his suffering because he is hastening the Lord's return by contributing to this predetermined amount of afflictions endured. Along with this might also be the idea that, since the amount of suffering has been fixed, the more Paul endures, the less the other believers have to suffer. Thus it is also in this sense that he suffers for the church.

We find no decisive reason to accept this interpretation, and there are several contextual and linguistic objections against it. In any case, it cannot replace the one that we have just given. This is because, first, this interpretation is not necessary in making sense of the verse or in preventing distortions about the atonement; and second, for this interpretation itself to make sense, it must presuppose the one that we have stated. That is, Paul's language reflects the union between Christ and the church. This is a necessary part of understanding 1:24, and sufficient to satisfy Paul's theology and language.

Paul suffers for the sake of the whole church, including the Colossians and the Laodiceans (1:24, 2:1), because the suffering occurs as he follows the commission that God gave him. This commission requires him to disseminate and establish the Christian religion. There is both a width and a depth to his task. He must introduce the faith to many people in many areas, but he must also ensure that he preaches the full message, and that the people follow it in an accurate and thorough manner. And so now our focus turns to his mission, method, and message.

Paul writes that he wishes to "present everyone perfect in Christ" (1:28), that it is "to this end" that he labors (1:29), and adding that it is his "purpose" for believers to have "complete understanding" (2:2). When he refers to the ministry offices of the church – apostles, prophets, evangelists, and so on – he writes that they were given "so that the body of Christ may be built up…and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13). He does not even mention evangelism or conversion.

What we call the Great Commission does not tell us to make converts by preaching a simple gospel message. Instead, it tells us to "make disciples of all nations…teaching them to obey

everything" (Matthew 28:19-20). Our task is not just to make people enter, but to make them abide, take root, and become productive. And our message is not the bare minimum, if there is even such a thing with God, but the whole word of God – everything. This is not something added to the Great Commission, to be performed after our evangelism leaves us with a surplus of resources; rather, this *is* the Great Commission, and to neglect this is to disobey it.

One of the most notable but neglected fact about the church's mission is that its main concern is not the conversion of sinners, but the perfection of believers, those whom God has chosen for salvation. If I leave my home and walk to a destination, I do not call the act of getting up from my chair, or the act of opening the door, or even the act of walking itself my destination. Each of these is only a step, albeit a necessary step, on the way to my destination. Likewise, conversion is not the goal, but a necessary step to the goal, which is perfection in Christ.

Thus the mission of the church is not evangelism, but discipleship. Evangelism is necessary only as a step by which the elect undergo conversion so that they may become lifelong disciples that strive to attain perfection. Notice that this does not undermine the importance of evangelism – we insist that it is necessary – but it points out that our task does not end in the conversion of sinners, but it continues in helping them attain maturity in the faith, "so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ" (1:28). Of course we may present conversion as the goal in contexts where evangelism is the immediate task at hand, but it is never the overarching goal of the church.

It is of tremendous importance whether our position on the mission of the church is biblical or unbiblical, and whether it has continual or only limited relevance for the entire spiritual development of all believers. Whether we perceive our main objective as conversion or perfection will impact every aspect of the church's agenda, including every decision involving church outreach, allocation of resources, parenting education, marriage counseling, charity programs, church discipline, the topic, content, and style of every sermon or sermon series, and many other such things. In the end, it will determine whether we are able to accomplish our true goal. That is, if God defines our mission as the perfection of the saints (with evangelism as a necessary but only one of many tasks), and we decide that it should rather be the conversion of sinners, then it is improbable that we will accomplish that which God requires us to do, since we would not acknowledge or strive for it at all.

To organize our efforts as if evangelism is the main mission and as if conversion is the ultimate goal is a mistake. It is unbiblical, so that it is disobedient to Christ's command. It is impractical, since it takes away the momentum from all other necessary ministry efforts, especially those that also closely contribute to the true goal, which is the perfection of the saints. The correct approach is to make the perfection of the saints not an afterthought but the overarching goal, the first and last consideration, at the outset of all church programs and activities. Here we speak in a relative manner, since to honor God is our actual first and last objective. But how do we honor him in our church agenda, and in the church's

interaction with people? How do we obey him in ministry? It is to make the perfection of the saints the highest priority.

Another advantage is that this way of thinking is implemented in the individual believer without any need for modification. Just as the church's mission is the perfection of the saints, the proper objective of the individual believer for himself is perfection, in knowledge, in reverence, and in holiness. (When it comes to ministry, the mission of the individual is the same as the church – the perfection of the saints – since the church is nothing other than a collective of individuals.) A Christian who thinks in accordance with Christ's commission to all the church understands it is not enough just to be converted, but true believers have been given a new heart, and a disposition to strive for maturity and fullness in Christ.

The main method by which we achieve our mission of the perfection of the saints is intellectual communication (1:28). This can be carried out in speech, in writing, or even in sign language. As to content and style, it may come as a bold declaration, a detailed lesson, a wise counsel, a gentle plea, a scathing rebuke, and in many other ways. Regardless of the exact manner in which it is conveyed, the method is the communication of intelligible propositions. And these are propositions that explain and apply divine revelation to the audience.

This task entails a conscious labor and struggle for the minister (1:29).[44] It requires much labor to study out and think through, and then to preach on and write about the things that God has revealed to us through Scripture. Then, there are many peripheral items that support this main task and make it possible, and that demand effort as well, such as the physical acts of traveling, visiting the sick, and so on. In addition, the minister's work is often a struggle because of the oppositions that come against him, from his own shortcomings, from circumstances, from unbelievers, and from false brothers. He is often criticized and misunderstood, in many cases, by those who call themselves Christians. He could live to please men and to be their mouthpiece, but that would make him a worthless person. But if he would please God and speak his word, he will encounter resistance from all sides. Therefore, his work demands much inner strength and courage.

Where present at all, this otherworldly power does not come from the minister himself, but as Paul says, it is "his energy, which so powerfully works in me." The vast majority of ministers lack this divine energy. Because of persistent unbelief, and a fear that this unbelief be exposed, because of a false theology about spiritual gifts and manifestations, and the work of the Holy Spirit, because of a love of tradition rather than the command of God, and because of a lust for acceptance and credentials bestowed by mere men, most ministers of the gospel do not exhibit any degree of divine power or unction in their work.

[44] Sam Storms writes, "Paul's 'struggle' is surely a reference to his prayer life. On this virtually all students of Colossians agree" (*The Hope of Glory*, Crossway, 2007, p. 143). Both of these statements are false. There is no indication that Paul's struggle has to do with prayer, and the context suggests something else. Also, contrary to the claim that "virtually all" agree with his interpretation, numerous major commentaries agree with our present usage of the verse (see Hendriksen, p. 101-102). In fact, most of those that I consulted do not say that Paul's struggle has to do with prayer. But the popularity of an interpretation means nothing. The main issue is that the passage itself gives no indication that Paul refers to prayer.

It is doubtful that many of them even believe in it. They labor by pure human effort and ingenuity, and the result is a failure and a stench. Paul is conscious of this divine power and considers it indispensable, for it is this energy that enables his own human effort.

This is another text where theologians and commentators sometimes use to assert the compatibility of divine sovereignty and human freedom or human responsibility. We have pointed out that human freedom and human responsibility bear no necessary relationship with each other, and that man is responsible because God has decided to judge him in relation to the moral law. Freedom does not enter into the discussion at all. Then, we point out that divine sovereignty is not compatible with human freedom, if the freedom we refer to is freedom from God. Clearly, if God is sovereign over man, then man is not free from God, and so man has no freedom. But if the freedom we refer to is freedom from something or someone else other than God, then it is irrelevant when the topic is God's sovereignty. It is misleading to even mention it.

If the assertion is that divine sovereignty is compatible with human choice, then it is again irrelevant and misleading. First, if we say that God's sovereignty comes short of controlling human choice, then this sovereignty is not absolute, so of course a powerful but not truly sovereign God is compatible with human choice, since man turns out to be free from God after all. But if we say that God's sovereignty is absolute, then it also determines human choice. Then, to say that divine sovereignty is compatible with a person making a choice is like saying that my act of snapping a pencil in half is compatible with the pencil snapping in half. Of course it is – I am the one who did it! The difference is that God has more control over a man's will than I have over a pencil.

So of course absolute divine sovereignty is "compatible" with human choice, since it is God who actively *causes* each human choice. And we are back to the realization that there is no point is stirring up so much trouble over "compatibility," since it is an irrelevant and misleading point. Man is still not free, and he is still responsible. And he is responsible because he is not free. Therefore, the divine energy comes from God, the human labor comes from God (Philippians 2:12-13), and just to complete the teaching, the outcome also comes from God – it "grows as God causes it to grow" (2:19; also 1 Corinthians 3:7).

Paul confesses that this energy "so powerfully works in me." Someone who says that today might be criticized by Christians as arrogant and self-important, but when Paul says it, they stand in wonderment, and congratulate their respect for the apostle. Those whose mindset are tuned to the current culture rather than the heavenly mindset tend to have a different standard for biblical characters and those that they idolize. And some have ceased to believe that God will work in this way – there has not been a cessation in spiritual powers, but a cessation in faith and piety.

As for the content of the verbal communication, Paul says that God has commissioned him to present "the word of God in its fullness" (1:25), and to lead believers to "the full riches of complete understanding" (2:2). Notice that this letter to the Colossians is itself a product of Paul's effort to fulfill his commission of using verbal communication to perfect the saints. We can say the same thing about all his other writings, and all other parts of the

Bible – all of the New Testament and the Old Testament – are also the result of the divine mandate to perfect the saints by the various prophets and apostles. The apostles repeatedly taught and applied the Old Testament as they performed their work. Thus the content of the verbal communication, on the basis of which all ministries function in order to perfect the saints, is the whole Bible.

Then, Paul makes a specific emphasis here, and calls the message that he delivers a "mystery." As mentioned, in Scripture a mystery is not something that is so intellectually difficult that the finite human mind cannot understand; rather, it is something that has been hidden, "but is now disclosed to the saints" (1:26). Again, this word is frequently misused in preaching and in theology. The Bible does not teach us something, and then tell us that it is impossible to understand. This idea is an evil doctrine invented and propagated by those who wish to cover up their own incompetence, inconsistencies, and their disagreements with the Bible.

Paul does not say, "I want to tell you something that is impossible to understand." But this is the nonsense that theologians after him wish to impose on everyone. Instead, Paul says, "I want to tell you the word of God in its fullness, and I want you to have a complete understanding. I want to teach you everything, and I want you to know and understand everything." It is true that some things are more difficult to understand than others (2 Peter 3:15), but it is possible to understand all of them, and none of them are called "mystery" to denote a high level of difficulty. Also, most of the topics that are commonly considered the most difficult are in fact some of the easiest to teach and to learn, such as the doctrines on God's sovereignty, election and reprobation, the origination and continuation of sin and evil, the creation of hell, where God actively tortures unbelievers forever, and others.

Theologians claim that these doctrines are difficult only because their own prejudice clashes with Scripture. There is nothing within Scripture to reconcile, since there are no contradictions in Scripture, not even apparent ones. But when the prejudice of theologians contradicts the revelation of God, it is not only difficult but impossible to reconcile the two. Those who refuse to yield but who do not want to appear guilty thus put on a show of reverence and blame the contradictions on Scripture, claiming that Scripture appears to contradict itself only because our minds are finite. And then in the guise of false humility, they conveniently leave these contradictions to be reconciled by God in the future. Some even think that they will never be reconciled, since our minds will still be finite even in our glorified condition. There is no biblical or logical basis to any of this. It is a conspiracy designed to hide the theologians' own disagreements with Christianity.

Since they refuse to abandon their own opinions and traditions, then of course it seems that these doctrines are difficult – they made up the problems. But in themselves it is almost impossible to conceive of doctrines that are more simple and obvious. These are some of the least perplexing doctrines in Scripture, since they are clearly and repeatedly stated, assumed, explained, and applied. The measure of the difficulty experienced is the measure of the people's defiance against these biblical doctrines, and not the measure of their intellectual complexity. A "complete understanding" is the inheritance of believers. We must not be cheated out of it by disobedient theologians, who want us to exchange the

divine promise for the pagan's portion, and complete understanding for paradox and contradiction.

As for the content of this mystery, Paul writes in verse 27, "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." This mystery was hidden in a manner but it is now declared in the open. It was hidden only "in a manner," because there are explicit prophecies in the Old Testament stating that God would save his people through Christ, that Christ would redeem his people by sacrificing himself to make an atonement, and that through faith in Christ peoples of all nations, and not just the Jews, would be included in the church.

This does not seem very hidden at all. So has it ever been a mystery? It was a mystery in a manner, and in the way that Paul means it. The Old Testament prophecies hardly left anything unsaid in terms of principles and generalities. The prophets had discovered even "the times and circumstances" of "the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (1 Peter 1:11-12). Nevertheless, New Testament revelation indeed contains additional details and even greater clarity. In addition, many of the Jews denied what had been in their Scripture all along about the inclusion of the Gentiles into the covenant community. In fact, the Jews themselves are excluded by their unbelief.

Finally, this promise was hidden from the Gentiles – not that it was entirely impossible for any of them to find out, since they could have read the Old Testament as well, and there had always been some Gentiles who believed, but by God's providence it was generally not known among them. For this reason, before the coming of Christ and the preaching of the apostles, the Gentiles were "without hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12). The Jews had the promise of the coming Messiah, and knew to expect him, whereas the Gentiles did not know that anyone was coming to save them. But the mystery has been disclosed, and now they know.

Sometimes people are so fond of popular biblical expressions (not that they are used often in Scripture, but that they have become Christian clichés) that they repeat them without regard to their original contexts and meanings. When Paul says that God has sent him to proclaim to the Gentiles the mystery, now disclosed, which is "Christ in you," he does not mean that he travels to city after city, town and town , village after village, shouting, "Christ in you! Christ in you!" And when he writes to the Corinthians that he did not preach anything to them other than "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2), it does not mean that he came to them and shouted, "Jesus Christ and him crucified! Jesus Christ and him crucified!" The latter is sometimes used to promote a "simple gospel," the idea that we should "just preach the gospel" and not argue about it, or some anti-intellectual agenda.

However, these are mere expressions that represent entire sets of doctrines, even elaborate, complex, and lengthy discourses. They do not so much tell us the actual words of the message (not to say all the words of the message) as the central motif of the message or even the theme of the worldview expounded to the people. One revelation behind Paul's ministry is that both Jews and non-Jews must come to God on the same basis, through faith

in Jesus Christ, and they will be accepted when they come in this way. And this is why he travels to the various peoples, to tell them about this. This is the idea behind the statement that he preached "Christ in you" among the Gentiles. As for "Jesus Christ and him crucified," it does not mean that Paul refrains from argumentation, but that he refuses to include pagan philosophy in his doctrines, and that he does not employ sophisticated rhetoric to manipulate his audience. He preaches only the Christian faith.

When it comes to his actual sermons and letters, we find extensive expositions and arguments about various doctrines, and sometimes practically a whole systematic theology, all centered around Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation. We can indeed preach a simple message, in the sense that we should make it easy to understand, but we must not preach a partial message, in the sense that it is incomplete in its content. If we are to follow Paul's example, we should do the same thing. We need not repeat in every presentation things that people already know or assume, but to those who are either hostile or ignorant about the faith in general, as in almost the entire population of the world today, both Christians and non-Christians, we must do what Paul did – preach a whole system of theology.

In the midst of all this, Paul directs our attention to one point about Christ, and writes that in him "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3). The meaning of "hidden" here refers to something "stored" and "deposited" rather than something removed from view so that no one can access it. He means that wisdom and knowledge are treasures, and that they are all stored in Christ. It is customary to distinguish between the words here translated "wisdom" and "knowledge," but we agree with Calvin as he comments on this verse: "I do not put any great difference between *wisdom* and *understanding* in this passage, for the duplication is only to strengthen it; as if he had said that no knowledge, erudition, learning, wisdom, can be found elsewhere."[45]

The latter portion of Calvin's statement leads us to another point, namely, the positive assertion and negative implication of 2:3 make Christianity the most intellectual worldview in existence and the only rational worldview possible. Any expression of the Christian faith that does not present it as the zenith of intellectualism fails to do justice to the nature of Christ. Any theology that does not present the Christian faith as the sole possessor of truth – any truth at all – is not Christian theology. Paul's statement effectively establishes the gospel as a message that says to the unbeliever, "I am completely right, and you are completely wrong. I have all the truth, and you have none of the truth, not even a little. I am intellectually competent, and you are intellectually bankrupt. I am rational in what I believe, and you are irrational in what you believe. Everything that you believe is wrong and foolish."

Whether we take this position reflects our true opinion of Christ, and it is shameful for any believer to even hesitate to openly affirm this. I would be embarrassed before the Lord if someone were to even misunderstand me for being more relaxed than this in my belief. All wisdom and knowledge are in Christ – all of it – and Christianity has a complete monopoly on truth, intelligence, and rationality. And all non-Christian beliefs are untrue,

[45] Calvin, p. 326.

unintelligent, and irrational. This is something that we can prove with ease in argumentation. The Christian has entered into a whole new intellectual realm of rationality, knowledge, and logical thinking to which unbelievers cannot attain. It is impossible to relax on this claim without attacking the very nature of Christ. Thus anything less than this in our profession is blasphemy.

That is the general doctrine, but Paul makes a specific application here. He writes in the next verse, "I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments" (2:4). That is, they are to focus their minds on the truth, so that they will not be deceived by arguments that may appear persuasive to some, but that are in fact false. Now, if Paul is writing against a specific false doctrine, then we can know something about what it teaches by the truths that he emphasizes in the letter.

In particular, since verses 2 and 3 are written so that the deception in verse 4 would not occur, we can infer that any false teaching that Paul seeks to counteract would undermine the truths in verse 2 and 3. Or, to consider this from the other direction, what Paul says in verses 2 and 3 provides the prevention or antidote to the deception that he warns about in verse 4.

And what we find in verses 2 and 3 is that Paul affirms his desire and the possibility for the Colossians to have "the full riches of complete understanding," and to know Christ, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Therefore, it is likely that if Paul is writing to counteract a specific false teaching, it is one that undermines the fullness of wisdom and knowledge in Christ, and the possibility for believers to attain a complete understanding of all things through the Christian faith.

This assessment is consistent with the content of the next passage (2:6-23), in which Paul reaffirms the fullness of the person of Christ and the work of Christ, so that the Christian needs only to depend on him. There is no need to supplement Christian spirituality with principles, rituals, and experiences that come from outside of our relationship with Christ or that are invented by men apart from Christ. The deception is in thinking that Christ is insufficient, or that the Christian worldview is insufficient. The emphasis here is that the Christian faith as delivered by the apostles is complete.

Although Paul sends them this warning, he tells the Colossians that he delights "to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is" (2:5). This seems to be an indication that, even if there is indeed a threat, at the time Paul writes this the Colossians have not been greatly influenced by the false teaching, and that until now their faith has remained overall sound and stable.

COLOSSIANS 2:6-23

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

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.

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. 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, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

This chapter covers a large section because of the close relationship between the verses. Although this passage includes many verses, because of our extensive discussions on the previous passages, there is nothing central here that we have not already considered in

some way. This is especially true of verses 9-15, which should now seem easy to understand.

Paul is continuing to write out of the concern he expressed in 2:4, namely, "I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments." The "this" refers to the truth that the fullness of wisdom is in Christ, and sophistries and deceptions are intended by "fine-sounding arguments." These can indeed come from a specific source, such as a group of false teachers attempting to indoctrinate the Colossians, but there is no decisive reason to rule out the possibility that Paul could be providing a general warning, perhaps against false ideas that are popular in the culture of the Colossians.

He continues this approach in verses 6-23. Positively, he states the truths that his readers need to know in this context, and negatively, he applies them against the errors that his readers must avoid. Paul summarizes his presentation in this section in verses 6-8 before going into details in verses 9-23. So verses 6-7 introduces a positive perspective, while verse 8 turns to the negative.

Verses 6 and 7 direct Christians to both maintain and advance in their faith. And the basis for maintaining and advancing their faith is that which they have "received" (v. 6), or that which they have been "taught" (v. 7). In other words, Christians must maintain and advance in their faith, and the way to do that is to *go back* to and *go deeper* into the teachings – the doctrine, the theology – that they have received concerning Jesus Christ and the Christian faith. This would include maintaining and advancing in obedience of these teachings.

Verse 8 then turns to the negative. The content of the verse demands a more lengthy treatment.

The "philosophy" that Paul warns against is "hollow and deceptive." It is "hollow" in that it is devoid of truth, wisdom, and reason, but it tries to convince people that it possesses these qualities by using methods and arguments that are "deceptive." In other words, this philosophy can appear wise to foolish people, such as non-Christians, or to Christians who at the moment fail to maintain their focus on the sound doctrines referred to in verses 6 and 7.

This philosophy is doomed to failure from the start because it is based on "human tradition" and "the basic principles of this world" rather than on Christ. It begins from the speculation of man, rather than the revelation of Christ. It is not a Christian philosophy. A tradition consists of a belief or practice, or a system of such, that is affirmed and guarded, and that is handed down to others. By this definition, there is nothing inherently wrong with tradition, and it is not something that necessarily lacks rational justification. In fact, a true system of belief ought to become a tradition that is embraced by all. And in this sense, the Christian faith itself can be a tradition, a revealed tradition. What Paul opposes is not tradition itself, but *human* tradition, or beliefs and practices that have been invented by men. It does not teach a true system of belief, but it gains acceptance by the use of deceptive appearances and arguments.

There is some question about the meaning of "the basic principles of this world." The two major interpretations understand Paul to be referring to either "elements" or "rudiments."[46] The former could refer to the earthly elements of ancient science (as in earth, water, fire, and air), or it could even refer to "elemental spirits of the universe" (RSV), including pagan deities that supposedly exercise power over peoples and nations.[47] "Rudiments," on the other hand, would refer to the first principles of a philosophy, that is, the basic principles, teachings, and assumptions of a system of thought.

Several considerations, including the context, favor the latter interpretation, so that the meaning should be "rudiments," as in basic principles or teachings. Paul refers to the rudiments of "the world," which in a context that chides the traditions of *men*, should be taken in the ethical sense.[48] The content of the rest of the passage is consistent with this understanding. In particular, 2:20 calls attention again to "the basic principles of this world" and cites "its rules" as "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" He says that these are "human commands and teachings…regulations." For this reason Calvin thinks the basic principles refer to "ceremonies."[49] But it is more precise to say that Paul is referring to the teachings about these ceremonies.

In any case, even if some insist that Paul has in mind elements or elemental spirits, it makes no pivotal difference in interpretation and application, since the meaning still reduces to a set of intellectual principles. This is because he is talking about a "philosophy," so that even if the reference directly concerns elements or spirits, he is in fact referring to the intellectual principles and assumptions associated with them.

These principles are false, Paul explains, because they are based on men's ideas and not based on Christ. This point is significant because it universalizes the application of the statement. The false philosophy is hollow and deceptive not just because it is based on some particular human inventions. If this is as far as Paul goes, then this verse might leave room for other human inventions to be correct, or at least they would have to be individually considered. But Paul says that the philosophy is false because it is not based on Christ, the Christ that the Colossians received and were taught (v. 6-7). In other words, any philosophy that is not based on the Christian faith as delivered by the apostles is a false philosophy.

A hollow and deceptive philosophy consists of the traditions and principles of men – things that they invented or deduced from their speculations and superstitions. These false principles pervade all non-Christian religions and philosophies. The natural sciences, including modern cosmology, physics, biology, and so on, are not exempted from this charge. Man-made philosophies are not only hollow, but also deceptive, and many Christians have been deceived into thinking that science is rational and authoritative. This

[46] We make a distinction between these two words for the sake of convenience, but of course "elements" can refer to elementary principles, in which case it would have a similar meaning as rudiments.
[47] N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Eerdmans, 1986), p. 101-102.
[48] William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon* (Baker, 1964), p. 110.
[49] Calvin, p. 330.

is what it claims, and this is what it wants us to believe, but it cannot withstand even the most basic logical scrutiny in its assumptions, methods, and conclusions. They are after all the traditions and principles of men, nothing more. On the other hand, true philosophy consists of Christian traditions and principles, things that God has revealed to us through the Scripture.

Attempts to destroy the Christian faith sometimes come from unexpected sources. Consider the case of pseudo-presuppositionalism. Some might be surprised that so many professing Christians would rise up to violently defend an anti-biblical epistemology, one that makes man's own sensation the precondition for any contact with biblical revelation, thus subjugating the entire Christian faith under subjective and unreliable human perception. And then this foolishness is integrated as a necessary component in what is supposedly a biblical system of apologetics. It stresses the role of presuppositions, but the problem is that its own presuppositions are based on human traditions and principles, the very thing that Paul condemns.

Paul warns against being taken "captive" by such a philosophy – not only one in particular, but any philosophy that is based on human traditions and principles, rather than on Christ. Pseudo-presuppositionalism is only one of many examples. Once a person is captured by the first principles of an irrational philosophy, one that is based on the inventions of men, he could order his whole life by it, including his understanding of the Christian faith. In another place, Paul calls this a mental "stronghold," a processing system and defense mechanism in the mind that protects false ideas and holds the person prisoner. It becomes a satanic outpost by which the evil one advances his cause, partly by reproducing such a stronghold in the minds of others.

We can refuse to submit to the same deception that has captured and enslaved so many. Instead, we will become established and built up in the philosophy of Christ. By the standard of 2:8, pseudo-presuppositionalism should be considered a non-Christian philosophy, a man-made tradition. We have no obligation to heed these hostages of human ideas, but because we are the faithful ones who stand on biblical principles, we have authority over them, and also an obligation to teach and warn them. Thus we must command their attention, and set their minds free by a philosophy that is truly based on Christ. This is one illustration that what Paul says has universal validity, since it is played out around us daily, but he makes a particular application that we will appreciate as we continue with the passage.

The verse does not disparage thinking, but promotes a Christian intellectualism. Paul does not say, "Do not be confused by the facts. Do not be taken by correct arguments. Do not be rational." No, he has the opposite attitude. He warns against non-factual, incorrect, and irrational philosophy. He does not renounce philosophy as such, for broadly speaking, a philosophy is just a worldview, or a system of beliefs, and in this sense the Christian faith is also a philosophy. He is against a philosophy that is based on human traditions and principles, and not on Christ. And his language suggests that a philosophy that is based on Christ would not be hollow and deceptive. A philosophy that derives its basic principles and assumptions from biblical revelation is a true philosophy – this is the Christian faith.

Corresponding to verses 6 and 7, verses 9-15 will draw attention to some definite doctrines that are especially relevant to the situation. And corresponding to verse 8, he will address some of the particular points raised by the false teachings under consideration. That is, although verses 9-15 contain teachings that are universally profitable for the believer, it is stated and gathered in this place because they are directed against the false teachings that Paul warns about in verse 8, and that he will enumerate in verses 16-23. We will follow his lead and first study the teachings in verses 9-15, and then apply them against the false teachings that Paul calls attention to in verses 16-23.

Verses 9-15 reinforce the teaching concerning the fullness of Christ, an idea that Paul emphasizes throughout this letter. Over and over again, he stresses the fact that Christ is complete. He applies this to the believers and adds, "and you have been given fullness in Christ." All of the false teachings that he counteracts in verses 16-23 undermine the sufficiency of Christ in one way or another. They suggest that it is acceptable or even necessary to supplement a simple reliance on the person and work of Christ with some religious observances, regulations, and experiences.

But if Christ's person and work are complete, and if Christians are complete in him, then to supplement the Christian faith with additional religious doctrines and practices, rituals, regulations, and revelations, would undermine one's spirituality rather than enhance it. Christ is so complete in his person and work that one must devalue him in order to make room for the addition of human traditions and principles. But when that happens, the person becomes "unspiritual," and not more spiritual. The Christian faith is so complete that to add anything to it is to take away from it.

He specifies several ways in which believers have received fullness in Christ. Christians have undergone spiritual circumcision, a "circumcision done by Christ," that has put off their sinful nature (v. 11). No doctrine of physical circumcision can add anything to the believer. Christians have experienced spiritual resurrection (v. 12-13). All unbelievers are dead in sin, but we have been made alive in Christ. A person is either spiritually dead or alive. Nothing could be done to make us more resurrected. The idea itself is senseless. Christians have received complete forgiveness. God has forgiven all our sins, canceled our debt, and nailed the note to the cross (v. 13-14). The language is final, and there is no room for improvement or for more forgiveness. Christians have attained complete victory. Christ has triumphed over all powers and authorities, and by our union with him, we share in his triumph (v. 15). We should stand firm in this, but there is nothing that needs to be done or that could be done to gain additional victory. Christ's work is complete, and we are complete in him.

The positive aspect of Paul's answer to false teaching is most important, because it provides the basis on which we may reject all aberrations. Any teaching suggesting that Christ's person or work is incomplete, and that we need something more in order to complete our salvation or enhance our spirituality, is automatically ruled out. For this reason, ministers ought to constantly teach and remind their listeners of the basics of the Christian faith through a positive exposition of biblical passages and doctrines. Of course, for this to

benefit a believer as he faces doctrinal deception, he must have the ability to apply the truths that he knows. But this requires only some basic reasoning skills, such as the ability to make simple deductions and inferences.

Paul has some specific examples in mind, and in verses 16-23, he applies to them what he has said in verses 9-15.

It would be wrong enough to enforce the Old Testament religious calendar on Christians, with verse 17 as the reason, but verse 16 probably suggests more than this to include observances instituted by human tradition. The theological criticism is that "These are shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (v. 17). A stringent observer of religious food laws and holy days may think that he has a basis to be confident about his spiritual commitment and to judge himself superior to others. But Paul's criticism is that, since Christ has already come, such a person has nothing but a shadow religion, an image of the reality. Therefore, he is in fact less spiritual than those who commit to Christ in simple faith. Moreover, since Christ the reality has already come, and since Paul and others have preached about his achievements, to persist in or return to a shadow religion is at the same time a denial of Christ, the reality, the actual substance of true religion.

If we will think about it for a moment, it might surprise and sadden us to realize that much of Christendom comes under the criticism of verse 17. Of course, the entire enterprise of Roman Catholicism is a shadow religion. But if we do not consider it part of Christianity at all, and we should not, then what about those Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, and others, who criticize other believers for failing to observe Easter and Christmas? They say that these are good days to remember Christ, and that these are great opportunities to draw attention to the faith. But first, the Bible does not teach this – to say that these are the advantages is itself a human tradition and opinion. And second, our passage explicitly tells believers to defy those who judge them on this issue. Anyone who then makes a negative judgment or criticism finds himself on the other side, in opposition to the apostle. All arguments are futile. This is the end of the discussion.

Nevertheless, it is a curious phenomenon that so many are attracted to a religion of shadow instead of a religion of reality. They prefer the symbol over the substance. And if there are no authorized symbols, because the substance has come, then they will invent some for themselves. And on the basis of tending to these symbols, they even assert a spiritual superiority over those who tend to the substance and the reality.

When we consider the nature of many of these symbols, we notice that they have at least three major characteristics. First, they appeal to the senses. Various tools, garments, and decorations appeal to the sense of sight. Special singings and instruments appeal to the sense of hearing. Food and drink appeal to the sense of taste. Candles and incenses appeal to the sense of smell. These are just a small list of examples, and some go further than others in organizing their entire religion into one for the senses. Second, they require much human effort and participation. The exercise of these symbols often demand elaborate arrangement and organization. Sometimes they require self-imposed labor and suffering.

Third, and people are often blind to this, they erect a barrier between God and man. Instead of going to God directly and regularly, they institute special days and rituals, and utilize special tools and trinkets. So while God invites all believers to come boldly to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16), it almost seems that these people would rather participate in their man-made rituals in order to delay coming to him.

Given these characteristics of a shadow religion, we may infer several reasons behind its attraction. A religion of shadow is in fact a religion of the flesh. It purports to be more spiritual, but in reality it is all of the flesh. It appeals to the sensation and not to the intellect, to the feeling faculties of man and not to his thinking faculties. In connection with this, a religion of shadow is more concrete or even more "real," that is, from the perspective of the flesh. It is less spiritual and less intellectual, but more physical and sensual. This is what the carnal mind wants. Christianity is too spiritual and too intellectual for a fleshly mentality. Related to this is the sense that in a religion of shadow there is more for the flesh to do and more for the flesh to control. And by equating one's spirituality with fleshly activities, such a religion accommodates the pride and unbelief of its adherents. Then, some people prefer a religion of shadow simply because they are bored with the actual Christian faith. Christ is complete, and his work is complete – he does not need them to add anything. And for some, this is just unacceptable, and boring. There is not enough in a religion of reality to satisfy their lust for sensual and animalistic stimulation.

Based on the above observations, the simple way to explain the attraction of a religion of shadow is that it is really for people who do not like God very much. A simple lifestyle of reading about him, thinking about him, talking about him, and praying to him is not enough. A direct contact with God through the mind with minimal sensual activities and distractions is unattractive and frustrating to them. Their lust for fleshly stimulation thus invents more complicated theories to believe and elaborate rituals to perform. All of this, it is most important to note, is not just a matter of preference. For one to persist in a religion of shadow when God commands a religion of reality means that this person has no spiritual reality, and no true contact with God.

As we proceed to verses 18-19, we must continue to keep in mind the positive context against which these negative criticisms are contrasted. That is, Christ's person and work are complete, and anything that undermines this idea of completeness is a false doctrine. Verse 18 describes a person who "goes into great detail about what he has seen." Those who are eager to suppress all spiritual manifestations on the basis of the sufficiency of Scripture cannot find support here, for the verse cannot refer to all such manifestations in general. The apostles themselves had visions and other so-called revelatory experiences, and other believers who were not apostles also had them. And of course, Paul writes this before the completion of Scripture, since he is writing a part of it. Yet Christ's person and work are already complete.

So spiritual manifestations in themselves do not conflict with the completeness of Christ, but Paul is targeting a particular kind of experience that leads to a particular kind of consequence. The vision that this person claims to have seen is associated with "false

humility" and "the worship of angels." Paul does not attack the idea of vision, but the false doctrine and the mindset of the person.

This is also the proper way to address claims to visions and dreams today. There is no biblical evidence to suggest that such things have ceased. Scripture is sufficient and complete, but if Christ wishes to appear to someone for whatever reason, I am not going to throw Warfield's book at the Lord and call him Beelzebub. Warfield's farfetched scheme is forced and artificial, and an embarrassment. If someone claims to have seen a vision, it is sufficient for me to examine the content of the vision, the doctrines suggested by it, and the mindset of the person who had the experience. It would be unbiblical to deny the very possibility or the legitimacy of the vision without regard to its content.

As for an illegitimate claim to such an experience, and most claims are illegitimate, in the end, it matters only a little as to whether the person in fact had an experience. Even if he has seen a vision, it does not mean that he is correct or that he should be heeded. If the vision suggests doctrines that are false, if it contradicts the completeness of Christ or some other biblical doctrine, then it was either imagined, demonically inspired, or conjured in some other manner, if there are other possibilities.

The person who "goes into great detail about what he has seen" might consider himself spiritually privileged, but he fails to maintain a connection with the Head, the true source of wisdom and knowledge, and spiritual insight (v. 3). He fails to uphold, and be rooted and built up in the doctrines of Christ, as he has been received by the Colossians and taught by the apostles. Thus Paul's judgment is that "his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions." His attention is given to his senses, to sensual experiences, and not that which is truly spiritual, which is faith in the completeness of Christ's person and work, through which we maintain our connection with him who is the head of the church, that is, his body.

There are those who claim to be prophets, and that God has revealed to them principles that are essential for spiritual advancement, but that no one could discover through a sober study of the plain sense of Scripture. Or, either through divine revelation or esoteric research, some make claims to have discovered certain "codes" that could unlock hidden mysteries or predictions within Scripture itself, beyond what it says with its words and sentences on the surface. Among them are professing Christians, non-Christians gurus, and other personalities. These individuals would fall under the condemnation of Paul. Despite their pretense, their minds and lives are unspiritual, but of the senses and the flesh, and they are puffed up with idle notions. The church must publicly denounce them, and if they are church members, it should expel them from the community.

We are in union with Christ. We belong to him and have died to the world and its human principles. Therefore, the world has no authority over us, and we do not need to submit to its teachings and regulations (v. 20). No one has any basis to impose these rules on us, or to stir up fear and guilt in us for non-compliance. Paul might mainly have restrictions regarding food and drink in mind in verse 21, but the language, and certainly the principle, applies to other man-made restrictions, such as one that forbids marriage.

In another place, Paul writes concerning those who teach the doctrines of demons, "They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods" (1 Timothy 4:1-3). It does not matter if he has the same thing in mind there as he does here, but there he provides another reason for rejecting these prohibitions: "For everything that God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer" (v. 4-5).

It would be too farfetched to apply this idea, as many in the Reformed tradition have done, to justify various things like artistic expression, culture, science, and even capitalism. Of course, the principle is sound and relevant for the purpose stated here. That is, nothing that God has created is in itself ritualistically unclean, and this includes food and marriage. But the narrow context restricts the application, so that, for example, the teaching does not allow one to deliberately consume poisonous mushrooms even though they are created "good." Indeed they might be ceremonially acceptable to eat, but not morally so.

Also, verse 21 does not imply that all prohibitions are to be ignored. There are many, many prohibitions in the Bible, a major summary of which is contained in the Ten Commandments. Thus the verse does not mean that we are now to freely commit murder and adultery, since we must ignore all prohibitions. For me to say this is not a needless precaution, since I have come across precisely such a misuse of this verse on more than one occasion.

And it does not mean that we are free from all human authority, especially when it is based on the word of God. For example, parental authority is given by God, and children are commanded to obey their parents. So a child must obey if his parents tell him to perform various house chores, or if they forbid him to attend a certain social function. These would be proper applications of an authority conferred by the word of God, and the child must not disobey by claiming that these are merely human commands. The parents would be mistaken, however, if they were to claim that these commands *in themselves* provide a basis for greater spirituality. They could do this indirectly, that is, if the child follows them with a view toward God's command to obey one's parents. We may make a similar point regarding the authority of church leaders (Hebrews 13:17).

Paul is speaking against "human commands and teachings" (v. 22) that represent themselves in a certain manner and that make certain claims for themselves. That is, we must not submit to man-made prohibitions that claim to be spiritually profitable in the keeping of them without a legitimate appeal to or application of the commandments of God. In fact, in keeping these "human commands and teachings," God's commands are often ignored or subverted: "Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition….They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Matthew 15:6, 9).

So when he insists on our freedom from human commands and teachings, the apostle is not just trying to protect our comfort and convenience. The issue carries great spiritual ramifications. These human commands and teachings that are so restrictive and dominating to the one who observes them in fact prevent the person from obeying God's commands

and teachings. Then, because these human commands and teachings claim for themselves significant spiritual value and effect, to affirm them is at the same time to deny the completeness of Christ's person and work. And as Paul writes, "They lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence" (v. 23), so that they fail to achieve the very thing that they supposedly do best, that is, to restrain the flesh.

Notice that the flesh does not refer to the body only, but as Paul writes in Galatians 5:19-21, "The acts of the *sinful nature* are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like," where "sinful nature" is the NIV's translation for the word "flesh." Since the works of the flesh include things that are internal, these human commands and teachings in fact engender the indulgence of the flesh, stirring up competition, self-righteousness, and so on. The flesh can be subdued only through Christ, and the power of a regenerated and reeducated mind. Paul will discuss this in the next major section of this letter.

When it comes to human commands and teachings, Paul instructs us to put on an attitude of defiance, saying, "Do not let anyone judge you" (v. 16), "Do not let anyone…disqualify you" (v. 18), and "Why…do you submit to its rules?" (v. 20). If we will rest in the completeness and perfection of Christ, in whom we have fullness, we will not allow human traditions and principles to threaten us. We will not bow to its pressure, or submit to its judgment.

COLOSSIANS 3:1-4:1

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. 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. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 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. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

The NIV gives this section the heading, "Rules for Holy Living." In light of the previous and the upcoming verses, this seems unwise and inaccurate. Reading through this section, we notice that it is more about encouraging positive spiritual characteristics than laying down rules. Thus the section is better named "Qualities of True Spirituality," as opposed to the false spirituality that Paul has denounced. This is not to say that rules as such are wrong or unspiritual. The apostle has been writing against *man-made* rules, and not all rules in general. Nevertheless, our passage is more about spiritual qualities than rules for living.

Paul has criticized a false system of religion in 2:16-23. Although it presents itself as a way to attain superior spirituality, in reality it is the invention of an "unspiritual mind." It denies the fullness of Christ in its attempt to supplement or replace his person and his work. It fails to restrain the flesh, but in fact provides a context for it to remain active. Under the guise of a kind of self-denial that is based on human tradition rather than God's command, it indulges in self-effort and self-righteousness. Therefore, contrary to its purpose and its promise, a person who submits to such a system is cut off from Christ and becomes unspiritual. His religion is of the flesh.

What, then, is true spirituality? Or, to adapt our language to 2:8, what is a spirituality that is based on a Christian philosophy, a philosophy that takes its basic principles and assumptions from Christ? Paul gives us the answer in this passage.

True spirituality begins from sound Christian theology. This includes an accurate understanding about the person and work of Christ, and our relationship with him through faith. Here Paul gives emphasis to the fact that Christ has been raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of God. And because of our union with him, we have also been crucified in him, raised with him, and as Paul writes elsewhere, seated with him in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6). Verses 3 and 4 say that our life is in Christ, and when he appears, we will appear with him in glory, thus reminding us of a future hope.

This is the theological basis that Paul weaves into the first part of this section. Again, the emphasis is in Christ as he is now positioned at the right hand of God, and also our union with him – that we have been crucified and raised with him, and that our life is now in him. Why is he drawing attention to this? Because this is the basis for a spiritual mindset. As Paul tells the Colossians, "Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (v. 1-2).

So true spirituality begins with an intellectual recognition of our so-called vertical relationship with God, and an intellectual attention to it. An active spiritual mindset is the foundation of true spirituality. Without it, no matter what a person does, he is not spiritual. However, a spiritual mind does not think on just anything – it does not dwell on "idle notions" (2:18), but on Christ who has been raised and seated, and on our union with him.

Notice that the apostle does not say only, "Set your minds on things above," but he also adds, "not on earthly things." Along with any teaching on being spiritual minded, there is often the warning that we should not become "so heavenly minded that we are no earthly

good." There are two problems with this. First, how I wish that this is a real danger! There has never been any danger that Christians were becoming too spiritually minded. Many people dwell on "idle notions" and fanciful doctrines, but Paul says that these come from an "unspiritual mind." Second, this is not a biblical warning. Paul tells us to fix our minds on heavenly matters, and he explicitly says, *not* on earthly things. The second part is just as authoritative as the first.

Some commentators wish to make the "earthly things" refer to the man-made teachings mentioned previously (2:16-23), as if this best fits the context. Although they might be included, I am unconvinced that Paul has only these false regulations in mind. This is because when one observes the context of a verse, he cannot just look backward, but he must also look forward. And looking forward, Paul contrasts the spiritual with the unspiritual, but the unspiritual are now represented by the characteristics of the flesh, and no longer by mere rules.

In his letter to the Philippians, when Paul writes about the "enemies of the cross of Christ," that "Their mind is on earthly things" (Philippians 3:18-19), he is not talking about human regulations only, even if these might be included. And when he writes to Timothy, "No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer" (2 Timothy 2:4), the "civilian affairs" are decidedly not man-made religious teachings.

My point is that the danger of being "no earthly good" *because* of an overly spiritual mindset is practically non-existent. What is needed is not a repeated warning against being "no earthly good," but more clear and consistent teaching on what it really means to be spiritual minded. Then, we will tend to the matters on earth in whatever way and to whatever extent the Lord would have us do.

Another argument is that the "heavenly" and "earthly" contrast does not refer to a spatial distinction, but an ethical one.[50] This is at best partially correct, and somewhat misleading. This is because when Paul mentions "the things above," they are not mainly ethical, but includes the ethical or what pertains to the ethical only by implication. He writes, "Set your hearts on things above, *where Christ is seated* at the right hand of God." So if we understand the "earthly things" as mainly or even solely ethical, then they no longer represent a contrast against the heavenly things that Paul is talking about. But he is clearly making a contrast. Therefore, the ethical interpretation fails. The apostle indeed makes an ethical application, but when he refers to the heavenly and the earthly, he is not there directly referring to the ethical.

We should be suspicious of theologians who wish to preserve culture and science in the name of Christ without first stressing the overarching importance of possessing a spiritual mindset and to *not* fix our minds on earthly things. Any teaching on the Christian's attitude toward culture and science should be consistent with Colossians 3:2 and similar verses. And if we really want Christians to do some "earthly good" in a sense that is in accord with biblical teachings, then we must first advocate a spiritual mind, one that is set on things

[50] Storms, p. 214.

above, *not* on earthly things. That is, we need to have a teaching on culture and science that does not shove this verse under the carpet, just so we can promote a misapplication of "everything God created is good" (1 Timothy 4:4), which theologians have wrested out of its context in order to justify all kinds of earthly ambitions and pursuits. Let us mind the things of heaven, without adding so many excuses and qualifications, and we will be as effective on earth as we should be.

True spirituality focuses the intellect on spiritual things, on theology and on heaven, and not on earthly things. As it does so, it puts off the old man and puts on the new man (v. 5, 9-10). This is the ethical application, and there are two sides to it, one negative and one positive. On the negative side, it recognizes flesh for it is and refuses to think and behave according to its nature, but rather puts it to death and throws it off. On the positive side, it recognizes the qualities of holiness and consciously puts them on in one's thinking and behavior.

This new self "is being renewed *in knowledge* in the image of its Creator" (v. 10). In a parallel passage, Paul writes, "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" (Ephesians 4:22-24). The procedure deals with spiritual knowledge, attention, and attitude, thus it is decidedly intellectual. True spirituality is a product of an application of sound theology through an education and exercise of the intellect.

Because the procedure in attaining true spirituality is intellectual, it is also deliberate. It can be studied, taught, discussed, performed, examined, improved, repaired, and redirected. And because it is deliberate, it also means that there is no excuse for believers to fail to learn and attain this true spirituality. In addition, verse 11 indicates that every kind of person can become spiritual through Christ. A Jew is not more spiritual than a non-Jew, and the circumcised is not more spiritual than the uncircumcised. It all depends on how the person is related to Christ.

A contrast between the qualities of the flesh versus the spirit, the old man versus the new man, is presented to us. Paul says that all non-Christians are immoral, impure, evil, and greedy (v. 5). They are a people of rage, malice, slander, and filthy language (v. 8). It is disturbing that many people accuse me of using abusive expressions, but they refuse to acknowledge that I am merely repeating or applying what the Bible says. In the name of God and by the authority of his word, I charge them with apostasy. Now, if you are too much of a coward or a men-pleaser to speak the truth, then at least do not get in my way when I do it. Otherwise, you are only making yourself an enemy of Christ.

I will say more about this when we come to 4:6, but here we must note the depraved condition in which we find the unbelievers. As Paul says to the Colossians, "You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived" (v. 7). It is necessary to acknowledge the extreme filth and baseness of a non-Christian's condition in order to honor the greatness of God's grace in saving us from it. To beautify the non-Christian's condition is also to insult

God's grace and devalue Christ's sacrifice. Because of the evil qualities and actions of non-Christians, "the wrath of God is coming" (v. 6).

Then, Paul turns to the Christians and calls them "God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved" (v. 12). What a difference! What a mighty deliverance! And now they are to throw off the evil qualities and actions of their former state, and put on things like compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience (v. 12). The new man can forgive others as the Lord forgives (v. 13), and can exercise a love that binds the people of God "in perfect unity" (v. 14). Therefore, on the basis of our new "vertical" relationship with God, now we may live out this true spirituality in our "horizontal" relationship with men.

Although the qualities of the new man apply to all our horizontal relationships, they are especially relevant and fitting when exercised within the covenant community. And so Paul proceeds to say, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace" (v. 15). This verse is often misapplied to address the topic of subjective extra-biblical guidance. That is, if a Christian has a peaceful feeling about a person, a decision, or an action, then supposedly it has God's approval and blessing. But this is not at all what the word refers to. The verse is talking about the relationships between believers, and this peace is referring to an objective and relational peace. It is the opposite of hostility and animosity between people, and not the opposite of unrest and turmoil within a person's mind.

Elsewhere, Paul writes, "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). Again, this peace describes the relationship that Christians have with God. Because they have been justified in Christ, there is no more conflict between them. And because believers participate in this peaceful relationship with God together in Christ, they are to maintain this peaceful relationship with one another as well.

Verse 16, among other things, again indicates that this spiritual relationship among believers is to be an intellectual one: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom." The content of our conversation is to be the word of Christ, the mode is to be teaching, and the quality is to be wisdom. The relationship is thoroughly intellectual. And if we are not saying it, then we are to be singing it: "…as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

Then, verse 17 would remind us that even in our human relationships and in our daily lives, all that we do, whether in word or deed, we should do with a view to please and honor the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father. We are to be set our minds on the things above even as we deal with the things on earth.

Colossians 3:18-4:1 also belongs to this context, that is, of the application or manifestation of true spirituality in our human relationships. Since I have expounded on a parallel passage in my *Commentary on Ephesians*, I will make only some brief comments in this place.

Wives are to "submit" to their husbands (v. 18). I have demonstrated in the *Commentary on Ephesians* that the word does not refer to only an attitude, but also to actual obedience. Failure to follow this biblical command is destructive to spirituality, happiness, and harmony. Husbands are to love their wives (v. 19). This refers to something much greater than a feeling of affection, since biblical love is defined as obedience to God's law in our relationships. And in the marriage relationship, the husband must love his wife in the way that Christ loves his church, that is, to be willing to sacrifice his own life for her (Ephesians 5:25). This is the true measure of a man. And a father is to raise his children in the admonition of the Lord, but not in a manner as to frustrate them (v. 21).

Slaves receive extra attention here (v. 22-25), not just because they might have to endure much suffering, but it is also possible that they are prone to be lazy, dishonest, and resentful. The Bible does not assume that the rich are always at fault. Notice how Paul helps the slaves apply a spiritual mindset to their work situation. He concludes, "Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism" (v. 25). Does anyone think that God will only judge the masters who do wrong? God judges according to the heart, and not according to appearance. He is not offended – nor is he threatened! – by your class, race, and gender. You may present yourself as the victim, but he is immune to your manipulation.

The masters have their instructions as well, and again as an application of a spiritual mindset: "Provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven" (4:1). It is impossible to overemphasize how much God detests unfair wages, or the withholding of earned and promised wages. "Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter" (James 5:4-5).

The Lord is jealous for the wages of all honest workers. This includes "those whose work is preaching and teaching," because "the worker deserves his wages" (1 Timothy 5:17-18). Do we not realize, and fear, that when preachers are always the last to get paid, and who get paid the least, the Lord will surely avenge them? To withhold finances from God's workers is not only an injustice, but an insult against the mission that God has assigned to them. God is patient and merciful, but he will not be mocked (Galatians 6:6-7). The wealth that people have hoarded, and withheld from the Lord's workers, and all other honest laborers, will testify against them in the day of slaughter.

COLOSSIANS 4:2-18

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.

My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.

Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord."

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

Whether we perceive it as another manifestation of true spirituality, or as a customary but nevertheless meaningful exhortation – both would be correct – Paul encourages the Colossians to "devote" themselves to prayer. "Devote" appears to indicate the amount, but here it is better translated as "persist," or as in the ESV, "continue steadfastly." And of course, persistence does increase the amount. In any case, we must not become fearful or discouraged, and give up (Luke 18:1).

Prayer is not just another religious activity to make us feel and appear more spiritual, although this is why many Christians do it. The better ones treat it as an emotional release, but proper prayer is still more than this. As James writes, "You do not have, because you

do not ask God" (4:2, also 5:15-16). It can make the difference between having something and not having it. In other words, it matters whether you pray, and whether you pray in faith (James 1:6; Mark 11:24).[51]

Since we are addressing the King of Heaven and not going through some impersonal and mechanical exercise, the attitude with which we pray is paramount. Knowledge, faith, and reverence are essential. Paul stresses watchfulness and gratitude here. Of course we must not fall asleep – that would stop our praying – but he is most likely referring to a spiritual alertness, as in a mental discernment and attentiveness that anticipates the Lord's return, but also results in insight in what to pray for and how to pray for it. This is the opposite of a flippant and distracted mental condition.

All prayer is to be done with a thankful attitude. Some people urge believers to release all their resentment and dissatisfaction against God in prayer, as a child beats against his father's chest in a tearful outburst. In addition to modern psychology, they think that they learned this from the prophets. But what we read is that God rebuked them when they showed doubt and weakness, and he killed off a whole generation of Israelites for complaining against him. It is better to take our lesson from the Bible, than to ignore its record of the fate of past murmurers, and its clear answers to the prophets who cried out in their suffering. We must not use prayer as an excuse to legitimize unbelief or to nurture discontent. Ingratitude is unbecoming to those who know the power of God, the grace of Christ, and the fellowship of the Spirit. I am thankful that God requires us to be thankful.

Among other things, Paul's request for prayer in verses 3 and 4 tells us what is important to him. He wants God to "open a door." Since he writes from prison, some commentators think that this could literally refer to opening the prison door, so that he would be set free. Or, this could metaphorically refer to opportunities to preach. But the latter probably entails the former anyway. In any case, the point is clear, and the same, that Paul wishes for opportunities to preach the gospel.

He also wishes his preaching to possess certain qualities. Here he wishes to make the message clear, and in a parallel passage, he wishes to be fearless (Ephesians 6:19-20). Of course, we may assume that he always wants his preaching to be both clear and fearless. His desire provides us with a worthy model for all believers to emulate, but especially by ministers. We are to be eager to perform the work that God has given us, and this should translate into a desire for opportunities to preach, and then to do it with clarity and boldness. Since many ministers lack both of these qualities, we should regard this as more than just an interesting observation about the inner life of the apostle. Rather, we should covet clarity and boldness in our preaching, and ask our people to petition God day and night so that we may attain.

Paul does not make himself the sole representative of the gospel, but he is aware that believers in general could receive or generate opportunities to advertise the faith as well. But he wishes that they would do this well, and so he exhorts them, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity." To walk in wisdom toward

[51] See Vincent Cheung, "Faith to Move Mountains," for an exposition of Mark 11:12-25.

outsiders would mean that "every opportunity is to be snapped up."[52] Wisdom also knows the way to take advantage of an opportunity: "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, and so that you may know how to answer everyone" (v. 6).

Verse 6 is sometimes used by critics against my practice of repeating the Bible's descriptions of unbelievers and heretics. Although I have responded to this in a number of places, here I will briefly offer yet another perspective.

Any application of verse 6 is prima facie erroneous if it attributes wrongdoing and hypocrisy to the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus. The claim that I violate Colossians 4:6 (or any other similar verse) when I repeat what the Bible says about certain types of people toward the same types of people, does by implication attribute wrongdoing and hypocrisy to the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus. This is because, given the critics' definition of "grace" or "graciousness" for this verse, we must say that the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord very often exhibited no graciousness at all in their speech and conduct.

The grace and salt in Colossians 4:6 refer to an excellence in the quality and content of our speech, so that to equate them with the usage of words and tones that are kind and gentle (often as defined by the culture and not by Scripture in the usual interpretation) is in fact to neutralize it. This excellence of speech could certainly include kind words and tones, but harsh and insulting rebukes are not excluded, as biblical principles and examples conclusively demonstrate.

Now, the Lord once turned over tables at the temple – a physically violent demonstration. This overburdens the critics' view even more, but perhaps we will save it for another time. Anyway, Paul once called down a curse on the high priest, and said, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall!" (Acts 23:3). It is true that Paul did not realize he was speaking to the high priest, and he implied that he would not have said this if he had known. But this in fact proves my point. Notice his reaction when he was confronted: "Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people'" (v. 5). He did not say that he was wrong in the very act of speaking an insult. In fact, he did not even say that he was wrong in insulting the high priest before he found out who he was, and he did not retract his statement even after he found out. He only implied that it would have been wrong to speak the insult in this context if he had known that he was addressing the high priest, and he gave a precise biblical reason for this conclusion, suggesting that he was consciously operating by specific biblical principles instead of by one all-encompassing rule that says he must be soft-spoken and non-insulting in every context and in every situation.

So although it is always good to be "gracious," this does not mean that we can never be harsh, insulting, and offensive. "Grace" simply cannot have this meaning in our context, or it would condemn the entire Bible. The prophets called their own people whores. Jesus called the Pharisees snakes. Peter called the Jews murderers. Paul told the Judaizers to castrate themselves. They were not being even a little bit gracious according to the critics'

[52] Wright, p. 153.

definition. On the other hand, because I am not imposing the world's definition of "grace" on the verse, I perceive no conflict between verse 6 and the examples of the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus.

Perhaps, some say, we may be harsh against "insiders," or believers, or people in the covenant community, as opposed to "outsiders." Once this argument is used, then notice that I have just received justification for all the instances in which I speak harshly toward Christians and professing Christians where their conditions coincide with biblical passages that use harsh words against the offenders. So the argument is in fact a concession to my advantage.

As for outsiders, the prophets also used offensive insults and condemnations against pagan kings, nations, and peoples. So I wonder if the critics have read much of the Bible. And if they are ignorant of the Old Testament, or somehow despises it, then let us take an example from Paul, who said to Elymas the sorcerer, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery" (Acts 13:10). Elymas was clearly an unbeliever and an outsider, but does this sound gracious to you? Not according to the critics' definition of grace.

Then, in his letter to Titus, not only does he use harsh words, approve of harsh words, but he also instructs Titus to use harsh words: "Even one of their own prophets has said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith" (Titus 1:12-13). He applies the quote in verse 12 not only to Christians, but to unbelievers and outsiders – all Cretans. And it is doubtful that those he instructs Titus to rebuke are all Christians or professing Christians within the church community.

Perhaps these are all exceptions. This is a favorite argument of those who have been defeated – all instances that destroy their theory are exceptions. But an exception from what? An exception from "wisdom" (v. 5)? An exception from "grace" (v. 6)? So they are saying that Christ was stupid and crude on these occasions. In any case, somehow Vincent Cheung is never allowed to be an exception. Now if I lack divine inspiration and infallibility – a deficiency that I, of course, happily acknowledge – and for this reason I cannot be an exception, then I can say the same about Titus, but he was instructed to be harsh with people.

And if I cannot insult something that the Bible insults because I lack inspiration and infallibility, then how I can commend something that the Bible commends? Or is this another exception, this time regarding a principle and not a person? But if Titus was also an exception because he was directly instructed by an infallible apostle, then the only way that this could make sense is if he received infallibility from the apostle for rebuking people, or if the infallible apostle accompanied him and approved of his rebuke in every instance where he was harsh with the people, or if the infallible apostle received a revelation that in the case of Titus, he would always insult people in the appropriate manner. We have no indication that any of these was the case. In fact, the Bible itself does not suggest that inspiration makes a difference on this issue. For example, the Spirit did

not inform Paul that he was addressing the high priest. The decision to insult was based on divine principle, not divine inspiration. And all believers have access to divine principles.

If for some reason, I am still forbidden to preach the Bible using its own language and expressions, then what am I allowed to do? If I am not permitted to say it to people, am I at least allowed to show people what it says, to open the book and point at the words with my finger? But the Bible says that unbelievers are stupid, evil, wicked, depraved, immoral, impure, greedy, idolatrous, superstitious, enslaved, dead, deceitful, malicious, slanderous, unjust, perverted, filthy, whores, dogs, pigs, donkeys, snakes, brutes…these are all biblical descriptions of unbelievers that come to mind at the moment, and the list goes on and on and on. It also uses some strong words against professing believers who are in error. These are the things that they will read if I were to show them the Bible – the same things that they would hear if I were to speak them. So if I am not allowed to say what the Bible says, am I allowed to show people the Bible? Or am I supposed to hide the book? Am I expected to burn it too? Perhaps this is the true desire of my critics, and only the destruction of the Bible would make them happy, even though some of them claim to be Christians. However, "If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10). Therefore, I will continue to both speak and show what the Bible says.

For the critics to suppress biblical evidence in order to impose their view on people and to push their own theological agenda is despicable. This ungodly behavior itself deserves harsh treatment and reprimand. It is obvious that I am in the right on this issue, but they do not want to admit it because they are a brood of hypocritical men-pleasing brutes. They are ashamed of the gospel. They kowtow to the culture and the pressure of the world. And they attempt to silence the voice of the messenger, knowing that he who preaches and practices the word of God will refrain from vengeful retaliation and underhanded methods of self-vindication. So to them the power of man is more to be feared than the authority of God. They have hijacked a divine command, including Colossians 4:6 itself, with their own man-made definition and interpretation, and then they attempt to impose the result on me. In the spirit of Paul's teaching earlier about human commands and teachings, I will not let them judge or forbid me. I refuse to comply.

I use strong speech under biblical warranted contexts not because I enjoy insulting people for my personal satisfaction, as if I derive some perverted thrill out of doing it, but with me it is a matter of faithfulness to the doctrine and practice of Scripture. As Paul writes, "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words" (1 Corinthians 2:13). If we speak the truths that the Spirit teaches, we should also use the words that the Spirit uses to express them in Scripture.

The matter has never been one of mere preference or personality, but one of doctrine and duty. So here is a challenge to those who oppose: What warrant do they have to *not* follow the examples of the prophets, the apostles, and the Lord Jesus, and to *not* follow the principle of expressing biblical truths with biblical words? And how do they plan to justify themselves before God for resisting rather than supporting one who does? I charge them with sin. What is their defense? And reader, what is *your* excuse? My approach is in accord

with biblical principles, and with true boldness and humility, and I refuse to stop doing it for any man, "so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Verses 7-18 are Paul's parting remarks, and we notice that they compose a rather large section, which includes the mention of many names and some details about their activities and circumstances. Paul has never met many of his readers, but this shows that the two companies of believers nevertheless have much in common. They know some of the same people, and they are all working together for the same cause. A sense of solidarity is thus established. This substantial personal section very likely produces such an effect, whether or not this is Paul's intention.

In this section we again see the apostle's primary interests. He values faithful and diligent service to the Lord, and prayer and encouragement for the saints, so that they may be "mature and fully assured." We are especially impressed with a special directive for Archippus: "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord" (v. 17). This is what the apostle considers important. Let us also order our lives by it.