

MISUSED BIBLICAL TEXTS

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Comments below have more to do with interpretation mistakes than with false ideas. Regardless of the correctness of the beliefs involved, many texts do not indicate them.

Readers misuse scriptures for several reasons.

(1) Texts get quoted incorrectly in popular usage. “*Money is the root of all evil,*” for example, misquotes the text, “*The love of money is the root of all evil.*” [incorrect quotation]

(2) The parts of a text get connected the wrong way. “*By grace you are saved through faith, and that [faith] is not of yourselves; it is a gift from God.*” That does not refer to faith, but to the salvation indicated in the verb—as the neuter form for “that” in the Greek text shows. [internal misconnection]

(3) Statements applied more broadly than context warrants, a typical problem with reading proverbs. “*Death came by mankind*” (1 Corinthians 15:21) has been used to suppose animals did not die or eat other animals before Adam sinned. [universalizing specific reference; allegorizing the comparison]

(4) Overly broad application takes a text as referring to topics the passage is not talking about. “*Thou shalt not kill*” is cited as prohibiting capital punishment, just war, self-defense, and eating meat. The commandment refers to murder. [wrong topics]

(5) Errors can come from stressing the wrong word, which sets up the wrong contrast. “*No one can come to me except the Father . . . draws him*” (John 6:44). As per context, the stress should fall on Father rather than on draw: “*No one can come to me except the Father . . . draws him.*” [wrong contrast]

(6) Interpreters equivocate unlike things and then use a passage to address the unlike thing. The Old Testament prohibition against eating blood has been used to prohibit blood transfusions. [equivocations]

(7) Readers fail to remember who the text is addressing. The problem shows up in applying Mosaic commandments to Christians—as with tithing and Sabbath directives, and in maintaining certain New Testament commands evidently meant within an implied first-century cultural limitation of the Mediterranean world—requiring women’s longer hair length in African Black races where hair length may naturally be same for women and men.

For a more complete treatment of reasons for misinterpretation, see “Pitfalls in Interpretation” in *Hermeneutics—Getting the Point*, pp. 118-53. Regarding some subtle issues, look at “Selected Linguistic Phenomena,” pp. 58-80, as well as the rest of that work.

Genesis 1:26-27 [God is a combination of male and female.]

The text speaks of God’s creating mankind in his own image and then goes on to say that he made mankind male and female. The verses no more apply to God the male-female variant

than they apply physicality in general to God. God is spirit (John 4:24); spirit does not have flesh and bones (Luke 24:39). Scripture gives no basis for the idea that sexuality somehow exists in the spirit realm. There is no marriage there; people in the resurrection are like angels in those respects (Matthew 22:29-30; Hebrews 1:14).

See also comments in *Old Testament Translation Notes* for *The Conversational Old Testament*, pp. 4-5 regarding inclusive language.

Genesis 2:1-3 [Sabbath observance]

God's blessing the Sabbath and hallowing it is taken to mean that from the time of creation, Sabbath observance was to be a permanent feature of human living, not just an element of Jewish national and religious life.

Writing from the viewpoint of his own time, Moses inserts here in Genesis a note connecting God's creation rest with Jewish national expectancies in his own time. The reason for the Sabbath was to serve as a memorial of the exodus—as a rest from Egyptian bondage (Deuteronomy 5:15). The manner of observing it was analogous to God's resting from his creative work (Exodus 20:11).

See also comments on Exodus 31:12-17.

Genesis 2:5-6 [No rain before the flood]

See also Hebrews 11:7.

Genesis 2:14-15 [Snakes have residual structures that formerly were connections for legs.]

Genesis 2:17 [forbidden fruit]

In popular talk, people have the habit of calling the forbidden fruit an apple, but the text does not specify what fruit God forbade. People have also made sexual relations what the "forbidden fruit" represented—the tree of "*the knowledge of good and evil.*" Again, no such idea appears in the text. If it comes into the picture at all, it comes from interpreters who consider the material world as evil so that anything distinctively associated with its operations is proscribed, physical desires included.

This second idea clearly removes the forbidden fruit from the rest of the story. The point of making mankind male and female was to fill the earth (Genesis 1:28). The fact that there is no comment about sexual relations prior to the Fall is a happenstance of record, not an indication of prohibition.

Genesis 2:18 [help meet]

Older translations say “help meet,” meaning a helper “appropriate to” Adam. Since the older expression has become unfamiliar, people today fudge it into “helpmate” as an elaboration of “mate.”

Genesis 9:25 [curse of the black race]

The claim is that the black race is accursed and doomed to servanthood because of the sin of their ancestor Ham. But Noah’s curse was pronounced on Canaan, not Ham, the forefather of the African nations. The curse was pronounced because he saw the nakedness of his father Noah and told his brothers Shem (Asian forefather) and Japheth (European forefather) about it. The two brothers covered him up without looking at his nakedness. When Noah got sober, he found out what Ham had done and pronounced a curse, but he pronounced it on Canaan, Ham’s son, not on Ham: *“Accursed be Canaan; he will be the lowest of servants to his brothers.”* A connection is made with the later inhabitants of Canaan, whom Israel conquered when God gave the land to the Israelites, who descended from Shem. [a case of etiology]

Genesis 2:26-29 [men have one less rib than women]

Genesis 38:8-10 [contraceptives] [onanism] [masturbation] [self-gratification]

The text has been used to prohibit contraceptives and masturbation and to advocate sex for procreation only. The issues tied to the occasion recorded either over-interpret what is recounted, or they apply the situation to matters not like it. The element considered common to the three issues is sexual self-gratification. God struck Onan down because he was “using” his sister-in-law instead of raising up children by her for his brother. Withdrawal and its equivalent—contraceptives—inside a normal marriage situation come from a different motivation. A second usage of *onanism* means masturbation in English dictionaries, a matter not at issue here or addressed in scripture.

Exodus 16:14 (manna), 22-30 (quail)

As part of belief in an eternal, universal Sabbath, these directives about the gathering of quail and manna are invoked to argue that Sabbath was (supposed to be) observed before Israel became a nation—in contrast to the view that Sabbath was a feature of national observance by Israel, a prescribed “holiday” that one can agree had physical, psychological, social, and even spiritual benefits.

But Israel was not viewed as becoming a nation at the time the nation received the Law at Sinai. It became a nation earlier at the crossing of the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:1-2), when God separated it from Egypt and its slave status and made it a separate, parallel nation (cp. Hosea 11:1). God instituted Sabbath as a sign between him and Israel: *“You must observe my sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for generations to come.”* The commandment to observe

Sabbath in Exodus **16** did precede the giving of the Ten Commandments in Exodus **20**, but it was after crossing the Red Sea.

There is no evidence that the Sabbath was observed by God's people before, outside, or after national Israel.

Exodus **20:13** [capital punishment]

The text says, "*Thou shalt not kill,*" in the familiar expression. It means "*Do not murder,*" rather than "kill" in every conceivable sense. Elsewhere the same Mosaic legislation provided for capital punishment for several crimes. See "Capital Crimes in Mosaism."

Exodus **21:24** [revenge]

"*An eye for an eye*" served as a guideline for judges in measuring out punishment to evil doers (cp. Leviticus **24:20**; Deuteronomy **19:21**). It states the judicial principle that the punishment should be commensurate with the crime. Taking the rule out of the judicial setting and making it a social principle turns it into justification for personal revenge. Jews of Jesus' day were evidently misapplying the principle in this way (Matthew **5:38-42**).

Exodus **31:12-17** [Sabbath observance]

"[The Sabbath] is a sign between [God] and the children of Israel forever." Some Christians believe they should observe Sabbath because the word *forever* appears in this quotation about hallowing it, particularly since they think of the Sabbath as a memorial of creation.

(a) The Sabbath, however, was a memorial of the exodus from Egypt (meaning; Deuteronomy **5:15**) observed after the analogy of the creation rest (form): weekly, as a rest, on the seventh day. That is why Exodus **31:17** calls it a sign between him and children of Israel; Christians are not Israelites or members of that nation. Moses wrote the explanatory comments in Genesis **2:1-3** from his own viewpoint in time—after Israel was constituted a nation at the Red Sea (1 Corinthians **10:1-2**). Those comments do not mean that people from the time of creation prior to Israel observed the seventh day of the week as the Sabbath or that Christians after and outside of Israel should perpetuate the practice as a religious principle.

(b) *Forever* means permanent within the frame of reference involved. It is an absolute word used in the Old Testament, for example, also about a slave serving "forever" (Exodus **21:6**; cp. Philemon 15), about Solomon's temple being forever (1 Kings **8:13; 9:3, 5**; 2 Chronicles **7:16; 30:8**), and other temporary things.

(c) In Colossians **2:16-17** Paul tells his readers not to let anyone judge them about meat, drink, feast days, new moons, or Sabbath days; those were shadows of things to come. When the real came, the shadows were removed (1 Corinthians **13:10**).

See comments above on Genesis **2:1-3**.

See *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 125-26.

Leviticus 10:1-2

The LORD struck Nadab and Abihu dead because they “*offered strange fire on front of the LORD, which he had not commanded them.*” The instance is universalized to mean that silence in regard to things associated with worship prohibits them. This case with the “strange fire,” however, involves using something instead of what God had commanded.

The formula for incense offered in the tabernacle was specifically indicated, saying that no other formulation could be used. It also indicated that the exact tabernacle formula could not be used for anywhere else.

Psalm 10:4 [atheists are fools]

See comments under Psalm 14:1.

Psalm 14:1 (= 53:1; cp. 10:4) [Atheists are fools]

“*A fool says in his heart, ‘There’s no God.’*” The observation has been taken to mean that a person without special revelation should be able to come to know through nature around and within that God exists and to discover certain important truths about him. The circumstance has called for using “theistic proofs” for God’s existence (general revelation) and then using special revelation to make him known more fully.

The “foolishness,” however, does not necessarily lie in not recognizing through general revelation the existence and nature of the true God. The foolishness lies in living sinfully and then trying to claim that there is no God to rein in the behavior. The ulterior motive for denying God’s existence is self-justification for exercising complete autonomy, and for hardening the heart toward any reason the believer might offer as a corrective. The role of theistic proofs may show a greater likelihood of divine existence than alternative positions can muster, but it is another thing to claim that they are adequate for positive proof for the typical person and therefore for condemnation because of unbelief.

The passage does not say the person is a “fool” because he says there is not God. It is just as likely that he is a fool because he wants to live how he pleases and tries to ward off correction by saying there is no God there to call him to task.

See also comments below on Romans 1:16-23ff.

Psalm 53:1 [atheists are fools.]

Psalm 51:5 [original sin] [original guilt]

David says, “*In sin my mother conceived me.*” His statement has been taken to mean that the guilt for Adam’s sin passed down to all his descendants, or the somewhat lesser claim that Adam’s descendants all inherited a fallen nature because of Adam’s sin and necessarily sin because of that “fallen nature” (natural depravity). The inference is that people—David and the rest of mankind—are born guilty of Adam’s sin or born with a fallen nature that necessarily leads to personally sinning.

The text of Genesis does not say Adam’s descendants incurred the guilt of his sin, nor does it indicate that his spiritual ability fell in a genetically inheritable sense when he sinned. Sin is an act; an act cannot be transferred; so its guilt and the penalty for it cannot be transferred to other people. What is true by the nature of the case, Ezekiel 18:4, 13b, 17, 20 also states directly; guilt and penalty are personal: “*The soul that sins is the one that dies.*”

As far as Psalm 51 itself is concerned, David surely exaggerates for emphasis on how thoroughly sinful he felt over the Bathsheba incident. He used similar wording in Psalm 58:3 about babies coming forth from the womb telling lies. Babies no more tell lies from birth than David was conceived in sin by his married parents or made to trust God when he was on his mother’s breasts (Psalm 71:5-6). If “born in sins” means natural depravity, then “*trusting God on his mother’s breasts*” means natural goodness. Interpreters cannot have it both ways. “Born in” means thoroughly characterized by, as when people say, “*He’s a born liar,*” “*He’s a born salesman.*”

A similar misuse of this text occurred on the lips of religious leaders in Jesus’ day when they claimed that misfortune comes from sin (poetic justice). When a man born blind responded cogently to accusations about Jesus’ healing him from blindness, they told him, “*You were altogether born in sin, and you are trying to teach us?*” (John 9:34; cp. 1-2).

See also Job 14:4; 15:14; Psalm 71:5-6; Ephesians 2:3.

See also Deuteronomy 24:16; Isaiah 3:11; Jeremiah 31:30.

Psalm 53:1 [Atheists are fools.]

See comments on Psalm 14:1.

Psalm 93:1 [The earth is flat.]

See also Isaiah 11:12; Revelation 7:1

Psalms 103:3 [divine healing]

“*[Yahveh] heals all your diseases.*” That God heals all diseases of people that have “full faith” (a) goes beyond the necessary and intended meaning of David’s words, (b) does not fit the rest of biblical teaching about sickness and healing, and (c) does not match Christian experience.

(a) The Psalm requires proper word stress (the “law of emphasis”). It extols the character of God and credits him with the good things of life. In so doing, the passage calls for stressing

the right element: not all (your diseases), but God. It is God who heals all your sicknesses [that are healed], forgives all your sins [that are forgiven], gives benefits [that are received], redeems your life from destruction [when redeemed], satisfies your desires [when satisfied], renews your youth [when renewed], executes judgments for the oppressed [when so executed] (2-6); so “*Bless Yahweh*” (**103:1**). He is a forgiving God who does not constantly chide or stay angry permanently. He is slow to get anger, merciful, gracious, and abundant in lovingkindness (8-11): he understands “our frame” (14). It is not that he cures all your diseases, so all faithful people never ail. Rather, God is the (ultimate) one who cures all the diseases you have been healed from. The real source of all remedies lies beyond your own efforts and beyond people who assist you. So to speak, take care of yourself, thank the doctors, but bless God.

(b) “*All your diseases*” is absolute in form, but not necessarily in meaning. The comment does not state the full picture any more than “*forgiving all your sins*” does. There are additional qualifying factors natural to such issues—factors scripture explains elsewhere. God intentionally built sickness and misfortune—culminating in death—into the human circumstance to make it obvious unequivocally that we are not fully in charge of our existence and that we are not self-sufficient. We are to learn that “*power is made perfect in weakness*” (2 Corinthians **12:9**).

(c) Relevant examples or unhealed maladies in the faithful are Trophimus, whom Paul left at Miletus sick (2 Timothy 4:20), and Paul’s own “*thorn in the flesh*” that God did not remove when Paul asked him three times to take it away (2 Corinthians **12:7-9**). Jesus prayed three times in Gethsemane for the Father to take away the cup he was about to drink, but it did not happen.

See also Exodus **15:26**; Psalm **30:2**; Jeremiah **30:17**.

See also the study of “all” as used in scripture: *Interpretation: Getting the Point*: “all.”

Psalm 111:9 [Preachers should not be called reverend.]

The term *reverend* occurs only once in the King James translation, and it is in reference to God. So, some think it should be reserved for him.

The same word (in the same Hebrew Niphal stem) refers to people in Isaiah **18:2, 7**, who are “*a terrible people*.” Psalm **139:14** says we are “*fearfully and terribly made*.” The root verb simply means “*to fear*.” There is something to be said for preachers and other religious workers not to be caught up in expecting to be addressed with honorifics, but the word *reverend* is no more objectionable than any other respectful term of address.

Proverbs 13:34 [corporal punishment]

In reaction against child abuse, it has become fashionable to forbid corporal punishment altogether. The two things are not the same, of course, but they are treated as if they were. The text here is re-handled as if the “rod” is not for corporal punishment, but for guidance. The idea comes from mixing two unrelated issues: the discipline of children and the managing of sheep. The “rod” is supposedly used to guide little lambs along the path the shepherd wants them to

follow. But, that is not what a shepherd's rod was for; it was for fending off other animals that might attack the sheep, which are relatively helpless. The shepherd's staff (with its crook) is the more likely tool for moving sheep around or guiding them. The only connection between the two circumstances is the word "rod." The situation is a case of wanting to bend biblical teaching into something acceptable to a cultural idea that in itself is not appropriate.

Several passages in scripture speak to the corporal-punishment issue. Those passages cannot be removed from biblical teaching by the equivocation advanced above: Hebrews 12:5-11 speaks extensively about the parallel between a father's corporal punishment of a child and a way of looking at the experiences of persecution. See also Proverbs 19:18; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15, 17. "*Using a rod on him will not kill him,*" and other phraseology in these texts do not picture gentile guidance given to a rebellious son.

Proverbs 23:31 [total abstinence]

"Look not on the wine when it is red." The admonition serves to undergird the commonly held belief that drinking alcohol is forbidden period (excepting medicinal purposes, perhaps)—"total abstinence."

Instead, the greater likelihood is that the passage advises rather than commands. In other words, it is a good idea to just leave wine alone. It is another thing to forbid it altogether. Staring at a cup of wine with desire or resignation presents a dangerous form of attachment to it.

In Romans 14:21 Paul says that he would not drink wine or eat meat if it caused a brother to stumble. The implication surely is that he would no more abstain from wine under other circumstances than he would abstain from meat (cp. Luke 7:33-34). If a Christian need not be a vegetarian, he need not be a tea-totaler. The advice still stands that alcohol brings with it the dangers of addiction and lack of ability to carry on personal relationships appropriately. The advice holds true especially in the modern situation where the proof of alcohol beverages can be much higher than the natural fermentation available in the ancient world.

Isaiah 11:12 [The earth is flat.]

See also Psalm 93:1; Revelation 7:1

Malachi 3:10 [Christian tithing]

"Bring all the tithes into the storehouse." The reference is commonly used as a basis for obligating Christians to tithe their earnings.

The commandment, however, comes from the Mosaic economy about the tithe as the basic element of the taxation system for the Jewish nation, which was a union of church and state. Malachi is not speaking to Christians. Applying his words to the church would be artificial because the church has no national component; civil matters are delivered to secular jurisdiction and financed by local, state, and national taxes. Christians are not under the Mosaic Law

(Hebrews 8:6-13 < Jeremiah 31:31-34; etc.). Tithing is never commanded in the church age; transferring the Mosaic tithe to the Christian church involves confusing covenants as well as making an apples-and-oranges equivocation.

In the Christian economy, giving is no more quantified than any other spiritual act like frequency of praying, fasting, fellowshipping, Bible reading, witnessing; or the number of times to forgive (Matthew 18:21). Such matters are “measured” relative to real need, a donor’s ability, and opportunity (Mark 14:7), not by abstract rule.

The Christian dispensation “raises the ante” by moving from quantification to reality factors: ability, commitment, and need. It is like “*doing greater things than these* (miracles)” (John 14:12), which included resurrections. A person could hardly do something greater than raising someone from the dead. The greater works Jesus’ disciples would do are made possible by moving to a greater kind of category, a spiritual one—moving to a higher kind of category rather than a greater degree within the same category. Saving a soul from death is greater than healing his leprosy, so to speak. In that same way, Christian gifting is greater because it is to be done in a greater kind of operation: reality rather than rules, from a higher motivation rather than more quantity.

Matthew 2:11 [the Magi/Wise men]

The Magi came to the “house” where Jesus was, not to the stable. Perhaps for efficiency, Christmas cards conflate the visits of the shepherds and the wise men as both occurring at the stable where the Lord was born. But the coming of these men from the East was a little while at least after his birth. If the star appeared to them at the time Jesus was born, it may have been a month or two before they reached Bethlehem. Ezra 7:9 records that Ezra left Babylon on April 8 and arrived in Jerusalem on August 4, a period of about 87 days. If the Magi were from that general area in “the East,” we have some idea of the order of magnitude for their travel time.

Matthew 2:1-12 [number of wise men]

Matthew does not specify how many wise men came to Bethlehem, nor does he give their names. The number three grew up in tradition probably from the fact that they brought three gifts that scripture mentions: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Tradition further elaborated the account by developing names for the Magi: Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar.

Matthew 5:17-18 [distinction of covenants]

“*I did not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it*” does not mean that Christians are still under the Law of Moses.

Jesus does not say, “*I did not come to destroy, but to perpetuate it.*” What he is getting ready to teach in this sermon does not imply that the Law should be cast aside (“destroy”) as wrong; he came to accomplish the intent of the Law in embodying righteousness himself—a

higher kind of righteousness especially than taught and practiced by the scribes and Pharisees in their legalizing, quantifying approach to behavior before God. Once he accomplished the real basis for righteousness, the legal codification of divine will would be removed, not as false, but as no longer having jurisdiction over the people of God (Ephesians 2:15). Christ now embodies righteousness in his person, and persons identify with him as the basis for their being viewed as like him, that is, as righteous. Christianity comes in the train of Mosaism, but it is not itself a legal system; the moral principles included in the Law have been “re-instituted” in the New Covenant, which provides them with an interpersonal context and nature. This New Covenant is not only another covenant, but another kind of covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-35; cp. Hebrews 8-10).

A similar sentiment in Luke 16:17 has as its preceding verse, “*The law and the prophets were until John [the Baptist].*”

“*Not destroy*” must mean “*not get rid of*” in the sense that it is not divine or true or good. Jesus did not want his listeners to get that impression from what he was about to tell them: “*you have heard, but I say.*” The contrast with “*destroying it*” is fulfilling it; hence, the law is not false. In fact, it prepared for the gospel (Galatians 3:24) by defining and sensitizing to sin (Romans 5:20; Galatians 3:19).

The New American Standard Bible reads “*I did not come to annul*” the law. Such English wording would normally imply that we are still under Mosaism because it has not been “annulled.” The wording could perhaps stand if a reader were to take Jesus’ full statement as a “relative negative,” “*I did not come so much to destroy the law as to fulfill it.*” Such a sentiment would probably not occur to an English reader’s mind, however. Besides, “destroy” would still carry the implication that the Law was false. Sometimes the law-gospel relationship interpreters picture the Law as amended by the gospel. That way, amendments remove Mosaic elements that do not continue—civil and ceremonial matters—and new elements are amended in. That takes care of the issue in part, but it does not take care of the change in kind between the covenants from legal to interpersonal. Not only are Christians under a different covenant; they are under a different kind of covenant, one written on the heart, as Jeremiah prophesied it. Besides, not everything in the Law has been removed item by item that Christians no longer observe. The law of jealousy, for example, has not been specifically removed (Numbers 5:11-31).

See also “The Distinction Between Covenants and Some Relevant Applications: A Sketch.”

Matthew 5:32 [divorce; remarriage of the “innocent party”]

“*Whoever marries her that is put away commits adultery*” is taken to mean that someone divorced by the spouse—so the spouse can marry someone else—cannot get married again; anyone marrying such a wrongfully divorced person would be committing adultery.

Such an understanding jumps over the immediately preceding material and connects it instead with the more distant general divorce comment at the front of 19:32. In contrast to the idea that Mosaism allowed for a husband’s divorcing his spouse for any reason whatever, Jesus speaks in terms of adultery as grounds for divorce. In that context, (a) divorcing her implies that

she has committed adultery. “*Makes her an adulteress*” compares to “*makes God a liar*” (1 John 1:10); that is, he “treats” her like an adulteress. It is difficult to imagine a sensible, practical meaning that would make an innocent woman guilty of something she did not do. Some have supposed that Jesus meant the possibility that—from a practical standpoint—she would be forced to remarry to have a means of support. Being forced to do what Jesus was forbidding to do would establish a self-contradictory situation. One bailout might be to suppose a contrast between basic theory (remarriage is adultery) and practical necessity (remarriage for support).

Jesus’ subsequent comment about remarriage comes in the train of the adultery situation he has established as his context: (b) Marrying an adulteress implies that her adultery does not matter to the second husband; that makes him as bad as she is: “*he commits adultery.*”

Strictly speaking, the passage does not deal with (1) remarriage of an “innocent party,” (2) any additional appropriate exceptions, or (3) the impact salvation has on a “guilty party’s” options.

The Lord’s brief comments about divorce “*for adultery*” do not necessarily mean (3) “*only for adultery*.” Paul comments in 1 Corinthians 7:15 that a spouse is not “*under bondage*” if an unbelieving spouse “*leaves*” the believer. “*Under bondage*” evidently means bondage to the marriage contract (rather than “*under bondage*” of guilt perhaps). Desertion, then, as a second ground for divorce establishes a “class of causes” appropriate to the marital institution: abuse, homosexual involvement, polygamy, desertion in the sense of refusing sexual relations (cp. 1 Corinthians 7:1-7), and perhaps other behaviors that deny the distinctive nature of marriage itself. These additional possibilities become less “black and white” because other considerations contribute to what conclusions are appropriate.

Matthew 5:33-37 [oath taking]

The words, extracted from their setting, could forbid taking oaths in legal settings like in court.

“*Do not swear at all, not by . . .*” Jesus addresses the habit of swearing oaths about everything in typical social situations instead of just speaking truthfully, meaning it, and acting accordingly. “*Your word should be your bond.*” “Yes” or “No” is sufficient. At his trial before Caiaphas, Jesus answered when the high priest said, “*I adjure you by the living God; tell us whether you are the Christ, the Son of God.*” So to speak, by responding to the adjuration, Jesus let the high priest put him under oath.

The whole Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) treats everyday relationships with people and God in the heavenly (read spiritual, interpersonal) kingdom Christ came to establish. He was concerned at the time with social conduct, not judicial process (5:33-37), physical abuse, or armed conflict (5:38-42).

See also James 5:12.

Matthew 5:33-3 [cursing]

“Do not swear at all, not by . . .” Cursing is another kind of problem that Jesus does not address here. The English word *swear* covers oath-taking and cursing, but the former is the Lord’s topic at this point. Filthy talk is prohibited elsewhere: Ephesians 4:29; 5:4; Colossians 3:8; 2 Peter 2:7.

Matthew 5:39 [pacifism]

As with the whole Sermon on the Mount, *“Turn the other cheek”* is directed at everyday social relations. Self-defense against physical threat and endangerment is another, complex matter. Jesus uses a graphic way of resisting the propensity to *“fight at the drop of a hat”* or to take revenge for every perceived slight or put-down. Don’t respond in kind. Later Jesus tells his disciples to sell their cloaks and buy swords, not as means of advancing the kingdom of God, but for self-protection (Luke 22:36).

John the Baptist did not tell the soldiers who asked him what they should do, *“Get out of the army.”*

See Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 1:8.

Matthew 7:1 [judging]

“Judge not, that you be not judged” is taken to forbid saying that what someone else is doing is wrong; that is God’s business. Each person is supposed to take care of himself. Saying someone is sinning amounts to “hate speech.”

“Judge not, lest you be judged,” however, prohibits criticizing, finding fault, looking for weaknesses and making a big point of them. Such behaviors exhibit a negative attitude toward the person, an attitude born of a competitive spirit that seeks self-worth by superiority. When people do that, other people hold them to the same standards they press against them.

A person has to “judge” in the sense of evaluating whether some act is sinful and whether other people are sinning when they do it. He has to evaluate those whom Jesus calls “swine” in the following verses; otherwise, he will not be choosing his friends. From a practical standpoint, of course, it is better to focus on the “sin” than on the “sinner”; doing so, removes the stigma of arrogance and avoids an excuse for others not to change.

Matthew 12:36 [jesting]

“In the day of judgment people will give an account of every idle word they’ve spoken.” The wording has been understood as prohibiting levity, exclamations *“for Pete’s sake”* as if they were necessarily replacements for swear words [*“swearing by proxy”*].

The comment, however, is not meant to prohibit humor, telling jokes, or having fun as such. Why would God give people a capacity for humor and then not allow any expression of it? The warning does not proscribe using meaningless words or even senseless sounds, meaningless (non-cursing) expletives, exclamations (for expressing feelings or emotions). Those other,

propriety matters are governed by circumstance and the connotations that have become associated with each expression.

In this setting, the Pharisees had accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub. “Idle words” may refer to the Pharisees’ casting around for any old explanation for his exorcisms. They may not have been all that confident in their Beelzebub claim, but they wanted to say something—anything—to neutralize his influence as attached to such demonstrations. The more negative “spin” they could put on it the better.

Jesus’ warning could eliminate “talk.” Off-handed, thoughtless comments come under evaluation as surely as any other kind of expression. People cannot say, “*Oh, I didn’t mean anything by it*”; “*I misspoke*.” Jesus noted that people are judged by what they say, whether they supposedly “mean” it or not, believe it or not, have their hearts in it or not, intend to do it or not (empty promises). People cannot just mouth what other people want to hear, what creates impressions, what neutralizes the situation, “*what gets you off the hook*.” Lying is lying; blasphemy is blasphemy. Words can’t be just “talk” to mislead, confuse, sound wise, or create impressions. People are not to “*talk through their hat*”; they must mean what they say. (cp. Luke 24:11, λῆπος; Matthew 12:36 uses ἀργός for “idle.”)

See also Ephesians 5:4.

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 [anti premillennialism]

The owner tells the foreman to gather up the tares first and burn them. Some have taken the wording that argues against premillennialism, which pictures Christ’s coming to deliver his saints from the wicked, who are left in the world. It is not wise to take wording from other circumstances and apply them to a person’s own topic of interest. They may differ in ways the original author was not concerned to avoid misunderstanding about. A person would expect gathering one to precede gathering the other; the choice might simply be arbitrary here. The prioritizing reason only comes into the interpretation because of a construction of future history that the reader has developed from whatever bases. If that construction is not correct, this observation does not have any value in discussing the issue.

Matthew 13:47 [the church as a mixed community of saved and lost]

Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea and gathers every kind. The text has been used in defense of the mixed church membership created by infant baptism and church-state unification; it is composed of every kind of person.

Jesus’ point is that the kingdom is open to all in the sense that the gospel is “cast out” to all to be gathered in. That is different from being comprised of all. Obviously, those in the “sea” (world) who do not conform to the nature and expectations of the kingdom do not become part of the kingdom. If that were not the case, there would be no difference between the church and the world.

The parable goes on to say that the good are gathered into the boat, but the bad are thrown away. Involved in this situation also is the question of whether local church membership is an advisable practice.

Matthew 16:18 [the primacy of Peter]

Jesus says to Peter, “*You are Peter, and I will build my church on that rock.*” The statement serves as a basis for the idea that Peter was the primary apostle on whom the church was built. His successors (the popes) are, therefore, the head of the church on earth.

The text does not say, “*I will build my church on you, Peter,*” but “*You are Peter, and I will build my church on that rock.*” The content of the confession is what stands in third person to both Jesus and Peter: “that rock.” That truth is what Peter came through with when he uttered his “great confession,” and that truth is what he was to proclaim. Jesus means, “*As surely as your name means ‘rock,’ I will build my church on the firm fact that I am the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and even death and the grave will not stop me from building it*”—a message that Peter and his fellow apostles were to preach.

Matthew 16:19 [doctrinal origination regarding church structure and Christian practice]

(a) Keys are for getting into something, in this case, getting into the kingdom. The binding and loosing on earth and in heaven is in regard to matters of the keys of kingdom, *i.e.*, salvation matters. Peter (and the other apostles) were to use the keys Christ would give them, not originate their own.

(b) What Peter and the other apostles bound and did on earth was done by proclaiming the message God gave them, *i.e.*, in regard to what originated with God, not what would originate with them. (The rare future perfect pass, used here, may reflect that priority of divine origination: will have been bound-loosed. It more likely intends to convey the certainty of divine follow-through in consequence of the apostles’ work.) The apostles “bound” what obligations people were to observe; they loosed whatever people were not—or were no longer obligated—to observe (out of the Mosaic system?). The apostles loosed people’s sins when they gave them an opportunity to respond to the message about forgiveness; they bound people’s sins on them when people refused the message that could take those sins away.

Matthew 16:19 [clerical absolution]

The accompanying promise is that whatever Peter would bind or loose on earth God would surely bind or loose in heaven. Christ’s promise is used to undergird the idea that God has given his representatives—in the persons of the clergy—the right and responsibility to forgive other people’s sins.

(a) The comments, however, are capable of an appropriate alternative explanation and so do not provide a positive basis for clerical absolution. The Lord presumably refers to loosing or

binding sin in response to the proclamation of his own message (in principle), not a binding and loosing by Peter's pronouncement of forgiveness (on individual persons). The loosing or binding comes from people's acceptance or rejection of Peter's proclamation. Speaking to all apostles later, Jesus promises the same thing (Matthew 18:18) when referring to prayer and to church discipline for sinning. The "*binding or loosing in heaven*" corresponds with the promise at the Great Commission that he would be with them to the end of the age. At the insufflation (John 20:22), after another statement of commission, Jesus associates the binding and loosing with receiving the Holy Spirit, which, among a complex of other things, involved the willingness to preach forgiveness to the very ones who killed their Lord and would persecute them. The requisite "spirit" contrasts with James and John's earlier mentality of wanting to call down fire on the Samaritans (Luke 9:54; cp. Mark 3:17, "Boanerges," "sons of thunder"). "*You do not know what spirit you are of,*" Jesus told them (Luke 9:55b, textual variant).

God sticks to his promise to stand by his followers when they present the message he has given them to present ("bind") and the promises it contains ("loose"). God carries through on his part of the process he devises. Stating that promise was important because they might not expect persecution, suffering, and death since they were fulfilling their responsibility. Such rejection by other people will not indicate abandonment by God or that nothing divine is happening as a result of their work. Their work would have an intangible character; so success was not necessarily measurable—as would have been the case were Christ to be instituting a national kingdom. The binding amounts to an assurance that the sins of those who reject the apostles' message and persecute them for proclaiming it will not "get away with" anything. Such sins will not be forgiven in "this world/age or the next.

(b) Clerical absolution is contrary to the nature of personal sin. Sin is against "heaven" and the other immediate person ("in your sight"; Luke 15:18, 21). It is against God in that he establishes the moral guidelines, and it is against anyone harmed by someone's failure to observe the values applicable to the situation. The Christian system is not under law—a legal standard abstracted from the one who gave it; so there is no corresponding legal authority attached to the abstracted standard by which a "third party" could involve itself by removing legal guilt for a breach of a legal standard. In the Christian understanding, sin is between persons; it is interpersonal; hence, there is no natural way to involve third parties. Only if sin had a legal component could there be a place to absolve by authority a breach of standard. Even the Jews understood that no one could really forgive sin except God (Mark 2:7). Real forgiveness cannot be pronounced by anyone other than the person sinned against.

See *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 401-2).

Matthew 18:18 [clerical absolution]

See comments under Matthew 16:19 and John 20:21.

Matthew 19:8 [= Mark 10:6] [flat creationism]

The Pharisees asked Jesus whether it was lawful to divorce a wife for every reason. Jesus answered that from the beginning God made male and female (**19:4-5**) with the comment, “*What God has joined together man must not separate.*” The follow-up question was why Moses allowed divorce. Jesus responded that Moses allowed it “*because of the hardness of men’s hearts [civil regulation], but from the beginning it has not been so [moral expectancy].*”

“From the beginning” has been taken to argue that the creation of mankind could not have been but a very short time since the beginning of the whole creation or Jesus could not have worded his comment the way he did. The statement in Matthew **19:8** is taken in reference to the wrong beginning. Jesus need not be taken as a reference to the beginning of all God’s creative activity; he is taking about the beginning of mankind—the beginning of the marital situation in contrast to the time of Moses, when he wrote the divorce provision into Jewish law. “From the beginning” indicates that from the beginning of creating mankind, God made them male and female. The inference favoring fiat creation applies the Lord’s words more broadly than what he is talking about.

Matthew 19:12 [castration for the kingdom’s sake]

The Lord comments that some men are born eunuchs, some are made eunuchs by other men, and some make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. The wording for the third set could be taken literally to mean self-castration for Christ’s sake—rather than as remaining sexually inactive in the single state. If Jesus had meant “remaining sexually inactive,” there were easier, clearer ways to say it, supposedly. (See e.g., *BAR*, spring, 2015, pp.)

The fact that Jesus could have expressed sexual inactivity some other way does not mean, of course, he could not express it this way—in analogical terms. Besides, Jesus is carrying forward his teaching about marriage and divorce in response to Peter’s comment about not getting married if a person cannot get out of a bad situation afterwards. The alternatives in that connection have to do with being able to remain unmarried, an option Jesus says—presumably from a practical standpoint—not every man can fulfill. Castration, however, is something every man could have done; it was an extreme measure forced on men under special circumstances (as for ministering to a harem or in a household with exposed female persons). There is nothing about the nature or purpose of Christ’s kingdom that calls for such a measure. The notion that the physical is somehow evil does not belong in Christian thought.

Furthermore, Paul’s solution to the issue raised by biological drives was not castration, but marriage. The alternatives were to marry or “burn” with desire 1 Corinthians 7:9). He makes these comments in the same general circumstance of serving the church without distraction in the face of eminent persecution.

Matthew 20:1-16 [equal rewards]

Everyone gets the same reward just as all the workers in the vineyard at the end of the day got the same pay regardless of how long they worked.

On the contrary, the parable means that salvation is by grace, using equal pay for all rather than quantified hourly wages as the vehicle of expression. Quantification does not fit easily into interpersonal matters because attitude and motive are not objectively quantifiable.

There appear to be levels of greatness in the kingdom (Matthew 20:26-28), which could correspond then to levels of reward in the eschaton. That reward, however, may be greater responsibility, not greater privilege (ten cities, *etc.*). There is the left and right hand of the throne, but those places are not “mine to give,” Jesus says. (Matthew 20:23).

In general, however, a person has to wonder, not only how you can quantify greatness in this life, but how you quantify it in the afterlife.

Matthew 20:28

The Lord gave his life as a ransom for many. The statement is taken to indicate the manner in which Christ’s atonement operates. His soul/life is payment to redeem us from Satan’s power.

However, ransoms are paid to someone for the freedom of a slave or to get back someone kidnapped. In the case of salvation, the lostness is alienation from God, not possession or ownership by Satan, legitimate or otherwise. Christ’s death is here pictured as having the same effect as paying a ransom does: it frees from an unwanted condition where the person in need does not contribute to the resulting freedom. It is not the kind of difficulty that can be paid by another, because sin and its consequences are personal and interpersonal, not having to do with a legal status. Ransom, purchase, and other images for the value of Christ’s atonement have in common the element that the recipient does not produce the result, in this case, relationship to God, reconciliation, being saved by another.

Matthew 21:22 [answered prayer]

“All things whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.” The generalized promise is taken to mean that all requests to God in Christ’s name will be granted; and if they are not, some explanation is required; especially the “no” is because of a deficiency of faith (cp. Matthew 17:19-21).

(a) Experience does not seem to bear out such an interpretation, and people can always suppose their faith or earnestness was inadequate since faith and sincerity are degree matters not readily measurable and always subject to improvement.

(b) The rest of scripture evidently shows that “no” is possible since the Father declined Jesus’ threefold prayer in Gethsemane. God likewise denied Paul’s threefold prayer for removing his thorn in the flesh; surely faith was not deficient in these cases, God’s “*grace was sufficient for him*” as he was. Having the thorn helped avoid pride (2 Corinthians 12:9).

(c) The gap between perceived promise and observed experience may be somewhat bridged over by saying that other answers exist: if it accords with the rest of God’s will, not now, if you do your part, if you are forgiving others (Matthew 6:15), if your motives are right (James

4:3), if you are treating other people right (1 Peter 3:7), if it is in earnest (Luke 18:8), if you have proper respect for God (Matthew 8:18); he may give something better in substitution or the functional equivalent in the afterlife. “No” might apply also to cases where the request would reduce the potential for growth. The one praying may have a good enough situation (God’s grace is sufficient for him; 2 Corinthians 12:9); granting the request would unnecessarily reduce growth potential (2 Corinthians 12:7, 9; cp. Job 1-2; Acts 4:29, 31; 2 Corinthians 10:13b; 12:8-9).

Another observation bridging the promise-experience gap is that such passages may mean all “kinds” of things rather than all things in number. In Matthew 7 the context speaks of God’s not giving a supplicant something contrary to what he wants or needs. Matthew 17 and Mark 11 talk about moving mountains by prayer, as if the point is that no matter how extreme the request might be, it is available through prayer.

See Matthew 7:7-8 (= Luke 11:9-10); 17:19-20; 18:19; Mark 11:24; John 14:13; (15:7); 15:16b; 16:23-24; James 1:6-7; 1 John 3:22; 5:14.

Matthew 23:9 [honorifics]

“Do not call (anyone) father on the earth because one is your father, the heavenly one.” Jesus speaks similarly about masters and rabbis; he does so after condemning those who try to create an aura of superiority. So, the point is not so much about the terms themselves, but about using them to exalt oneself. The manner of speaking here may represent relative negative, which creates relative emphasis by total denial.

People do well not to make themselves subservient to other people whether by address or behavior that implies obsequiousness. In this text, religious leaders are particularly warned not to vaunt themselves up by special dress, expected salutation, or obeisance from others, who actually are their equals in value. But self-abasement is a different thing from respecting people in authority (Romans 13:7). Anyone who does not have such authority should not expect special treatment, and those who have it should not expect it outside their sphere of operation.

A person does question the propriety of calling someone “father” who was not in fact responsible for his conversion—as Paul was to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:2). The propensity toward titular proliferation in the religious arena does not bode well with the spirit of these warnings.

Jesus populates his parables with people who say father: “father Abraham” (Luke 24:24), the prodigal son that says, *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight”* (Luke 15:18).

Matthew 23:23 [tithing]

Jesus criticized the religious leaders for meticulous tithing while leaving more important matters undone. *“These you ought to have done and not to have left the other undone”* (= Luke 11:42); they should have been doing both. So Christian should tithe, it is said.

Jesus conducted his ministry while the Mosaic economy was still operating; he was not overthrowing Old Covenant requirements as such, regardless of the perversions these men had brought in (23:1-39). At the start of this denunciation, he told the audiences to observe whatever the scribes and Pharisees told them “*because they sit in Moses’ seat*” (23:2). That blanket admonition would obligate Christians to all the Mosaic requirements and “the traditions of the elders” if indeed this passage served as a basis for Christian observance—such as tithing. Jesus addresses, not Christians, but his Jewish contemporaries by the command. In the new dispensation, however, no portion belongs to God in any sense that is not also true of the whole. There is no “golden portion.” Similarly, we do not have altars that we bring our gifts to (23:18; cp. Matthew 5:23-24) or a temple whose gold we can swear by (23:16-17).

These comments about giving apply to spiritual activities in general. We do not ask how many times to forgive a repentant brother (Matthew 18:21-22), how many times a day to pray (Acts 3:1; 10:9, 30), how many times a week to fast (Luke 19:9-14), and the like. If some obligation is not addressed to Christians, it is not part of our manner of operation. Without special accompanying information, if matters from Jesus’ ministry do not appear in the teaching from Pentecost and afterward, they are not of Christian obligation or guidance.

Cp. Luke 11:42.

Matthew 23:37 = Luke 13:34 [the feminine in deity]

Jesus speaks of his efforts to bring the people of Jerusalem together to him. He compares those efforts to a chicken trying to gather her chicks under her wings. From this comparison some readers have wanted to claim that Jesus has the element of the feminine in him.

Such an inference is called “allegorizing the comparison,” carrying an author’s comparison beyond the point of the author notes. When that happens, the reader loses the author’s authority for whatever claims the reader is making.

It would be as legitimate to infer in this case that God is bipedal with feathers or that in the flesh Jesus was a bisexual. It would be like arguing there can be female apostles because Paul told the Galatians he was in travail till Christ was formed in them (Galatians 4:19). If readers want to make such a point, they do so on their own authority; it does not derive from this text.

Besides, the male-female variant does not apply to the God of the Bible. In one of his resurrection appearance, Jesus tells his disciples that they are not looking at a spirit because “*spirit does not have flesh and blood like you see I have*” (Luke 24:39); in John 4:24 Jesus tells the woman at the well that “*God is spirit/a-spirit.*” Sex is a characteristic of the physical order, not the spiritual.

Other instances of trying to attach female sexuality to God include comparisons to a servant’s mistress (Psalm 123:2-3), a woman comforting her baby (Psalm 131:2; Isaiah 66:13), a woman giving birth (Deuteronomy 32:18; Isaiah 42:14); a mother taking care of her baby (Hosea 11:3-4), a nursing mother (Isaiah 49:14), a woman looking for a coin (Luke 15:8-10), a mother

bear robbed of her cubs (Hosea 13:9); a mother eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11-12). Allegorizing these comparisons would be like claiming there can be female apostles because Paul says he is in travail again till Christ is formed in you (Galatians 4:19).

Look also at comments above on Genesis 1:27

Matthew 24:14 [time of Christ's return]

"The gospel of the kingdom must be proclaimed in the whole world [οἰκουμένη] as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come" (= Mark 13:10). The frequent inference is that Christ's second coming will not happen until the gospel reaches every nation.

Jesus is talking, however, about the end of Jerusalem and the Jewish nation, not the end of the world or the Christian age. The misreading supposes that *world* means the whole "world" in modern English parlance. Romans 1:8; Colossians 1:6, 23; and 1 Timothy 3:16 speak of the gospel as having already been preached throughout the world (κόσμος or κτίσις). In Acts 24:5 Tertullus says that Paul had caused "*insurrections among Jews throughout the world* [οἰκουμένη]. " Acts 11:28 tells about a famine over the whole *world* (οἰκουμένη) in the days of the emperor Claudius. See also perhaps Romans 16:25-26. Such statements indicate the then-known world, the inhabited world (<οἰκέω, to dwell), the Roman empire.

The point of Jesus' prediction is that the fall of the Jewish state would not occur until it was clear that his movement was permanent, that it was not just another fly-by-night Messianic claimant. About a generation's time had pretty well crystallized the number of Jewish believers and unbelievers (Acts 5:33-40).

Matthew 26:26 [real presence] [impanation] [transubstantiation] [consubstantiation]

At the institution Jesus says, "*This is my body.*" The words are pressed to mean that the bread was actually his body, and the fruit of the vine was actually his blood. Accordingly, the idea is that when the officiant offers the prayer of dedication, the "essence" of the elements changes to the actual flesh and blood of the incarnate Christ or is intermingled with them.

Nothing about the Christian message or the efficacy of its operation suggests or requires such a way of taking the words of institution. His body is holding what he calls "my body." All the features of the elements remain those of the bread and the fruit of the vine. By appealing to the Greek philosophical distinction between essence and accidents, an interpreter can claim that the traits of the elements remain the same while the "essence" changes.

Obviously, there is no way to disprove such an idea because "essence" is not susceptible to perception. But the real point is that there is no positive basis for it; the words do not require such an idea, and nothing relevant is gained by having the bread and the fruit of the vine actually become Christ's flesh and blood. In fact, we no longer know, or relate to, Christ after the flesh (2 Corinthians 5:16). The "emblems" remind us that as deity he lived in our physical human circumstance and experienced its most extreme range of suffering while maintaining his commitment to the Father's will. We commit ourselves to that same level of obedience in

identifying ourselves with him through these tokens of his physical existence here. Any transformation here—bread to body, wine to blood—occurs in the mind of the observer, not in the elements observed; they are regarded as meaning what they refer to; they are emblems of those things, not the things themselves in whole or in part.

When the Christian message entered the Greek world, one serious difficulty in interpretation was the tendency to “hypostatize” it—to take its words and meaning in a hypostatic sense, to interpret them as referring to substance/“stuff” rather than to “spirit.” People readily say of a photograph, “*This is my mother,*” not meaning at all that it is substantively “*my mother.*”

If Jesus is going to eat this supper with us in the kingdom of heaven, would that mean eating himself?

So we have here another example of taking the wording of the text in an unnecessary way and making it orthodox. The hermeneutical method breaks three rules of interpretation: (1) not staying with minimum affirmation (*i.e.*, not over-interpreting, hermeneutical restraint), (2) not reading the unclear in light of the clear, and (3) not keeping the burden of proof on the affirmative.

Matthew 27:46 [the Father’s abandonment of the Son]

“*Eli, Eli, why have you forsaken me?*” In keeping with the penal substitution theory of atonement, the “Cry of Dereliction” is taken to mean that the Father abandoned (objectively) the only perfectly righteous Son as he was substituting for the many sinners.

The gospel account itself offers no explanation for the meaning of this cry from the cross; so any specific significance attached to it comes from a larger framework invoked to imply a more specific meaning than is evident from the words themselves.

About the closest thing to objective abandonment is a man’s subjective sense of being alone when dying in agony.

The cry quotes Psalm 22:1, a Messianic Psalm. Jesus may have cried out the verse to explain to the people and warn the Pharisees themselves about what they were doing: laughing at him, shooting out the lip, shaking their heads in ridicule, and saying, “*He trusted in God; let him now deliver him if he wants him*” (Psalm 22:7-8 = Matthew 27:39, 42-43). They did not realize what they were doing (Luke 23:34), even though from their comment about his “trusting in God” (27:43), they evidently saw the connection Jesus later made (27:46) between what was happening and the words of the Psalm. Of course, they just did not believe it was a valid connection. Jesus’ point would be that the one crying out to God in the Psalm was vindicated as Jesus would be as well, not by coming down from the cross, but by coming up from the grave. God had not departed from the “king of the Jews” (23:42) any more than he had abandoned David of old who had trusted in God and whom Jesus was quoting. Besides, that cry of David had nothing to do with being alone because he was the substitute for others.

See also Mark 15:22-37; Psalm 22.

See essays on “Atonement.”

Matthew 28:19 [proclaim as you go]

In an effort to encourage people to take advantage of daily opportunities to share Christ “as they go” about their normal routines, some have slipped into using “*Go into all the world*” as a statement about evangelism as part of the natural Christian life. Whatever may be said of the idea as such, it is not the point of this passage. This command is a commissioning of the apostles in their distinctive work, not a comment to typical people about how to incorporate evangelism into daily living.

The Greek text combines an aorist participle with an imperative form, which makes both form imperatival in value. See “Places Where Greek Helps.”

The broader idea could be better exemplified from the Mission of the Twelve in Matthew 10:5-15, where Jesus uses a present participle tied to a present imperative when he tells the disciples, “*As you go, preach, saying . . .*”

Matthew 28:18 [trine baptism]

Trine baptism performs the baptizing action three times because Father, Son, and Spirit are all three mentioned.

It is worth noting that the “formula” Jesus uses in his directive to the apostles is “*baptizing them into the name of the Father and the son and the Holy Spirit.*” The text does not say “*into the names . . .*” nor does it say, “*into the name of the Father and the name of the Son and the name of the Holy Spirit.*” The three share a common identity—“into the name,” and their oneness is the larger truth than their distinctness from one another. While we would not invalidate either Jesus-only baptism or trine baptism, the bases for requiring either of them does not bear its weight of proof.

Mark 6:5-5 [faith healing]

Jesus could not do any mighty works in Nazareth because of the people’s unbelief. Modern faith-healers sometimes try to excuse their failed attempts at faith healing by saying that the person does not have enough faith—something that could be said about anyone’s faith.

The success of a miracle, however, does not depend on the recipient in a causal sense as evidenced by Jesus’ healing Malchus’ ear in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:51; John 18:10-11). Matthew’s account of the first rejection at Nazareth (13:54-58) concludes with the comment, “*He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief.*” Not being able to do many miracles in Nazareth was because he chose to do his miracles in the context of faith or engendering faith (condition), not that he did not have the ability to do so unless the recipient had faith. The kingdom of heaven is not about performing miracles but about accomplishing reconciliation.

Mark 8:29-30 [“Messianic Secret”]

On at least eight occasions, Jesus told his disciples, those whom he had healed, and demons not to make him known. In the Good Confession, Peter had just expressed his confidence that Jesus was the Messiah. This admonition to secrecy has been misused to say (1) that Jesus himself never claimed to be the Messiah; it was an exaggerated claim that arose later among his followers (= Matthew 16:20).

Twice his admonition to silence about healing had the adverse effect (Matthew 9:30-31; Mark 7:36). So others have suggested that (2) Jesus was using reverse psychology to get his name “out there” all the more—something he hardly needed to do.

A better explanation lies in the opposite direction: (3) Jesus wanted to keep his prominence in check till he had time to adjust the prevalent Jewish misconception that Messiah had come to be a national deliver—a real concern as shown when his proponents attempted after the feeding of the five thousand to take him by force and make him “king” (John 6:15). He also told his own disciples not to say he was the Messiah; they did not yet understand either what Messiah meant (Matthew 16:20). Alternatively, opponents of his influence wanted him out of the picture before a popular uprising overran the national leadership (cp. later John 11:47-53); pushing too publicly too early would only stymie his already harassed ministry. In a related way, telling people not to spread news about his healings was meant to restrain excessive pressure for healing miracles; too much enthusiasm for them would overshadow his teaching work. In that vein, after a major healing episode in Capernaum, Luke 4:42-44 records that Jesus told the multitudes that wanted him to stay, *“I need to preach the gospel to the other cities too.”*

Furthermore, the prohibition against advertising him was not absolute. In the case of the transfiguration, he told the three apostles to delay telling it till after his resurrection (Matthew 17:9 = Mark 9:9). More effective, then, was waiting closer to that ultimate proof of Messiahship before outright claims were made.

Besides not encouraging false anticipations about the nature of Messiah’s work, Jesus sought to downplay another type of misinformation: (4) he forbade demons to testify about him for obvious reasons: their statements would only play into the hands of religious leaders, who were all too willing to say, *“Consider the source.”* That would give credence to their attempt at explaining his exorcisms: *“He casts out demons by Beelzebub”* (Mark 1:34 = Luke 4:41; Matthew 12:15-21 = Mark 3:12; see Matthew 12:22-37).

Matthew	Mark	Luke	Addressees
8:4	1:34	4:41	demons
12:15-21	1:44 3:12 5:43		a leper the healed, demons Jairus’ household 2 healed blind men
9:30-31	7:36	8:56	people of the

16:20	8:29-30	9:2	Decapolis
17:9	9:9		the apostles the 3 apostles

Mark **10:13-16** (= Matthew **19:13-15** = Luke **18:15-17**) [infant baptism]

“Let the little children come to me.” “Of such is the kingdom of heaven.” “The kingdom of heaven belongs to such.” Receiving the kingdom as a little child is taken to mean “when” rather than in the “manner” of a little child. The comment cannot mean in the “state,” or “when” of a little child; otherwise, adults would be eliminated since the explanation continues by saying that a person will not enter it otherwise. So, aside from “in the manner of,” one wonders what an infant’s “receiving the kingdom” would mean. The infant would not know that he was, in fact, receiving it.

Cp. Matthew **18:1-6**; Mark **9:36-37**

Mark **10:6** [fiat creationism]

See comments under Matthew **19:8**.

Mark **16:18** [snake handling]

Picking up serpents need not mean deliberately picking them up any more than drinking something poisonous would mean deliberately doing so. It is interesting that snake handling cults do not venture into the poison drinking too. The two issues are alike in that they involve poison.

The nature and purpose of the kingdom does not foster showing off supernatural powers. Jesus’ promise is better illustrated in Paul’s being bitten by a poisonous snake after the shipwreck on Mileta on the way to Rome.

Putting ourselves in harm’s way sounds like putting to trial the Lord our God (Matthew **4:6-7** < Deuteronomy **6:16**), something neither Jesus nor his disciples were willing to do.

Mark **16:17** [permanence of tongue speaking]

“These signs will accompany believers.” The words apply to the time frame the writer has in mind. **16:20** states a fulfillment of the prediction; anything more goes beyond the scope of the passage. Besides, being able to “speak in tongues” is not a matter of choice, but of enablement.

Mark **16:17** [necessity of tongue speaking]

Jesus includes speaking in new languages in his list of signs that will accompany believers. He does not say every believer will do so or that such speaking will continue beyond

the time frame marked by the statement of fulfillment in the subsequent text (**16:20**). The purpose of speaking in languages lay in connection with the preaching of the gospel (**16:20**; cp. **1 Corinthians 14**), not as a sign to believers, but to unbelievers (**1 Corinthians 14:22**). A sign to believers that they are in fact saved, for example, is not what is needed; faith in God's promise to that effect is sufficient. A sign to unbelievers may be useful, but not necessary, because the gospel addresses the secrets of people's hearts, and they can thereby perceive that God is in the proclaimers of the good news (**1 Corinthians 14:24-25**).

Luke **2:1-2** [taxation at Jesus' birth]

"To be taxed" should read "to be enrolled." The emperor had ordered a census, which took place at the time Luke indicates by his list of rulers.

Luke **11:42** [Christians need to practice tithing.]

See notations on Matthew **23:23**.

Luke **15:11-32** [eternal security]

While the prodigal was in the far country, he was still his father's son; so a convert who reverts to his former life is still "saved" as to status. The prodigal lost the benefits of home and his testimony to others, but he was still a "son."

However, the prodigal was only his father's physical son, not his spiritual one. The father later tells the older brother that, while in the foreign country, the prodigal was "lost" as well as "dead"—though he was physically alive, of course, but not in a way pertinent to the parable (**15:32**). Anything about physical sonship lies outside the point of the parable; so nothing in spiritual sonship corresponds to something in salvation—a least as could be shown from this parable.

Salvation is reconciliation from alienation—an interpersonal process and condition (**2 Corinthians 5:18-19**; **Romans 5:10-11**; **Ephesians 2:12-16**; **Colossians 1:19-20**; e.g.); physical connection, legal status, logical structure do not characterize the concern; such things are foreign to the enterprise. Salvation is a present relationship, not an impersonal state called "heaven," or a place of "*not being in hell*" or "*saved from going to hell*" in the future

Luke **17:34** [acceptance of homosexual behavior]

At the time of the end, Jesus says two will be on one bed, one taken and the other left. It is a stretch to suppose that they were in the same bed because they typically had homosexual relations. That would be like trying to justify pedophile behavior because Jesus tells a parable about a man being in bed with his children (**Luke 11:7**). They can be in bed together for other than homosexual sexual relations. Ecclesiastes **4:11** says, for example, "*If two lie down together,*

they are warm; how can one be warm alone?" The clear prohibition against homosexual relations eliminates an unnecessary take on any text elsewhere: Romans 1:26-27.

An aside observation may be of interest. A reader expects Luke 17:34 to mean two men, but there is no word for men; that is an inference based on a masculine article. Jesus offers a parallel case where two are grinding together, one taken and the other left (17:35); again, the noun *women* does not appear in the Greek text. Men and women in parallel make the best sense between the two sets since women did the grinding. The subsequent uses of "the one" in both comparisons are two masculine articles in the first case and then two feminine ones in the second case. The subsequent masculine articles and feminine articles would be carrying out the masculine-takes-preference usage at the first part of the comments. The word two ($\delta\omega$) itself, however, has the same form for masculine and feminine, and mixed reference by custom uses masculine form.

Luke 18:8 [Will orthodox faith be found on earth when Christ returns?]

The article plus noun *the faith* is taken to mean that Jesus wonders whether the true faith will exist on earth when he returns.

But will he find "the faith" or will he find "faith." The Greek article on the noun does not have to mean the body of doctrine so as to imply that doctrinal accuracy is the point of Jesus' question. The latter emphasis is sometimes taken as a basis for urging some kind of "orthodoxy" the current speaker wants to promote to the exclusion of other false doctrinal "faiths" on the current scene.

It is better taken *faith* as a reference to the kind of thing faith is. "*Will faith be found on the earth?*" "*Will there be people fill with faith/trust in God?*" The Lord's comment is made after the Parable of the Unjust Judge, in which Jesus encourages people to pray, trusting that God will answer and give them justice. Will Christ find that kind of trust/faith when he returns? The Greek article marks contrast with parallel alternatives. That value can be one individual within a group (definiteness) or it can mark one group in contrast to another, in this case faith in contrast to the lack of it.

Luke 18:17 [infant baptism]

"Let the little children come to me; don't forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of heaven." Jesus' words are taken by extension to imply the appropriateness of infant baptism—since they are then in the kingdom and those in the kingdom are baptized into it.

One typical counter-response has limited application: "Let them come is a different thing from bringing them (to baptism)." It is not clear that the passages record an incident just about "ambulatory" children (cp. Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16).

More to the point is that the text is not dealing with baptism or salvation from lostness. Without some prior indication of the relevance of baptism to infants, the text offers nothing to aid in that identification. Instead, it highlights the typical attitude of little children, who trust their

parents even when they do not understand why they do what they do or require of them what they require. That trusting attitude pictures people's appropriate attitude toward God and satisfies the intent of Jesus' comment.

If the passage is taken to imply something about baptism because it connects children with the kingdom of God, then certain comments seem in order. It is one thing to say that baptism (identifies us with Christ and on that basis) is associated with forgiveness of sins; it is another thing to say that without it there is no "safeness," no forgiveness. It is one thing to say that baptism identifies a person with the kingdom of God; it is another thing to say that only those baptized does God identify with the kingdom. The lack of infant baptism does not mean there is no "theology of the child" in an interpreter's understanding of children's relationship to God. Aside from irrelevant considerations, there is no reason to suppose that little ones are lost or that they are of no import in the concerns of the gospel and the point of salvation. If "*such is the kingdom of heaven,*" then there is no need for them to be "saved" into it; they are not lost, and they are already in the kingdom."

Not entering the kingdom "as" a little child does not mean "when" a little child, or no adult could be saved. The closing verse of Luke 18:15-17 says, "*Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will certainly not enter it.*" "As" means manner, not age—in modern parlance, come "like" a little child.

John 1:1 [trinity]

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The Word is somehow thought of as "being with" God and at the same time "being" God. It is as if there were two brothers, Bill and Bob; and somehow Bill was "with Bob" and "was Bob."

In scripture, "God" covers the general reference to God as (a) "godhead" and at other times more specifically (b) God the Father, as when Jesus calls God his Father (John 5:18) and the Jews accuse him of blasphemy for doing so. A third usage is (c) "deity." In this last instance, the stress falls on kind of being, deity rather than angel, mankind, animal, or the material universe. It is in this sense that we are to understand John 1:1. The Word that became flesh was previously with God (the Father) and was himself deity. He is not the same one as the Father (identity)—under, say, a different name (monarchianism) or operating in a second role (economic trinity). He is of the same kind. In this very gospel, 14:16 makes clear distinction between the Father and the Son (and the Spirit as well): "*I will pray to the Father, and he will send another Comforter.*"

In keeping with the distinction between identity and kind, the original language omits the article on "God" when it says. "*God the Word was.*" The absence of the Greek article calls attention to the kind of thing the noun refers to, hence, deity.

See "Places Where Greek Helps" at John 1:1.

John 1:1 [deity]

Some have noticed that the Greek article does not appear with “God” in the clause, “*The Word was God*” (or, more literally, “*and God the word was.*”). Supposing that the article in Greek has the same value as the definite article in English, these readers want to say, “*And the Word was a god.*” From that point the reasoning can go different ways, one being that the Word was “God” in the sense that he operated in a role associated with God—functional deity. The idea is somewhat akin to the usage of “gods” in Psalm 82:6, “*I said, ‘You are gods,’*” said of those to whom the word of God came, the judges of Israel (see John 10:34-36).

The problem comes from misunderstanding the value of the Greek article. It does not equate to the English definite article “the” so that its absence would mean “a” (indefinite). Instead, it means identify *vs.* quality, or to put it differently, the article draws attention to something in contrast to one or more parallel alternatives. The absence of the article, then, draws attention to the kind of thing it is as thought of on its own terms rather than in contrast to others in the category.

In both this entry and the last one, the strained interpretations come from the underlying assumption that one God (monotheism) means a single individual person rather than an interpersonal oneness having the same nature and united purpose and being the only entity of that kind. The belief stems from a fear of polytheism or tritheism (“three-god-ism”), an issue dealt with elsewhere in this website under “The Doctrine of God.” The closest thing to the threeness-in-oneness of deity is the twoness-in-oneness of husband-wife (minus, of course, the physical dimension), on the one hand, as distinguished from a man and a woman, on the other.

See “Places Where Greek Helps” at John 1:1.

John 1:9 [universalism]

“[Jesus] was the true light that enlightens every person that comes into the world.” Consequently, at some point, either during life or later in eternity, all persons will eventually be saved (“enlightened”).

John refers to Christ’s role for all people, his value, his potential. That is the character of what he brought into the world and who he was; that was his motive for coming—to bring salvation to all people. Because of what this “salvation” is and who this savior is, the enlightening happens only when people respond to the light. It is interpersonal, requiring both offering, on the one side, and accepting, on the other side.

This text cannot mean that all people are saved, as universalism believes. John proceeds to say that not everyone received him. A difference exists between the all Christ came to the world to enlighten and the less than all he gave the right to become God’s children because they received him. The difference between the two numbers lies in people who did not receive him.

John 1:19 [anti-Semitism]

Critics sometimes accuse New Testament writers of anti-Semitism. Part of the basis for the idea comes from the negative use of “the Jews,” particularly in John’s gospel and in The Acts.

One corrective on this understanding is that (a) “the Jews” does not refer to Jews in general, but to resistant and hostile Jews, those who opposed Christ and persecuted his disciples. That opposition primarily came from the Jewish national and religious leaders during Christ’s ministry. Many Jews became Christians, and so do not fall under the use of “Jews” in an adversative sense.

Furthermore, (b) “the Jews” does not always carry a pejorative sense. In John about one-third of the uses have neutral connotations.

John and Acts were written from a later perspective—the 90’s (?) and the 60’s respectively, when the number of Jewish converts to Christ was pretty well settled; the influence of the religious leaders and traditional expectancies about the Messianic kingdom had crystalized the Jew-Christian distinction. That process made the terminology all the more appropriate, because more generally “the Jews” amounted to non-Christians of Jewish heritage. So “Jews” takes its place alongside “Gentiles,” “Samaritans,” “Romans,” “Greeks,” and the like as a designation that no more bears a negative sense than those other terms do.

Even then, in the earlier stages of this divergence, (c) Acts takes opportunity to note the favorable attitude that the general populace took toward the converts (2:47a; 4:21; 5:13, 26). Similarly, there is a note that not all the leaders evidenced hostility toward the Christian movement: “*A large company of the priests obeyed faith/the faith*” (Acts 6:7). Special mention is made of Nicodemus (John 3:1-12ff.; 7:50-52; 19:39) and Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:38 = Matthew 27:57-61 + Mark 15:42-47 = Luke 23:50-56) even during the ministry of Jesus. Acts records that even Gamaliel, the apostle Paul’s famous teacher (Acts 22:3), successfully cautioned the Sanhedrin against dealing ruthlessly with Christian leaders (Acts 5:33-40).

Lastly, we find (d) several gracious comments toward the Jews who rejected Jesus as their Messiah: the Lord’s cry from the cross, “*Father, forgive them; they don’t know what they’re doing*” (Luke 23:34? ms); likewise, Stephen’s amazing, dying prayer, “*Lord, don’t hold this sin against them*” (Acts 7:60). Peter tells an assembly of Jews in Solomon’s Porch, “*Brothers, I know you did it [crucified Jesus] in ignorance, as your rulers did too*” (Acts 3:17).

Given the atrocities carried out against Christ’s followers by many leaders and members of the Jewish community, rather than anti-Semitism, the more notable observation is the lack of vitriol against opponents of the Messianic movement.

John 2:15 [abuse]

In John’s account of the cleansing of the temple (2:13-22), Jesus made a lash/scourge/whip (*φραγέλλιον*) and supposedly used it on the merchants and money changers to drive them out of the temple area.

More exactly, the text says, “*Having made a whip out of ropes, he drove all [πάντας] out of the temple—both the sheep and the oxen . . . ,*” and told the ones selling doves to get them out

of the temple. “*Both the sheep and the oxen*” renames (appositives) what “all” refers to; so the account does not say that Jesus used it on the people, but on the animals. In fact, the merchants are still around to call for something to show that he had the authority to do what he did (**2:18-20**).

John 3:7 [salvation as supernatural]

Jesus tells Nicodemus that a person has to be ‘born again,’ or perhaps “born from above.” That image has been taken to indicate something supernatural because it is not physical.

The expression “born again” need not mean more than starting over in a new frame of reference that is not physical birth (Matthew **3:8-9**, *e.g.*), starting over in a “transcendent,” “spiritual,” interpersonal way. Spiritual need not mean supernatural; it simply means not physical, as Nicodemus had supposed Jesus must have meant.

What happens in conversion must be learned from descriptions elsewhere that more clearly address the nature of the process than a single word image can do. From the rest of scripture, we learn that the issue in salvation is reconciling alienated persons by the factors always involved in reconciling (**2 Corinthians 5:18-19**; **Romans 5:10-11**; **Ephesians 2:12-16**; **Colossians 1:19-20**, *e.g.*).

Bringing divine supernatural activity into the process arises from the prior belief that everybody has biologically inherited from our first parents a fallen nature that has to be “regenerated” supernaturally before conviction, conversion, and continued Christian living can take place. If that idea does not belong in the picture, introducing a supernatural element into the “new birth” word picture does not commend itself. “Natural depravity” (*vs.* behavioral depravity) has to be dealt with from other texts and in response to texts appealed to.

Regarding “natural depravity,” see TOPICS > anthropology > depravity.

John 5:24 [Christians and judgment]

“*The one that hears my word and believes him that sent me, has entered into eternal life and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.*” “Does not come into judgment” has been taken to mean that Christians does not go through the final judgment indicated in Revelation and elsewhere.

The word translated “judgment” has a meaning wide enough to include “condemnation,” a negative outcome of judging. The latter fits the Great White Throne Judgment pictured in Revelation **20:11-15**. That prophecy speaks of everyone appearing at the event, and anyone not found in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. Similarly, in The Olivet Discourse, Jesus pictures the Son of man sitting on his throne with all the nations gathered in front of him, and he separates the sheep from the goats and sends the two groups on their separate ways; “*every man was judged*” (Matthew **25:31-46**). So, Christians are evaluated-judged just like everyone else, but they are not condemned-judged because they have put their trust in Christ’s righteousness.

John 6:37 [irresistible grace]

“All that the Father gives me will come to me.”

The emphasis is on *Father*, not *give*. Jesus is contrasting Father and people. People that do not come were not given by the Father. The Father gives in that he sets the norms and terms of acceptably coming to the intended Messiah, not what people supposed the Messiah would be and do (cp. John 6:44).

John 6:44 [irresistible grace]

“No one can come to me unless the Father . . . draws him.” By emphasizing draws, the Lord’s comment comes to mean that people cannot come to Christ if the Father does not draw them.

The import, however, is that people cannot be coming to Jesus as Messiah unless the Father is the one drawing them—in contrast to their own or other peoples’ ideas drawing them. The comment reminds us of Jesus statement to Peter that his confession “*did not come from flesh and blood but from the Father that is in heaven*” (Matthew 16:15). Jesus did not fit the religious leaders’ expectancies; instead, he was exhibiting the Father’s real intentions; so they were not drawn to him. Misemphasis in reading creates the wrong contrast.

John 8:7 [criticism]

In the episode about the woman taken in adultery, Jesus says, “*Let the one without sin among you, cast the first stone.*” The comment is used to fend off anyone who objects to a certain person’s sin or takes actions appropriate to it. The wording becomes an excuse for not owning up to one’s own sin by shifting attention to the accuser. If that were its import, the church could not exercise church discipline (Matthew 18:15-20).

Jesus’ comment does apply to a condemnatory attitude toward someone guilty of significant sin. It is well-taken as an admonition in respect to the person who sins, but it should not be stretched to deflect objection to the person’s act—as if no one else has any right to say that what someone is doing is morally wrong. In such cases, the counter motive would be to stifle moral standards. The difference here is the same as that between “hate speech” (against a person) and identifying certain acts as sin (behavior). The difference likewise applies to disagreeing with, say, a Muslim’s beliefs (concepts) about God and blasphemy (degrading attitude) against his God. In the last case, the motive is to justify retaliation, “holy war,” and the like.

The verse stands in a text whose integrity has been questioned on the basis of manuscript evidence. That point does not seem to affect the discussion on the idea as such.

See comments on Matthew 7:1.

See also “Passages Where Greek Helps.”

John 10:26-29 [eternal security]

“No one will snatch you out of my hand.”

No third party can forceably separate Christ's disciples from him; so they need not fear being destroyed, for example, by the authority of the Jewish religious leaders of the day. The current national leaders could not come between Christ and his followers. They are secure against external forces and persons because Jesus himself will not be overcome, and he will protect them against their adversaries. That is a different thing from saying they cannot leave voluntarily. Judas was still among the twelve when Jesus made this promise.

John 10:30 [monarchianism]

“The Father and I are one,” taken to mean they are the same one; Father and Son are two names for the one person.

“One,” however, means “united” here, “at one,” in agreement. Jesus’ ministry was in agreement with the Father’s intentions for Messiah’s ministry. They are one in nature and purpose, not the same one in number. John 14:16 shows that the Son is distinct enough from the Father to pray to him, the Father is distinct enough from the Spirit to send him, and the Spirit is distinct enough from the Son to be called “another.” His prayer to the Father recorded in John 17:22 was that the disciples “*would be one like we are one.*” The disciples are not the same one; they are to be united as one.

John 11:49 [annual priesthood]

“Caiaphas, being high priest that year” does not reflect a later time when the Roman government sold the priesthood to the highest bidder on an annual basis. The time reference is “time within which,” or during that year, which carries no implication about the duration of that priest’s functioning; hence, there is no implication that the gospel was written later by someone other than the apostle John—by someone who did not realize that the high priesthood during Jesus’ ministry was not an annual reappointed by the Romans.

John 14:8-11 [monarchianism]

“If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” The intent of meaning was not that Jesus and the Father are the same one so that seeing the one is the same as seeing the other. He meant that seeing Jesus was as good as seeing the Father; seeing Jesus was as close to seeing the Father as a mortal can come to seeing God in his own nature: “*God, whom no man has seen or can see*” (1 Timothy 6:16). “*Nobody has ever seen God; the only begotten God, who is in the arms of the Father, has declared him*” (John 1:18). Jesus is speaking about kind rather than number or identity.

Just a few verses farther on, the text contains probably the clearest indication in scripture about the distinction between the members of the “godhead.” Jesus promises to pray to the Father, and the Father will send another Comforter. There must be enough difference between Father, Son, and Comforter for the actions between them to occur and for the Comforter to be called “another” (14:16).

John 14:7 [monarchianism]

“If you have seen me, you have seen the Father” is taken to mean seeing the one is the same thing as seeing the other instead of seeing me is as good as seeing the father. What you see in me is as close as you can come in the flesh to seeing what the Father is like, because spirit in its own nature is not visible to the human eye.

Consequently, the text should be read with an emphasis on Father: *“If you have seen me, you have seen the “Father. ”*

John 14:10 [monarchianism]

“I am in the Father, and the Father is in me,” taken to mean some kind of substantive compenetration. The a-in-b-in-a pattern in John’s writings means closeness, mutual relationship. A control case appears in John 15:4-5: *“Stay in me and I in you”* as illustrated by the fruit and vine branches.

John 14:26 [personality of the Holy Spirit]

The word for “Spirit” is grammatically neuter. In four Johannine texts a masculine pronoun is used in statements about the Spirit. The reason, however, for the masculine pronoun is that “comforter,” a masculine noun, is the nearest antecedent for those masculine pronouns. “Comforter” is a label used for the Spirit. Consequently, John is not breaking a rule of grammar to highlight the personality of the Spirit. His personal nature is evident, rather, from the fact that a personal role—that of comforter, advocate—characterizes the Spirit’s role.

See also John 15:26; 16:(7, 8) 13.

See “Greek Helps.”

John 18:36 [pacifism]

“My kingdom is not of this world, otherwise my servants would be fighting.” War and self-defense are foreign to Christ’s enterprise in the world.

Jesus’ point, however, is that if his kingdom were “of this world”—a political, national kingdom, his servants would be fighting to keep him from being delivered to the Jews; but it is not “from there.” His kingdom is not established and maintained by force; his is a “spiritual kingdom,” that is, an interpersonal one, a transcendent one. That leaves open the question about

holy war, self-defense, police action, and other civil endeavors carried out by forceful means—which are not black and white issues and are not addressed here.

In Luke 22:36 Jesus tells his disciples to buy a sword if they do not have one. John the Baptist does not tell soldiers to quit their job (Luke 3:14).

See also Luke 22:36; Romans 13:1-7 as well as Luke 17:20-21 (*ἐντὸς ὑμῶν*).

John 20:22-23 [clerical absolution]

“Whosever sins you forgive, they are forgiven; whosever sins you retain, they are retained.” The statement does not grant humankind the right to forgive the sins of third parties; only God can forgive sin in that sense (Mark 2:7; Isaiah 43:25). Sin is forgiven by the person against whom the sin was committed and by God who defines what is and is not sin—“*against heaven and in your sight*” (Luke 15:18, 21). Since Jesus has just given the apostles a statement of commission (John 20:21), he evidently means that they will be forgiving or retaining people’s sins by preaching the gospel to them by which their sins are forgiven or retained—or not, depending on their acceptance or rejection. God will stick with his messengers in their endeavor to proclaim the message by which sin is forgiven. Indeed, whose sins are forgiven or retained depends on their fulfilling their mission.

Between individuals, of course, we have a responsibility to forgive those who repent after sinning against us. For the apostles, that dimension of the situation would soon become real when persecution started—as with James the brother of John, who was among those Jesus was talking to at the time. If we forgive those who sin against us, God will forgive them as well—at least in principle.

See also comments with Matthew 16:19; 18:18.

Acts 1:15-26 [Peter’s brash replacement for Judas among the apostles]

While the apostles waited for the Spirit to come at Pentecost, Peter proposed that a man be chosen to replace Judas Iscariot, who defected from his place in the apostolic circle. Some have felt that the proposal represents another case of Peter’s history of jumping into things ahead of time. God, it is said, had intended that Saul of Tarsus replace Judas to bring the number back to twelve.

The account gives no indication that Peter acted without warrant. The originating reason for saying so seems to be that adding Saul of Tarsus later as primary apostle makes thirteen instead of twelve for the full contingent of apostles. Suffice it to say the number need not be that precise; it is sufficient to say that there were twelve apostles in the same sense there were twelve tribes of Israel—to which the Lord links the apostolic group (Matthew 19:28 = Luke 22:30).

See “The New Testament Structure” for an explanation of the distinctive *vs.* general use of the term *apostle* as well as the evidence that Paul claimed to be an apostle in the distinctive sense.

Acts 2:1-4 [descent of the Spirit]

From this passage some suppose that the Spirit descended on the 120 at Pentecost. That idea may lead further into the belief that everyone should expect to receive that kind of special “anointing from the Lord.”

Tracing through the pronouns from 2:4 backwards, leads to the observation that the Spirit fell on the Twelve, the ones Jesus explicitly addressed in this regard in his promise (Acts 1:4-5). The parenthetical comment about the 120 (1:15) does not indicate to whom Peter was talking when he proposed replacing Judas, who had fallen way from fulfilling “this ministry.” Peter was talking to the rest of the Twelve, and they were the ones who cast lots for Matthias and the ones who had been called to “this ministry,” the apostolic calling of giving their witness of the resurrection (1:8; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39, 41; [13:31]; hence, the qualification for Judas’ replacement as a witness of the resurrection: 1:21-22).

Acts 2:38 [the meaning of baptism]

On Pentecost, when the multitude asked what they could do now that they realized they had rejected their Messiah, Peter answered, *“Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus for the remission of your sins.”* So baptism is for committing ourselves to Christ and identity with him provides the rationale for the forgiveness of sins, which is the same thing as considering people righteous like the One they have identified with.

The text does not say, *“Be baptized for the remission of sins.”* It says, *“Be baptized in the name of Jesus for the remission of sins.”* Baptism is not done so much to the forgiveness of sins, but to God, who forgives sin on the condition that we are willing to identify with the Christ, an identification we express in baptism. Note the same sentiment in the Great Commission regarding baptism. The baptism act is a personal statement of identification with Christ (together with all that identity implies), and it is on that basis God forgives sin. Consequently, on the one hand, baptism is not a work or an outer act thought of as producing the resultant salvation—and therefore has to be separated from forgiveness lest it breach the principle of salvation by faith rather than works. On the other hand, in connecting baptism with salvation, one must not misconceive the connection: it is not done to produce the result (cause)—as an act does in legal process; it is connected by being the Lord’s commanded performative act that formally expresses willingness to identify with the person of Christ as Lord and with all that identification implies, especially the candidate’s commitment to Christ’s values and purposes, and if necessary, to suffer for doing so. On the basis of that willing identification and commitment, God forgives sin. One important factor here is that baptism is an interpersonal act, not a legal one. The other important factor is that God does the forgiveness, the “heaven” against whom all sin is performed.

Acts 2:44-45 [Christian communism]

Luke indicates that the Jerusalem Christians had all things in common, sold their possessions and goods, and distributed them to all according to need. Similarly, he says later that none of them regarded their possessions as their own. As many as owned properties, sold them and brought the proceeds to the apostles for distribution to the needy (cp. Barnabas' benevolence in 4:36-37 and the Ananias-Sapphira incident in 5:1-11). The inference is sometimes made that the Christians here were practicing communism or even that Christians should not own material things.

More likely the text draws attention to the attitude toward possessions among those Christians—an attitude that issued in notable, not necessarily uniform, sale of them. The writer does not say the apostles forbade owning property; so the practice was voluntary. Some had to retain property or there would have had no place to go “home” to (2:46), and the believers would have had nowhere to congregate at night for fear of the Jewish leaders (4:23-31). In fact, later Peter says to Ananias, “*While it remained, did it not remain your own; and after it was sold, was it not in your discretion?*” When an angel freed Peter from prison, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, perhaps the same place where the disciples observed the Last Supper with Jesus (12:1-19). The Christians occupied a dependent position within the larger political situation. In such a situation communism cannot operate because the state does not exist to provide the infrastructure to the full social situation.

What happened among these believers became especially significant because the national Jewish benevolence system operated through the synagogues. Becoming a Christian meant being excommunicated from the synagogue (John 9:22, 35 with the man born blind; cp. Luke 6:22; 3 John 10); that meant being removed from the benevolence rolls. The matter presented such a difficulty that it led to the appointment of “the seven” to take care of support for Grecian widows particularly (Acts 6:1-6).

Whatever may be said about the use of possessions among the early Jerusalem Christian, it certainly did not become a feature of Christianity in general. The Corinthians had homes to eat in (1 Corinthians 11:22, 34). Lydia was a businesswoman with property in Philippi (Acts 16:14-15). Other people’s property enabled the benevolence toward the needy. The most obvious example is Paul’s offering for the poor saints in Jerusalem during his third missionary journey (1 Corinthians 16:1-4; Romans 15:25-27; 2 Corinthians 8:1-4; 9:1, 2, 12; Acts 24:17; note also Galatians 2:10 and Acts 11:27-30). This poverty among the Jerusalem Christians stemmed in large part from what occurred during the early years to keep the Christian community afloat in Jerusalem and Judaea.

The silver lining in this economic condition among Jerusalem Christians was that when the Roman armies came later to destroy the Jewish state, the Christians had already liquefied much of their assets. They probably understood from the beginning that since the real Messianic kingdom was transcultural and universal, the Jewish state would not continue or grow to rule the world as popular expectancy had previously supposed.

Acts 2:46 [daily communion]

“Daily continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple and breaking bread at home, they took their food with gladness and singleness of heart.” Some have taken this note to indicate that the first Christians observed the Lord’s Supper daily.

“Break bread” covers eating a normal meal as well as observing communion (, the cross-over being perhaps due to the practice of embedding the Lord’s Supper in a full communal meal—the agape feast (note 1 Corinthians 11:17-22 + 23-34; Jude 12). At best, the issue raises a moot question, then, because the comment need not mean anything more than eating normal meals at home. While the idea cannot be disproved, neither can it be affirmed since the expression has more than one usage. Acts 20:6-7 sounds like Paul waited seven days to meet with the Christians in Troas to break bread. That implies that they did not observe it every day. 1 Corinthians 11:18ff. + 16:2 indicates that the Christians gathered weekly to observe the Lord’s Supper.

Acts 2:47b [unconditional predestination]

The King James Versions says, “*The Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.*” The wording has been taken to fit with the idea that, without reference to anything done by individuals themselves, God has chosen who will be saved.

Better translated, the passage reads, “*The Lord added together daily the ones being saved.*” Whether salvation is conditioned on human trust/faith must be settled from other texts.

Acts 4:34-35 [Christian communism]

See comments on Acts 2:44-45.

Acts 8:4 [persecution to gain fulfillment of the Great Commission]

Luke comments that the Christians in Jerusalem fled from Saul’s devastating persecution of the church after the stoning of Stephen. An inference has been made that it took persecution to overcome the apostles’ complacency in not launching out to preach the gospel to the whole world as per the Great Commission.

The text indicates that the stoning of Stephen had the effect of spreading the Christian message into the places where these early saints fled. It is unnecessary to infer, however, that such persecution was necessary to “get the ball rolling.” The Great Commission called for no particular time frame for its accomplishment. It made sense first to accomplish as much as possible among those most prepared for the message and most aware of the events that underlay gospel origins. Acts 8:1 remarks that the apostles deliberately stayed in Jerusalem in the face of that persecution. Such a decision does not bespeak complacency; if anything, it implies that shoring up the home front was important for their work before moving to more distant realms.

Acts 8:14 [transfer of charismata by apostles only]

When the Christians in Jerusalem heard that Samaritans had accepted the gospel, they sent Peter and John so the Samaritans might receive the Holy Spirit. The inference has sometimes been made that apostles were sent because only they could impart supernatural gifts; Philip, who was already there, could not impart them.

Since the account offers no explanation for sending Peter and John to impart the gifts, any reason a reader supplies is conjecture. Perhaps the Jerusalem Christians wanted to signal that the centuries-old rift between Jews and Samaritans was now over in Christ. Having the most prominent Jewish Christians impart these gifts would provide a clear statement that Samaritans were fully accepted into the fellowship of believers.

This context becomes part of the larger discussion about the duration of supernatural gifts in the church. Especially in opposition to claims of contemporary miraculous manifestation, it becomes a seemingly useful observation that such gifts were possessed only by the primary apostles and those on whom they laid their hands. The further inference comes that the charismata would disappear with the death of those on whom the apostles had laid hands.

While the proposition calls for attention, scripture does not directly affirm the scenario described. It does work out that no one in Holy Writ passed on gifts except the apostles, but that may result from the brevity of the records and the brevity of the time frame it covers. When Peter and John came to Samaria, they prayed as well as laid hands on the recipients. That point brings to mind Paul's statement to the Corinthians that someone speaking in a tongue could pray to be able to interpret (1 Corinthians 14:13). The directive suggests that special gifts under certain circumstances may have been available through answered prayer as well as by the laying on of hands. The proposed pattern about apostles and recipients could foster a mechanistic understanding of the Spirit's work in this regard.

See also Romans 1:11.

Acts 8:16 [Jesus-only baptism]

Samaritans had only been baptized in the name of Jesus. Some infer that their baptism was done in Jesus' name only.

Believers in Samaria had not received the Holy Spirit when they believed. The text says, “*Only they had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.*” (a) “Only” stands in contrast to also having received miraculous gifts by way of the laying on of hands. (b) “Only” modifies *baptized*, not *Jesus*. Putting the statement in contrast to the Great Commission creates unnecessary tension within scripture—if not contradiction. (c) The contrast is with John’s baptism, not with Father, Son, and Spirit as in the wording of the Great Commission.

The impetus for “Jesus only” baptism comes from the trinity issue. People fear that by using the Great Commission “formula,” others will suppose a plurality in deity that the adherents of the “Jesus only” formula do not believe is the case. In this respect it is worth noting that the “formula” in Matthew 28 is “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” not in

the name of the Father and in the name of the Son and in the name of the Holy Spirit" or "in the names of the"

See trinity materials herein in "Topics: Doctrines."

See also Acts **19:5**

Acts **9:4** [slain in the Spirit]

Paul's falling to the ground on the way to Damascus did not result from being knocked down by the Spirit. The falling was more likely his fearful reaction to the bright light and the voice he heard. His response is reminiscent of the Philippian jailor's reaction to the earthquake at the prison. The third account of Paul's encounter with the Lord outside Damascus (Acts **26:14**) says the whole company fell to the ground, but we have no indication that anyone but Paul was converted in connection with that experience. Besides, strictly speaking, this event took place preliminary to Paul's full conversion. It was not something he sought as part of an ongoing Christian experience, recurrent or otherwise.

See also Acts **22:7; 26:14, 16.**

Acts **9:31** [the church in Judaea]

The phraseology here need not be taken in an organizational sense, as if to imply that already in early church there was territorial level of church organization. The concern of the writer is to note that after the conversion of Paul, the generalized persecution of Christians by Jews greatly diminished.

Acts **10:44-48** [infant baptism]

Acts records a number of household baptisms; so the inference comes that with several households of extended families and servants, there were probably some babies or young children under "the age of accountability" in them. So infants would have been baptized along with the rest of the household.

That inference about the presence of infants may well be true, but the description of those who were baptized shows more clearly than the word "household" who it was that were "candidates": they received the Holy Spirit, spoke in tongues, believed, repented, rejoiced, were addressed by the word of God. In these proceedings the accounts do not contemplate any infants that may have been in these households.

See also Acts **10:2; 11:14; 16:15, 31-34; 18:8.** Cp. John **4:53;** 1 Corinthians **1:14.**

Acts **11:18** [repentance as given]

"To Gentiles then God has granted repentance to lie."

The expression “give repentance” conjures up in the English reader’s mind a direct, therefore supernatural, deposit in which the receiver is passive. The Hebrew background helps because the same word for “give” also covers “allow” (גַּנְעַן). Giving repentance is circumstantial, giving the opportunity to repent. “Repentance” becomes a summary word for the salvation process (metonymy). Elsewhere “faith” stands for the whole process of which it also is a characterizing part. Philippians 2:13 says similarly, “*It has been granted to you not only to believe, but to suffer on his behalf.*” (1) The decisive point in the question derives from the interpersonal character of the Christian faith. Interpersonal involves actively receiving what was giving; otherwise, it would be only one person acting: God. (2) The passive reading of the expression “give repentance” does not allow for the range of Semitic idiom that appears throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Acts 15:37 [dispensational shift]

Note F. F. Bruce, Acts, p. 309.

Acts 16:29-34 [infant baptism]

The idea sometimes proposed is that the solidarity of the household means that the faith of the father justifies baptizing the whole house, including the babies. The closing comment, however, shows that Paul means you and your house will be saved the same way—by “believing.” The closing verse about the incident indicates that the rejoicing and believing was “with his house.”

See also the notations above at Acts 10:44-48

Acts 19:5 [Jesus-only baptism]

Being baptized “*in the name of the Lord Jesus*” does not contrast with being baptized “*in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*” It contrasts with being baptized with John’s baptism since the account deals with twelve believers in Ephesus who knew only the baptism of John.

The trinity issue underlies Jesus-only baptism and the aversion to using the wording of the Great Commission as the baptism “formula.” The fear is that a supposed misunderstanding of Father-Son-Spirit comes from employing that expression.

See also Acts 8:16.

Acts 20:7

“*On the first day of the week, when we assembled to break bread, Paul discoursed . . . until midnight.*” The text has been used in formulating the case for weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper.

But the passage does not necessarily speak of more than the Sunday on which this event took place. “The” does not amount to “every” unless the circumstance of usage is already talking about a regular pattern. The case for weekly communion is better grounded in 1 Corinthians 11:18 + 16:2.

Acts 20:27 [the whole gospel]

In speaking for the last time to the Ephesian elders, Paul told them that he did not “*shrink from declaring to them the whole counsel of God.*” In the modern scene, the expression “whole counsel of God” gets picked up by different Christian and quasi-Christian groups that believe something important has not been taught or that want to add other writings, doctrines, or promises beyond the ones that scripture contains. They pick up on the expression to reinforce a particular interest they believe needs to be added to typical gospel commands and promises. Those who believe in the permanence and necessity of tongue speaking use it to crystallize concern for that idea. Those who believe Christian baptism must be regarded as a necessary aspect of initial salvation quote it in that connection. Millennialists may cite it to promote belief in a literal future thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. Health and wealth advocates may use it to advantage in those contexts.

Obviously, Paul did not have those concerns in mind because they were not problems in the apostolate age or matters erroneously omitted by Paul’s fellow apostles. So whatever a person thinks about them, he gains nothing from bringing up this passage in discussing them.

From the following comments, it is evident that he is warning these elders against false teachers even from among themselves who would want them to believe that there is more to be known than what they had heard from Paul. He surely has in mind the “secret knowledge” that Gnostics claimed to have, knowledge that they wanted to fuse into the pure gospel (hypostatic). He may have included Judaizers, who followed Paul around the Gentile territories, trying to get his Gentile converts to commit to circumcision. Judaizing teachers had wanted to add circumcision and obedience to the Law of Moses (legal)—a procedure that stood alternative to grace (interpersonal). The Gnostic and Judaizing messages were completely different, parallel messages from what Paul had given. People claiming to have more were really trying to subvert the truth with parallel ideas, not specific understandings of particulars in Christian teaching. Important doctrines or promises may be proper to highlight, but for the most part the examples that come up in the modern setting are not of the order of magnitude that Paul had in mind in his warning.

The canon is closed; so no new writings or doctrines are forthcoming (cp. Revelation 2:6; 22:18-19). The faith is once and for all time delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

Romans 1:18-23 [theistic proofs]

General revelation (through nature external and internal to self) can supposedly bring a person to the knowledge of the true God, albeit an incomplete knowledge of him and his will.

General revelation is not presented as able to bring a person to a knowledge of the God of the Bible. Instead, Paul is talking about leaving a true knowledge for something less satisfactory. He refers to a situation where people already knew God and left that knowledge to pursue less likely understandings of God and the world around them. The motive for doing such a thing must be suspect in some way.

Romans 3:23 [all sinned (in Adam)]

“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (KJV). The wording sounds like *have* goes with *sinned* and *come*. The present and perfect form are the same in the English verb “come”: “come” (present) and “have come” (perfect). A clearer wording is “have sinned and fall short” because the second verb is present tense in the original. The point is that all people have sinned in the past, and they continue not to be perfect now either.

See “Places Where Greek Helps,”

Romans 3:28 [salvation by faith only]

“A person is justified by faith apart from the works of law.” The sentence is taken to mean that a person does not do (“works”) anything in salvation except believe, or trust, in Christ. The inference is that no other human act is involved in salvation, which creates a problem for the idea that identification with Christ in Christian baptism is (1) unto salvation by being in Christ (Acts 2:38; that would be a “work.” So, baptism must be for some other reason: (2) for entrance into Christ as entrance into the visible church of Christ, (3) for a testimony to others that the candidate is a Christian, or at best that (4) baptism is the time when God saves on the basis of inner faith/trust/belief in Christ (*vs.* the outward expression of it going on at the time).

The appropriate concern in such reconstructions is to avoid the idea that a person can save himself (“autosoterism”) by “works,” taken to mean doing something or doing something outward—as in a ritual—to produce the result salvation. (a) **The first difficulty** lies in misunderstanding what Paul means by “works.” He is not talking about works in any sense whatever, but about (1) “works of law,” legal works, acts in the context of law; he is not talking about (2) “doing something” or (3) doing something “outward” (James 2:24), (4) doing something “after” salvation as in saved for good works (Ephesians 2:10). That means Paul is using “works” to mean the cause—in this discussion what produces salvation.

Faith itself could be called a “work,” for that matter (John 6:29), if “works” simply meant doing something. Instead, works is the apostle’s word for producing a result—as is the case in a legal setting—in contrast to trust in someone else to give that result—as is the case in interpersonal interaction. What the acts express the faith is a further consideration; the acts that express the faith cannot have other than the character and value of the faith that gave rise to them.

(b) **The second difficulty** with these reconstructions is misunderstanding “faith”—as if it were something inner. “Saving faith,” as it is sometimes called, is not sheer belief (as with

demons in James 2:19) or abstract trust within a person; but trust to the extent of doing what that faith naturally entails—active faith. Outward expression combines with the inner conviction/belief/trust in “saving faith.” Saving faith is active faith. It is just that the acts themselves—inner or outer—do not produce the result. Faith itself is not a cause of anything whether in salvation or otherwise; it is a condition for the other person’s giving what the trust and its expressions do not themselves produce in whole or in part.

(c) **The third difficulty** is often a misunderstanding of what salvation itself is. It is the reconciliation of alienated persons, not the pronouncement of legal inclusion or saved from going to hell in the future. Sin separates persons from each other (alienation); reconciliation comes from the free promise by the one sinned against to forgive the sinner on the condition of repentance and its appropriate expressions. Those who sin trust the one sinned against to accept them back into fellowship—interpersonal relationship.

Paul’s parallel discussion of faith *vs.* works in Galatians 3:10-12 is perhaps clearer and more efficient. He notes that if a person always did (works) everything in the law (Deuteronomy 27:26), he would be righteous, and God would “owe it to him” to consider him righteous (cp. Romans 4:4). But nobody does or can do everything right all the time (Acts 15:10). “*Nobody’s perfect,*” and righteousness means perfect righteousness (Matthew 19:17). Perfect righteousness is always the standard for any relationship, especially relationship with God. Since none of us can be considered righteous because we are righteous, we cannot be in relationship with God on that basis. God has taken the initiative by offering another way for him to consider us righteous and therefore be in fellowship with him—on the condition of willingness to identify with the only human being that has been righteous the way we are all supposed to be. The baptism act simply issues from that trust; in baptism we formally identify with Christ and commit to him and his values. In works of law, there is no other person to identify with for righteousness, and there is no possibility of becoming perfect again (James 2:9) after the requisite perfection is lost.

Romans 5:12 [animal death]

The expression “by man came death” is taken to mean that animals did not die previous to Adam’s sin—there was no predation.

But Paul is not talking about death as a phenomenon; he’s talking about human death. Applying it beyond his frame of reference loses his authority for the idea. Besides, Paul also says, “*By man came resurrection from the dead*” (1 Corinthians 15:21). Taking these expressions to refer to death as such would as likely commit Christians to believing in the resurrection of animals.

Cp. comments below on romans 8:18-23.

Romans 5:12(-21) [Adamic sin]

In Adam all sinned.

The text indicates that we all are in Adam and that in Adam we all die; it does not say that we get into Adam by physical birth. As regards the salvation issue, we get into Adam the same way we get into Christ—by identification. We get into “Adam” by a personal act—of sin by which we in effect identify with him; we identify with Adam when we do as Adam did and appropriately share Adam’s destiny. We likewise get into Christ by a personal act—an act of identification; when we identify with Christ, we commit to who he is and share his different destiny. The apostle speaks of Adam spiritually, not physically; even as he speaks of Christ spiritually, not physically.

Regarding further considerations, see “Greek Helps” on this text.

Romans 8:18-23 [animal death]

Paul speaks of the “whole creation” as in the future being delivered from pain, corruption, and pointlessness (“vanity,” futility, worthlessness; ματαιότης). We “groan” within ourselves, waiting for the redemption of the body (in resurrection?). The paragraph has been used to serve the belief that natural disasters did not occur prior to human sin and says also that no animal death, pain, and carnivorousness existed then either.

(1) As to context, the verses need not be taken as speaking of death as such and therefore death in the animal kingdom—or the plant kingdom, for that matter. The apostle’s interest is in the human condition. The principle of “minimum affirmation” means that we not apply statements beyond what they address. Paul has humanity in mind when he uses “creation” (κτίσις) as the arena where the gospel had already been preached by the time Colossians was penned (Colossians 1:23).

(2) As to concept, it is difficult to see a connection between human sin and a curse on animals. What would be the reason for God’s instituting death, pain, and carnivorousness in the animal realm because of that human sin? All the consequences of human sin that scripture identifies have a limiting or punitive character directed at the sinners themselves: Adam, Eve, and the serpent. It makes sense that God would reduce natural conditions to a less ideal level to help people recognize their dependent condition, help curb evil, and provide occasions for people to help others face difficulties created by the less ideal situation. Even that meaning may lie outside his frame of reference; “creation” may speak only of human suffering, social disorder, and their consequences caused by their sin.

God’s decision to bring pain, suffering, and death on animals because of Adam’s sin seems akin to punishing the righteous with the wicked; does not the judge of all the earth do right (cp. Genesis 18:23, 25).

As respects the animal kingdom, it is sufficient to suppose that their current condition in these respects does not differ appreciably from their original one. That God would originally create these factors into their condition seems no more unworthy of him than doing it to them later because of what people did. God is actively doing it either way. Aversion to such divine activity seems more to come from philosophy or human anthropomorphizing of animal experience than it does from special revelation.

(3) As to consistency, “*by man came death; by man came also the resurrection of the death*” (1 Corinthians 15:21). If by man animal death came, does that mean by man came animal resurrection too? If “death” means death as such—hence, animal death by inclusion, then by parity of reason resurrection is resurrection as such—hence, animal resurrection by inclusion. But Paul is talking about those who are “in Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:22; Romans 5:13); animals are not “in Adam” nor are they addressed by God’s special revelation.

(4) In close, we might ask how Adam would even know what death was if it did not exist before to show him what God meant by the threat of it.

Cp. comments on Romans 5:12.

One consideration might be that God killed all the animals in the flood, and that was because of human sin. But we do not view that situation as a new one; it had been occurring all along as far as we know.

Romans 8:29-30 [unconditional election]

“*Whom he foreknew*” is not a statement of selection but of identity. Paul is not talking about how we get into the “whom,” but about what the “whom” are predestined to do: pass through trial and testing before entering into glory—the same pattern the Lord’s experience evidenced. The image of his Son refers, not to the ethical image, but to the pattern of suffering before glory. The passage therefore is not about selection or election; it is about the pattern the elect pass through. In this text, God’s choice is about the pattern, not about selecting who is in it. It is not about individuals but about what happens to the Christ group. How God chooses the elect must be learned from elsewhere.

Besides, Paul is talking about a chronological series, not a logical one. The series does not rest on “foreknew” in the sense of “set regard upon,” as some interpreters have done, and then base the rest of the series on that “setting regard upon.” That interpretation underlies God’s “arbitrary” choice of whom he will save—usually called “unconditional choice/election.”

The third point to make here is that “foreknow” more easily means “know ahead of time” rather than “set regard upon.”

Romans 9:12-13 [unconditional election]

“*I loved Jacob more than Esau*” describes God choice of the younger brother before they were born, before either had done anything good or bad. The reference is understood to mean that God’s choice of individuals for salvation (“election”) is irrespective of anything they have done—so to speak, before birth.

The context is not talking about God’s choosing the (a) salvation of (b) individuals, but about his choosing which line of descent would carry forward the program of redemption history: the Jacob (b) group would carry forward (a) the program of salvation history begun with Abraham, passing through Isaac rather than Ishmael (9:9 < Genesis 21:12) and Jacob rather than Esau (9:10-13 < Genesis 18:10): “*They are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all*

children who are of Abraham's seed" (9:6-7); they are not all spiritual Israel that have descended from Physical Israel. Through this lineage God would prepare a nation through which he would in turn bring salvation to all nations. God's choosing in this text, then, is about bestowing blessing (9:4-5), not fulfilling need; assigning national responsibility, not giving personal salvation; establishing Israel's national role, not a person's personal relationship to God. So to speak, it is an election of the messengers to bear the message more than a selection of those who respond to the message.

Throughout 9:1-11:33, the concern is to show that opening up salvation to Gentiles as Gentiles does not indicate that God has abandoned his promises about Israel's role in redemptive history: "*It is not as though the word of God has come to naught*" (9:6); "*God did not cast off his people whom he foreknew*" (11:2).

Furthermore, Paul's four examples are calculated to show divine sovereignty, not unconditional divine sovereignty: the choice of Isaac's lineage rather than Ishmael's, the choice of Jacob's rather than Esau's, the choice to subdue Pharaoh as witnessed in Exodus, the choice to make clay containers for precious commodities and others for mundane purposes. (a) Only what is common to the illustrations serves as Paul's reason for citing them. Unconditionality is not the point since the birth of Isaac involved the prevenient acts of Abraham and Sarah; his birth was not a case of parthenogenesis. (b) Only the applications Paul makes of the examples serve as his reason for citing them. Paul infers that God is sovereign in his choices and that the results that come are decisively from him, instead of being produced by the people involved. Human acts are God's conditions, not natural causes. Conditionality does not eliminate sovereignty; the sovereignty is still sovereignty because God determines whether to offer any possibilities at all and what the conditions will be for his giving them.

See *WBSAS*, pp. 133-52.

Romans 9:20 [unconditional election]

To some readers, "*who are you to reply against God*" means lost people have no right to criticize God for choosing whom to save or leave unsaved. Sinners are like lumps of clay that have no right to tell the potter what to shape them into. They need to acquiesce to what God has decided to do.

That reading of the phraseology has little to commend it, unless the interpreter imports into the text a belief in unconditional election to individual eternal salvation. Paul is responding to the question, "*Why does God find fault*" with a human 'lump' not chosen when the person is merely carrying out the destiny God assigns him? Paul means that the person is replying with impertinence. The person is misrepresenting the situation; he is missing the point. Paul is arguing that God is sovereign over salvation history, not that he is unconditionally sovereign in personal salvation. In the chapter the apostle is not talking about personal salvation. He is talking about God's choice of whom to give the responsibility and opportunity to carry forward the Lord's program for salvation history—whether to national Jews, to non-Jewish Gentiles, or aside from national identity.

National Israel was ideally supposed to equate to “spiritual Israel,” but, of course, it did not; no nation would. In deliberately and intentionally opening up also to Gentiles the message of reconciliation, God has not cast off Israel to do that (Romans 9:1-5; 11:1); he added Gentiles to “*his possible people*” and removed national identity as a defining mark of “*his people*,” the church, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven.

Paul’s line of thought represents the same understanding as presented by John the Baptist, Jesus himself, and the earlier Christians. From the start, John the Baptist had warned that physical descent from Abraham had nothing to do with commanding people to God as his children (Matthew 3:7-9). People need to identify instead with the “repentance” system for reconciliation to the God of Israel—hence, his “*baptism of repentance for remissions of sins*” (cp. “*repentance was given to Gentiles*”; Acts 11:18). Similarly, Jesus had told the Samaritan woman that the time was coming—and already was present in principle—when people would worship God wherever they were (“in spirit and in truth,”/non-locationally) rather than in a designated place of centralized worship like Jerusalem—or Gerizim (cp. Acts 8:17). A primary charge against Jesus and his early disciples was that “*they spoke against this holy place*” and that Messiah would change the customs that Moses established (Matthew 26:59-61 with Jesus; Acts 6:12-14 with Stephen; Acts 21:28 with Paul). A Jewish center of worship (“this temple”/“this holy place”) and the customs of Moses (the constitution for Jewish national identity) were the two things set aside in the new economy. The new covenant reduced identity from physical sonship to Abraham to spiritual sonship by itself (John 8:39-44).

In the historical section of Romans, Paul comes eventually to the Olive Tree Parable as maintaining the identity rooted in Abraham with unbelieving branches pruned out, believing wild olive branches grafted in, and pruned-out Jewish branches because of disbelief, being grafted back into the root stock.

Romans 9:22 [vessels God has fitted for destruction]

No one makes vessels for the express purpose of destroying them. The perfect participle can be taken a stative, that is, “*fit for destruction*.” Less likely the participle could be taken as middle rather than passive voice: “*fitted themselves*.”

See *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 137-38.

Romans 11:29 [salvation is not reversed/apostasy issue]

“*The gifts and calling of God are not repented of*,” taken to mean that once a person is saved, the salvation is not taken back. As we noted in previous entries, Paul is not talking about personal salvation in this section of Romans; he is talking about the responsibility God put on the Jewish nation. That responsibility has not been retracted. Their disobedience to the gospel message is not to be read as an indication that God has abandoned his people and the role he laid on their shoulders to perform.

The passage also does not mean the even more general idea that God never changes his mind as a universal principle. 1 Kings 11:34 and Psalm 89:28-37 are a couple texts that say precisely that God does change his mind—in relation to changed circumstances obviously. Paul does not enunciate here a general principle but a specific point relative to Israel’s role. A clearer translation would be, “*The gifts and calling of God are not being revoked* (in this matter).”

God, in fact, shows his consistency by changing his relationship to people that have changed their behavior in relationship to him.

Romans 11:33 [God’s mysterious ways]

Paul says that God’s ways are past finding out; “*his judgments are unsearchable.*” The sentiment gave rise to the wording, “*God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.*” The idea is often appealed to—indeed, as a justification for claiming some supposed divine operation contrary to expectancy from revelation.

“Mystery” and “unsearchable” do not mean being immune to contradiction. God’s ways being higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:9) does not mean they transcend self-consistency. “Mystery” means “hidden” and therefore not able to be figured out by us. That is different from saying his ways can be inconsistent with his words.

Romans 11:26 [All Jews will be saved.]

In finishing up the historical section of Romans (9-11), Paul comments, “*All Israel will be saved.*” The partial quotation leads people to suppose that all Jews are saved or will be saved.

(a) More completely and correctly the passage says, “In this way all Israel will be saved.” The “and so” in some translations is not a statement of conclusion but a statement of manner: “so” (οὕτως) means “thus.” The pattern involves a change from current hardening to subsequent faith: the hardening that had in part befallen Israel will change with the coming in of the “fullness of the Gentiles” (11:25). Paul carries forward the olive tree illustration (11:16b-24) by saying that branches removed because of unbelief will be grafted back in when faith comes. Hardening can be remedied, and God is willing to accept faith after disbelief as surely as he is willing to accept faith after unbelief; Paul himself is an extreme example of that very pattern. God’s opening salvation to Gentiles can have the effect of provoking Jews to faith by “jealousy” (9:11).

The picture is not one in which God has thrown Israel aside because of their disbelief and transferred his call to salvation and witness to Gentiles instead. God’s previous work through them still stands as the historical background and preliminary revelation that led to Christ. The truth still is that all the families of the earth will be blessed through them.

(b) When Paul speaks of “Israel,” he speaks of them ideally; “Israel” means “spiritual Israel.” Earlier in 2:28-29 he teaches that a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly but who is one inwardly—in the heart, that is, spiritually. Likewise at the front of this three-chapter presentation, Paul says plainly, “*They are not all Israel who are of Israel* [descended from

Israel]” (9:6). He winds up his discussion with that original framework in mind; so his words need to be understood accordingly—not as they could be read, but as he intended them to be read as shown by his context of thought.

(c) “*All Israel will be saved*” ends up meaning “*all (true) Israel that will be saved*” or “*all (spiritual) Israel will be saved*,” because it is spiritual Israel that Paul is contemplating here. Israelites are still caretakers of salvation history with Gentiles added to them in the program of blessing all nations with personal reconciliation to God. All Israelites that are reconciled to God will be reconciled to him by faith, especially after a time when the fulness (full number?) of Gentiles has been added to the olive tree.

(d) The interpersonal process in salvation keeps us from interpreting Paul as meaning that Jews regardless of faith are saved, as if their behavior did not matter. Behavior necessarily belongs to alienation and reconciliation.

See “Places Where Greek Helps” at this place.

Cp. *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 122-23.

Romans 11:29 [divine immutability/unchangeableness/irreversible salvation/universalism/effectual calling]

“*The gifts and calling of God are not repented of.*” The passage has been taken to indicate that once people are saved, God does not reverse the decision to save them regardless of whether they continue in faith and practice.

Getting such a meaning from the words requires taking them as a general principle, but Paul cannot be laying down a general principle of divine operation here. That would contradict examples of withdrawing gifts and cases of God’s “repenting.” The translation can be worded to fit Paul’s present topic: “*The gifts and calling of God are not being repented of.*” Translating the verb as present progressive rather than characteristic present refers to the present discussion rather than stating a universal principle. The present discussion about including Gentiles as Gentiles in the gospel does not mean God has revoked Israel’s calling as the nation through whom all the peoples of the earth would be blessed.

The salvation possibility has not been removed from Israel. The salvation actuality has not become true for Israel as whole; only a remnant of any people at any time will become God’s people (11:6).

Again, we say that God’s never changing his “gifts and calling” does not fit with the rest of scripture. God called Saul and his dynasty to be the royal house of Israel, but he later withdrew that calling because Saul disobeyed (1 Samuel 16:1-13; 2 Samuel 7:12-16). He “repented of” his intention to destroy Nineveh because the city repented. The threat was a conditional one. God’s gifts and callings therefore may be conditional; so when the conditions are not met, God does not give the results, or he withdraws results already in part bestowed when ongoing conditions cease to be met. In the case of choosing a nation through which to bless the others, the gifts and calling were not conditioned on the continued faithfulness of Israel; their chosen status stood on the basis of God’s love (“regards”) for the fathers (11:28). So Paul does

not state a general method of divine operation here—a divine operation that can then be transferred to other topics; he makes a claim regarding the choice (“election”) of Israel as caretaker of salvation history.

At a more general level, some qualification must be made on the idea that God’s decisions are alterable, or he would be locked into all previous decisions about how to do things with other persons.

Topic 2: [effectual calling to personal salvation/irresistible grace]

Paul’s statement cannot be a general principle of divine operation (see above). It cannot be extended, then, beyond choosing Israel as the curator of the message about relating to the one true God. An individual’s acceptance of, and benefit from, that message is a different topic from Israel’s being the caretaker of that message. Therefore, irresistible (“effectual”) calling to an individual’s personal salvation finds no foundation in the words of this verse.

See “Places Where Greek Helps” at this place.

Cp. *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 189-91, 474, 478-80.

Romans 12:1 [worship]

“Present your bodies as living sacrifices . . . [which is] your reasonable service.” Since some translations render the last word as “worship,” readers have used this text to define worship. The term in the original, however (*λειτουργία*), means religious “service” more generally, which makes it too broad for worship in a specific sense. Texts that use “worship” to translate *προσκυνέω* (word picture, bend the knee toward) provide a clearer idea distinguishable from general Christian living: service to God as present, superior, second person.

See *Basic Christianity*: “Worship.”

Romans 16:2 [egalitarianism]

To the Romans Paul commands Phoebe, a servant (*προστάτις*) of the church in Cenchrea. Some interpreters have fixed on the word picture in the term translated “helper.” It is compound of *pro* (before, for) and *stand*, a combination then taken to mean “one who stands in front of,” hence, a leader.

However, “*She has been a ____ of many, and of myself.*” She would not have been a leader of Paul; so the standard translation “helper” fits the situation better. The word picture of “standing in front of” connects with helping in that such a person is pictured as standing at hand, *i.e.*, ready to help.

Romans 16:7 [egalitarianism]

“Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen” were of note among the apostles. In the original, *Junias* is in the direct object form *Junian*, which could be the accusative form either for *Junias*, a man’s name, or *Junia*, a woman’s name. So gender is indeterminate in this case. The two names could represent a husband-wife couple like Aquila and Priscilla, or two men related to Paul (spiritually?). The accompanying “my kinsmen” is masculine; but that would not disallow the second name of the pair to be feminine, since classical languages use masculine gender for mixed situations.

With the gender issue unclear, the attempt to use the reference to say that “Junia” was a notable woman among the apostles is indeterminate and unwarranted. Furthermore, *“being of note among the apostles”* does not necessarily mean the two were apostles positionally in some leadership sense; it may mean only that the apostles considered them noteworthy—apostles associationally. Passages like Romans 16:2, 7 taken to reinforce the belief that men and women are completely interchangeable in Christ illustrate failure to take the unclear in light of the clear.

1 Corinthians 1:12 [the Christ party]

Paul lists four groups of Corinthian Christians: people that identified with Paul, with Apollos, with Cephas, and with Christ. The question comes as to what the “Christ party” consisted of. Paul concludes his discussion of division in Corinth by saying in 3:23 that they actually do belong to Christ, who belongs to God.

Some readers what to emphasize that last comment and bring it back to apply to the phraseology in 1:12, including the admonition that Christ’s body should not be separated up into denominations, as something of an indictment on the current situation in Christendom. In response to that warning, others have claimed that the Christ party was worst of all because they saw themselves as the true followers of the Lord. Of course, trying to ferret out the nature of that fourth part is not possible at this late date. It remains best then to apply the hermeneutical principle of taking the unclear in light of the clear or leaving the unclear unspecified. In this case, we should all recognize the clear principle the apostle states in 3:23: we belong to Christ. That has to be the proper motive and attitude toward Christ and each other regardless of how well we can bring that mentality into reality. In doing so, we certainly do not want to create yet another denomination in an effort to get rid of denominationalism!

Other identifications of the Christ party with some sort of Gnostic sect are a second line of inquiry that has too little to go on to amount to anything fruitful in New Testament study.

1 Corinthians 1:17 [downplay baptism]

If the wording *“Christ did not send me to baptize”* were taken to mean it is not part of the response to the proclaimed message, the apostle would be speaking at odds with the Great Commission. Paul is talking about “performing baptisms,” not about including baptism in the conversion process. His remark comes in a context where he considers it a matter of good

fortune that he did not perform more baptisms in Corinth than he did; it might have fostered the notion that, so to speak, he was baptizing people to himself, a matter that would have falsely reinforced the tendency for Corinthians to identify themselves with one or another of Christ's ministers.

1 Corinthians 1:21 [the preaching ministry]

"It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." This King James rendering has often served as a basis for encouraging men to go into the preaching ministry—to give themselves over to what the world would consider a waste of time, talent, and treasure.

The text should read "*the thing preached*"; it serves as part of Paul's contrast between human wisdom and rhetorical eloquence, on the one hand, and power of the message through Christ to speak to the inner yearnings of the heart (cp. 14:25). The contrast is between form (eloquence) and content (message) as well as between content (from human wisdom) and content (from divine revelation) rather than between ways of disseminating it. The "foolishness of preaching" application to ministry is an example of a decent idea in itself that is then misusing a certain text as a basis for it.

See "Greek Helps" here.

1 Corinthians 2:14 [natural depravity]

"A natural man does not receive [δέχουαι, welcome?] the things of the Spirit of God because they are spiritually discerned." The passage, put in the service of inherited natural depravity, is thought to mean that a person descended from Adam does not have the ability to accept spiritual truth.

Such a take on the wording might be possible were natural depravity an already-established viewpoint. As it is, Paul's intent of meaning is that people committed to (2:16) carnal things (3:3) do not accept spiritual things, not because they have no ontic ability to do so, but because they have no "circumstantial" ability to do so. Operating in one system, they are predisposed not to welcome understandings incompatible with that system. Being oriented to, interested in, committed to the earthly, material, physical, tangible realm, they lack a propensity toward spiritual things; God's concerns are foreign to that frame of mind. Spiritual things have to be appreciated from a spiritual frame of reference (cp. 1:19). Wisdom, eloquence, and the like (1:18-2:5) appeal to a different mentality than the one concerned with personal matters with God and other people. (Note that the context deals with division among the Corinthians.)

Note: An illustration might help distinguish "ontic" vs. "circumstantial" inability. A world-class athlete cannot run a hundred-yard dash in a jail cell.

1 Corinthians 6:12 [non-morality of all acts]

“All things are lawful for me, but not all things are expedient.” Evidently the point is that not everything that is lawful is expedient or edifying. “All” equals “a lot of things” (are lawful); it is a significant generality, not an absolute uniformity. Other cases exist where Hebrew כָּל and Greek πᾶς mean everything or everybody in a phenomenological sense. *“All the people said”* means everybody (so it seemed) said. Cases include Mark 1:5; John 12:19. See instances referenced in *Interpretation—Getting the Point* notes where “all” is limited.

See also 1 Corinthians 10:23.

1 Corinthians 7:25-35 [celibacy] [clerical celibacy]

Paul’s concern about marriage and the ministry was not tainted by the pagan notion that matter is somehow evil or less excellent. Rather, he wanted to remove a snare to his readers (7:35). He had practical reasons in mind, not natural (ontic) ones. He worried that prospective persecution would make life and ministry more difficult for married people (7:28-29). He understood, of course, that, all things being otherwise equal, ministry can be done with greater diligence without the responsibilities of marriage and family. Paul said elsewhere that he had the right to have a wife like the rest of the apostles, the Lord’s brothers, and Peter (1 Corinthians 9:5; Mark 1:30). In the other direction, however, under normal circumstances, many aspects of ministry are carried on more effectively by people who have gained credibility by good marriage and family life.

Turning Paul’s advice into commandment for ministers presses the issue into a rigidness that does not fit well with the way most people are built (Matthew 19:10-12; Genesis 2:18). What is circumstantial should not be mandated as universal.

See 1 Corinthians 7: 7-9; cp. Luke 21:23

1 Corinthians 9:27 [self-flagellation]

“I buffet my body and bring it into bondage.” There is no reason to associate Paul’s words with the later practice of literally beating one’s body with whips to bring the spirit and will under subjection (self-flagellation). The imagery reflects the preceding text that uses the Greek games to picture deliberate, relevant exercise for physical training. It is reminiscent of calling Paul’s thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan to “buffet” him lest he become proud. It is difficult to see how physical self-abuse would foster spiritual sanctity.

Abusing the body does not purify the soul. *“Severity to the body . . . is of no value against the indulgence of the flesh”* (Colossians 2:23). Extreme fasting, celibacy, withdrawal from social relations, sleep deprivation, and literal flagellation reflect the depreciation of the material realm derived from Iranian, Greek, gnostic dualism. Such practices disdained the flesh, and in many cases attempted to escape from it as part of the quest to become pure spirit. That is not the perspective of biblical revelation, which from the beginning pronounced the material world “good” (Genesis 1:31, etc.). The programmatic in the Judaeo-Christian faith is escape

from alienation, not escape from material existence. It concerns itself with interpersonal behavior, not with metaphysical knowledge on how to escape our present form of existence.

In I Timothy 4:8 Paul makes the statement that bodily exercise profits little/a little. That sentiment seems to look in the opposite direction from the idea behind self-flagellation.

1 Corinthians 11:22, 34 [prohibition of church dinners]

Censuring the Corinthians, Paul says, “*What, don’t you have houses to eat in? If anyone is hungry, let them eat at home.*” So, churches should not have communal meals, or “church dinners”?

The apostle’s comments stand among correctives on the way (some of) his readers were conducting themselves in the Corinthians’ agape feasts. His point is that if they are going to operate in their inconsiderate ways as a group, eat at home individually. That is different from requiring them to eat at home. There is nothing about eating together that makes it wrong to do; so the prohibition is not against doing it, but against doing it inappropriately. What is circumstantial should not be mandated as universal.

1 Corinthians 11:27 [unworthiness to observe communion] [communion observance]

“*Whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily*” is guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. The apostle is talking about manner (adverb) of observance, not the character (adjective) of the observer: “whoever drinks in an unworthy manner.” Naturally, Christian character always connects with all acts of worship and human relations, but that is a different thing from avoiding worship because no person could consider himself worthy. Paul himself could not have partaken (Philippians 3:12-13).

The spirit of Paul’s admonition stands against perfunctory, superficial, ritualistic, formal observance—any activity that does not attach appropriate meaning of the emblems (11:29-32). Besides, in the context the apostle denounces their communion services because of the divisions and insensitivity that had perverted these agape feasts into overeating by some in front of others left hungry (11:17-22 + 33-34). Under such circumstances “*it is not possible to eat the Lord’s Supper*” (11:20); such communicants are observing the memorial meal unworthily.

About the closest thing to an unworthy participant might be someone who has sinned against a brother. In a worship act involving sacrifice, Jesus said to straighten things out with the brother before offering the gift to God. Insofar as communion might parallel sacrificing as an act of worship, the pattern could suggest not coming before God without first trying to fix the human alienation (Matthew 5:23-24).

1 Corinthians 13:1 [glossolalia]

“Tongues of angels” is an exaggeration for emphasis in somewhat the same vein as Paul’s statement to the Galatians, “*Though an angel from heaven should preach to you any*

gospel other than what we preached to you, let him be anathema” (Galatians 1:8). Angels are spirits, and spirits do not have flesh and bones (Hebrews 1:7, 14 + Luke 24:39). Consequently, their communication is not by physical means that could be reproduced like human languages. As a result, there is not a second, supernatural type of tongues/language speaking that is different from human languages.

1 Corinthians 13:10 [duration of miraculous gifts]

“When the perfect has come, the in-part will be done away.” In one direction, (a) the perfect is not Christ at the second coming (“perfect” is in the wrong grammatical gender) or that event when he comes. The passage is not useful in showing that the charismata will last throughout the church age till Christ comes.

In the opposite direction, (b) “the perfect” also does not refer to the completed New Testament canon with the implication that when the written word was completed, miraculous manifestations ceased. Paul is in both the in-part and perfect situations. He died before the whole New Testament was written.

The reference is to (c) the next stage of our existence, when we are in face-to-face relationship with Christ. The stage begins when death takes us into that next situation; hence, it is already here for “those who have gone before.” The contrast is between two states of being, stages of being, two times of being.

1 Corinthians 13:11 [character of glossolalia]

“When I was a child I, I talked like a child . . . When I became an adult, I put away childish things.” Whatever a reader may think about present-day tongue speaking, Paul does not call the phenomenon “childish.” He is talking about “things that belong to childhood,” which better grabs the import of the expression. “Childish” carries a negative connotation in English. There is no need to attach a negative connotation to what the apostle says about this gift. It was not a “childish thing” when the apostles used it on Pentecost and other occasions.

1 Corinthians 14:1-4, 14 [Tongue speaking is addressed to God.]

“He that speaks in a tongue speaks, not to men, but to God, because no one understands.” Paul means that untranslated languages in effect speak to God “because no one understands them.” They do so by default, not by intent.

1 Corinthians 14:(2), 14 [a tongues speaker does not understand what he is saying]

The text says that the tongue speaker’s “understanding is unfruitful.” Paul does not mean tongue speakers have no idea what they are saying; otherwise, he could not go on to say, “*You are giving thanks, all right,*” but other people cannot say “*Amen*” to it (14:17). The speaker

understands the flow of thought—at the concept level; it is at the word-for-word, element-by-element level that he does not understand.

1 Corinthians 15:22 [universalism]

As in Adam all die, so all in Christ will be made alive. The passage does not say all are in Adam or in Christ, but that all the ones in each group share the same destiny as all the rest in either group, the same destiny as the representative of the group.

1 Corinthians 15:29-34 [baptism for the death]

“What will they do who are baptized for the death?” Whatever Paul means, it cannot be that he means one person can be saved in place of another. Guilt and righteousness are personal; that is, guilt and righteousness are not transferable from one person to another. The faith or obedience of one cannot suffice for the obedience or salvation of another.

The best understanding is that the apostle refers to [a] a baptism of suffering (Mark 10:38-39; Luke 12:50) [b] on behalf of [c] the dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13; 1 Timothy 5:6). The next three verses talk about significant suffering, not just suffering of any kind or suffering for being Christians, but suffering incurred because of labor to save those who are dead in sin.

2 Corinthians 9:7 [God loves a hilarious giver.]

“Hilarious” has picked up a connotation in English that is not present in the Greek word it translates (*ἰλαρός*). Giving is not something lighthearted and frivolous. “Cheerful” or “merciful” catches a more appropriate sense of the word. Cp. “cheerfulness” in Romans 12:8.

Galatians 3:28 [egalitarianism]

“In Christ there is neither male nor female.” The dictum does not mean everything that could conceivably be carried by its words; it refers to the subject at hand: salvation. Salvation applies to all human persons regardless of non-interpersonal differences among them—nationality (Jew-Gentile), sex (male-female), social status (slave-free), and the like. Paul speaks soteriologically and behaviorally. The phrase cannot be removed from that setting and put in some other context [homosexuality, equalitarianism] that shapes its meaning in a way contradictory to Paul’s teaching elsewhere.

See also passages about female “deference/submission.”

Galatians 5:4 [apostasy]

“You are separated from Christ; you are fallen from grace.” It is a stretch to use this text to argue for the possibility of apostasy. Paul’s point is that receiving circumcision in principle

puts people under the Mosaic Law—a legal system. In so doing, the Galatians would in theory be putting themselves out of the grace system—the Christ system. Law and grace-faith-promise are parallel, alternative systems, not one within the other as if grace-faith (interpersonal) took place inside of law (legal) or accomplished the purposes for the law which the law by itself could not accomplish. Jewish Christians like James in Palestine were still operating under the Law nationally speaking, but they were not therefore lost; they were already Jews. Paul's circumcising Timothy made sense because he had a Jewish mother (Acts 16:1-3) and was therefore qualified to be a Jew nationally—as in half-way covenant. Circumcising him would be for expediency to remove an unnecessary hindrance in ministry among Jews. Circumcising Gentiles had no such justification.

Ephesians 2:1-5 [natural depravity, original sin, original guilt]

“Dead in trespasses and sins” is not the writer’s precise wording. He says, “*dead through your trespasses and sins*” and “*among [the disobedient] we once lived in the lusts of our flesh, doing the desires of the flesh and mind.*” The “deadness” comes from our own actions, not Adam’s, and consists of insensitivity to spiritual things, not insensibility to them, and of being separated from Christ (2:12; cp. “dead to the world”), not from the living. Death separates from other persons and makes people insensitive to spiritual (interpersonal) matters, especially with God. Hardening (insensitivity, callousness) comes from the “deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:13), not from genetics. It is a social, psychological term, not a physical, fleshly one.

Ephesians 2:8-9 [faith as a gift]

“By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is a gift of God.” Paul does not have in mind the idea that a person cannot believe on his own, that God has to enable him to believe—to “give” faith to him. *That* does not refer to *faith*, but to *salvation*, the idea in the verb *saved*. *Faith* is feminine gender in the Greek, but *that* is neuter. From the standpoint of grammatical concord (agreement in number and gender between pronouns and antecedents), neuter *that* cannot refer to the feminine word *faith*; it must refer to the abstract idea in the verb *save*. Salvation is what is not of ourselves; that is a gift from God.

It is worth noticing that when the apostles asked Jesus to increase their faith (Luke 17:5), he did not say, “Here, have some more.” He used the mustard seed as an illustration. The implication is that we are to exercise the faith we have, and in so doing it will increase to stronger faith when we see that it works; so to speak, it will (increase to the point that is will) move mountains. After all, the success of the faith lies, not in the strength of the one exercising faith, but in the One they put faith in.

Ephesians 4:5 [trine baptism; single “mode of baptism”]

“There is one faith, one Lord, one baptism.” For some time, Paul has been talking about the lack of Jew-Gentile distinction in the body of Christ. There are not different Lords, faiths, baptisms, etc., for Jews on the one hand and Gentiles on the other.

The passage should not be applied to the beliefs that (a) only one form of baptism exists (rather than sprinkling, pouring, and immersion), that (b) threefold baptism is not the case (a threefold application of water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit each one), or (c) that there is no baptism in the Holy Spirit because that occurred in the past only on Pentecost (Jews) and at the household of Cornelius (Gentiles). Whatever decision a person makes about these other matters must come from other considerations besides the word “one” in this text.

Ephesians 5:18 [filled with the Spirit]

“Don’t get drunk on wine but be filled with the Spirit.” The text does not mean to suggest that being filled with the Spirit is like being drunk. Paul means the readers should replace being filled with “spirits” with being filled with the Spirit. Filling is not a matter of achieving an altered state of consciousness, a trance, or lapsing into uncontrolled behavior or ecstatic utterance; it is the very opposite. The Spirit of God is a means of gaining self-control, not of letting go. Paul is wording a contrast, not a likeness.

The idea that “tongue speakers” have no control over themselves is not a natural inference from what the apostle says. He is not even talking about “speaking in tongues.” He has a broader frame of reference in mind: Christian living. The general rule Paul lays down is that *“the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets”* (1 Corinthians 14:32).

Ephesians 5:21 [mutual submission] [egalitarianism]

“Submit to one another” is taken to mean that husbands are to submit to their wives in the same sense that wives are to submit to their husbands. The husband is no more the head of the wife than the wife is head of the husband.

If that were the point, one wonders what Paul means two verses later (5:23) when he says that the husband is *“head of the wife like Christ is head of the church.”* Husbands are never said to submit to their wives, and wives are never said to be the heads of their husbands.

First, the wording about “submission” applies to the whole section of household teaching (5:22-6:9), not just the first part of it—the husband-wife part. Ordering the whole household is what the apostle summarizes under the admonition to *“practice appropriate deference one to another”*: husband-wife, parent-children, and master-slave. Similar teaching occurs elsewhere in Colossians 3:18-4:1 and 1 Peter 3:1-7. Noting that 5:21 heads the whole section on household teaching clarifies the writer’s point because father-children relationship shows what he means about husband-wife relationship. Whatever may be said about parents submitting to children, does not remove parental priority over them and responsibility for them.

Secondly, the mistaken interpretation evidently comes also from supposing that the reciprocal pronoun “one another” (ἀλλήλων) always means a-to-b-to-a. But “one another” applies as well to a-to-b plus c-to-d within a group (“one to another”). The most obvious example is Revelation 6:4 (“killing one another”). Other cases are Luke 7:32 (“*children calling to one another*”); Mathew 24:10 (“delivering one another up”); people in a crowd asking one another (Luke 8:25 = Mark 4:41; Mark 8:16; 15:31; Luke 2:15; 4:36; 6:11; 8:15; 20:14; 24:32; John 4:33; 5:44; 6:52; 11:56; 16:17; 19:24; Acts 4:15-16; 26:31; 28:14). See also Galatians 6:15 (“*devouring one another*” [?]); Luke 12:1 (“*treading on one another*” [?]); Acts 7:27 (“*Why do you wrong one another?*” [?]); James 5:16 (“*Confess your sins to one another*” [?]); Galatians 5:13 (“*Serve one another*” [?]).

Thirdly, husbands are never told to submit to their wives. Other teaching about the household unit and husband-wife relations in Colossians, 1 Peter, and elsewhere affords no opportunity for injecting the idea of husbands submitting to wives. The general female deference principle—regardless of how that strikes a modern western-world reader—predicts that the New Testament will not contain a statement about mutual submission in the sense advocated in the misreading. A writer must always be read on his own terms, not those of the reader.

Fourthly, proper understanding differentiates structure and personal relationship. Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 5:21-33 pertains to the structure of the family unit—and the natural behavioral implications of that arrangement. Order assigns responsibility, the primary factor in leadership, which is then reinforced by authority. It has nothing to do with greater worth, personal importance or value, or greater ability. Being “in charge” is not a “big deal”; being in submission is not a “put down.” Headship means having responsibility; being in submission means acting in accordance with the other person’s responsibility. Even the creator of the universe was not made less by being subject to his parents (Luke 2:51). “Submission,” then, enjoins deference behavior so as not to interfere with the person’s responsibility. Besides the natural behaviors implied, cultures may establish additional customs that signal compliance with the established order—veil wearing, manner of verbal interaction, role fulfillments, dress, and so on.

In the interpersonal dimension, of course, there is admonition to mutual considerateness in sexual relations (1 Corinthians 7:3-5), physical constitution (1 Peter 3:7), and general interdependency (1 Corinthians 11:8-12. In fact, as regards gathered worship, comments about interdependency in 1 Corinthians 12:8-12 appear in the very midst of instructions about wives’ deference (modesty) behavior (11:2-7, 13-16). Obviously, Paul distinguishes two things while relating them, one involving order and another involving interdependency. The former sets the framework for its cultural ramification in gathered worship—as between God and Christ and between Christ and a man and between a man and wife—and the subsequent interpersonal operation between parties at each level of the ordered relationship. The apostle uses the Christ-man model to set the framework for his instructions about female worship demeanor.

As in church (1 Corinthians 11), so in the home (Ephesians 5-6). In the very context about domestic order, Ephesians 5:21-6:9 commands interpersonal actions expected within the

structure. Husbands should love their wives and give themselves for them as Christ did for the church. Fathers are not to exasperate their children but nurture them in the admonition of the Lord. Masters should act toward slaves as slaves should act toward masters, forbearing threats. Personal behavior takes place within structured order in a way that does not vitiate that interpersonal framework. The two dimensions do not conflict because they deal with different matters, one with responsibility, the other with interpersonal associations within it. They no more conflict than the Son's love for the church conflicts with his leadership for the church ("head"). In fact, in the Ephesians household teaching, there is more about the model—Christ's relationship to the church—than there is about its domestic applications of the model: "*I am talking about Christ and the church*" (5:32).

See "Greek Elements in the Interpretation of Ephesians 5:21."

Ephesians 6:17 [The Holy Spirit operates only through the word.]

"The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" is taken to mean that the Holy Spirit operates only through the "word," which is his "sword." The message in the Bible is the only means necessary for conviction and conversion. The idea in the interpretation is meant to contrast with the belief that the Spirit operates supernaturally parallel to the word to bring about the faith (regeneration) and the Christian growth (sanctification) that takes place in each person.

Whatever a person decides about that idea, this text is at best not a clear statement of it. The antecedent is more likely the sword, not the Spirit. The antecedent of *which* (ὅ) is not apt to be *Spirit* though indeed "which" is neuter like *Spirit* (*πνεῦμα*). However, the gender of a pronoun subject ("which") in a linking-verb clause sometimes "attracts" to the predicate nominative ("God's word," *ῥῆμα θεοῦ*). The conceptual antecedent—the phrase head in that case—is *sword* (*μάχαιραν*, feminine).

Revelation elsewhere indicates that the Spirit replaces the ascended Christ as another Comforter (John 14:16-18, 26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15). That promise involves a personal presence constantly available for guidance, power, and intercession in an unknowable degree through circumstance, scripture, and other Christians. While some of these Comforter promises to the apostles may not transfer to everyone after them, a plethora of texts about his work pertains to this matter. At any rate, Ephesians 6:17 should not be interpreted to the point of de-activating and depersonalizing the Spirit in the Christian life. The idea that supernatural operation is necessary for fruitful hearing of the message is better handled from other considerations and other texts. If the idea cannot be sustained from elsewhere, it is not something that has to be, supposedly, disproved by an unnecessary take on this verse.

See also Romans 8:26.

Philippians 1:29 [faith given]

"It has been granted to you not only to believe, but to suffer on his behalf."

The expression “give faith” conjures up in the English reader’s mind a direct act in which the receiver passively receives. The Hebrew background helps because the same word for “give” also covers “allow” (**לְתַתִּים**). Aside from that consideration, it should be evident that the believing is no more a direct deposit by God than is the suffering that is paired with it. Both are circumstantial; having the opportunity to believe and being allowed to incur suffering both come from the God who oversees all historical processes. Acts 11:18 says similarly that to Gentiles “*God has granted repentance to life,*” meaning, we take it, that the message, which highlights repentance, has been made available to Gentiles to accept and profit from just as is has for Jews.

Philippians 2:10 [triple-deck cosmos]

“In the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” This text along with several others is taken to imply that the writers thought of the cosmos as flat and perhaps in two or three layers: Luke 10:15, 18; 24:51; Acts 1:9-11 (“ascent to heaven, descent to hell”). The Old Testament is full of references to the abode of the dead as being “down.” That is not necessarily anything more than an extension of burying people “down” in the ground. Revelation 7:1; 20:8 refers to “four corners of the earth.” Ezekiel 7:2 speaks of four corners of the land when the land did not exactly have four corners (cp. Isaiah 11:12). Ezekiel talks about four winds (37:9) just like we talk today about four directions for simplification purposes, meaning in every direction.

It seems satisfactory to regard such expressions as phenomenological language, simplified language that comes from the way things look. People regularly talk about the sun coming up and going down. People that have a modern cosmological understanding still speak of heaven as up.

When a speaker’s subject is something else, listeners do well not to make too much of how he describes the off-subject. If he is deliberately giving a description of the universe, he might not use such loose language.

Philippians 2:12 [works]

“Work out your salvation with fear and trembling” is a comment Paul is making about “living out” the implications of salvation or the way they live. He is not talking about obtaining salvation but with maintaining and improving it.

Philippians 2:13 [the work of the Spirit in the believer]

“God works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Some interpreters give this text a supernatural reading according to which the Spirit energizes the human will and mind to enable what would not be possible or particularly satisfactory without such enablement.

The issue is not what the Spirit does in and to the inner man, but how he assists a believer, Is it by personal influence or supernatural power? It is sufficient to understand that he

works directly by the influence of sheer presence and indirectly through providential circumstance, the word, and other people who have appropriated the word and redistribute the Spirit's influence interpersonally to others. Without supernatural operation already in mind along with the doctrine of natural depravity that it supposedly remedies in this process, such a "hypostatic" take on the text would not commend itself or even come into the picture. In place of supernatural activity directly on a person's inner being (hypostatically/substantively/ontically), we suppose Paul means a normal interpersonal kind of activity—without denying the possibility of something more that is not uniform.

Colossians 1:15 [createdness of the Son]

"The Son of his love . . . who is the firstborn of all creation," taken to mean that the Son was created first (first-born), and then he created everything else.

"Firstborn" has another, different intent of meaning. According to ancient Jewish custom, the firstborn son in a family was given the responsibility for the ongoing welfare of the family (primogeniture). He received a double portion of the inheritance in "payment" for accomplishing that role. While it is true that physical sons had a beginning in this situation, the dominion Christ has over the creation satisfies the reason for labeling him firstborn (primogenitor). Paul is not talking about a literal firstborn over a family; hence, the figurative nature of his comment should be clear. The figurative meaning needs go no further than the dominion and concomitant responsibility he has as "Son" of God. Otherwise, the interpretation allegorizes the comparison.

Without some clear statement anywhere else regarding the createdness of the Son, there is not much reason to suppose he is a created being, therefore not eternal from the past or deity in nature. Is *firstborn* meant in the sense of position or time? The approach here takes it as position. At least, the unclear should be taken in light of the clear. A passage that could conceivably be understood in more than one way, cannot serve as a basis for an idea not witnessed elsewhere.

The trinity issue is really what lies behind the urge to press this text into meaning more than it has to mean. Choosing an interpretation for this passage will not happen until readers have settled the trinity question in their own mind. Many texts like this one are not in themselves capable of producing a definite meaning because a person's general framework of thought establishes a context that sorts through possible meanings to determine intended meaning.

Colossians 1:18; Revelation 3:14; 21:6 can be brought in as part of this same discussion of the word *beginning*.

1 Thessalonians 5:17 [ceaseless prayer]

"Pray without ceasing" taken as continuous action presents a difficulty for the practical significance Paul's wording. A person cannot pray endlessly; so interpreters undertake to find other applications of the apostle's words. One tack is to make the verse mean that a person is in a constant attitude of prayer. A similar one redefines "pray" into a label for the upward directedness of life.

To avoid such unlikely values of the command, readers need to shift from continuous action to characteristic or iterative action. In that vein, the command becomes practical: Christians need to maintain a healthy practice of praying, not continuously, of course, but characteristically. Praying is a recurring action directed toward God. There are gaps in the actual act (iterative), but worshippers maintain a wholesome pattern of relating to God in this way.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 [gratitude]

“In everything give thanks” does not mean the same thing as *“give thanks for everything,”* even though a person could probably make practical sense out of the second wording. Most everything, good or bad, has a silver lining, teaches us something we could not learn otherwise, strengthens us in ways we would not have grown into without the adversity, provides an opportunity to glorify God in a fashion that lesser trials would not have produced.

A more practical understanding of the admonition says that, regardless of the circumstances, we still find things to be thankful for. Paramount among them is a basis for having a positive attitude toward life and the future despite the distracting aggravations that come on us. Paul’s advice highlights life’s positives to counteract the defeatist’s tendency to dwell on negatives. It avoids the unrealistic yearning for a better situation that will probably never come.

1 Thessalonians 5:19 [advocating special gifts]

“Don’t quench the Spirit; don’t disregard prophesying.” Those zealous for modern supernatural gifts take the apostle’s admonitions as a response to others who question whether what are happening are in fact special manifestations of the Spirit and of prophesying.

Without settling first whether cases of language speaking, prophesying, interpretation, or special healing, for instance, are what the New Testament is talking about, the passage here does little to remove being careful about claimed cases of supernatural manifestation. The New Testament “languages speaking” was talking in unstudied, foreign, real languages of the day. New Testament examples of healing were instantaneous and uniformly “successful.” If examples urged for acceptance do not measure up to those definitions, setting them aside as miracles does not come from an unwillingness to accept current supernatural manifestation. It comes from not wanting to regard them erroneously as genuine and then be led into false teaching, false expectancies, or undue regard for the miracle workers or even miraculous manifestations themselves. In scripture, authenticating the claims of the miracle worker was one of the purposes of miracle. Defining the gifts must precede exhorting the use of them or acceptance of them.

The same pattern of thought applies to evaluating prophecies, revelations, prophesying, interpretations, healings, and the like. If they are, in fact, instances of people “speaking presumptuously” (Deuteronomy 18:20-22), we should not get caught up in the ideas, predictions, and exhortations they accompany. Willingness to “*test the spirits*” (1 John 4:1-3) is as much a part of Christian faithfulness as willingness to be led by the Spirit. Testing the spirits applies to

distinguishing genuine miracle from “lying wonders” (Matthew 24:24 = Mark 13:22). The testing involves applying the doctrinal test (cp. Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 18:20-22; Galatians 1:8-9). Using 1 Thessalonians 5:19-20 to lower resistance to false doctrine and practice works against the Spirit’s real concern in the world today. That real concern is not so much displaying supernatural phenomena as it is in properly leading people into proper relationship to God through Christ.

“Testing the spirits” also applies to distinguishing miracle from answered prayer. Everything involved in one is available through the other. The difference lies in the lack of uniform “success,” immediate results, and the availability of answered prayer to all Christ’s followers, not just specially gifted ones. The distinguishing elements in miracle relate to their apologetic purpose: uniform success, immediate and permanent results; without such marks, evidential value would be lost. Answered prayer is more for benefit than for proof.

“Testing” could also apply to cases where the one doing the “signs” thinks he is doing something supernatural when he is not. It might be answered prayer instead, or some psychological effect,

1 Thessalonians 5:19 also warrants considering a related matter. Some uncertainty exists about whether *spirit* should be capitalized here. The Greek and Hebrew original does not show when to capitalize the usual English translation of ιαντή and πνεῦμα as *Spirit*, that is, whether a given usage is proper name or a noun description. Each time the word occurs in either testament, the reader must make that determination.

Paul may not be speaking here about the Holy Spirit particularly. His exhortation can make good sense when taken to mean (a) the spirit/atmosphere/morale among the believers, which could (b) hinder the Spirit’s work by improper attitude, motives, and behavior. Likewise, prophesying does not necessarily involve special giftedness either since it is broader than predicting the future; it may stress more basically a person’s role in “speaking on behalf of another.” Straining after miracle may not signify the Christian maturity that the first comments above may illustrate. Christianity is not so much about having supernatural experiences as it is about properly functioning in the natural, interpersonal realm God created for us from the beginning.

See “Tongues in Corinth” and other essays in apologetics, in Holy Spirit studies, and in Greek helps *in loco*.

1 Timothy 3:2, 12 [married elders and deacons]

“Husband of one wife” means to some that elders and deacons must be married men. Such a take provides a ready way of responding to the requirement for a celibate clergy.

While such a meaning is conceivable from the words aside from contextual considerations, that cannot be the writer’s point. He begins his list of qualities in 1 Timothy 3:2 by using the general word “without reproach,” immediately after which he says “husband of one wife” and remarks again about the need to be without reproach. Then he lists a series of behavioral maturities that should be evident in a leader. Being unmarried is not a matter of

reproach or Paul himself would not be without reproach (1 Corinthians 9:5)—or Jesus himself, for that matter. Furthermore, the Corinthians would come under reproach if they had taken his advice not to marry lest it distract from ministering in these “offices” (1 Corinthians 7:32-35). See especially Titus 1:6 + 7.

In keeping with the emphasis on qualities, the Greek text does not carry an article on “husband.” That absence implies quality *vs.* identity, which the article would convey. The force of the comment is “a one-woman kind of man.”

In regard to deacons (3:8-10, 12-13), one section of qualifications ends with “*let them serve . . . if they are blameless*” (3:10). In laying out these characteristics, Paul’s concern is with personal character, not legal status. That verdict comes even more clearly in Titus 1:6, where Paul brackets “*husband of one wife*” with the word “blameless”: “*for a bishop must be blameless*.” A similar qualification for church support of widows includes the item “wife of one husband” (1 Timothy 5:9). Being married and having a plurality of children is not a matter of blamelessness. Marital statuses that are not moral matters lie beyond the author’s purview (celibacy, deuterogamy, legitimately divorced and remarried). The expression marks a moral qualification, not a social status.

See also Titus 1:5-9; 1 Timothy 5:9.

1 Timothy 2:15 [saved by childbearing]

Salvation is a spiritual matter, not a physical one. The force of the characteristic is more child-rearing since physical abilities do not accomplish spiritual purposes. There is a general correlation between the quality of parents and the quality of their offspring. Eschewing familial responsibilities does not serve well the stable nature established by families rather than individuals.

1 Timothy 6:10 [wealth]

The text is frequently misquoted to say, “*Money is the root of all evil*,” whereas it says, “*The love of money is the root of all evils*.” The point is not that wealth in itself is evil or that wealthy people cannot be Christians. Lydia was a seller of purple (Acts 16:14), presumably a lucrative business. The point also is not that evil can always be traced back to money. “All” can better be taken in the sense of “all kinds of evil” or “as a significant general cause of evil.”

Hebrews 7:8 [Christian tithing]

“*Here men that die receive tithes [Levites], but there one of whom it is witnessed that he lives [Melchizedek].*” The Hebrew writer is contrasting Levites with Melchizedek, whom the author has just said was “*without beginning of days or end of life*” (7:3). To serve as a basis for advocating tithing, some have taken “he lives” as a reference to Christ. The context, however, is

showing the superiority of Melchizedek to Abraham; Christ is not part of the immediate comments.

Christ compares with Melchizedek only in that Melchizedek was a priest of God Most High, as Psalm **110:4** says (Hebrews **5:6-7:25**). The Hebrew writer emphasizes the contrasts between Melchizedek and Levi—specifically that the Melchizedekian priest was appointed with an oath (Hebrews **7:21**), was appointed after, was appointed forever (Hebrews **7:17**), and was distinct from the Levitical system (**7:6b**). So his is a better priesthood that replaces the Levitical priesthood. Being comparable to Christ in being a priest (office) does not mean he was so in every (unspecified) respect—as in receiving tithes (functioning of the office). Besides, as far as the record goes, Abraham's tithe to Melchizedek was a one-time offering from the spoils of war (Hebrews **7:1**) rather than an ongoing practice from personal possessions.

Hebrews **7:14** [prohibition of instrumental music] [silence as prohibition in worship matters]

“Concerning which tribe Moses spoke nothing about priests” comments on who has a right to serve as a priest. The writer is not talking about operating in an office—as in worship, but about qualifications for holding an office. Priests led in worship, but the topic is who had a right to conduct that worship. The subject is the office of priest (priesthood), not the activities of a priest (worship). “Silence” amounts to prohibition in matters of office qualifications; silence about persons with other characteristics eliminates other candidates from holding the office. The verse does not serve, then, as a basis for the proposition that silence in matters of worship amounts to prohibition and that since mechanical instruments are not commanded in the New Testament, there is no “justification” for their use in worship.

As with so many other topics in misused texts, whatever person thinks about the non-instrument position, this passage is no basis for it.

Hebrews **11:7** [no rain before the flood.]

Hebrews **13:8** [immutability of Christ] [permanence of miraculous manifestation]

“Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” Advocates of language speaking today argue from this verse that glossolalia is a permanent feature of the church age. To the contrary, the statement is that Jesus is the same (unchangeableness), not that he does things the same way permanently. Besides, languages would be a feature of the afterlife as well since the verse ends, *“Jesus is the same . . . forever.”* Nevertheless, Paul says that languages are not part of “the perfect”; they will cease; so they are not “forever” (1 Corinthians **13:8**). Finally, if Christ always operates the same way, how would the Pentecostal outpouring (Acts **2**) fit with bringing in such manifestations as were not present before?

James **2:10** [sin in one thing, (may as well be) guilty of all]

“Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one [matter] has become guilty of all.” The point is not that in doing one thing wrong, a person may as well have broken all the laws. Rather, it means that whoever breaks one ordinance in the Law has become guilty of breaking the Law as a whole—guilty of lawbreaking; a person is a lawbreaker and no longer perfect. Perfection is the only standard under law (Deuteronomy 27:26). A person is still a lawbreaker whether by little or by much.

The passage also does not mean that all sins are equally bad. All sins are equal in being sins; but as respects consequences, all sins are not equally destructive, and all sins are not punished equally—some with many stripes, others with few (Luke 2:48).

James 2:10 [One sin is as bad as another.]

All sins are alike in being sins, but they are not alike in how much damage they do or in the degree of bad attitude they issue out of.

James 5:12 [oath taking; see above at Matthew 5:33-37]

James 5:16 [clerical absolution, the confessional]

“Confess your sins to one another.” Clerical absolution puts this admonition in the service of the confessional and the clerical forgiveness of sins. The reciprocal pronoun here is a-to-b-to-a, as shown by the parallelism with pray for one another. Without supplying a legal framework, such wording cannot have the one-directional value that the practice of the confessional assumes. The authority of a legal framework has to come into the picture to make something interpersonally artificial into something legitimate.

Confessing sins to one another is a different thing from confessing sins to a third party to get his forgiveness for what was done to someone else. We confess sins to one another (a) if the other is the second party, the one sinned against; (b) if the other is a third party who serves as an intermediary for communication purposes; (c) if the other person is a third party we can call on for advice on how to handle the situation; and (d) for strengthening purposes. The general principle in confession among people is “*I to you if you to me.*”

1 Peter 3:3 [braided hair and wearing jewelry]

“Let not your adorning be with braided hair or wearing jewels of gold” is a partial statement that sounds like Peter is prohibiting braided hair and jewelry. But the verse goes on to add “putting on clothes.” Obviously, the apostle does not mean women are to go naked. He is urging them to prioritize inner beauty over outer appearance, and to rely on how they are within instead of how they look on the outside. That is an entirely different thing from prohibiting looking nice. Besides, it seems that current practice was like it can be in the modern setting

where extreme attention is given to ostentatious display in dress. The situation also involves the Semitic tendency to speak of things in binary fashion, one or the other, instead of by degrees.

2 Peter 1:4 [divinization]

Peter speaks of becoming “partakers of the divine nature.” “Nature” does not refer to something substantive, but to the kind of persons behaviorally Christian work toward becoming.

The goal of the Christian enterprise is not to change in substance, but to change in personal relationship by changing behavior—relationship to God and other people. People do not become deity; they are not to become gods but more godlike in conduct: “*You shall be holy because I am holy*” (Leviticus 11:44; 1 Peter 1:16). A hypostatic, or substantive/ontic, reading of such language started happening when the Christian gospel hit the Gentile world. Greek thought was steeped in ontic (“stuff”) issues as manifested in its many strands of philosophy represented in Gnosticism, Manichaeism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, Platonism, and so on. Hypostatic thought fudges scripture statements from characteristic behavioral nature into substantive nature and thereby perverts the concern of the faith and misses the benefits that come from people’s concerning themselves with the correct category.

1 John 3:6, 9; 5:18 [sinlessness of the sanctified Christian]

“*Whoever is begotten by God does not sin.*” They may make “mistakes” (non-moral matters), but they will not sin. They can live a perfect life of love. A second definite supernatural work of grace by the Spirit is then postulated to eradicate the last vestiges of in-bred sin.

But 1 John 1:9-12 is a control passage: “*If we say we have no sins, we deceive ourselves, we make him a liar, and the truth is not in us.*” In the first passage, John speaks of characteristic sin as something a Christian does not do. John may be giving a warning against the kind of Gnostic teaching that made moral behavior irrelevant. In Gnostic dualism, matter was considered unable to affect spirit; so some gnostic teachers concluded that behavior in the flesh (matter) was irrelevant. “Salvation” in that system was from admixture of spirit and matter, not from alienation between persons.

Revelation 3:14 [Christ as the beginning of God’s creation]

The verse gets caught up in the difficulty many Christians have with the trinity issue. One proposal for solving that three-in-one issue is to make God (the Father) the one referred to basically as “God.” This verse can then be brought in to say that Christ was the first that God created (“beginning of God’s creative activity”), and Christ perhaps turned around and created the rest of reality. If Christ is considered deity under the “God” terminology, it can be taken in a functional sense, that is, as carrying out the work of God.

At any rate, the discussion in this passage turns on the meaning of the word *beginning* (ἡ ἀρχή). Is it to be taken in the sense of time or status? It is the same question that belongs to the

word *firstborn* in Colossians 1:15; so see the comments herein on that text as well as part of the same discussion and as turning on the same distinction between usages: time or status.

Colossians 1:18; Revelation 3:14; 21:6 can be brought in as part of this same discussion.

Revelation 7:1 [The earth is flat.] See also Isaiah 11:12; Psalm 93:1.