

ULTIMATE QUESTIONS

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PREFACE

This book brings together three independent essays that are nevertheless related in content. Each one is roughly structured around a biblical passage from which I produce an exposition of the text itself as well as the theological and philosophical discussions that it inspires. The product is a book that illustrates how the Christian worldview alone answers all the ultimate questions of life and thought.

Chapter one centers on Romans 1:18-32. I show that God has placed an inescapable revelation of himself in the mind of man. A denial of this constitutes an inexcusable suppression of evidence, resulting in an inevitable damnation. From this, the Christian derives a strategy of apologetics that is fortified by invincible argumentation, showing that the Christian worldview is a necessary precondition to all of life and thought.

The next chapter is entitled, "Ultimate Questions," in which I provide an elementary exposition of the *logos* doctrine from John 1:1-18, relating it to metaphysics, epistemology, and soteriology. The conclusion is that biblical teaching provides data based on which the Christian may construct a comprehensive and coherent worldview. Secular philosophy, on the other hand, fails to answer the ultimate questions.

Applying an essential theme of the previous two chapters – the sovereignty of God – the third chapter expounds upon specific aspects of soteriology using 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10 as its starting point and structural outline. A parallel passage in 1 Corinthians 2, from which the title of this chapter is derived, is also examined. The chapter concludes that only God can produce true faith in the mind of man, that only true faith perseveres, and that only those who persevere inherit everlasting life from God. On the other hand, all that God has chosen for salvation receive true faith, and all that receive true faith from God persevere, and inherit everlasting life.

1. INESCAPABLE REVELATION

W. K. Clifford is often quoted as having said, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." To many, this appears to express the very essence of good sense and rationality; however, upon analysis, the statement is shown to be naïve and foolish.

First, we must understand what Clifford asserts by noting its universality. To say that the principle applies "always" and "everywhere" indicates that it transcends cultures and eras; "anyone" and "anything" eliminate any exception to the rule. The proposition, therefore, applies to any and all beliefs.

The immediate problem is that the principle fails to justify itself. What evidence do we have that, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence"? The principle itself is asserted to be a true belief, and thus must satisfy the requirements that it proposes. Unless we have evidence, not to say *sufficient* evidence, that we must have sufficient evidence to believe anything, the statement self-destructs.

There are prior and deeper problems with it. What does Clifford mean by the word "wrong"? He cannot mean factually wrong, since one may believe in something that is factually correct, even if by accident, without having sufficient evidence for the belief. But if he means that it is morally wrong to believe something without sufficient evidence, we must inquire as to the source of his definition of immorality, and whether there is sufficient evidence for him to adopt such a definition.

What about the word "evidence"? What is Clifford's definition of evidence, and by what authority does he use and impose such a definition on the rest of humanity? People disagree as to what constitutes evidence to support a certain belief. During the debate between Christian apologist Greg Bahnsen and atheist Gordon Stein,¹ a question from the audience, addressed to Stein, asked, "What for you personally would constitute adequate evidence for God's existence?" Dr. Stein replied:

If that podium suddenly rose into the air, five feet, stay there for a minute, and then drop right down again, I would say that that was evidence of the supernatural, because that would violate everything that we know about the laws of physics and chemistry, assuming there wasn't an engine under there, or a wire attached to it, to make those obvious exclusions. That would be evidence for a supernatural, violation of the laws...or maybe we would call it a miracle, right in front of your eyes. That would be evidence I would accept. Any kind of a supernatural

¹ Held at the University of California (Irvine); Covenant Media Foundation, 1985.

being putting in an appearance, and doing miracles that could not be staged magic would also be evidence that I would accept.

Really? Stranger things have happened than the unexplained levitation of physical objects. Atheists do not call them miracles, but consistent with their presuppositions, assume these to be natural events that may be explained by natural causes. Even if they cannot immediately discover the natural causes to these events, they continue to assume that future research would uncover them. What primitive people believed to be supernatural events, scientists now can explain by natural causes – on the atheist's worldview, miracles are ruled out from the start.

Stein's worldview would reject the appearance of a supernatural being as evidence for God or the supernatural, since his presuppositions exclude the existence of such beings – every event is explained on the assumption that there are no such beings. Therefore, all supernatural apparitions are relegated to the hallucinations of the poor deluded victims. Dr. Stein's answer was not only amateurish, but it was a lie; otherwise, *Ripley's Believe It or Not*² would be sufficient to refute his atheism. However, Jesus says, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

What one regards as conclusive proof seems irrelevant to another. On the basis of Clifford's statement, one must have sufficient evidence to show that a given piece of evidence is relevant to the claim under examination. Of course, the evidence that endorses the evidence must also be supported by evidence showing that it is relevant. Furthermore, Clifford says that we must believe nothing based on "insufficient" evidence, so if we ignore the present irresolvable infinite regress, we still have to define what type or amount of evidence is *sufficient*, which we must also prove by prior sufficient evidence, of course. But if "sufficient" has not yet been defined, and substantiated by previous sufficient evidence – also undefined and without support from previous and sufficient evidence – on Clifford's principle we cannot accept the evidence that supports his definition of "sufficient" in his statement.

If I prefer to believe that there is a pink unicorn in my backyard, by what authority may Clifford forbid me? By his own authority? By imposing his principle on my epistemology? But I reject his principle. What then can he do? Unless Clifford can justify his principle, I can just as easily say, "It is *right* always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything *without* sufficient evidence" – and I indeed would not have sufficient evidence to justify this claim!

From the Christian's perspective, the content of the truth is defined when Jesus says to his Father, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). God requires us to believe the truth; he can and he does impose his principles on everyone, and to resist him is to risk eternal damnation. It is morally wrong to believe falsehood because God will hold us accountable for what we think and do. Christianity is justified by God's authority, and no

² Julie Mooney, *Ripley's Believe It or Not: Encyclopedia of the Bizarre*; Black Dog & Leventhal Publishing, 2002. Or, Mary Packard, *Ripley's Believe It or Not*; Scholastic Trade, 2001.

authority is prior or higher than him. On my worldview, almighty God enforces his prescribed epistemological principle; on Clifford's, he hopes we accept his.

Is evidence rationalistic or empirical? If it is rationalistic, how do we know it is not arbitrary? What evidence do we have that evidence should be rationalistic? And what kind of evidence would be legitimate to show us that evidence should be rationalistic? If evidence is empirical, it is also inductive; if inductive, Clifford must prove his principle by verifying every possible proposition conceivable by an omniscient mind with his own principle – making his argument viciously circular – before he can satisfy the requirements that his own principle imposes upon itself.

Therefore, even from a non-Christian's standpoint, the statement, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence," fails to be the essence of rationality and sound judgment. Rather, it is meaningless; it is utter nonsense. The revelational epistemology of Christianity accepts the propositions given infallibly by an almighty omniscient God. Not even the monotheistic God of Islam can make this claim, since "As Pfander correctly observed of Muslims, 'If they think at all deeply, they find themselves absolutely unable to know God...Thus Islam leads to Agnosticism.'"³ And besides saying that the polytheistic gods often argue and fight among themselves, how do these finite gods know what they know?

Only the Christian conception of deity makes it possible for God to possess all knowledge, and at the same time make knowledge possible for us. In God dwells "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3). Since God has all knowledge, he requires no one greater – there is no one greater – to justify his knowledge. His absolute sovereignty implies that he wills what he knows, and he knows all that he wills; there can be no error in his knowledge. At the same time, "the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever" in the words of Scripture (Deuteronomy 29:29), and so we have knowledge as well. God has all knowledge – his knowledge consists of what he wills – and our knowledge consists of what he wills to reveal.

If non-Christian worldviews and religions cannot produce an adequate and defensible epistemology, they can have no knowledge at all. If they cannot know anything, their systems of thought cannot begin or produce any content. And if they cannot begin, or have any content, they can pose no challenge to Christianity. No proposition, let alone objections against the Christian faith, can be uttered on the basis of non-Christian worldviews.

It may appear that what has been said so far amounts to a denial that Christianity endorses the use of evidence, or that perhaps there is no evidence in support of the Christian faith in the first place. This is not so; what we have shown is that the atheist cannot make an intelligible and coherent demand or challenge against Christianity on the basis of reasoning from evidence. When an unbeliever says that he rejects Christianity

³ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999; p. 371.

because it has insufficient evidence in its favor, he does not know what he is talking about; his objection is unintelligible.

Nevertheless, a study of classical or evidential apologetics will show that, even on the basis of non-Christian presuppositions, Christianity is the only rational worldview to adopt.⁴ Even if we assume the criteria required for verification assumed by the unbelievers, the Christian faith is vindicated. Now, since the presuppositions adopted by the unbelievers are flawed, when the Christian builds his case on such a basis, he is arguing *ad hominem*.

By *ad hominem*, we do not refer to the fallacious *ad hominem* abusive, *ad hominem* circumstantial, or *tu quoque*. Rather, the proposed form of *ad hominem* arguments takes premises espoused by the opponent, and deduces from them – perhaps more validly than he does – conclusions contradictory to his, or conclusions that would be embarrassing or repulsive to him.⁵ In the hands of the apologist, the *ad hominem* argument deduces conclusions that favor the biblical worldview – or at least ones that are unacceptable to the unbeliever himself – using the non-Christian's own premises. But since these premises are themselves uncertain or faulty, the conclusions deduced do not prove the Christian's case, but only destroy that of his opponent's.

For example, although the presuppositions and methodologies of scientific investigations preclude the possibility of discovering truth, there are scientific arguments for the Christian position that serve to silence and refute the unbeliever's objections against the biblical worldview. The Christian may argue, on the basis of scientific presuppositions, that it is more rational than not to believe that the universe requires an intelligent omnipotent creator. Since science itself is always tentative and fails to discover any truth,⁶ no conclusive positive case can be constructed for Christianity, or any other worldview, on such a basis. That is, if scientific plausibility is made the standard of truth, then Christianity is the most rational worldview, but scientific plausibility should not be made the standard of truth.

We may offer another example of how the use of evidence, although it makes no sense on the basis of non-Christian presuppositions, vindicates biblical claims. Historian C. Behan McCullagh writes that the best explanation to a body of historical facts must satisfy the following six requirements:

1. It must have great explanatory scope.
2. It must have great explanatory power.
3. It must be plausible.
4. It is not ad hoc or contrived.
5. It is in accord with accepted beliefs.

⁴ See my *Evidential Apologetics*, in which I outline the classical or evidential approach to apologetics.

⁵ That is, a *reductio ad absurdum*.

⁶ See my writings on the philosophy of science.

6. It far outstrips any of its rival theories in meeting the previous conditions.⁷

William Lane Craig argues that the proposition, "God raised Jesus from the dead," meets the above conditions.⁸ The details of his argument are not relevant here. If successful, it would seem to vindicate biblical claims concerning the resurrection of Christ, and refute the unbeliever's objections. However, one wonders whether these tests are reliable, and whether an explanation that satisfies these conditions is in fact true. And by what authority does McCullagh list and impose these tests upon all historical explanations?

Although Craig's argument may not prove the resurrection of Christ, it refutes all objections against it launched on the basis of non-Christian principles. An argument founded on Christian premises would of course assume the resurrection to be true. On the basis of the historian's principles, nothing can be positively established with certainty, but at the same time, no argument against the resurrection can be based on them. And if one adopts these tests to be the standard of truth concerning historical matters, one should come to believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead.

So non-Christian principles cannot prove anything at all, although Christians may use them to construct *ad hominem* arguments in refuting any objections against the biblical worldview. However, there is nothing to prevent non-Christian principles, including religious ones, from collapsing into total skepticism, and since skepticism self-destructs – it is contradictory to affirm that we know that we cannot know – one cannot remain a skeptic. Only Christianity rescues the intellect from complete skepticism; therefore, rather than depending on a non-Christian foundation to construct a case for the biblical worldview, the Christian adopts the revelational epistemology of biblical infallibility.

It is not that Christians do not believe in the use of evidence – the problem is that the non-Christian theories of evidence are defective. And when unbelievers demand evidence from the Christians, they do not know what they are asking. Unless intelligibility is secured by the proper presuppositions, the demand is nonsensical and cannot be logically understood. As will be explained in what follows, the Christian believes that every conceivable proposition is in fact evidence for the truth of Christianity. And once a correct theory of evidence is adopted, scientific and historical studies, although still tentative by nature, will only lead to conclusions consistent with the biblical system.

Now, Romans 1:18-20 says:

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 since the creation of the

⁷ C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984; p. 19.

⁸ William Lane Craig, *God, Are You There?*; Norcross, Georgia: Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, 1999; p. 48.

world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

Some commentators take a more or less empirical interpretation of this passage, saying that from observing the external universe, man derives a knowledge of God and some of his attributes, and such evidence in creation renders his denial of God inexcusable. There is some truth to this statement, but partial truth is often misleading. Ignoring the problems with empirical methods for the moment, it is true that man ought to come to a theistic or even Christian position by observing nature – but no thinking is possible without the preconditions of intelligibility. Since the only preconditions that preserve intelligibility are the Christian presuppositions, it is untrue that a blank mind can, through empirical methods, derive information about God (or anything) from the created order.

For empirical data to be intelligible – if empirical data can be intelligible at all – Christian principles must be presupposed. Paul says that God has built into every human mind such principles, such that one ought to derive Christian conclusions from observing the universe. Man by nature possesses an innate knowledge of God, and it is only when such is presupposed that he may rightly interpret empirical evidence. This is not to say that reality is subjective, but that one fails to gain knowledge of reality in the first place without first adopting the Christian position. The point to be emphasized here is that man already knows God before he observes the external world; otherwise, no knowledge could be derived from such observation.

Thomas R. Schreiner says, "God has stitched into the fabric of the human mind his existence and power, so that they are instinctively recognized when one views the created world."⁹ This states the above position very well, with one qualification – the knowledge of God is present in the mind prior to any experience or observation of creation, so that no empirical data is required for one to recognize the *a priori* propositions and thought categories given to him at birth.

Charles Hodge, although somewhat of an empiricist, admits, "It is not of a mere external revelation of which the apostle is speaking, but of that evidence of the being and perfections of God which every man has in the constitution of his own nature, and in virtue of which he is competent to apprehend the manifestations of God in his works."¹⁰ Accordingly, the NLT translates, "For the truth about God is known to them instinctively. God has put this knowledge in their hearts."

If arguments based on the grammar of verse 19 are inconclusive,¹¹ Romans 2:14-15 dispels all doubt that God has endowed man with innate knowledge concerning himself:

⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998; p. 86.

¹⁰ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans*; Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997 (original: 1835); p. 36.

¹¹ Leon Morris, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Romans*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988; p. 78-80.

"Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves,¹² even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them." The term "innate sense" is used in the NJB: "So, when gentiles, not having the Law, still through their own innate sense behave as the Law commands, then, even though they have no Law, they are a law for themselves. They can demonstrate the effect of the Law engraved on their hearts, to which their own conscience bears witness..."

From these two verses, we learn that man's innate knowledge is specific. It is not only a general sense of the divine, or an instinctive propensity to worship; rather, this innate knowledge includes at least the basic moral code of the Christian Bible. Robert Haldane comments, "This natural light of the understanding is called the law written in the heart, because it is imprinted on the mind by the Author of creation, and is God's work as much as the writing on the tables of stone."¹³ Although it may be impossible to enumerate every proposition included in this innate knowledge, we know that it is detailed and specific enough to exclude all non-Christian worldviews and religions; only Christianity is compatible with it.

As a side note, since "conscience" is mentioned in verse 15, we must make clear that it is not a part of the human being distinct from the mind or intellect. Anthropological trichotomy and popular preaching would have conscience be the voice of a non-intellectual "spirit" or "heart," although these terms are intellectual in Scripture, and very often synonymous with "mind." The verse says that conscience is at work when "their *thoughts* now accusing, now even defending them." Conscience is therefore a function of the mind, and not a separate and non-intellectual part of the human being.

J. I. Packer defines conscience as "the built-in power of our minds to pass moral judgments on ourselves, approving or disapproving our attitudes, actions, reactions, thoughts and plans, and telling us, if it disapproves of what we have done, that we ought to suffer for it."¹⁴ But contrary to many, it is not true that one will always do the right thing if he listens to his conscience. Although it functions to accuse or defend us for our thoughts and actions, its judgments are not always correct. Paul writes that some people's "consciences have been seared as with a hot iron" (1 Timothy 4:2). And so the conscience "may be misinformed, or conditioned to regard evil as good," and "may lead a person to view as sinful an action that God's Word declares is not sinful."¹⁵

What the conscience approves is not necessarily good, and although it is not right to violate one's conscience, what it disapproves of is not necessarily evil (Romans 14:1-2, 23). The final authority for making moral judgments can only be the moral precepts of

¹² This just means that although the Gentiles lacked the explicit revelation of Scripture, their innate knowledge of God's moral law is sufficient to condemn them.

¹³ Robert Haldane, *Commentary on Romans*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1996 (original: 1853); p. 99.

¹⁴ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology*; Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1993; p. 96.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

God, and not a subjective evaluation based on this innate function of the mind. However, the more one's conscience is informed and trained by the words of Scripture, the more reliable it will become in matters of right and wrong.

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin mentions the innate knowledge of God in the mind of man. The subject is so relevant to our discussion, and the passages so aptly summarize the topic, or at least a part of it, that a lengthy quotation is justified. Although the following comes from the translation by Battles, the Beveridge translation is cited in the footnotes where his rendering is helpful or preferred.

There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops.¹⁶ Since, therefore, when one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker, they are condemned by their own testimony because they have failed to honor him and to consecrate their lives to his will...So deeply does the common conception occupy the minds of all, so tenaciously does it inhere in the hearts of all!¹⁷

...Men of sound judgment will always be sure that a sense of divinity which can never be effaced is engraved upon men's minds...For the world...tries as far as it is able to cast away all knowledge of God, and by every means to corrupt the worship of him. I only say that though the stupid hardness in their minds, which the impious eagerly conjure up to reject God, wastes away, yet the sense of divinity, which they greatly wished to have extinguished, thrives and presently burgeons. From this we conclude that it is not a doctrine that must first be learned in school, but one of which each of us is master from his mother's womb and which nature itself permits no one to forget, although many strive with every nerve to this end.¹⁸ (I, iii, 1 and 3)¹⁹

¹⁶ Henry Beveridge's translation reads, "...the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges..." (I, iii, 1); John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998; Vol. 1, p. 43.

¹⁷ Beveridge: "...so thoroughly has this common conviction possessed the mind, so firmly is it stamped on the breasts of all men"; *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁸ Beveridge: "For the world...labours as much as it can to shake off all knowledge of God, and corrupts his worship in innumerable ways. I only say, that, when the stupid hardness of heart, which the wicked eagerly court as a means to despising God, becomes enfeebled, the sense of Deity, which of all things they wished most to be extinguished, is still in vigour, and now and then breaks forth. Whence we infer, that this is not a doctrine which is first learned at school, but one as to which every man is, from the womb, his own master; one which nature herself allows no individual to forget, though many, with all their might, strive to do so"; *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; Edited by John T. McNeill; Translated by Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960; p. 43-46.

The mind of man is not born a *tabula rasa* – a blank slate without any *a priori* information. Instead, every human being is born with an innate knowledge and awareness of God. The prerequisites for language acquisition, rational thought, and theological contemplation are inherent in the mind of man. No one, therefore, can think or speak without employing Christian principles that provide the precondition of intelligibility. Even objections against the existence of God in general, and biblical doctrines in particular, must first presuppose the Christian worldview in its entirety to be meaningful. Once the entire Christian worldview is assumed, the force and substance of any objection vanish.

No one can make sense of Buddhism and Islam without first adopting the biblical presuppositions that allow logic, language, and ethics to be meaningful – but then besides their fatal internal contradictions, Christianity rules out other religions from the start; once it is assumed, other worldviews cannot be true. Without presupposing it, nothing is true and nothing can be known, but then we cannot know that we can know nothing, and it cannot be true that nothing is true. Christianity is a necessary precondition of knowledge and intelligibility; the whole Bible is true by necessity.

This is the basis for the assertion, previously stated, that every conceivable proposition is evidence, not only for the existence of God, but the truth of the whole Christian worldview. "Murder is wrong" is a proposition that lacks any justification unless an almighty and omniscient being has verbally expressed his forbiddance for such an act to creatures who bear his image of a rational mind, and enforces such a command with an eternal judgment. Atheism and Mormonism have no basis from which to declare murder as morally reprehensible. On their presuppositions, they cannot even make the word *wrong* universally applicable. They cannot authoritatively define *murder*, nor can they enforce any rules against the practice.

Yet, many do think that murder is wrong. But if the worldviews they espouse cannot lead to such a conclusion, and if only Christianity can produce such a moral law, it can only mean that they themselves have presupposed Christianity in formulating the law. "Murder is wrong" is only true within the Christian worldview, and finds no justification in any other.

Now, "Murder is right" is false under Christian presuppositions, but the proposition itself can only be understood within the biblical system, since the concepts of right and wrong, and any definition of murder, cannot be justified outside of the Christian worldview. Therefore, unbelievers employ Christian presuppositions in every proposition they utter and in every action they perform. Contrary to the objection that there is insufficient evidence for the existence of God or the truth of Christianity, the revelation of God is inescapable – "God has made it plain to them" (Romans 1:19).

Every proposition and every action is evidence for the Christian faith; however, unbelievers refuse to acknowledge or give thanks to God, who has provided this precondition of intelligibility and knowledge. Paul condemns unbelievers for this when he 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...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...they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God" (Romans 1:18, 21, 28).

A lack of evidence has never been the problem, but unbelievers "suppress the truth" by their wickedness. They already know God; the knowledge is so much a part of them that they can never escape from it. But they "did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God." Unbelief results from a foolish preference, not a lack of evidence. No matter how vehemently they deny him, unbelievers remain creatures made in the image of the Christian God, and must therefore employ Christian premises in whatever they think or say. This is the basis of an invincible argumentation for the Christian apologist, already hinted at, but will be further explored later.

The evidence is present, but suppressed. Acts 14:17 says, "Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." What appear to be natural and ordinary events such as rain and harvest ought to remind man of what he knows about God, indelibly imprinted on his mind.

Although such a knowledge is implicit in whatever he says and does, on occasion it breaks forth more clearly. Paul says to the Athenians that even the Greek poets wrote, "For in him we live and move and have our being," and "We are his offspring" (Acts 17:28). But if we are his creation, how can the worship of idols – bowing down to lower objects than we – be justified? This is what Paul says: "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man's design and skill" (v. 29).

Note again that non-Christian worship is incompatible with the innate knowledge of God. What man knows in his mind is substantial and specific enough that it excludes other forms of worship. The innate knowledge does not only exclude atheism, but also Buddhism, Islam, and all other non-Christian religions and philosophies. Their writings betray an innate knowledge of Christian presuppositions, but then they refuse to live up to what they know to be true.

This is also stated in the passage from Romans 1: "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 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (v. 21-23).

What then is the verdict? Since the revelation of God to man is inescapable, the suppression of the same is inexcusable: "...ever since the creation of the world, the invisible existence of God and his everlasting power have been clearly seen by the mind's understanding of created things. And so these people have no excuse..." (v. 20, NJB). The Greek says that they have no *apologia* – no apologetic; their non-Christian positions

are indefensible. Part of the process of defending our faith involves demonstrating that the unbelievers themselves have no defense for their beliefs. We have caught them red-handed – they deny the Christian faith while continuing to use Christian presuppositions.

Such an inexcusable suppression of truth and evidence renders their just damnation inevitable. Recall that Paul begins the passage with God's judgment against those who suppress the knowledge of God: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (v. 18). The punishment against them is evident even in this life, that is, God gives them up to a depraved mind: "Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done" (v. 28).

As God does not restrain their thoughts, their wickedness becomes worse and worse, and their sins become increasingly grotesque and unnatural. As examples, Paul mentions homosexuality and idolatry: "Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion" (v. 24-27).

But other sins are also mentioned: "They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (v. 29-31). They do not do these things in ignorance, but Paul once again emphasizes their innate knowledge of God in verse 32: "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." They know what God requires, but refuse to acquiesce. More than that, they grant approval to those who rebel against him. Just as God's revelation to them is inescapable, their damnation is inevitable.

Before outlining a strategy of argumentation against all non-Christian systems of thought, we will first summarize what has been presented so far. Although the basic themes have already been repeated several times, much of the materials may be new to many readers, and further repetitions or paraphrases should be helpful.

The Christian position is as follows. God created man in his own image. This image consists not in his body or a non-intellectual "spirit," as the term is often mistakenly used; rather, it is a rational mind – very limited compared to the mind of God, but similarly structured. This not only separates man, as the crown of creation, from the animals, but it makes meaningful and extensive verbal communication between God and man possible. A dog cannot understand the Ten Commandments or the doctrine of predestination.

The mind of man is not born blank, to be filled with information gained from experience. Without *a priori* forms and categories already present in the mind, no empirical data can furnish knowledge to man.²⁰ In any case, the Scripture teaches that man is born with some innate knowledge of God, such that he knows the reality of God and something about the moral code he has imposed upon all of humanity. Such knowledge, in itself, is sufficient to demand the adoption of the complete Christian revelation.

The observation of nature, although hampered by the inherent limitations of empiricism, reminds man of his knowledge of God. Empirical investigations cannot teach man what he does not already know,²¹ but only the divine *logos* may add information to the mind, in addition to the innate knowledge he possesses. The created order, therefore, does not add information to the mind of man concerning God, but stimulates him to recall what God has already placed into his mind, or to intuit what the *logos* immediately conveys to him on the occasions of the acts of observation.

There is something that we have not yet mentioned. Although the innate knowledge of man is extensive enough to exclude all non-Christian systems, it does not contain the entire biblical revelation. It is enough to render sinful man culpable, but the knowledge inherent in his mind and creation is not a saving knowledge.²² It is fully compatible, and only compatible, with the Christian faith, but it does not contain all the biblical propositions. To quote the Westminster Larger Catechism, "The very light of nature in man, and the works of God, declare plainly that there is a God; but His Word and Spirit only do sufficiently and effectually reveal Him unto men for their salvation."²³ The "light of nature in man," of course, indicates the intellectual illumination, or knowledge, concerning God built-in to man.

The doctrine of the necessity of Scripture naturally emerges when discussing the innate knowledge of man, since the latter is insufficient to save. However, a verbal revelation is necessary also because of the destructive consequences of sin on the mind, or the noetic effects of sin. Recall the words of Paul: "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" (v. 21). Man remains the image of God after the fall of Adam; otherwise, he would no longer be human. As such, he still knows God, as verse 21 here indicates, but "their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened," and they fail to acknowledge and worship him.

This explains why unbelievers implicitly acknowledge God in their speech and conduct – it is inescapable – but they refuse to glorify him explicitly; rather, they give credit to

²⁰ See my writings concerning the problems with empiricism.

²¹ See Augustine, *De Magistro*.

²² Those who have never heard the gospel are nevertheless condemned for rejecting what they already know through the innate knowledge of God. Besides salvation, a number of other biblical doctrines are absent, such as teachings concerning church government and the return of Christ. Even what is part of his innate knowledge, clear enough to render him culpable, is often obscured and distorted by the noetic effects of sin. The Scripture is therefore necessary even if the innate knowledge in man is extensive and specific.

²³ *The Book of Confessions*; Louisville, Kentucky: Presbyterian Church, USA, 1999; p. 195.

someone or something else. This provokes God to wrath, who then gives them up to greater filthiness of mind, resulting in greater sinfulness. Of course, in all of this, God exercises precise control over the mind of every individual, so that their rejection of Christianity is in fact decreed by him: "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Romans 9:18). Since the doctrine of election is not our main topic, I will trust the reader to remember the role of divine sovereignty without additional reminders. On such a theological basis, we may now construct a strategy for Christian argumentation.

Everyone has a worldview – a network of interrelated propositions the sum of which forms "a comprehensive conception or apprehension of the world."²⁴ There is a starting point or first principle to every worldview from which the rest of the system is derived. It is not possible for a worldview to be a web of propositions that depend on one another without a first principle, since even such a conception of a worldview requires an epistemological justification. Also, it remains that some beliefs would be more central to the web, the failure of which destroys the propositions farther from the center of the web. Even the most central claims require justification, and a worldview in which the propositions depend on one another in a way that lacks a first principle or ultimate authority, in the final analysis is exposed as having no justification at all.

Therefore, every worldview requires a first principle or ultimate authority. Being first or ultimate, such a principle cannot be justified by any prior or greater authority; otherwise, it would not be the first or ultimate. The first principle must then possess the content to justify itself. For example, the proposition, "All knowledge comes from sense experience," fails to be a first principle on which a worldview can be constructed, since if all knowledge comes from sense experience, this proposed principle must also be known only by sense experience, but prior to proving the principle, the reliability of sense experience has not yet been established. Thus, the principle results in a vicious circle, and self-destructs. It matters not what may be validly deduced from such a principle – if the system cannot even begin, what follows from the principle cannot be accepted.

A worldview that begins with a contradiction is impossible, and must be rejected. This is because contradictions are unintelligible and meaningless. The law of contradiction states that "A is not non-A," or that something cannot be true and not true at the same time and in the same sense. A denial of this law must itself employ it to be meaningful. If truth can be contradictory, then truth cannot be contradictory, dogs are cats, elephants are rats, and "See Jane run" means "I am married." If it is not true that "A is not non-A," nothing is intelligible.

Since no legitimate first principle can contradict itself, epistemological skepticism, being contradictory, must be ruled out. A "skeptic," when used in the philosophical sense, refers to one who maintains that "no knowledge is possible...or that there is not sufficient

²⁴ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*; Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2001; "weltanschauung." *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, Second Edition*: "A worldview constitutes an overall perspective on life that sums up what we know about the world..."; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001; "Wilhelm Dilthey," p. 236.

or adequate evidence to tell if any knowledge is possible."²⁵ Both are self-contradictory – the former claims to know that he can know nothing, and the latter claims to know that there is inadequate evidence to know anything.

This means that an adequate first principle must guarantee the possibility of knowledge. Self-contradictory first principles are untenable, and skepticism is contradictory. In addition, this first principle must yield an adequate amount of knowledge, and not merely make knowledge possible. "My name is Vincent" may be a true statement, but it does not tell me anything about the origin of the universe, or whether stealing is immoral. It does not even define morality for me...and how do I know "My name of Vincent" in the first place? A principle that fails to provide information concerning epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics, is therefore inadequate.

For the above and other reasons, a first principle cannot be based on induction, which reasons from particulars to universals. No amount of empirical investigation can tell me, for example, that "Every human being has a brain." To establish a general proposition such as this, I must examine every human being who has ever lived, and who is now living. And while examining human beings in one part of the world, I must somehow ensure that the nature of man has not changed in those parts of the world whose human beings I have already studied.

On the basis of empirical methods, it would be impossible to define a human being in the first place, since that concept is also a universal. Similar problems are inherent in establishing a proposition such as "All men are mortal." Some seek to rescue induction by saying that, although it cannot establish any proposition conclusively, at least it can establish a claim as probable. This is very strange. If probability is "the ratio of the number of outcomes in an exhaustive set of equally likely outcomes that produce a given event to the total number of possible outcomes,"²⁶ even if we grant that empirical methods can discover the numerator of the fraction – although I deny even this to empiricism – to determine the denominator requires knowledge of a universal, and omniscience is required to establish it in many cases. Since empirical methods cannot know universals, to say that it can come to probable knowledge is nonsense.

Induction is always a formal fallacy, and a system based on an empirical principle cannot succeed. Deduction, on the other hand, produces conclusions that are guaranteed to be true if the process of reasoning is valid, and if the premises are true. Rationalism reasons deductively, and as such is an improvement over empirical methods. Rationalistic systems appear to be less popular, but we will quickly point out some of its difficulties before proceeding.

Rationalism selects a first principle – or as in geometry, begins with one or more axioms – and from them deduces the rest of the system. If the first principle is true, and the process of deductive reasoning is valid, the subsidiary propositions, or theorems, would all be true by necessity. The problem with non-revelational rationalism is how one may

²⁵ *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, "Skeptics," p. 850.

²⁶ *Merriam-Webster*, "probability."

select a first principle. Now, if the axiom selected is self-contradictory, then it is of course rejected. But assuming that a non-contradictory principle is selected, it must still justify itself.

Even if we assume that a number of self-consistent and self-justifying principles exist, they must be broad enough to render knowledge possible. So, to posit "My name is Vincent" as the first principle in a rationalistic worldview would result in the failures mentioned earlier. The final blow is that there are various schools of rationalistic systems, and their starting points are different and incompatible. Which one is correct? A rationalistic worldview with an arbitrary first principle cannot succeed. Although the result is no better, the method itself is still superior to the inductive procedure.²⁷

By this point, all non-Christian systems, including the monotheistic revelational system of Islam, have already failed. They simply cannot satisfy all the requirements thus far listed. However, for the sake of completeness, we must also mention that the propositions within a worldview may not contradict one another. A first principle must not produce a proposition in ethics that contradicts another proposition in science or theology. I trust that there is no need to recite again the problems with contradictions.

The present apologetic strategy begins with the recognition that Christianity is the only deductive system with a self-consistent and self-justifying first principle revealed by an almighty omniscient being that is also broad enough to yield an adequate number of propositions sufficient to construct a complete worldview that entails no self-contradiction. Christianity is the only true worldview that makes knowledge and intelligibility possible. All other systems of thought collapse into philosophical skepticism, but since skepticism is self-contradictory, one cannot remain in such a position, and Christianity is the only way out of the epistemological abyss.

Since knowledge is possible only when Christianity is presupposed, and knowledge is impossible on the basis of non-Christian systems, those unbelievers who have any knowledge – such as $1 + 1 = 2$ – must therefore presuppose Christianity, although they refuse to admit it, perhaps even to themselves. Non-Christians, even those who have never learned the contents of the Bible, can employ Christian presuppositions because a minimal number of them have been implanted into their minds by God. Thus, we challenge the non-Christians to be consistent with their own worldviews, and cease using Christian presuppositions in constructing their systems, in which case their intellectual edifices collapse into self-contradictory skepticism. Or, they may repent of their sinfulness and be converted. Such a strategy of argumentation will be successful not only against secular philosophies, but all non-Christian religious worldviews as well.

"How do you know?" is a question sufficient to destroy any non-Christian worldview. The believer will soon discover that, as long as his opponent does not hold to biblical orthodoxy, his beliefs will turn out to be inconsistent and arbitrary. He may not even

²⁷ In case the reader wonders, a mixture of rationalism and empiricism achieves nothing more than combining the fatal flaws of both methods.

know what his ultimate authority is, but the apologist may search for it by asking the right questions, generally ones that seek justification for his opponent's claims.

The Christian who knows biblical doctrines well will find that he can easily answer the epistemological challenge in any field of inquiry when his opponent cannot. For example, natural science assumes the uniformity of nature, that experiments are repeatable, that the laws of physics and chemistry will be the same next year as they are today. But on what basis do they believe that? It is impossible to justify such a bold assumption on an empirical basis, since whenever the question is posed, it is always true that the future has not yet been observed.

To say that the future has always been like the past in our previous experience avoids the question, since the "future" in this reply is already the past, but the question pertains to the future of our experience, not yet observed by anyone. On what basis can empirical science guarantee that the future will be like the past? If they cannot, of what use are the scientific laws they so diligently formulate and confidently employ in their calculations?

One may think it silly to question the uniformity of nature, but this is only because we have assumed it all along. The question is still unanswered: By what authority and on what basis do we make such a grand assumption? Even secular philosophers find it difficult to justify the many assumptions of science. If one abandons certainty and says that it is very probable that the future will be like the past, he makes an unintelligible statement, as established above.

Christian theology assures us of the uniformity of nature in Genesis 8:22: "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease." Our opponent may require justification from us for this claim, but this merely pushes the issue back to one's ultimate authority, which is not a problem for the Christian at all. God tells us that the future will be like the past when it comes to the operations of nature. Since the scientists and adherents of various worldviews cannot justify the uniformity of nature, when they nevertheless assume it, they are presupposing a Christian premise, while refusing to admit it or give thanks to God for it.

If man is a product of evolution, on what basis does our opponent forbid genocide or infanticide? But Exodus 20:13 says, "You shall not murder." If moral laws are in place only by convention, or the consent of the majority, on what basis does our opponent approve of a moral reformer? But Acts 5:29 says, "We must obey God rather than men!" Unless evolution can prove – prove, not assume – that all of humanity has evolved from one common source, on what basis does our opponent assert the unity of mankind and the immorality of racism? But Acts 17:26 says, "From one man he made every nation of men."

Curious indeed! If the unbeliever rejects our presuppositions, on what basis does he assert ethical principles similar to ours? By what authority does he assert principles that differ? If non-Christian presuppositions cannot justify basic issues in science and ethics – we have not yet asked them about politics, education, music, and history – their systems are

completely worthless. And once a person assumes any Christian premise, he logically commits himself to adopt the entire Christian system, since the authority behind any biblical proposition is the authority of God, who demands that everyone believes and obeys all that he says.

Unless one accepts the infallibility of Scripture, he has no right to any biblical proposition. By what authority would he judge some biblical propositions as true and others false? If he claims a prior authority or principle by which he determines the truth of each biblical proposition, and assuming that there is no authority even higher within his worldview, then this principle is in fact his ultimate authority, based on which he should derive the rest of his system.

Therefore, one who assumes an empirical first principle is consistent when he evaluates Scripture with empirical methods, but he must also produce an account of ethics on the same basis, without borrowing any Christian premises. But of course, he cannot justify such a first principle. At any rate, every biblical proposition assumes the self-attesting infallibility of Scripture. If one accepts any biblical proposition, he must accept the authority behind it, or be left without justification for adopting the premise.

Believers who are confident when it comes to arguing against atheism sometimes find it difficult to challenge other religions, especially those that claim a revelational epistemology. The way to argue against religious systems is just to treat it like other types of worldviews. Revelational epistemology or not, unless it is a complete and orthodox Christian system, it cannot withstand the tests listed above.

The questions to ask are the same in kind, although the words may differ, depending on the context of the debate. Is knowledge possible based on their ultimate authority? Are there self-contradictions inherent in their first principle, or subsidiary propositions? Do they borrow Christian premises? If the religion claims to acknowledge or follow the Old and New Testaments, does its content nevertheless contradict them?

No prophet can replace Jesus, since he is God. Although God may complete his revelation, he does not contradict what he has said before with new revelations. While the Old Testament predicts the New Covenant, the New Testament anticipates no further revelation. The Scripture is complete, and no non-Christian religion can claim biblical support.

I cannot here critique the theology of every major religion, but I can suggest some important questions to consider. Some who lack understanding in both Christianity and Islam think the two are very similar, but these two systems contradict even at the very beginning. Islam rules out the Trinity from the start, and Christians believe that God is knowable. Many Muslims and Christians know that one religion is incompatible with the other, but those who understand neither insist that they are similar enough, if not the same.

Then, one may perform an internal critique of Islam. It has a hamartiology,²⁸ so a soteriology is relevant. Does Islam have an adequate and coherent soteriology? Or, does it fail like Catholicism, Mormonism, Buddhism, and Arminianism? Does its soteriology satisfy its hamartiology? Is its hamartiology coherent with its anthropology? Does its anthropology follow from its theology proper? But just like the other worldviews, the Christian will soon discover that Islam fails at the starting point of epistemology.

We have set forth the basics of a biblical system of apologetics, in which every proposition and every event is evidence for the existence of God and the truth of Christianity. Many may need additional training and instructions to gain effectiveness, but the system itself allows even a child who has been taught Christian theology to defeat the non-Christian scientist or philosopher.

It is the superior content of the Christian faith that triumphs over unbelieving thought. "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?...For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Corinthians 1:20, 25). The failure of secular philosophies is total; the defeat of non-Christian religions is complete.

²⁸ The doctrine of sin.

2. ULTIMATE QUESTIONS

While preparing for the publication of his book, Fred Heeren had arranged to meet with several marketing executives who were experts in the area of religious publishing. He relates his experience as follows:

"People don't care about life's ultimate questions," said one seasoned old marketer. "People care about money. They care about their personal appearance. They care about getting more leisure time, more physical comforts..."

...Another executive told me he personally wasn't interested in the content. "I don't think about life's ultimate questions," he said... "Your book's got no appeal to me. No one's going to buy your books unless you appeal to some universal self-interest, some basic want. And what do people want?"

"Truth?" I ventured, just to be perverse.

"No, no – people want to dominate others. They want to emulate the admired, to *be* admired. They want more power, more popularity, more self-confidence," and he continued with another list, concluding: "You need to tell people how this will make them richer, happier, more fulfilled, how it will give them a spiritual high."

These were not words to be taken lightly. The men before me had successfully packaged many books for some of the largest religious publishers. One executive boasted that his company routinely packaged books even before they were written, relegating the content to a mere afterthought.¹

After recovering from the nausea, not so much caused by the business practice described, but by the truth of the executives' words about the reading audience, we realize that here we also have the formula for contemporary preaching: proclaim a message that "appeal to some universal self-interest." Truth is unimportant, as long as we "give them a spiritual high." Such a false gospel has generated an entire niche of spiritual readership – those who consider themselves Christians, but are not – and it is to these false converts that the businesses market their attractively packaged products.

However, the overwhelming number of false believers in our midst is not the subject; rather, I wish to discuss the observation that, "People don't care about life's ultimate

¹ Fred Heeren, *Show Me God*; Wheeling, Illinois: Day Star Productions, Inc., 2000; p. xx-xxi.

questions." By ultimate questions, we refer to issues regarding the controlling assumptions in every area of thought and life. Instead of the superficial, we focus on the fundamental ideas from which our view of reality is derived. For example, rather than performing scientific experiments to test a particular hypothesis, we are interested in theories that prescribe the place and limitations of science.

It is true that many people do not think about the ultimate questions, and most who give some attention to them do not perform the task seriously or with competence. Young people sometimes say that they will contemplate the ultimate questions when they become older, when they get rich, or when they retire. This intent may make them slightly more noble than those who plan never to consider any issue deeper than the basest animalistic needs, but the result may not be any better.

To delay obtaining answers to the ultimate questions, one must make the dangerous assumption that he does not require these answers in the meantime. Determining to achieve financial success first already assumes a given purpose to life, and a set of priorities. To put it off until retirement assumes that answers to ultimate questions are irrelevant for daily living. However, if the answers to these questions govern all subsidiary propositions within a person's worldview, on what presuppositions do they operate until they are ready to entertain them? One may plan to consider the existence of God after retirement, but if there is a God who punishes adultery and theft, he should stop cheating on his wife and embezzling funds from his firm *now*.

No one can live a day without presupposing answers to the ultimate questions. To delay a serious contemplation of these issues is equivalent to saying that even if their presuppositions are in error, they will abide by them for most of their lives, and then they will consider if they need to be altered. But on what basis do they suppose that life is even worth living until then? Christians have an answer to this, but a naturalistic worldview has no defense against an invitation to commit suicide. Why is life worth living on the basis of evolutionary principles? To propagate the species? But why must the human species continue to exist? On account of humanistic theories, humanity should eventually become extinct. Even if this tragic end will not happen for many years, each individual only lives for so long, and afterward ceases to exist. Why should he concern himself with what happens to humanity? But Christianity affirms that God had said, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28). It also teaches an afterlife and a final judgment.

Then, there are those who say that one should suspend judgment over ultimate questions, since one cannot determine the answers to them in this life. However, if they do not believe in an afterlife, which is already an assumption concerning an ultimate issue, all they will have is this life to answer those questions. And if they believe in an afterlife – an opposite assumption – do they or do they not also assume that they need to prepare for it? Those who claim to be agnostic about ultimate issues nevertheless assume very definite answers concerning them, thus contradicting their agnosticism. Their lack of awareness on this point does not prove their position.

We may offer another example as to how one's ultimate presuppositions are constantly applied. Perhaps we have all faced a situation where we must decide whether to tell a lie. Does the expected positive result justify the lie? In that case, we have assumed a teleological ethics that says the end justifies the means. And who is to say that the projected end is positive in the first place? A standard of making value judgment has been assumed. Or, do we need some other authority to justify lying? Perhaps lying is never justified. How do we know?

Ultimate questions are unavoidable, and whether they have seriously considered them or not, people have made certain assumptions concerning them. To operate upon unjustified ultimate assumptions for most or all of one's life is to risk living it in vain. Therefore, not only must everyone settle these questions in his mind, but it should be done as early as possible in life, and not to be postponed until one has carried out elaborate plans founded upon unjustified presuppositions, or old age.

In his book, *Life's Ultimate Questions*,² Ronald Nash discusses, among other things, logic, metaphysics, epistemology, theology, anthropology, and ethics. We will touch upon all of these topics from a Christian perspective in what follows, mainly from a partial exposition of the prologue of John's Gospel. These are appropriately called ultimate questions since they are basic to any system of thought, and our answers to them affect our view of every other issue in life. A looser conception of what we mean by "ultimate" may include discussions on politics and education, but politics cannot be divorced from ethics, and theories of education must presuppose some sort of anthropology. Metaphysics and epistemology govern one's view of the procedures, roles, and limitations of the natural sciences.

We begin with John 1:1, a source of both inspiration and controversy: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The content of verses 1-18 renders the referent of the "Word" unmistakable, and verse 17 identifies it with "Jesus Christ." So the prologue gives us much information for a biblical christology.

The "Word" in Greek is *logos*, and verse 1 can hardly be read without some mention of the *logos* doctrine. In *Preach the Word*,³ I complain that modern preaching hides the minister's seminary education from his congregation. His homiletic theory demands that the class lecture he attended and the sermons he preaches be separated into two distinct categories. Describing one who does not know better, *The Elements of Preaching* says:

Fresh out of school, he is so enamored of his notes that he tries to transform them into sermon outlines, and his congregation is subjected to terms such as *logos*, *hypostatic union*, *parousia*, and so on. We know of one church, located near a seminary, which always knew what the new student pastor would preach about in his first sermon – the *logos*

² Ronald H. Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999.

³ Vincent Cheung, *Preach the Word*, Chapters 2 and 3.

doctrine in John 1. Why? Because that was one of the first lectures given in the Greek class each year.⁴

I suspect that any reader interested enough to read the present work is also interested in knowing about the "hypostatic union" and the "parousia." Many may suggest avoiding using technical terms when addressing the general audience, but even Christians not in the ministry should talk about the return of Christ. If they do not need to use the word *parousia* to do it, then neither do the professional theologians, but if the theologians require their use, then so do the rest of the believers. Technical terms are useful in summarizing a concept that may take several words or sentences to express. For this reason, I favor the use of technical terms, but it is most irresponsible to "protect" regular Christians from being exposed to them. *Trinity* is also a technical term, but one so much discussed and used that most believers know something about it. Christians need to know about the hypostatic union as well as the trinity.

The same chapter from *The Elements of Preaching* ends with the admonition, "Digest your material first, then prepare messages that meet human needs and glorify Jesus Christ." In other words, seminary lectures do not meet human needs and do not glorify Jesus Christ. Are these Christian seminaries? And we wonder why Christians have a poor grasp of even the fundamentals of the biblical system of thought.

Contrary to such anti-intellectual recommendations, all Christians should be taught theology, and the technical terms that render convenient the expression of relevant concepts. Paul did not hesitate "to preach anything that would be helpful" (Acts 20:20) to his hearers. Of course, the preacher may need to begin with elementary doctrinal teachings before proceeding to the advanced materials, but to deliberately hide theological knowledge from Christians robs and insults them, and disqualifies one from the ministry altogether.

Heraclitus of Ephesus (530-470 B.C.) argued that nature is in a constant state of change. His famous illustration contends that a man cannot step into the same river twice, since the water does not remain the same; the bed and banks of the river are also altering. Not only that, but the man himself would also have changed by the time he steps into the river again.

However, if everything changes, then nothing really exists. A sculptor works a piece of clay into the appearance of a dog, but before one can say its name, or even decide what it is in his mind, the object changes into a car, then a building, and then a pot. If its appearance never remains the same, we may still call it clay, but what if the substance of the object also changes? The clay changes into bronze, then to iron, then to ice, and then to gold.

If something is not anything, it is nothing. And if it is nothing, it cannot be known. Knowledge, therefore, depends on the immutable. Heraclitus admitted that there is a

⁴ Warren Wiersbe and David Wiersbe, *The Elements of Preaching*; Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1986; p. 85.

logos, a law, that does not change. It is "a rational and good agent whose activity appears as the order of Nature."⁵ Without it all would be chaos, and nature would be unintelligible.

Later, the *logos* is taken over by Stoicism, a school of thought founded by Zeno of Citium (about 300 B.C.). The Stoics were ideologically more diverse than their contemporary Epicureans, and both groups were among those whom the apostle Paul confronted in Athens (Acts 17:18). Stoicism regarded *logos* as a principle of divine reason, and the *logoi spermatikos*, like seeds and sparks of divine fire, govern the development of every object in nature.

Philo (20 B.C. – A.D. 40) was a contemporary of Christ. This Jewish Hellenistic philosopher from Alexandria had a rather developed *logos* doctrine that appear to make the Word "nothing else than the faculty of reason in God."⁶ Yet, an insufficient concern for consistency renders the exact nature of Philo's *logos* difficult to specify. Although it is variously represented in his writings, interpreters understand that its primary purpose is to "bridge the gulf between the transcendent deity and the lower world and to serve as the unifying law of the universe, the ground of its order and rationality."⁷

By the time the apostle John penned his Gospel, the word *logos* had been invested with tremendous background and philosophical meaning. Although there are similarities between John and the Greek philosophers in their usage of the term, to suggest "any connection amounting to doctrinal dependence"⁸ betrays a misreading of both the apostle and the philosophers. Heraclitus was like the Milesian philosophers in many ways, while the Stoics held to a materialistic physics, and their views of the *logos* fit into their respective systems.

The *logos* of Philo is also incompatible with Johannine christology. For John, the *logos* is not only a metaphysical principle, but a person. When Philo refers to his *logos* with personal terms, a metaphorical sense is intended. At any rate, no Greek philosopher conceived of this principle of rationality and order as a historical person, as the doctrine of incarnation affirms: "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). Even further from their thinking is an epistemological and soteriological mediator who is both God and man (1 Timothy 2:5). Kittel concludes that, "From the very first the New Testament *logos* is alien to Greek thought."⁹

Nevertheless, John must be permitted to use a word that his readers could recognize, with an intended meaning that has *some* resemblance to non-biblical usage. Indeed, the

⁵ Gordon H. Clark, *Ancient Philosophy*; The Trinity Foundation, 1997 (original: 1941); p. 37.

⁶ Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey*; The Trinity Foundation, 2000 (original 1957); p. 165.

⁷ *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, Second Edition*; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999; "Philo Judaeus."

⁸ *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, Vol. V*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981 (original: 1867-1887); p. 492.

⁹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. IV*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999 (original: 1967); p. 91.

biblical *logos* has much to do with logic, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and provides its own answers to other ultimate questions, only that it is not a product of human speculation, but divine revelation. Through an understanding of the prologue, we will uncover how biblical revelation supplies content to a complete Christian worldview.

Here is John 1:1 again: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." *Word* is one legitimate choice in translation, but *proposition*, *sentence*, *speech*, *argument*, *discourse*, *logic*, and several other words are arguably satisfactory also. However, if we take its theological and philosophical background into account, *logos* here may be translated with a capitalized *Word*, *Wisdom*, or *Reason*.

To ascribe such high place to the *Word* or *Reason* is repugnant to anti-intellectualistic thinking. In *Faust*, the German romanticist Goethe writes:

'Tis writ, "In the beginning was the Word."
I pause, to wonder what is here inferred.
The Word I cannot set supremely high:
A new translation I will try.
I read, if by the spirit I am taught,
This sense: "In the beginning was the Thought."
This opening I need to weigh again,
Or sense may suffer from a hasty pen.
Does Thought create, and work, and rule the hour?
'Twere best: "In the beginning was the Power."
Yet, while the pen is urged with willing fingers,
A sense of doubt and hesitancy lingers.
The spirit comes to guide me in my need,
I write, "In the beginning was the Deed."¹⁰

Without tracing the philosophical influences implicit in the passage, we may note that what is expressed is not a matter of translation, but a prejudice against the Christian view of the universe. Goethe here has little concern as to what the verse actually says, but he seeks to oppose the intellectualism of the apostle John. If in the beginning there was the *Word* or the *Thought*, then this divine principle of reason is what began and governs the universe, and theology must be thoroughly rational. Contemporary Christian apostates disagree.

Although, to some readers, the *Word* conveys little meaning if left unexplained, it does not necessarily demand the alternate translation of *Reason* or *Wisdom*. *Word* implies the self-expression of a person, and this fits well with the christology of the New Testament, which says that Christ "is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15), and that, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3). If it is kept in mind that this *Word* is a person, this rendering preserves the personification of the *logos*, as well as the meaning of reason and wisdom inherent in it.

¹⁰ *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 45; Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1996; p. 12.

"In the beginning" is reminiscent of Genesis 1:1, and confers to the Word a place in creation. What this is, we will see more clearly in verse 3. "The Word was with God" conveys an important bit of information that, together with the next phrase in verse 1, begins to construct a picture of the triune Godhead. The word translated "with" is *pros*. That the Word, or Christ, is *with* God indicates that he is distinguishable from God. Some examples of *pros* include the following: "Aren't his sisters here *with* us?" (Mark 6:3); "Every day I was *with* you" (Mark 14:49); "I would have liked to keep him *with* me" (Philemon 13); "...we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was *with* the Father and has appeared to us" (1 John 1:2). The final example refers to Christ and once again implies that he is not identical with the Father, but at the same time has a definite relationship with him.

With some exceptions, *God*, or *theos* in Greek, refers to the Father in the New Testament, and therefore Christ is not identical with God, or the Father. However, that Christ is not the Father does not mean he is not deity. John writes that, "He was with God in the beginning" (v. 2), which is sufficient to imply his divine status. But more explicit is the third clause in verse 1, which says, "the Word was God."

This clause in John 1:1 has been the source of much dispute and controversy, a phrase that "ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16). Wishing to deny the deity of Christ or the Trinity, some have observed that the *theos* in *theos en ho logos* lacks the definite article (as in "the" God), and thus merely indicates that Christ has the quality of being divine, and not that he is deity. That is, he is like God, but he is not God in his being.

Since the article (Greek: *ho*) precedes *logos*, it makes the Word the subject. That *theos* follows immediately after the conjunction "and" (*kai*) shows that it receives the emphasis. Had an article preceded both *theos* and *logos*, the phrase would have identified the Word with God completely, which is inconsistent with the trinitarian theology that John and other New Testament writers affirmed. To have an article before *theos* would make John say something that he does not wish to say. The clause as it is written affirms the deity of Christ, and at the same time preserves the doctrine of the Trinity. The grammatical structure of this clause therefore demands the translation, "The Word was God." The REB accurately translates its meaning, saying, "what God was, the Word was."

"In the beginning was the Word" teaches the pre-existence of Christ; "the Word was with God" implies an intimate relationship between Christ and God, without identifying the two; nevertheless, "the Word was God" prevents misunderstanding by saying that Christ himself is God, and equal to the Father. Of course, biblical evidence on the Trinity is not exhausted by this verse, but anti-trinitarian cults and heretical groups must answer many other New Testament passages on the subject. For now, it suffices to say that Christ is God, but he is not the Father. The Bible teaches that God is a Trinity; there is only one God, but three divine persons in the one Godhead.

We are interested in how the prologue answers ultimate questions. Verse 1 tells us that there is at the beginning a principle of reason and order; however, unlike that of the

philosophers, this *logos* is a divine person. Verse 3 continues, "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." The NASB is preferable: "All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being." Other translations punctuate verses 3 and 4 differently, with the result that the former reads: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (NRSV); "Through him all things came into being, not one thing came into being except through him" (NJB); "Everything came about through him, and without him not one thing came about" (Lattimore).¹¹

Some commentators find it difficult to make sense of verse 4 when the passage is punctuated according to the second version, for it then begins, "What has come into being in him was life..." (NRSV). Nevertheless, the symmetry of verse 3 has become more evident. D. A. Carson suggests an alternate translation of verse 3 that says, "All things were made by him, and what was made was in no way made without him."¹² My primary concern with the verse is to prevent, "without him nothing was made *that has been made*" from being misunderstood as implying that some things were not created. The Christian view is that nothing apart from God is eternal, and opposes any concept of creation in which God merely rearranges pre-existing chaotic matter into definite form. Christianity teaches creation *ex nihilo* – out of nothing. That is, there was no pre-existing matter for God to work with at creation. God created both the matter and the form or arrangement of the universe.

The second version of verse 3 eliminates the potential misunderstanding: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." However, if such a rendering is impossible due to various considerations, Carson's translation is perhaps helpful in avoiding the problem. Nevertheless, the first half of the verse in itself makes the Christian view of creation clear in any translation: "*All things* came into being through him." Taking these words seriously prevents the possibility of misunderstanding the second half of verse 3. Both portions of the verse say the same thing, the first half affirms that all things were made by the Word, and the second half denies that anything exists apart from his creative power. There was no matter at all before creation; God, by agency of the Word, made everything.

Verse 1 and 2 introduce the *logos*, the basic principle on which the rest of the prologue depends. This *logos* is more than a metaphysical abstraction, but a personal God, who is later said to be incarnated in the historical person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Herein is the foundation of Christian metaphysics: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Then, the created order is discussed in verse 3. In opposition to other systems of thought, John denies that creation was merely an act of rearrangement of pre-existing matter. Rather, there was no matter at all before God created it. Creation was by divine *fiat*.

¹¹ Richmond Lattimore, *The New Testament*; North Point Press, 1996; p. 195.

¹² D. A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991; p. 118.

Since *Reason* precedes creation, the laws of logic were not created. They are not true only for human beings, nor do they operate purely by cultural convention. Instead, they are necessary laws of thought that had existed eternally in the mind of God; logic is the way God thinks. Therefore, contrary to contemporary Christian irrationalism, what is a contradiction to man should also be a contradiction in the mind of God, and what is non-contradictory to God should not appear as a contradiction to man. But due to the noetic effects of sin, man does not always reason correctly, and so what may seem to be a contradiction to him may not be a genuine contradiction. The point is that the laws of logic are the same with God as it is with man.

The implication is that when man thinks with perfect rationality, his thoughts are true. His mind corresponds to the mind of God. However, due to sin's effect on the mind, man is often irrational. In addition, he is limited in knowledge. Therefore, the verbal revelation of Scripture is required to overcome the mind's failure to grasp truth, and to supply man with the necessary premises to know God and reason correctly about him. Foundational to the believer's sanctification is to learn the propositions in the Bible, and reason correctly with them.

An erroneous understanding and outrageous application of Isaiah 55:8-9 has done much damage to the development of many Christians. The passage says, "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'" It is said that this means man can never think or understand God's thoughts. But if this is true, then no one can understand Isaiah 55:8-9. It is precisely because our thoughts do not correspond to God's that we need to renew our thinking to match his. Since our thoughts are not his thoughts, we must read the Scripture to know what God thinks, and change our minds to conform to it.

Colossians 1:16 says, "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him." The thrust is that "by him *all things* were created"; the rest of the verse gives emphasis to the fact that nothing at all has been made apart from his act of creation. So far this repeats what we have read from John. The next verse informs us that, not only did he create all that exists, but even now he sustains the creation by his power: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (v. 17). The Epistle to the Hebrews echoes this teaching, saying, through the Son God "made the universe" (1:2), and that he is "sustaining all things by his powerful word" (v. 3).

Biblical metaphysics is therefore as follows. The metaphysical starting point is the triune God. By agency of the Son – *logos*, Reason, Wisdom, or Word – the Godhead created the universe, which includes both the "visible and invisible" (Colossians 1:16), the spiritual and the material realms. Nothing exists that God had not created; he made everything that exists.

The Christian view of reality, however, does not ascribe to God only the act of creation, but even now he sustains and facilitates all the operations of the universe he had created.

In fact, he not only makes the continual existence of creation possible, but he is the cause of all that occurs. Just as nothing could have come into being apart from him, nothing can happen in creation apart from his will and power: "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" (Matthew 10:29).

This view of metaphysics is pivotal to Christian epistemology, ethics, and soteriology. In theological terms, having a biblical conception of the sovereign God is necessary for a sound Christian theology. A compromise in theology proper creates a rippling effect that destroys the integrity of all other biblical doctrines. Once a false view of God is accepted, the rest of the system cannot be Christian. For example, a sovereign God precludes the humanistic free will doctrine in soteriology. And one who insists on Arminianism cannot at the same time affirm a sovereign God. Some theologians perceive this dilemma, and so they have come to believe in a God who is limited in power and knowledge. But then they are no longer worshipping the God of the Bible. The logical consequence of Arminianism is paganism. The Christian system requires an affirmation of the absolute sovereignty of God.

This solves the mind-body problem, which questions how an immaterial mind can manipulate a physical body. How can the incorporeal contact the physical? But if God facilitates all mental and physical operations, his omnipotence makes this possible. In other words, without divine absolute sovereignty, it is impossible for a person to even roll his eyeballs at this doctrine. God knows and wills our thoughts, and at the moment the thought occurs, he also causes the corresponding physical motion. Man has no power of existence or causation within himself.

Such a view of metaphysics produces a necessary implication for epistemology. If it is God who facilitates all operations in the universe, it follows that all operations relating to thought and knowledge are also in his power. If the continual existence and operation of the created order depends on him, and man is not autonomous in this respect, then all knowledge acquisitions and intellectual activities also depend on him, and man is also not autonomous in this area. Just as man cannot exist or function without God, man can know nothing without him.

Thus, Christian epistemology is consistent with Christian metaphysics. When empiricism is rejected as a necessary consequence of Christian theology, and a revelational epistemology based on scriptural infallibility is affirmed, empiricists often challenge, "Don't you have to read your Bible?" They of course defend the reliability of sensation, and the more extreme claim that knowledge comes solely from the senses, whereas the present writer insists that no knowledge *at all* comes from sensation.

Their question misses the point. If knowledge cannot come from sensation at all, then the question itself does not rescue sensation. Christian epistemology – consistent with its metaphysics – affirms that, for any knowledge to be possible, it must be immediately – that is, without mediation – granted to the mind by God. Thus, at the moment that one

sees the words of the Bible, the divine *logos* communicates what is written to the mind. So, we do read the Bible, but knowledge never comes from sensation.

This again solves the mind-body problem, this time in the reverse direction. Whereas in metaphysics, God facilitates physical motion in correspondence to the thoughts of the mind, in epistemology, God grants knowledge to the mind on the occasion of the sensation. Sensation, therefore, does nothing more than to stimulate the mind to intellectual intuition, obtaining knowledge from the *logos*. The empiricist must explain how physical sensation can otherwise convey knowledge to the incorporeal mind. It cannot be done.

Even if we ignore the mind-body problem, how can any concepts be inferred from the many sensations presented to the mind at any given moment? Would such an inference be formally valid, or unavoidably fallacious? An empiricist cannot make a plausible case of how one can tell that there are two objects when one sees an apple on a table. Based on sensation alone, one cannot tell where one object ceases and another object begins. At any given moment, one is bombarded by a number of sensations, and the mind must organize and combine them so that only the sensations belonging to their respective objects are grouped together. As one writer notes, one may "on one occasion combine the ruddy color and the juicy taste to make an apple, if he wishes; but may he not on another occasion combine that color with the smell of hydrogen sulfide and the sound of B-flat to make a boogum?"¹³ Also, on the basis of empiricism, one cannot tell the distance between two objects. Space *itself* is not observable to the senses; no one has ever seen or touched "space."

Augustine argued that each word is a sign that can represent any intelligible concept; that being so, there is no way for a person to learn the meaning of a word by sensation. A father may teach his child what a car is by pointing at one, but then "car" may mean the act of pointing, the finger used to do the pointing, the color of the car, any part of the car, the car together with the road and the background, or any large object. If one attempts to overcome the problem by pointing to many cars, then the meaning of the word may become "transportation," which may be an elephant or camel in some parts of the world.

Besides, pointing to the same object many times whenever the word is mentioned depends on a limited instances of pointing to generate a definition of a universal, such as "car," in the mind of another, but induction is always a formal fallacy. What kind of car is meant by the person who points at the objects – only those made within the past two or three decades? If not, let the person find cars older than that, and point to them as well. He must also shake his hand at *every* object that the word cannot designate. To define a word by mere pointing, the person must point at every existing object meant by the word, and shake his hand at every object not meant by it. Even more difficult is the requirement to do the same for every object that has been destroyed, and every object that has not yet been produced.

¹³ Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewy*; The Trinity Foundation, 2000 (original: 1957); p. 307-308.

If one were to ask what "walking" is, another person may stand up and begin walking if he was sitting down. But then the word may mean standing, leaving, the act of standing and leaving, or even standing and walking. If the two were already walking together, the one being asked the question may walk faster to emphasize the act, but then how can the observer distinguish between walking, hurrying, or even running? Even more perplexing is how one may learn the words *God, faith, is, and justice* on the basis of empiricism.

If one were to reply by giving a verbal definition, he must also use words. However, to understand the definition, the hearer must also know the meanings of the words that make up the definition; otherwise, the same problems occur all over again. It follows that the meanings of words must first be known in the mind before the words as perceived by the senses may be understood. If so, knowledge does not come from the outside, but from within. Some of this knowledge is innate, so "Christ enlightens every man ever born by having created him with an intellectual and moral endowment... This knowledge is a part of the image of God in which God created Adam."¹⁴

Although it is not possible to summarize the detailed arguments in the *De Magistro* of Augustine, we may at least reproduce his conclusion:

By means of words, therefore, we learn only words or rather the sound and vibration of words. For if those things which are not signs cannot be words, even though I have heard a word, I do not know that it is a word until I know what it signifies. So when things are known the cognition of the words is also accomplished, but by means of hearing words they are not learned. For we do not learn the words which we know, nor can we say that we learn those which we do not know unless their signification has been perceived; and this happens not by means of hearing words which are pronounced, but by means of a cognition of the things which are signified. For it is the truest reasoning and most correctly said that when words are uttered we either know already what they signify or we do not know. If we know, then we remember rather than learn, but if we do not know, then we do not even remember...

But, referring now to all things which we understand, we consult, not the speaker who utters words, but the guardian truth within the mind itself, because we have perhaps been reminded by words to do so. Moreover, he who is consulted teaches; for he who is said to reside in the interior man is Christ, that is, the unchangeable excellence of God and his everlasting wisdom, which every rational soul does indeed consult. But there is revealed to each one as much as he can apprehend through his will according as it is more perfect or less perfect. And if sometimes one is deceived, this is not due to a defect of external light, for the eyes of the body are often deceived...^{15 16}

¹⁴ Gordon H. Clark, *The Johannine Logos*; The Trinity Foundation, 1989 (original: 1972); p. 27.

¹⁵ Augustine, *De Magistro*; Prentice-Hall Publishing Company, 1938.

Truth is propositional, since only propositions can be true or false; however, propositions are not conveyed from one human mind to another by means of sensations, but by the facilitation of the *logos* alone. Therefore, Christian epistemology, even as it relates to sensation, does not depend on sensation, and thus is not plagued by the insuperable difficulties of empiricism. The role of sensation in Christian epistemology is only to provide the occasion for intuition; no knowledge is acquired from the sensations themselves.

Yes, we read the Bible, but even this activity does not depend on sensation, but on God. Man is dependent on God for his continual existence and intellectual operations; he is not autonomous in any sphere of life. Unbelievers fail to acknowledge God and give thanks for his goodness, and thus God turns them over to a depraved mind, to the end that they would store up the wrath of God for future condemnation. But Christians are those who have repented of their sinful thinking and worship God for his sustenance.

Some find such an epistemology hinted at in the prologue of John. To quote Ronald Nash, "After John describes Jesus as the cosmological Logos, he presents Him as the epistemological Logos. John declares that Christ was 'the true light that enlightens every man' (John 1:9). In other words, the epistemological Logos is not only the mediator of divine special revelation (John 1:14), He is also the ground of *all* human knowledge."¹⁷ Several of the early church fathers also teach such a view. "On the basis of John 1:9, Justin Martyr argued that every apprehension of truth (whether by believer or unbeliever) is made possible because men are related to the Logos..."¹⁸ Everyone depends on Christ to know anything. Believers admit it; unbelievers do not.

Even if one disagrees with this interpretation of the verses mentioned, it does not undermine the view of epistemology just presented, since it is a necessary consequence of the biblical metaphysics earlier introduced. Also, there are a number of verses in the Bible teaching that it is God who grants understanding and knowledge. To repeat, in knowledge acquisition, God acts directly on the mind – sometimes on the occasions when one receives physical sensations. Only what is deducible from Scripture can be known for certain, and even reading the Bible depends on Christ and not the senses. Any other epistemology is indefensible.

Just as the above epistemology is a necessary consequence of biblical metaphysics, Christian soteriology is shaped by biblical metaphysics and epistemology. But since soteriology presupposes hamartiology, we should first discuss the Christian view of sin and ethics. Now, if all of reality depends on God, knowledge also depends on him, and anthropology must then address man's relation to God. Ethics must also be defined by him. Verses 10-11 of the prologue say, "He was in the world, and though the world was

¹⁶ We have fell upon the subject of linguistics and its relationship to epistemology and metaphysics, but we cannot spend time developing it here.

¹⁷ Ronald H. Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man*; Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1982; p. 67.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." F. F. Bruce translates verse 11, "He came to his own place, and his own people did not receive him."¹⁹ Since verse 10 refers to a more general rejection of Christ, while verse 11 deals with the historical situation in Israel, for our purpose we will ignore the latter in what follows.

To say that "the world was made through him" (v. 10) reinforces the doctrine of creation, or biblical metaphysics, introduced in verses 1-3. The Word became a historical person "in the world," but the world "did not recognize him." Instead of receiving the worship he deserved as the creator, he was ignored and rejected, and finally crucified by those whom he had made. Such is the nature of sin, and thus of sinful men, that while obedience is owed to their maker, they scorn his commandments and persecute those who would follow him. If the creator dared invade their territory, they were determined to kill him.

The Christian view of metaphysics demands obedience to the creator's commands in the area of ethics. Verse 10 implies that the world ought to have known Christ because "the world was made through him." He was their creator, and he was in the world, yet he did not receive the welcome he deserved. If they were aware that "the world was made through him," they surely did not act like it; sin is blind, ungrateful, and irrational. At any rate, the verse shows that man's relation to God has been damaged through sin. We must look elsewhere for explicit treatment on the meaning and severity of sin.

Through the influence of secular philosophy and psychology, many Christians have adopted a distorted concept of sin. I have met several who told me that they had never sinned at all, but this is impossible when we use the biblical definition. Perhaps the plainest reply is 1 John 1:8, which says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." One must note that this verse, together with verses 9-10,²⁰ is written to believers, and not primarily evangelistic in nature, as is sometimes assumed. Even Christians who assert to be sinless are self-deluded.

Without first defining what sin is, we know on the basis of the above that everyone sins, whether he is a Christian or not. However, to gain better understanding of the subject, one must provide a definition of sin. At this time we can do without Berkouwer's more than 550 pages on the topic,²¹ and so I will only attempt a quick introduction.

New Testament teaching indicates that sin is a transgression of the law of God. Romans 3:20 says, "through the law we become conscious of sin," and John writes, "in fact, sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). Right and wrong is defined by the law of God. To break his commandment is to do wrong, and one who does so is said to have sinned. It is a gross misunderstanding of the gospel to say that the law has been abolished by the work of

¹⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983; p. 37.

²⁰ "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives."

²¹ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Sin*; Grand Rapid, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980 (original: 1971).

Christ. Paul writes, "where there is no law there is no transgression" (Romans 4:15). If the moral law has been abolished in the sense that there is no longer a moral law, then there is no sin, at least for the Christian toward whom Christ's work applies, but perhaps also for the unbeliever. However, as we have read, even the Christian continues to sin, and therefore the moral law of God must still be in force.

In connection with the above, it is also a perversion of New Testament teaching to say that love, or even the commandment of love, has replaced the moral law prescribed in the Old Testament, such as the Ten Commandments. Romans 13:9 says, "The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" The commandment to love is a summary of the moral commandments of God, not a replacement. In fact, the word *love* remains undefined until it is given meaning by relating it to the specific moral commandments. Murder and theft are still sins in the New Testament, and to love my neighbor means not to murder him or steal from him.

Against the notion that the New Testament has somehow relaxed the definition of sin, Jesus reinforces the strictness of God's moral law in his ministry. He dispels the human traditions that excuse the people from obeying the commands of God (Mark 7:13) by insisting that one violates the moral law even by thinking evil thoughts, and not only by overt actions. He says:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, "Raca," is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell...You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery." But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28)

Jesus is by no means revising the Old Testament commandments, but he is expounding on their intended meaning in opposition to the interpretations of human traditions. God has always counted evil thoughts as sinful:

The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. (Genesis 6:5)

Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. (Isaiah 55:7)

Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood. Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways. (Isaiah 59:7)

O Jerusalem, wash the evil from your heart and be saved. How long will you harbor wicked thoughts? (Jeremiah 4:14)

While murder and adultery are sinful, it is also sinful to refrain from them for the wrong reason. And to worry about food and clothing is to commit the sins of unbelief and Mammon worship (Matthew 6:24-25, 30). One must obey God in his thinking, motives, and actions. It appears that there is no possibility that anyone is sinless, except Jesus Christ (Hebrews 4:15). But it will get worse before it gets better. The apostle James notes, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker" (James 2:10-11). An act or thought is wrong because God says it is wrong. To obey him on one point and disobey on another point still makes one a lawbreaker; he has defied the one who issued the commandments.

The Westminster Larger Catechism offers an excellent statement on the definition of sin. Question 24 – "What is sin?" – invokes the reply, "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, any law of God, given as a rule to the reasonable creature." Any transgression or deviation from the moral law by a rational creature is sin. The law of God does not only prohibit evil, but in many places demand positive good from us: "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" Add to all this Matthew 5:48, and the high moral standard required by God is made evident: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

There seems to be a problem – a big one. The moral standard described is not only very high, it appears to be impossible. And even if we can keep God's law perfectly from now on, what about our previous sins? It is no light matter for one to offend an omnipotent and holy God – one evil thought is sufficient to damn him forever. Therefore, the law of God drives us to despair: "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law'" (Galatians 3:10).

For anyone to be justified in the sight of God, there must be a way that it may be done apart from the law (Romans 3:28). Galatians 3:24 says, "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith." The law sets an impossible standard that renders every man guilty, thus driving those to Christ who have despaired of their own efforts. With this background, the reader should be able to understand Romans 3:21-24: "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short

of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

No one is guiltless, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." As Psalm 130:3 says, "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?" Despair! However, the psalm continues, "But with you there is forgiveness" (v. 4). We are "justified by his grace," and so have "the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7). We are not saved by our own goodness, for there is none, but we are saved by his mercy and election.

Before we conclude this whirlwind tour on the biblical concept of sin and proceed to the doctrine of salvation, there is one final point that helps connect this discussion of, and important digression from, verses 10-11 of the prologue with verses 12-13. It is the extent of the effect of sin on man. Is man capable of contribution or cooperation in his salvation? Can he, without determinative divine influence, decide to accept the gift of God?²² Using metaphorical language, is man spiritually sick or blind, or is he something worse?

Jesus says in Luke 5:31-32, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." The sinner is as one who is sick when it comes to spiritual things. This metaphor suggests that he is at least crippled in his ability to deal with things moral and spiritual. Then, the sinner is said to be blind: "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn – and I would heal them" (John 12:40). This metaphor provides us with a specific piece of information regarding the condition of the sinner. The blindness of his eyes is equivalent to the deadening of his heart, and both mean that he fails to understand. Spiritual blindness is not different from an intellectual blindness, as those who hold to a trichotomous anthropology sometimes maintain. Instead, spiritual blindness is a subset of intellectual blindness, only that we are referring to an intellectual inaptitude regarding spiritual topics. Paul says that unbelievers are "darkened in their understanding" (Ephesians 4:18).

The sinner is spiritually sick and blind, but he is also spiritually dead. Writing to the Christians at Ephesus, the apostle Paul says, "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). This theologically decisive metaphor is not a fleeting rhetorical device with Paul, but he assumes it as he continues, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved" (v. 4-5). To those who are Christians, Paul says that God has "raised us up with Christ" (v. 6). This brings us from the problem to the solution, from hamartiology to soteriology, and back to the prologue of John.

²² Whether the grace of God for salvation is extended to every person in the first place is another question. "For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion'" (Romans 9:15).

Having established the sinful condition of man implied by John 1:10-11, we now proceed to verses 12-13: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." Although all human beings are creatures of God, not all are his children; non-Christians are children of the devil (John 8:44). In the writings of John the believer becomes a "child" (*teknon*) of God, and only Jesus is the "son" (*huios*) of God, while with Paul both Christ and the believers are said to be sons, but the latter only by adoption. Both apostles make a distinction between the sonship of Christ and the sonship of a Christian. One never becomes the son of God in the same sense that Christ is the son of God, contrary to the teaching of some misguided preachers and liberal theologians.

We have seen two metaphors for conversion – resurrection and the new birth. To repeat Ephesians, Paul writes to the elect that God has "made us alive with Christ," and that he has "raised us up with Christ." Here in the prologue, those who believe in Christ goes through the new birth to become the children of God. As Jesus says in John 3:3, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Ezekiel gives an excellent summary of what happens at conversion: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezekiel 36:25-27). Whereas it is impossible to obey the moral laws prior to conversion, God enables the Christian to obey them by his Spirit.

There is now enough information to produce a synthesis on soteriology, and to relate it to biblical metaphysics and epistemology. Unbelievers are spiritually dead in sin. The sinner is in a condition such that conversion requires a radical²³ reconstruction in personality and intellect amounting to a spiritual resurrection. Now, one who is merely sick and blind may perchance do something to help himself, or at least receive a gift that is offered to him. However, one who is dead can do or decide nothing for himself. Therefore, a man prior to this radical reconstruction, or spiritual resurrection, cannot contribute to or cooperate in his own salvation, nor is he willing to do so. Romans 8:7 says, "the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so."

Therefore, it depends solely on God to will and execute the spiritual regeneration of a person. Verse 12 of the prologue says, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God," and so faith in Christ is indeed the means by which God effects the justification and adoption of a person. However, whether to have faith in Christ does not depend on man, but on God, since faith itself is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8). The biblical order is regeneration, faith, justification, and adoption. The spiritually dead cannot exercise faith, and must first be resurrected, but God regenerates only those whom he has chosen.

²³ By that I mean "fundamental" or "at the root."

Paul writes in Romans 11:7-8, "What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: '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.'" The false gospel of Arminianism says that it is man who chooses whether he will accept Christ, but Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last" (John 15:16). Deceived by a false message, some say they choose to receive Christ, but unless they have been chosen by God to be saved, their choice is false and ineffectual. They will not bear true and lasting spiritual fruit.

Since faith in Christ is the assent of the mind of man to the gospel message about Christ, soteriology presupposes an epistemology. How does one come to know, understand, and accept the gospel? When Peter says to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus replies, "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). Peter did not observe the particulars of the words and works of Christ, and then by a process of induction infer that he must be the Christ.

Nicodemus says, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him" (John 3:2), but his observation did not arrive at the proposition required for salvation. By observing the same works, the Pharisees inferred, "It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons." The empirical method renders knowledge impossible; biblical soteriology depends on a revelational epistemology – that is, not the subjective revelation of the mystics and charismatics, but the immediate operation of the *logos* on the mind by means of the Scripture or the preaching of the gospel. Therefore, "faith comes from hearing the message" (Romans 10:17), but at the same time it is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8). Not all who hear the gospel obtain faith, but only those to whom the *logos* grants assent to it.

Another passage worthy of note is 2 Corinthians 4:4-6: "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." The preaching of the gospel in itself does not save, but it requires the direct action of God on the mind in order for the light of the gospel to penetrate. It is God who "made his light shine in our hearts." Thus, "neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:7). This is consistent with the epistemology explained earlier, that sensation – in this case, the hearing of the gospel – at most provides occasion for the mind to intuit the truth from the mind of God. But if God does not grant it, the man cannot understand (in a saving manner) or believe the gospel. We may add that knowledge often comes even apart from the stimulation of sensation; the latter is never necessary in obtaining knowledge.

Just as soteriology depends on epistemology, and epistemology depends on metaphysics – knowledge is made possible only by the power of God – biblical soteriology also depends on biblical metaphysics. That reality is wholly controlled by God means that he controls the salvation of each individual also. "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Romans 9:18), and salvation is in the hand of God alone to dispense to whomever he wishes. To those whom he has chosen, he issues an irresistible summon to accept Christ; to those whom he has rejected, he hardens their hearts against the gospel. As Psalm 65:4 says, "Blessed is the man whom thou choosest, and causest to approach unto thee, that he may dwell in thy courts: we shall be satisfied with the goodness of thy house, even of thy holy temple" (KJV).

Here we have arrived at the core of the Christian worldview – we depend on God for existence, for knowledge, and for salvation. As Paul writes, "...you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:4-6). While secular philosophies and non-Christian religions fail at every point in answering the ultimate questions, the biblical system provides true and coherent answers to all of them. From logic to metaphysics, from metaphysics to epistemology, from epistemology to ethics, from ethics to soteriology, the one and only sovereign God reasons, creates, sustains, reveals, commands, judges, and saves.

3. DEMONSTRATION OF THE SPIRIT

Essential to Christian theology is the sovereignty of God, and essential to Christian soteriology is the doctrine of election. Writing to the Thessalonian converts, Paul says, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you" (1 Thessalonians 1:4). The doctrine maintains that in eternity, before the universe was made, God had selected a definite number of individuals for salvation in Christ, and he did so without basing his decision on the faith and works, or any other condition, in the individuals so selected. Rather than choosing an individual because of any foreseen faith, the individual receives faith because God has chosen him.

It is common for those who deny the biblical doctrine of election to nevertheless affirm that God has chosen those who believe in Christ. However, their version of election changes the words of Christ, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16), into "You chose me first, and therefore I chose you." In the latter case, God does little more than accept our choice, and does not choose us in any real sense of the term.

The Arminian account of election turns it into a reaction of God to what we choose, and our choosing Christ is logically prior to God's choosing us; therefore, mere human beings determine the will of God in salvation. Against this humanistic heresy, Paul declares that "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you." If Jesus speaks the truth in John 15:16, then Arminianism is false. But even "he has chosen you" should be enough – it does not mean, "he has approved of your choice." It is God who chooses the elect.

In a disappointing paragraph on 1 Thessalonians, David J. Williams writes:

...election becomes ours only when we are "in Christ"...Thus the element of human choice enters into the process. If we choose to be in Christ, we have been chosen by God. There is nothing arbitrary, therefore, about election. Our choice makes us his elect. At the same time it makes us "somebodies" who in the eyes of the world may be "nobodies." Election gives us a value that otherwise we would not have, for God chose us, not because of what we were, but despite our being sinners and simply because he is the kind of God he is...Our election is entirely an expression of God's love.¹

It is confusing, if not contradictory, to say that election "becomes ours" only when we are in Christ. Is God's choice of a person an object that can be given or taken away? It is based on this nonsensical statement that "the element of human choice enters into the process." He continues, "If we choose to be in Christ, we have been chosen by God." This

¹ David J. Williams, *New International Biblical Commentary: 1 and 2 Thessalonians*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1992; p. 28.

statement by itself can, with some allowance for different interpretations, fit into either Christianity or Arminianism. In the former, this would mean that one who chooses to be in Christ discovers that God has already chosen him. God's choice is prior to and the cause of his choosing Christ. That is, God first chose the person, and in due time causes him to choose Christ.

The next statement implies that this is not what Williams means: "There is nothing arbitrary, therefore, about election." In other words, if "the element of human choice" does not enter the "process," then election would be arbitrary. If election is up to God without reference to any condition found in the person, then God's decision would be arbitrary. To prevent a decision from being arbitrary, therefore, God must base his decision on what we have chosen.

Adherents of both sides of the debate are often careless in their use of the word *arbitrary*. If by arbitrary, the Arminian means, "existing or coming about seemingly at random or by chance or as a capricious and unreasonable act of will,"² the Christian would deny the charge that election is arbitrary. However, this is the last definition in *Merriam-Webster*. The previous definitions include: "depending on individual discretion (as of a judge) and not fixed by law...not restrained or limited in the exercise of power: ruling by absolute authority."³ Using these definitions, election is indeed arbitrary – God rules "by absolute authority" and election is based on his "individual discretion." Paul writes, "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Romans 9:18), and therefore election is arbitrary, but not in the pejorative sense.

The next sentence from Williams makes his position more clear: "Our choice makes us his elect."⁴ Provided he understands that the elect refers to the chosen, he means, "Our choice makes us his chosen," or, "Our choosing God makes us chosen by God." Notice the word *makes* – our choice is the cause or reason for God's choice. But if this is the case, how does election make us "somebodies"? God has not in fact chosen us, but we have chosen him. All he does is respond to our choices. God does not make us special; we make ourselves special.

After this, Williams has the gall to write, "God chose us, not because of what we were...simply because he is the kind of God he is..." This is a lie. He has just said that, "Our choice makes us his elect." He chose us precisely "because of what we were" – we are those who have chosen him first. How then, can our election be "*entirely* an expression of God's love"? This is very poor scholarship.

The doctrine of reprobation teaches that, just as God has chosen those individuals who would be saved, he has also decreed the damnation of all other individuals. Some who are convinced concerning the doctrine of election nevertheless deny the doctrine of

² *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*; Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2001.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Perhaps we should understand his earlier statement, "If we choose to be in Christ, we have been chosen by God," in the light of this latter. The two appear to mean the same thing.

reprobation. However, just as the former is a necessary conclusion from the sovereignty of God, so the latter is true if by nothing else other than logical necessity. But many are proud to reject this biblical doctrine "however logical it may appear to be."⁵

Commenting on 1 Thessalonians 1:4, William MacDonald writes, "The doctrine of election teaches that God chose certain people in Christ before the foundation of the world,"⁶ and he cites Ephesians 1:4 as support. To show that he accepts some form of divine election, we may include his remarks on Romans 9: "In His sovereignty, God has elected or chosen certain individuals to belong to Himself."⁷ This broadly agrees with the biblical doctrine of election.

But then, continuing with his comments on 1 Thessalonians 1:4, MacDonald flatters the present author by saying, "These two doctrines, election and freedom of choice, create an irreconcilable conflict in the human mind."⁸ He says in another place, "But the same Bible that teaches God's sovereign election also teaches human responsibility...How can we reconcile these two truths? The fact is that we cannot. To the human mind they are in conflict. But the Bible teaches both doctrines, and so we should believe them, content to know that the difficulty lies in our minds and not in God's."⁹ Since divine sovereignty and human responsibility produces no contradiction in my mind, my mind must be superhuman or even divine. According to MacDonald, it is anything but human. But since there are other authors who deny that these two truths contradict, let MacDonald repent of his polytheism.

MacDonald fails to understand the nature of a contradiction. He says that if the Bible affirms two contradictory doctrines, we must then affirm both of them. That is, the Bible affirms divine sovereignty, and then it affirms what seems to be the contradictory doctrine of human responsibility. Since it affirms both, we must affirm both. What MacDonald does not realize is that if these doctrines are contradictory, then to affirm one is to deny the other; it is impossible to affirm both at the same time.

If these two doctrines contradict, then when one reads about divine sovereignty in the Bible, he is not only reading an affirmation of sovereignty, but also a denial of human responsibility; and a biblical affirmation of human responsibility is tantamount to a denial of divine sovereignty. Therefore, if the two doctrines contradict, it will be just as easy to say that the Bible *denies* both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. To say that these two doctrines only appear to be contradictory to human minds is irrelevant, since if this is true, it remains that no human being can affirm both doctrines even if God can.

Unless MacDonald charges the Bible with error, he must either deny one of the two doctrines as foreign to Scripture, or he must admit that they do not contradict. What many

⁵ Peter E. Cousins, "1 Thessalonians"; F. F. Bruce, ed., *New International Bible Commentary*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979; p. 1461.

⁶ William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc., 1995 (original: 1989); p. 2024.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1714.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2024.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1714-1715.

commentators refuse to confess is that they do not have the subtlety of thought or the intelligence to harmonize the two – that is, if they need to be harmonized in the first place. If they cannot harmonize the two, no human mind can! Since I affirm that the Bible teaches both divine sovereignty and human responsibility, I must also affirm that the two doctrines do not contradict. To me, there is not even an apparent contradiction, and so MacDonald calls me God.

Sarcasm aside, a large part of the problem involves imprecision regarding the idea of responsibility. What does it mean for man to be "responsible" for his actions? MacDonald and others like him think that there is a contradiction between divine sovereignty and human responsibility because they assume that the latter requires man to have freedom of choice, or free will. However, if God has absolute control, man is not free, and therefore divine sovereignty and human responsibility contradict.

The first definition for "responsible" in *Webster's New World College Dictionary* is, "expected or obliged to account (*for* something, *to* someone); answerable; accountable."¹⁰ Regardless of whether man is free or not, is man "expected or obliged to account" for his actions to God? Yes, "For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:14). God will reward the righteous and punish the wicked; therefore, man is responsible. What seems to so many as an "irreconcilable conflict" is hereby resolved.

Man is responsible precisely because God is sovereign, since to be responsible means nothing more than being held accountable to one's actions, that one will be rewarded or punished according to a given standard of right and wrong. It has everything to do with whether God has decreed a final judgment, and whether he has the power and authority to enforce such a decree, but it does not depend on any "free will" in man. Man is responsible because God will reward obedience and punish rebellion, but this does not mean that man is free to obey or rebel. The Bible teaches that God controls all human decisions and actions. Autonomy is an illusion.

Romans 8:7 explains, "the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." Man is responsible for his sins not because he is free to do otherwise; this verse says that he is not. Man is responsible because God has decided to judge him for his sins. The doctrine of human responsibility, therefore, does not depend on the humanistic teaching of free will, but on the absolute sovereignty of God.

Right away the question becomes one of justice, or whether it is just for God to punish those whom he has predestined to damnation. Paul anticipates such an objection in Romans 9:19, and writes, "One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?'" He replies, "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?'" (v. 20). This amounts to saying that God is arbitrary – he rules by absolute authority; no one can halt his plans, and no one has the right to question him. This is true because God is

¹⁰ *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition*; Foster City, California: IDG Books Worldwide, Inc., 2000.

the creator of all that exists, and he has the right to do whatever he wishes with his creation: "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?" (v. 21).

The next two verses read, "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..." (v. 22-23). This is still part of the answer to the question in verse 19: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" Paul is saying that since God is sovereign, he can do whatever he wishes, including creating some vessels destined for glory, and some destined for damnation. The elect rejoices in this doctrine; the reprobate detests it. Either way, there is nothing anyone can do about it. Peter says regarding those who reject Christ: "They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for" (1 Peter 2:8).

It is only due to poor reasoning that the issue of justice is even brought up against the doctrine of reprobation. The objection in its various forms amounts to the following:

1. The Bible teaches that God is just.
2. The doctrine of reprobation is unjust.
3. Therefore, the Bible does not teach the doctrine of reprobation.

Premise (2) has been assumed without warrant. By what standard is one to judge whether the doctrine of reprobation is just or unjust? If the Bible speaks of it, then it is not up to us to decide the issue. On the other hand, the Christian reasons as follows:

1. The Bible teaches that God is just.
2. The Bible teaches the doctrine of reprobation.
3. Therefore, the doctrine of reprobation is just.

The pivotal point is whether the Bible affirms the doctrine; whether it is just or unjust should not be assumed beforehand. Calvin notes:

For God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous. When, therefore, one asks why God has so done, we must reply: because he has willed it. But if you proceed further to ask why he so willed, you are seeking something greater and higher than God's will, which cannot be found. Let men's rashness, then, restrain itself, and not seek what does not exist, lest perhaps it fail to find what does exist.¹¹

Election and reprobation together provide an answer to objections formed on the basis of a scriptural passage such as 1 Timothy 2:3-4: "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." Verse 4 states

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; Edited by John T. McNeill; Translated by Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960; p. 949, (III, xxiii, 2).

that God wants "all men" to be saved. Two interpretations are possible. Arminianism insists that this verse teaches that God wills the salvation of every human being, but this desire is not fulfilled due to people's rejection of Christ by their own free will. Although the words "all men" by themselves can be understood this way, an alternate interpretation takes the words to mean "people everywhere" (Acts 17:30), and not every human being.

It is difficult to determine the correct interpretation on the basis of this verse alone. However, since we have already established the doctrines of election and reprobation on the basis of other parts of Scripture, it is impossible to understand "all men" as referring to every human being. The New Testament emphasizes the universal offer of the gospel not in the sense that every human being can be saved, since only those whom God has chosen will come to Christ, but in the sense that salvation is not limited to the Jews, or the physical descendants of Abraham.

New Testament writers do not concern themselves with teaching that God has made salvation possible for every human being – they deny it – but that salvation has been made available to "every nation, tribe, language and people" (Revelation 14:6). Likewise, the astounding truth in Joel's prophecy is that God would pour out his Spirit upon "all flesh" (Acts 2:17, KJV) in the sense of making salvation available to every ethnic group. One idiot of a preacher said that this means "all Muslim flesh, Buddhist flesh," and so on, but this is not what is meant. On the day of Pentecost was present "God-fearing Jews from *every nation* under heaven" (Acts 2:5), and the Book of Acts chronicles the progress of the gospel to the Gentiles. That is, "God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).

This is the good news and the surprising message, that the elect company is not restricted to the blood descendants of Abraham, but God has chosen individuals from all ethnic groups, so that, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28-29). One should also read Ephesians 2:11-13: "Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' (that done in the body by the hands of men) – remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ."

Assuming the reader gets the point, 2 Peter 3:9 poses no challenge to the doctrines of election and reprobation, but is rather consistent with and explained by them: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." However, unlike 1 Timothy 2:3-4, the verse itself eliminates Arminianism, since prior to "not wanting anyone to perish" comes "he is patient with *you*."

Peter does not refer to every human being, but only those designated by "you." The letter is addressed to "those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ

have received a faith as precious as ours" (1:1), and in 1:10, he urges his readers to "be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure." Therefore, 2 Peter 3:9 says that the Lord is not slow to fulfill the promise of his "coming" (v. 4), but he is waiting for the full number of the elect to come to repentance.

As for 1 Timothy 2:4, it cannot be used to prove or disprove election and reprobation, but questions surrounding the two doctrines must be settled prior to approaching the verse. If other parts of Scripture affirm these doctrines, then "all men" cannot possibly mean every human being. From the two possible interpretations, Arminianism picks the one it prefers and attempts to suppress other verses that make such an understanding impossible. American individualism may make the Arminian preference appear more natural, but the rest of the New Testament shows that the good news is the universality of salvation in terms of people groups and geographical area, and not that it is possible for every person to be saved, if only they would believe in Christ by their own free will.

After denouncing the opponent, it is always wise for the author to restate his own position in order to prevent confusion. The relevant sections in the Canons of Dort¹² are too lengthy to reproduce here; therefore, I will cite several passages from the Westminster Confession of Faith:

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.

These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his free grace and love alone, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.

As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Where they who are elected being fallen in Adam are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ,

¹² Read especially "The First Head of Doctrine: Of Divine Predestination"; Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, Vol. 3: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998 (original: 1931); p. 581-585. Or, Joel R. Beeke & Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Reformed Confessions Harmonized*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999; p. 28-36.

effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.

The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice. (III, 3-7)

In connection with the providence of God, the Confession states that his control extends itself "to the first Fall, and all other sins of angels and men, and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them..." (V, 4). Just as the elect comes to Christ by an irresistible summon, and "it is God who works in [him] to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phillippians 2:13), the reprobate is by no means autonomous – not even in his sins. God directs a person's thoughts "like a watercourse wherever he pleases" (Proverbs 21:1), and there is no free will.

It is futile to repeat the silly objection that he permits some actions but does not will them, since "...why shall we say 'permission' unless it is because God so wills?"¹³ Since God controls and sustains all things, what does it mean for him to permit something except to say that he wills and causes it? There is no distinction between causation and permission with God; unless he wills an event, it can never happen (Matthew 10:29).

The Confession says that the election and reprobation of individuals belong to the "secret counsel" of God, so that the members of either group are not listed for public scrutiny. If so, on what basis does Paul say, "For we *know*, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you" (1 Thessalonians 1:4)? Despite all his faults, MacDonald gives a correct explanation: "The apostle was assured that these saints had been chosen by God before the foundation of the world. But how did he know? Did he have some supernatural insight? No, he knew they were among the elect by the way they received the gospel."¹⁴ Paul lists the indications that his readers were chosen by God for salvation in the next several verses.

Verse 5 begins, "our gospel came to you not simply with words." Most Christians in our day are anti-intellectualistic in their faith due to the pervasive influence of secular philosophy. A presentation of the gospel consisting of "just a sermon" is unacceptable; rather, they place great emphasis on music, drama, fellowship, and mystical experience. With such a disposition, "not simply with words" in this verse will doubtless be understood as an endorsement to this type of thinking, or even a direct deprecation of preaching.

Even the less anti-intellectualistic commentators stumble over the phrase. Leon Morris writes, "Words alone are empty rhetoric, and more than that is required if people's souls

¹³ Calvin, *Institutes*; p. 956, (III, xxiii, 8).

¹⁴ MacDonald, p. 2024.

are to be saved."¹⁵ However, just because "more than that is required if people's souls are to be saved," does not mean that "words alone are empty rhetoric." His words are ambiguous in the first place. If by rhetoric he means, "the art of speaking or writing effectively," "skill in the effective use of speech," or "verbal communication,"¹⁶ then what he has written almost amounts to saying, "Words are words," which forms an irrelevant tautology.

I surmise that the meaning he has in mind resembles, "artificial eloquence; language that is showy and elaborate but largely empty of clear ideas."¹⁷ A fuller quotation from verse 5 says, "our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction." Now, if Paul's preaching had been stripped of the latter elements – that is, the power of the Spirit – it still does not follow that his words would have been "artificial eloquence" or "language that is showy and elaborate but largely empty of clear ideas." What Morris has written is equivalent to saying that the gospel by itself is nothing more than showy language void of substance and clear ideas.

Morris betrays his confusion when he writes in the next paragraph of his commentary, "The gospel is power...whenever the gospel is faithfully proclaimed, there is power."¹⁸ But if "the gospel is power," then one can never preach the gospel as empty rhetoric. It is fashionable to repeat such anti-intellectual phrases as, "Words alone are empty rhetoric," but words are always rhetorical, and rhetoric always deals with words. Whether a presentation is *empty* rhetoric depends on the content of the speech. The proposition, "Jesus is Lord," consists of words alone, and no one will acknowledge its truth unless by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3), but whether one believes it or not, it is not empty rhetoric.

Any interpretation of verse 5 that deprecates the role of words or preaching cannot be true. The entire Bible consists of words without a single picture or musical note; it conveys intellectual information. Paul says in Acts 20:32, "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified." Verbal communication is more intellectualistic relative to other forms of expressions, and thus becomes the target of attack for anti-Christian philosophies, although even a mystical experience is meaningless apart from the intellectual information it conveys.

There are two ways to understand the "only" in "for our gospel did not come to you in word only" (NASB; "simply," NIV). The following examples illustrate the two senses in which the word may be used:

1. The Godhead does not consist *only* of God the Father, but also Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit.

¹⁵ Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, Revised Edition*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991; p. 46.

¹⁶ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*.

¹⁷ *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition*.

¹⁸ Morris, *Thessalonians*; p. 46.

2. His wealth does not consist *only* of his father's old bicycle, but also five cars and two houses.

In the first statement, the word *only* does not belittle the status of God the Father, but merely indicates that he is not the sole member of the Trinity. The same word, however, may imply the small value of the bicycle when placed alongside the other items listed in the second statement.

Since in many passages Scripture teaches the importance of words, the *only* (or *simply*) of verse 5 cannot be understood in the second sense. That is, by saying that his gospel did not come "in word only," Paul has no intention of belittling words or preaching, but merely desires to indicate that other things had happened other than his verbal presentation, suggesting to him that his converts were in fact among God's elect.

Misconception in this area is common. Robert Thomas begins well his explanation of verse 5, saying, "...words are basic to intelligent communication. But the gospel's coming was not 'simply' in word; speaking was only a part of the whole picture."¹⁹ But then he stumbles over the same point and writes, "Their preaching was not mere hollow rhetoric but contained three other ingredients essential to the outworking of God's elective purpose."²⁰ Is the content of Paul's preaching *ever* "mere hollow rhetoric"? Galatians 1:11-12 eliminates this possibility.²¹

Morris and Thomas do not seem to know what the word *rhetoric* means. If Paul knew that God had chosen the Thessalonian converts *because* his preaching came "with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction," this means that his preaching did not always come with these elements, that God did not always make his preaching effective; otherwise, all who hear Paul preach would have been saved. But in instances where the elements listed are not present, does the content of his preaching become empty rhetoric, or does the content of the gospel remain the same – that is, the power and wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24)?

Against the anti-intellectualistic interpretations of Scripture, our position must be that words by themselves can be meaningful, and whether a presentation consists of empty rhetoric depends on the content of the speech. Since the gospel provides true and coherent content, it is never empty rhetoric. Neither does Paul put down the role and effectiveness of preaching, since he writes, "God...at his appointed season...brought his word to light through the *preaching* entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior" (Titus 1:2-3). It is true that besides the words we utter, God must exercise his power to convert the sinner, but it is by means of our preaching that he does it. Paul came to know that some of the Thessalonians were among God's elect because of the effects accompanying his preaching that he himself as a human being could not have produced.

¹⁹ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 11*; Grand Rapid, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978; p. 244.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

²¹ "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."

We will now consider what it means for the gospel to come "with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (v. 5). A detailed analysis of verse 5 can become complicated. For our purpose, we only need to note that from verse 4 to 10 Paul mentions a twofold effect of the gospel among the Thessalonians. Paul was aware that God had chosen the Thessalonians for salvation due to the consciousness of divine involvement in his preaching, and the genuine reception of the gospel by the converts. We will take verse 5 as referring to the former.

Preaching is the means by which God summons the elect to salvation. The elect who come under gospel preaching are regenerated by the power of God, who then is given faith in Christ, and thus become justified. As not all who hear the gospel are among the elect, the power of God does not operate in a saving manner every time the gospel is preached, or at least not toward everyone.

Not that the gospel is ever void of power, since "it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16), but only those whom God has called to salvation will receive a change of mind, so that he may recognize Christ as the power and wisdom of God. Paul explains, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:22-24).

The *power*, therefore, is the divine influence of the Holy Spirit at work through the preaching of the apostles to effect a subjective change in the minds of the hearers. Common consensus rejects the notion that here the apostle has the power to work miracles in mind. Lenski writes, "*Power* has no connection with the miracles wrought in Thessalonica,"²² and Robertson notes, "Paul does not refer to miracles by *dunamis*." Then, Vincent: "Power of spiritual persuasion and conviction: not power as displayed in miracles..."²³ Besides Vine's "no miracles are recorded in connection with the preaching of the gospel at Thessalonica,"²⁴ and other theological concerns, the reason for this is that the word is in the singular, and should not be confused with the plural, as in 1 Corinthians 12:10 – "miraculous *powers*." Nevertheless, the singular by itself does not exclude the miraculous.

This is not to deny that preaching can be accompanied by miracles, and there is no alternate interpretations to Romans 15:18-19²⁵ and Hebrews 2:3-4²⁶ than to say that

²² R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001 (original: 1937); p. 226.

²³ Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament, Vol. 4*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.; p. 17.

²⁴ *The Collected Writings of W. E. Vine, Vol. 3*; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996; p. 22.

²⁵ "I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done – by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ."

miracles may be an integral part of evangelism, although not necessarily in every instance of preaching. We will reject cessationism without argument at this point. However, this does not mean that the New Testament writers have miracles in mind whenever power is mentioned, even when it is related to preaching or evangelism. Sometimes the subjective influence of the Spirit is in view. Some even think that this is more often the case than not: "Paul rarely alludes to his power of working miracles."²⁷

If we may declare the cessationists innocent of theological bias in their understanding of verse 5, we may need to find some of the charismatics guilty for misreading it. Donald Stamps says that the *power* of verse 5 "resulted in conviction of sin, deliverance from satanic bondage, and the performing of miracles and healings."²⁸ Another writer asserts that the verse "probably suggests that miraculous manifestations are in view." I only wish to establish at this point that one does not need to be a cessationist to reject such an interpretation.

Since 1 Corinthians 2:4 parallels 1 Thessalonians 1:5, we should study it to gain a better understanding of both verses. The entirety of 1 Corinthians 2 has been distorted by many anti-intellectualistic and charismatic commentators. It is ludicrous, as some popular charismatic preachers think, that "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (v. 2) means that Paul decided to suppress his knowledge regarding other Christian doctrines as he was preaching. "Jesus Christ and him crucified" should be taken as designating a central theme of the gospel message, that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3).

However, as 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 indicates, Paul had also taught the resurrection to the Corinthians when he preached to them. "Jesus Christ and him crucified," "the message of the cross," and other such phrases should be understood as general designations of the Christian worldview. Of course, several particular aspects of Christianity may receive emphasis at the beginning, but Paul did not preach only a simple message with little regard for the comprehensive set of doctrines forming the Christian faith. Rather, he says that he preached "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27) to his hearers.

1 Corinthians 2:6-7 also contradicts the anti-intellectual agenda of some preachers: "We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began." All through 1 Corinthians 1-2, Paul is not saying that the Christian message is somehow less intellectual, or that the gospel has no claim to intellectual respectability,

²⁶ "This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."

²⁷ Vincent, *Word Studies*, Vol. 4; p. 17.

²⁸ *Full Life Study Bible: New International Version*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992; p. 1860.

but that its *content* differs from non-Christian philosophy. He is saying that the content of the gospel is different from and superior to the product of human speculation.²⁹

Christianity is more intellectually rigorous than secular philosophy, not less. There is no trace of anti-intellectualism in 2 Corinthians 11:6: "I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way." He claims to have received "surpassingly great revelations" (2 Corinthians 12:7), and possesses "insight into the mystery of Christ" (Ephesians 3:4). Love must abound "in knowledge and depth of insight" (Phillippians 1:9). Paul prays for his readers for "God to fill [them] with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Colossians 1:9). According to Peter, God had given Paul great wisdom, such that "His letters contain some things that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:15-16).

The Christian system is thoroughly intellectual. Detractors of this view often confuse the Bible's denunciation of human speculation as a denunciation of the intellect. It is the false intellectual content of secular philosophy that Scripture repudiates, and not the exercise of the intellect itself. However, many preachers have distorted "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (v. 2) so as to excuse their disobedience to 2 Timothy 2:15: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (NASB). Most preachers are not qualified to be preachers, and to belittle knowledge and the intellect is a convenient way to hide their deficiencies.

Our purpose compels us to focus on verses 4 and 5: "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." Much stronger than with 1 Thessalonians 1:5, the charismatics assert 1 Corinthians 2:4 as referring to the miraculous, but the verse emphasizes the same thing as 1 Thessalonians 1:5 – that is, the subjective influence of the Holy Spirit in operation through preaching.

Some background regarding the Corinthians is crucial; let us provide just enough for the reader to continue. The Greek culture had tremendous admiration for oratory eloquence, so much so that at times it caused them to ignore the substance of what was said. The "wisdom" (1 Corinthians 1:22) they so respected "often degenerated into meaningless sophistries."³⁰ The sophists, scorned by Plato, were those who would argue for whatever position the situation demanded. Their blatant disregard for truth allowed them to be debaters for hire, that is, to argue for whatever position that one may have paid them to assume. Many compare them with the present-day lawyers.

However, this does not mean that the sophists always offered sound arguments. As Plato pointed out, their arguments were often fallacious and deceptive. The Greeks did not help

²⁹ To *speculate* may mean "to think about various aspects of a given subject," or to "meditate" and "ponder." My emphasis in the use of this word, however, carries the meaning of "conjecture" or "guesswork." See *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition*.

³⁰ Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 1 Corinthians*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999 (original: 1958); p. 45.

to stem the situation, for they "tended to judge the value of a discourse more by its external exhibition than by its inward power."³¹ Any serious philosophical arguments were based on dubious human speculation. Thus, as he defends his apostleship, Paul writes, "I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way" (2 Corinthians 11:6). The gospel is not based on speculative philosophy, but divine revelation.

In addition, Greek "wisdom" despised the message of the cross, which appeared to them as a message of defeat and not triumph. But there is salvation in no other message, and so Paul writes, "we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23). "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2) is therefore written in contrast to secular thinking, and does not at all imply an anti-intellectualistic strategy of evangelism. Paul is noting that he preached to them a message that is contrary to their cultural and spiritual disposition, and since the message was not founded on speculation in the first place, he did not speak as the sophists did, but relied on the power of God to convince and convict his hearers.

This is the meaning of verses 4 and 5: "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." Paul deliberately slips into philosophical terms in verse 4, asserting that his preaching was shown true, not by speculative and fallacious arguments, but by the "demonstration" of the Spirit. The word is unlike the "manifestation" in 1 Corinthians 12:7, as popular charismatic preachers falsely assume. Rather than the idea of exhibition, the word indicates a logical proof, such as in philosophy and geometry. The English translation is therefore appropriate, since "demonstration" denotes a "logical proof in which a certain conclusion is shown to follow from certain premises."³² Morris adds, "The word translated *demonstration* (*apodeixis*) means the most rigorous proof. Some proofs indicate no more than that the conclusion follows from the premises, but with *apodeixis* the premises are known to be true, and therefore the conclusion is not only logical, but certainly true."³³

Someone like Vine would say that *demonstration* here "has the force of a proof, not an exhibition, but that which carries conviction, and that by the operation of the Holy Spirit (not here the human spirit) and the power thereby imparted to the speaker (not here referring to accompanying miracles or signs, which would require the plural)."³⁴ Popular charismatic preachers may think that the verse speaks of miracles as proofs of the gospel, but the more scholarly ones do not insist on such an interpretation. Gordon Fee, with his Pentecostal background, nevertheless writes:

It is possible, for example, and is often argued for or simply assumed, that in keeping with Rom 15:19 this refers to the "signs and wonders" of

³¹ *The Collected Writings of W. E. Vine, Vol. 2*; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996; p. 10.

³² *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition*.

³³ Morris, *1 Corinthians*; p. 51.

³⁴ *Collected Writings of W. E. Vine, Vol. 2*; p. 17.

2 Cor 12:12. But that would seem to play directly into the Corinthians' hands, to build up the very issue he is trying to demolish (cf. 2 Cor 12:1-10). More likely, therefore, especially in the context of personal "weakness" and in keeping with 1 Thes 1:5-6, it refers to their actual conversion...

Therefore, with the concluding purpose clause of v. 5 the argument that began in 1:18 comes full circle. The message of the cross, which is folly to the "wise," is the saving power of God to the believing. The goal of all the divine activity, both in the cross and in choosing them, and now in Paul's preaching which brought the cross and them together, has been to disarm the wise and powerful so that those who believe must trust God alone and completely. Thus v. 5 concludes the paragraph: "so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power." In another context this might suggest that faith rests on evidences; but that would scarcely apply here. The power of God throughout this passage has the cross as its paradigm. The true alternative to wisdom humanly conceived is not "signs," but the gospel, which the Spirit brings to bear on people's lives in powerful ways.³⁵

Most commentators agree that the verse does not have miracles as its focus, and that Paul is not rejecting the use of intellectual arguments. He merely insists on preaching the gospel, or the Christian worldview, instead of philosophy that is based on human speculation. In fact, Bullinger writes, "Here, it denotes the powerful gift of Divine wisdom, in contrast with the weakness of human wisdom..."³⁶ In another place, Fee writes, "He deliberately avoided the very thing that now fascinates them, 'the persuasion of wisdom.' But his preaching did not thereby lack 'persuasion.' What it lacked was the kind of persuasion found among the sophists and rhetoricians, where the power lay in the person and his delivery...What he is rejecting is not preaching, not even persuasive preaching; rather, it is the real danger in all preaching – self-reliance."³⁷

This is precisely the issue at hand. Paul's preaching differs from the orators both in method and content, but his arguments are logical and persuasive nonetheless, not hollow and deceptive. Unlike the fallacious "proof" of the sophists, the apostle provides sound "proof" for his message that is powerful to effect conversion in his hearers. This parallels the interpretation to 1 Thessalonians 1:5 given earlier.

Before proceeding to verse 5, although some of the quotations have already referred to it, I wish to note a problem with the definition of "demonstration" in *Vine's Expository Dictionary*, which is also related to misconceptions concerning this and other New

³⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994; p. 92-93.

³⁶ E. W. Bullinger, *Word Studies on the Holy Spirit*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1979; p. 120.

³⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987; p. 94-96.

Testament passages. It says, "a 'showing' or demonstrating by argument, [*apodeixis*] is found in 1 Cor. 2:4, where the apostle speaks of a proof, a 'showing' forth or display, by the operation of the Spirit of God in him, as affecting the hearts and lives of his hearers, in contrast to the attempted methods of proof by rhetorical arts and philosophic arguments."³⁸

That *apodeixis* means "demonstrating by argument" is correct, and the "showing forth" is not a visible "manifestation" as in 1 Corinthians 12:7, but it is the operation of the Spirit's power "as affect the hearts and lives of his hearers." This is consistent with the exposition given so far. It is also true that Paul contrasts his approach against "the attempted methods of proof by rhetorical arts." In this case, rhetoric indeed denotes, as denied of the apostle Paul previously, "artificial eloquence; language that is showy and elaborate but largely empty of clear ideas."³⁹ Any speech is rhetoric in the sense of verbal communication or discourse, and as such Paul engages in it, but his arguments are free from sophism.⁴⁰

The definition is acceptable to this point. Paul's approach differs from those who employed mere rhetoric, since he preaches a message with true and coherent content without using fallacious arguments to deceive his hearers into yielding their assent. But *Vine* also contrasts Paul's speech against "philosophic arguments." Now, this can be misleading. If *philosophy* is the "theory or logical analysis of the principles underlying conduct, thought, knowledge, and the nature of the universe,"⁴¹ then Christianity may be designated by the term. The content of Christianity indeed produces a *Weltanschauung* – a worldview, or "a comprehensive...philosophy or conception of the world and of human life."⁴² Unless the "philosophic" in *Vine's* definition is attached to the secular philosophers themselves, and thus causing its meaning to become "sophistic," the term does not pose a contrast to Paul's approach or to Christianity.

Contrasting Christianity against philosophy – not a particular school of philosophy, but philosophy as defined above – often results in a suppression of logical thought among Christians. They may cite Colossians 2:8, which says, "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." This they assume to mean that the believer should shun philosophy altogether. However, if we turn away from an "analysis of the principles underlying conduct, thought, knowledge, and the nature of the universe," we must also stop studying the Bible, since everywhere it discusses "conduct, thought, knowledge, and the nature of the universe," or ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics.

³⁸ *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc., 1985; New Testament section, "demonstration," p. 158.

³⁹ *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition*.

⁴⁰ "A clever and plausible but fallacious argument or form of reasoning, whether or not intended to deceive," *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

Pay attention to what Paul says. He says not to be taken captive by "*hollow and deceptive philosophy*," not philosophy itself. The Bible in many places warns against false doctrines, but this does not mean that we should avoid all doctrines. In fact, the surest way to guard against falsehood is to know and understand the truth. False philosophy, according to Paul, "depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world" – it begins from erroneous first principles. However, the apostle has just as good as called Christianity a philosophy when he implies that true philosophy would be based "on Christ" – it has Christ as its first principle. Paul never tells us to stop thinking, or contemplating the ultimate questions, which is the task of philosophy, but to stop thinking like the unbelievers.

Many people are comfortable with categorizing Christianity as a "religion" – a very difficult, if not impossible, term to define – and they acknowledge Christianity as the true religion among the false ones. Just because we must reject the false religions, therefore, does not mean that Christianity is not itself a religion. Perhaps religion is a subset of philosophy, or a worldview. In any case, there is no legitimate reason for denying that Christianity is a philosophy. I tend to agree with one theologian who wrote that Christian philosophy is merely Christian theology expressed in different vocabularies. The advantage of conceiving Christianity as such is that it allows a direct confrontation against all other worldviews, those that are considered religious as well as those that are not.

One problem may be that people often associate philosophy with futile speculation, but this is an unnecessary assumption, as quotations from the dictionary have shown. However, as it turns out, secular philosophy is indeed little more than speculation in the sense of conjecture and guesswork, while Christianity is founded on the indubitable premises revealed by God.

The ESV has Paul saying that his preaching was not "in plausible words of wisdom" (1 Corinthians 2:4). Now, *plausible* can mean "appearing worthy of belief,"⁴³ and as such Christianity is of course not *implausible*. However, the first and second definitions in *Merriam-Webster* are "superficially fair, reasonable, or valuable but often specious;⁴⁴ superficially pleasing or persuasive." When such meanings are intended, as seems to be the case in the ESV, then Christianity is more than plausible.

Unlike secular philosophy, which may appear reasonable or persuasive on the surface, but turns out to be mere sophistry under analysis, Christianity is backed by the "demonstration of the Spirit," and as pointed out earlier, "with *apodeixis* [or demonstration] the premises are known to be true, and therefore the conclusion is not only logical, but certainly true."⁴⁵

Therefore, the ESV brings to light Paul's position, namely, not that secular philosophy is too intellectual or logical, but that it depends on unjustifiable premises, while Christianity

⁴³ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition.*

⁴⁴ *Specious* means, "having a false look of truth or genuineness; sophistic," *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Morris, *1 Corinthians*; p. 51.

draws necessary conclusions from true premises. Non-Christian thought is not intellectual or logical enough. May this explanation concerning the relationship between Christianity and philosophy help curb the anti-intellectual tendencies of Christians.

1 Corinthians 2:5 says, "so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." Fee remarks, "In another context this might seem to suggest that faith rests on evidences; but that would scarcely make sense here."⁴⁶ As with 1 Thessalonians 1:5, "The main point is that the whole is God's work. The Corinthians were made Christians by divine power."⁴⁷ Since the *power* in both places refer to "the powerful operation of the Spirit, bearing witness with and by the truth in our hearts,"⁴⁸ "men's wisdom" and "God's power" do not necessarily refer to the object of faith – that which the person believes – but rather the means by which faith has been generated. We may understand the verse to say, "with the result that your faith should not *exist by* the wisdom of men, but by the power of God."⁴⁹

This fulfills our purpose for dealing with 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 and takes us back to 1 Thessalonians 1:5. Again, the verse says, "our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction." To paraphrase the relevant portion of this passage using theological terms, "We know that God has chosen you for salvation, because when we preached to you, you did not only receive the external call of the gospel from us, but God acted to generate the inward summon of the Spirit in your minds and produced in you faith in Christ."⁵⁰

Earlier we mentioned the twofold effect of the gospel evident in the missionary project at Thessalonica, leading Paul to believe that his converts there were truly among the elect. The first indication to Paul that God had chosen some of his hearers for salvation was the awareness of active divine power in his preaching. He speaks of this again in his second letter to them: "But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). It was God who had called or summoned by irresistible power the converts to himself, albeit through or by means of the preaching of the gospel. Romans 8:30 says, "those he predestined, he also called."

Mentioning the effect of the Spirit in the minds of the Thessalonian converts leads us to discuss the second part of the twofold effect of Paul's preaching to them. Corresponding to the first, it was the positive reception of the gospel by the Thessalonians. Paul describes this in some detail in 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10:

⁴⁶ Fee, *Corinthians*; p. 96.

⁴⁷ Gordon H. Clark, *First Corinthians*; The Trinity Foundation, 1991 (original: 1975); p. 34.

⁴⁸ Charles Hodge, *1 & 2 Corinthians*; Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000 (original: 1857); p. 32.

⁴⁹ Clark, p. 34.

⁵⁰ See my *Systematic Theology*, 2001; chapter 6: "Salvation," see *calling*.

You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Anybody can nod his head to the gospel and show feigned assent to its content. Paul was confident that at least some of his hearers were ordained to salvation due to his being conscious of the divine power in operation in his preaching. However, corresponding evidence of regeneration and faith must also be evident in the converts for one to acknowledge them as genuine believers. As Jesus says, "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them" (Matthew 7:18-20; see also v. 21-27).

Since regeneration is a radical reconstruction of the personality and intellect of the individual, changes corresponding to such a drastic transformation of the inward man ought to become evident in the speech and conduct of the outward man. From the transformation that had taken place in the Thessalonians, Paul inferred that they were truly born again, and that their faith in Christ was real.

Take, for example, "in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit." Jesus explains in the parable of the sower that not everyone who appears to receive the word with joy is indeed saved: "The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away" (Matthew 13:20-21). However, Paul is not referring to the kind of joy from a heart in which the word has not taken root. The joy of the Thessalonians in accepting the gospel message was "given by the Holy Spirit," who had changed the very roots of their personality and intellect, for such is the nature of regeneration.

The Spirit performs such a work only in the minds of the elect. Jesus says in John 3:8, "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." A free will soteriology cannot make sense of this verse, but a biblical doctrine of salvation affirms that, as "the wind blows wherever it pleases," so the Spirit of God regenerates those – and only those – who have been chosen to be saved by God. Scripture says, "all who were appointed for eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). A person believes in Christ because he has been chosen. God did not choose us because he had foreseen our faith, but we have

faith because God has chosen us without regard for any condition that would be found in us.

Since the joy of his converts was given by the Holy Spirit, it means that God had performed a work in their minds on his own initiative. And since God does not so affect the heart of those whom he has not chosen, Paul infers that the Thessalonians were among the elect.

The false convert falls away "when trouble or persecution comes because of the word," Jesus says. On the other hand, the joy of the Thessalonians endured "in spite of severe suffering." Although their legal procedures are often unjust toward Christianity, many countries stop short of making an official agenda of persecuting Christians. Not that we should hope for severe persecutions, but under such a comfortable atmosphere, the false converts that have been gathered by unbiblical preaching are not sifted out of the church. Contributing nothing but costing much, they continue to be a vexing but unacknowledged problem for the church. The solution is a return to the biblical gospel.

More than a few writers have expressed concern over the alarming rate with which professing Christians are converting to other religions – Buddhism, Islam, Mormonism, and other lesser non-Christian groups and cults. What is more alarming, however, is the unceasing influx of false converts. In the sovereign plan and purpose of God, one function of non-Christian religions and philosophies seems to be the weeding out of nominal believers from the church, lest we be overwhelmed by them. But true believers belong to Christ forever, and "no one can snatch them out of [his] hand" (John 10:28). It is better for a kingdom to have many easily marked enemies than to have many foreign spies within its domain, wrecking havoc and draining its resources from within. Add to this the thought that many false converts have become ministers, it is better for them to leave the church than to remain in it as false believers.

Discussing this subject also reminds us of the need to evangelize our own congregations. Let the truth of the gospel either convert them or drive them away. In John 6, Jesus gives his followers a "hard teaching" (John 6:60) after which "many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (v. 66). But even this did not remove Judas, who being "doomed to destruction," remained with Christ until his arrest "so that Scripture would be fulfilled" (John 17:12). He later betrayed Christ as predicted (v. 70-71), and afterward committed suicide. Yet Peter denied Christ three times, but recovered to become a great apostle. What was the difference? Jesus had prayed for Peter so that his "faith may not fail" (Luke 22:32). He also prays for the rest of his elect, but not for the world: "I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours" (John 17:9; also Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 7:25). The truth is that "no one can come to [Christ] unless the Father has enabled him" (John 6:65). Peter was enabled; Judas was not.

Genuine faith embraces the true gospel message without regard to the practical consequences that may occur. If Paul knew that the Thessalonians were true converts due to their joy and endurance in the face of severe suffering, he would no doubt denounce those who compromise their profession of faith due to pressures from relatives, financial

disadvantages, or just to please their girlfriends. On the other hand, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life" (Luke 18:29-30).

Thus, perseverance of faith in hostile circumstances is one indication of genuine faith, which in turn implies the person has been chosen by God. The apostle Peter writes, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:3-5). He has "given us new birth" because of his "great mercy," and we persevere in the Christian walk because we are preserved by God's power through faith.

Against Arminianism and its salvation based on the will of man, God does not preserve us as a reaction to our continued faith. Rather, our faith continues because God causes it to endure, and by means of this faith, we are shielded by his power until the end. Hebrews 12:2 calls Jesus both "the author and perfecter of our faith." Faith did not come from our own wills; it is a gift from God. Neither does it continue by our own power, but "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phillippians 1:6). Salvation depends on the will and mercy of God from the beginning to the end. Therefore, it is by his immutable decree in election and not free will that all "those he justified, he also glorified" (Romans 8:30). Those who fail to persevere until their glorification, have never received justification.

Genuine faith does not only endure, but it is active and growing. Paul continues, "And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us" (v. 7-9).

"Newborn babies," Peter explains, "crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Peter 2:2). One who shows no interest in doctrines and theology is perhaps temporarily ill in spirit, but it is more likely that he has never received the impartation of spiritual life from the Spirit of God. By feeding on spiritual milk, the believer grows up in his faith.

However, one who "lives on milk" is still a spiritual infant, and "is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness" (Hebrews 5:13). Anti-intellectualism has prevented generations of Christians from growing up in the faith. Growth has to do with understanding the word of God – not a mystical and intuitive understanding, but an intellectual one. Maturity has to do with how one speaks and reasons: "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me" (1 Corinthians 13:11).

The writer of Hebrews reprimands his readers, saying, "In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!" (Hebrews 5:12). Now, how many Christians understand the letter to the Hebrews? Many consider the materials to be quite advanced, but the letter was directed to those who were "slow to learn" (v. 11). However, the anti-intellectuals are unabashed, because they reject the biblical standard of growth and make Christianity a matter of feeling and experience. Let us heed the apostle Paul instead and begin to speak and think as spiritual adults rather than infants.

Bearing spiritual fruit is another metaphorical way of indicating spiritual maturity. Jesus teaches, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The Bible contradicts the notion that the mere profession of faith⁵¹ guarantees salvation. Although it is true that a genuine profession saves without regard to the person's works – for they are evil anyway – one who afterward bears no fruit produces no evidence that he is a believer at all. Verse 8 confirms that it is by producing spiritual fruit that one gives evidence of his faith: "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

The Thessalonian believers once again demonstrated their genuine faith in this area. Their faith endured and grew to a point that they became models for other believers to imitate. As Paul instructs Timothy, "set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). Other Christians readily recognized the powerful effect the Spirit of God had on the Thessalonian converts, so that wherever he went Paul did not find the need to report it. Believers everywhere knew how the Thessalonians "turned to God from idols" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). As mentioned, true conversion results from a drastic and permanent transformation at the deepest level of one's personality and intellect. The individual's most basic commitments are turned to God from the abominable objects that he once served. This change in one's first principle of thought and conduct generates a rippling effect that transforms the entire spectrum of one's worldview and lifestyle.

Conversion does not result only in a negative change, in which one turns from idols, but Paul states that they also turned "to serve the living and true God" (v. 9). Further, a definite system of doctrinal belief has been added to the person's thinking, replacing the former unbiblical philosophy. This new worldview is one in which we "wait for [God's] Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (v. 10).

Salvation does not come from turning to a generic "God," but a true believer must affirm the Christian system of doctrines. Verse 10 is of course not exhaustive, but at least it includes the resurrection and return of Jesus Christ, the coming wrath of God against the unsaved, and it also carries a partial reference to the Trinity, since Paul distinguishes between the Father and the Son. The Christian worldview offers a teleology that ties

⁵¹ That is, a *false* profession, since a profession energized by the Spirit indicates sincere faith, through which we are saved.

together the entirety of human history. Turning from idols to serve the true and living God, the believer now looks forward to the culmination of the ages in the return of Jesus Christ.

Our passage therefore assumes the apostle's soteriology from election to glorification. God has chosen those who would be saved through Christ by an immutable decree in eternity. In due time, he regenerates them and produces faith in their minds by means of preaching. Genuine faith then perseveres and grows into maturity. This transformation of the inward man results in a glorious hope, through which the believer yearns for and expects the soon return of Jesus Christ and the consummation of his salvation.