

# THE LIGHT OF MIND

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## PREFACE

The prevailing climate in modern evangelical Christianity is one of anti-intellectualism. Books advocating a mystical and irrational faith are rampant, and God's people – at least those who say they belong to Christ – "love to have it so" (Jeremiah 5:31). It has come to a point where some have identified anti-intellectualism with Christianity, and a self-imposed disjunction between faith and reason requires an irrational "leap of faith" for one to embrace the Christian worldview.

However, this "faith" is not the Christian faith. Far from favoring irrational thinking, it is the Christian worldview that rescues the intellect. Christianity preserves rationality, and provides the precondition of intelligibility. God says through the prophet Jeremiah, that the "shepherds after my own heart" are those who will lead his people "with knowledge and understanding" (Jeremiah 3:15). Paul writes that one who has undergone regeneration "is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Colossians 3:10).

The mind of man, made in the image of God, is the part of him that has fallen in sin, and is the part of him that is renewed and reconstructed at conversion. The subsequent process of sanctification likewise involves the development of the intellect in conformity to the content of biblical theology, which is "the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

The following chapters is a collection of essays written to address various topics concerning the Christian faith, but they share at least two common themes – namely, the biblical emphasis on the mind and the monopoly of the Christian worldview over the intellectual realm. Together, these chapters serve as a reminder for the Christian to love God with all his mind (Matthew 22:37), and at the same time illustrate an effective strategy for Christian apologetics.

## 1. ARGUE TO WIN

Oxford professor Alister McGrath has written a most misleading statement in his awkwardly titled book, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths*. In it, he says, "Apologetics is not about winning arguments – it is about winning people."<sup>1</sup> The book has as one of its central theses that many, or even most, individuals reject Christianity not mainly due to any insuperable intellectual objections, but other factors such as existential applicability. "Christianity must commend itself in terms of its relevance to life, not just its inherent rationality," says McGrath.<sup>2</sup>

The rest of this work, also latent with problems, attempts to justify and develop this assumption and its ramifications to the practice of apologetics. But for now, I am only interested in examining his statements as cited in the previous paragraph, since to my knowledge, they represent not just a minority view, but rather a popular notion of what apologetics should strive to accomplish.

Before going into more details, let me first show why McGrath's first statement is misleading. He says, "Apologetics is not about winning arguments – it is about winning people." When winning arguments is contrasted with winning people, most people would not wish to disagree with the statement right away even if they sense that there is something wrong with it; to do so may imply the contention that since apologetics is about winning arguments we do not then care about winning people. That is, if apologetics is taken to be concerned mainly with winning arguments against the unbeliever, then the Christians will somehow be distracted from what is supposedly his main objective to win people.

Of course we would like to win people to Christ, but my question to McGrath is whether *apologetics* is about winning arguments, and whether winning people is the chief end of *apologetics* as opposed to something else. If I were to say, "Apologetics is not about hitting people in the face, but about winning people to Christ," does that mean I may hit people in the face, and still lead them to Christ? No, but refraining from hitting people in the face is one of the things that is conducive to winning people to Christ, making it preferable and almost necessary.

McGrath's statement is misleading because it implies that one may lose an argument against the non-Christian and still win him to Christ, or that there is no positive connection between winning arguments and winning people. That is, a debate against an unbeliever may show that the Christian is mistaken, that Christian claims are untrue, and yet the person who has just won the debate may come to Christ anyway. I grant that this

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<sup>1</sup> Alister McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993; p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

is possible due to the convicting power of the Holy Spirit applied to the minds of God's elect, but is this what apologetics mean?

The heart of the error is that McGrath has confused apologetics with evangelism. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines the word *apologetics* as a "systematic argumentative discourse in defense (as of a doctrine); a branch of theology devoted to the defense of the divine origin and authority of Christianity."<sup>3</sup> And it says that *evangelism* is "the winning or revival of personal commitment to Christ."<sup>4</sup> Lest any may object that these are not theological definitions, but only reflect common usage, the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* likewise defines *apologetics* as "a systematic, argumentative discourse in defense of the divine origin and the authority of the Christian faith,"<sup>5</sup> and *evangelism* as "The proclamation of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ with a view to bringing about the reconciliation of the sinner to God the Father through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>6</sup>

Given these definitions, it is evident that apologetics is not the same as evangelism, however they may be related. McGrath has merely substituted the word *apologetics* with the meaning of *evangelism*. It is more accurate to say, "Evangelism is not just about winning arguments, although such may be the means by which conversion results – it is about winning people to Christ." However, since apologetics is not evangelism, we cannot speak the same way about it. McGrath's statement is tantamount to, "Our *debates* with unbelievers is not about winning arguments, but winning people." But by definition, debate is mostly about winning arguments. This is especially true in arranged public debates – would McGrath still maintain that apologetics is not about winning arguments in such a setting? By replacing the meaning of apologetics with that of evangelism, there is no longer a word for expressing the meaning of what is properly called apologetics.

There is yet another statement in McGrath's book that I would like to use as a basis to answer a common misconception about apologetics. Concerning the unbeliever's mindset when hearing the gospel message, he says, "the gospel is being evaluated, not on the basis of its ideas, but on the basis of its effects on people and institutions."<sup>7</sup> And this is supposed to count against the idea that apologetics is "to demonstrate the rationality of the Christian faith."<sup>8</sup>

A similar objection against the traditional definition of apologetics is made when it is observed that many reject our faith not because they think it to be false, but that they have certain personal needs (psychological, social, financial, etc.) that they think cannot be met by the gospel. Apologetics, therefore, should respond accordingly by emphasizing these needs rather than the unbeliever's obligation to grant assent to the truth as imposed by God (Acts 17:30).

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<sup>3</sup> *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*; Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2001; "apologetics."

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, "evangelism."

<sup>5</sup> *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1984; "apologetics."

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, "evangelism."

<sup>7</sup> McGrath, p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

However, it may be that, "the gospel is being evaluated, not on the basis of its ideas, but on the basis of its effects on people and institutions" is precisely what is wrong with the unbeliever, and about which the apologist must endeavor to confront him. That the faith is not evaluated according to its truth or falsity, but how well it "works" or makes one feels, is a lapse in or even denial of rationality that is the duty of believers to correct.

What if the gospel is now being rejected, not because it is false, but because it makes one unpopular with certain people? Do we now modify our approach to show that Christianity will in fact make a person popular, or do we instead argue that this is the wrong way to judge a worldview? If pragmatism is the predominate philosophy in a given society, must we then show that Christianity is the most practical of all religions and worldview? Why not instead show that pragmatism is wrong?

It is precisely because we have not been performing evangelism by preaching and defending the truth, but rather by satisfying the audience's psychological and other needs, that there are so many false converts in churches today. And this same error explains why it appears as if the gospel's "effects on people and institutions" have not been all too positive. We must maintain that if people refuse to come to Christ for the right reasons, they should not come to Christ at all; there are already too many false Christians in our churches to accommodate more of them. Neither apologetics nor evangelism is to "win people" at all costs – certainly not at the expense of the truth.

Even McGrath, having stated the quoted statement as an attempted corrective against the traditional aim of apologetics, proceeds to say, "It is the intractability of human sin, rather than any deficiency in the gospel, that underlies the fact that there are bad Christians. Sadly, sin is so pervasive that the Christian church tends to obscure Christ as much as she reveals him. It is only by the grace of God that the attraction of Christ and his gospel breaks through the tainted witness of the institutional church. That there are Christians who are not especially good is a testimony to the reality and power of human sin; that there are Christians who are especially good is a testimony to the reality and power of divine grace."<sup>9</sup>

Other than to add that many who profess Christ are false converts, this is at least a decent attempt at answering the problem through rational argumentation on the basis of Christian beliefs – that is, the intellectual ideas and truth that constitute Christian theology. His answer shows that Christian theology is not contradicted by the fact that believers sin, and thus our message is still true despite what the unbeliever has observed. This is still a rational argument, and one that refutes the unbeliever's reason for rejecting the gospel.

What is the difference, then, between what McGrath does here, and the agenda of traditional apologetics? If it is suggested that different people object to the gospel for different reasons – some from the basis of cosmology, others from biology or history, and still others for existential reasons – and that, among other things to be accomplished in

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

apologetics, we should overcome their objections squarely through rational argumentation, thus demonstrating the superiority of the gospel message in every sphere of life and thought, then I have no objection. But this is not what McGrath and others like him seem to be saying.

In the light of his own response here, it is difficult to explain how McGrath could disparage traditional apologetics as giving "the impression that Christianity is a set of ideas that some people accept and others reject."<sup>10</sup> What he has written shows his implicit acknowledgment that Christianity is indeed a set of ideas, or a worldview, that we claim as true and commend forcefully to the unbeliever as something he must accept. His saying, "Yet Christianity is about ideas incarnated in history, about the embodiment of values in real life,"<sup>11</sup> adds nothing to the discussion, and does not excuse his inconsistency. According to this latter statement, Christianity is still "about ideas"; likewise, "values," whether or not they are "embodied in real life" (whatever that means), are still intellectual ideas and concepts.

The whole premise of how it is deficient to think of apologetics as primarily concerned with winning arguments is therefore without basis. Having defined our terms correctly, we now realize that apologetics and evangelism may be discussed separately even though they may be closely related. And while many people are converted without extensive debates, God often chooses to use the arguments of apologists as means by which he converts the sinner. Apologetics may serve evangelism, but is not to be identified with it. Apologetics has as its end the demonstration of Christianity's intellectual superiority through rational argumentation, and often (but not always) operates under the broader purpose of evangelism. On certain occasions, an apologist's sole aim is to defend the credibility of the Christian faith against the criticisms of unbelievers, and not to lead his audience to Christ, although conversion may indeed result by means of his presentation if God so wills. Apologetics, then, is mainly about winning arguments, and evangelism is about winning people to Christ. And we should remember that even evangelism itself serves the broader end of gathering and maturing those whom God has chosen for salvation.

That apologetics has as its end the total refutation of unbelieving *ideas* on an intellectual level, as well as providing a rational defense of its own position, is the explicit teaching of Scripture. Note that in biblical examples, what we have defined above as apologetics and evangelism are often not presented as two distinct procedures, but may rather occur at the same time. This is consistent with what we have stated above, namely, that apologetics is often performed in the context of serving the broader purpose of evangelism, or pressing for conversions.

However, what we have established is that it is possible to distinguish between the two concepts so that they may be discussed separately, regardless of their close relationship. Therefore, apologetics is about winning arguments, and evangelism is about winning people to Christ. The relationship between the two is that winning arguments against the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

unbelievers is often the means by which God presses home his reality and truth to them, and by his sovereign grace converts their minds.

Regarding Paul's missionary work to the Thessalonians, Luke writes, "As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures" (Acts 17:2). The expression, "as his custom was," follows the same grammatical construction as "as was his custom" in Luke 4:16, where in the latter case Jesus' habit of synagogue attendance is described.

Here Paul "reasoned with them from the Scriptures." The English word translated "reasoned" (*dialegomai*) is clear enough, signifying a verbal presentation and exchange of intellectual ideas for the purpose of arriving at a logical conclusion. A.T. Robertson confirms this understanding, and indicates that the word means, "to select, distinguish, then to resolve in the mind, to converse (interchange of ideas), then to teach in the Socratic ("dialectic") method of question and answer...then simply to discourse, but always with the idea of intellectual stimulus."<sup>12</sup>

Given the context of the passage and Robertson's definition, the translation by J.B. Phillips makes the sense of Luke's words explicit: "On three Sabbath days he *argued* with them from the scriptures, explaining and quoting passages to prove the necessity for the death of Christ and his rising again from the dead. 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you,' he concluded, 'is God's Christ!'" (Acts 17:2-3).<sup>13</sup> And although the classical Greek scholar Richmond Lattimore has it as saying that Paul "*lectured* to them on the scriptures," the translation is not only correct, but he has also maintained the element of rational argumentation by rendering the words that follow as, "*demonstrating* and *proving* that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead" (Acts 17:2-3).<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, Paul's evangelistic efforts involve reasoning, arguing, and lecturing – all of which are highly intellectual activities. It is easy to see that his arguing is an integral part of his evangelistic strategy. Not only that, rather than arguing for the existential value of the gospel – the ability that it has to satisfy the unbelievers "felt-needs" or creaturely longings, he argues for the central propositions that Christianity claims to be true, such as the redemptive suffering and the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ.

He presents the gospel message as something to be believed because it is true, and does not focus on its power to deliver individuals from such things as depression, loneliness, and a lack of meaning in life. Such is the role of apologetics, that it serves the purpose of evangelism by arguing persuasively that Christianity is true, and therefore must be believed. Paul says, "Now [God] commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). God imposes a moral obligation on humanity to believe the truth concerning Jesus Christ, and no one can reject the gospel with impunity.

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<sup>12</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament, Vol. 3*; Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1930; p. 267.

<sup>13</sup> J.B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English*; New York: Touchstone, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> Richmond Lattimore, *The New Testament*; New York: Bryn Mawr Trust Company, 1996.

The examples of the early Christians commend to us, not the modern anti-intellectual approach characterized by emotional appeals, and much drama and fanfare, but rather the highly intellectualistic method of academic lectures and rational arguments – this is the way to both reach unbelievers with the gospel and educate believers in the faith. Although the case is often made that other evangelistic programs appear to be more effective, from the viewpoint of biblical theology, they are only more effective in generating false converts. If people are not converted to truth, they are not converted in any Christian sense at all.

Of course, our confrontations with unbelieving thoughts vary in degrees of formality. Sometimes we are challenged to defend the faith against professional academics, but more often the exchanges occur in our daily conversations with friends and associates. Whatever the case may be, the rational presentation of truth-claims must never be absent. People must believe the gospel message not because it will make them feel good or alleviate any personal inconvenience, but because Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2:5).

More than a few Christian authors consider it wise to attempt other approaches in reaching the unbelievers if they do not respond to rational argumentation. This I find acceptable only if it is meant that, whenever possible, we should arrange the circumstances and behave in a way that is conducive to intellectual confrontations between opposing worldviews, but often this is not what these Christians intend to say. It is futile to reach unbelievers without verbal communication and without requiring assent to the truth – the former means that one is not preaching the gospel at all, and the latter may result in a false profession of Christ.

At this point, let us deal with one popular biblical passage, from which many derive support for deviating from the biblical pattern, and into anti-intellectual and so-called "creative" outreach strategies:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

I would be interested in providing an extended exposition on this passage if it were related to our main topic. For now, only one point needs to be observed to prevent the type of misuse mentioned. Paul says, "To those not having the law I became like one not having the law." Why? "...so as to win those not having the law." But in the middle of his sentence, Paul adds, "though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law."

Although Paul is sensitive to the culture and background of those he tries to reach, he does not relax his actual Christian commitment or doctrine at any point. His explanation, that though he "became *like* one not having the law," he was in fact "*not free* from God's law," ought to exempt this passage from the abuse under which it is often subjected.

In connection with our present discussion, it is true that different people may have different objections against the gospel, and in this sense, we adapt the content of our message so that our presentation may have a direct effect on the audience. However, it remains that our response to any objection consists of rational arguments, and the object of faith proposed to them is still the *truth* of Christianity. Therefore, any modifications are only superficial – we may adjust the frame of our presentation, but not the essential content or approach.

For example, a person who claims to disbelieve the gospel on the basis of a scientific objection may require a different answer than another who rejects Christianity due to a prior commitment to a false religion. But in either case, intellectual arguments are used to counter their resistance, and what they must believe remains the same. And in the biblical system of apologetics, there are similar arguments that can in fact successfully refute both types of objections at the same time without substantial modification, as with the case of an epistemological challenge.

There are a number of things that we may do in order to avoid allowing cultural differences to hinder the gospel, but our commitment to truth and doctrine is never compromised in the process, as Paul himself indicates in this passage. The objection that we should "become all things to all men" as an argument against the view of apologetics and evangelism as presented here is therefore pointless and irrelevant. We affirm that Christians may be sensitive to the audience's culture and background, but that does not result in any essential changes in our approach and message.

Acts 17:1-3, as cited earlier, concerns Paul's evangelistic outreach to Thessalonica. Later at Corinth, the Bible says, "Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks" (Acts 18:4). This verse again describes Paul's approach, notice, to both the Jews and Greeks. We see in Acts that Paul adjusts his presentation according to the culture and background of his audience. For example, he is sensitive to the information and knowledge concerning Old Testament Scripture that his hearers possess, so as not to assume too much of them.

However, against those who disregard the importance of winning arguments, he does not vary the *nature* of his approach as an intellectual and coherent message concerning the Christian God and his Son, Jesus Christ. Thus Luke says that he "reasoned" (argued, discussed, lectured) with his audience, with the express intent to "persuade" (Thayer: "to induce one by words to believe") all types of hearers.

Is it true, as many say, that we must not argue with the young people of our day, whose culture is so adverse to intellectual discourse that our message would be completely disregarded if we attempt to reason with them? And is it true that, since the people of our

image-oriented television generation have only an attention span of several minutes at the most, it is no longer realistic to expect congregations to endure an hour-long lecture-like sermon filled with highly theological and philosophical content? In reply, besides the realization that an intellectual presentation is the biblical way, and therefore our only hope, we also need to understand that the people's aversion to deep thinking about life's ultimate issues is in itself an intellectual conclusion based upon premises they have implicitly accepted.

Unless they are unusually dull (in which case we may ask the right questions to guide them), these premises will surface when we press them for an explanation regarding the mindset they have adopted, and thus preparing the ground for an intellectual battle. Once a person's accepted position has been turned into an argument, or a network of arguments, he can be meaningfully challenged by the Christian apologist. In short, the very belief that intellectual discourse is useless is an intellectual position that the Christian may require him to defend.

Many budding apologists are befuddled when non-Christians retreat into irrationality. If the Christians have the advantage when it comes to rationality, some unbelievers simply decide to be irrational. When an opponent puts up this hurdle, the Christian should not be at a loss, since in the eyes of any third party present, he ought to have already won the debate. In addition, adopting irrationality as a legitimate way to operate in itself requires justification, for if one may arbitrarily choose his beliefs, however ridiculous they may be, then the unbeliever has no basis in the first place from which to challenge and debate with the Christian, whose beliefs he is able to conclusively defend. And it has become evident that the non-Christian refuses assent to the gospel not because of any compelling objections, but just because he does not wish to accept it. The Bible tells us that many will react this way even to a cogent presentation and defense of the faith, and thus sealing their fate as those who would suffer under the wrath of God.

To abdicate doctrinal preaching in order to give place to music, drama, dancing, and socializing only serves to foster the problem. It is impossible to destroy anti-intellectualism by surrendering to it. We ought not throw down our weapon, "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17), just because deluded Christians and hostile unbelievers tell us that it no longer works. "The word of God is living and active" (Hebrews 4:12), penetrating deeply into the hearts of men. Against any type of anti-Christian reasoning, including the self-contradictory argument that we should not argue, we may apply the word of God, which as God promises, will not fail to fulfill its purpose (Isaiah 55:11).

In preaching, we ought not need to treat the people as imbeciles, not capable of understanding the most basic lecture or sermon. At first, we may need to accommodate their untrained intellect, but the law of God makes wise the simple (Psalm 19:7). And so, although we must allow time for the people to progress, we do not hold back forever, but declare to them "the whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:27, NASB). To do anything less is to perpetuate the spiritual famine in our churches today. It is impossible to gain biblical results while defying biblical procedure and methodology.

Evidently, Paul argued against unbelieving ideas all the time. That was an integral part of his evangelistic strategy, and it is part of what it means to preach. Similarly, we read in Acts 18:28 that Apollos "vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ." Earlier in verse 24, it is said that, "Apollos, a native of Alexandria...was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures."

The great city of Alexandria was the hub of Jewish-Hellenistic learning; in it was located a university and library. Having been educated in such a setting of academic and philosophical rigor, Luke acknowledges Apollos, who was Jewish, as a "learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures." And in verse 28, he puts his education to good use by refuting the Jews in public debate, proving that Jesus was the Messiah. Once again, instead of disparaging his enthusiasm to argue, Luke casts Apollos in a positive light precisely due to his intellectual prowess and his ability to refute the opponents of Christianity.

We can say more, but I trust that the reader has been convinced, and requires no further argument concerning this point. Let us not lose sight of what we have been trying to show; to quote a statement made previously, "That apologetics has as its end the total refutation of unbelieving *ideas* on an intellectual level, as well as providing a rational defense of its own position, is the explicit teaching of Scripture." I believe that we have provided sufficient evidence to substantiate this.

We will therefore conclude this section by mentioning that Jesus also argued so skillfully that it is said of him, "And none of them could answer him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day to question him any more" (Matthew 22:46).<sup>15</sup> The reader should take time reading through the verses preceding this, especially verses 15-45. In them, Jesus proves himself a brilliant exegete (v. 23-33) and systematic theologian (v. 34-40); he resolves a doctrinal dilemma raised against him by the Pharisees (v. 15-22), while posing one of his own that can only be resolved by acknowledging the dual nature of Christ as God and man, with him as the only one who fits the description (v. 41-45). So Christ also argued; he was a master debater.

Reading the gospels with an anti-intellectual mindset, one easily misses the subtlety and precision with which Christ argues with his opponents on numerous occasions. Do we suppose that the guards were mesmerized by some sort of mystical presence or non-intellectual charisma emanating from his person when they said, "No one ever spoke the way this man does" (John 7:46)? No, people believed because of the intellectual content conveyed through his words: "And because of his words many more became believers" (John 4:41; also Mark 6:2, Luke 19:48, John 7:15). Effective ministry is never attributed to some sort of mystical presence or charisma in the Bible, which many erroneously call the "anointing" today, but to sound doctrine communicated through faithful preaching, rendered effective by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Now that we have established the nature and intention of apologetics as one of winning arguments, there are a number of passages in the New Testament commanding Christians, and especially ministers, to refute Christianity's intellectual opponents. The nature of the conflict is spelled out in 2 Corinthians 10:4-5: "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

Our fight, according to Paul, involves the destruction of every anti-Christian argument, pretension, and thought. Clearly, he speaks of an intellectual battlefield, where ideas are pitted against one another. The struggle is not non-intellectual, as many suppose, but precisely the opposite – it is mainly a war between worldviews, the networks of intellectual ideas that structure our way of understanding and organizing all thoughts and experiences. The gospel is a message carrying intelligible information that people must believe.

Paul's language depicts a military campaign, storming the gates of the enemy. This is a war of ideas; Christians advance the kingdom of God through verbal communication, whether in speech (Ephesians 6:19) or in writing (John 20:31). When Paul requests prayer, he says to pray for his preaching to be effective (Colossians 4:3-4); there is no alternative or backup strategy. We preach "whether the time is favorable or unfavorable" (2 Timothy 4:2, NRSV), and not just when the practice is in vogue or acceptable to our target audience. Preaching sound doctrine is the only program for advancing the kingdom, gaining converts, and promoting Christian growth. But believers are rendered impotent when they misunderstand the nature of the gospel and how they ought to communicate it.

The apostle Paul teaches in Titus 1:7-9 that "an overseer" of God's people must be able to teach biblical doctrine and refute error: "Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work...He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." Using our terminologies, he is saying that a minister of the gospel must be competent in both theology and apologetics. The basis of his doctrinal instructions and refutation of errors is "the trustworthy message as it has been taught," meaning that he must be orthodox.

One way to look at this is to divide the two disciplines into a positive and negative aspect. While theology creates a positive construction of Christian doctrine to be passed on to believers, apologetics is the negative discipline that seeks to answer those who dissent from it. However, since an increased understanding in theology translates into more powerful apologetics, and the process of refuting false doctrines and non-Christian ideas compels greater precision in theological formulations, this distinction between the positive and negative aspects of doctrinal ministry ought not be regarded as absolute. They may be distinguished for the sake of convenience in discussions, but they are closely related ecclesiastical duties.

Having established that the minister must be a skillful apologist, the Bible also commands Christians in general to learn how to defend their faith. Addressing Christians in general, 1 Peter 3:15 says, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." The Christian ought to be prepared when an unbeliever approaches and asks, "Why do you believe in miracles?" or, "Why do you believe in creation in the light of such-and-such a scientific theory?"

To be always ready to answer any objector, as Peter commands, is to be never caught off guard or without an adequate answer. The requirement here is to be able to answer "*everyone* who asks" about Christianity – that is, one must learn to respond to every person who asks or even attacks his faith from any angle (theological, philosophical, historical, moral, scientific, etc.). This implies considerable preparation and study on the part of the Christian. But as in doctrinal instructions, it is the responsibility for the minister to teach his audience in how to defend the faith.

The present condition of the church, in which not even basic doctrines are taught, let alone how to defend them, renders God's people extremely vulnerable to intellectual assaults from unbelievers. It also gives the Christian faith a poor reputation as lacking intellectual credibility, since its adherents fail to represent it as otherwise. And if the general Christian population is to be so equipped, how much more is it necessary for preachers to learn apologetics, and be able to decisively refute unbelieving thought?

One reason behind people's resistance to defining the aim of apologetics as winning arguments is the lack of confidence that they can indeed decisively win every debate against the unbelievers. If it is known that it can be done, then perhaps these same individuals would not object to it as much as they do. But we must begin with establishing a solid theological foundation; if God's people are constantly "tossed here and there by...every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14, NASB), apologetics would not be possible. One cannot defend the faith without first knowing what it consists of.

Now, the word translated "an answer" (*apologia*) in 1 Peter 3:15, is properly defined by Thayer as "a reasoned statement or an argument; verbal defense, speech in defense," and therefore Wuest provides the fuller translation: "...always being those who are ready to present a verbal defense to everyone who asks you for a logical explanation concerning the hope which is in all of you."<sup>16</sup> This is in harmony with our contention, as established in previous pages, that apologetics is indeed about winning arguments through a verbal presentation of intellectual ideas.

To do apologetics is not just to woo the unbeliever into faith in Christ by promising him existential benefits; rather, it is to confront him with the truth of the gospel, and demand submission to it. Those who say that apologetics is not about winning arguments, or that the Christian life has no place for arguing with our opponents, has allowed contemporary concepts of social etiquette and religious tolerance to color their reading of the Bible. Over and over again, the Scripture calls us to win arguments against unbelievers with an

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<sup>16</sup> Kenneth S. Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961.

end to annihilate their systems of thought *in toto*, and by such means perhaps to convert some of them.

Finally, Jude 3 says, "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." This apostle is eager to discuss positive truths concerning their common salvation in Christ; he is interested in theological reflections. However, the urgency of the situation requires that he exhorts the believers to "contend for the faith."

The word translated "contend" (*epagonizomai*) carries the meaning of intense struggling or striving. "The faith" refers not to subjective belief here, but the object that must be believed, namely, the Christian system of doctrine "that was once for all entrusted to the saints." That the content of the Christian faith has been "once for all" delivered to us necessarily implies that it cannot be altered at a later time. And therefore those false prophets and heretical theologians who attempt to "update" the content of faith cannot at the same time claim a Christian heritage or to be friends of Christianity.

Gospel truths do not "evolve" or become obsolete at a later time; it requires no "modernizing" or such disguised attempts to subvert the faith at its foundation. There are false religions who claim to follow the Christian tradition, but since the doctrines of faith have been established by the apostles "once for all," it is not subject to change in the slightest degree, and those who say that this should be done has no affiliation with Christianity.

This excludes the thinking of all liberal theologians as well as religions such as Mormonism from being called "Christian." Paul writes, "As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!" (Galatians 1:9). Anyone who preaches a gospel different from Paul's will suffer the ultimate punishment.

At any rate, note that this verse is not directly referring to ministers, but all Christians. The preceding passages have shown that learning a system of invincible apologetics is not only the obligation of teachers, but of every Christian. I do not say that one must learn thoroughly all existing or possible systems of thought, and be able to point out at every point how Christianity is different and superior to them. This is permissible to do, if at all possible. What I see the Bible saying is that we must master theology and apologetics – and biblical apologetics does not necessitate a thorough knowledge of all other systems.

If truth is exclusive, then a true exclusive truth-claim would automatically eliminate the truth status of all contradictory propositions. But the Christian's task does not end there – he must prove this to be the case with Christianity through rational argumentation, which is the meaning of apologetics. There is a system of invincible apologetics derivable from the Bible that can easily destroy all other worldviews. For this, I refer the reader to my other writings. Most Christians have not been trained by their ministers in apologetics, and this deficiency exists as a genuine hurdle in their attempt to obey the biblical

mandate to defend the faith. But most do not even have a basic knowledge of biblical doctrine, and therefore the remedy must begin with learning Christian theology.

Many hesitate to accept our concept of defending the faith because they think that it is somehow unkind, and therefore in this sense "unchristian" to argue. Although verbal exchanges between proponents of two opposing viewpoints may at times become quite heated, it does not follow that all debates must be conducted in an overly contentious manner. We must speak the truth, but allow our love for God and people to govern our presentation. Nevertheless, Christian morality does not forbid forceful confrontation against the unbeliever.

Peter teaches us to do apologetics with "with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15), but so that by our sound reasoning and good behavior, our opponents "may be *ashamed* of their slander" (v. 16). Likewise, Paul writes, "In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be *ashamed* because they have nothing bad to say about us" (Titus 2:7-8). By proper conduct, cogent arguments, and "soundness of speech," we put hostile unbelievers to shame. Therefore, the Bible's instruction to act kindly toward others does not exclude arguing against them, but is in fact given as a means by which we may embarrass our unbelieving opponents.

The assumption of many is that being benign and polite automatically means that we are not to embarrass others by demonstrating the intellectual absurdity of their beliefs, let alone reprimanding them sharply. However, the Bible explicitly allows for both: "Better is open rebuke than hidden love" (Proverbs 27:5); "When [Jesus] said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing" (Luke 13:17); "Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, 'You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?'" (Acts 13:9-10); "Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning" (1 Timothy 5:20); "Even one of their own prophets has said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith...These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you" (Titus 1:12-13, 2:15).

Evidently, those who walk in love do not always have to be soft-spoken or non-threatening. Sharp rebuke may often help others become "sound in the faith." One who contends for the faith with intellectual ruthlessness before a hostile audience shows his love for God and for the hearers. In contrast, the prophet Jonah ran from his mandate to call Ninevah to repentance.

Therefore, on the basis of scriptural revelation, I exhort the reader: Argue! Argue while maintaining a Christian composure, but argue forcefully and shrewdly; argue uncompromisingly and unrelentingly; argue to demolish every unbelieving thought, allowing no unjustified presuppositions to escape your scrutiny; argue to expose the

intellectual bankruptcy of every unbelieving system of thought. Argue well, and argue to win.

## 2. BY WORD AND DEED

Acts 1:8 says, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Before Jesus ascended to heaven to be with his Father, he told the disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit who would be poured out upon them, granting them power to "be my witnesses." The outworking of this promise in the days of the apostles is recorded for us in the Acts of the Apostles.

I have personally heard, more than once or twice, preachers relate a strategy of evangelism from our present text that gives emphasis to the Christian's moral behavior rather than the message he is to verbally articulate to the unsaved. They rather naively point out that Jesus said we are not "*to* witness" (as in through speech), but we should rather "*be* witnesses" (as in through our behavior).

While I do not deny the role of good works in providing outsiders with an attractive representation of the Christian faith, evangelism is not to be done through our godly lifestyles alone without a verbal message. In fact, there is no evangelism at all without a verbal message, and the effectiveness of our godly conduct in evangelism presupposes a strong presentation of the gospel in the form of preaching or writing.

The anti-intellectual mindset that has gained a foothold among the unbelievers has sadly also permeated much of the church today. Whereas Christians used to be accused of being "too intellectual," nowadays they take pride in their irrationality and accept without protest charges of self-contradiction, although such is not the nature of the faith to which they have given their lives.

**The Necessity of Verbal Proclamation.** First, let us see that the word alone is enough to establish moral obligation. In other words, an intellectual communication of the will of God, even without a consistent behavioral representation of the same, provides a sufficient basis on which moral responsibility is now demanded from the hearer.

If the content of a message comes from God, who possesses ultimate authority, the hearer is obligated to obey whether the messenger lives up to the message he delivers or not. This is to say that knowledge of divine commands immediately creates moral obligation on the part of one who gains such knowledge. Even those who have never heard the gospel are held accountable for the innate knowledge they possess concerning God and his moral laws (Romans 1-3).

Since "now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30), anyone who hears the Christian message preached ought to "obey the gospel of God" (1 Peter 4:17). This is true whether or not the Christian who speaks demonstrate holiness and

righteousness in his conduct. The pivotal issue in the act of evangelism, therefore, is not the lifestyle of the believer, but the content and presentation of the message he preaches.

This is by no means to encourage or permit hypocrisy among believers, but to make clear that the moral failure of the speaker does not negate the responsibility of the hearer, provided that the message related is true. Therefore, I am not saying that the Christian may live inconsistently with the faith that he professes. The apostle James reminds us, "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:26).

Rather, what I am saying in this section may be summarized as follows: (1) The verbal message of the gospel logically precedes the good works that make it attractive or credible, although in some cases the message may be presented after the unbeliever observes the good works; (2) The sinner has no excuse for rejecting the gospel even if the Christian fails to live up to what he preaches. As long as the message is true to biblical revelation, it is God's word to the hearer, carrying an authority that does not need the consistent conduct of the Christian to substantiate.

For example, the illegal practices of some government officials do not grant other citizens of the nation the right to break the law themselves. This is because the law is above both groups of individuals, who must all answer to it. In a similar fashion, God's word remains above both the speakers and the hearers, and therefore it is the standard by which both parties will be judged.

It is true that the Christian sins by not living in accordance with divine commands, and this may create a stumbling block for the sinner. Indeed, the moral failure, or at times even only the lack of excellence, among ministers of the gospel and other Christians have caused many to become disillusioned and disgusted with the Christian faith. The point, however, is that the sinner is not therefore exempt from believing and obeying the gospel message, since in rejecting it he still sins by defying against God's word.

But is the verbal proclamation of the gospel ever sufficient by itself? It is, because, "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Preaching alone renders the hearer responsible for accepting the gospel, and provides a sufficient basis for faith. It is often effective as well – there are those who, having received regeneration from God, see the truth of the gospel in spite of the evil behavior of certain professing Christians, and come readily to repentance and faith in Christ.

**The Inadequacy of Non-Verbal Strategies.** On the other hand, the same cannot be said regarding good works alone, although many seem to believe that one may win others to Christ without giving priority to a verbal message filled with relevant information. The common misconception that one may be a witness for Christ primarily through one's lifestyle reflects the infiltration of non-Christian philosophies in the church, and does not originate from a careful exegetical study of Scripture. The worldly philosophies I have in mind include pragmatism, anti-intellectualism, and religious pluralism. Cultural trends,

which are also heavily influenced by philosophical thinking of the times, are also responsible for the deprecation of the word.

In his introductory work on apologetics, *No Doubt About It*, Professor Winfried Corduan relates the following: "Our college and career group had adopted the habit of getting together after Sunday night service in a restaurant... One week the conversation turned to evangelism. Some of us shared how we had attempted to present others with the gospel and the usual mix of success or lack thereof. Linda had been quiet up to now, apparently more absorbed in her strawberry ice cream cake than in the conversation. In a moment of silence she broke in, 'I don't witness with words; I try to share my testimony through my life...'"<sup>1</sup>

Many Christians nowadays, to differing degrees, think this way. The problem is that such a method of "evangelism" is both unbiblical and impossible. Before elaborating on this, let us first read Corduan's comments on the above situation: "I have always been puzzled by folks like Linda who say these things (and she is not alone). For one thing, I do not know how many people lead such obviously Christian lives that everyone else can unequivocally see Jesus in them. That does not mean that our lives ought not to be clear witnesses for Christ (they should)...but I am amazed at the refusal of some people to give even minimal verbal witness to Christ..."<sup>2</sup>

A non-verbal witness is also an unbiblical one because the very meaning of the word witness as used in our main text, Acts 1:8, refers to one who gives verbal testimony regarding objective reality based on his personal knowledge, as in a court of law. In the case of the apostles, they had direct knowledge of Christ's life, teachings, transfiguration, death, and resurrection. Peter writes that they were "eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16).<sup>3</sup>

And John says, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:1-3). Note that John says what he has seen and heard he *proclaimed* to us – that is, in the form of verbal testimony, and not his lifestyle, although the latter may certainly be in accord with the message that he brings.

To be a witness for Christ, therefore, is primarily to provide verbal testimony on his behalf in the form of the total gospel message. For example, the apostle Paul writes in 1

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<sup>1</sup> Winfried Corduan, *No Doubt About It*, Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997; p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Words*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991; "Testify/Witness/Testimony." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; "martyreō."

Corinthians 15:3-8: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also..." To relay this message is what it means to "witness" for Christ.

Keeping in mind that our function as witnesses is mainly to offer verbal testimony, there is also a place, as in a court of law, for providing objective evidence for the position that we are advocating as true. Such is the role of miracles and good conduct. The former serves to confirm the divine origin and authority of the message preached (Mark 16:15-20; Hebrews 2:4), while the latter makes the gospel attractive, as well as to demonstrate the power of the gospel to effect moral transformation.

As stated earlier, not only is a non-verbal evangelistic strategy unbiblical, it is impossible. The gospel message is such that it must be articulated, not merely "lived out." Action does not speak louder than words. In fact, action does not speak at all unless explained by the one who acts or interpreted by the one perceiving it. However, people often think of action as inherently exhibiting obvious meaning and purpose because they are not aware of the assumptions necessary for interpretation already imported into the situation.

Take the observation, "A man takes the arm of an old woman, and they begin to walk across the street." In itself, the statement offers no information regarding the motive of the man, whether he is helping the woman cross the street, whether providing such assistance to someone is a moral action, or whether the man is performing this kind act as a Christian. But from the observer's point of view, the action may be immediately seen as: "A man, out of *compassion*, takes the arm of an old woman, and *helps* her cross the street." The information concerning the motive and purpose of the action does not come from what is perceived; rather, the observer imports knowledge, assumptions, and categories of thought to the situation that the action itself does not yield.

This illustrates how an action without an interpretation is meaningless. The kind of interpretation given to an action is based on the assumptions imported. How does the observer know that the man is not attempting to kidnap the woman? Saying that the man is gentle with the woman does not help at all, since that only exposes the assumption that kidnappers are not gentle when abducting their victims. This assumption does not come from the action itself – it has been imported by the observer to assist in giving meaning to what he sees.

Having been created in the image of God, the unbeliever possesses innate knowledge about God and his moral laws. Potentially, he is able to recognize moral actions and godly habits when he perceives them. The problem is that the unbeliever has suppressed and rebelled against such knowledge, and opposes what he innately knows to be the case. In addition, the innate knowledge he has is by no means comprehensive or sufficient for salvation. Therefore, it is necessary for the Christian to verbally articulate, whether

through speech or writing, the message of salvation, making information concerning God, Christ, man, sin, and divine moral commands explicit. Granting that illumination is given to the sinner by the Holy Spirit, he is then able to see the miracles and good works performed by the believers through the correct mental framework, and thus acknowledge them as attestations to the Christian message.

In other words, an action in itself carries no meaning, but must be interpreted based on what resides in the observer's mind. If the individual perceiving the action possesses false assumptions relevant to the situation, an erroneous interpretation will result. The Bible teaches that God has given everyone true innate knowledge about himself and his moral commands. For this reason, the sinner is potentially able to interpret Christian miracles and conduct as giving support to the gospel. But through wickedness and a depraved mind, he has suppressed such knowledge. It is necessary, therefore, for the Christian to give first place to the content of the gospel through proclaiming it verbally, and then to authenticate the power of the same through miracles and godly conduct.

What does it mean when a crippled person is healed by the laying on of hands? Nothing – that is, unless the observer knows that the minister has laid his hands on the cripple as a Christian, and that he credits this miracle to the mercy of God and the power of Jesus Christ. The action itself conveys no such information, but must be related to the observer through verbal communication. The same is true of one's godly lifestyle and moral conduct – a distinctly Christian message must be explicitly articulated sooner or later. Moral conduct alone cannot bring a sinner to Christ, but a proclamation of the gospel can by itself do so; therefore, the verbal message should always be given primary emphasis.

I will only take time to deal with one biblical passage based on which some may object to what is asserted above: "Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives" (1 Peter 3:1-2). Although the passage says that a husband may be "won over without words," these words follow "if any of them do not believe the word." The stated possibility that the husband may be "won over without words" presupposes that the wife, or someone else, has already presented the gospel message adequately to the husband, while the latter has rejected it. The husband is then fully aware that the "purity and reverence" of the wife is exhibited as a Christian. Otherwise, the husband may not associate the good behavior of the wife with the Christian faith at all. Peter is indeed saying that godly behavior may at times be instrumental to another person's conversion, but he presupposes the necessity of presenting a verbal message.

**Summary and Conclusion.** The Westminster Confession of Faith states, "The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word" (XIV.1). One theologian writes regarding this section of the Confession, "...this work of God in our minds, causing us to believe, is ordinarily, one might say always, accomplished by means of the Word...Since saving faith comes only through the Word

of God, one can easily understand why we place such great emphasis on the Word and on its being preached..."<sup>4</sup>

That such faith is "ordinarily" generated through the word simply means that, "We do not deny that God can regenerate an imbecile, an insane person, or a dying infant. In these cases the person is mentally incapable of the activity of faith so that he must be saved apart from an understanding of the Word."<sup>5</sup> But this is not so where the usual mental operations are not impeded. A sane man must believe the Gospel..."<sup>6</sup>

I have argued that words without works are authoritative and often effective in evangelism, while works without words are never effective or even meaningful. A message carrying intellectual content must accompany or be attached to good works for the latter to be meaningful or instrumental in leading people to Christ. On the other hand, the message by itself without good works has inherent in it the power to save and is sufficient as the object of belief for the hearer.

This being so, the biblical pattern is that we present ourselves as individuals regenerated by the power of God, disposed toward holiness and righteousness – yet, for this reality to count in representing Christ to the lost, an intelligible gospel message must either first be presented, or later added. Whatever the order of presentation, the verbal and intellectual aspects of evangelism have preeminence. As Paul writes in Romans 10:14, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"

Paul writes that learning the contents of the gospel message is "of first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3). At the same time, Jesus commands, "let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). But how will people know that our good deeds are performed as Christians, and that praise should be directed to our Father in heaven? Good deeds are only meaningful if a distinct verbal message either precedes or follows them.

This means that to be faithful and effective witnesses of Jesus Christ, we must first gain a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the Christian faith. We must become proficient in theological and biblical matters, and be able to convey such to the unbelievers in an intelligible and orderly manner. We must also be able to provide

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?*; Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1965; p. 144.

<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that all insane persons and infants are regenerated, but all *elect* insane persons and infants.

<sup>6</sup> Clark, p. 144.

justification for what we believe: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). But we must also commit ourselves to lifestyles characterized by holiness and righteousness, so that "those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (v. 16).

### 3. THE LIGHT OF MIND

Attaining spiritual enlightenment has been the end purpose of several major religions, and it is an important aspect of New Age teaching. Although the Bible is not silent on the subject, upon examination we discover that there are marked contradictions between biblical Christianity, non-Christian systems, and even purportedly evangelical Christian theology on the nature and source of spiritual enlightenment. It is necessary that Christians familiarize themselves with this area of biblical teaching so that they may cling firmly to the scriptural revelation, and not be misled by doctrines of demons cloaked in garbs of counterfeit wisdom and virtue.

In this study, we will derive several points concerning true spiritual enlightenment as it relates to the gospel message from 2 Corinthians 4:4-6, where the apostle Paul writes:

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

During the course of this study, we will also take the opportunity to clarify the nature and content of the gospel itself.

**Preliminary Issues.** Although many commentators assume the "god of this age" (*ho theos tou aiōnos toutou*) to be a reference to Satan, the matter is not as straightforward as it may first seem. The exact phrase does not appear anywhere else in the writings of Paul, and it is customary for the apostle to refer to God with *ho theos*. Moreover, some see evidence for the use of this expression in reference to God in Daniel 5:23 of the Septuagint and Tobit 14:6 of the Apocrypha (*ton theon tou aionos*).

To say that the "god of this age" in this passage must be a designation for Satan purely due to the presupposition that God is not one who hinders man's minds from grasping spiritual truths would be a case of imposing one's theological bias, and in this case a faulty one, into the text. Scripture indicates that God does withhold spiritual sight from certain individuals. The apostle, quoting from Isaiah 29:10, writes, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day" (Romans 11:8). And Jesus himself says, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (Matthew 11:25).

On the other hand, even though there are no exact parallels in reference to Satan to the expression in question, elsewhere the Bible indicates that he is the "ruler" of those who

disbelieve: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient" (Ephesians 2:1-2). In addition, the view saying that Satan is "the god of this age," which seems to be the dominant position in contemporary exegesis, gains support through appealing to early extra-biblical writings such as that of Ignatius and certain rabbinical documents. As for "the rulers of this age" in 1 Corinthians 2:6, 8, the term speaks of the leaders responsible for Christ's crucifixion (or those of whom they are a type; v. 8b) and other respectable men of the time (as judged by worldly standards; 1:25-30), and not Satan or demonic spirits.

One ought not eliminate either interpretation at the outset. For our present purpose, we will submit to the contemporary consensus and assume that "the god of this age" is Satan, yet keeping in mind that biblical teaching requires us to think of his activities as under God's sovereign control. Therefore, whatever Satan may do, including blinding the minds of men, is done only as a secondary agent in fulfilling God's plans and purposes. As Romans 9:18 says, "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden." And even if the term refers to Satan here, the Bible still speaks of God as blinding (or opening) the minds of men to truth as he wills. Without settling conclusively the object of the designation, we will proceed to examine the nature of spiritual blindness itself.

**The Intellectual Message.** Paul writes that the "god of this age" blinds "the minds" of those who do not believe. The nature of spiritual blindness, therefore, is intellectual – which is to say that it is of the thoughts. In an age when even Christians have been indoctrinated by anti-intellectual teachings, many people assume that spiritual blindness is non-intellectual; rather, the problem lies in some undefined "spiritual" aspect in man.

It follows that conversion to them is a supra-rational event if not an altogether irrational or sub-rational one. What they fail to see is that the Scripture does not distinguish between the spiritual and intellectual in this manner. Referring to something as "spiritual" often only means that emphasis is placed on the spiritual nature of the intellectual concepts or activities. Instead of dealing with intellectual concepts relating to, say, physics or history, we are dealing with concepts relating to spiritual matters; nevertheless, the nature of such concepts remains intellectual in nature.

For example, to say that chemistry belongs to the category of natural science but that religion is spiritual in nature does not mean that one deals with these subjects using two separate parts of his being. Instead, one interacts with both using his mind – concerning the natural for the former, and the spiritual for the latter.

Romans 8:5 says, "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires." To live in the spirit does not mean to live through the "spirit" as a part of man distinct from the intellect, but that the mind would focus on and conform to God's precepts. The popular notion of man as a trichotomy should be

replaced with a dichotomy or duality, in which man's being consists of a material aspect (body) and an immaterial aspect (soul or spirit).

Within the Pauline corpus, spiritual blindness is consistently attributed to the mind: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Romans 1:21); "They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts" (Ephesians 4:18). To eliminate another person's blindness to spiritual things, therefore, involves a supernatural operation on the mind. If it is the mind that is blinded, it is the mind also that is acted on when God works to change the evil disposition of the sinner so that he may see the truth of the gospel.

It is important that one does not misunderstand what we mean by the gospel being "intellectual" in nature. We do not mean that one can only learn it in an academic setting, or that only the educated may know to accept or reject it. By "intellectual," we mean "of or pertaining to the mind." That is, the gospel message is directed to, understood by, and accepted or rejected by the mind, as opposed to other parts or aspects of the human person.

We are not suggesting that spiritual problems are in fact academic problems, or that spiritual blindness is caused purely by a lack of education or information. We are saying, however, that spiritual blindness is a problem of the mind or intellect. Of course, as a thought system or worldview, Christianity is without peer, and in this sense it is intellectually superior to all others. However, our immediate emphasis is not whether Christianity is intellectually superior, but that it is intellectual in nature.

We are articulating from what Paul has written in 2 Corinthians 4:4-6 the location and nature of spiritual blindness, that the pivotal point at issue is located in the mind, making the rejection of the gospel an act of the intellect. According to Scripture, resistance against the gospel proceeds from a dark, wicked, and twisted mind.

By locating spiritual blindness in the mind, we are not saying that evil is caused solely by a lack of education or information, as many humanists and several false religions are prone to teach. Rather, the Bible teaches that there is a serious defect in the unbeliever's mind, a twisted disposition in the intellect, that prevents him from seeing the truth and glory of the gospel even when presented to him with an abundance of information.

Although spiritual blindness is intellectual in nature, regeneration and conversion do not occur through education alone (although preaching may be seen as a form of education) precisely because the unbeliever cannot see the "light" in the information being presented before him. This does not take away from the fact that the blindness is intellectual in nature, but only goes to show that besides having a person preach the gospel, the power of God must be in operation to convert the sinner, thus eliminating his blindness and altering the disposition of his mind.

One implication of spiritual blindness being in and of the mind, or intellectual in nature, is that its opposite is naturally also intellectual in nature. It is through our understanding of the nature of spiritual blindness that we should interpret the language used in Paul's commission from Jesus to the apostolic ministry: "I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:17-18).

To "open their eyes" (to grant them understanding), that is, to cure their spiritual blindness, is to "turn them from darkness to light." From our discussion of 2 Corinthians 4:4, this means that Paul's ministry would bring intellectual enlightenment concerning the truth of the gospel to those who were spiritually blind and ignorant. Do not misunderstand this to mean that, since spiritual blindness is intellectual in nature, non-Christians cannot therefore be educated in the sense meant by the common usage of the word. On the other hand, do not assume that educated people, in the sense meant by them, are for the same reason spiritual.

However, a necessary implication of the above is that no non-Christian is wise or enlightened in the sight of God. According to Scripture, all unbelievers are intellectually defective and blind. Since God's thoughts and perception constitutes objective reality, it is also true that what he thinks concerning them is the way they really are. Therefore, from a biblical perspective, all non-Christians are objectively foolish and wicked.

One who has been influenced by a secular worldview may resist such a low estimation of humanity as it is in opposition to God, but the apostle Paul clearly asserts that those who reject biblical theism are ones who "suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Romans 1:18). Their "thinking" are said to be "futile," and their "foolish hearts" have been "darkened" (v. 21). Although they imagine themselves to be wise, they are fools (v. 22). These are "without excuse" (v. 20), and the wrath of God is "revealed from heaven against all [their] godlessness and wickedness" (v. 18).

Some Christian scholars attempt to soften the biblical language regarding this matter, saying that the unbelievers' minds are defective only in the moral sense. Although they are mentally intelligent, their evil dispositions compel them to draw false conclusions from the premises. However, the Scripture in numerous places affirms that non-Christians are defective in terms of both their intelligence and morality, and that the situation may only be rectified by the power of God in regeneration. And so Jesus teaches, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3).

Even though many unbelievers may seem to be intelligent in certain areas of thought, we must affirm that all non-Christians affirm worldviews that even a thoughtful infant should know better than to embrace. One task of the Christian apologist is to expose the absurdity and contradictions inherent in all non-Christian religions and worldviews, that

their systems of thought crumble under the weight of their own non-Christian presuppositions.

Since Paul is here describing the nature of spiritual blindness toward the gospel message in particular, it follows that the gospel message itself is intellectual in nature, as opposed to being mystical, experiential, supra-rational, or sub-rational. The gospel is communicated through intelligible statements, forming a coherent presentation of God's redemptive work through Christ. It is directed to the mind, and since its rejection is intellectual in nature, its acceptance also occurs in the mind.

True spiritual enlightenment involves an enhancement of the intellect or increase in understanding. Paul says to the elect that God has "lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding" (Ephesians 1:8). The part of man that is affected is the part that is in God's image, namely, his rational mind. Colossians 3:10 says that the "new self...is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."

The information with which the mind is enlightened must also be true and accurate. Embracing false doctrines with the mind is not enlightenment, but spiritual deception. Therefore, we must guard against the notion that God is pleased with an inaccurate but sincere preaching event. He may use what truth there is in our message to convert some, but if so, the success is granted in spite our preaching and not because of or through it.

Additionally, if spiritual enlightenment is intellectual in nature, it necessarily follows that the information with which the mind is enlightened is propositional in form; otherwise, the said information would be meaningless. This runs contrary to those who say that spiritual knowledge or enlightenment may come through experience, mystical or otherwise. If spiritual enlightenment is intellectual in nature, the information with which it is enlightened must be in a form that the mind may define and grasp.

An experience, by itself, can offer no such information. Any experience is subject to interpretation to begin with, and it is unavoidable that one interprets an experience using the presuppositions and categories already present in his mind. Therefore, not everyone interprets an experience the same way. If this is the case, what is the experience meant to convey?

In any case, once a person derives meaning from such an experience, this knowledge becomes propositional in form. To avoid this, one must not interpret the experience at all, in which case it will remain without meaning, failing to convey whatever information that may enlighten. Therefore, even if we were to accept that an experience may bring spiritual enlightenment, it is only true to the extent that one may derive true information from it that is reducible to propositional form.

In summary, to say that spiritual blindness and enlightenment are intellectual in nature means that our gospel preaching must be intelligible in presentation, cogent in argumentation, coherent in organization, and accurate in formulation. Our preaching must consist of true propositions arranged in a coherent form, presented in an unambiguous

manner that is intelligible to the mind. Preaching, whether for the purpose of evangelization or edification, cannot be replaced by experiences, prayer, music, fellowship, or rituals.

**The Christological Message.** While 2 Corinthians 4:4 shows that the gospel is intellectual in nature and therefore directed to the mind, verses 5 and 6 add that the content of the gospel message is christological: "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake...to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

From the above discussion, we understand that the "knowledge" mentioned in verse 6 is not some mystical or otherwise non-intellectual apprehension of truth; rather, it is an intellectual grasp of and assent to the gospel message. And such a knowledge, being intellectual, must also be propositional in form.

The "light" of this knowledge of "the glory of God" is found "in the face of Christ." As will be given additional emphasis in what follows, the source of spiritual enlightenment and knowledge is God, but he only grants such through Jesus Christ. As Jesus himself says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

There are not many ways to God – there is only one way, and Jesus calls himself "the way." Truth is not relative or changing – there is only one eternal being who is truth, and Jesus, whom the New Testament writers identify as the *logos*, or the eternal unchanging principle of order in the universe (John 1:1; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:1-3, 13:8), calls himself "the truth." This being so, only Jesus Christ is "the life," while all other options lead to everlasting death and torment. "No one," not a single human being, "comes to the Father except through me," Jesus says. No one can reject Jesus Christ who at the same time finds God and life. Apart from Christ, there is ultimately only despair, death, and damnation.

In another place, Jesus declares, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters" (Matthew 12:30). Not only are all anti-christological ideas to be rejected, but even non-christological ones, or messages that are void of christological content or implications, are to be likewise condemned. This is because what appears to be merely non-christological is in fact anti-christological.

Paul writes that we are to "demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and...take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." (2 Corinthians 10:5). Of course, not every statement that one makes must explicitly mention Christ. However, it remains that every statement, or even thought, that does not implicitly acknowledge the ultimate authority of Christ must be forcibly brought into subjection to him.

The divine power to accomplish this is not manifested through physical violence, since "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have

divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:4). Rather, we triumph over competing religions and worldviews through rational argumentation, founded wholly on biblical theism, and energized by the Holy Spirit.

Regarding Paul's missionary work to the Thessalonians, Luke writes, "As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures" (Acts 17:2), and later at Corinth, "Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks" (Acts 18:4). Similarly, Apollos "vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:28). An intellectual and christological message is also an invincible message.

Any message that is not christological in the biblical sense is in the final analysis anti-Christian in nature. To be christological in the biblical sense means that one is not to preach merely an abstract concept of "Christ" as an example of morality or mystical enlightenment. The complete and unadulterated Christ must be represented or implicitly acknowledged in the message presented. This includes Christ's pre-existence and deity, virgin birth, incarnation and humanity, earthly life and ministry, atonement through his substitutionary suffering and death, his physical resurrection, and the expectation of his future literal return as the judge of all.

The Christ of Scripture is God manifested in human flesh. He is fully God and fully man. The apostle John testifies, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). And he warns in 1 John 4:2-3: "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world."

The true Christ is the historical Jesus of Nazareth. The apostle Paul gives us a summary of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, placing great emphasis on the historical nature of Christ's redemptive work: "Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."

As Paul says, a clear conception and faith in the historical Jesus and his work of redemption is of "first importance." The apostle emphatically states that it is "by this gospel you are saved," and if we fail to "hold firmly" to it, then "you have believed in vain." The biblical Christ is not a mystical or ideological Christ, but the second person of

the Triune God manifested in time and space. His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension were physical events, and not symbolic or mythological ones, although more occurred than what is apparent only from the physical point of view.

As Jesus Christ ascended into heaven, the angels said to his disciples, "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). It is the same Jesus Christ of Nazareth who will return, and he will return "in the same way." Peter says, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16).

I am zealous to help Christians understand the historical nature of our christological message because in our day, there is a resurgence of false doctrines and false messiahs in which Christ is presented as little more than an ideological symbol or moral example. But as we have noted above, any message that is not christological in the biblical and historical sense is of the antichrist, and one believes in such a message "in vain." A symbolic Christ, rendered as nothing more than an idea and robbed of his redemptive work performed in history, cannot save anyone. The object of faith in such a distorted message is not the biblical Christ at all.

A christological message is also necessarily a christocentric one. That is, the content of one's preaching must uphold the supremacy of Christ, instead of making oneself the latest revelation from God to mankind, as is the case in a number of false religions. Paul writes, "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4:5). But some had declared themselves the latest prophets from God, even ones who superseded the authority of Christ or carried the mandate in adding to the Christian revelation.

Of course, others subsequently arose and declared the previous ones to be obsolete, and that they were now the authoritative voice of God to humanity, that they were the truly enlightened ones, although some of those who went before had already claimed to be the final prophets. The student of apologetics or comparative religion should honor Christ by examining the historical, philosophical, scientific, and theological errors and contradictions within these false systems of thought, and thoroughly cripple their claims to truth. Several religions come to mind whose core beliefs are easily demonstrated to be self-referentially incoherent – these include Islam, Mormonism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Baha'ism.

Again, 2 Corinthians 4:5 says, "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." The true gospel declares, not the authority of the one who preaches, but the supremacy of Christ – that is, Jesus Christ "as Lord." Although it is beside our present purpose to perform a critical analysis of various religions and worldviews, we should briefly state the Christian position on the issue of world religions and "prophets" who claim to be God's present revelation, who preach themselves rather than instructing people to trust in Christ.

Paul says, "My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge...For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him" (Colossians 2:2-3, 1:19). In Christ, "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Of course, this has to be true if Jesus is the omniscient God. Christ possesses all wisdom and knowledge, and he "has become for us wisdom from God" (1 Corinthians 1:30).

No previous prophet could claim to have possessed "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" or to be the incarnation of God. As Hebrews 1:1-3 says, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven."

In the past, God spoke through the prophets, but now he had spoken through his Son, in whom are "hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." He is also the one who has created and even now sustains the universe. Therefore, the biblical Christ has complete and superior knowledge of all things.

It is important that we understand what is being said here so that we may perceive what implications necessarily follow. If all (not just some) wisdom and knowledge are in Christ, then unlike the prophets who went before him, he was the full and final revelation of God to mankind. It was Christ that these ancient messengers of God prophesied about in the first place (Luke 24:44; John 5:39) – that is, their message was christological in content and christocentric in focus. And if Christ is the complete expression of God (Hebrews 1:3), then there is nothing else that anyone after him may reveal that is not already in Christ.

This being so, there is no one after Christ who can rightly claim to be his equal or superior, nor may anyone offer revelations that contradict, update, or supersede the Christian revelation as recorded in Scripture – at least no one may do so until having first refuted Christianity. But in this respect, it is strange that many of these prophets who claim to supersede Christ would at the same time honor him as a true prophet of God.

However, this person whom they acknowledge to be from God also said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Jesus was the perfect and complete revelation of God since he was God himself. How, then, can there ever be a greater or more current and relevant messenger or revelation?

If one admits that Christianity is true, then he must also confess that all other religions and worldviews are false; otherwise, he would not be really admitting that Christianity is true, since exclusivity is integral to its system of thought. If he then claims that Christianity is false, then it generates a collision of worldviews, which gives the informed

Christian the opportunity to totally annihilate his opponent's beliefs and to make him a public example.

There is no way around it – either one believes Christianity is true or false. If true, then all other religions and worldviews are false; if challenged to be false, then the opponent must defeat us in the battlefield of rational argumentation. Any claim saying that Christianity is only partially true should be received by the believer as a challenge tantamount to saying that Christianity is false, since the claim of our system is that it is wholly true in every aspect and detail. In Christ is all wisdom and knowledge.

It is a cowardly compromise to say that there is some truth in every religion, and therefore one should not hold to one's own to the total exclusion of others, and that one should always respect another's religion. That even some Christians have been deceived into thinking that this is a legitimate option reflects their feeble commitment to Christ, as well as the lack of strong biblical preaching offered by their church leaders.

If a religious worldview is a revelation from God, then no aspect of the system may be false or irrelevant. God cannot reveal falsehood, but even if he does, it would be impossible for one to distinguish the true from the false. If a given worldview consists of both true and false propositions, one will not be able to identify the true from the false on the basis of that worldview itself. If one is indeed able to distinguish the true from the false, this only implies that, prior to examining the one in question, he has already presupposed a worldview that he knows or assumes to be wholly correct, and by which he is now evaluating the one presented before him.

If such is the case, he would not be learning anything from the worldview under scrutiny, since he has already adopted one that he assumes to be true in its entirety. But if the worldview he has assumed is not entirely true, then once again we have the epistemological problem of identifying the true from the false.

For example, one who tests a truth-claim with the "scientific method" presupposes a worldview in which such a method for testing truth-claims is assumed to be reliable. However, if the worldview based on which he makes this assumption is not wholly true, then how does he know whether the scientific method is reliable in the first place? Therefore, a worldview that is only partially true is also a worthless one. It logically collapses into total skepticism regarding reality, with no knowledge being attainable at all.

The Christian claim is that all of the Bible is true, and if Christ has all wisdom and knowledge, then if there is anything true at all in other religions, it can only mean that they have learned (or stolen) the information from Christianity without acknowledging its source. This makes them plagiarists and hypocrites from a human perspective, but from God's perspective, their guilt is greatly magnified. The apostle Paul writes, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them...For although they knew God, they

neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools" (Romans 1:18-19, 21-22).

Paul refers to people who received knowledge from God, yet refused to acknowledge him. They neither glorified the one who has given them this true knowledge as God, nor did they give him thanks. Rather, they credited their knowledge to another source, and worshipped the latter as their God. "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator..." (Romans 1:25).

To say that non-Christian religions possess some truth, then, only serves to utterly condemn them, and does not lend support to their credibility or usefulness at all. The recognition that false religions nevertheless have something true to say does not imply that we must respect them, but it only means that we have caught them "red-handed" in their crime of spiritual robbery against God. They have received from God, and yet they deny him.

They have set up what amounts to their "golden calves" and declare loudly to their shame, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (Exodus 32:4)! However, God has said, "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols" (Isaiah 42:8). Rather than giving the glory due to the God of the Christian Bible, they suppress their knowledge of this true God, and give glory to idols instead. Therefore, adherents to non-Christian religions are "without excuse" (Romans 1:20).

God "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). Not all who bask in the sun's warmth and light are good, and not all who receive rain are righteous. An idol worshipper does not receive rain from his idol, but from the Christian God – the problem is that he fails to give glory to whom glory is due. Although God has given him sufficient knowledge concerning himself so as to render true worship possible, the latter suppresses the truth through wickedness (Romans 1:18), and chooses to honor an idol instead (Romans 1:21).

If Christ possesses all wisdom and knowledge, then the fact that any non-Christian can know  $1 + 1 = 2$  means that Christ, who is "the true light that gives light to every man" (John 1:9), has given him this knowledge. This knowledge does not originate or reside in his non-Christian worldview, but is rather an integral part of the Christian system. If he does not then proceed to give thanks to the Christian God, then he is committing spiritual and intellectual robbery in failing to give credit to whom credit is due. On the other hand, Christians receive knowledge freely from the one they worship: "It is because of [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God" (1 Corinthians 1:30). Since Christ has a monopoly on truth, any person who knows anything at all owes his knowledge to him, and a failure to worship him and give him thanks is a sin deserving the ultimate punishment.

It also follows, therefore, that it is sinful for Christians to say that they can learn truths from other religions. Suppose that another religion has within it a piece of true information about God. From our premise that Christ is the possessor of all wisdom and knowledge, this piece of information must necessarily be a "Christian" truth, and therefore is also a part of the Christian revelation. How foolish it would be then, for one to learn a Christian truth from a non-Christian source, and one that offers it in the context of a mixture of truths and falsehoods?

And to revisit an aforementioned issue, if a religious system is only partially true but not entirely true, how will one distinguish the true from the false? Christians who say that other religions contain some truths are able to recognize these truths for what they are precisely because they have already learned them from the Christian worldview; otherwise, there is no way to tell the true from the false.

Suppose a given system of thought includes the following propositions: (1) X is a man, and (2) X is an accountant. If, in reality, (1) is true but (2) is false, how will one know to affirm (1) and deny (2), unless he is already acquainted with X? Unless the system is true (or false) in its entirety, there is no way to tell which proposition is true without bringing in knowledge gained from outside of the system, in which case the system in question would be evaluated by the system from which one has obtained the said knowledge. And if one has already obtained this knowledge from another system of thought, how is he learning from this second system? He is judging it, not learning from it.

There is nothing to learn from a religious system that is not wholly true. One can only learn from a system of thought if it is true in its entirety, and then one may use the knowledge acquired to evaluate another system that is not wholly true, but not to learn from it. To extend the status of having "some truth" to another religion is therefore to condemn it as unfit for belief or adoption, and not to praise or honor it at all.

It is impossible that any non-Christian religion teach any true information that is not already explicitly stated or implicitly assumed in the Christian worldview. There is nothing true that any non-Christian religion may teach that is not already part of the Christian system. To say otherwise would be to deny our basic premise that all wisdom and knowledge are in Christ, in which case we may question whether the one making the denial is a Christian in the first place. If not, then once again there arises an opportunity for confrontation of worldviews, where the informed Christian is guaranteed victory.

I conclude that there is nothing, therefore, that Christians may learn from non-Christians that is not already included or implied in the Christian worldview, only that the Bible reveals these truths without impurity or mixture, and in a way that is comprehensive and coherent. For me to say that other religions have "some truth" is to insult them – I am implying that their prophets are wicked thieves, certainly not worthy of anyone's trust and respect.

Paul says, "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians

3:10). God intends for the church to glorify him by manifesting his wisdom in the context of the proclamation of an exclusively christological message. He certainly does not intend for the church to praise non-Christian religions for the wisdom and knowledge that they have stolen from us, and still less for the church to acknowledge even the falsehoods in other religions as truths.

We have given emphasis in this part of our discussion to non-Christian religions, but the same criticisms apply to worldviews that claim to be non-religious in nature. For example, Christians can learn nothing from the atheistic worldview unless atheism is true in its entirety. The atheist can know nothing at all if not for Christ the *logos*, who gives light to every man.

To prevent misunderstanding, let me clarify one point before proceeding. My claim is not that a Christian can learn nothing from the non-Christian, but that there is nothing in the non-Christian worldview that can offer any truth to the Christian that is not already in the Christian worldview.

For example, a Christian may obtain a drink of water from an atheist, who had it to offer through collecting rain. But the source of rain does not come from, and cannot ultimately be explained by, anything inherent in the atheist's worldview; rather, rain comes from the Christian God. The difference is that the Christian gives thanks to God for the water, but the atheist does not – and in failing to acknowledge the true God who is the ultimate source of rain, the atheist sins and commits his soul to damnation.

Likewise, a Christian may learn that  $1 + 1 = 2$  from an atheist, but this piece of information belongs to Christ, who has all wisdom and knowledge. The atheist is simply teaching the Christian something that is inherent in the Christian's worldview, which he has learned from Christ the *logos* without giving due thanks to him. The Christian, on the other hand, should acknowledge that all knowledge belongs to Christ, and be grateful to God for having obtained this new piece of information.

To put the matter in terms of propositions, all true propositions are in fact Christian propositions – they are the property of Christ – and therefore are much more appropriately and accurately expressed within the context of the Christian worldview. Thus, to say that Christians may in fact learn true knowledge from non-Christians, such as  $1 + 1 = 2$ , does not mean that it is desirable to do so, since some degree of distortion and limitation inevitably result due to the non-Christian presuppositions of the one who teaches.

For example, in a non-Christian worldview, one cannot even give an explanation as to why a certain number must mean the same thing from day to day. But from the basis of Christian theism, we understand that the universe has been created and is even now being sustained by a being whose eternal, rational, and omniscient mind gives meaning and stability to the laws of thought and logic. The number "2" (not the symbol, but the concept that it represents) will mean the same thing tomorrow as it does today not

because of human convention, but because it remains the same in the mind of God, while we pattern our thoughts after him as those made in his image.

No non-Christian worldview, including the religious ones, can give a more satisfying answer to this question (although they will try), since we have established that, any worldview must be wholly true in order to be meaningful and relevant. A religion who posits a "God" that holds the meanings of numbers constant, but cannot defend the other claims integral to its worldview, ultimately collapses into epistemological skepticism, since there is no way to tell the true from the false. We would not know which beliefs within a given worldview is true or false if even one of them is false.

Even knowledge that is seemingly non-religious in nature, such as information regarding astronomy and economics, is best expressed and taught within an explicitly Christian context. For example, if it is an objective fact that God is the ruler and planner of history, then a textbook on Western civilizations that fails to mention divine providence is not good history at all, since it neglects the very defining factor of historical events and progress. Similar things may be said concerning physics, literature, music, and even sports.

If God exists, and that in the form set forth by the Christian Scripture, then no area of human thought can afford to ignore him. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1) is a superior explanation to the universe's existence than any sophisticated system of cosmology that fails to acknowledge him as the first and sustaining cause of all that exists (Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3).

One who insists on reasoning independently from God must first refute the challenge presented by the Christian worldview. Ultimately, reasoning does not even make sense without first assuming the Christian worldview, in which all things have been created and are now sustained by the divine *logos*, Jesus Christ. Reasoning cannot even be intelligible without the existence of an eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and rational mind, from whom we, made in the image of God and thus patterned after his mind, have received the laws of logic and grammar.

The Christian revelation is not only one option among many. The message of salvation is either exclusively christological, and that only in the biblical sense and with a historical basis, or it is no gospel at all. Unless a system of thought is christocentric, with the historical and divine Jesus Christ of Nazareth as the object of faith and worship, it has no power to save – not the one who hears it, nor the one who preaches it. On the other hand, Paul writes, "the holy Scriptures...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15). There is salvation only in the biblical, and therefore christological, gospel.

Jesus himself warns that "false Christs and false prophets will appear..." (Matthew 24:24), and Peter adds that these false prophets and teachers will "introduce destructive heresies..." (2 Peter 2:1). John plainly states that, "Dear friends, do not believe every

spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

Sometimes unbelievers perceive the exclusive stance of Christians as indicating a lack of love toward fellow human beings, but the Bible teaches that true love "does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth" (1 Corinthians 13:6). We are under no obligation to allow the non-Christian to define the meaning of divine love for us.

Christians do not welcome the ideas and beliefs of non-Christians not because we are, as the intellectual coward who cannot resist biblical theism on rational grounds says, narrow-minded, hateful, or bigoted. But we reject all non-Christian worldviews, religious or otherwise, because they are demonstrably false. An "openness" that would accept the lie just as quickly as it assents to the truth is an indication of a foolish, depraved, and twisted mind – not a sign of intellectual acuity or moral progress.

This being so, let us take seriously the apostolic declaration: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!" (Galatians 1:8-9). Amen. Let anyone who advocates a religion or worldview contrary to the Christian revelation be eternally condemned.

My emphasis on the exclusive nature of Christianity is not intended to offend, although I am aware that even professing Christians may stumble over it. I insist that Christianity has a monopoly on truth, and that all non-Christian worldviews are false, because this belief is an integral part of the Christian system, and therefore may not be arbitrarily suppressed without doing damage to the credibility of the entire worldview.

However, as a Christian I do not wish to suppress the exclusive nature of my faith in the first place; rather, I glory in it. One who finds the Christian's claim of exclusivity repugnant should deal with it as a matter of truth or factual claim. The matter is not whether one finds the claim emotionally satisfying, although I do, but whether it is objectively true that Christ, and therefore Christianity, is the sole possessor of truth, and that any truths in other worldviews are nothing more than stolen goods.

That said, it is integral to our faith that Christianity is the only worldview revealed by the one true God, and that all claims to revelation from God in other religions are false. No name-calling against the Christian, saying that he is advocating hate and bigotry, can change the truth of this claim. Anyone who denies the Christian's claim to exclusivity must be ready to confront the Christian worldview with his own.

If Christianity dares to declare itself as having a monopoly on truth and expect others to comply, then it is only right that it should demonstrate its superiority when assaulted by other worldviews. However, it would be intellectually dishonest and morally despicable for the non-Christian to remain resistant to the Christian worldview, including its claim to exclusivity, after the Christian has triumphed in argumentation.

In connection to this, the church may certainly be criticized for not providing believers with better training in the task of apologetics, so that many of them have even succumbed to the unbeliever's cowardly appeal to "tolerance," and thus have ceased to confront the false religions and worldviews embraced by the latter. Although Christians are to be courteous toward unbelievers on a social level, those who are sympathetic to non-Christians on a theological or ideological level commit treason against Christ and his kingdom.

Colossians 2:9-10 says, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority." If "all the fullness of Deity" is in Jesus Christ, no subsequent prophet can be greater than him – there is nothing left to be revealed by another prophet that is not already in Christ – and those who claim to do so must be false prophets. Christ is "the head over every power and authority," and no one who comes after him may supersede him. If we "have been given fullness in Christ," who in turn has "all the fullness of the Deity," then there is nothing to learn from non-Christian religions and worldviews.

If Christ is not merely a messenger or manifestation of God, but God himself, no prophet may alter, update, contradict, or add to the Christian revelation. Those who do are impostors and liars. One may think that this type of language is surely too harsh and unkind. But dear reader! If you think this way, you should try reading the Bible some time! Unbelievers are described as brutes, vipers, dogs, pigs, fools, hypocrites, whitewashed tombs, and sons of the devil.

We do not use harsh words out of bitterness, anger, or discourtesy, but as an attempt to give adequate descriptions of the stupidity and depravity of unbelief that accurately reflect biblical teaching. Nor are we asserting that non-Christians must remain as they are. Those of us who are saved "also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3). However, "because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved" (v. 4-5). We do not gloat and triumph over the failures of non-Christians because of some superior qualities inherent in ourselves, but "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:31). And even now, we can do nothing apart from Christ (John 15:5).

Christians who have professed faith in Christ should understand to whom and what they have committed themselves. Those who call themselves Christians who at the same time experience great difficulty with the biblical claims to exclusivity should examine themselves to see if they in fact belong to Christ (2 Corinthians 13:5), or whether they had greatly misunderstood the gospel message, and therefore experienced false conversions.

If they understand the true nature of Christianity as an exclusive worldview, yet deny the supremacy and exclusive authority of Christ, and therefore the Christian faith, then by

what definition are they genuine Christians? In what sense can a person be a Christian who at the same time declares that Christ may be only one option among many, and that his own claims to exclusive authority and truth are mistaken (Matthew 28:18; John 14:6)?

We must press the unbelievers to provide justifications for what they believe, besides providing them with answers to the questions and accusations that they have against the Christian faith. But no less urgently, we must confront the indecisive Christians within the church, so that they must choose once for all whom they will serve (Joshua 24:15), and cease being double-minded, or "between two opinions" (1 Kings 18:21). If Christianity is true, then all non-Christian religions and worldviews are false and fraudulent; if any other religion or worldview is true, then Christianity cannot at the same time be true.

Many believers readily condemn stealing, adultery, and murder, with their stance seemingly immovable and not subject to compromise. However, they would at the same time encourage non-confrontational dialogues with non-Christian religions in a way that betrays an attitude of viewing idolatry as not being as serious of a sin as the others.

Is murder a greater sin than worshipping false gods? Jesus says that "the first and greatest commandment" is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37-38), while the love of our fellow human beings is designated as the second commandment (v. 39). Yet, it seems that most Christians react to theft and murder much more strongly than the worship of false gods.

Our society approaches various sins in different ways. While we arrest those who steal and murder, we do not arrest people for not being Christians. Whether civil law is correct in this respect or not, this is not our point. My concern is how serious a sin do Christians consider false worship to be, and whether the first four of the Ten Commandments may be ignored while we must adhere to the rest. I am convinced that the attitude of most Christians toward the sin of false worship fails to reflect the Scripture's extreme denunciation against it. And to the extent that our thoughts disagree with God's, we make him out to be a liar, and sin against him.

We must call upon Christians to make up their minds, that if they profess Jesus Christ as Lord, to have them give up their idolatrous and syncretistic mindset permanently, and to maintain that the knowledge of salvation is found in the Scripture alone, that God's redemptive work is appropriated through Christ alone, and that it is applied to the individual by faith alone.

One who rejects Christianity's exclusivity is already practicing exclusivity in saying that it is exclusively true that no religion may make exclusive claims. All exclusive religions are to be excluded from acceptance. The appeal to tolerance or to be inclusive in our theology is often an excuse to avoid dealing with the numerous and irreconcilable contradictions between worldviews. The non-Christian should stop being an intellectual coward, face reality, and admit that due to these contradictory claims, not every worldview can be true.

And what gives them the right to be intolerant of our exclusive claims? If they are truly tolerant, why do they not endure our attacks without fighting back? But unbelievers do fight back, and attack Christianity with a vengeance, although strangely do not attack the easy targets such as Buddhism, Mormonism, and Baha'ism nearly as often, if at all. The irony, showing their hypocrisy, is that these religions also make strong exclusive claims. Is it a case of ignorance in the study comparative religion, or is it a case of selective prejudice amounting to a global spiritual conspiracy with Satan behind it?

Why do unbelievers focus their efforts on attacking Christianity? A number of things may go on in their twisted and depraved minds, but there are two obvious possibilities. First, only the Christian worldview poses a threat to them from the intellectual point of view. Second, in reality there are only two sides – Christians and non-Christians; those who reject the Christian faith – whether they are atheists, Buddhists, or Mormons – are all on the same side. It is ultimately a case of truth versus a variety of falsehoods, and not a number of worthy worldviews competing for dominance.

Appeals to theological and ideological tolerance often betrays a "Please don't hurt me" mentality, amounting to a tacit admission of one's own intellectual incompetence, that one simply cannot contend with the Christian in the battlefield of ideas. There are those who say that intolerance of others' ideas is a result of ignorance, but this should once again sound like a desperate plea from them to spare their beliefs from annihilation by the Christian.

The truth is that even these individuals reject certain claims as false based on what they claim to know, and not what they do not know. For example, they reject the idea that the earth is flat from the knowledge that they claim to have. Therefore, it is shown even by their own practice, that intolerance of others' beliefs is in fact a result of a claim to knowledge, while tolerance is a mark of ignorance – if you do not know what is true or false, you have no basis from which to reject anything.

Intolerance on an ideological level comes from the knowledge that the existing worldviews make contradictory claims. I am, lest it is not already obvious enough for some, not referring to political or social tolerance, but intellectual tolerance – especially regarding, but not limited to, religious claims. It is this latter type of tolerance that implies ignorance, indecision, and cowardice.

If, however, the unbeliever challenges the Christian's claim to knowledge, that what the Christian claims to know is in fact false, then once again there is a clash of worldviews and truth-claims – but this is why I insist that we must be allowed to challenge, and so to destroy, other people's claims to truth that cannot stand the test!

Falsehood should never be tolerated, but rather be utterly destroyed – nevertheless not through physical violence, but by rational dialogue and argumentation, which in fact may often require one to be intellectually ruthless. Those who are courageous and honest should allow various worldviews to clash in public and private debate, and decide

beforehand that those who cannot withstand intense scrutiny should be abandoned as false. Christianity will be the only one left standing when the dust settles.

**The Revelational Message.** Besides its implication for christological preaching, 2 Corinthians 4:6 also sets forth the revelational nature of the gospel message: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

The verse contains an allusion to the Genesis creation account that carries an important implication for our present discussion on the subject of spiritual enlightenment and the nature of the gospel message. Namely, emphasis is given to God's initiative in creation and the power of his sovereign decrees: "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Genesis 1:2-3). Of course, Paul is not saying that the conversion of a sinner results from God's decree in creating physical light, or that he performs the two acts in exactly the same way; rather, he alludes to the Genesis account as an appropriate analogy.

We have already made clear that the darkness of the sinner, among other things (Romans 13:12; Ephesians 5:11), is intellectual in nature – that is, the sinner's rejection of the gospel is due to the blindness of his mind. Ephesians 4:18 explains, "They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts."

Therefore, the "light" with which God breaks through the darkness of the sinner is also intellectual in nature. 2 Corinthians 4:6 itself indicates that this light is the light of "the knowledge" of the glory of God. This usage of "light" to mean intellectual understanding is not unique to this passage. For example, the parallel structure of Psalm 119:130 equates "light" to "understanding": "The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple." The work of Christ is described as one that grants his people "the knowledge of salvation" (Luke 1:77).

To say that an intellectual transformation is an essential ingredient in regeneration and conversion is repugnant to anti-intellectuals, both in and outside of the church. But this is the testimony of Scripture. Unbelievers are intellectually blind and defective; their minds are filled with darkness. Regeneration and conversion occur when God causes the light of the gospel to break into their impoverished souls, to give them "understanding, so that we may know him who is true" (1 John 5:20).

Paul's allusion to the Genesis creation account also implies that the blindness of the unbeliever is removed, and so that the light of the knowledge of God might shine brightly in his mind, solely due to God's choice and initiative, and not that of the sinner's. The unbeliever, being blind to the light of the gospel to begin with, will not and cannot simply decide to receive the gospel. If he is able to do so, he would not be blind in the first place.

2 Corinthians 4:3-4 says, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." The gospel is "veiled" to those who are perishing, since their minds have been blinded. To dispel this darkness of mind, God causes light to shine in their souls, not unlike what he did when he said, "Let light shine out of darkness" at the time of creation (v. 6).

It is God, and not the sinner, who causes this to happen. It cannot even be done at the sinner's request, since being blinded, he would not make such a request in the first place. And so Paul writes, "there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God" (Romans 3:11). There is no one who seeks God who has not been first "apprehended" (Phillippians 3:12; KJV) by God solely due to his divine will and pleasure.

Therefore, the decision of the sinner to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ begins as a monergistic work of God – solely due to God's decision and initiative, and not the will or desire of the person. Regeneration comes not by man's will or works (Romans 9:16), but by God's will and mercy alone (Romans 9:15; John 1:12-13). We love God and man only "because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Although this has been the Bible's teaching all along, the ancient sinful desire of man for autonomy (Genesis 3:1-7) cannot help but also affect his theology. Thus, much of contemporary Christianity puts great emphasis upon man's "free will," something that is non-existent from the biblical perspective. The will of man exists as a function of the mind, but it is not free in the sense of being autonomous, or not subject to any influences apart from the man. It may seem that one chooses according to his dispositions and propensities, but even these have not been freely chosen by the man himself.

God possesses unrestrained liberty to direct man's thoughts, desires, and choices: "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases" (Proverbs 21:1); "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phillippians 2:13). This is a controversial topic, not because the biblical teaching is obscure, but mainly due to man's ferocious desire for intellectual and behavioral independence – the seed of rebellion implanted in him by the "ancient serpent" (Revelation 19:2).

Non-Christians would like to think that they have control over their own lives, but informed Christians realize that only God has control, and those who love God would not have it any other way. As Jeremiah says, "I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps" (Jeremiah 10:23; also Luke 12:19-20, James 4:13-15). Since I have written about the subject elsewhere, I will proceed to examine specifically the role of God's revelation in conversion, as well as in constructing the Christian system of thought.

The Bible teaches that it is God who decides to whom he will give enlightenment, or the "light" of the knowledge of Christ, so that they may be converted: "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in

parables, in order that while seeing, they may see and not perceive; and while hearing, they may hear and not understand lest they return and be forgiven" (Mark 4:11-12; NASB); "He has blinded their eyes, and He hardened their heart; lest they see with their eyes, and perceive with their heart, and be converted, and I heal them" (John 12:40; NASB); "At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure'" (Luke 10:21).

Jesus, having said to Nicodemus, "You must be born again" (John 3:7), continues to explain, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (v. 8). It is God who decides on who will undergo regeneration, and not the individuals themselves, just as "the wind blows wherever it pleases," and is not subject to our control.

We understand from our earlier discussion, that the gospel message is exclusively christological, and that "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Jesus is the only way to God, but at the same time, Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws [literally, compels or drags] him" (John 6:44). Without the prior regenerating work of God, a person's mind remains in darkness, and he will never come to Christ on his own.

By saying that the gospel message is revelational, part of what is meant is that it is God who initiates a person's faith in Christ, and not his own will or desire. No preacher can cause the light of the gospel to break through the hearer's darkness of mind – it must be a creative and sovereign work of God. In this sense, then, true spiritual enlightenment and the operation of gospel preaching is revelational. There is an example of this in the life of Peter, who upon making the confession to Jesus saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," receives Christ's response as saying, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:16-17).

Indeed, man has no ability to turn the darkness of mind within another person into light. Nevertheless, God uses means through which he brings his light to those whom he has chosen to receive it, and thus Christians are commanded to "preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15), and the apostle Paul's ministry is described as one that opens the Gentiles' eyes and turns them "from darkness to light" (Acts 26:18). The power to do so, of course, "is from God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Romans 9:18).

The Christian, therefore, does not reach spiritual enlightenment through ascetic lifestyles, prescribed prayers, prolonged meditation, chanting meaningless syllables, performing ridiculous ceremonies, or other strange and foolish means. The foundation of the Christian life is not self-effort; rather, it begins when one who is totally helpless

regarding spiritual things is rescued by God. How humbling and yet exciting! "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6)!

Salvation is "the gift of God...not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). We recognize that we have been saved solely due to God's mercy, and not because of anything good inherent in us. All that is good in us, we have received from God (1 Corinthians 4:7), and there is no place for boasting. The Christian life is one characterized by an "ever-increasing glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18) since God is without limits, while other systems are crippled by the limitations and failures of the adherents' merits or lack thereof, leading from despair, to death, and to damnation. On the other hand, the Christian's glory is that which "comes from the Lord" (v. 18), and will last forever (v. 11).

Just as only God can overcome the initial physical darkness through his creative power, only he can give true enlightenment to a person through his sovereign decree. All attempts by people to reach God amount to a rebellious effort to construct a spiritual and intellectual Babel. "Let us unite and build an edifice tall and strong enough to reach the heavens!" But God has "made foolish the wisdom of the world" (1 Corinthians 1:20). They are ignorant of the fact that, in digging the foundation of self-effort on which to construct their building of spiritual enlightenment, they are in reality digging their own graves. All of their "righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6), for apart from the Christian revelation, there is no salvation, no righteousness, no hope, and no future.

If even Christians can do nothing apart from Christ (John 15:5), non-Christians are insignificant "nobodies," living futile and meaningless lives. Once again, we are simply using language and concepts adopted from the Bible or necessarily implied by it to describe the condition of the unbeliever (see Ecclesiastes). It is time that believers begin seeing things this way, and realize how great a salvation (Hebrews 2:3) the Lord Jesus Christ has purchased for us with his own blood, and thus give thanks! The difference between the Christian and the non-Christian is not trivial, but is as great as the gap between light and darkness, Christ and Belial, and the temple of God and idols (2 Corinthians 6:14-16).

That the Christian worldview is revelational in source also means that this system of thought is not constructed upon man's empty speculation or his deductions from false first principles; rather, the entire worldview of biblical theism has its origin from God's verbal communication to mankind as recorded in the Bible.

The apostle Paul solemnly warns, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Colossians 2:8). A "philosophy," or worldview, that depends on mere tradition and convention or the presuppositions offered by this world is "hollow and deceptive." It promises much, but fails to deliver. It may appear intelligent and sophisticated on the outside, but it is empty and without substance within. It claims to be an accurate representation of reality, but instead distorts and misrepresents what is in

fact the case. It claims to provide certainty, but collapses into total epistemological skepticism under the weight of its own faulty presuppositions.

Instead of being taken captive by such a false philosophy, Paul says, our worldview should depend wholly on Christ. We ought to contemplate and interact with reality from the perspective of biblical teaching. The Christian revelation provides the only authoritative and accurate basis for a comprehensive philosophy because all the fullness of deity resides in Christ (Colossians 2:9) – he is the all-sufficient foundation for all of life and thought. Not only that, Christians "have been given fullness in Christ" (v. 10), so that we know we have access to his fullness and sufficiency. And since he is "the head over every power and authority" (v. 10), we may rest certain that no true revelation or prophet will contradict or supersede him.

**Summary and Conclusion.** The apostle Paul, in one of his letters to the Corinthians, says to them, "But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough" (2 Corinthians 11:3-4).

How relevant are these words today! As Eve was deceived by Satan, many have been "led astray from [a] sincere and pure devotion to Christ." Why were the Corinthians easily deceived? Paul says that they were willing to "put up with" a different Jesus, a different spirit, and a different gospel. In other words, they practiced "tolerance."

What we need to do, then, is to impose a zero tolerance policy against heresies and false philosophies. To continue having a "sincere and pure devotion to Christ" necessitates building our immunity against non-Christian ideas. We may show courtesy and kindness to adherents of other religions and worldviews, but intellectually speaking, we may not sympathize with anything that does not comport with the Christian Bible. In Revelation 2, Jesus praised the church in Ephesus, saying, "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false" (v. 2).

Jude says, "I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (v. 3). This faith of ours has been "once for all entrusted to the saints," and as such, it needs no updating and is not subject to revision. The biblical gospel as set forth in the Scripture allows for no subsequent revelation to supersede or even add to it. It is this faith that has been established permanently and in its fullness by Jesus Christ and his apostles that we must believe and defend.

We have learned from 2 Corinthians 4:4-6 that the gospel message is intellectual in nature, christological in content, and revelational in source. Spiritual enlightenment leading to eternal life through faith in Christ can only come through the Christian revelation. Such a gospel message is ultimately also an invincible message, with which

none other may compete or compare. The bold declaration of it by believers will be the means through which God will accomplish his purposes and plans for humanity.

May God give us the strength and determination to "speak [the] word with great boldness" (Acts 4:29), and "hold out the word of life" without compromise in the midst of this "crooked and depraved generation" (Phillippians 2:15-16). Jesus Christ, and him alone, is the light of our minds, and everyone who rejects him remains in darkness and death.

#### 4. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

A frequent objection against the existence of the Christian God has as its basis the existence of evil. Many think that what the Christian affirms about the nature of God is logically irreconcilable with the evil we daily witness. Since they know for certain that evil exists, then it follows that God does not.

More than a few Christians are silenced when confronted by the unbelievers on this issue, and they themselves are often disturbed by it as well. Some manage to provide answers that sound plausible, but are not logically compelling, while others simply attribute the existence of evil to the status of a mystery.

Unbelievers scoff at answers belonging to the latter variety, for they seem to confirm their bias against Christians, namely, that their faith in God lacks a rational foundation, and they believe blindly in what cannot be true. Of course, a failure to comprehend everything about God does not mean that he does not exist; however, if the Bible addresses this issue of the existence of evil, then it would be foolish for the Christian to ignore what it says.

My intention is to explain why the existence of evil poses no challenge to the Christian concept of God, but rather logically requires his existence. Although I am primarily interested in unraveling the logical aspect of this discussion, I will also provide some biblical data on the subject.

**Defining the Problem.** In accordance with Scripture, Christians believe that God is omnipotent (all-powerful) and omnibenevolent (all-loving). Our opposition reasons that if God is all-powerful, then he possesses the ability to terminate evil; if he is all-loving, then surely he wishes to do so. However, it is obvious that evil still exists; therefore, the God that Christians affirm cannot also exist in reality. That God is said to be omniscient (all-knowing) is at times added to the argument – if God knows everything, then he should know how evil may be destroyed. Regardless of the precise form in which the argument appears, the point is that the divine attributes affirmed by orthodox Christianity cannot coexist in the being of God.

Christian theologians and philosophers have agonized over this so-called "problem of evil" for centuries; however, the argument is not as difficult to answer as it may first seem. One reason so many have trouble addressing the existence of evil is that they have succumbed to the emotional force of the issue, rather than finding the problem overwhelming from a logical perspective. However, the unbeliever is attempting to deny the existence of God with a logical argument, and the believer only needs to show that the existence of evil does not logically contradict his notion of God. Within the context of such a debate, it is not his responsibility to answer the related emotional issues, although the Bible provides us with sufficient information to deal with them also.

**Free Will Theodicy.** One popular approach employed by Christians to answer the argument from evil is the "free will defense." In the context of biblical narratives, when God created man, he wanted to grant him free will – a power to make independent decisions, even in rebellion against his maker. Of course, God was aware that man would sin, but he had to allow for this possibility if he were to give him free will. By creating beings with free will, he has also created the potential for evil, but the actualization of this potential can be blamed only on the creatures themselves. One who uses the free will defense must also affirm that the existence of evil is not too high of a price to pay for genuine free will in human beings.

Although such an explanation for the existence of evil is popular among Christians, and may sound reasonable to a number of people, it is stricken with a number of problems, some of which are fatal to the argument as a theodicy.

First, this solution only postpones addressing the problem, in that it transforms the debate from why evil exists in God's universe to why God created a universe with the potential for such great evil. Second, since the Christian claims that God is omniscient, he did not create the universe and humankind realizing only that they had the potential to become evil; rather, he knew for certain that there would be evil. Either directly or indirectly, God created evil.

A discussion on the existence of evil may distinguish between natural and moral evil. The former includes natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, while the latter refers to the evil committed by rational creatures such as human beings. Even if the free will defense provides a satisfactory explanation for moral evil, it fails to adequately address natural evil. Christians may claim that it is moral evil that leads to natural evil; however, there may not be any necessary connections between the two unless God wills it to be so. God again appears to be responsible for the existence of evil, whether natural or moral.

Even if Adam's sin had brought death and decay, not only to mankind but also to the animals, the Bible says that not one sparrow can die without God willing it (Matthew 10:29). Even the seemingly insignificant cannot occur without, not merely the permission, but the active will and decree of God. Christians are not deists – we do not believe that this universe operates by a set of natural laws that are independent from God. The Bible shows us that God is at present actively running the universe, albeit often through natural laws. But even these natural laws cannot continue one moment in independence from God's active power (Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3).

From the Christian's perspective, the free will defense is unacceptable simply because Scripture denies its existence. It teaches that God is the only being who possesses free will. He says in Isaiah 46:10, "My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please." On the other hand, man's will is always enslaved either to sin or righteousness: "But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" (Romans 6:17-18). The first independent decision Eve

tried to make was caused by an idea placed into her mind by Satan. Free will does not exist. It is a concept assumed by many Christians without biblical warrant.

Another groundless assumption held by many is that moral ability, the ability to obey God's laws, is the prerequisite for moral responsibility. Without the ability to obey, there is no moral responsibility, nor should there be any penalty for disobedience. But in reference to the unregenerate, Paul writes, "the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Romans 8:7). Since the sinner cannot submit to God's law, then if responsibility is only imposed when there is ability to obey, it follows that every sinner is not a sinner. But this is a contradiction. The Bible calls the unbelievers sinners, yet at the same time says that they do not have the ability to obey God. This means that man is responsible to obey God's laws even if he is unable to do so. It is sin to disobey whether one has the ability to do otherwise or not. The biblical teaching is that moral responsibility is grounded on the commandments of God. Man is required to obey because God says so.

From a logical standpoint, free will is an impossible concept. If we consider the exercise of the will as a movement of the mind toward a certain direction, the question arises as to what moves the mind, and why it moves toward where it moves. To answer that the "self" moves the mind is unacceptable since the mind is the self, and this amounts to saying that the mind moves itself. Then the question becomes what makes the mind move itself.

Even if we assume that the mind can move itself, we are still left with the question of why it moves itself toward a certain direction – that is, why it chooses one option instead of another. If the cause of such a movement and the direction that it takes can be traced to factors external to the mind itself, factors that impress themselves upon the consciousness from the outside and thus influencing or determining the decision, then how is this movement of the mind free?

If the cause is traced to the person's innate propensities, then this movement of the will is likewise not free, since such in-built inclinations have not been freely chosen by the person in the first place, yet they determine the decisions that he makes.

It may well be that one's decisions are determined by a mixture of his innate propensities and external influences, but the situation remains the same. The question is, if the mind makes decisions based on factors not chosen by the mind, then such choices are never free in the sense that they can be made in independence from God. The Scripture teaches that not only may God exercise immediate control over one's mind, but even the innate propensities and external factors are determined by his sovereign will. It is God who forms a person in the womb, and it is he who arranges outward circumstances by his providence.

For these reasons, although we may affirm that man has a will, that the mind can move toward different options, the movement is always influenced to the point of being determined by something else so that the will is never free. Since the will is never free, the free will theodicy should not be used when addressing the problem of evil.

**Logical Compatibility.** The free will defense having been demolished, the reader is perhaps hoping that there is something more potent to replace it. Indeed, several logically compelling answers are available that are also biblically sound, and I will provide two of them in the remaining pages. The first argues that the existence of evil is logically compatible with the existence of God, while the second demonstrates that without a prior acknowledgment of God, the argument against his existence from evil does not have any meaning.

Let us first state the unbeliever's case again more clearly:

1. The Christian God is all-powerful and all-loving.
2. If he is all-powerful, he is able to end all evil.
3. If he is all-loving, he wants to end all evil.
4. But evil still exists.
5. Therefore, the Christian God does not exist.

Although most Christians agree to premise (3), if I were to demand a justification for it from the atheist, how would he go about establishing it? If we assert that God is all-loving because the Bible says, "God is love" (1 John 4:8), then we must also allow the Bible to define love. And unless it defines the concept in a way that necessitates the desire to destroy evil, the atheist's argument fails before we even finish reading it.

If the atheist bases this premise on the Bible's claim that God is loving, and then substitutes his own definition of love, then he commits the fallacy of equivocation, where one changes the meaning of a term within an argument. His argument would then only have the effect of pointing out that his definition of love is different from the one given in Scripture.

The Bible teaches that God is loving, but at the same time affirms that evil exists in this world under this sovereign control. Therefore, the Scripture admits to no contradiction between God's loving nature and the existence of evil. The atheist points to the biblical teaching that God is loving, smuggles in a definition of love that requires the desire to destroy evil, and after that rejoices in the alleged contradiction that he has produced.

If one wants to hold the Bible accountable for what it claims, then he must also allow it to define its own terms; otherwise, I can just as easily redefine the atheist's words and turn his arguments into affirmations of God's existence. Even if we allow him to import a definition of love foreign to the Bible, he must justify that it is a reasonable instead of arbitrary one.

I demand that the atheist demonstrates to me why a loving God must desire to destroy evil. A reply such as, "Because a loving God would want to relieve suffering" only restates his premise in different words. Why must a loving God desire to relieve suffering? How does one define suffering to begin with? If one cannot define either love

or suffering, then he is saying that a God with an undefined attribute X must desire to destroy an undefined Y, which is almost a meaningless statement.

If the Bible recognizes both the loving nature of God and the reality of suffering, then why must one say that these contradict, when we can just as easily draw the conclusion that a loving God does not have to end suffering, at least not immediately? If a person argues against biblical assertions, he must use the relevant terms as defined by the Bible, and the Bible defines the terms that it uses in ways that do not generate contradictions.

As long as the atheist fails to justify premise (3), the Christian is under no obligation to take his argument seriously or to continue with the debate. However, in order that we may present other answers to address the reality of evil, we will grant the premise for now – just so the discussion may continue. Even when we allow the atheist to use premise (3) without justification, it is still possible to refute the argument.

For the sake of simplicity, we may state the atheist's argument in fewer words:

1. God is all-powerful and all-loving.
2. But evil exists.
3. Therefore, God does not exist.

The contention of the atheist is that given the existence of evil, God as conceived by the Christian cannot logically exist. To refute this claim, the Christian only needs to point out that the premises of the argument do not lead to the atheist's conclusion by logical necessity, but that very different conclusions are possible:

1. God is all-powerful and all-loving
  2. But evil exists.
  3. Therefore, God has a good purpose for evil.
- 
1. God is all-powerful and all-loving.
  2. But evil exists.
  3. Therefore, God will eventually destroy evil.

Instead of using the reality of evil to deny God's existence, the above two arguments come to two different conclusions about evil in light of the existence of God. With ease, we have shown that the existence of God cannot be denied based on the reality of evil; rather, the issue must be settled by other means.

If premise (1) is established through another argument, then (2) may in fact be explained by it. Premise (2) cannot be used as a test for (1), since in doing so a number of conclusions may be drawn by it, and no logically necessary conclusion results that supports or denies (1). That is, no logically compelling case can be built by claiming that the reality of evil refutes theism, since we may just as easily say that it is theism that explains the reality of evil.

Christians have set forth numerous arguments for the existence of God, but the unbeliever's argument from evil fails to confront them directly. Instead, they point to the emotionally latent issue of evil and suffering to deny God's existence. However, since we have shown that the reality of evil is logically compatible with the existence of God, and is also explained by it, the atheist must argue for God's non-existence through some other way.

It is not necessary to explain what "good purpose" God has in mind for the existence of evil, and once known, neither is it necessary to prove such a purpose is indeed good. Likewise, the believer is not required to show why God has allowed evil to continue for so long. All we had to do was to show that, given the reality of evil, it is logically possible to come to different conclusions other than the non-existence of God, which we have now done.

Having said this, we should note that the two new conclusions above are in fact taken from Scripture. We are not left with mere logical possibilities, but these are in fact the true explanations for the reality of evil. The Bible teaches that God decreed evil for the ultimate purpose of his glory, and that one day it will end. Strictly speaking, evil and suffering will only cease being part of the believer's existence and experience, while they will never end for the unbelieving. The way that God will "end" moral evil is to banish all non-Christians to endless suffering in hell, at which time natural evil will also cease for those who love him.

This is enough to nullify the atheist's argument against the existence of God based on the reality of evil. But some Christians may be uncomfortable with our answer, in that it seems to make God "responsible" for the existence of evil. In the free will defense model, it appears that God is not so much involved in the origination and continuation of evil, or at least moral evil.

However, it is the free will defense that fails to address this issue, since according to its proponents, it is God who had created the possibility of evil by granting his creatures free will. He did it knowing that mankind would actualize this possibility by committing sin. Therefore, the problem exists in the free will defense as a contradiction (since they deny that God is responsible), along with the other fatal logical impossibilities of this theodicy stated earlier. For example, we have established that what many think to be "free will" in fact is not free at all, being dependent on many innate or external factors. Whatever we do with this problem, we must eventually trace it back to God, and seek an explanation from there.

**A Theological Excursus.** The existence of God is no longer an issue, since we have refuted the atheist's argument by giving alternative conclusions to their premises. Instead, we are now attempting to justify these conclusions to Christians who are unfamiliar with or resistant to this aspect of biblical teaching. Therefore, the issue is now one of Christian theology, which means it is appropriate and desirable to allow biblical data to control our line of thought and discussion.

Scripture teaches that God's will determines everything. Nothing exists or happens without God, not merely permitting, but willing it. Biblical passages that indicate this include:

*Isaiah 46:10.* I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.

*Matthew 10:29.* Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.

Not only does natural events occur in strict conformity to God's will, but human affairs and decisions are also subject to his control:

*Psalms 65:4.* Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts! We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple.

*Proverbs 16:4.* The LORD works out everything for his own ends – even the wicked for a day of disaster.

*Proverbs 16:9.* In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.

*Proverbs 20:24.* A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?

*Proverbs 21:1.* The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.

*Job 14:5.* Man's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed.

*Daniel 4:35.* All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"

*Acts 18:21.* But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus.

*Phillippians 2:13.* For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

*James 4:13-15.* Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make

money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

*Revelation 4:11.* "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

If God indeed determines all natural events and human affairs, then it follows that he has also decreed the existence of evil. This is what the Bible explicitly teaches:

*Exodus 4:11.* The LORD said to him, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD?"

*Lamentations 3:37-38.* Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?

*Isaiah 45:7.* I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.

*Amos 3:6.* When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?

The greatest moral evil and act of injustice in human history is said to have been actively performed by God through secondary agents:

*Isaiah 53:10.* Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

*Acts 4:27-28.* Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

In any case, God decreed the death of Christ for a good reason, namely, the redemption of his elect. Likewise, his decree for the existence of evil is for the worthy purpose of his glory. The elect and reprobates are both created for this reason:

*Isaiah 43:6-7.* I will say to the north, "Give them up!" and to the south, "Do not hold them back." Bring my sons from afar and my daughters

from the ends of the earth – everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.

*Ephesians 1:11-12.* In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

*Exodus 14:4.* And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD...

*Romans 9:17, 22-23.* For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory...

Based on the above passages, we come to the following conclusion. God controls everything that is and everything that happens. There is not one thing that can happen that he has not actively decreed – not even a single thought in the mind of man. This being so, he has decreed the existence of evil, and not merely permitted it. Evil could not have started unless God had decreed it, since we have shown that no created being has the ability to make completely independent decisions. However, God himself does not directly commit evil (James 1:13-17), but only decrees it to be done through secondary agents, such as Satan and Adam. Nevertheless, they were able to perform evil only because of his active decree. God decreed evil ultimately for his own glory.

Most Christians do not embrace this explanation for the existence of evil. However, besides failing to refute it, they have not proposed a better one – one that is able to account for every relevant element of the topic without compromising the divine attributes of God. In addition, the view presented here is what the Bible teaches, so the opposition must also argue against a number of biblical passages, either showing that the Bible cannot be trusted, or that our interpretation is mistaken. No one has been able to accomplish this.

Although those who oppose this view often carry the motive of not wanting God to have anything to do with evil, except perhaps for permitting it, we have already seen the problems with saying that God would even permit evil. However, given what we know about God from the Bible and the specific passages listed above, what can permitting evil mean but that he is working out his own purpose through secondary agents? Since "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), independence from God on a metaphysical level is impossible. Without him, one cannot even think or move. How, then, can evil be devised and committed in total independence from him? How can one

even think evil apart from God's will and purpose? It is best to acknowledge with the Bible that God has actively decreed evil, and deal with the issue from this basis.

An example of evil performed through secondary agents may be seen in the census of Israel taken by David:

*2 Samuel 24:1.* Again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go and take a census of Israel and Judah."

*1 Chronicles 21:1.* Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel.

The two verses refer to the same incident. There is no contradiction if the view being presented here is true. God decreed that David would sin by taking the census, but the temptation was performed through the secondary agent Satan. Afterward, God punished David for committing this sin:

*2 Samuel 24:10-14.* David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, O LORD, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing." Before David got up the next morning, the word of the LORD had come to Gad the prophet, David's seer: "Go and tell David, 'This is what the LORD says: I am giving you three options. Choose one of them for me to carry out against you.'" So Gad went to David and said to him, "Shall there come upon you three years of famine in your land? Or three months of fleeing from your enemies while they pursue you? Or three days of plague in your land? Now then, think it over and decide how I should answer the one who sent me." David said to Gad, "I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men."

Although the evil we are speaking of is indeed negative, the ultimate end is positive – the glory of God. Anticipating objections on this point, we must also affirm that the glory of God is a good and justified purpose for decreeing the existence of evil. God is the only being who possesses intrinsic worth, and if in his wisdom the existence of evil will in the end serve to maximize the glory that he will receive and demonstrate, then the decree is undeniably good and justified. One who thinks that God's glory is not worth the death and suffering of many billions of people has too high an opinion of himself and humanity, at least in comparison to God. The worth of a creature can only be derived from his creator, and in light of the purpose for which he has been made.

Christians who are in a proper relationship with God should have no trouble accepting all this: "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny" (Psalm 73:16-17). On the other

hand, those who find it especially difficult to accept need to examine their spiritual commitment. The case may be that they do not love God or "permit" him to be who he is as much as they imagine.

Granting that the glory of God is a good and worthy purpose for evil, does God have the right to make such a decree? In connection to divine election, where God chooses some for salvation while rejecting others, Paul anticipates a similar objection and writes:

*Romans 9:19-21.* One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

Paul is saying, in effect, "Of course the creator has the right to do whatever he wants with his creatures. And who are you to make such an objection in the first place?" It is futile to say that a man is greater than a "lump of clay." First, this is a biblical analogy, and a Christian has no business claiming that the analogy is inappropriate as long as we are applying it in accordance with the biblical writer's intention. Second, if man is not a lump of clay, then neither is God a potter – he is infinitely greater than a potter. The analogy is proper when we understand it to say what it means, that is, God as creator undoubtedly has the right to do whatever he wishes with his creatures. "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Romans 9:18).

There is another answer to whether God is justified in decreeing evil that is both biblically and logically satisfying. Hidden within the difficulty in accepting that God would decree the existence of evil is the sense that it seems "wrong" for him to have done so. But then the question arises as to by what standard of right and wrong one may judge God's actions.

Is there a being or an objective standard superior to God, to which he is accountable, and by which he may be judged? If there is, then the "God" we are speaking of is not God at all; rather, this higher being or standard would be God. But even having discovered this higher being, the problem remains, since what we now realize to be the actual supreme being would be the one who had decreed the existence of evil. If we consider his decree for the existence of evil to be a mistake, we are once again confronted with the question of how we may make such an evaluation.

If we define God correctly, it means that we must conceive him as the ultimate being, and there is no being or standard above him. This being so, there is no standard by which his actions may be judged as right or wrong. If we are able to hold the concept of God as the ultimate being constant in our minds, then it becomes obvious that it is logically impossible to accuse God of doing anything morally reprehensible.

Jesus says, "No one is good – except God alone" (Luke 18:19). Only God is good. The very concept of good is defined by God's nature, and since he "does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17), he is the only and constant standard of goodness. No matter how moral I may be, one cannot consider me the objective standard of goodness, since even the word "moral" is without meaning unless evaluated and applied to me in light of God's character.

The word "moral" in this case refers to the degree of conformity of one's character to God's nature. To the degree that a person thinks and acts in accordance with God's nature and commands, he is moral. Otherwise, there is no difference in status between altruism and selfishness; virtue and vice are meaningless concepts; rape and murder are not crimes, but amoral events. But given God's existence, evil is defined as anything that is contrary to his nature and commands. Since God is good, and is the sole defining factor of goodness, his decree of evil is also good. We are not affirming that evil is good – that would be a contradiction. But we are saying that God's decree for the existence of evil is good.

There is ample biblical support for this argument. Hebrews 6:13 says, "When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself." In other words, there is no one to hold him accountable, and there is no court to which one may drag God in order to press charges against him; rather, all thoughts and actions are judged by him.

Other passages indicating this include the following:

*Job 9:3-12.* Though one wished to dispute with him, he could not answer him one time out of a thousand. His wisdom is profound, his power is vast. Who has resisted him and come out unscathed? He moves mountains without their knowing it and overturns them in his anger. He shakes the earth from its place and makes its pillars tremble. He speaks to the sun and it does not shine; he seals off the light of the stars. He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea. He is the Maker of the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the constellations of the south. He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted. When he passes me, I cannot see him; when he goes by, I cannot perceive him. If he snatches away, who can stop him? Who can say to him, "What are you doing?"

*Job 40:2-8.* "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" Then Job answered the LORD: "I am unworthy – how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer – twice, but I will say no more." Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm: "Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?"

*Isaiah 45:9-11.* Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, "What are you making?" Does your work say, "He has no hands?" Woe to him who says to his father, "What have you begotten?" or to his mother, "What have you brought to birth?" This is what the LORD says – the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands?

*Romans 11:33-36.* Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

It is not for man to accuse God of wrongdoing. Those who do either fail to understand the nature of God (that he is the ultimate being) and its implications, or they choose to ignore it without giving a logical refutation, which is irrational. If we derive our very definition of goodness from him, how can we then accuse him of evil? This would be like saying that good is evil, which is a contradiction. Therefore, the answer to our question is that God's decree of evil is good by definition. Incidentally, our present discussion, that God's nature provides the very definition of goodness and deviation from his nature is the meaning of evil, leads us to the second reply against the atheist's argument from the reality of evil.

**Logical Priority.** I have promised to provide two answers to the atheist's argument from evil against God's existence. The first one was presented earlier before we began to discuss the issue from a theological perspective. What I have just mentioned regarding the standard of good and evil now leads us to the second refutation against the argument from evil.

The atheist contends that God does not exist because evil exists. Again, we may summarize his argument as follows:

1. God is all-powerful and all-loving.
2. But evil exists.
3. Therefore, God does not exist.

Besides the first refutation given earlier, we may also reply that God's existence is the logical prerequisite for the existence of evil. Logically speaking, evil is meaningless and undefined without an objective standard of goodness, namely, the ultimate being we call God.

When the atheist says "evil exists," what does he mean by "evil"? He may be referring to greed, hate, murder, rape, earthquakes, floods and the like. But why are these things evil?

Is it just because the atheist does not approve of them? He may attempt then to give some definition of evil that does not require the existence of God, but any definition he gives will be arbitrary and unjustifiable.

For example, if he claims that murder is wrong because it violates the right to life of the victim, we only need to ask why the victim has any right to life? Who gives him this so-called right? The atheist? Who says that there is anything as a right to begin with? Any other solution he attempts to muster, when questioned further, will be exposed as without logical justification.

On the other hand, the Christian can affirm that murder is forbidden because the Bible teaches that man is made in the image of God: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man" (Genesis 9:6); God explicitly disallows it when he says, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). To say that murder is immoral and that the murderer must be held accountable is consistent with the Christian worldview, but how can the atheist ever justify the same assertion on the basis of their worldview?

Let us examine the atheist's argument again:

1. God is all-powerful and all-loving.
2. But evil exists.
3. Therefore, God does not exist.

The atheist assumes (2) to be true, and from that basis attempts to evaluate the status of (1). He attempts to use something that is obvious to him, to refute something that is not obvious to him. However, the existence of evil is not obvious at all unless there is a being whose metaphysical status is ultimate and supreme, and who can provide a universally applicable and binding definition of goodness for us. For premise (2) to have any meaning, premise (1) must first be assumed. But once we grant premise (1), or the existence of God, this argument from evil ceases to have any effect against Christian beliefs.

If the atheist does not acknowledge the existence of God, he cannot acknowledge the existence of evil. By logical necessity, our recognition of God precedes our recognition of evil. The notion of evil remains undefined as long as there is no concept of God. And if we have a concept of God, yet this God does not exist in reality, then neither does evil exist in reality.

By an act of intellectual terrorism, the atheist hijacks the moral absolute of theism in the process of arguing against it. But he cannot even say the word "evil" as carrying the meaning of a natural or moral negative without implying that there must be a standard by which to judge something as evil and another as good. If the atheist acknowledges the existence of evil, he must also acknowledge the existence of God.

An atheist may not surrender immediately upon hearing our refutation. He will attempt to provide some acceptable definition of evil to rescue his argument. I cannot here list all the possible definitions that he may try to propose, but the Christian can frustrate any such attempts simply by continuing to demand justification for the atheist's definitions of evil. It will soon become evident that without the existence of an ultimate being, there can be no universally applicable and binding definition of evil.

There is no reason for lengthy explanations or needless repetitions, since the matter is indeed as simple as it appears. But before concluding, I wish to encourage believers to take the non-Christians to court, so to speak, and assume the offensive position on this matter.

**Other Worldviews and Religions.** One area often neglected in discussions on this topic is whether other worldviews and religions can provide logically acceptable answers to the problem of evil. Can non-Christian worldviews provide a definition of evil that is not rationally absurd? Can they explain how and why it began and continues? On the basis of their worldviews, can they guarantee the eventual defeat and destruction of evil?

No worldview except the Christian faith can even begin to answer these questions. It would be impossible to survey every system of thought here, so I will provide only one example. To those unfamiliar with the subject of religion and related matters, it may be surprising to learn that several major worldviews and religions consider evil to be an illusion, and once man becomes enlightened and realize this fact, evil will cease to be a problem.

However, if evil is an illusion, then all of humanity is enslaved to such an illusion, and we need only ask whether this illusion is good or evil. If this illusion is good or neutral, then why do these worldviews and religions seek to eliminate it? If it is an evil illusion, then evil exists (in the form of this illusion that evil exists), and we should marvel at how real and widespread this evil is indeed! To say that evil is an illusion is self-contradictory.

But let me remind the reader that when discussing such things, the opposition is operating on stolen resources to begin with, since they have not even defined evil. We are simply allowing them for the time being to use the theistic definition of evil, and proceed to argue their case from a non-theistic viewpoint. Saying that evil is an illusion certainly does not define evil, since the question would then arise as to what we are having the illusion about. Once a person assumes the theistic definition of evil and proceed to call it an illusion, he has entered the path of logical self-destruction alluded to above. Even when the Christian lends them his theistic definition of evil, non-Christian worldviews and religions fail to incorporate it into their systems of thought without generating logical contradictions. But without it, they cannot even discuss the subject intelligibly.

Next time the reader encounters the argument from evil posed by an unbeliever, instead of being pressed into a corner, he ought to be able to give a logically compelling defense, but then take the offensive and turn the argument around against the challenger (2 Corinthians 10:5):

"I am able to show that given the nature of God and the existence of evil, logical conclusions may be reached other than his non-existence. God decreed the existence of evil for his own glory. Every aspect and instance of it is under his precise control. There is no standard higher than him to judge this decree as wrong. Without him, the concept of evil is meaningless – the recognition of evil implies a prior recognition of God's existence. One day he will conquer evil and banish all sinners to an eternal hell. Every instance of murder, theft, rape, and even every word a man has spoken, will be accounted for. Just punishments will be served to all sinners who do not depend on Christ for salvation, while his chosen ones will surely be saved.

"But how do you deal with evil? Given your worldview, how can you even have a meaningful and universal concept of evil? How do you explain its origin and continuation? Can your worldview guarantee its eventual defeat and termination? Are you able to set forth universally applicable and binding reasons against such things as genocide and racism? How can your worldview make moral demands on someone that does not subscribe to it? Is there final and perfect justice for anyone given your worldview? How can you define justice to begin with? Why must a person from another nation recognize your so-called rights?

"If you cannot give adequate answers to these and thousands of other questions based on your worldview and intellectual commitments without self-contradiction, then it is evident that the existence of evil means the destruction of your worldview, while it poses no threat at all to mine."

While many people are fond of challenging believers with the problem of evil, in reality the Christian faith is the only worldview in which the existence of evil does not create a logical problem. If our present discussion is not limited to the reality of evil and its implications, I can demonstrate that without biblical theism, one cannot make sense of anything at all – from music to physics, ethics to politics, history to chemistry, or even fishing and sleeping. Additionally, although theism makes meaning possible for all categories of thought, only Christian theism can provide an all-encompassing worldview that accounts for every aspect of human thought and experience. Therefore, even non-Christian theism is rationally unacceptable.

Nevertheless, sometimes Christians are intimidated by the arguments of atheists to differing degrees because not only do they have trouble with the logical aspect of the issue, but a part of them also agree with the unbelievers on an emotional level. Although it is not my purpose to deal with the latter on this occasion, I will point out that emotional problems do not affect the logic of things. Being disturbed emotionally by the existence of evil does nothing to deny God's existence.

If the atheist is still emotionally disturbed over the existence of evil even after we have silenced him through rational argumentation, he can always visit a local pastor to learn how to depend on Christ for salvation, or he can commit himself to a psychiatric ward where he may remain miserable under professional care. As for Christians, the words of

Isaiah are applicable: "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you" (Isaiah 26:3).

When dealing with unbelievers, we must press them for a good explanation for the existence of evil on the basis of their worldviews after having provided our own, or perhaps even before. Psalm 73:16-17 says, "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny." Only by accepting the Christian worldview can one deal with the logical problem of evil, and only by entering "the sanctuary of God," can the issue cease to be "oppressive." Only those who draw close to God can sufficiently understand the reality of evil and retain emotional stability. The Christian faith is true and is the only way to God and salvation. It is not vulnerable to any attacks from unbelievers. It cannot be challenged, but only studied and obeyed. God exists, and the Christian Bible is his only and final verbal revelation.